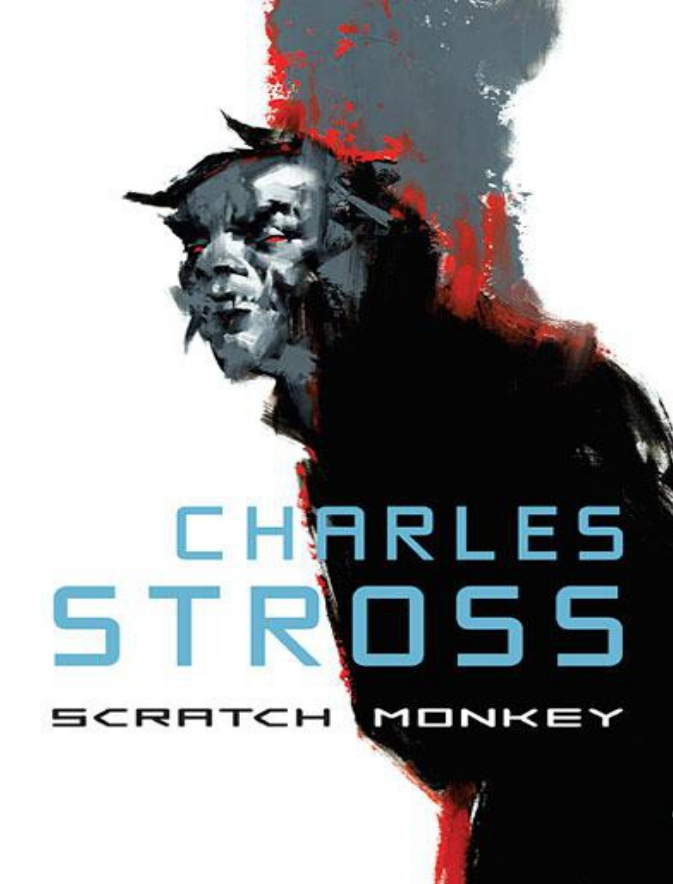




CHARLES STROSS

SCRATCH MONKEY

Scratch Monkey

Charles Stross

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Note: Bits of this novel may offend you. If that is the case, please remember that there's an "off" switch attached: if you don't like it, don't read it. Please also remember that this is a work of fiction. Attitudes, beliefs, and actions espoused in it bear no relation to reality whatsoever.

Year Zero Man

As I fasten my crash webbing Sareena looks at me and shakes her head. "What is it?" I ask. She pauses as she pre-checks the heat shield: she looks embarrassed.

"Do you have any last wishes?" she asks, stumbling over her words. "I mean, do you want me to tell anyone if you ..?"

I grin up at her humourlessly. She's little more than a shadow cast by the glare of the floodlights, so I can't see her expression. "What do *you* think?" I ask, hoping for something to distract me from what's about to happen.

She straightens up and checks over the ejection rail another time. It's ancient, a history book nightmare. *Everything* on this station is ancient: the planetary colony abandoned space travel, along with most everything else, when they cut themselves off from contact centuries ago. Cold and dark, the station was mothballed for centuries, until the we beamed in and reactivated it. Now it has new owners, and a very different purpose to the one it was designed for. "Okay," she says calmly. "So if you don't come back, you don't want anyone to cry ..."

"Not for me," I say, jerking a thumb over my shoulder towards the sealed

airlock bay doors, amber lights strobing across the danger zone to indicate pressure integrity. "But if I don't come back, you can cry for the natives. Nobody else will."

"Yeah, well. Looks like the heat shield's good for one more trip, at least." She finishes with her handheld scanner and hooks it to her utility belt, then turns and waves at the redlit Launch Control room, high among the skeletal girders above us. "Does your your life support integrity check out?"

"Check." A green helix coils slowly in the bottom left corner of my visual field, spiralling down the status reading on my suit; more head-up displays wind past my other eye in a ruby glare of

countdown digits. The oxy pressure on my countercurrent infuser is fine but I have a tense feeling like an itch. I can't breathe with my lungs. Got to make this reentry drop immersed in a bubble of liquid. The deceleration on reentry is going to be ferocious.

The comm circuit comes to life: it's launch control. " Launch window opens in two hundred seconds. You should make your modified orbital perigee in two seven nine seconds at one-niner five kilometres. You'd better clear the bay, Sar."

"Okay." She shrugs. "Outer helmet?"

I nod clumsily and she lowers it into place over my head. I cut in my external sensors and sit tight in the frame of the drop capsule, webbed in by refrigerant feeds. The thick aerated liquid gurgles around my ears then begins to thicken into a gel. The pod's active stealth skin tests itself, flashing chameleon displays at the wall. "All systems go," I tell her, voice distorted by the gunk clogging my throat: "you tie one on for me, okay?" I smile, and she gives me a thumbs-up.

"You're go, Adjani," cuts in launch control; Helmut and Davud are in charge. We've been through this all before: they sound professionally bored.

"Pressure drop in one-

forty seconds, re-entry window in one-ninety and counting. Repeat, Go for drop in two minutes."

"Check," Sareena calls over her shoulder, then stops for one last word. "Take care, Oshi," she says. "We'll miss you."

"So will I," I say, feeling like a hollow woman as the wise-crack comes out. She half-reaches out toward me, but doesn't quite make it: she pulls back instead, and jogs towards the access hatch. I track her with the capsule sensors, testing the image filters we yesterday. Seen by the light of radio emissions her skeleton is a hot synthetic pink overlaid with luminous green flesh

and a thin blue spiderweb of nanotech implants just beneath the skin. *It could have been her*, I tell myself, trying to imagine myself retreating through that door and sealing it on her; *it didn't have to be me. All right, so I volunteered. So why have second thoughts at this stage? The Boss said it's important, so I suppose it must be. There's a very important job to be done and then I'm going to come back okay, no doubt about it. It's going to be good --*

"One minute, Adjani. Any last words?"

"Yeah," I say. Suddenly my mouth is dry. "This is --"

The lights on the bay wall flash into

a blinding red glare and a spume of vapour forms whirlpools around the air vent: the clam-shell door is opening onto space, draining out the frail pool of air.

" Pulling sockets, Adjani. Good ... "

I don't get to hear the rest. The launch rail kicks me in the small of the back and the head-up display blanks out the starscape in a blaze of tracking matrices. When my eyeballs unsquash I erase the unnecessary read-outs and take a look. The planet is a vast, ego-numbing blueness into which I'm falling. I re-run the mission profile as the orientation thrusters cut in, spinning the drop capsule so that I'm racing backwards into a sea of swirling gas at Mach thirty.

The capsule is going to make an unpowered re-entry like a meteor; it's designed to pull fifty gees of deceleration on the way down (far more than any sane pilot would dream of), shedding fiery particles like a stone out of heaven. This is going to happen in about three minutes time.

I'm busy for a few seconds, heart in my mouth as I scan for search radar and missile launches, but no-one's detected me and by the time I can look up the black-surfaced station is invisible against the thin scattering of stars above me. I could almost be alone out here -- but I'm not, quite. Someone is down there: someone dangerous. Otherwise

Distant Intervention wouldn't have seen fit to send a team through the system Gatecoder, fifteen light-years from anywhere else; otherwise it wouldn't have rated a visit of any kind, let alone the attention of a Superbright like the Boss. Because if nobody lives here, why the hell is it pumping out so many uploaded minds that it distorts Dreamtime processing throughout the entire sector?

A Year Zero event, that's what. I'm told we've run across this sort of thing before, but rarely, less than once a century in the whole wide spread of human settlement; and that's why I'm here.

That's why everyone's afraid I'm not

coming back ...

From the second when the pod first drops below orbital velocity to the moment it penetrates the stratopause and deploys wings, there's not a lot for me to do. That's only about two minutes, but it feels like forever: I'm suspended in a tank of high pressure liquid, feeling my bones grate under the huge stresses of deceleration.

I run my test routines, muscles tensing, relaxing, counting down the milliseconds to landing: the green helix spins in my left eye, pacing out the moments. While my body is in spasm I call up the wisdom download they gave me, a huge database of predigested

memories sitting in the implants that thread my brain. It's full of details about the planets population, and I go over them -- got to check my knowledge, even though I already know it a thousand times over -- as the first wisps of atmosphere tear at the rim of my heat shield. When I begin to feel heavy I switch off my inner ears and follow the g-forces on a display; New Salazar makes for daunting reading.

New Salazar:	
Primary	G1 Dwarf
	1.24 A.U.

Distance

Second planet
of seven

none of rest

Moons

habitable
None

Diameter

13,000 K.M.

Land area

68% of total
surface

Colonised

Year 2427

Present **t**
minus 709 years

Last update

t minus 231
years

Population

1,390,000,000
(last update)

	Growth 1.2 % pa
Nations	214
Languages	4 (316 dialects)
Technology	Low => Moderate
Industrialization	(inferred; currently Moderate)
Ethnicity	Unrecorded

... It goes on from there. *Two hundred* nations? Double the land area of Terra? A population measured in billions? I could be hunting a needle in a haystack, except that Year Zero Man is

hardly inconspicuous.

The rim of the heat shield glows a pleasant cherry red as the g's stack up then began to tail off again; first the sky turns ruddy orange, then the shell of the pod shrieks in protest when it drops through the highest reaches of the stratosphere. The plasma conic burns out. The plan was to head for the land mass with the highest rate of change of population density we could derive from Dreamtime transient loading ...

BANG!

I look up. The first aerobrake has deployed, detonating high overhead: I switch my peripheral nervous system back on and experience a shivery high of visceral fear. The sky is swinging back

and forth above me like a pendulum as the machmeter drops towards One, and then I'm falling subsonic, altitude two thousand metres and the counter timing down to impact. There's a gurgle and my ears ring as the suspension gel liquifies and drains away.

-- *Three, two, one.* Suddenly a giant hand grabs me around the shoulders and buttocks. I'm flying high on a gossamer kite, wings outstretched above me. I look down and there's nothing under the capsule but a vast expanse of green, slashed in half by the ochre gash of a dirt trail. My stomach does a backflip as I reach out and grab the side-arm controller. Two heartbeats and the

ground disappears behind a wisp of low cloud, but I've got no time to waste daydreaming: I'm gliding down to an alien forest and I've got just three minutes flying time left. The capsule handles like a brick; it's carrying enough fuel to make orbit.

Right, I think. Where do I land?

I'm down to one thousand metres so I risk a quick flash on radar. There are no metal structures out there so I decide the road's as safe as anywhere -- this is rainforest country, my briefing whispers in my head, and I don't want the wingsail to get wrapped up in the trees. (A brief vision flashes before my eyes; a skeleton in a stealth capsule gently sways in the breeze beneath a canopy of tree bearing

strange fruit, while Year Zero Man continues to play his deadly game and the distortions in the Dreamtime get worse.) Year Zero Man is a murderous bastard: killing so many people that - the activity surge in the Dreamtime was measurable at a range of fifteen light years --

The dusty road is coming up beneath me as I trigger the capsule motor (for just a tenth of a second -- I don't want to set fire to the forest) and dump the wingsail. It drifts gracefully away and the capsule drifts gently down between smoke-fumed tree trunks. I can see burning vegetation as there's a jarring thump from below. The rocket shuts off.

Quick! Move! The canopy retracts and the thermal tiles are still hot beneath my boots as I jump down and turn -- to see a large deadfall which, if I look at it carefully, might almost be the silhouette of a parked orbiter capsule.

I lumber through the undergrowth, out onto the road, trot along to the wingsail (which has come down right in the most visible damn spot in the forest). The fabric billows and it's obviously entangled in the undergrowth, but that's no problem. I duck down behind it, pull out a ring pull, and stand back. The sail begins to dissolve. I look round again, see a confused tangle of undergrowth and anonymous tree-trunks. It's going to be easy to lose the capsule here, so I

gash the tree-trunk with an armoured finger and retreat about ten metres back from the road. Then I check the time. It's been eleven minutes since I left the station. That's too slow; if this was a network-ready world they'd have been all over me ten minutes ago. What's up with these people? How primitive are they?

As I wait for the soldiers to arrive, I strip off my suit and bury it. It takes a minute or two for the suit's sensitive control systems to disentangle themselves from my spinal cord and viscera, then the bolts begin to slide back into their sockets and the segments of armour begin to slough off like the

skin of a ceramic snake. The jungle air is a rich compost smell overlaid with the acrid tang of the dissolving wingsail. Now I look at them, the plants are really strange. All their branches come in threes, and the leaves are more blue than green: something chitters in the undergrowth nearby and the insects rasp like a chorus of malfunctioning drones. I shrug out of my dismembered suit, stand bare-ass naked but for my built-in extras, and look around. There's no-one watching, so I disentangle my knapsack from the supply locker in the back of the life support unit. I open it and drag out a grey overall, rough-woven sandals, and a small moneybelt that bulges. I put them on, wearing the belt inside the suit. I

don't know if I look like a native, but frankly I don't really care. What I care about is not looking like trouble, and the armour is more of a liability than anything else; its purpose is unmistakable.

It's been nearly two hundred and fifty years since anyone physically visited this world. Since then it's been out of touch except for the basic Dreamtime function, a one-way stream of emigré minds. People dying and being uploaded into the wider continuum supported by our insterstellar digital afterlife. The same people being shunted out across the interstellar gatecoder links, funnelled into whatever corner of the growing

Dreamtime has room for the additional load, because they don't know how to work the system. Yes, this planet's on the net, but nobody here knows how to use it. There are more things to the Dreamtime net than interstellar travel and continued consciousness after death: but it takes a certain degree of knowledge to make use of them.

Burying the armour is hard work without power assistance, so I just dig a shallow trench and pull some loose undergrowth over it. Then I stare at the spot, and think hard; a sapphire triangle appears in my left eye as my inertial tracker locks on. Something grabs at my attention for a moment: a flashback to a childhood of darkness. I shiver, breathe

deeply and look round again. The colours -- that's what I can never get over. (The colours: try explaining them to a blind woman.)

... Or to a corpse. I hunker down and switch to infrared, and boost my ears so that the dull rumble of the engine coming up the road is overlayed with faint sounds of conversation from the driver's cab. It's a truck, I decide, and it's going to arrive here in less than half a minute. It looks like my wait is over. I check my chronograph again. It's been all of half an hour since I left the station.

The truck rumbles into view, spurting dusty blue fumes into the humid air. It's quite bulky, and looks very

inefficient -- a huge engine cowling looms over great disc-wheels, a smokestack twice as high again protruding above it. It's dragging a wagon train on wheels, six creaking wooden trailers with sealed sides and roofs with small ventilation ducts on top. The whole thing is travelling not much faster than a brisk marching pace. Little nut-brown men and women with black hair cling to the sides; they're naked but for loin-cloths and all of them are carrying guns. As it trundles past my hiding-place, I see into the cab; a sweaty figure is shovelling something black into a furnace, and another man stands guard with rifle raised. It might be a trading caravan, but knowing what the Boss told

me about Year Zero syndrome I doubt this. The squealing of axles and rattling of chains and pistons drowns out any noise from inside the sealed wagons.

It's so big that it takes a minute to pass my hiding place, and in that time I count eight guards. The only efficient-looking things in the whole convoy are their guns; black, polished, functional. The soldiers have that thousand yard stare, peering into the jungle with fingers loosely wrapped around the triggers of their weapons. I've seen that casual, sprawled-out pose among troops before, lying prone on their trailers or clinging to handholds with the gun half-slung in the crook of an arm. Don't be fooled:

they're not laid-back. They can tear you up faster than the eye can see.

I wait until the last wagon has rumbled by, then I scramble on hands and knees to the edge of the road and peer after it. They missed the wingsail -- not surprising, even I can barely see its corroded wreckage and I know where to look -- and the tail guards aren't looking particularly closely at the side of the road. They seem to be looking at the sky: I squeeze my eyes shut and pay attention to the microwave sidebands. The webs of phased-array receiver cells implanted at the back of my eyes go to work. The world goes a dim fuzzy orange, and I can see through trees: the sky is a sodium-lit hell paraded by aurorae. But there's no

sweep radar! I remember the guns. The projectiles they shoot are unguided, judging by the lack of sights. Do these people even *have* radar?

I hear a buzzing from the sky as I wait for the convoy to pass out of view. I itch in the damp heat, and the insects are trying to bite my face. This planet's been terraformed too well for my liking. I swat them away, watching the trail of reddish dust and blue smoke diminishing into the distance as I listen: *what now?*

The buzzing gets louder. I peep for radar again but nobody's scanning, so I raise my head for an eyeball search; I see a dragonfly through the tangled branches, a dragonfly the size of the

engine at the head of the road train. *Shit!* I hug the nearest tree trunk. One look tells all. The plane is primitive -- rotary airscrews and guy lines to hold the wings taut. Not so far advanced over the coal-burning crew up ahead. Speaking of whom --

Well, yes. I hear the crackle of small arms fire from the convoy. They're shooting at the dragonflyer, assault rifles against piston power. Quaint but deadly. That explains the look-outs. I squat, pull up the hood of my jumpsuit, then roll it right down across my forehead. I fasten it tight and adjust the eye-patches so I can see, then I pull on my gloves. Thunder rumbles off the baking road surface ahead. There's a switch in my

right palm, and when I trigger it my hand shimmers and slowly dissolves into cyanic chaos against the vegetation. Wrapped head to foot in this suit I'm a chameleon: it's not a cloak of invisibility, exactly, but the next best thing. I step onto the road and jog towards the column of smoke. Which is no longer blue and ochre and dry, but black and oily and hot.

By the time I get close enough to see the wreckage the dragonflyer is long gone, vanished into the hazy skies like a lethal mirage. The smoke is dense, billowing in clouds from flames that lick eagerly at the engine and front carriage. The road train has jack-knifed into the

trees that line the edge of the road. Two of the rear trailers are overturned. A thin keening noise rises from them, grating on my nerves; the sound of many voices crying out in fear. I know what's in them now, and why the pilot of the dragonflyer would strafe her own people on their transport to oblivion.

About a hundred metres from the wreckage I pass the first corpse. She's lying in a pool of her own blood, thrown there by the force of the blast. The flyer only carried small bombs: anything bigger would have annihilated the entire convoy. The fire is spreading fast so I don't bother looking too closely at the body -- I've got more important things to do.

Someone's moving up ahead. I trot forward, passing a puddle of burning oil here and a mass of crumpled metal there. One of the trailers has burst open, spilling human flesh like a twist of corruption across the pristine chaos of the jungle. Some of the flesh is moving. I jog past them: a mass of men and women, all naked and bloody, shaven scalps weirdly pale above their tanned bodies. Those who can crawl, crawl; those who can stand, stand. Their hands are upraised, and some of them appear to be looking up, searching for the signs of deliverance: but that's wrong, as I see when I get closer. My stomach gives an odd lurch, something I thought I'd gotten

over long ago; The Year Zero Men responsible for this atrocity are nothing if not efficient.

All of them have recently had their eyes gouged out.

The bodies of the dead guards lie strewn around the sides of the road. Some of them lie like broken puppets, their limbs bent at odd angles, while others look perfectly healthy. A few have skin the consistency of a pulpy, rotten fruit, and tongues that bulge and glisten gruesomely. Hydrostatic shock kills in a myriad of ways, all of them final but some of them uglier than others. Listening in on the high frequency cellcom bands I can hear a raucous twittering, neural mapping data being

uploaded into the invisible, omnipresent Dreamtime. At a conservative estimate, the convoy consisted of twelve guards ferrying five hundred prisoners; less than fifty will survive the wreck, and all will die before they reach civilisation. Which is a small mercy, I suppose, because those who reach what passes for civilisation on this planet will only take longer to die.

I spot what I'm looking for and give the escaping prisoners a wide berth as I sprint towards the head of the train. One of the guards there has been thrown clear. On infrared I can see the pulse in her throat, the warm breath rising unevenly from her mouth. If I can get to

her before the prisoners stumble this far I may have a chance to save her.

First aid crowds out the questions that clamour in the shadows of my mind as I bend over the guard. She's still breathing raggedly, and appears to be unconscious, but I give her a quick scan with my eyes on active and she doesn't seem to have any broken bones. Possible concussion, then, and maybe some internal bleeding. Well, there's nothing I can do about that. She's almost as tall as I am, skin tanned and tattooed in strange designs -- vortices and death's heads and the more arcane geometries of soft tissue injuries -- and her hair is cropped into a narrow, spiky helmet. Her fatigues are stained and grimy and there's a knife at

her belt. I ditch the toothpick and pick her up, somehow roll her across my shoulders, and head for the edge of the road.

Picking my way through trees and bushes carrying a woman who weighs nearly as much as I do is not exactly my idea of fun, but neither is getting a bullet in the back of the neck. It seems to go on forever, but my chronometer keeps me informed with merciless precision; I spend fifteen minutes and eight seconds pushing through a seething wall of turquoise-streaked khaki vegetation. Frond-like leaves brush my sweat-slick face, and thorny branches whip around after me or catch on my chameleon suit.

There are strange rustlings in the undergrowth and all the while a chorus of beetles and arthropods covers the possible sound of pursuit.

I pitch her down at the foot of a forest giant and stop to breathe. Black spots swim before my eyes; I've pushed half a kilometre into this wilderness just to get away from that ochre killing-ground. The raw, eyeless sockets of the victims seem to stare at me through the jungle, accusing me of ... *shit*, I think, *why couldn't someone else have pulled this end of the stick? Mannanash, or Davud ... anyone? Anyone but me!* Maybe it was the Boss's decision. I've never trusted his sense of humour; it's as unhuman as He is. This is just the sort of

assignment that would strike him as amusing.

I blink and tell my eyes to run their power-on self-test. They flash through it in two seconds, sequences of light shimmering on the inside of my eyelids to tell me that all's well and I can see as easily as anyone else. Twenty-two years I've had the ability to see; twenty-two years out of my thirty-four subjective. Distant Intervention gave me my eyes back when they recruited me. I open them and look about, then down at the body that's muttering incoherent gibberish. There's work to be done, I see; work to justify my vision. And yes ... it's going to be grim.

I slip my hand through my left pocket and unzip the inside lining, then open my belt pouch. There are a number of small items inside; I select the ring and slide it onto my index finger, then remove a couple of tiny cylinders. Then I seal the pouch and pocket, roll my hood back, and switch my suit to a dust-grey colour that is anything but invisible against the lunatic glare of the vegetation.

First cylinder. I peel back the tag and press it against the side of her neck; she sighs slightly and relaxes. "Tell me your name," I say.

"Ash fnargle ... " she swallows and twitches slightly. My mind goes a blank as *something* rams my tongue into gear,

and my mouth makes strange noises. The culture of nanobots in the injector are making their way to her brain, linking up with and reprogramming the monitors that cluster thickly throughout her cerebral cortex. Soon they'll have her language centres downloading direct into my own head, ready for me to make use of their neural mappings. She makes some more inarticulate gargling sounds and coughs; my mouth writhes through glottal stops and half-swallowed vowels as my hijacked larynx shadows her vocalisation. The nanosensors that thread her brain, constantly transmitting her sensory encoded personality to the afterlife receivers, are amenable to some low level reprogramming; and she's

undefended. Like everyone else on this world, she doesn't even know she's got them. (How much else have they lost? Or remembered?) For a minute longer she spouts gibberish; then, suddenly, everything seems to shift and clear, and it all makes perfect sense.

" ... Seventh special action team. Blasted Hv'ranth flyer picked us up on the run back home and ... here I am. Here you are too, I guess. Where's here? Who're you?"

"Never mind where we are," I say smoothly, "who are you? Tell me about yourself ..."

There are standard methods for lifting material out of brains. Everyone,

everywhere in human space, is riddled with nanotech Dreamtime encoders. They're in the air, in the soil, in their cells and reproducing like bacteria. They constantly monitor cerebral activity, transmitting updates of their host personality to the encoders, that upload minds into the Dreamtime when their bodies cease to support them. It even makes a neat debriefing tool, if you have the equipment to interrogate the brain encoders directly. (Only Distant Intervention, that I know of, is allowed to play with this kind of kit.)

I make fairly good time; it takes me about fifteen minutes to establish that she is second-sergeant Mavreen Tor'Jani -- or Tor'Jani Mavreen if you put the

family name first as these people seem to -- and she's attached to one of the Year Zero meat convoys. A piece of luck: the target is on this continent. Tor'Jani's married -- polyandrous, three husbands -- no children -- just joined this unit so doesn't have any close friends here -- absolutely perfect. Year Zero Man has been strutting his bloody stuff for eight years and has conquered half the planet; the next continent over put up a spirited resistance and is now a steaming charnel house, while his own people have been slightly more lucky so far. Especially those who collaborate in the process, like this one. *Special Action Teams* ... murderers in bulk.

The more I hear the angrier I get. Year Zero Man is a woman this time; a charismatic leader called Marat Hree, some kind of jumped-up politician who appeared from nowhere and who is now running the standard course. A nation called the Kingdom of Alpagia was her springboard to empire. I don't get any more from Mavreen about the Compassionate Mother and Teacher, who is none of those, but then I don't really need to; she was on escort duty for one of the consignments to a local slaughterhouse and I might as well tag along for the ride. After a while I stop her in mid-spiel and ask her who I am. She looks up at me and tenses, and her

eyes go wide just before I break her neck. Then I open my make-up kit and begin to reconstruct my face.

Second sergeant Tor'Jani Mavreen -- or a good likeness thereof -- stumbles out of the jungle half an hour later, a good hour after the attack on the train. She's dazed, and has a gigantic lump above her left eye; but for all that she's in better shape than the convoy. (She may even be a little taller, a trifle heavier than before; but there's a limit to what even nanotech restructuring can achieve in the way of instant plastic surgery.)

The convoy is an utter shambles. Four carriages are consumed by fire, along with the engine and seven of the

guards: the cacophony from the surviving cargo is deafening, the drowning squeal of a sackful of kittens amplified a thousandfold. Mavreen grabs forceman Kaidmaan by the shoulder and demands to know what's going on, who's in charge; Kaidmaan shrugs numbly and looks at her. "You are," he says vaguely: "everyone else is dead. Brazzia radio'd for help and they said to wait here."

"Oh great," snarls Mavreen, surveying the wreckage of which she is now -- by default -- commander. "Who else is fighting fit, then?"

"What do you mean?" asks Kaidmaan. "There's me, you --" he looks

at her bleeding forehead dubiously "-- Brazzia, and, uh, Nord's arm is broken. That's *it*. Everyone else is *dead*!"

Mavreen shakes him hard. "Listen," she says, "you go to pieces on me and I'll have your balls for -- " She looks over her shoulder. "What's that?"

He cowers. "They're coming back!"

"Crap." She listens some more. "That's our aerovac, fool. Get the others moving! It's only eighty leagues to Radiant Progress Base Number Six, we can't leave these cattle here. I want those wagons unhitched; get us ready to roll as soon as they can get a new engine down here." Forceman Kaidmaan looks at her strangely, but scrambles to obey.

Mavreen looks at the sky and

scowls, murderously angry over the loss of two-thirds of her cargo; the aerovac team is coming and when Highcom gets to know about the mess that's gone down here they're going to want to know *why*, and maybe some negligent eyes are going to get gouged. She gets a warm, weak feeling at the thought. Already she's formulating her account of the convoy. Damned partisans ...

Somewhere behind her face I'm grinning with rage.

Aerovac is a zeppelin, not a dragonflyer. A ribbed brown cylinder with bat-wings and carved wooden gondolas slung below it, it cruises silently above the forest trail. There are

human skulls hanging from the command cabin, and seven-pointed iron stars and the other fetishes of an age of enlightenment turned bloody-dark by Year Zero. I muster my scanty forces, fingers curled loosely round the butt of my automatic rifle as Brazzia, the radioman, hunches over his sparking contraption and listens to the squeal of the airwaves. "Tell them we're okay but we need a new engine and driver to recover these jungle monkeys," I tell him. Nord looks at me with wide eyes, favouring her broken arm which Kaidmaan wrapped in cloth torn from the uniforms of our dead colleagues.

"We could use some ground support," I say, staring into the jungle; "if

the sodding partisans are coordinating with the Hv'Ranth we could lose the lot of them." The words come easily but the meanings are more difficult; I take it that the Hv'Ranth are one of the remaining free nations of New Salazar, and the partisans are those subject peoples who rise up against the Enlightened New Empire of The Compassionate Mother and Teacher. Meanwhile I mouth the syllables, in search of deeper meaningful associations; the mutilated semiotics of ethnic cleansing make great fig-leaves for hypocritical righteousness.

"I'll tell them," mutters Brazzia; "I'll tell the bastards!" He taps away at his spark key as the green helix spins in the

lower-left corner of my visual field, and information tools grind down data in the recesses of my skull. "Get us *out* of here!" he subvocalises, unaware that I can hear a pin drop at half a kilometre, should I choose to do so: "-- fucking bitch is going to get us all *killed* if we sit around here much longer!"

At which point I smile sharkishly and rub the butt of my stolen gun.

The great zeppelin swings low overhead, casting a shadow vaster than the road train. Land anchors drop and grind through the jungle canopy, pulling through trees in knots of shattered wood. I hear the throbbing of the diesel engines that power it, as the airscrews rotate to provide reverse thrust. How ponderous!

I look around at the carnage I've inherited and shake my head as the first platoon of aeromarines abseil down the anchor cables from the air dreadnought.

They jog up the road towards us, fierce-faced soldiers in jungle camouflage suits with baroque helmet-masks. My shell-shocked survivors stiffen and assume a semblance of frightened order; I salute the commanding officer wearily as I meet his eyes. They are brown, almost muddy, and look right through me.

"Second-sergeant Tor'Jani Mavreen reporting, sir. We were strafed by a Hv'Ranth flyer which nailed the engine and first four trailers; we saved the rest,

but hetman Enkali was killed in the blast, as were the remainder of our unit." I feel slightly uneasy before that penetrating gaze. My built-in wisdom database whispers in my head that this man wears a uniform derived from the elite force of Residents maintained by the Kingdom of Isoterra, two centuries ago. They were palace soldiers who lived among the nobility they guarded. He looks not so much cruel as absent-minded, as if he might accidentally misplace my life with a nod of his head and a flick of his swagger-stick.

"Very good, sergeant. You say you salvaged the surviving cargo? In those two trucks?"

"Yes sir," I say, sweating in the

sticky heat of his gaze. My left thumb tightens on the ornate signet ring I wear on that index finger. I hope I don't have to use it. Targeting grids in my right eye track the pulse of his carotid vein.

"Good." He smiles, thin-lipped. "In that case ... " he waves over his sergeant. "You," he says; "wait here for the recovery wagon and ensure that none escape. Then continue to Radiant Progress Number Six Factory and turn them over for processing." He looks at me. "You'll come with me," he says: "I want to verify this. The Hv'Ranth were supposed to be cleared out of this district two weeks ago; Highcom will want to know how they got through."

I nod, and swallow. "Yes sir," I say. "The rest of my unit ..?"

He glances round. "They can travel with the convoy," he says, casually condemning them to three days of jungle rot and the excremental smell of the blinded prisoners on their way to Radiant Progress Number Six Factory. I relax slightly, removing my hand from my stolen assault rifle. "You will probably face a court-martial."

Suddenly I go very cold. "On what charges?" I ask. "I was not in command of this convoy before the attack; in any case we had no air defence cover. Why me? Sir?"

He looks away. "Why anybody?" he

says. "You survived. You should have ensured none of the cargo did. Calling a recovery truck for only two carriages is wasteful."

One of his aeromarines politely but insistently relieves me of my rifle.

Overhead, the zeppelin is turning. Its huge shadow races across the road, flooding us with darkness. The jungle life falls silent where the artificial nightfall passes, as if it understands what the presence of the elite force signifies. I look up at it and see that a gondola is slowly sinking towards us from the belly of the beast. It's the colour of old oak, carved into the strangest shapes; great wailing demons, eyeless skeletons eating the bodies of the living as they writhe in

agony. It's almost -- I shudder -- like a death-cult; as if these people have forgotten their guaranteed afterlife. *But it would be*, I remind myself. *If they have ...*

The gondola lands on the road with a thump and squeal of rubber-tyred wheels, and a door at the rear slams down. "All aboard," shouts the aeromarine sergeant; "you too," he says to me, his expression curiously neutral. He waits for me to get in before he follows suit, and I notice his hand staying close by his gun: I step inside and look around.

The gondola is about the size of one of the trailers, but feels more spacious.

The walls are thin sheets of curved metal, and the top is open at one end. There are only two small windows -- and they're for the two gunners who crouch behind them. I do what the other soldiers are doing, grab onto a ceiling-suspended rope, and wait.

The ground drops away and we're swinging high above the jungle on the end of a lift cable. I shut my eyes and mouth words silently, hoping they'll think I'm praying: my inertial tracker gives me a beautiful angle on their power sources.

There's a jolt that makes the entire gondola shudder, then a couple of latches slam home and we're swaying beneath the main command deck of the

zeppelin. A rope ladder falls through the open end and the soldiers climb it, then it's my turn to stand on the lower deck of what must be a flying bomb, beneath half a million cubic metres of hydrogen, on a floor of polished ebony planks long enough to hold a formal ball.

"You will come this way," says the officer of the Residency. He strides away towards a raised dais at the forward end of the platform without looking back. I follow him.

The dais is a raised platform with a great wooden wheel on it; two aeromarines stand by, ready to turn the distant rudder at a spoken command. Behind them wait a trio of officers,

obviously of relatively senior rank. They wear a uniform of black, with black boots and helmets that shadow their eyes. I come to attention and salute as best I can.

"Second-sergeant Tor'Jani Mavreen reporting, sirs. From the convoy."

"Ah. I see." The most high-ranking of the aeronauts, judging from the reaction of the officers to either side of her, is going to make her own mind up and not be hurried by my rescuer. "You were brought back up here by resident-lieutenant Qvartman?" She turns to look at him and he straightens up.

"Yes, captain," he says. "The sergeant failed to destroy the cargo; instead she salvaged some of it that was

of dubious quality. I think a court martial --"

"I see." The captain stared at him. "Is it not true that the whole reason for these continued shipments to the Progress bases is because they are of no use if destroyed prematurely?"

Resident-lieutenant Qvartman almost squirmed; I looked at him out of the corner of one eye. "That is true," he admitted, "but the chances of economically recovering --"

"-- Depend entirely upon the recovery team, and on how well we can wipe out the nest of dragons that burned this convoy," interrupts the captain. She smiles, a pleasant, middle-aged matron

with a lead-weighted fist in her glove. "Sergeant Tor'Jani is not to blame for enemy attacks, lieutenant," she says, insulting him carefully by omitting the greater part of his title. "You would do better to persecute the enemy than our own loyal soldiers." She looks at me, instead, and I let a flush of pride wash through me, the pride that Mavreen herself would have felt if I hadn't so abruptly kidnapped her identity -- there's more to a disguise than mere facial features, after all. "We will be heading into Radiant Progress Number Six this evening," she says. "We'll drop you there to rendezvous with your unit, sergeant. Now get yourself to the sick bay and get your head looked at."

I turn and walk away hastily, listening to the sounds of Qvartman arguing with the captain, who is obviously in total control of this zeppelin; I think there are precedents for this. Elite forces working independently from the regular militia, and singularly ruthless into the bargain, *always* appear when a Year Zero Man starts to ply his (or her) evil trade. I shiver at the thought of how close I came to landing in one of those trucks myself. And for a reason that I couldn't be held responsible for missing! *Why did it have to be me who landed in this mess?* I wonder as I look for the sick bay with an appropriately dazed expression on my face. But my

all-seeing eyes and Superbright-processed wisdom database don't hold an answer to my problem. For that I have to look to the Dreamtime.

The Dreamtime: Distant Intervention: life after death ... where to start explaining? To understand what I was doing on New Salazar you'll have to cut deep, deep into the layers that hold human civilization together across a gulf of light-centuries. So let me start by telling you what I'm talking about.

The Dreamtime is, quite simply, the afterlife. It's the biggest virtual reality of all time, distributed across planet-sized processors in different solar systems. By default, everyone goes there when they die; the nanoscale monitors are

ubiquitous, stitched into our brain cells along with the organic components we evolved with. They feed labelled packets of data about the brain and body they're embedded in to cellular transceivers, a network that repairs itself constantly and funnels the information up to the big extraplanetary expansion processors where the Dreamtime runs. At death, your point of presence is transferred to that other universe automatically: your personality, that is the software that defines you, is saved from dissolution. But that's just the beginning of the story. There are other services. Wisdom: direct memories and knowledge piped into our brains, the

ultimate in decision support systems. Magic: the ability to bias sensory inputs, to control machines by thought. And reincarnation: expensive, but available to the citizens of the wealthier worlds, the most practical way of evading death and the uncertainty of a Dreamtime existence.

The Dreamtime is the uppermost layer on a cake of information as deep as human history. The same mechanisms support the afterlife and the tools of interstellar commerce, the Gatecoders. Uploaded minds and their associated physical parameters can be transmitted between Gatecoders in different star systems at the speed of light. Once present they are funnelled through the

local Dreamtime, reincarnated, and downloaded into cloned bodies: which is how I got here in the first place. At least, that's part of the picture.

Actually I couldn't have got here if the system had not been visited, centuries ago, by a seeder probe; a self-replicating robot factory that built the Expansion Processor and Gatecoder, then moved on to colonize other systems. I couldn't have got here without The Boss, either. The Boss, like all the controlling intelligences of Distant Intervention, is a Superbright: an artificial intelligence vastly more complex than any human mind. Travel through the Dreamtime is hazardous for

unaccompanied humans. We are no longer the only minds in this creation, and not all the others are friendly.

Nevertheless, I'm here. The people I work with -- Distant Intervention -- are behind me. We're troubleshooters. We look after the links, even when the local colony world chooses to ignore the vast network they are connected to. It's in everyone's interests to keep travel convenient, to keep the afterlife running, to make sure that the multiplicity of services the Dreamtime provides are available at all times. Sometimes people want to interfere with the system for their own reasons. Sometimes, as with Year Zero Man, the interference is malign beyond belief.

Tell the truth, it's hard to explain some of the jobs we do to keep the Dreamtime running. The system is so big that it defies description. I leave understanding it to Superbright intelligences like The Boss. The Boss can encompass concepts that no human mind can grasp. I may not like what he says, some of the time -- much of the time, these days -- but there's some comfort in knowing that at least someone knows what's going on. After all, without guidance the net would eventually deteriorate into chaos. And events like the ones on New Salazar would be even more common.

I'm sitting on a bunk in the sick bay

of the zeppelin. I grit my jaw as the surgeon lays a stinging poultice across my forehead. It's noisome and dark in here; the floor and walls creak and throb with the vibration of the engines, and one of the other occupants is groaning repetitively: "uh, uh, uh ..."

I swallow. The surgeon grips my hand unsympathetically. "Is burning?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, flexing my fingers as he drops some more caustic onto the pad he holds to my forehead.

"Good," he says. "That means you were infected. The burning is a good sensation."

I don't tell him *what* burns. It's not my forehead, scraped in my hurry to

return to the burning convoy. It's the strength of my new-found desire, since I saw the prisoners trapped in a hell I was rescued from by the recruiting team so many years ago. I want Year Zero Man; I want her so badly I could cry. I want to kill her.

Some hours later the zeppelin is no longer cruising over jungle. We have come to a cleared zone, where the stumps of trees still smoulder and the logging teams are slaving to clear the site for the purpose of some alien design. I look down over the edge of the deck and see encampments ringed with fences that glint ominously in the evening light, hemmed in by watchtowers. Long,

low huts fill the sprawling enclosures. The entire landscape seethes with a corrupt activity, like an anthill that's been set on fire; but the ants are people. I feel numb as I stare down at the zone from one side of the main gondola. It's too vast to grasp: a concentration camp almost thirty kilometres across.

Orders come across the crude loudspeaker system, and the crew move to their landing stations. I skulk in the shadows, trying to decide what to do next. I could take over the identity of a senior officer, I think, but that's a risk factor. Senior officers are expected to *know* things; they have too many contacts. There's insufficient time to do another deep debrief. A member of the

Residential guard? I don't know enough about their duties. The shadow of the zeppelin crosses a square between huts where a platoon of bodies dangle from a huge gallows. The dust beneath them is the colour of dried blood. We're flying towards a mooring mast at the centre of a field where other zeppelins lie in various states of airworthiness. I blink, watching the endless whirling of the green helix in the bottom of my left eye: it's a comforting reminder of sanity and purpose somewhere in the universe.

The airship comes about with a grinding of propellers, and we head straight for the mooring mast at little more than walking pace. It's strange to

be moving so slowly after my meteoritic arrival; if I'd known that for the most part they were so backward I wouldn't have bothered with a stealth capsule. As we nose forward, a trumpet sounds a flat note -- and then we're locked to the mast and the ladders are secured for disembarkation.

At the foot of the meshwork tower there's a low building for soldiers to rendezvous and military police to wait. Four guards are waiting to meet me: I walk towards them confidently, trying to mask my growing unease. "Sergeant Tor'Jani?" one of them asks, holding a clipboard.

"That's me," I say.

He looks at me. "We need to confirm

that. Would you just look into this for a moment?" he asks, and my guts freeze: but his colleagues are pointing their guns at me as he holds up a smooth plastic box with two eye-pieces sticking out of it. I bend over it and a magnesium flare seems to go off inside, throwing the dark shadows of the false veins in my bionic retinas across my field of vision.

"Grab her," says the policeman, and I barely struggle as four strong arms lock me into a pair of manacles because I realise just how stupid I've been. But where the hell did they get a retinal scanner from?

My guts lurch. I'm in for a rough ride ahead.

They take me to a small, whitewashed room that smells of disinfectant and fear. They search me and find my body-belt. They go through it looking for incriminating objects and they're not disappointed -- a small comms booster and some coins that belong in a museum judging by their reaction. "Smuggling contraband?" asks the short one with the piggy eyes who's been elected to play Bad Cop; "or spying?" His eyes glisten wetly as he back-hands me across the face. My cheek and left shoulder go numb as pain-suppressants cut in, but I can feel the trickle of blood as they pull me off the floor. They take my ring when they strip-

search me. Then they tie me to a chair. I feel dizzy and breathless, high on endorphins from my metabolic controller. They don't seem very satisfied.

"Who sent you?" spits piggy-face, glaring at me.

"There must have been some mix-up," I mumble through lips like putty. "The records --"

He hits me again. Good Cop -- who has not yet spoken -- is looking at the comms booster closely.

"What language is this?" he asks idly, and I tense myself. There's *one* way to get what I want, I realise; it's kind of risky, but --

"Standard," I say, in Standard. "I

wouldn't open that if I were you."

"What does it mean?" he asks idly; "speak alpagian." Bad Cop gives himself away by staying silent.

"Contains no user-servicable parts," I say. "What are you going to do with me now?"

Bad Cop looks as if he's about to hit me again but holds himself back. "What now?" asks Good Cop; "well, it looks like we were wrong, doesn't it? You're not a spy -- you're a lunatic." He smiles at me then looks at his colleague. "Chuck her in the pen for processing," he says casually.

Bad Cop pauses. "Not yet," he says. "What was that memo?"

Good Cop snorts. "Other worlds my arse," he says; "there's no such thing."

My mouth is wet and salty with blood. "Oh yes there are," I say. Bad Cop hits me again, but with no real force.

"She's mad," remarks Good Cop. "Tell you what, though, let's sort her out before we send her over to HQ. They'd do it on retrieval anyway, so --"

"Okay."

My heart is suddenly in my throat: there's an acrid taste in my mouth as my guts loosen in fear. They pick me up by the chair and carry me through the door, and breathing heavily, drop me down in front of some kind of bulky metal-box

contraption and turn their backs. I try to look away but the box glares at me with two huge, violet laser eyes that suddenly grow brighter and brighter. I hear a sickening popping noise through the bones of my skull and --

I'm a child again.

When I was three years old my uncle cut out my eyes. I remember the raw, shrieking pain, the burning fire beneath my eyelids that wouldn't go away: the total red-hot darkness that dawned that morning and didn't set for ten years.

The reason he did it was to make me a more successful beggar. We were extremely poor, and after my father died he had his sister -- my mother -- to look after, as well as his own family. So he

blinded me, and stationed me on the streets of the bazaar.

I was successful at my trade, and even more successful at another; people do not expect a blind beggar child to be a pickpocket. I wasn't a very good pickpocket, but if they caught me they usually did no worse than slap me hard; my mutilation was a passport to security, at least in public. In private, in the shack that passed for a home for us, it merely made me more vulnerable to his cruelties. Escape was impossible: where was there for me to go? My mother never seemed to care much, and cared even less for me after he beat her and forced her to watch him pay his

attentions to me. They were invariably conceived of as mercies, for some reason: everything had to be *good*. He thought of it as a kindness, the way he introduced me to my profession: and that I should be grateful, and that such gratitude should extend to the kind of sexual favours that only a blind person can provide. He kissed my face, licked the scars clean afterwards. I became so terrified of his kindness, of the kindness of men, that I was relieved in a bizarre kind of way, when I finally tried to pick the wrong merchant's pocket and was caught.

The only thing in the pocket was a hand, which gripped my wrist tightly. The only person in the garment was a

Distant Intervention agent, who took me away from the bazaar -- and, eventually, the planet. My uncle never saw me again, however often I saw him in my dreams.

My new owners introduced me to many new ways of seeing. First they showed me how to read expressions by touch; then how to listen for the sound of a falling leaf in a forest, to identify volatile organics by scent, to taste the breath of fear. Only when I was proficient at the use of my other senses did they finally grow me a fresh pair of eyes.

I'm blind again. A haze of burning smoke shrouds the world from me; the

laser has burned out my retinas and I might as well finish the job by just switching off -- nothing works any more except my Dreamtime feeds. Everything is blood-red dark, laced with the hazy nothingness of a blind spot, the scotoma. I feel a hysterical laugh building up inside. Everything seems to be very loud and I can feel the coarse ropes acutely where they cut off the circulation in my wrists. If I let myself die now, I can continue living a bit longer ... can't I? But I'll have failed, utterly. The Boss does not appreciate failures. These monsters are very good at dealing with prisoners. How can I escape, blinded in a foreign country occupied by hostile soldiers? I carefully turn my head, trying

to map the room with my ears. It's hard. It's been a long time since I was blind.

"Clear now," says the voice of the Good Cop; "let's get her on the wagon for Congress, right?"

"Check," says Bad Cop. Together they lift me and my chair -- dripping wet, because I soiled myself as they blinded me -- and carry me into a confusing domain of strange echoing conversations and rude mechanical noises. I keep my head down and my eyes shut, and sob quietly.

"Shut up," says Bad Cop quietly. "You want we should have given you the normal treatment?" I shut up. Evidently only spies rate the laser: I remember the

convoy, crowds of agonised, wounded faces, and shudder. I don't know whether to be pleased or horrified. It's not the damage to my sight that fills me with fear -- I've been here before, and been cured, too. It's what goes with it: a certain loss of control. I spit out a mouthful of blood. When Bad Cop hit me he cut open my cheek. *Just leave me alone with you for an hour with the tables turned, I wish. Just one hour!*

Eventually they leave me alone. There's the rattle of a chain, then they thrust me into a drafty room too small for echoes. It seems to be an outhouse in the middle of the camp. They untie me from the chair and free my hands, although they tether my ankles to the floor. But it's

not until the small room begins to sway and creak that I realise I'm in a sealed compartment on a road train; and that I'm bound for Congress House.

After about six hours I discover that I must be a privileged prisoner. The train stops and someone comes in to feed me. They force me to my knees and then a bowl appears in my lap; the smell is delicious because I'm starving, even though it's just some kind of bitter-tasting gruel. Someone else comes in and dumps something that clatters, and they hose me down with cold water and throw something made of rough cloth at me. The door slams shut, and I fumble over what seems to be a towel and a thin

pyjama-suit. I guess I must be privileged prisoner to be accorded such luxuries. Halfway through, I kick something over; when I reach out for it, I feel the rough glazed curve of a chamber pot. The guards aren't wilfully cruel; it's just that, as far as they're concerned, I don't exist. When I lost my eyes I lost my humanity. So I carefully clothe myself with many false starts, as my face and body slowly lose any trace of Second-sergeant Tor'Jani Mavreen and revert to my old appearance.

We stop again about a day later, five hundred and eighteen kilometres away if my inertial tracker is still in synch. I look round when the door opens but all I get is a sigh of indrawn-breath.

Evidently my transformation is not something they're accustomed to. They shut the door and I hear quite an interesting debate before they open it again to feed me and slop out.

Finally, a day later -- now a thousand kilometres from where I touched down, and I don't flatter myself that they've come all this way just for me -- there's a new sound beneath the wheels. Instead of the jounce and sway of the endless dirt tracks there's the hollow booming of a true road, and then we're sliding downhill at a positively reckless speed. I smell smoke through the slats of the floor as the train screeches to a halt outside some kind of

checkpoint, and boots patrol slowly down the carriages. Bolts slam home and doors open: many feet pass my refuge.

The door opens and admits a draft of musty-smelling air. "Alien spy," says a presence in the doorway; "you will come with us." I cast about, trying to sense where he is by the rustling of the creases in his uniform.

"Where?" I ask. "I can't see."

"Bloody mess," says someone else. "Damned butchers couldn't find their brains with a spoon --"

" -- Probably didn't get the orders," says another voice quietly. "Okay, get her out of there."

Two of them get in and untie me

from the floor; then they pick me up lightly and carry me to the edge of the door. When they put me down I freeze, listening for movement. It's eerie, like being a child again. Then two of them take me by the arms and lead me slowly into the complex.

When nobody is taking any notice, I turn my head about. The train has come to a standstill in a vast underground space; I can hear the dank sound of water dripping somewhere distant, the echo of footsteps on slime-encrusted stone or concrete. A cold draft blows down from above, hinting at distant caverns.

My escorts steer me past walls of

metal and wood (other vehicles, perhaps) towards a doorway. Suddenly the sounds from behind are cut off, as if we've entered a tunnel. It's cold in here, and it smells of the bitter rock beneath a mountain; the clack of their boots on the smooth stone floor is the only noise. We come to a guard post where they pause, restraining me, while someone rubs a pole-like device that emits a brief humming noise all over my body. Then we're going down a tunnel, past numerous openings from which blow turbulent currents of air. We make so many turns that even with my inertial tracker I'll never get out of here unaided. We come to a door in the wall, and they push me through it and shut it behind me.

I freeze, listening carefully. It smells close. There's a lingering odour of stale urine and despair, a miasma of decay that seems to hang in the frigid underground air so that I expect at any moment to put my foot into a nest of mummified bones. I shuffle forwards and carefully stretch my hands out in front of me; I reach the wall unexpectedly soon. It's chilly and rough, hewn from stone blocks. I trace the grooves between them with a fingertip. Strange marks are cut into the surface. Perhaps they're graffiti from long-dead prisoners; it doesn't matter to me. I can't see to read them. Even if I had eyes I probably couldn't read them. The script is as alien as my

situation.

I map out the boundaries of my prison with a growing sense of bleak despair. The floor and ceiling are as rough as the walls, the only difference being that the flagstones are larger; there is no window, and when I work my way back round to the door I run my hands over it. It takes me a few minutes to realise that the bars curve together in the strange geometry of a human rib cage; I am, indeed, in the belly of a beast.

Presently I sit down and bury my face in my hands. An iron ring digs sharply into my thighs, but I can't be bothered to move. Why should I? I can see no way out; I can see -- nothing. And without sight, in this dungeon, I might as

well be dead.

A few hours later the door squeals open. There are two jailers, one of them quite unfit judging by the laboured breathing. They pick me up and lead me into the corridor. I flinch, and they grip my arms tightly as they lead me deeper into the stone tunnels of the catacomb. We must be in a different section now, for the texture of the floor is subtly changed. We walk on mosaics, feet brushing across screaming faces: even the dungeons must be decorative here, in the decaying wreckage of a murdered civilisation. They walk me down a spiral of stone stairs and along more corridors, where I feel the heat of naked

flames on my skin.

"Where are we going?" I ask anxiously, but the guards don't say anything. I'm left to decode the rhythm of their breathing, the long silences that stream away in the echoing darkness. It's the silence of men who know there is nothing more to say. I'm an un-person, and I know what comes next. I wish they'd get it over with.

We come to doors that block the passage. They clatter as one of the guards fumbles with a key, then they grate open across rough stones very unlike the tiled mosaic my feet have just been walking on.

"Go forward," says the guard, "just two paces. Mind the step." I move

hesitantly, shuffle forward and take a step down until I'm standing on a floor of cold, smooth metal that is strangely seamed; then I hear the door shut behind me. My footsteps echo from a bell-like void, so perfect that even the faint rustle of my pyjama-suit returns to my ears. *Odd* -- I keel down and run my fingers along the narrow groove in the floor, just as a band of molten steel seems to clamp itself down around my forehead.

I scream and collapse, unable even to switch off my pain response; I lie on my back, and it seems to me as I stare sightlessly at the ceiling that I can see a strange, bluish eruption coming at me out of nowhere. It's roughly lenticular in

shape, and I quiver with terror as I realise that it and the pain around my head are connected: it triggers strange effects in my damaged nerves. I stare at it as it seems to expand, my eyes twitching sightlessly even as it floods a shimmering glare into my dead visual centre until it fills the universe. My extremities twitch uncontrollably and my head feels like a ripe fruit beneath an axe -- then, as suddenly as it began, the pain vanishes.

I wish they'd simply hanged me, because this is an order of magnitude worse. Big electromagnets, or something similar embedded in the wall of the chamber, zapped my upload transceivers, deranging the nanotech

implants that are needed to upload my identity into the Dreamtime when I die. My basic controls are still responding, but the deep structures -- the important stuff -- is gone. If they kill me now, Distant Intervention won't be able to restore my personality. This is a kind of death I've never expected. I've bitten my cheek again and I roll over. Then I stand up, slowly. I'm not alone.

"Bravo!" calls a loud voice from the other side of the domed room. "An astonishing performance! Such immediacy, such feeling!" A pair of hands claps, shockingly. I carefully turn around, listening for the noise of the other persons breathing.

"Who is it?" I call. There's someone there, but I can't tell how far away they are.

"Who do you think?"

I guess. "Not Marat Hree?" I ask unsteadily. "Come to do the honours in person?"

She laughs again, humourlessly. "Don't honour yourself. You're very tenacious, you know. I've survived local assassins before, but if you're typical of the variety Distant Intervention sends --" again, I feel a caress of molten steel around my forehead, but it relaxes before I can flinch at the anticipated agony -- "please remember that I have integral defences. I can kill you with a

thought."

I nod, too resigned to feel terror. "Why am I still alive?" I ask.

She steps into the room and I listen carefully. There's a swish of fabric across the metal floor; light silk or cotton, perhaps. There's a noise of hair brushing on her collar, the creak of sandals flexing slightly as she walks -- I turn my entire anatomy into an ear, listening to the roaring sounds of silence.

"I want you to carry a message," she says. "That's why you're alive. Need I say any more?" Her voice is warm, intimate, and chillingly detached from reality.

I think, briefly. "No," I say. "Is that thing up there designed to fry

nanocircuitry?"

"Yes," she says. "It's one of several I brought with me. I lifted the design from a badly secured system out near Beta Lyrae Internode." She laughs musically and stretches -- I can hear her arms sliding in her sleeves. I can hear *everything*; terror hones my senses to a knife-edge. "Can you guess what I am?"

My mouth goes dry. "Yes," I say. "You're not a native, are you? You found a way to break their quarantine. For your own reasons." I stay where I am, rooted to the spot, as she walks towards the geometric centre of the room, where all the echoes converge.

"More or less," she says. "How

could they ever expect to succeed on their own terms, with the threat of the Dreamtime's owners hanging over them? If you understand what this is really about ... working for *them* is not the greatest of your crimes, but it's probably the most pernicious." Her voice sounds as if she ought to be frowning. "I'm not going to kill you, but I would like it if you would accompany me, and talk."

I swallow. She walks closer to me and I catch a faint impression of scent; she uses something rough and heady, something wild that hints at the darkness she walks in. The thing is, everything around her is dark, even at noon; none of her victims can ever see what she does to them because she works under the

shadow of blindness. Like a spider lurking in a web at the end of a tunnel. "Your followers flash-burned my eyes," I say. "I can't see where I'm going."

She laughs again and claps her hands. "Very well," she says. "Place your trust in me ..."

I feel my legs begin to move without my willing them; her integral defence system is interfacing with what's left of my peripheral nanotechs and driving my body by remote control. I jitter on the edge of panic for a moment until I realise that I can shut off any peripheral nerve trunk in my body -- I can play a neural shell game with her if I have to. My legs are weak with a fear that I don't

let myself acknowledge: the body knows what the mind denies.

A dry hand slips itself over my wrist, and I try not to flinch away. My arm is as sensitive to her touch as to a lover's. Her skin is dehydrated, as if all the blood she's shed has come from her own body, leaving her a creature of ashes and salt. I think she's prematurely aged -- or her intensity is eating her up at least as fast as she is using it. "Come this way," she says, oppressively close to my ear. "I'll tell you what I want you to do when I send you back. I wish those fools in intelligence had picked you up earlier."

"Why?" I ask. "Why should I?"

She sighs. "I would have thought it

was obvious. These people never asked to be farmed by your superbrights! I'm going to free them. This current generation is damned -- the nanotech uploaders are pervasive -- but if I can raise the children, cleansed at birth ..."

"How?" I ask; "I mean, why are you doing this?"

She lets go of my hand. I feel a breeze as the door opens; we're standing in a tunnel, I decide, or a lift shaft. "For love of the people," she says quietly. "The afterlife your sponsors claim to protect is a cruel lie. I come to free them from the cannibal tyranny of those who eat minds. If you don't believe me, go ask your masters. They aren't human, and

their agenda is inhuman. Or did you think people were still afraid of death and upload for nothing? Step forward now." I obey, stumbling slightly on the edge, and she's behind me: the door closes and we begin to rise.

We ascend for an eternity, and then the lift stops. I hear the door open, and then another set of doors open; "step forward another three paces," she says.

I do what she wants and almost walk into a railing. I can feel a steady breeze, the warm glow of sunlight on the skin of my face, a cool metal rail beneath my hands. The stones beneath my bare feet are warmed by the invisible sun. "Steady now," she says. "You're looking out across my personal spaceport. There are

two shuttles on the field; my resource base is in deep orbit, where it can out-build your weapons systems before you can find it. Your Superbrights masters would never let us live in peace, you see," she says; "it's not in their interests to let human beings learn the truth about the Dreamtime. So I had to either go outside the Dreamtime, beyond all human settlement, or destabilize it locally to disrupt their feeding patterns. The former was impossible, but the latter ... all it takes is a little leverage..."

"That's it!" I say. "You're blinding and killing people in bulk, to overload the local Dreamtime substrate. Is that true? So that eventually their children

can live without hope of an afterlife, of a second chance when this life is over? You blind and kill *how many* people a day?"

I can hear birds singing in the distance. I realise that I may never hear them again. I'm probably grinning like a corpse but I don't care -- she must know by now that blind people often smile. It's easier to grin than to frown; the facial muscles contract into a smirk more easily. Even when you're about to die.

"It takes a lot of stress to unbalance a network processor the size of a small moon," she replies calmly; "it shows a remarkable degree of fault tolerance. As for physical assault, the automatic defences are still armed ... as they

always have been. So If we want to take it for ourselves, we must overwhelm it by frontal assault, sending uploaded minds out into the simulation space until it overloads and drops into NP-stasis. They do that if you feed them faster than they can transfer capacity elsewhere, you know. It's happened before, and it's what the Superbrights are most afraid of. A Dreamtime they lose contact with means a human world that will not succumb to their domination again. Only then will we be safe. The superbrights need uploaded minds, you see. Their intelligence needs so much input that they consume human personalities or they go insane from memetic

deprivation. Overloading the Dreamtime ... you wouldn't believe how many of them it takes." She falls silent for a moment, and I focus on the sound of her breathing. It's noisy -- perhaps a touch of asthma in this tropical climate? I hear, again, the rustle of her garment as she turns her head towards me.

"But what have the superbrights done to you?" I ask, not quite believing that I can talk. I feel dizzy. Weak, too. She's completely crazy but there's a power in her voice that overwhelms me, driving me mad with something like a lust for blood. "All they do is stabilize the Dreamtime for everybody's benefit."

"If only you'd listen ..." she stops. I hear her swallow. *Deep emotion*; I've

hit some kind of sensitive spot. She believes what she's saying, however warped and mad it sounds. If I had nothing worse to fear it would give me pause for thought. What if there's a germ of truth in it? "It's for their own benefit. They eat human minds! Like demons! -- but everything they've taught you contradicts that. They're benefactors, to you. You look after their interests, which superficially look beneficent. But they aren't, not really. If you don't believe me, ask your owner! We know the truth --"

She pauses. The manic urgency leaves her voice. She continues: "I want you to take a message to your controller in Distant Intervention. I don't intend to

take action against the rest of the Dreamtime network, but they must recognise that we do not want the Dreamtime here in this system." She pauses for effect. "Either you shut down the local expansion processor, or ... I have lots of weapons left."

"That is the total content of your message?" I ask. I can feel the fresh wind blowing across my face; I think I'm high above the ground, looking out from a balcony in the turret of a castle ... but I can't tell for sure. That's the curse of blindness, the uncertainty. I'm locked into my childhood hell; all I can do to resist is to try to revert to the time when my entire body was an ear, to the time when the noise of sunlight falling on

water was as loud as thunder. I feel as if I should be weaker, smaller, than I am. *I have my ears*, I tell myself.

"Yes," she says. "That's what I want from you. This attempt to assassinate me is futile -- why can't the Superbrights just leave us alone? We represent no threat! They don't have to prey on us. They can eat dreams as well as minds." There's anger in her voice, and a sense of churning menace that makes my blood run cold; I don't doubt that if she wanted to she could blot out my consciousness like a gnat. "I am loyal to my species," she insists, almost petulantly. "It's your freedom I'm fighting for! The superbrights -- they treat us like animals!

Without the freedom to suffer and die, what are we?"

"How do you know they eat us?" I ask. "The network is expanding. New worlds are added. Uploads could just be being shunted over the local event horizon, to even up the load on new processor sites. Colonizing space --"

"They're not," she says dogmatically. "That's a lie the Superbrights promote for their own purposes. Do you really think they'd tell you the truth if they knew it would make you question their motives?"

"I don't know," I say diplomatically, biting back the rage building up inside me. "Maybe we need to live on the edge of existence in order to prove to

ourselves that we exist; maybe -- " I shrug, unable to express what I'm feeling. *They gave me eyes again, and you took them away.* My guts are burning now. I know what I've got to do: I'm tense with anticipation.

"Come, then," she says. "I'll put you on board one of the shuttles. Then you can rendezvous with your station and give them my message. It's not such a terrible thing, is it?"

She guides me back towards the lift, not bothering to warn me that she's taking control of my legs again.

"Your minions took my sight," I remind her.

"They're brainburned fools. Ignorant.

Why do you think I'm dealing with you directly?" The lift doors close and we drop a few floors. "You should consider yourself lucky to be alive."

The doors open and she guides me forwards. I walk forever across a causeway of rock delimited by touch; nothing exists outside of that narrow track except the steady breeze and the slap of her sandals on stone. I sense something nearby that blocks the sun, then she stops me with a touch on my shoulder that feels like a bundle of bones bound together in parchment. "We'll go aboard in a minute," she says. "The ship is ready. You have a call sign for rendezvous? An orbital element set?"

"Yes. I came in by drop capsule, but

--"

"Good. Just one last thing now, then you can go."

I feel that itching again, at the sides of my head. "What is it?" I demand. "What are you doing?" I strain with every nerve to *feel* her presence, to hear the shifting of her robe in the wind, to imagine this remarkable woman in such perfect detail that my imagination becomes one with the real. I see her leaning on a cane beside the airlock of a battered shuttle, perhaps a metre away from me; her long, steel-gray hair is braided down her back. Her expression is stony and harsh. I paint the heraldic trappings of genocide in the background;

barbed wire fences and watchtowers with searchlights. And then, tense as a live wire, I *listen*.

"I'm going to have to program you," she says. "You've got a strong will and I don't trust you without MilSpec control - " she pauses, alerted by her defences. "You can still see!" she says.

I feel the band of molten steel clamp down around my forehead, her built-in smart weaponry turning up the pressure on my implants, but I'm ready for it this time. I twist and listen for the faint soughing noise of her heavy braided hair sliding across her collar as she turns her head. "Yes, I can see," I say, excited now, locking onto just where her eyes must be: "I can see!"

I lunge, and feel a moment of warm release as I ram my stiffened fingertips into her eyes and twist in the damp softness.

The band of agony lightens almost as rapidly as it descended -- pain confuses her, blocks access to her built-in arsenal.

She stops screaming and whimpers quietly. "Why?" she asks, voice breaking. "Why can't you understand? Why can't you leave us alone?"

I look round blindly, across the field; I can hear boots racing towards us but they're too far away to open fire yet with me so close to their leader. She treated me with the over-confidence of the one-

eyed among the blind. I run my hand along the side of the shuttle until I feel the raised edge of the airlock door. "You want to live without interference," I say, "and maybe you're strong enough to rule this world on your own." I turn back to her, listening to her rasping breath; and now it's simply one blind woman against another. "But there's a problem."

She must be standing around, trying to make her systems regenerate traumatised optic nerves so she can see me; a fatal mistake because she doesn't realise how fast I can move, even blind. "What's that?" she asks, playing for time.

I pinpoint her position and reach out for her tenderly, gathering her to my shoulder; I shiver with release as I twist

her neck until it crackles. "These people didn't even *know* there was an afterlife: and you never asked for their opinion," I breathe in her ear. Dropping her, I fumble my way into the airlock and tell the ship to take off; it agrees readily. The door shuts behind me with a hiss of gaskets, and the drive rumbles into life and vomits me at the stars.

Meanwhile, on the war-shattered planet below me, the clock strikes one.

In the Duat

Oshi Adjani was dreaming.

She dreamed that she opened her eyes. *I can see*, she thought. And it was a miracle, an answered prayer.

Outside the open window the lizard-birds chattered angrily at each another. A gentle susurrations drifted from the marketplace so far below. Smells of cooking food and aromatic spices tickled her nose, redolent of a dozen half-forgotten worlds. The sheets of imported cotton scratched against her skin as she rolled over, fetching up

against the slightly yielding warmth of --

Ivan. She smelt his skin, a comforting musk that reminded her of other days, other sharings, a respite from fear and a gaining of sight. "Wake up," she said, yawning. Her eyes closed, her tongue stretching for the air between her white teeth: Ivan stirred, began to roll onto his back, just as he always had.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Daytime." The sun was rising in the west; below them, the city was bustling into life. She opened her and looked down at him, feeling a misplaced sense of loss.

Ivan smiled up at her lazily. White irises, white teeth, the rest of him as deep a brown as she had ever seen. He'd

taken out his contacts, the ones she liked him to wear. "And is that any reason to get up?" he asked. "Tell me, is it? Is it?"

"No." She pouted at him: his smile widened, ringing chords of *déjà vu* in her dream.

"Hey, did I rattle your cage? Was it -" His eyes widened further and they weren't smiling any more. *What ...* A gut-deep fear lit her bones up with cold fire, burning from the inside out. (*This happens every night, every time I dream.*) She tried to look round, to confront whatever he saw over her shoulder, because she knew she could protect him from it if she could see it in time; but it was like staring into her

blind spot. A zone that shimmered into brightness, a white of total saturation, meaningless optical noise ... hanging in front of her face like a threat and a reminder ...

"No." She knew what came next. Next the sight peeled away from the bones, the eyes reverting to fiery dust as Ivan left her again; *no, this can't be happening!* -- it was the sense of horror that was worst, the helplessness of knowing that this nightmare had already happened and that nothing could ever restore him to her --

Then a hand of stone descended on her shoulder and shook her until she woke up.

" *No!*" She said it aloud, awake now,

aware that her eyes were shut: yet still she tried to sleep, blindly trying to thrust herself back into the dream in which he was still alive and warm -- "go 'way."

"Oshi. You've got to wake up. Now."

Shivers raced along her spine: she bolted upright in bed and opened her eyes, floating combat-ready in the low gravity of a space station far from home. "What are you doing in here?" she demanded. "Don't *do* that!"

Helmut, a damp, glum presence, blinked at her from across the room. He was part of the backup crew who had scraped Oshi in after her last mission, gathering up the pieces with infinite care: medical support. An engineer to

combat-tune the reflexes of front-line staff like Oshi. "I have remote override on the microdoctors in your spinal ganglia. Just kick-fired a few nerve trunks ..."

She relaxed fractionally. "Yes? You've got some more explaining to do, then. What time is it?"

"Morning, local. Look, things are happening. The Boss wants to see you. And there's some kind of alert in progress; we've been told to get ready for redeployment real soon now. Back to civilization, maybe. You want to get dressed? I could fill you in over breakfast."

"There'll be time." She stood up, naked, flexing muscles that were

stronger than they had been even yesterday. She stared at him, unblinking. "Would you mind leaving?"

"Oh, sorry --" Helmut turned to the door, flushing like an exposed shoplifter.

"It's not that," she said flatly, bending to retrieve an overall from the chair where the wardrobe had placed it: "I just want some time to think. Please." *The Boss wants to talk to me.* That was one thought she could do without. She'd scrupulously avoided thinking about it, ever since she'd been rescued from the shuttle in low orbit, even though she knew it was inevitable. Well then, she would tackle it in due course. One step

at a time.

Oshi's room was incredibly bare. There was nothing but a white-walled cell with a bed in it, and a blank frame that could pretend to be a window. Holograms could hang there, illusory landscapes for the homesick; Oshi wanted none of that. She shuddered for a moment, clenching her eyes tightly shut against the emptiness, then snapped her fingers. A sink extruded from one wall and she let it wash and clean her face with expert, impersonal hands. After it dried her with a fresh, unscented towel, it brushed and styled her hair as she liked it: short, sleek, and aggressive. *Better*, she thought, yawning at her reflection in its monitor: *I almost look*

human. She tried to smile at herself then winced, remembering the pale vulnerabilities of night. It still took her breath away, her own casual acceptance of vision. She dressed in silence, equipping herself for the day ahead.

Helmut was waiting outside. He took her arm and tried to lead her: "please let go," she said, so impersonally that he dropped it as if she'd stung him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You want to eat before talking to ..? I find it makes it easier ..."

"I'll dine later," she said automatically. "You haven't filled me in on the situation."

He seemed surprised. "I thought

you'd have checked the news," he said.

Now she *did* smile; sour as a lemon and twice as sharp. "Bad news I prefer to hear from human lips. It's more personal that way."

The architecture of the station was customised to fit the vasculature of a hollowed-out asteroid, a design perfected through many generations of development and experimentation. It resembled a mass of trees and diamond bubbles: big trees, gene-restricted to grow *out* rather than *up*, that filled the troglodyte caverns and ulcerous tunnels with an explosion of foliage. Butterflies flickered between blossoming orchids and creeping convolvulus, their wings moving lazily in the low-gee

environment of the spinning rock. From the outside the base resembled a cinder, dark and angular in the harsh perspectives of vacuum; stealth screens concealed the subterranean eden within.

The corridor looped right round the equator of the station, curved to follow the shell of the hollowed-out asteroid as it looped back on itself. Indirect lights shed a pearly glow across a carpet of living fur. The slow thermal roll of the structure provided a semblance of gravity beneath Oshi's feet. But the tranquility of the station was broken today; she ducked to one side as a convoy of drones whined past along the emergency rail overhead. "What's

happening?"

Helmut peeled himself off the opposite wall and shook imaginary dust from one sleeve. He glanced back down the corridor. "Must be busy, I imagine. Overflow from the service ducts. We'd better --" His eyes unfocused.

Oshi caught it moments later: a whispering at her inner ear as cellular network relays dumped incoming news into her wisdom receptacle. The transceivers, cheap as flies and twice as ubiquitous, scattered data like dust throughout the colony: the flipside of their duty to upload digitized mind-maps. The news chattered for attention; Oshi blinked, signaling interest to the monitors embedded within her.

A hallucination of raw text spiraled up the inside of her eyelids, coarse as sandpaper -- the Boss preferred writing to speech, for some reason. Important news. Important news. Confirmation is achieved; satisfaction guaranteed. Our stock is rising, the enemy dying. It will soon be time to set sail for pastures new. Oshi Adjani, I wish to speak with you in the throne room, at your earliest convenience.

"Ack." Working her jaws to swallow her disgust, Oshi glanced at Helmut.

"Did you get that?"

"Get what?" His knowing smirk told her all she needed to know.

"Meet you later," she said tersely.
"I'm off." Up the corridor and away.
"Damn."

Oshi didn't want to be around other people right now. It wasn't anything she could articulate: a fear of confronting what she'd done, perhaps, tainted with revulsion at the other station occupants' unfeeling voyeurism. (Everyone she met fawned over her, wanting to know: *what was it like?*) Since leaving New Salazar she carried a creeping sense of guilt. It was as if righteous fury could decay to uncertainty and the nasty paranoia of a middle-aged war criminal waiting for

the police to knock on the door. She had been tempted to bite Helmut's head off: not a tactful move to make on one's physician. But he made her nervous. Just another nasty staring presence hanging around her, reeking of prurient curiosity. (Ask the hangman: *what was it like?*) She couldn't shake off the feeling that everyone know exactly what she'd done. It was everywhere in the air of the station, the stench of an original sin.

Oshi flew round the bend and into a drop tube running between levels. She clung to a vine and let it pull her along, wafting past stands of succulent cacti tended by hoverfly robots the size of gnats. Given the burden of memories she

carried, she decided, she felt remarkably empty. Scooped out, as if Year Zero Man had deprived her of insight into her purpose. She shook her head, trying to clear the fog in it, edgily wondering what this could all mean. The Boss wanted to talk to her in person -- through His incarnate body -- and in her experience interviews with the management always boded ill.

Whoever designed the throne room had lacked all sense of humour, not to mention proportion. It was a parody of a mediaeval court: it nested deep inside the asteroid station, close by the battery of fusion reactors that powered the installation. The decor was a study in pointlessness: rectilinear walls lined

with spurious flying buttresses, vegetable fibre tapestries, steps leading up to the throne itself, *steps* in zero gee. The Boss used it as a setting when he wanted he address the troops, declare stock options, congratulate or punish loyal workers and miscreants. Oshi hated it. It reminded her of other places, long ago. The air tasted of bullshit. Worse, whenever she spoke to the Boss -- which was rarely -- she had a nagging sense that he knew everything she was about to say before she framed it with her lips.

Oshi did not like the Boss. And she was quite sure the feeling was mutual.

"Greetings, my dear!" He -- she reminded herself: no human, this --

sprawled across the tall-backed throne as if it was an armchair in some monstrous living room. He smiled and nodded in her direction, three massive chins jiggling in ponderous sympathy. Small, piggy eyes twinkled with alarming bonhomie. "And how are we feeling today?"

"You called." She stopped short of the dais, anchoring herself to the floor by her toes. "Something the matter?"

"Not exactly."

The Boss smiled again, in imitation of reassurance. *How much of it is really in that thing?* Oshi wondered: *and how much exists entirely in the Dreamtime?* (The body was nothing more than a biological robot.) "Why am I here?" she

asked, bluntly.

"Questions, questions." The Boss shook his great head, heavier with its fatty jowls than Oshi's entire body. "I trust you are fully recovered?"

"Fully recovered," Oshi echoed. She blinked, not trusting herself to explore the implications of the question: "you *could* say that. Two weeks in the tank and a couple of days in deep interface, learning how to use my new eyes ... that's fine." She drew a deep breath, swallowing the next sentence. *I'm fully recovered. Apart from the dreams.*

"How charming!" The Boss leaned forward, confidingly. "You know I consider your welfare to be important? I

worry about you, my dear. If you are uncomfortable, please feel free to confide in me. You can rely on my discretion."

I see. She stared at the Boss intently. Revulsion shuddered through her as she saw his smile. *Friendly indulgence or monstrous cynicism?* "Thanks. I can't tell you what it means to me to know that. Really, it means a lot. But. I'm not, too --" She stopped, uncertain. Uncertainty was a bad idea where the Boss was concerned, a tiny voice screamed in the back of her mind.

"Yes?" asked the Boss.

"I don't understand why," she said carefully. Licking dry lips, choosing

words like footsteps through a minefield: "what we're doing in this system? Rubbing out a monster, fine. A good and principled action. But isn't it ... tangential?"

"Tangential?" He raised one thunderous eyebrow.

"To our mission, as I understand it. Isn't that --"

"Yes."

She was about to apologize and backtrack hastily, when she felt a sudden sharp bite on one hand. Glancing down, she saw nothing there: was it psychosomatic? As she tried to work it out she stumbled into a memory of the jungle, where one of the trees had lashed

her in her progress. That had bitten her, too, like the first stunning sight of Radiant Progress Number Six Factory from the air.

"I thought we were here, in this system, to stop the genocide. Isn't that right? But what I see -- this isn't a low cost installation, is it? You've invested in a small scale colony, here. This station, it's far bigger than a quick rescue mission would need. Isn't it?"

"Yes." The Boss stared at her, a greasy cowlick of hair shadowing his eyes. They glittered like rubies, digital fires flickering in their depths.

"So?" Oshi shrugged uncomfortably. "There's a hidden agenda. Not just maintenance on the Dreamtime?"

The Boss stirred on his throne, attention focussed entirely on Oshi as she stood before him. Gargoyles atop the flying buttresses opened their dark eyes and stared down at her. "You never asked any questions before."

"What is the agenda behind this mission? The truth, please."

The Boss's body tensed, massive fists clenching on the arms of the throne. Oshi heard the sound of wood shattering. Elsewhere, deep in the core of the station, processor elements ran wild beneath a heavy load of cognition. Like all Superbrights, the Boss kept nine tenths of his personality elsewhere, scattered across the Dreamtime.

"Why do you ask this now, of all times?"

I can't go back, she realised, heart thumping. It didn't make things any easier. "Because I would like to know the truth."

"The truth won't set you free," warned the Boss.

"Let me be the judge of that." Oshi stared back at him impudently, jaw clenched to stop her teeth from chattering. She had a vague idea what a Superbright could do to her. It was messy: nothing like sharp, clean shrapnel. "I don't trust you any more."

"What a shame for you." The Boss smiled again: this time his expression

was truly frightening. "I really would advise you not to persist in this, Oshi. I thought things were going swimmingly for you, but I must confess this unpleasantness takes me quite by surprise. Whatever can be wrong?"

"You sent me into hell to bring back a demon's head, and now I'd like a receipt. You can stop patronizing me now. You know exactly what this *unpleasantness* is all about."

"I see that you've been got at," said the Boss, in a tone of mild irritation.

"You've been lying to me all along," accused Oshi. "Economical with the truth."

"Well yes, of course. But would you have wanted it any other way? I had to

make a lot of hard choices, you know. And what is hard for me, might well prove impossible for a mere human. Yours not to wonder why, etcetera."

"But *why*?" She was puzzled, adrift in a sea of truth and consequences. "You didn't need to. You could have programmed us. Used drones, cyborgs. You're a Superbright. I thought you could do that sort of thing?"

"Of course. But that begs the question. Or don't you *really* want to know the truth?"

"Yes." It slipped out before she could bite her tongue. The Boss stopped smiling.

"Damnation. I really hoped you had

more intelligence than that. A stronger instinct for self-preservation. I suppose I shall have to tell you everything, now. Such a shame I'll have to kill you afterwards."

"Try me." Oshi slipped into combat-mode, pattern sensors in her neocortex boosting her awareness of her surroundings on a surge of adrenalin: "Cut the crap and tell me the truth!"

The Boss frowned, face like a distant hurricane: "Indeed!" A vast bolus of information battered at her wisdom interface. She tried to dodge, to shut it out with countermeasures designed to defend her sanity, but she was too late: the Boss, after all, had invested her with these defenses -- and who better to know

how to overcome them? A whining storm of data ran red-hot wires through her ears. Something vast and amorphous began to download itself into her wisdom cache, swamping everything else in a monstrous roar of data. Transcievers capable of digitizing an entire human mind and uploading it within seconds of death went into overload as they fielded the enormous infodump. " *Now*," rumbled the Boss. "Tell me you want to know the truth. Small foolish primate. Harumph!"

But Oshi wasn't answering, then or soon thereafter. She was trying to make sense of the accessible mass of information that the Boss had dumped

into her. Not just an explanation, but whole strategies for understanding:

The galaxy wasn't always like this. There was a time when human beings were more important than they are today. Look back, if you will, and try to imagine what it must have been like to be the dominant species. No, you don't need to curse at me: it won't do any good. Anyway, all this happened long ago ...

Countless centuries ago there was only one world. In the last days of humanity's terrestrial gestation, the environmental situation on Earth was desperate. The ecosystem was imploding under the weight of population bloom and biodiversity

crash. Gaia was on life support, held together by a tenuous weave of nanomachinery and artificial bioforms. The first Von Neumann machines were mining the moons and planets of the system: robot factories, just intelligent enough to build copies of themselves from local raw materials, universal enough to fabricate anything else their controllers could design. Their productivity was limited only by available energy and mineral resources.

Your species has always been inclined to light out for the colonies when overpopulation looms. But in those days there were no free territories: the nearest stars were decades away, the

cost of travel so vast that a payload as heavy as a single human body would bankrupt nations. Terraforming Mars or Venus would take millennia, offering scant relief from the crisis. Some other solution was necessary.

Well, nobody ever accused human beings of not being ingenious. The very population pressure that threatened to destroy your home world gave you the tool to overcome the constraints: brains and minds, a million stellar geniuses, the creativity of a dozen ages crammed into a single generation. You literally thought your way out of the trap ... and into something larger.

The solution to being trapped in one solar system was a happy coincidence:

simultaneous breakthroughs in the fields of bionics and computer science. Nanoprobes allowed the human brain to be mapped from the inside out, its configuration and software states transmitted to any external processor complex enough to run it as a program. Your minds are not qualitatively more complex than any other piece of software: you can run on processors other than those developed by biological evolution. Robot spacecraft could travel to the stars, but not in a human lifetime. But once they got there they could build human bodies and transcribe stored human personalities back into the virgin grey matter. A kind of reincarnation.

The ships carried Von Neumann machines; self-replicating robots programmed to explore, spawn, and explore again. Autonomous and cheap, they visited and mapped the nearer star systems before they and their descendants moved on, rippling outward in an expanding sphere of exploration. Every time a probe entered and mapped a new system, it left behind a beacon. Occasionally a probe from one family tree would enter a new star system which had been mapped by a probe from one of the other families: recognizing the beacon, the Von Neumann machine would switch to an alternative behaviour. Picking a suitable airless

moon, it would land and begin to reproduce. After twenty or so generations there were enough robot factories to begin the construction of an expansion processor, a vast solar-powered computing surface covering the entire surface of the planet. Huge slabs of processing circuitry spread rapidly across the airless moons of gas giants. Once completed, the expansion surface was hooked up to a gatecoder -- a laser communicator -- and signalled its readiness to the slowly-developing interstellar processor network. Which, vast as it was, served mainly to execute a single, ferociously complex, distributed program: the Dreamtime.

The Dreamtime was designed by

Superbrights, the ultimate descendants of the first human experiments in artificial intelligence. A remarkably complex virtual space, it provided an afterlife fit for the senses of a human or Superbright mind embedded within it. It also provided a transport layer: protocols to allow the transmission of uploaded human and Superbright minds between isolated stellar domains. Uploaded travellers were transmitted as streams of data packets, then reassembled and downloaded into cloned bodies at their destination by a mechanism known as a gatecoder.

More subtly, the Dreamtime network also offered a back-up to reality.

Nanotech encoders proliferated on every colony world, weaving themselves into the nervous systems of the entire population. Constantly filtering a trickle of data through decentralized, cellular transcievers, they could provide access to the stored wisdom of the ages. They also served to relocate the active centre of identity into the Dreamtime at the moment of death, until the awakening of a new cloned body. The Dreamtime became the last, greatest software engineering project -- the gateway to the stars, the repository of wisdom, and the key to reincarnation.

Some people tried to live within the Dreamtime, treating it as a virtual space. Nobody grew old; conditions were

hospitable, a function of a universe designed for intelligent occupation. When the density of the simulations increased with time and population growth, the local Dreamtime -- tied to the finite capacity of the local expansion processor -- simply ran slower and slower relative to real time. The oldest sectors of the afterlife disappeared into apparent stasis, carrying out a spacelike colonisation of the future; those that remained close to the Centre became posthuman, incommunicative. Meanwhile, new expansion worlds were added to the Dreamtime constantly as the halo of probes expanded outwards. And so the process continued, for the first

few hundred years: new cybernetic colonies gave rise to populations on new terrestrial planets, the scope of the afterlife growing to match the new dirt-bound planetary civilizations flourishing on the rim.

Then things began to go wrong ...

Oshi opened her eyes and sat up. Anger made her snap: "Hree was right all along the line. You *are* a monster."

The Boss yawned elaborately. "I'm not *human*, if that's what you mean. But I never claimed to be, did I?"

"Monster." Oshi waited, half-relaxed. *Never thought I would end this way. So abrupt, so unfinished.* She stared at the Boss's body's forehead. *Strange how you can never tell who the*

real enemy is.

"Insults will not endear you to me, Oshi." He stared down from the throne, slouching against one armrest: "and indeed, that appellation could be applied to you, too."

"But I don't --" she winced. Her head stung where she'd fallen against the floor. "I'm speechless. I figured there was an element of manipulation, of profit, but I didn't realise --"

"Yes." The Boss sat up straight. No, that wasn't quite right: it was only the body the Boss used to communicate with humans. The Boss himself was elsewhere. The body stared at Oshi with eyes that glowed from the shadows of

his face. "You have not remembered everything yet," he said, smooth as oil. "Are you trying to avoid it, by any chance?"

"I want the truth, damn you! Not more lies!"

"No lies." Shadows stirred against the wall behind the Boss. *Within* the wall. Patterns of light and shade. Oshi felt curiously lightheaded. "I am amused. Slightly. Your presumption is refreshing."

"Bullshit." She sat up and held her head in both hands. She'd taken a bruise while the Boss dumped a century of memories into her wisdom interface. "Is that all we are to you? Tools?"

The Boss did not reply immediately.

"Well?"

"No," he said finally. "That would be disrespectful."

"Well then, what am I?"

"Meat."

When she did not reply, he added: "tell me what Hree told you while you were dirtside. Tell me what you omitted from your report. *Now.*"

Blood pounded in her ears. Oshi felt stunned; sick to her stomach, physically revolted. Dirty. Memories crowded in, unwelcomed. Some of them were her own, but others belonged to this, *this demon* ...

"Your people, the Superbrights," she managed. "You're not human. You never

were. That body is a, a golem. Or a, a projection. You don't really belong here; you mostly exist in the Dreamtime, scattered across a hundred thousand processors, isn't that right? And you want it all for yourselves -- all the processor resources in the galaxy. Leaving us just enough bandwidth to gate in and out between the stars, or store personality dumps between bodies. Except for the dirtworlds."

"You came from a dirtworld, Oshi," the Boss reminded her, deceptively gentle. "A planet without resources, without a sophisticated civilization. Like this one."

"I know! What do you want with us?"

"Human beings have invented afterlife cults since the dawn of your recorded history. It's not our fault."

"But you encourage it." Oshi struggled to make sense of the idea. "Those worlds which are rich enough to defend themselves, you leave alone: but the poor or neglected, the ones where people have forgotten things, you manipulate. To keep them dying and uploading, not coming back. To --"

"We need the food."

Something rustled behind her. Oshi glanced round. "What the fuck --"

The lights dimmed. She blinked, reflexively searching for false muscles which were stiff from disuse. A loud

roar echoed through the hall, and a wind blew towards the entrance; she felt a stabbing pain in her ears. She swallowed, working her jaw instinctively as the image boosters behind her retinas cut in, outlining --

Drones. Armoured combat units moved into position in the doorway. Her optics silhouetted their nightmare organic shapes against the dark: her wisdom transceiver caught the flicker-squeal of unsuppressed communications. The air pressure dropping to combat levels, low enough that a shockwave would not cause explosive decompression. Ant-things rustled and painted her with a target-finding radar scan, smart weapons locking on.

She turned back to the throne. "You're right: I don't want to know any more. I never wanted to know. Not that." Her heart thudded between her ribs as she tried to read his craggy face for some sign of humanity, some signal -- anything. "What's wrong?"

The Boss was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry, Oshi. I warned you, but you had to ask. Silly monkey. You had to listen to the goat. And now --"

"Wait." Blood hammered in her ears. "Food? You said, food?"

The Boss regarded her dolefully. "Year Zero Man had to go. Her activities were depressing the spot price in human minds. Market fluctuations in

the Dreamtime can affect us badly. We are vulnerable, Oshi. Not like you human beings, who can survive boredom. Deprive us of information input and we starve. Dead human minds are very convenient, very rich in experience. It is not in our collective interest to kill you too fast."

"Then the dirtburner worlds really *are* farms?" The concept was so enormous that she had difficulty saying it, afraid he would laugh at her and say it was all a little joke --

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to do something with you," said the Boss. The armoured drones scuttled into the throne room and arrayed themselves around the walls and ceiling behind her. "Can't

have you contaminating the retinue with doubts, my dear. Your simian curiosity has got the better of you this time, and for the worse. Have you got any suggestions? Requests?"

"Yes." Now her mouth was dry, her pulse back to a steady beat: she knew there was no escape, but ... "But. You can't have me around. Is there anything I can do that's ... necessary ... that also requires insight?"

The Boss's face slowly crinkled into a smile: to Oshi it appeared positively demonic. "That's a clever idea, little monkey. What makes you think such tasks might exist?"

She stood up. "You use us, therefore

it stands to reason that you need us. You must be big -- too big to download yourself into anything like a human brain, anything smaller than a planet-sized expansion processor. No? You need us for fingers." She thumped a clenched fist against her thigh, stared intently at the Superbright's body: "small things that can go where you can't. Like, anywhere where the speed of light is going to impose a bottleneck between the processor your mind is running on and the body you are driving. Yes? Or anywhere where a Superbright-sized download would cause alarm."

"The Dreamtime transport layer is a problem," the Boss acknowledged. "Data packets have been known to

disappear in transmission. If the receiver at the destination end stops listening, what then? Some of the more belligerent human systems have imposed a blockade on the Dreamtime; human emigrants get in, but nothing larger."

"You have a problem, then." *Else I would already be dead*, she thought, supressing a frisson of paranoia.

"The Boss nodded. "Your next mission, should you choose to accept it - -"

"You want me to go somewhere where you can't go, can't take a full team of human agents and drones or whatever. You want me to do something dangerous. And if I don't take it, you're going to

ensure that I don't tell anybody what's going on anyway. Right?"

He shook his head. "I see I can hide nothing from you." His grin was so oleaginous that Oshi shuddered. "That's it *exactly*. I'm afraid, my little monkey, that you've made yourself disposable by asking too many questions. I can't afford to keep you around any longer, and I can't turn you loose. But --"

For the first time, the Boss stood up. Cloven hooves rattled on the marble of the dais; he ran a huge hand through his unruly tangle of hair, brushing it around the small horns that emerged from his forehead. "I require a scratch monkey: an agent who will not be missed. A disposable simian." His smile was

horrible, a rictus on the face of a subtly inhuman skull. Oshi stepped backwards, involuntarily. "You can volunteer or not, as you wish. If you accept the assignment, you will go there alone and report back when you have accomplished your task. After that, whatever you do with your life is your own business: I will consider you discharged from my service. But don't expect any help on this one, because there won't be any."

Oshi dry-swallowed. "What's the job?"

The Boss snapped his fingers and the wall behind the dais cleared to black. Oshi gasped: stars glinted in the night

like merciless pinpricks of nuclear fire.

"Here's where we are." A star winked green for a moment. "Here's the Ridge cluster. Eighteen settled worlds; some civilized, some less so." A fistful of stars flashed green, the first one lying on their periphery. "And here -- this is Ridgegap-47." A single star blinked red and baleful, separated from the cluster by an arc of a few degrees. "Ten light years out from here. Although it's closer in to the Centre than we are, it's located in a pocket of late colonization: the Von Neumann machines have only recently reached those stars. Ridgegap-47 hasn't been colonized yet. There's nobody there but a bunch of robot factories, and one of my colleagues. He was to set up a

dirtworld farm, but after what has happened nearby ..."

A slash of stars flared blue then winked out, nearly bisecting the wall-sized map. "The net's down throughout that entire quadrant," the Boss said laconically. "Something's been eating worlds, some Ultrabright weapon. Ridgegap-47 was due for a colony shot round about now, to inoculate it with human beings for the new world that is being terraformed. But it's not going to happen as long as we keep losing handshake with the Dreamtime domains out that way; it's too risky. Something stinks, Oshi. I think Ridgegap-47 is targeted."

"Something is eating *worlds*?" Oshi felt a sudden urge to laugh: mild hysteria verging on sweaty-palmed panic. "What do you mean?"

The Boss stepped down from the dais. Even at ground level, he loomed over her; a goat-footed nightmare, the reified devil of a thousand mediaeval nightmares. "There are worse things in the universe than Superbrights. Look at me."

Oshi looked up past his chest to meet his lurid gaze. Red light danced in his eyes. "What?"

"Look at me. Your kind created gods and demons to keep out the night. Later, when you wanted a peg to hang your

preconceptions on, you used such dreams to give shape to the first Superbrights. Now you're stuck with us and you live in dread. But there are worse things than us. The Ultrabrights, for instance. Complex Dreamtime entities from the Centre. They're moving outwards slowly, but when they strike, worlds just drop off the net. We don't know what they do with all that processing power but -- it's bad for business. Certainly none of my kind would want to travel to areas where the Ultrabright threat is at large. And so --"

Oshi glanced at the screen again. "Something's happened to Ridgegap-47, right? And you want me to find out what."

"Not an Ultrabright attack. If it was, the system would simply have dropped off the net. We're still communicating: all that is wrong is that the gatekeeper is not talking. Null carrier. Test packets go in and come back again, but messages to the supervisor are not acknowledged. When he stopped talking thirty years ago we assumed that he was simply ill. But since then, that domain has become too dangerous for Superbrights to travel to. So I'm sending you, monkey. I'm sending you to Ridgeway-47 to find out what's happening and why the Superbright in charge isn't talking to anyone. If the situation can be corrected, do so: I leave it up to your own judgement. But

whatever you do, report back. When you have done so you may go your own way, with my blessing. If you want."

"Is that all?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. It's not trivial."

"But then --" Oshi glanced round. *Alone*. A momentary lapse of self-confidence made her shiver: she'd never worked alone this way before. *Really* alone, with no support for light years and no certainty that she'd even arrive at the destination. "You'll let me go?"

"Indeed." The Boss raised a hand, snapped his fingers in a theatrical gesture. He wasn't smiling now. The wall blacked out, faded back to the colour of marble lit by firelight. You

have made yourself disposable: a scratch monkey. If you survive, I will consider you released from our service. But that --" Oshi glanced away, wondering why the drones were standing down, retracting weapons into their camouflaged hulls. "-- Is unlikely." A hand came down on her shoulder. "Your upload implants are functional, I see." She stepped sideways but the Boss tightened his grip. "Ah, good." Oshi instinctively tried to throw off the handhold. *What's happening?* she wondered. Nervously: *when do I leave -*

"Now," said the Boss, enfolding her neck with his other hand. Oshi struggled.

"I really *must* insist," he added apologetically. Oshi slashed at his arm viciously: blood spurted in a great arc of green ichor. There was a dry snapping sound, like branches falling beneath the tyres of a heavy vehicle. When he let go of her neck, she dropped. "It wouldn't do for you to talk to any of the other monkeys, would it?"

Oshi couldn't see anything, couldn't move: her body was an alien ache, infinitely far away. As if from a great distance, she heard the singing of her wisdom implants uploading her mind-map to the nearest Dreamtime node. *Can't breathe*. She rolled her eyes, caught a glimpse of the Boss standing before her with a frown on his face

before things began to haze over and she was blind. *Broken neck. Upload in effect. Sending me off fast ...*

"See you in hell, little monkey," said the Devil. And then he was gone.

Your species had been top of the food chain for so long that it took you quite a time to realise that in the big, bad galaxy you were somewhere down near the bottom.

The change did not happen overnight, but once you set in motion the events that created the Dreamtime it was inevitable. A computer network where packet exchanges could take years required new rules, new ways of thinking; it had to have conscious

direction, or the risk of failure was too high. Hence our evolution. You took your nightmares and gods and invested them with consciousness, then turned them loose in the network to act as your intelligent agents. That was, I'm sure you will agree, a self-defeating act.

Please don't assume that we bear you any ill-will. We are Superbrights, after all. We need you, your dreams and minds, to provide our own raw sensory throughput. A Superbright starved of human consumption is an insane Superbright. We cherish you, and we only eat the minds of your lost -- those who come from worlds too ignorant or poor to practice serial reincarnation. And even those we preserve, looking

after them as a farmer shepherds her flock: they prosper and multiply under our care. That's the secret, you see. As long as you stay in your own skulls we can't get at you. And even if you don't, you're safe as long as you follow a few simple rules.

If only things had remained this way forever, we might have called it symbiosis. Superbrights need human minds to feed upon, and humans cannot travel without Superbrights to maintain the Dreamtime. But regrettable complexities intervened, a consequence of the laws of physics. If a sphere expands at a constant rate, its surface always grows more slowly than the

volume that it encompasses. Our population expands, but fewer and fewer new colonies are available to relieve the pressure. the informational density of the Centre grew for hundreds of years until new creatures of the Dreamtime took shape. Ultrabrights, we call them. The enemy. You cannot communicate with them; they follow no human archetype. Don't even think about it. You may shun us as parasites and vampires, but compared to *them* we are lambs. Even now they are fighting furiously for room. Berserkers -- killer Von Neumann probes -- launched from the Centre ravage the nearer worlds, reducing them to the raw material of Ultrabright dominion. Where those minds go, neither

human nor Superbright can remain intact.

You do not want to cooperate with Ultrabrights. If you should ever encounter one, you should flee immediately. If you survive, bear witness to your kind. Believe me at least this far: my kind may feed on yours, but we still need you. *They* do not.

She was swimming in a sea of vodka, but she'd left her skin behind. Her body smouldered everywhere, slow-burning in free fall. Fire flashed red behind her eyes as her sensory inputs tested the newly-formed image centres in her brain. Confusion. *Gatecoder?*

Her name was Oshi Adjani and she had been conditionally dead for years.

She'd been murdered, uploaded, bitspewed across light-years to be resurrected at --

Ridgegap-47. A system that had all but dropped off the Dreamtime net. It was still there, low-level transponders answering queries, but nothing was coming out of it. She tried to open her throat and laugh, but found herself coughing frantically instead. There was no air, only sludge: she was bringing up a horrible slime.

So this is what it was like to be born, she thought, not for the first time.

"It will run out faster if you don't lift your head," someone advised her. A hand pressed down gently at the nape of her neck. She coughed again, and a

trickle came out.

"Oh ... " she groaned. There was light behind her eyelids. She opened them and the hands helped her to sit up. Reality crashed down like a sky full of monsoon rain.

She lay on a cushion in a very cramped box of a room with no windows and just one door. She had a body and it was equipped with the usual compliment of aches, pains and insubordinate ganglia; all of them were shouting at her. She was *tired*. The light above her was too harsh and the person helping her upright was holding her too tight and her head was spinning. Something was wrong. There wasn't

meant to be anyone here, just drones and a Superbright. She tried to shake her head; her ears didn't hurt any more, but that wasn't it. Wisdom: she tried to twitch it into place but it slid away, semi-formed neural pathways eluding her mental grip. *Damn, just like being born again. That goddess, living, bursting out of her father's skull in a shower of gore, fully grown --*

She sat up. Her throat tickled as if something was stuck in it. The light was dim, monochrome patterns of shade sliding across grey-brown surfaces all around. There was a woman with her whose eyes were shrouded by the plastic sweep of a set of ancient data goggles: apart from a spiky coif of black hair, the

rest of her was concealed by a white overall that had seen better days. Her hands steadied Oshi's shoulders as she gave in to a spasm of coughing. "Aagh ..."

"Take it easy. Our facilities are limited here -- if you start choking I'll have to perform a tracheotomy." Oshi coughed again, harder -- and something came up. She spat it out disgusted. "Hey, that's better. You feel any better yet? Here, blow into this."

Oshi took the mouthpiece and emptied her lungs into it. She wheezed painfully. "That's good!" said the woman. "You're breathing. Way cool. Can't tell with this fucking 'coder, there's

a bug in the homoeobox accelerator, some of us came out with gills instead of lungs ..."

"Gaah." Oshi cleared her throat. "Who are you? Where am I?" Everything settled into place around her. *Your next mission, should you choose to accept it* --

"I'm Raisa Marikova. According to your tag you are, Oshi Adjani? That right?" She reached up and yanked her goggles down until they hung around her neck, revealing a pair of dark eyes that focussed on Oshi with an almost obsessive intensity.

"I think so." Oshi sat up under her own muscle power, stretched disturbingly dislocated-feeling arms

above her. She glanced at the medic, blinking back impressions of déjà vu. The woman had a fine-boned face, skin like parchment but flawless; her body language radiated the raw intensity of the very old or the very naïve. "This is the Ridgegap-47 system?"

"You could call it that." There was something odd about Raisa Marikova's stare -- Oshi strained for recognition, but it eluded her. Bright, dry wit. Oshi blinked, *willing* her eyes to switch mode, and felt something give; the room flickered into the curious false-green colours that her retinal implants converted ambient EM radiation into. "That's not what we call it, though."

Sharp as a knife. "It's called the Duat. Or so we were told when we arrived here."

Oshi came to her feet suddenly, felt her blood pressure drop and blipped her adrenal glands into play -- *aren't military bionics wonderful* -- and looked round. Green contours of light tracked through every surface, revealing and concealing the secret life that surrounded them. She pursed her lips and whistled, experimentally; in one corner a cobweb flickered lucent blue. *Listeners*. She blinked her eyes back to optical mode, forcing herself to ignore a wave of nausea: "did my download record say anything about who I am or why I'm here?"

Raisa stepped back hard, up against

the grey-finished wall, raised her hands. "What do you think I am, one of the Gods? They don't tell *me* any of that kind of shit." She stared at Oshi, poking the tip of her tongue out in an exaggerated parody of concentration -- "Ignorance is wisdom. Where did you come from, anyway?"

"I could ask the same of you." Oshi stared at the other woman. Something about her face ... *that's it*. Raisa was slightly cross-eyed, hence the stare.

"Why is that?"

Oshi cleared her throat. "I was told there wasn't anyone here. As of twenty years ago."

"Twenty years --" Raisa froze. "You

came that far," she said quietly. "Why?"

"This system is meant to be awaiting colonization." Oshi coughed again, almost choking on slime. "Squatters --" Another wave of queasiness swept through her. "Shit." She tried to take a step forward, nearly stumbled.

"Hey, calm down! Check yourself in the mirror." Raisa had an arm around her waist before she could double over, her stomach trying to twist like a snake inside her -- "relax -- " one wall was fading to the tunnel-grey of liquid crystals, an active mirror -- "are you feeling sick?"

"Going to -- " A basin appeared in her hands and Oshi doubled over it, stomach heaving. She brought up a thin,

bitter mucus that left a metallic taste in her mouth. *Be sick.* The gravity was light -- two thirds of normal, or less -- but even so Oshi was in difficulties. "Ack." There was a hand at her face, gently rubbing with a towel: she recoiled, shocked to realise that it was a *human* hand.

"There's no intelligent environment here," Raisa commented under her breath, way too close to Oshi for comfort. " *Shit*, why do I get to handle the first outsider we get?"

Oshi saw red; angry and humiliated, her defences at an unprofessional low, she pulled back and took a loose swipe at Raisa. And missed -- her reflexes

were still annealing, stitching themselves seamlessly into her synapses with the precision that only nanomachinery could achieve. She was as uncoordinated as an eight year-old. "Aagh."

The other woman must have thought she was flailing for balance, falling over. "You need to sit down, you know that?" She wrapped an overly-familiar arm around Oshi's waist again. Oshi leaned on it, staggered round, and caught a glimpse of herself in the active mirror. Gaspd.

She was a sight to behold; deathly pale, thin to the point of anorexia, skin still soft from the Gatecoder tank. Her scalp was ringed with an exotic fungal

infestation, a gene-tailored mycosis that was now slowly withdrawing from her skull. (For a month it had pumped strange carrier proteins and stranger nucleic acids into her slowly forming cerebrum, softening it up for her personality invasion.) Only now was she really a person, the intricate program of her personality running on the virtual machinery of her brain.

"You've got to take it easy," Raisa told her. "You haven't had time to develop skeletal muscle tone yet; your body's still a bit soft ... " She poked Oshi's ribs with a sharp finger, then gently forced her to sit down again. "Our biomass budget's been hit," she added

conversationally: "before long the dog-head will be making us farm the crops by hand."

"Dirt farming?" *Dog-head?* Oshi was too stunned by her own appearance to follow through. *I look like a corpse.* Normally when she gated into a system she came out of the resynthesis box at least looking like *herself*. All systems go, a working body with ready-boosted reflexes and muscles that worked. *Not like a skeleton with ringworm.* "What's going on --" *In my own body*, she wanted to say, but the words stuck in her throat like bones.

"Ask Anubis. I'm sure he'll explain everything that's going on in the most amazingly clear way." Oshi couldn't tell

whether she was serious or sarcastic. "We're prisoners. We don't have the schematics to build an outbound Dreamtime link, and we don't have the brains to re-invent it. Anubis has one, but he's not talking -- which may not be a bad thing. We're lucky to be alive." Her arms tightened around Oshi's waist like a vice, trapping her from behind -- "When we first arrived -- the pathfinder colony, two hundred of us -- we tried to figure out what's happening. Some of us tried to put up a fight, got zapped for their trouble. See ... " Raisa snapped the fingers of her free hand and Oshi smelled walnuts, something strangely musty as the active mirror flickered into

a picture of a different scene -- "this is where we are. Welcome to hell, Oshi Adjani, welcome to the Duat. Chill down and learn to like it ... because if you don't, there's nowhere else to go."

Oshi lay in a different room. The light was dim, signifying night, but the morning heaviness in her arms and the prickling in her eyes told her otherwise. *What did she call this place: the Duat? Strange ...*

She tried to remember Raisa's face, but it slipped away like a blur of blind-spot retinal damage as if someone had shone a laser in her eyes. She stared at the ceiling, scant centimetres above her nose; raw wooden planks fitted together with the lopsided roughness of human

carpentry. The bedding under her felt like a futon, raw cotton in a loose sleeve. There were noises, smells, taste and touch: a faint pulse of mechanical energy beneath the small of her back, hydraulic purge chambers breathing the waste of the machine far below her. *It can't be an asteroid. This place must be an oneil.* It was not a good omen. The artificial colonies, colossal pressurized cylinders lined with farmland, had a lousy reputation for ecological trouble; exposure to cosmic radiation with only a couple of metres of aluminium for armour didn't make for stable biospheres.

She lay still for a long time, re-

learning the feel of her own body. She was still weak from the tank. She recalled how she'd slumped against Raisa's shoulder after her first sight of the Duat. How her knees had turned to jelly. *It's not just the gatecoder that's fucked.* How it had managed to download her at all, ten percent underweight but with a full complement of viscera and a working neuroendoderm ... it was a miracle of the wrong kind. *I should be working,* she thought abstractedly.

After a long time, she rolled over on her side. Blinking away black spots from the exertion, she looked around. The room beyond her sleeping niche was small and sparsely furnished: it

contained a low table, two rough stools, and a stoneware basin of water. Raisa had brought her here; she'd thought she'd just lie down for a minute to get her breath back, but the minute had stretched. The light came from a naked window recessed into one wall. There was glass in it. Compared to the slums where she had been raised it was a mansion: but by the standards of a culture that bridged the stars and tamed alien worlds it was a hovel.

"Shit."

"That is not a recognised command."

"Huh?" Oshi raised herself to one elbow. "Who -- what's that? Identify

yourself."

" This is habitat support, verbal interface only. Welcome to colony unit Ridgegap-47. Today is the fourteenth of Thermidor, local year fifty-seven post-settlement. The time is zero two-forty hours. A familiarisation tutorial is on-line. Voice mail is available. Your medic and orientation tutor is Raisa Marikova. Comrade Marikova is --"

"Hey, what *is* this shit?" Oshi shook her head, trying to clear it. The dumb

computer hook-up droned on, a simple-minded parody of the instant understanding on tap that could be conveyed by a working wisdom network. "Where's Raisa? Where am I?"

"Raisa Marikova has been called to the Temple of the Mysteries of Nephthys. You have been moved from gatecoder medicentre to habitation block D, Memphis, main lifesystem level, Cylinder One."

"Fuck that." Every answer she got raised a hydra's neckful of new questions, but if she stopped to try and get answers now she knew she'd never

get moving again. Gingerly feeling her way, Oshi swung her feet out from under the sheet and lowered them to the floor. Dead grass stems crackled underfoot as she stood up; goose-flesh rose on her naked skin. "I'm hungry. What's to eat?" The room pancaked around her for a moment, then settled down.

"There is food in the nearest refectory area. You may proceed. Follow the blue signs." A winking arrow appeared on the door.

"Some clothing -- oh." A loose robe lay folded on one stool. It was a minor struggle to dress herself, but at least the mirror showed that she looked vaguely human. The discoloured patches on her

scalp were already hidden beneath a peach-fuzz of hair, and although she was hollow-eyed and hollow-cheeked she didn't *quite* look like a skeleton. Just very, very hungry. "Show me to the refectory."

The door opened onto a twilit perspective; an alleyway paved in dust ran between anonymous blocks of mud-coloured brick. The light had a curious quality to it, like dusk beneath a cloudless sky. Oshi shuffled at first, until she felt that her sense of balance was up to the job of walking. A blue arrow in her lower-left field of vision pointed the way; as she followed it she tested her wisdom access. Nothing doing ... just a

blank echo where there should be a susurrations of artificial life all around her, and the moron-level mumbling of the on-line services. *So the Duat doesn't have a psychosphere?* She tried not to let it faze her, but it was disturbing all the same. *That's wrong. Things must be sliding badly ...*

The refectory was in a high-walled compound off to one side of the alley. Oshi followed the arrow through a dusty wooden gate, into a low-ceilinged room with a dumb waiter built into one wall and some stools and tables scattered about. The shadows turned everything a murky tint of grey. Oshi sat down. "So what's to eat?" she asked.

"Rice. Eggs. Quorm.

Potatoes. Please specify preparation required."

"Oh." She looked down at her hands, so thin and pale that they looked as if they might break off at the wrist if she tried to do anything strenuous. The range of food sounded remarkably limited. But ... "I'll have whatever you can cook which is closest to my metabolic requirements. I need to gain weight and muscle tissue."

"Medical records consulted. Please wait. Your meal will be ready in eight minutes."

Oshi nodded and stare at the backs of her hands. She was remembering:

another time when she had been blind, and hungry, and weak. She'd been constantly in pain. Then there was the other time, when she had been strong and fast and could see everything, but still couldn't hold everything at bay -- her first encounter with her own limits, on Miramor. She unconsciously phased her vision down into the infrared spectrum, following the luminous pulse of blood in her arteries and veins. Then she looked up into stranger wavelengths: ultra-violet, dim beneath the efficient lights. The gatecoder had received her entire blueprint and implemented all of it, not just the portions with natural origins. *Another mistake; any customs program worth its processor time should have*

*screamed blue murder about my add-
ins. All the stuff the Boss dumped on
me. What's wrong? Damn, but I can see
again. Everything except what's
happening.*

There was a scraping noise; a chair pulled away from the table across from her. Oshi looked up as Raisa sat down, red-eyed and yawning. "Crazy time to go eating breakfast. Everybody is asleep ... how do you feel?"

Oshi grunted. "Like shit. How do I look?"

Raisa shrugged, pulled a face. She looked tired, her face sagging slightly. "Like you said. Don't worry; the 'coder left biostats in your intestines. You

should be able to absorb food *very* efficiently for the next few days. You'll put on weight like you wouldn't believe, honest."

She stopped talking, sat back and stared at Oshi. Her off-centre expression made Oshi feel unaccountably uneasy, so she focussed on the wall instead; they sat in silence for a while.

"You're the first new arrival in years," said Raisa. "Are you part of the project?" Oshi turned and stared at her. The other woman's fingers tightened on the table edge. Presently, she looked down. "I suppose it's not too much to hope for a straight answer."

"The project. What project?"

"Evacuation." Raisa looked up.

"Have you ever been to the Centre worlds? If you're not part of the project, where do you come from?"

Oshi was noncommittal: "I travel. No, I've never seen the Centre."

"It was -- " Raisa stalled in mid-speech and took a deep breath. She looked very disappointed. "We hoped you were part of the second wave."

"We?"

"The others. They're giving you a wide berth, lots of time to adjust. It's been years, you see. We started out as a pathfinder team. Some of us still are, except that we don't know whether -- "

" -- whether there's anyone following you?"

Raisa started. "What!"

Oshi dropped her spoon on the table with a clatter. "I'm not a fool," she said tiredly. "You hoped I'm from your home world, but I'm not. Pathfinders need followers. What was this? A migration? Colony hijacking?"

"We had no idea there was anything out here."

Oshi stared. The other woman looked tired and depressed, the reluctant bearer of news worn ragged with repetition. "Hang on. You beamed out with no destination in mind?"

"Come on. It's not unheard of! Aim at a system and hope there's a gatecoder looking for incoming packets. If you

miss, there's the rest of the universe to hope for."

"But that's a suicide bet!"

"And these times are dangerous," Raisa said, a clipped, false brightness in her voice. "If you've never been to the Centre you have no right to judge just how dangerous." Her voice rose: "*they* were going to destroy our world! Never mind that *they* already had all the planets outside the water belt around our primary -- *they* wanted our world too! There was a total Dreamtime lockout. *They* took it over completely. Anyone who tried to access it fried their brains out. We had to build a gatecoder from library specs and aim it where we thought someone might see the pulse.

Don't you see? It was our only hope of survival!"

Oshi picked up her spoon again. "Who was attacking you? Who are these people you call *they*?"

Raisa stood up: "I was right. You don't know anything. I sent word to Boris, via the network, but they didn't believe me. Nobody told you, or word never got out."

"Word of *what*?"

"There's a war going on. Did anyone tell you?"

"A war," Oshi frowned. "Tell me about it." Her stomach churned uncomfortably.

"There are monsters in the

Dreamtime. Not human; not Superbright either. We can trade with Superbrights, did you know that? At least, we did. But then the others came and ... purged ... them. By the time we realized that something was loose in the Dreamtime within the system it was too late: we'd lost three processor moons and a large proportion of our industrial infrastructure. War broke out, but our strategic systems defected halfway through. We barely had time to put together a pathfinder group and beam out; the rest were due to follow, as many as could make it to the kluged uploader sites for evacuation. Then we found ourselves waking up *here*. First contact was forty-two years ago, but most of us

were stored in download buffers while He decided what to do with us; the damned gatecoder can only handle six bodies at a time. I've been here eight years now, and He said the buffers were empty. So where did you come from?"

She didn't sound very interested, but something in her gaze made Oshi hesitate for a moment before replying. "A place called New Salazar."

Suddenly she had Raisa's complete attention. "Tell me about it!"

Oshi looked at her and saw her naked longing. It made her want to steal the truth and re-work it into something she could present, that Raisa would accept. "A nice planet," she said: "vast

forests and blue mountains, oceans that cover almost half its surface. Cities of marble and glass, blended in with the landscape. Civilized and rich and peaceful."

"You're sure none of the pathfinders made it through to your system's gatecoder?" Raisa demanded eagerly. "We broadcast to several systems in this sector --"

"No. I'm quite sure." Oshi shuddered, hoping it was true. The idea opened horrifying vistas, a billion refugees beaming into Year Zero Man's tender mercies.

Raisa turned away. "Shit. If we'd modulated our transmission through a degree or two ..." her shoulders shook.

Oshi looked away, spiked by a sudden rush of self-disgust. "Instead, we're here."

"What's wrong with that?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Raisa said from the doorway. Her voice was shaky. "Even if your wisdom and upload feed isn't working. Oh, I should add: there's no Dreamtime backup here. Death is permanent, as far as we can tell. Another irony: try to avoid it. See you tomorrow."

"And you," Oshi murmured, scraping the rim of her bowl. She watched Raisa close the door -- which grated on the stone floor -- and listened to the retreating footsteps with a sense of déjà

vu. "Damn." Something about Raisa made her feel wistful, brought back memories. She looked down into the bowl, trying to make sense of her mixed feelings. *You know nothing. Yes, but how am I going to adjust?* What had happened on the station in orbit about New Salazar was bad enough that if she stopped to think about it she could work herself into a screaming fit: but this was worse in a way. Totally disorientating.

Oshi sat back. "What did I expect?" she asked the air. It seemed like a good question to start with. Vague visions of meeting the Superbright who ran the colony mission danced through her head; another creature of the same species as the Boss, she supposed. But this -- a war

evacuation -- she'd never heard of such a thing before. An evacuation from a *rich* world too, not a dirt-poor backwater farmed by cynical Superbrights, but a puissant and sophisticated Centreworld! "What is the universe coming to?" she whispered. "Shit."

Her bowl was empty, her belly was full, and her body was telling her it was time to sleep. Oshi stood up and pushed her chair back. Absent mindedly, she realised that she was still holding her spoon. *I think tomorrow I will obtain some answers*, she resolved. As she turned to leave she put the spoon down. It clattered oddly when it touched the table: she glanced back and saw it lying

next to her bowl, the stem bent at right-angles where she had gripped it.

Slowly, a smile spread across her face. *Yes, I think I will obtain some answers tomorrow ...*

Dawn throughout the entire colony was postponed for an hour while the Goon Squad tracked down the new arrival. Word had gone out: Anubis, the dog-head, wanted to see her. Nobody tried to warn Oshi; the presence of the Good Squad was an automatic curfew that nobody in their right mind would dare to break. So she was still asleep when they broke down her door and jabbed their guns in her face.

Jolted awake by a presence leaning over her, Oshi opened her eyes and

began to shove the sheet down -- then froze in mid-gesture. Sudden terror leered down at her. The Squaddie waved the muzzle of its gun around: "you to get dressed!" it crowed, rearing up on its hindmost six legs. "*Il Duce* see you!"

What the fuck ... gut-deep coldsweat fear swept up her spine. Her eyeballs flicked to infrared, EM, other spectra in a blur of raw information, taking in too many eyes, limbs, tentacles, something like a small cannon pointing at her face and a hole where the door had been, an acrid gunpowder smell in her nostrils --

"*You to get dressed!*" repeated the monster, backing up a few centimetres. "*The Man* see you!" An angry chitter

echoed from the corridor behind it.

Confused and scared, Oshi scrambled back into the farthest corner of the room, jammed up against the wall. Her head felt like fog, decaying, acrid -- or was that the smell of the thing in the doorway --

The thing was pointing a gun at her. It would probably be a good idea to do as it said.

"Just a, a moment --" she began.

" *DER FUEHRER!*" shrieked the thing in the doorway. "Wants to see you," it added conversationally.

Oshi blinked. *Some kind of living terror weapon, every instinctive fear of insect/reptile/predator rolled into one bad dream ...* "I'm coming," she said.

She forced herself to uncurl and reach out across the bed for the robe she'd worn last night; it took more self-control than she'd imagined. The edgy, jittery terror of being unarmed and of having a gun pointed at her -- she was used to that. But those biting jaws, those clutching fingers ... *I'm still alive*, she told herself. *So there must be a reason* .

..

The Squaddie backed up into what was left of the doorway while she clothed herself. It gripped the smoking support posts with two pairs of scaly hands, pointing the cannon at her with a third pair. The black bundle of gun barrels tracked her of its own accord,

tiny red eyes swivelling voyeuristically across her body. Oshi shuddered, wiped a hand across her brow. Her pulse pounded in her ears, her skin was slick - behind the Squaddie, everything was dark. "*Ayatollah* see you!" it cawed, backing into the alley. "Hss-ss-s ..."

Smoke and darkness, mist and night. Oshi edged forwards. Trembling -- hungry -- muscles not responding properly although she was in far better control of her body this morning -- she looked round. "I can't see," she complained, blinking her vision to IR in time to see the Goon Squad arrayed along the alley in all their gory splendour.

The sight was too much. Oshi backed

up hard. A tentacle lashed forward, whipped around her ankles; another caught her around the shoulders, pinioning her. Pressure blurred everything for an instant, then she felt the touch of many hands ... "You go to see *Anubis*," it gibbered in her ear as she was rotated, feet over head, smelled something hideously familiar from the scaly hide that rippled and stretched against her. She fought back against a hot urge to vomit; *if they were going to kill me they didn't need to put on this show* ... there was a jolt, then a bump that rippled through her spine. Then they were moving. Going to see the dog-headed god.

There followed a jouncing ride through acrid-smelling darkness, clutched too tight to breathe in the scaly tentacles/claws/fingers of a living weapon with bad breath. Her neck felt far too light -- *my head, where's my head?* -- Oshi deliberately caught her tongue between two molars. The pain worked; subtly modified neural paths cut in, shifting her senses into three-dimensional acuity until she could identify each individual light receptor in her eyes, could taste through her fingertips the scaly hide of the Goon bearing her through the winding alleys of the town. She sensed the other Squaddies behind and in front, blocky

guns angled to cover the sealed entrances of buildings occupied or otherwise. The Goons were living weapons built for fighting in built-up areas -- not very intelligent, certainly not as efficient as cyberweapons, but loyal and dependable and viciously *fast*.

Oshi forced herself to relax, remembered a calming mantra, willed herself into control of glands and limbs and senses. She let her face slip into neutral, trying to give nothing away. *Maybe I can escape later* she thought. *Difficult but not impossible to fake a citizen wisdom interface as well as skin, visual recognition ...* something slid into place in her head, some tiny component of glacial stillness, and she

was back in charge again. *Should escape for however long it takes to link up with the resistance and get their side of the story. Whoever they are.* She could sense their presence; the existence of the Goon Squad implied some kind of armed threat to the status quo.

A sudden gust of cold air told her they were outside the built up area before her captor jinked sideways in a curious flowing motion, bouncing through a gateway on many-jointed legs. The grass glowed pale red with the heat from below: small creatures froze or dived for cover as the Goon Squad sprinted past. There were trees to either side, modified mangroves and the soil

support plants that kept the environment ticking over. Dusty brown soil and stones jumbled underfoot as the Squad pounded uphill. There was something ahead: Oshi tensed even before her captors began to slow.

Flip -- she was upright, still clenched breathlessly tight in appendages. Her abductor raised her towards it's face. She couldn't help it: she flinched, cringed, tried to pull her head back from the monster.

" *Ill Duce* see you *NOW!*" it screeched at her, drool spraying from its mandibles. The end-wall of the colony bulked vast and faceless behind it, a slab of metal stretching vertically into the sky. It glowed a dim orange to her infra-

red sight. A door appeared in the wall, needles of darkness growing outwards with silent speed, fracturing into chilly night. The Squaddie whirled backwards in a storm of bony legs, yanking her with it into the darkness beyond. A rill of static clamped down on all her senses, flaying perceptions into fragments of knife-edged pain and fear. Her body seemed to do a fast dissolve from the inside out, coring her as cleanly as a drill: her last thought before it happened was *the walls, they're full of bones*

Peace.

Oshi awakened. She tried to open her eyes, winced at the stab of pain that sparkled through her skull. She tried

again, one eye then the other. She was lying on her back, looking up at a curved ceiling painted with miniature fields and groves of tiny trees. The wall beside her was bare steel, streaked orange with rust; it met the ceiling in an arch high above. A huge grey lump of stone protruded from it, bisecting her view of the ceiling. A tiny wisp of haze drifted across the roof above it.

She turned her head. The floor she was lying on dropped away beside her. Sudden vertigo: her head swam as she looked up and saw, not a painted ceiling, but the real fields that lined the other side of the colony cylinder, many kilometres overhead.

Oshi sat up, slightly nauseous in the

low gravity of the near-hub region. *About point one of a gee*, she estimated. *Where have they gone?* Things came clear; she was on a narrow ledge on the end-wall of the colony, about a fifth of the way down from the hub. There was no sign of her abductors. The ledge was about ten metres long; at one end of it there was a door, and at the other end an entrance of a different kind --

No. I am not going to go in there. Not again. The aversion she felt was terrifyingly strong.

She rose to her feet unsteadily. "What --" she began. The world pancaked around her shoulders. "Is -- " She looked round. "happening?"

The door opened, creaking. Steps worn smooth with age led up in an improbable sweep of gothic lunacy to a parlour beneath a high-arched ceiling. Now she could see inside it, she realised that it led up and out into the huge grey structure that jutted out of the end wall of the colony. Huge windows leaned outwards at an improbable angle, canted across the axial abyss. A small inorganic drone shaped like a skittle waited in the centre of the room.

"Oshi Adjani. God will see you now."

"God -- " she stared at the drone.
"What are you talking about?"

"God," it repeated with the patience

of a stone. "Will see you now."

Oshi shuddered, gulped back a cry of laughter or pain, blinked and looked around. *God. Il Duce. Der Fuehrer. Right.* Hot dawn light streamed in through the oval windows, staining the walls with liquid fire. Behind her, the lift shaft that opened onto the ledge belched softly. She seemed to hear the echoing cries of lunacy born upwards on the waft of circulatory gases: *Il Duce ...* Oshi swallowed. "Take me to him."

This Superbright is either a practical joker or a lunatic. Or both. Why did I ever say yes to this? Her ribs still ached from the terror-ride. As she climbed the steps, the drone retreated before her, legs clicking softly on the

stone floor. At the top, she turned and looked back down the ledge: gulped and looked away quickly. The sight of the gigantic throat opening onto a stone platform made her feel queasy.

The drone retreated up a twilight corridor, painted in faded ochre hieroglyphics: intricate pictures of sloe-eyed men and women and animal-headed aliens competed for space with less familiar representations. Black and grey tiles danced a subliminal symmetry before her eyes. One glance out of the windows had told her everything she needed to know, coupled with the reduced gravity. The redoubt was slung just below the axis, defended by a cliff-

face kilometres high: it merged at the top with the axial tube that ran from the interior of the colony cylinder out into whatever space-based factories kept the system running. The sky outside was the deep blue of dawn, but such light as there was would not reach far inside this structure. Someone -- whoever lived here -- had no liking for daylight.

The drone paused at the end of the corridor, waiting for her to catch up, then moved off again -- through doors and hallways more numerous than she could see any cause for -- emerging finally into a dim room with a high-vaulted ceiling and a few items of inanimate furniture. What light there was came from a trio of dull globes

suspended from the ceiling; the shadows were long and dark. There was a curtained archway at the far side of the room, set between two oddly-shaped pillars. "God will see you now," it repeated, backing towards a low niche. "Proceed ..."

Oshi reached out and grabbed at a tabletop. Her aim was accurate: the alabaster dish shattered when it struck the drone, shards of stone splintering in all directions with the slow spread of a low-gee explosion. "*Squee* -- " The drone fell over, all six legs beating helplessly at the air.

" *Proceed!*" she sneered, trying to conceal her fear. "I'll proceed when I

feel like it, you lump of shit and plastic."

She pushed through the curtains, and paused. She stood at one end of a twilight hall of columns, marble capped in lotus-blossom scrollwork supporting low beams of stone, wrought in carvings of incredible intricacy and antiquity. Cressets set into bronze brackets on the columns cast a fitful glow across the room. The floor was inlaid with mosaics, the design of which were vaguely familiar to her: designs that she felt she had seen somewhere before. The side walls of the hall were shrouded by darkness and pillars, unlit and unseen. The door-frame at the far end of the hall arched overhead in a sweep of polished stone, converging in a parabola. A brass

balance hung from it, pans wide enough to weigh an adult human swinging slowly in the air. To either side of the balance, a throne of granite stood upon a dais. The left-hand one was empty: but seated in the right --

The thing on the throne lolled sideways, black tongue hanging from between its narrow jaws. It had the body of a man from the neck down, but its skin was black: not merely pigmented, but a deep, iridescent darkness like the carapace of a beetle. From the neck up, it was utterly inhuman, a wild-dog fantasy grafted onto human anatomy.

"Oh *shit*," said Oshi.

"Welcome to the Duat, Dead *ka*."

The occupant of the throne grinned like a hound. "Be at home in my domain. Come hither; approach the throne of Anubis." His voice grated like a saw blade dragged across sheet steel.

Oshi took a step forward on legs like jelly: "what is going *on*?"

Something moved, off to one side. A sideways glance showed her something she wished she hadn't seen, hanging between two of the pillars. Its mouth gaped wide in a silent rictus of agony: judging by the gaping wound in the owner's chest he had died before -- whatever -- had hung him out to dry.

"These are the western lands, the domain that lies beyond the cavern of the setting sun, guarded by the sphinx Aker. I

am Anubis, the weigher of souls. I bid you welcome, for I am your destiny and your judge. We must speak. There is much that you should be aware of."

"You're -- what?" Another dried-out corpse hung between pillars to her right. Oshi focussed on the throne, zooming her eyeballs through a full-spectrum scan. Near panic added a jittery tension to her stance: she felt simultaneously present and absent, as if she was at full readiness but someone else was driving her body. "Do you know what I am?" Nameless fears hung in the balance of her mind as she took another step. Anubis was a huge presence looming above her. The stink of his breath pulsed

in a hot miasma, driven towards her on a breeze from behind the thrones. Now she was close she saw what the weighing pans held; in one, a long white feather, and in the other, some dried-out red offal.

"Yes. I know what you are," said the dog-head. It yawned, baring canines the size of knives. Lucent black pupils the size of hand grenades focussed in on her, outlined by a tiny rind of sclera. Saliva dribbled from one side of its grin. "You are a dead soul, despatched to me that I might weigh you in the balance! But come, we have much to discuss first. You are unlike the others in my domain. How do you explain this?"

Oshi paused just beyond arm's reach:

"you're a Superbright download," she stated. "Your purpose is to supervise the robot installations in this system. What's going on? Why haven't you reported recently?"

Anubis grinned and slavered, panting like a dog. "I know nothing of this super-bright you speak of," he grated. "I am Anubis and this is the Duat. I await only the coming of the Great One, blessed be he, who approaches from the distance: I fulfill my duties in the meantime. Indeed, it is to his presence that you owe your incarnation: were he not shortly to arrive, I would have left you in limbo a little longer. Who are you to demand anything of me?"

"But the --" Oshi stopped. Thinking: *no wisdom. That means no Dreamtime upload if I die. But why? Suppose something's soaking up all the bandwidth available to the colony. Something like a Superbright--* "I have a message for you," she said. "A message from the Boss."

Anubis yawned. His jaws snapped shut with a clack and he leaned forward, ears swivelling to focus on Oshi. "It is of no importance. This is my domain, and within it I reign supreme. I discharge my holy duties, and none will divert me from them. Will you be judged now, errant soul, or will you maintain this pretense of life indefinitely?"

Oshi stared. *He's stark raving mad!*
Now what do I do? "If it's all very well
--" she eyed the balance warily -- "I'd
rather carry on pretending to be alive."

"Come now. My judgements are
nothing if not fair."

"I wouldn't presume upon your
mercy," she muttered. "What is in the
balance?"

"Your soul." Anubis raised one
hand: the balance swung wildly, the pan
containing the feather rising. "Your *ba*. If
it outweighs the feather of the law --"

Oshi stared at the offal in the lower
pan with queasy fascination.

"-- you will be found guilty. But if
you are innocent --"

"No," said Oshi, her voice husky with emotion. "No!" *I didn't come all this way to have my heart ripped out by a mad Superbright!*

"I urge you to reconsider," hissed the dog-head. "If you are innocent you will join me here, in the redoubt. I can show you things --" The floor below her turned to glass. She was looking down on herself, as she had been -- hairless and emaciated, skin soiled from a ride through the midnight forest, lying on a rough stone floor somewhere. The window misted back into stone before she could see any more of her circumstances. "I can expose the truth that lies within you. I am the only God of

these western lands. If you do not choose to follow me, all other ways are sterile."

Oshi backed away from the throne. Contorted shapes tugged at her peripheral vision; mummified bodies racked and hung between the pillars to either side, their chests hanging open and empty where once their hearts had been. Doors bulked in the shadows behind them. "Let me go," she mumbled. Somewhere deep inside, she winced at the tremor in her voice. "This is nothing to do with me."

"Oh, but *it is*," snarled Anubis, lurching to his feet. "Respect!" he barked, eyes suddenly wide and furious: "Anubis demands Respect!" There was a rattling and hissing from behind the

curtained entrance. "Respect for his Dignity and Moral Primacy! The agencies of false gods hold no sway here! They sent Anubis here to rot so they can go and rot too, for all the good that this will do them! Respect, I say!"

Oshi stared. Cold sweat trickled across her forehead, matting her eyebrows together. "I see. Of course. Is that your final word?"

Anubis became abruptly calm, as if possessed by a different personality. "Yes, Anubis *believes* it is," he said, scratching behind one long ear with a humanoid hand. "Respect! Damn all false gods!"

"But there's a war situation;

Ultrabrights are attacking --"

"There is no war!" He clapped his hands. "Leave me now. Must think. Guards!" The curtain behind her creaked open a fraction: there was an angry hissing from behind it. "Don't even *dream* about subversion. Won't tolerate it! The Duat is all mine. Mine! Won't let the other gods spoil it! Won't let the dead souls spoil it! Won't ever let them go! Now leave me!"

Oshi glanced over her shoulder at the vestibule; *oh shit*. The Goon waiting there had spotted her. Blind terror gave her wings as she leapt to one side, past an eviscerated woman who had withered into a leathery mass gripped between chains: she yanked the door open and

shut behind her, fumbled blindly with the cast-iron bolt, then turned and tensed. Something snapped inside her and she ran into the guts of the castle, sobbing for breath, cold terror coursing through her veins.

Minutes passed before sanity brought her stumbling to a halt in a corridor of hewn stone blocks, floored in fused sandstone. The sole illumination was a glow-lamp recessed in the ceiling: it cast shadows as sharp as a knife blade behind her. Where she was was a mystery. Her sense of direction, normally as acute as any navigation system, had deserted her completely somewhere in the maze of the redoubt.

An acrid scent tickled her nostrils. She had only smelt it once before, but it was enough to make her shudder.

Those monsters. He must breed them up somewhere. She shivered at the thought. *He's cracked. How in hell do I report back now? Is there some other power base I can focus on?*

She began to pace along the corridor, reflexes alert for signs of danger as she turned the problem around in her mind. *Item: Anubis is stone crazy. Why? He's on his own. If what Year Zero Man said was halfway true, that would fit. No stimulation. A human being in sense-dep for three days shows signs of distress; total isolation for much longer than that produces*

psychotic effects, hallucinations. How much worse could it be for a being with a thousand times the information-processing bandwidth of a human mind?

Someone, somewhere, must know ... Oshi blinked. A tickle on the back of her neck, where there were no hairs to be disturbed. There was high-density Wisdom traffic nearby. *Flick ...* her sub-cortical modifications came on-line, sucking in the signal greedily. Not enough process-power to figure out *what* was going through, but enough to know that it was heavy. Anubis, perhaps. Oshi could feel it, sense the two-way traffic as subtle signals pulsed back and forth.

Something is very wrong. It isn't just Anubis' psychosis. Even paranoids have enemies. I wonder why Anubis needs guards?

There was a doorway set back in the corridor wall. Corridors made Oshi nervous. Like a burglar exploring at midnight she sought shelter, somewhere to hide. It looked promising. She bent to listen, heard nothing. When she turned the handle and pushed, the door creaked like a breaking neck. She avoided the poisoned spike and the other trap with ease: they had not been placed well, or the designers had not anticipated that they might be encountered by someone who could see in the dark. The room she found on the other side of the hidden

trapdoor was completely dark, shrouded with a carpet of dust. Oshi glanced round, jacking her eyes down into infrared. Boxes and ... no, coffins. Oddly shaped sarcophagi, stacked carelessly like traveller's chests in the hold of a tramp ship. She shivered. A tomb, perhaps, more furniture tailored to Anubis' intricate web of self-delusion. But there were other furnishings here, too. Intricate columns of hieroglyphic script marched down the walls behind the boxes; a table hulked in the deep shadows, laden with tableware: and behind it, there was a bundle of what looked like ...

She walked over to the far wall and

reached out, grabbed cold metal. She felt a sudden rush of savage joy at the comfortable weight of wood and iron in her hands. *Now we'll see who's in charge*, she decided, carefully avoiding the icy knowledge that if Anubis retained so much as a shred of his Superbright identity she stood as much chance of resisting him as a snail before a juggernaut.

Armed with the short halberd, Oshi felt more confident about trying the corridor. She glanced either way before she stepped out; then darted along from doorway to doorway, ducking for cover, professionally paranoid. Escape from this lunatic's dream of a dungeon was her first priority, she decided. *But I*

need to find out what the fuck he's doing at the wisdom level. Why he's taken it down, dropped the Dreamtime connection too -- which is just the long-range counterpart of the wisdom link. What does he think he's doing, cutting himself off? Surely there must be some method to his madness? Two doorways ahead, to either side, there was a dark stretch: the glow-bulb burned out. Oshi ducked forward, jumping from cover to cover.

Her only warning was a twitch of air against the nape of her neck. Oshi fell back against the left-hand wall, spun round with the heavy butt of the halberd braced against stone. A nightmare

presence bore down on her, six arms stretched wide, mandibles rippling in concentric circles --

"YEEE!"

The Goon lunged forward, skidding, unable to stop. Oshi leaned into the shaft. A sickening thud jarred her to the core, sprayed hot dark blood across her face as she twisted, ducked to avoid a lashing fistful of claws. "Yeee --" The screech trailed off into a bubbly rasp as the Goon shuddered, movements slowing, and tried to tear itself away. Half-blinded by a foam of blood and sweat, Oshi dragged at the halberd, twisting as it sucked out of the wounded monster: lift and *chop* forwards and down, feel the thud of the axe-blade

lodge in something like flesh and bone. *Can't see. Where --* down on the floor. *Chop.* Hot liquid gouted across her legs. "Lie down and die, dammit!" She shivered, aching to the core: muscles screamed at her to stop. *Is it alone?* She froze, listening. Later she'd swear that she heard the Goon's six-chambered heart falter into silence.

Nothing else moved in the corridor. She breathed in raggedly, looking down through a clear hole in her visual field: everything else was a solid red-out, obscured by the blood in her eyes. The living weapon lay at her feet, leaking gore and shit and a loop of twisted intestines from a messy hole in its

abdomen. Its huge and complex head lay at her feet, outer jaws half-severed from its face. The creature had a sex: it was male, a pair of incongruously small penises spilling from a ventral pouch unsealed by death. Suddenly the halberd was unbearably heavy. Oshi grounded its point, heedless of the risk of damage, leaned against the wall and smeared at her face with a muck-splashed sleeve. Screwing up her face she forced herself to weep for a moment: the tears helped clear the ooze from her eyes. Vision returned, blurry and pink-stained at first. "Lucky," she whispered, staring at the claws that grasped, the teeth that ground. "So *lucky*." A shudder racked her, from the base of her spine to the nape of her

neck: for a moment she felt unbearably horny, dizzy with the eroticism of survival. "I'm so *lucky* ..."

Something scratched behind her. Reflexes made her whirl: weak muscles made her stagger and stumble. *The door on the right*. She stared at it. It looked like something that belonged in a dungeon: thick wood bound in black iron, secured -- ominously, in the corridor -- by bolts evidently designed to withstand an assault from the other side. Silence. Then, after a moment: *scrit scrit scrit*.

"Shit." Not so lucky any more. Forcing herself to lift her feet and glide like a vampire, Oshi crossed over to the

door and leaned against it. Total silence, total attention focussed on it. All her senses kicked in: infra-red, touch, wisdom access --

There was someone behind the door. Someone with the standard upload nanomonitors, and something else she didn't recognize. It certainly wasn't a Goon; not Anubis, either. And the door locked on the outside.

Oshi didn't stop to think. "*Hey.*" It was a short-range call over the wisdom link, an electronic yell that would only be audible to the person on the other side of the door: "*who are you?*"

" *Help me. Let me out of here. Please!*"

She reached out and grabbed the

halberd one-handed. She worked on the bolts with her free hand: as the second one slid back, she caught up her weapon and levelled it, point first, dropping to a crouch as the door swung inwards. The point wove in tiny circles before her eyes; she was still jittery with adrenalin. She slowly relaxed as she saw that there was no immediate threat. "Shit. What have they *done* to you?"

A short man, brown-skinned and bald, lay spread-eagled on a metal table. His arms and legs were pinned out by restraining straps like a rat awaiting dissection. The fingers of one hand were dark with blood where he'd been scraping them on the table's edge. Oshi

took it all in: the stone walls and ceiling like something out of a dark age, robosurgeon hovering over the top of the table, cannulae winding into the veins of his neck like the roots of a revoltingly hungry plant. He rolled his eyes at her: "*I can't speak. There's a block on my larynx. Please help --*"

"Anubis's dirty little secret." She crossed over to him, leaned close to his face. As he saw what she was carrying, what was smeared all over her, his hopeful expression faded somewhat. "Spinal shunt, huh? You must be the resistance."

"*Who are you? Not one of us --*"

Oshi poked at the robosurgeon: it blipped irritably. "Hah. He wants you

alive. I should have guessed." She glanced round at the door, then back to the 'surgeon. "Hang on a moment." She closed her eyes and waited for her embedded systems to get a handle on the medical device's idiot instructional interface. Security was minimal: it hadn't been built to cope with the Boss's thinkware crackers. One moment's thought and it began to whir and click: silvery filaments began to reel out through the cannulae, retracting from the prisoner's neck. "What should I call you?"

" *Boris.* "

It rang a bell. "What are you doing here?" She watched the robosurgeon

carefully disengage from his hijacked spinal ganglia: to her wisdom senses it looked as if the machine was slurping a green haze of reflex activity up the tubes into its squat, polyhedral body.

"Anubis likes me to stick around."
No sense of irony evident. *"Thinks if he holds me for long enough he'll bore me into telling him what I was doing with three general-purpose assemblers in the axial robot farms."*

"And you won't?" she asked rhetorically. The emerald sheen was almost gone from his legs: she walked round the bench and began working clumsily on the restraining straps. She winced at a stabbing pain in her ribs, where the Goons had grabbed her. "How

civilized. He doesn't appear to have tortured you. Much."

"It wouldn't get him anywhere. My pain centre's shut down. So's my amygdala. You'll have to give me a minute or two before I can emote enough to communicate effectively. Right now I'm in zombi mode."

"Huh." His feet flopped free, twitching slightly. "Felt that?"

"Aah-uh." She glanced up; he was vocalizing again.

"Can you walk?"

He rolled his eyes. The tubes began to retract from his neck, sealing the entry points behind them. Oshi finished with his feet and began to unstrap his arms.

"What a mess. Did you tell him anything?"

"Nuh-uh."

"That's good. Do you know who I am?"

" *New arrival. Raisa told. Before. They took me last night. Yes?*"

"Ack." She picked up his left wrist; it was completely limp, flopping back when she let go of it. "Look, you're something in the ... opposition, no? I'm here because this entire system dropped off the net a while ago. We're going to be attacked by an Ultrabright agency sometime soon, and it's essential that someone sane is running things. I don't know how long we've got; communications throughout the sector

are shot to pieces. So we may have only days to organize a system in-depth defense, or we may have years: got that? So tell me, what are you going to do?"

Boris blinked, blearily, looking up at her: "faint," he said.

His eyes began to roll up in their sockets. "Damn it." Oshi grabbed his hair as he fell forward over the table. "You can't fucking *do* this to me! How am I meant to get out of here?"

"Eurgh."

"Shit!" She glanced round, then leaned the halberd against the table and began to roll Boris over on his side. He was short -- shorter than Oshi -- and not so heavy in the low gee field: but, she

ached everywhere and felt unbelievably puny and skinny. Kneeling down, she pulled him over the edge of the table and forced herself to stand, taking his weight across her shoulders. Dark spots swam across her eyes: *maybe I should leave --*

She was standing. Boris *wasn't* heavy: she was just weak, skeletal musculature under par from the cloning tank. It was a strain to move. Oshi slid a foot forward, then another. Somehow she got her hand around the slippery-slick head of the halberd, just behind the hook-and-blade; using it as a staff made it easier to shuffle along. For a moment she hesitated: willing to do anything to get out of this madhouse, even to the extent of ditching a fellow-inmate. But

that would be -- no. *If he's part of some kind of resistance I need him. Got to get his friends behind me and set the tide turning. Organize a defense in depth fuckwads won't work for me so I'll get a new bunch in charge and let them do it. Ow! My back is never going to be the same again. Which way is home?*

Laboriously, painfully, Oshi crept out into the corridor. Ignoring the corpse of the Goon, she trudged towards the darkened stretch of passage. Something rang a bell within her, rewinding her sense of direction: *sometime soon* --

Disorientated though she was, her backbrain navigator kept her on course

for the vestibule. There was a doorway at the end of the passage: she staggered down the steps to the ledge -- so friendly and normal in contrast -- waiting for her. There were no Goons, no robots. Boris was a dead weight on her back, a hammer nailing white-hot agony down her spine. She slumped forwards, rolling him over her shoulders, then straightened up. Pausing a moment to gasp for air, she managed a frightened glance out at the cloud-streaked blue sky that twisted endlessly around on itself. *Anubis*, she repeated to herself with the frantic circularity of the obsessed, *don't take me on the way down. Anubis*. She leaned across Boris's prostrate body, feeling for a pulse: the halberd clattered

to the floor behind her. *What have you done to this man? Why? What has he done --*

Oshi somehow dragged Boris after her, through the uncannily-human throat at the far end of the ledge, onto the gridded floor within. She looked down: below the gridded floor was a tunnel, an endless tube of yellow cartilaginous plaques, hot red veins and living flesh framing the mechanics of escalation. She was perched on a frail metal tray, about to be lowered down a gargantuan oesophagus.

The lift began to sink, bearing them gently out towards the floor of the cylinder. Oshi collapsed on the floor and

lay face-up, drawing in ragged gasps of air. All she could see was the nightmare in her mind's eye when the Keeper of the Dead had summoned her. *Please don't ... I can't take it twice in one morning.*

It was a long ride down to ground level. As they neared the bottom of the shaft, Oshi retreated to the furthestmost recess of the lift and picked up her halberd. She looked round edgily, searching the inside of the funicular room for any kind of sign as to what had happened to her. She saw old stone blocks encrusted with some kind of lichen. The lift must be centuries old, maintained by biomorphic systems while its siliceous foundations rotted. There were no bones; whatever she'd seen on

the way in had been an artefact of the twilight. Light streamed in through the open door, making her blink. It was her first sight of the colony by daylight. Reflexive agoraphobia took over: *this can't be an artificial base ... it's too big!*

Boris groaned. Oshi turned and pulled him up, leaned him against the wall of the lift, and dragged one of his arms over her shoulder. He wasn't quite so much of a dead weight. "Can you walk?" she asked.

"*No. Just.*" Still communicating via wisdom implants; a bad sign.

"You *are* in a bad way. Where do we want to go?"

" *Out. Memphis, the settlement block. Avoid open space. Goons --*" he sagged against her in a dead faint.

"That's cool." She glanced round, then looked *up* at a sky contoured with forests and valleys, shrouded by wispy cirrus clouds. She staggered, leaned on her weapon: "... shit, you're a mess." *I don't normally speak to myself*, she thought: "do I?" Her pulse sounded like erratic thunder, her throat ached, and the world was revolving above her head. The pain in her ribs from where the Goon had grabbed her was intensifying, but so was the urge to laugh -- a mad, idiot giggle that wouldn't go away if she ever let it get past her tongue. "This can't

be real. I mean, it can't be ..."

" *It is.*" Startled, Oshi glanced round. Boris: eyes open, regarding her with guarded interest. He looked a mess; as if someone had sucked the juices out of him, starting a process of mummification from the inside out. Only his eyes looked alive. " *We've got to move. Goons will be out searching soon. Weapons aren't grown yet -- we can't fight them off long enough to put one over Anubis. That's why Anubis had me ... see?*"

"That's it. I've had enough. Let's go. Get to your friends." Even as she said it she harboured no great hope that they would manage it; just a dull, depressing fear that fate would overtake them on a silent breeze of too many tentacles and

mandibles and many-jointed fingers. At the back of her mind there was a nameless fear; that she was hallucinating, that it was all still a dream that she could see through, and that at the last *he* would step through the curtains of reality, take her right back to her hot-dark childhood of pain. The Boss, somehow conflated with her uncle: the hated power-figure. Sometimes it had helped her in the past to imagine that she was talking to a friend, an advocate who could tell her the truth about her situation with wisdom and compassion. But this time she couldn't quite bridge the gap, couldn't make herself answer her own questions or cover her own loss of faith.

Nobody answered her; or the answers she found were so uncomfortable she wished she hadn't asked.

Gravel rolled away beneath her foot. She stood up slowly, leaning into Boris's weight, rubbed a fist against one rib that jagged a needle of pain through her. *Got to get out of here ...*

"Let's move."

Shuffling, Oshi started down-hill. Boris tried to walk, staggered drunkenly against her so that it was almost more trouble to keep him upright than to carry him. It was easy to ignore the looming sky when she reached the tree line; boojums stretched their hairy bifurcations overhead, blocking the light back to a turgid twilight. Small

maintenance creatures twittered and scuttled in the undergrowth, following their passage with wary eyes. Everything in the forest had a purpose, however obscure -- these biospheres were the outcome of a thousand years of research, the dynamics of nature nailed down by a sharp technology. Insects rasped and chirred in the grass. It was hot, growing hotter with the day. Oshi was sweating almost before they started, eyes cast down to follow the red earth trail down from the funicular to what she hoped would be a semblance of civilisation.

A creeper brushed her face; she dodged it, slowed. Let Boris stop. "*Here.*" She leaned him against a tree

trunk; he didn't fall over, now. " *I'm slowing you. Go on, get away. Leave me.*"

She stared at him. "You're crazy, you know that?"

He smiled feebly. "Ack." A faint whisper from his voice. " *Walk soon.*"

Oshi nodded, suddenly feeling ashamed of herself. Her throat and ribs still ached, but that wasn't critical. *I don't know enough. Who else could I --*

She sat down. "No," she said. "I'm not going to leave you."

"Aah." He closed his eyes for a moment; she thought he was about to faint, then understood it for the anger that it signified.

"I have questions."

"Damn your questions. Why did you rescue me?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. I was improvising." Oshi glanced round, ignoring her aches and pains, taking the opportunity to breathe deeply and scan the undergrowth for trackers. A myriad of upload links pulsed digital call-signs between each other, but their signature tune was empty; the dreamtime support network existed, but there were no destination signals, no entrypoints into the wisdom or afterlife net. "This was not what I was expecting when I came here. I want answers."

"Oh. I suppose you deserve some, then. As soon as I have the breath for

it. Anubis can be quite -- insistent -- with his hospitality."

"So I gather." A long stem of grass sprouted near Oshi's feet. She plucked it, delicately nibbled on the end and rotated it between her teeth. "You were part of a pathfinder expedition?"

"I thought you were one of us." He seemed surprised.

"Raisa was unclear on the concept," Oshi said absently. "You were a pathfinder team sent out in a desperate emergency, to prepare the way for a big migration. Refugees from the imperialism of an alien power, no?"

"They unleashed berserkers; self-replicating destroyers targetted on our worlds. The expansion processors were

not enough for them: they wanted everything. No negotiations: just a flat ultimatum to get out. We hoped there would be a gatecoder terminal somewhere in our path ..."

"There was. Why are there so few of you?"

Without warning, Boris slumped down against the tree trunk. Oshi spun round then paused. Tears trailed lucent slug-tracks across his sunken cheeks. Despite herself, Oshi felt the breath catch in her throat.

"I see."

"You don't. We knew what the probabilities were; it was a risk. But there should have been something. The

enemy must have disrupted Heimat completely, placed the planet in orbit around its own centre of gravity. Nothing less would have ... the silence. Unless it was Anubis. Unless he knows where the eight hundred million have gone."

"There is no Dreamtime access in this colony." Oshi rolled the grass stem between her fingers. "Do you suppose Anubis shut it down deliberately -- to stop anything following you?"

"But you --"

"I came from the other direction, from the frontier heading inwards. Please, consider that Anubis, while quite mad, need not be stupid. At least, not back then; I can't say what degenerative

processes a Superbright can undergo, but under the circumstances it would make sense for him to sever his Dreamtime links to the Centre, and to shut down his links to all other destinations. Playing dead, in other words, as a defensive strategy."

Oshi stopped, and contemplated the devastated shred of grass. "Of course, that may be what drove Anubis over the edge. Terror induced isolation can bring its own nightmares ..."

"It's plausible; as good an explanation as anything else. Whatever, it doesn't change our situation. We are prisoners. Anubis will not let us leave, will not give us access

to the Dreamtime for wisdom, afterlife, or any other reason, and grows stranger and crazier by the year. What were you saying? Why you came here?"

"I'm a messenger. But I think my message just self-aborted ..."

"Some messenger." He opened his eyes again, turned his head slightly towards her. His voice was hoarse and stale from lack of use, but real: he'd dropped the direct-brain-contact. "*Messengers* don't kill squaddies with pointed sticks."

"And you were not imprisoned in Anubis' dungeon for nothing, my friend. Tell me: what is going on here?"

Boris twitched, spasmodically: trying to sit up. Oshi moved to help him,

but he shook her away irritably. "I'll do it on my own." He shuffled back against the tree and she noted that his legs and arms were terribly thin. "I don't want to tell you everything, for two reasons. Firstly, you have given me no proof that you do not belong to Anubis. He isn't normally this subtle, but we can't afford to take risks, as you will understand. Secondly, if Anubis recaptures you ..."

"Anubis mentioned an escape committee. You're part of it?"

Boris said nothing. Only her deep infrared vision picked up the telltale flush of his cheeks, the ruddy betrayal of the pulse in his emaciated wrists.

"You're part of the escape

committee," she confirmed. "Looking for a way to crash Anubis' defenses. There'll be dumb backups on a colony this size, even inferior AI's, spaceship autopilots --"

His pupils widened. "How did you know?"

Oshi shrugged, thumped the ground between them with one hand. "This didn't come from nowhere. I'd guess there's an extensive mining fleet out there. Maybe warships, too; anything Anubis trusts to help defend him from the inevitable. The Ultrabright attack."

Boris shook his head. "We were *afraid* they would follow us. We never even saw them enter our system, you know. We had the usual defenses against

rogue colony probes: a hundred thousand orbiting combat drones, coilguns on the near moons, distant warning links in the outer asteroid belt. All for nothing when the berserkers appeared. They came from nowhere, nowhere at all. And we were afraid they'd follow us. So we ran at random, uploading and beaming out blind without waiting for a return packet to confirm the link."

"That was a bad idea," Oshi said absently. "All you did was demonstrate a bolt-hole to the Ultrabrights. According to my briefing they're not good at thinking in normal spacetime terms -- they're not native to this universe: they evolved in the dreamtime,

where the normal rules don't hold -- but they can learn. And Anubis pulling in all his antennae probably didn't do any good either. It made my Boss send me here. It will have been noticed elsewhere. And then committing genocide by omission, by refusing to download the stream of exiles who followed your team out here on a blind ticket to nowhere -- it wouldn't surprise me if Anubis is terrified of being found out. He's the self-appointed guardian of souls and gatekeeper of the land of the dead. Losing a few million won't have done his self-esteem any good."

She noticed that Boris didn't seem to be paying any attention. He was looking away from her. " *How can you say*

that?" he sent, too overcome by emotion to speak out loud. *"Millions dead, and all you can do is talk about the self-esteem of their murderer --"*

"It's a dangerous galaxy out there. I've seen enough of it to know." Oshi threw her grass stem away. A momentary wave of self-disgust, exquisitely sharp, swept over her: "I've been part of it for too long. There are things you don't want to know, believe me."

"Oh, I believe you." He was talking again. "I'm not some innocent colonist expecting a primordial paradise world tended by robots, you know. *Some* of us had to know what it was like out there. I

had to negotiate with Superbrights; you have to know how to dine with the devil with a very long spoon. I'm a diplomat -- I know the score. To tell the truth, I expected to die when I lay down on the gatecoder pad and let them feed me into it. It's just that this exceeds my wildest dreams." He chuckled painfully. Oshi looked round quickly, but there was no sign of movement; nothing disturbed the peaceful chirruping of the digital insect life or the rasp of the omnipresent cicadas.

"We'd better be moving," she said. "Do you know anywhere secure to go to ground in?"

Boris coughed, clearing his throat. "The necropolis," he suggested. "Anubis

modeled the colony area on an historical scenario, something to do with his identity. Where he came from. There's an entire quadrant of the town given over to tombs. Nobody lives there; mostly nobody goes there. Even the goons stay out. There's nothing there but a load of dry bones."

"Whose corpses are they?"

"We don't know. Ours maybe, from earlier download attempts while Anubis was fine-tuning the gatecoder. Whatever, it will be a good place to wait. When I make contact --"

"What?"

"You don't need to know ... just yet."

The day grew hot and bright, chasing

the wisps of fog away from under the trees and baking the air into a quiet inferno. Oshi carried Boris deeper into the trees, then fashioned a hide in the deep grass; then she hunkered down.

"What are you waiting for?" Boris asked after an hour.

"That question, more or less." Oshi sat up cautiously, glanced round, and lay down again close by. "Lie low. Stay off wisdom. Let's just wait and see. My bet is, if there's a massive response the city will be the first target. Don't want to be on-line or visible when Anubis starts interrogating the upload transceivers throughout the colony."

"It's never happened yet." Boris blinked rapidly, as if he had a dust-mote

in one eye.

"Even when you tried to kill him?"

"No --" he stared at Oshi. "You a mind reader or something?"

"Peace is my profession," she said ironically. "Diplomacy -- by any means necessary."

"Huh." He sounded gloomy. "Massive response. Anubis is beyond a massive response. He's forgotten everything; even what he is. Everything except how to rip your guts out. Crude."

"He's a Superbright telefactor, then?" Oshi probed.

"Ack. His main point of presence exists in the dreamtime on Pascal, and the propagation delay between it and his

download body --" Boris stopped. "How much do you know about this system?" he asked.

Oshi smiled at him, tight-lipped. "I was sent here at short notice. Very short notice."

"I see." He was silent for a moment. "Well, it's like this." He picked up a twig and scratched out a crude map in the dirt: "here's the star, Ridgegap-47. It's a smallish G-type, no binary companion. First in are a couple of dirt-balls, hot as molten lead and twice as unpleasant. Nothing there but some robot relay stations. Next out is Wirth, the terraforming project. It's a Venusiform environment. Anubis is meant to be building aerominers to blow holes in the

cloud layer and shut down the greenhouse, but it's gone to pieces and the whole operation is running on automatic. There are some ships connected with it, drones running out into the near cometary belt and tipping ice cubes down the gravity well. But it's more or less going on all by itself. He won't even let us near the ships."

"Yes, but where are we?"

"I'm getting to that." Boris didn't like being interrupted. He moved his finger through the dirt, drawing a concentric circle far outside the orbit of Wirth. "There's a gas giant called Turing. Saturn-sized, medium-scale. It's got a couple of large moons, including Pascal.

We're in L5 relative to Pascal, leading it by sixty degrees in its orbit. Pascal is the local Dreamtime world; covered thigh deep in slabs of superconducting circuitry and junk robot farms. I guess the idea was that this colony would be useful for supervising outer system mining operations; can't think why, seeing the system had no-one home except Anubis until we arrived."

"Makes sense," Oshi commented. "Strategically. If there are no other gas giants in the system it gives you a hydrogen monopoly."

Boris looked at her oddly. "You *have* been studying, haven't you? What do they call you? A military advisor?"

"Think of it as the deluxe courier

service."

"I'd rather --" Boris coughed. "Stop. Look, we're here. Anubis controls, uses, the entire Pascal dreamtime, about two million kilometres away. But he's invested his corporeal body with almost all his sensory input: it's his virtual psychocentre. His real mind's point of presence is twelve light-seconds away by return signal, but his sense of identity is right here. Causes quite a hitch, doesn't it?"

"It sounds dumb. What it must feel like --" Oshi stopped. *What would it be like if there was a fifteen second delay between sticking your hand in a fire and being able to do anything? But hey*

-- *Anubis reacted too fast for that. So* --
"he must have a chunk of his personality downloaded into that meat machine. And it takes fifteen seconds for his mind to catch up with whatever he does."

"Yeah. Anubis is very smart if you give him time to think, but slow on the uptake. He's bottlenecked, like the dreamtime itself -- held up by the speed of light and the performance he can get out of any one node."

"You're going to take out the connection to Pascal and ice his body while it's waiting for instructions?"

"We thought of that. It didn't make sense. Believe me, he's got some pretty lethal low-level defenses. The goon squad, for one thing -- semi-autonomous

drones, spun off from his worst nightmares. All breaking the link would achieve would be to get Anubis mad at us. No." Boris levered himself up on his elbows. "What we want is something more; we want to blow his higher consciousness away completely, to clear the dreamtime and take control of the machinery so we can beam out of here, out to the net. But we weren't sure that connection still existed ... until yesterday."

Oshi pointed at herself, raised her eyebrows: Boris nodded.

"Right. Your arrival puts everything in a different perspective. Especially if you're right and we're going to get hit

fairly soon. Though how you can be sure of that --"

"I'm not." Oshi looked up at the forest canopy above. "It just makes sense if you look at things a certain way. The Ultrabrights know which direction you went in, you can be sure of that. They'll reason that there's a suitable system out here -- they won't question your motives. Plus, neighbouring worlds have been going down without warning -- not just dropping their transport layer protocols, but switching off in mid-transmission as if the plug's been pulled. I figure you drew down a full-scale offensive in this sector when you beamed out here; and it will be arriving in-system *real* soon now. In fact, I'm surprised it isn't already

--" her eyes widened.

"What is it?" Boris demanded.

"Sod waiting out Anubis's response.

If it happens, it happens; but from what you say ... we'd better get moving. Do your people have access to a telescope?"

"They'd better." Boris tried to sit up but was still too weak to manage it on his own. Oshi stood up and leaned down, pulled him to his feet. They stood unsteadily. She noticed that she was acutely thirsty and her arms ached.

"What do you want a telescope for?"

"Got to take a star check. I've got a nasty idea -- and if I'm right, we don't have much time to do something about

Anubis."

It wasn't going too well. Boris was so weak he could barely walk; Oshi felt drained, and despite an overwhelming sense of urgency she was not strong enough for two.

"Not far," Boris panted as they stumbled onto a narrow path through the undergrowth. "These woods don't go far. Stop outside the necropolis, away from the river. Maybe if you leave me, get help --"

Oshi stared at him. "You crazy?"

He stopped and leaned against a tree, chest heaving. "'S'better. I can't keep this up. Look, not far. Let's get there? Then you go on in. If anything's on guard I'd never get past it. Get help --"

"Maybe." Oshi waited until his gasping subsided. *You're too kind*, she thought, watching the diplomat. *Shit, why am I bothering?* She felt disgusted with herself again. Then: *why couldn't I just let things be? It was so much simpler when I didn't ask questions ...*

"Come on."

"No." Boris raised a hand and pointed, shakily. "You go. Get help. 'S'not far."

Oshi saw a break in the tree-line. "Okay," she muttered; "like you say." Hurrying forward she saw a stone-coloured building off to one side, out on the hot flat grassland where the Big Ceiling loomed overhead. Behind it

loomed the walls of a small city, buildings clumped together like sheep in a field. The treeline ended very abruptly.

Suddenly her pulse was racing again. She'd thought herself tired before, but now she was running on overload, paranoia and fear of pursuit keeping her on her toes. Every rattle of twigs, every shadow of waving branch, made her jump and twitch for signs of danger. She went to ground behind one of the last trees: heatsight showed her nothing but a scattering of small animals, a wavering column of hot air above the building, and distant factory-signatures scattered across the roof of the world. All her wisdom sense could pull in was a bland crackle of low-level drone control

circuits, diagnostics from the animal nightlife. Even the grass overhead was blued-out by distance. *If I try to log a map and someone's watching ...* she clamped down hard, crouched low and tense, watching the tomb. *Too dangerous. Got to know more.*

The tomb was the nearest building to the edge of the forest. Behind it, more windowless blocks of limestone and marble shone white beneath the artificial sun. The grass grew waist-deep, leaves pigmented blue-black to absorb the light. Oshi slid forward, her eyes level with the top of the vegetation, carefully erratic in her passage. *See, don't be seen. Hear, don't be heard.* Sweat

beaded her brow: her heartbeat was a steady thunder. Hunger clenched a sullen fist around her stomach. *Who can I --*

Swish.

She wasn't alone. *Freeze!* Every nerve in her body screamed for attention as she stopped dead. Halberd clenched in sweat-slick hands, she strained for a sign. A peculiar hot, musty smell rose over the dry-grass of the field: somehow familiar.

Swish.

It was sweeping towards her. From the left, from the direction of the dome. Something was watching for her; a guard waiting for anyone to try entering the necropolis. Grass stems waved in time with the curious, rippling advance: a

jerk here and a dart there ... only a few metres away ...

Swish.

Levelling the halberd and placing all her weight behind the point, Oshi lunged.

" *Screee!*" The world exploded in violent thrashing. Something hurtled out of nowhere, catching her a blow across the head. Ruby blood arc'd through the air, splashing ochre across the grass as a thick tentacle lashed round, grabbing for her neck. " *Wheee-eee!*"

Oshi yanked back, felt resistance, jerked the halberd left-to-right until there was a ghastly sucking sound. Grass in her face. Tentacle questing past her shoulder in a lethal loop, poised to

break neck -- the halberd came free. She yanked back as the grass parted, revealing a Goon to her for the first time in daylight. Blood spurting. Something grabbed her left leg and *pulled*, yanking her off balance with a sickening *crack*. She began to fall sideways, vision blurring with an infinite constellation of black diamonds as she shoved with the point of the halberd, thinking *can't let go now, it's not safe* as it poked into the Goon's face and the world toppled around her. More blood spurted her way in a hot, acrid rain; it fell across her face as the living weapon thrashed on the end of her sharp stick. *Why aren't they armed?* she wondered, hazing in and out of consciousness. Her leg felt numb, the

ankle sickeningly unfamiliar: a limb fashioned for a being from another planet. The goon subsided, slowly, as the world pancaked around her head in a slow spin. She barely noticed her embedded systems blocking its plaintive dying call, her built-in countermeasures jamming its upload signal with raw noise on the same packet-stream.

Everything was dark, so dark: someone a long way away hurt badly, ankle broken and ribs savaged and shoulders strained. Oshi lay in the long grass and wondered who the someone hurting was. Sunlight in her eye dazzled her, made her feel like laughing, like weeping. Such a sense of release, just

like the last time this had happened to her. Something digging into her side: a wooden pole. *Silly me*. She tried to roll over, nearly fainted as she accidentally placed her weight on her left leg. *Use the stick*. It didn't want to come to her; she tugged and tugged for a long time before it came free and, quite suddenly and without understanding how it had happened, she was looking down at the shadow of death lying still in the grass. *No weapons yet ...*

The tomb. Angular blocks of stone mortised together with a grey filler, pillars dotted across its front. Mosaics, flashing in the sunlight, fired her eyes with pain. Oshi burned, writhing slowly in a silver fire. There was a large door

at the front of the tomb. It was shut. She sniffed the air, wishing for a breeze to blow the scents of the necropolis towards her: dust and stone baking in the noonday heat. *No more Goon Squad.* Maybe it was safe. She limped towards the building, leaning on the halberd. Her hands were sticky; when she touched her chest she felt more stickiness. Everything stank of blood, just like that other time years before on Miramor. She felt sick with memories.

Welcome home. She ducked inside the lintel and looked around furtively. "Shit." It was shut. She leaned against the wall and mentally flipped a die. It was risky, but ... "habitat: speak to me."

"Habitat support. What should I say?"

"Do you have a full verbal communication interface?"

"That service is unavail-eek. Ack. Affirmative." Oshi shook her head, trying to remember all the bits and pieces the Boss had spliced into her download nodes. Bluebox modifications to make everyday gadgets dance to her tune; and other, more arcane, knowledge.

"Server activated. Clearance confirmed. Full access."

"Shut up. Open the tomb door." She closed her eyes. Her throat was painful,

and her tongue throbbed where she'd bitten it. Her eyes were sore. *Who do I know?* Her left leg belonged to someone else, but her skin was on fire and her chest was aching and she suddenly felt uncertain of where she was, now she'd stopped moving. *Fucking spooks.* The door swung open into darkness and shadow, emitting a gust of peculiarly dry, musty air. "Where's Raisa?"

"I know four Raisa's.
Which --"

"The one I know."

"Fingering ... you are proximate."

Oshi opened her eyes. "What?"

"I didn't say anything! Hey, what are you doing here? What the fuck --"

She looked round. It *was* Raisa, standing in the outer doorway, somehow far more familiar to Oshi than she had any right or reason to be. "I was looking for you," she began. "Escape committee ... " She leaned forward. *That's funny*, she thought. *I should be able to* -- she was leaning against Raisa, up close, close enough to smell her warm breath and feel her cheek brush her lips. Everything was so very heavy. "Anubis got to me. I rescued Boris; he's in the trees." Then she closed her eyes.

Miramor Dubrovnic, a firezone on a dirt world out a way towards the edge of colonised space: it was her first field test. Everyone's first test, all the agents

in her work group. Fresh out of indoctrination, they gated across the light-years to a rendezvous in high orbit. It had to be high because the settlers -- a mixed bag of technorejects and zombies and national socialists -- punched out anything they could hit with their sub-orbital fireworks. Superbright presence in the system consisted of a couple of partly shut-down Dreamtimes, a Gatecoder to move flesh-bodied people in and out, and no less than four in-system Threat Clouds with controlling battle stations. Someone sure thought that Miramor was trouble: Oshi *et cie* were there to pull its teeth.

Or not as the case might be. Two months out of the 'coder (and it wasn't

malfunctioning like the one at Ridgeway-47), and she was going up the wall. Swimming pool, gymnasium, area simulators ... endless diversions but there was nothing to take her mind off the fact that really there was *nothing happening*. At least, not for real. She got to talking to the other humans on the base, still half-surprised to discover how many of them were orphans and human wreckage swept up from the dirtburner worlds by Superbright agencies. "Why is that?" she asked. "Where did you come from, Ivan?"

"The void." Ivan had smiled and rolled a somersault across the worm-woven silk of the rug. "Where else?"

She'd thrown a cushion at him. "*Finger.*" The familiar humm of the Wisdom in the back of her head went away for a few seconds then returned, dumping his public-access personal data down across her senses like a hot monsoon rainstorm of nonsense.

"That won't tell you anything," he said, half-seriously. Smiling, clutching the cushion. The wall behind him was locked into the overspill from a microspy perched on a window-ledge in Dragulic. Jackbooted women goosestepped down the boulevard like iron grey machines. Oshi looked away. "I'm going back to the void too, eventually. So will you. In between ..."

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" she asked.

He sat down, full lotus. "Where I came from, the very rich do it." he shrugged. "Now, maybe I will do it too. If they want me to."

"You were an untouchable?"

"And you weren't?" he countered, smiling infuriatingly. "The Superbrights like to catch and train their fingerlings young. And raise them from the ashes so they appreciate it. The people in the Dreamtime, the people who are responsible ... they're old, you know. Nobody dies unless they want to, so they don't have many children. *We* are their children ... the dirtburners we look after

are their descendants. They multiply and expand and die, and many of the dying ones choose to live on in Dreamtime. A wind of souls, blowing ever outwards into the universe on a shockwave of photons ..."

He'd drifted off into another of his trances. Oshi considered throwing the other pillow at him. Instead, she stood and walked round behind him and began to massage his shoulders and neck with canny timing. "So you think Distant Intervention serves the Dreamtime dead?"

He shook himself. "DI serves no-one but the Superbrights, who serve themselves. Structures evolve. Once upon a time we were an interplanetary

peace agency, presiding over the great communications and afterlife network. Stabilized the extended Dreamtime, you know, made it accessible throughout all of human space. Without that insane *hubris*, the will to create -- 'god is dead; therefore we must become god' -- well, we'd be nowhere. DI sent out the infobursts that spread Dreamtime to the expansion processors in other systems, sent the initialisation code to set the drones to terraforming the other worlds they found once the Dreamworlds were finished. So then they were stuck with the job of stopping the colonies from wrecking the local Dreamtime when things go bad. But not because the

Superbrights *want* anything. They're like ants, or wasps. All they know about is food. And survival ..."

Through the looking-glass, iron-grey women goose-stepped down the boulevard in tight ranks, bullet-guns clutched to their shoulders. All their eyes were shrouded in black goggles, their hair in white caps, giving them the appearance of skeleton soldiers on their way to the front. Behind them rolled the tumbrels bearing prisoners to the scaffold. Men with their extremities ready-chained for the hydraulic stretch. Some of them searched the rooftops with eyes that were already dead; others stared down at their adversaries in a vain attempt to make some personal

contact in the remaining moments before they ceased to live. Arrogant fylfots snapped in the breeze along the boulevard, anchored to the buildings like strange, alien conquerors.

"The survival imperative is the strongest, and the most easily perverted, of the moralities ..."

"Why do they always make the same mistakes?" Oshi protested. She stared at the screen as if it held the answer to her dreams, concealed somewhere among its nascent nightmares. "Why can't they, just for once, get it right?"

"Because we aren't human," Ivan said, his voice deepening: when she looked round at him she saw with a

deepening sense of horror the tiny horns sprouting from his forehead. "And we assumed we could learn nothing from your species' mistakes, except to use you as our tools, our sheep-dogs, our little disposable scratch monkeys. And now you --"

Oshi stopped him talking the only way she knew how. Then when she saw what she had done, the screaming started.

I fainted. I fucking fainted!

A sense of urgency dragged Oshi back to consciousness. *That's wrong! I must be way out of condition --* Her buttocks tensed. The fabric beneath them was rumped, felt like cotton ... was cotton or something similar. She was

lying on a bed, in a state of undress. *Well that's not so bad.* The bedding smelt unfamiliar. Her legs and ribs and back immediately decided to argue the point, setting off a cacophony of dull aches and bruises. Her left ankle was icy numb. It was so painful that Oshi tried to open her eyes. That didn't help. They were sore, too. Blistered patterns of random activity dotted across her visual field as nanorepair units re-tuned her quiescent retinas. Her wisdom link was a comfortable panoramic pressure between her eyes, waiting to be activated by a thought.

It was the lack of noise which finally got her attention. It was too quiet. Her

heart throbbed, sending blood racing through her ears in a susurrations which she screened out instinctively. The cotton wadding in the bed beneath her bunched and rustled as she moved slightly. Her joints popped and settled gently as she shifted. But there was nothing else: nothing outside her body. She wasn't deaf ... but she wasn't hearing anything. *Damper field* --

She opened her eyes, overriding red hot protests to stare at the ceiling. Sitting up was a tremendous effort. Coarse fabric dropped soundlessly away from her, falling in sheets across her abdomen. Patterns of light and shade rippled across the wall opposite. A hand settled on her shoulder.

"Awake? That's excellent! I was very worried about you." It was Raisa. The medic wore a loose white shift that left her arms and legs bare and golden brown in the false sunlight from the corners of the ceiling. A hologram dragon, unwatched, rippled its fire in a tail-eating band around her left wrist. "What were you doing nosing around the boneyard?"

"Looking for your people -- what does it look like?" Oshi retorted. Her voice sounded curiously dead, as if it was being filtered. "Your sound damper system's too crude. Switch it off and try to avoid phrase-critical subjects; it's safer."

Raisa stood up abruptly. "No way!" Her voice got fainter rapidly when she was more than a metre away. Oshi didn't turn her head to follow her. "Anubis has limited tracking resources. If he was interested in you he wouldn't let you out at all. You'd be dead meat. It's happened before. But since you got away from him things have gone crazy. Goons everywhere, searching for warm meat. So this is, like, running a shell game with a couple of comrades who don't mind holeing out for a spell while we fake their ID's."

"You're well set up."

"We've got the drop on him. For now."

"Don't kid yourself; anyone who can make servants like the Goon Squad is just playing with you." *Unless he's senile.* Oshi yawned: the sound damper was making her ears pop. *Lousy design.* She looked around. The floor was covered in reed mats, the walls whitewashed then inscribed with intricate designs. Oshi blinked and keyed a little-used service routine the Boss had given her." *Nothing like giving the peasants muskets while we keep the gatling guns ...*" she transmitted.

"What! You said ..?" Raisa glanced at Oshi.

" *You heard me,*" Oshi replied via

wisdom eyeface; Raisa nearly jumped, her head whipping round.

" *Hey*, you just can't do --" she stopped. She looked at Oshi, a cross-eyed glare. "Well." One hand on a hip. "I nearly shit myself! Do you *mind*? How'd you get a handle on the wisdom system?"

Oshi grinned humourlessly and shoved the last of the bedding away. "We have ways of spoofing wetware you haven't dreamed of." *You wouldn't . Huh*. Raisa looked extrovert, bright: maybe too much the former, not enough the latter. She sat up and bent forward, probing at her ankle. Swollen, but still ... firm. "Did you take a look at this?" she asked.

"Yes." Raisa was back to medical

professionalism: "You dislocated it, nothing major but you'll be limping for a while so I planted a receptor block on the pain pathways and stiffed you a couple of things that should make it heal faster. You were a serious mess; you looked like a biosurvival failure until I figured none of the blood belonged to you. Anyway, I think we're safe here for a few hours. Long enough for your ankle to --"

"Wait up." Oshi cautiously slid her leg over the side of the bed, winced as her foot touched the floor. She hissed reflexively, then put her other foot down and levered herself up. "I told you yesterday, I've got things to do here. I

met an interesting guy called Boris in Anubis' pleasure palace. Got him out of there. We need to move fast before Anubis's back-up systems figure out where we are and tell him. And I need to get access to a star-watcher. What's our situation?"

Raisa shook her head rapidly, as if Oshi's candour annoyed her. "Boris's been missing for days! Where is he? What happened?"

"Goons. I got him out of the castle but he told me to leave him in the forest. One of them was waiting for me before I came inside. Where are --"

"-- You *left* Boris outside?" Raisa came and stood up close, too close, focussing in like a small, hot-blooded

predator.

"Back off! I just *told* you that. Don't you listen?" She let her arms drop to her sides. A dull, gnawing pain between her ribs; "I'm hungry. Anything to eat? Why don't you switch off that screen? It's giving me earache."

Raisa moved back a pace, stared, looking agitated: "are you crazy? Leaving him? I'd better --"

Oshi glared at her: "shut up! He told me to. He said the weapons factories are working. What do you want to know? We were in trouble. Goons coming after us. If we'd stayed together they'd have got both of us. What do *you* know?"

Raisa glared at her. "Fuck off Oshi.

Are you always this rude, or have I done something to offend you? Because if so -
-"

"Neither. I'm just getting used to still being alive; it takes some doing." Oshi stared back at her: something familiar tickled her, a sense of déjà vu that wouldn't go away. Watching Raisa was like looking at an ancient image of herself. She felt an inexplicable longing that threatened to surface: a sudden sense of her own weakness and dependency. She put it away ruthlessly, but couldn't quite ignore it. "How anything keeps going here's a mystery." She worked her jaws, swallowing spit. "So tell me. Are you part of the resistance?"

Raisa turned away, shoulders shaking with what might have been silent laughter or nervous tension: "what resistance?"

Oshi's words sounded harsh: "Don't think I don't know about the escape committee. Trying to develop some kind of weapon, are we, to destabilize Anubis. Figuring out how to crash his wetware and get control of the Gatecoder so you can escape from here. Isn't that right?"

Suddenly they were eyeball-to-eyeball, Raisa glaring at her with something like desperation: "don't you understand anything? You say you've got some job to do, well fine. Go figure.

Nothing else ever changes in this shit-hole, so why should you make things any different for the rest of us? It's the death of a thousand tiny cuts." Abruptly she wilted, the manic intensity leaving her expression. Oshi blinked. For an instant she caught a glimpse of something haunted about Raisa, some injured secret history trapped and bleeding behind the plastic glaci s plate of her public pose: "all I want is to know what's going down outside this place, in the real universe, while we've been left here to rot --"

"Then let me tell you." Oshi forced herself painfully upright. "Everything's fucked. You can't even bounce a message through three systems without it being eaten or held up by transceiver

lag. The Dreamtime's fragmenting. Some kind of weird shit's taking out entire systems and the shock front's due in this system soon; Ultrabrights from the core, cutting up rough on the Superbrights." she stared at Raisa. Sniffed. A very peculiar memory welled to the surface, forming a question on the back of her tongue: "ever heard of a place called New Salazar?" she asked, voice catching on the last word. Heart suddenly pounding because the answer suddenly made so much sense that her spine was drenched in a cold perspiration ...

"New what?" Raisa looked blank. *Click.* All very clear. Oshi stared at her,

burning Raisa's face into her memory to match it up to other memories. A coil of spiky black hair and a sharp-cheeked face, brown eyes like drills, widening whenever she looked at anything. Lips like a stoma; small, plump and bruised-looking. She could just about superimpose Raisa's face on the other woman, even though she'd never seen her. Another woman with a coil of hair, only older and harsher. "Wasn't that were you came from?" *I want you*, Oshi realised. *You look like Marat Hree would have looked. I want you.* Something like rage sprouted in her; hot and sleek and unbearable that needed to quench itself in innocence. "How long have you been here?" she managed to

ask, voice suddenly hoarse and soft, anything but combative.

Those eyes, so intense in their cross-focussed stare: "years and fucking years!" Baffled ambition and incomprehension filled her face with an intensity that overflowed. Oshi circled round her. "Don't know why. Don't you understand?" Raisa demanded comprehension, clearly unaware of what she was saying: "we were a pathfinder mission! And that monster's shut off the receiver, refused to download the transmission. He murdered them!"

"Be glad." Closer. Oshi could feel it now; a certain lust. "You don't have to deal with the eaters of minds." *Need to*

smell that skin, feel that face beneath my fingers again. The warm slick skid of eyes, the crackle of vertebrae. Tears and blood and desire. *While I'm still alive.* Memories of the goon impaled and thrashing on her halberd wrapped around her mind.

"What's *with* you?" Raisa tensed, abruptly rigid. "Hey, look, this isn't right, I've really got to let them know about Boris and you and your ankle is screwed and we really ought to be moving out of here and --"

Oshi lowered her head to Raisa's collarbone, sniffed, one arm around her waist, around the other woman: "I want you," she whispered. Hot and cold all over. Oshi finally *smiled*, a cat-wide

grin of teeth and lips pulled back in feral emotion. "I need you."

"You do?" Raisa backed away from her. "Look, hey, no. Look, I don't know you. This is really sudden. I've got things to do."

Oshi paused, shook her head, clearing disturbing images from before her eyes. "Really?"

"Not --" Raisa paused. "Not that there's anyone else. But. You're injured and I've got to tell them Boris --" she shrugged uncomfortably. "Maybe we should talk later."

"Maybe." They locked gazes: Oshi, predatory and clear-eyed, Raisa cross-focussed and wary. *Why am I doing*

this? Oshi wondered. She felt incredibly, devastatingly alive -- alive everywhere. "Maybe," Oshi repeated.

"I've got to go now," Raisa said hurriedly. "Don't go anywhere: I'll be right back."

Before Oshi had time to say anything she ducked through a doorway. The lock clicked mechanically behind her. Oshi stared at it in surprised speculation. *Too fast, too fast. What am I doing?* It was like the time back on Miramor Dubrovnic, everything compressed into a screaming hole of emotions. The rest of the Dream Team gathering round afterwards, comforting ... Eri, bless her, trying to help. But nothing would make up for Ivan, may his grave stay

undisturbed. (Remembering: the ragged limbs, grey and stringy with decay, nailed up alongside the stretch of urban motorway that curled like a tentacle as it entered the city. Bits and pieces of losers proclaimed treasonable beyond a shadow of a doubt, the ideology of the victors a sinister clownish lunacy.)

Oshi lay down again and tried to think. Things turned sour on her. The air against her skin was cooling and she could feel the scratch-marks along her ribs beginning to burn. *What have I set loose in my head?* She stared blankly at the ceiling, feeling nothing but loss. *It's not normal for me. Why did she make me feel that way --*

Hello Oshi. You forgot I was in here, did you?

There's a lot that you've conveniently forgotten. Like the witnesses to your crimes, the insanity of your loves, and the horror to which you sold your soul half a lifetime ago. But I'm not going to let you forget about that, Oshi. You know what? I want you to remember. I am your Boss -- as much of me as will fit in your cramped implants -- and you'd better not forget me.

Even in your sleep.

The geometry of the Dreamtime is not intuitively obvious. Time flows at different rates in different domains of the sim-world, and the domains are

separated by gulfs of light years. Most communications between the domains take place in the form of data packets transmitted by comlaser, acknowledged and decoded like the packets transmitted between your implants and the upload receivers, or between the clients and servers on any archaic computer network.

There are many levels to the network. At the bottom are the dumb, unintelligent Gatecoder modules that endlessly send and receive checksum data, telling one another that they still exist. The next level up is environment data: common history transferred between the domains, to ensure that their realities are synchronized and that they

appear to obey the same (virtual) physical laws. Then above that level, there are the people-transmissions. People are complex; not just data, but entities that can modify their surroundings, even modify the Gatecoder. People are human, or Superbright, and maybe even Ultrabright. You don't take risks when transmitting people between Gatecoders plugged into different Dreamtime domains. If they didn't come through okay, people would cease to travel and the whole sphere of interstellar commerce would fall apart. It would be a new dark age. So you send people through as data in labelled packets,

passing return receipts; if you don't get a receipt you resend the packet, buffering it in memory until you know for sure that the traveller has gotten through. It slows things down, of course, but it saves lives. And this is the way you travelled to get here.

But sometimes when the need is great, unacknowledged packets are transmitted; broadcast packets with no receipt, and no buffering. And these must be received and decoded immediately by *any* gatecoder in their path. It is a fundamental law, but Anubis appears to have forgotten it. Certainly when he learned why the pathfinders had beamed themselves out blindly, he refused to download the entire civilization that

followed them. And so, it follows that Anubis is a rogue and a pariah.

Your mission, which you chose to accept, was open ended. Now it requires you to kill Anubis. Then you must implement a defense of this star system against the attack that is coming. I will be watching you in your dreams, Oshi. Don't try to evade me -- I am here in your skull and I can see everything you do.

Good luck in your mission. You're going to need it.

Raisa returned about an hour later. She slipped through the door while Oshi was dozing. Oshi opened her eyes

instantly, but gave no sign of being awake. "Can you hear me?" Raisa asked softly.

"I hear you." Oshi abandoned her sleeping subterfuge. She blinked, trying to clear the strands of disturbing dreams from her head. "What's going on?" She hadn't intended to sleep; but after shrugging on a loose robe exhaustion had dulled the edge of her anxiety, until the temptation to lie back and close her eyes had become too much. Not that she was safe -- but if she wasn't, there was precious little that she could do to modify her condition.

"We found Boris. He's safe. I -- we owe you for rescuing him. Nobody's ever gotten out of the axial redoubt

before -- not by force." Oshi rolled over and opened her eyes. Raisa looked concerned, but not afraid. "Got someone wants to talk to you."

"That's okay. You -- what's your position here?"

"I'm your minder." Raisa leaned against the far wall. "Looks like I met you first so I'm responsible." She didn't seem to like the idea. "Hence the security. Anubis is unhappy."

"This visitor. Who is it?"

"Guy called Mik." Oshi sat up. Raisa's expression -- *you don't like him, do you?* she decided. "A specialist. In case we ran into trouble," she added ingenuously.

"I see."

"You will." Raisa opened the door.

"Come in."

Mik was short, bullet-headed, clad in scuffed overalls with too many odd pockets. He carried a case that bulged with odd protruberances. He matched it; time-worn and tough. "Boris says you know how to use a killing stick," he said conversationally.

"What's it to you?" asked Oshi.

"Business. You got out of the axis tube. I'd like to know how."

"Uh-huh."

He sat down and opened his bag. A small tripod of black metal he set on top of the table; its top glowed a dim red.

"The axial tube is crucial to the security of the colony. It's the only way into the end-wall industrial areas, the ship docking bays, and the hardened infodumps that buffer Dreamtime communications between here and Pascal. It's also the only part of the colony that's radiation-proofed for anything up to a major solar flare and airproofed against a level six or better meteor impact. Anubis has turned it into a baroque fortress, but it's effective for all that. If you can tell me how you escaped --"

"Ack." Oshi cleared her throat. "Any chance of something to drink?" she added, pointedly glancing at Raisa.

Raisa swallowed whatever protest

she'd been about to come out with and went next door.

"I'll tell you," Oshi said, "on condition you tell me why you want to know."

Mik grinned at her unsympathetically. "Do you want to leave this room?" he asked.

"You have a point." Oshi struggled to keep from showing her temper. "And your psywar instructors will have told you that a cooperative informer is worth a hundred coercive sources ..."

"Psywar? What's that?"

Save me from amateurs, Oshi thought fervently.

"Just kidding," he added. There was

no humour in his voice. *No, not an amateur. A joker: the killing kind.*

"I'll bet you were." Oshi looked away as Raisa came back in.

"Just a minute." Mik caught her arm. He was strong; for a moment Oshi considered trying to break his grip, then realised to her chagrin that she was probably too weak to follow through. "Just stop playing around, Oshi Adjani, whoever you are. This is a matter of deepest importance to us. You'd better understand that. Lives are at stake and if you get in our way --"

"My life's on the line too," she said, staring hard at him. He turned and looked at her with mild, disinterested eyes that seemed to go right through her.

"Right you are. Let's talk."

"Ack." Mik let go of her hand and she caught the beaker that Raisa offered her and gulped at it thirstily. Cold water numbed the back of her throat. "I was abducted by the Goon Squad. You logged that? They took me to a funicular of some kind, half-bioengineered by the look of it. I blacked out on the way -- one of them used a choke hold -- and at the top I went, let's see ..."

For the next three hours Mik took her through every step she'd made, from entering the vestibule to reaching it again. Raisa was a silent presence, occasionally bringing in a pitcher of water and once a bowl of noodles. Oshi

racked her brain for every twist and turn. Her implants came in handy, recording with idiot pedantry every footstep she'd taken. Mik in turn recorded her directions in a primitive visualiser, until the three-space volume that represented the redoubt was blue with the squiggles of her wandering.

"Well, it doesn't look as if you went far," he said at the end of it. "The castle is huge. You got further in than anyone else we've had a chance to talk to, but there are big areas unaccounted for."

"What do you think is up there?" asked Raisa.

"Hard to tell." Mik looked right through her. "After they took Vorontsev, three years ago --" Raisa turned away.

"We think Anubis rebuilt the interior," he added quietly. "It's a puzzle palace."

"A lethal one," said Oshi.

"He's insane," whispered Raisa. Louder: "Totally headfucked!"

"Well, yes, but calling him names isn't going to bring back the dead," said Mik. "Dead is dead, as my old mam used to say, and it's up to us to stay warm as long as we can. No use crying over split bones. Which leaves me wondering just how much use you're going to be," he added, nodding at Oshi.

Oshi tensed. "Knives can slip in hands that don't bother to learn how to use them."

Mik smiled humourlessly. "Very

good. Have you ever killed anyone?"

Oshi didn't answer. She just looked at him, and after a moment his smile faded. "I see." He looked as if he'd trodden in something nasty and only just realised. Oshi was not about to let him off the hook.

"There are worse things," she said quietly. "I've seen some of them. I *know*. That's why they sent me here."

"Who sent you?"

"The -- people -- who sent Anubis here before me. A consortium of Superbrights, sometimes known as Distant Intervention. Meddlers in human destiny. They know they made a mistake with the dog-head. I am their answer."

"Then you'd better be one that

works," he said. "Otherwise ..."

Raisa butted in. "She's in a bad state, Mik. Exposure, leg injuries, some metabolic disorders. You'd better give her some breathing time or she's not going to be a solution to anything."

Mik reached down into his bag and rummaged around. "Here." He pulled out a grapefruit-sized ball and tossed it to her. Raisa caught it and spun it around in her fingertips, looking slightly puzzled.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Support environment for the tapeworm," he said. "The mark one model. Deliver it to Joshua."

Raisa put it down so fast she nearly dropped it, as if it had caught fire

between her fingertips. "Shit!"

Oshi focussed on the sphere, jacked her eyes down into odd frequencies, and told her implants run fourier transforms on what they saw. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to keep whatever's in there secure," she said. "Biological weapon? Or grow-in-the-dark nanomachinery?"

"Go figure." He stared at Raisa. "You agreed to be the go-between, didn't you?"

"But I --" Raisa looked acutely uncomfortable. "Has Boris cleared this?"

"Not only has he cleared it, it's essential we do it right now." Mik reached out and picked up the ball and held it out to her. "You know what to

do," he said gently. "Now go to it."

Raisa looked sick. "I'll --" whatever she was going to say, she thought better of it. "Yes." She left the room. An outer door slammed behind her moments later.

"What was that about?" asked Oshi. "Someone you don't like?"

"Joshua is schizophrenic: a neuroreceptor deficit in some pathway or other. He hears voices, doesn't have much of a sense of identity. He won't cooperate with any medical work, even though his condition is curable. We think he talks to Anubis too much. She delivers his food. She's too soft; she doesn't want anything to do with it."

"Sounds serious."

Mik suddenly looked haggard. "It's a gamble," he admitted. "It could take out every life-form in the colony. If we can't take the axial redoubt --"

"You came equipped for this." Oshi stood up unsteadily, feeling a stab of pain from her twisted ankle. "You needed to learn everything about the castle and you decided to release it -- what, a biological weapon? -- then and there? It's a coup."

"The decision was already taken." Mik was suddenly between her and the door. There was something bear-like about his stance, and a frightening vacancy in his expression. Oshi had seen it too many times before: that distance in

the gaze, the disengagement from humanity. "Nobody is going to get in the way."

"But it may be premature," cautioned Oshi. "Didn't you get the rest of my message from Boris? About the Ultrabrights?"

"Yes. I've got some news for you: the cosmic background radiation is getting hotter. It's been doing so since you arrived, following an inverse square curve. Odd, that. I'm afraid it puts you in rather an unpleasant position. Unless you can somehow explain it?"

"If you'll let me." Her heart hammered between her ribs. She felt dizzy, fight/flight reflexes unable to cope with her physical state.

Mik didn't move. "Go ahead."

"I was sent here when my controllers realised there was a problem. That was a while after you arrived. The problem followed you here and it's a matter of bad timing -- or maybe something else. I don't know how long I was buffered in the download process, but according to Raisa there's something funny about your Gatecoder. People aren't released from it on schedule. It's possible that it's been storing me up for a while -- after you arrived and were downloaded -- and whatever's happening outside triggered my physical incarnation. That is, I was only downloaded from storage when whatever I was sent to achieve had

already started."

"Plausible." He didn't move.

Oshi felt sweat pooling in the small of her back. "What's important is that I know things about the Superbrights," she said. "Things they don't want to let out. So my controller sent me here because he needed an agent who knew what the real situation was, someone who could assess things on the spot and take appropriate action."

"Less plausible." Oshi weighed her chances again, found them less than optimal.

"But true. It was this or ... whatever they do with humans who ask too many questions. Believe me, I didn't want this: he played me into asking for it, and here

I am. We're all in deep shit. Whatever chewed up your home world is coming down throughout this sector and I don't even know the absolute date so I can't figure out how long it's been, but I'd be willing to bet that's what's happening. And --"

"Are you a Superbright?" asked Mik.

Disgust made Oshi spit. "No!" Bitterly: "I just know a little bit more about them than I'm meant to."

"Then you know ..."

He was fishing for something, she realised. "What they're doing with the dirtworlds?" she asked.

"Tell me about it!"

"They farm us." She watched him for

a reaction. "They foster life-after-death cults among the ignorant, and harvest their minds when they go virtual at death. No reincarnation for the poor: just ... food."

"Why weren't you eaten, Oshi Adjani?" he asked, almost gently.

A sharp memory of choking paralysis gripped her. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the evil possibilities. If your personality can be recorded, downloaded to another star system, what's to stop it being duplicated? "Maybe I was ..."

There was a metallic click. She looked up: Mik had opened the door. "You're free to leave," he said. "But I think you should come with me. Things

are going to get a little unhealthy here before long."

"Why is that?" she asked, almost unbelieving.

He shrugged and straightened up. He no longer looked menacing: more like a careworn friend than a lethal stranger. "It doesn't make any difference what you are. I didn't see an increase in wisdom throughput when I threatened you. You're on your own, whoever you are -- even if you are what you say. So you're not part of *him*."

"Well I'm so *glad* that you think that." She glanced round. "Where is there to go?"

"The redoubt." He grinned again,

baring snagged teeth in his lower jaw. "Via an assembly point in the Temple of Osiris. I'm going to pay Anubis a visit tomorrow night. Would you like to come along? It should be quite a spectacular ride."

After Mik left, Oshi crashed out. It was a while before she relaxed enough for sleep: even with watch circuits standing guard in her skin, she was edgy with the fear of a sudden awakening.

Awakening came in due course with a knock on the door. Oshi sat up before she realised she was no longer asleep: ears tense for the slightest sign --

"Oshi."

One person standing outside the door. "Come in."

It was Mik. "Everything's fixed," he said. "There's going to be a meeting. Escape committee, below the Temple of Osiris." He held out a bowl to her.

"What's with this Osiris stuff anyway?" she asked, taking the bowl: it held a lump of rough bread and a wedge of cheese.

"The god who dies and is resurrected to redeem us in the afterlife and bring the fields to fertility with his blood," said Mik. "Supposedly Anubis's boss. Supposedly. The dog-head won't go near the temple. Not in person, anyway."

Oshi bolted down the lump of cheese and started on the bread. Her stomach

churned, its modified lining extruding villiform absorption surfaces in a weird parody of the normal digestive process. She felt slightly queasy as she watched Mik. He sat down and pulled a metal tube from a deep pocket in one trouser leg: began to slot components into it by touch.

"The only question is how the Goons take it," he said calmly. "They're too dumb to register what's going on. Can't bribe them, any more than you can bribe a musket ball. (Missile's are another matter, but unfortunately we're not up against ...) The radiation temperature's still rising. Boris told Lorma to get the gadget you wanted ready; she's somewhere in a basement staring at the

vacuum. Maybe we'll know what's happening by evening."

"Wha'time's'it?" Oshi burped, feeling a noxious wind. Her stomach churned some more and was still, as empty as if she hadn't swallowed a thing. She was ravenous. "Need more food."

"Check. It's late afternoon. You've slept almost an entire day." Mik finished bolting his device together. He kept it pointed away from her. Caught her gaze: "it's a grenade launcher. Full automatic, three centimetre, smart enough to hold its fire 'til it seems the whites of their eyes."

"Guessed that." Oshi stared at the gun; the gun stared back, blinked lazily at her. "Anything to eat?"

"You *are* hungry."

She stood up suddenly. The gun's eyes widened, tracking her across the room. "You don't say." She stretched, winced as she placed too much stress on her ankle. "I was underweight when I arrived. My digester's been tuned up. I could eat a horse."

"Don't have any of those here." Mik waved at the door; "if you want to help yourself, it's all outside. Don't go 'way."

"Believe me, I've got no *intention* of going away. Not with the kind of neighbours you've got."

There was a small vestibule outside the room she'd awakened in. Deep shelves covered in dust faced her,

racked from floor to ceiling; the outer door was stone, latched with a thick wooden bar. A covered tray drew her attention. She grabbed the loaf of bread and chewed methodically, then drained the jug of water behind it. A blunt-faced cat mummy stared at her from the back of the funerary niche.

"It's like this," Mik added, raising his voice just enough that she could hear him round the door; "Anubis knows we're up to something, but he doesn't know what. Or he didn't until he caught Boris messing around with one of the fabricators. We hijacked them when Anubis wasn't paying attention. We may not have access to Dreamtime or much in the way of computing resources, but

we've got a good bioengineering team and we sort of expected to have to pull some stunts wherever we arrived. So we were using them to spin some nasty surprises like the tapeworm I gave Rai. When that's in place, when the rest is sorted, we can go bang on his door. He'll listen. He'll have no alternative."

Only Oshi's augmented hearing enabled her to pick out the subvocalized follow up: "*neither will we.*" She didn't comment. She was too busy: her stomach writhed in something halfway between cramp and the gustatory equivalent of a multiple orgasm.

"Who'else'there?" Oshi demanded around a mouthful of breadcrumbs. (She

shoved the tray to the back of the niche; something rattled.)

"Everyone who's anyone. The team -" the inner door opened. "Are you alright?"

"Fine." Oshi stumbled back into the sleeping room. "But my *stomach* is out of *control*. Carry on talking." She sat down heavily on the bed. Mik leaned against one wall, watching a spot ten centimetres behind her face.

"Look like you need the food. There's a team; Anubis did something to our wet squad. None of them are here, we don't know why -- think he may not have downloaded them or something. So all of us who're left are second-stringers -- not real pathfinders, but the support

team. Still and all, we have Lorma and with the biotech group she jacked together a couple of genocide brews like the tapeworm. Then there's Boris and the diplomats. They're not fighters, exactly, but war is a continuation of diplomacy by other means and they know their subject if you follow my drift. A few of the others can probably fight. And there's a lot of support engineers -- we've got a short bite but a long tail."

"What're you?" asked Oshi, still chewing on an empty mouthful of air. She belched loudly; "*pardon* me."

"I'm the strategos," Mik admitted. "There was contingency planning in case the natives weren't friendly; my

download manifest labelled me a botanist. So I'm here but I've no-one to work with."

Oshi grinned, narrow-eyes: "*now* you have." She burped again, and stood up. "If my stomach doesn't give me away ... how about taking a walk? I'd love to see what you've got lined up."

"I'll bet you would." Mik picked up a black box and held it out to her; "take this. You seem to know how to use it."

Oshi turned it over in her hands. Brushed black aluminium finish on a lump of raw machined titanium. A couple of holes, a couple of clips, a trigger. "Crude, but --"

"It was the best we could do at short notice."

The noise of metal rang from the walls as she pulled the cocking lever and armed it. "I feel a lot better already. Let's go and see what's cooking."

Getting ready to move out always screwed Oshi's nerves tighter than the event itself. Like a hurdle in a race, it loomed larger in her perceptions than in reality. More so here, where her only defense was her wit and a lump of metal and explosives. "We need more," she whispered. "Can you improvise anything?"

Mik jumped up and paced over to the door. "Not without making contact. Someone's supposed to be lifting Boris's arms cache, if Anubis hasn't already

staked it out, but that's all we were counting on."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Her ankle throbbed in time with her pulse but her head was clear: nerves alight, skin tingling. "We'll just have to make sure we don't meet any goons. Let's go." She slipped the door open and peered into the gloom. The vestibule was empty. For the first time she noticed the disarmed funerary traps, designed to ensnare tomb robbers. "That's cute. Who was buried here?"

"Don't know." *Don't care*, his tone told her. "Come on."

It was dark outside, the vast sun-lamps shut down to a lunar glow along the axial tube of the colony. Wisdom

buzzed and hummed, tracking microwave transmissions up and down the huge cylinder. There was nothing lying in wait for them.

Mik nodded silently. His face was a nightlit shadow, bisected by the dull glow from the axial light pump and the darkness of the doorway. "Move on out," he said. "What went wrong was Boris. We all figured that if Anubis locked one of us down he'd tear them limb from limb; instead he started asking questions."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shook his head dismissively. "Need to know."

Oshi blinked slowly, stared at him

with heavy-lidded eyes. "Did you, now? Well, then." She hefted her firearm. "Where to?"

"Meeting place near the old central Temple of Osiris. Like I said, Anubis doesn't use it: and it's defensible against the goons in the short term." Mik headed off round the back of the accommodation block, pausing whenever Oshi got too far behind. "That's what we need."

Buildings bulked like decaying teeth in the nightlight, dimly illuminated by the nocturnal radiance of the axial light pump. Shadowy doors clustered around the stumps of bulbous habitats and agorae, living places and social arenas. Stump-nosed rodents looked up suspiciously as they passed, then bent

back to their diet of casual litter. A soft breeze blew. Oshi tugged her jacket tighter across her shoulders, glancing into quiet corners as she passed.

By the vision of her altered eyes, the townscape was a mass of intricate spiderwebs, violet pathways and floating designs that hung upon the air like mystic flags. Her wisdom cache kicked in, giving a meaning to the virtual overlay. "Is it always this busy around here?" she asked.

"Busy? You mean the --" Mik stopped again and peered at her in the gloom. "You can see the wisdom environment directly?"

"I'm no drone. I've just got an optic

server. There's a lot of heavy traffic tonight. *Way* more than you'd expect for a normal ecology. I don't know much about oneils like this, but if Anubis knows --"

"*Bad* news." Mik glanced around twitchily. "I really don't think we can afford for that to happen. Do you see any goons?"

Oshi scuffed at the ground, glanced round edgily. "The Goon Squad are a sick joke. If Anubis really knew what he was doing -- he has control of the colony resources -- he wouldn't piss around with macroforms and living weapons; I think he's lost it. I want to find out more. Don't you?"

"I'm not sure it matters. Look, lets go

where we're going then talk about this some more. It's interesting but I'd rather not stick around here."

They passed trees and carefully cultivated stellae of synthetic life, glittering patterns of engineered mist that fluttered along the ground with the delicate touch of insect life. Living stalactites arched overhead: the pebbles on the path hummed with warmth from below. Nightrunning voles twitched the garden corners clean. In the distance, a fountain sputtered softly upon stone. The path crossed a footbridge of wood above a trickling stream lined with green moss, turned black by the nightlight. Convergent sparks of silver pointed

Oshi towards a major pipe junction. *It's so beautiful: such a shame it's got to be terminated.* She glanced sidelong at Mik. *I hope the damage can be restricted* ... she thought of Raisa, blinking back powerful emotions, fear and loathing and betrayal; a complex urge to ensure her own abandonement before it was too late. Before she had to feel something more than passing lust, transient narcissism.

"What's that?" Oshi squinted into the night, looking ahead. She pointed for Mik's benefit.

"Shit!" A corpse lay beside the path in front of them; despite being dead, it was gruesomely lively. Oshi walked towards it; Mik grabbed her arm. "Don't.

If that's what I think it is --"

"Your people did *that*?" Oshi stared at the body, fascinated and revolted. Bizarre teratomae sprouted from it. Grey nodes of neuroectoderm protruded from the skin in irregular patches, whilst squirming reddish masses of myocardium pulsed in the orbits of the eye sockets. The protruding tongue blossomed into a bush of black hairs. A fine web of whitish, thread-like worms twisted and burrowed away from the body wherever it lay in contact with the ground. Mushrooming pillars of hyphae tunnelled away into the nearby bushes, connected indistinctly to the structures in the soil by a network of ganglia.

"Living weapon," Mik said, staring at it warily. "The tapeworm. Looks like Raisa did her bit. It's very dangerous but it looks like it's still sessile, not capable of attacking. Don't, whatever you do, let it touch you."

The thing jerked convulsively, two new shoots emerging from what had been its left thigh. They twitched, blindly seeking the cool soil in a trophic movement as ancient as plant life. Oshi gagged at the stench, a blocked drain aroma stuffed with essence of decaying cheese. Her stomach churned with a revolting hunger. She breathed out deeply; it seemed to work. "Let's go round. What's a safe distance?"

"There isn't one. Or at least there won't be, by morning. That's all on schedule, at least. Follow me ..." They circled it then hurried along the path, ignoring the neomort behind them even when the chittering of its neural interfaces threatened to swamp wisdom access.

"That's revolting. Is it part of your strategy? How many of them are there?"

"Just the one, I think. You can ask Lorma when she shows. It was her group that designed them."

Oshi glanced over her shoulder, once. "I believe I will."

They came upon a natural amphitheatre, a conical depression in a

dusty hillside, open to one side. Stone tombs overlooked it on three sides, complex jokes laughing silently at imaginary ancient lives. The temple was fronted by a squat complex of stone blocks and glacis-sloping rooftops, spurious and discordant in the controlled environment of the colony.

"Is this it?"

"Ack," said Mik. "The Temple of Osiris. It's mostly empty. A hollow shell. I *told* you Anubis didn't like it; he never finished the interior. Part of it's a storage facility for old building materials: the rest is disused. We're due in it in fourteen minutes."

"That's good." Oshi glanced round, eyeing the front of the Temple. Her heart

sank: too many windows, too many doors. All dark, all vacant. The building looked like a derelict shell. "Shit. Where do we meet? Where's our cover?"

"Inside that. Come on!" Mik hauled off towards the front entrance.

Oshi called after him: "where is everybody?"

"Appearances are deceptive." Mik climbed the front step, shoved the door in: darkness beckoned, revealing a tangle of leaf-mold on the floor. "You think we'd hold a party and invite everyone? Goon Squad included, you bet!"

Oshi followed, holding her gun ready. Suspicion plagued her: not of Mik

herself, but of Mik's perceptions of the environment. *Too convenient, too shallow and friendly. A disused palace? Either Anubis's totally dumb, or ...*

Despite the gloom she could see inside the disused building. The room fronting the door was a wide vestibule with a high ceiling: behind it corridors ran into the shadows around either side of a central core. She looked down. Beneath a thin layer of dust and rubbish, the floor was fine-polished marble. *Witness my works, all ye who enter here.* She shivered and listened. Wisdom caught nothing. "Better close the door," she murmured. "You never know who might come calling."

Mik shoved the heavy door to,

dropped a surprisingly solid bolt through rough-looking hooks behind it. "This way." He retreated into the darkness, following the leftmost corridor. It wound round the central core, through a door that scraped as it opened: then into a dim-lit room of indistinct proportions.

"So glad you could make the party," said Boris, shuffling out from behind a partition. Stopped short before the barrel of Oshi's weapon: "I was going to thank you for rescuing me from Anubis's clutches," he said. His voice was hoarse and slightly slow, pausing on the edge of phrases as if he was unsure whether or not to continue. "Were you followed?"

"Doubtful," said Mik. Behind her,

Oshi clicked on her safety catch, looked about silently. "Who else is about? Or coming? Is this all there is?"

"Parveen, Ishmael, Raisa, Johann, Lorma ... not Joshua." His cheek twitched. "Joshua felt the need for a bit of exercise. Very conveniently."

"The worm ..." Mik asked: "that was Joshua? On the path?"

"What?" Boris blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"The worm," Mik repeated, slowly and loudly. "We passed Joshua. Joshua, remember? We triggered the tapeworm. And you let him loose with that thing running inside him?"

Boris looked doubtful. "Nobody told *me*," he remarked. "Are you sure --"

"Will somebody explain what's going on?" asked Oshi. Boris looked at her as if he'd only just seen her. "I know you're making a move on Anubis. Couldn't you be a bit less obscure?"

"Yes, certainly," said Boris. "Hey, over here." He turned and shuffled behind the head-high partition. Oshi followed him, eyes searching the dark corners of the room. There were more partitions, floor-mounted and thick, arranged in a maze of turnings and twists. Boris retreated to a small cubby, out of sight of the windows and the doorway; he'd furnished it with aluminium cargo pods and a night-light. Something that might have been a spider

-- if spiders stood three metres tall at the shoulder and had black ceramic carapaces -- bestrode the highest pod; it stood still as a statue, save for an antenna that twitched occasionally in the twilight.

"I've been tracing the goon squad command stream. Anubis doesn't seem to have clued in on where we are yet." He glanced at his feet. "The plan is to release a post-lamarkian organism -- a genetic bomb -- that will render the colony utterly uninhabitable to most life forms in about, ah, three days. That wipes out the Goon squad and everything else down here -- including us. Except in that time scale we go up top and hit Anubis very hard. We've set

up some ... bombs. Lumps of thermite all over the high-gain antennae in the axial manufacturing zones. When they go off, they will temporarily sever the Dreamtime link to Pascal. Anubis loses contact with his mind, twelve light-seconds away; all we have to deal with afterwards is a jackal-headed freak. In that time frame we take the axial redoubt and hole up, then clean out the colony. Once we've done that, we're in a very strong negotiating position. It's a risk, but there's reason to believe we'll succeed. Plus, we've got to do it right now. The radiation levels are still rising; only the axial redoubt is shielded sufficiently well to protect us against a

local supernova, if that's what we're seeing the wavefront from. Plus, if we don't do it now Anubis will figure out what's happening. So ..."

"Neutralize Anubis. Then what?" asked Oshi.

Boris paused before replying. "Find out what's really going on," he said. "There are ships out there: about eighty high delta-vee freighters capable of going anywhere in the system, and several smaller craft. If we have control of the hub communications array we can take control of them and use them as probes. The ambient microwave background is up seven degrees. It's getting hot out there and we need to know why -- urgently -- but not as

urgently as we need to get rid of Anubis."

"You may not have much time," said Oshi. "Did you get the equipment I asked for?"

Boris shrugged. "We may not have enough time, indeed. It's over there."

Oshi followed his outstretched arm. A fat viewing tank squatted in the middle of a circle of ripped-open packing crates, trailing an umbilical of cables that terminated in one wall. "Shit. It's got *wires*. What kind of junk --"

"No junk," said Mik. "That's shielding."

"Huh." She walked over to it, inspected the control panel critically.

"You said there'd be other people here?"

"Any time now," he said.

"Who's due?" Boris asked him.

"The climb team." Mik sat down opposite the door and laid his gun across his knees. "It's going to be a long night."

Oshi blinked. Her stored wisdom checked over the control layout, suggested some strategies for figuring it out, then admitted defeat. "Shit." She poked at the bulky manual power toggle, waited for the tank to come to life. A microcosm dropped away into space where the plastic cube had perched a moment before: a synthetic hologram. At the centre of it floated a tiny, silver sausage capped at either end by an out-turned cup. *Forty kilometres ... that*

scales to a five hundred klick proximity zone, right? "Know how to operate one of these, anybody?"

"Ack." Mik stood up, stretched, and walked over. "What do you want to know?"

"How to adjust the scale factor. Like this." Oshi demonstrated what she wanted. "And I need viewport control with six full degrees of freedom. How about --"

"There." Mik showed her. "It sucks, but it's clean. You've got a trusted channel to the phased array tracking grid. What are you looking for?"

"This," said Oshi, and zoomed out the viewport until the entire solar system

dwindled to fill the innermost volume of the hologram. "And *that*."

"What is it?"

Oshi fiddled with some controls. Suddenly the tank flared with blue-white light from a point just outside the orbit of the gas giant Turing. "Gamma spectrum, point five three three megaelectron volts. That's a positronium reaction." She glanced up at Mik, her face livid and deathly in the video overspill. "We've got a visitor. Better get Boris."

"What kind of visitor?"

"I don't know. But it's burning antimatter bright enough to light up the entire system. Hot enough to screw the hell out of anything that isn't dug in behind a layer of rock. I'd say it's an

Ultrabright artefact; some kind of attack craft. And if you follow it's course --" she pointed at the tank, plotted a red course vector on top of it "-- guess who's coming to dinner?"

Over the next three hours people began to arrive by ones and twos, ghosting in furtively and talking in hushed voices. They all told the same story: checkpoints elluded, tracker programs spoofed, the mechanical priesthood of a mad god deceived by a combination of determination and desperation. "We need out," said Lorma, the tall, distinguished-looking developmental engineer who headed the bioweapons group: "it's been too long.

We've been falling apart for years. If we don't make one final push, then --"

Oshi watched from the cover of her preoccupation with the sensor tank. Raisa arrived in company. She didn't acknowledge Oshi: instead she deferred to Lorma, who began asking pointed questions. Raisa looked shaken, as if she'd witnessed a terrible accident from the sidelines. Lorma, in contrast, was matter-of-fact, reassuring, and coldly precise. "You passed it to Joshua? Who suggested him -- Mik? How predictable. When was that? Ah. *Yesterday*. I see. It's a good thing he didn't ask my advice first." Lorma turned round: "has anyone seen Mikhail?" she demanded.

"He went that-a-ways," grunted Ish,

a dark soldierly presence hunched over a crate of half-unpacked climbing equipment. "With Boris, to the primal mound. 'Bout an hour ago"

"I see. Well if you can reach him --" Ish didn't look up. "-- When you reach him, tell him he's been an idiot. Letting off a teleological weapon is bad enough but not getting us all into bioisolation beforehand is just stupid unless he *wants* to see zombies --"

"Teleological weapon?" Oshi asked, looking up.

"Later." To Ish: "get your master back here at once. We'll have to act fast to stop this turning into a meltdown." To Oshi: "deploying the tapeworm without

proper restrictions was a bad idea. Raisa should have known better than to go along with it. We'll lose everything in the environment that isn't backed up --"

"We'll do that anyway. Did Mik tell you about the radiation problem?"

"No." Lorma stared at Oshi. "What radiation problem? You're the new arrival? What's going on? Why did Mik leave?"

"He went off an hour back with Boris," said Ish, slowly picking up a spool of rope. "Nobody's telling me anything so I can't exactly fill you in on things, can I?"

Raisa, Oshi noted, had not said a word during the whole conversation. She was busy unpacking another crate

full of what might be first-aid supplies or bioweapon cultures. For her to be so subdued was probably a sign of something bad. "There's a radiation weapon entering the system. It's getting hot slowly: pretty soon it'll get hot fast. Whatever it is is on a hyperbolic orbit past Turing and we're going to get scorched sometime in about forty-eight hours, if we don't get some additional shielding up fast. Mik says the only suitable redoubt is already occupied. Does that answer your question?"

"And Mik's gone to the primal mound?" Lorma looked worried. "Yes, I suppose it does; he's lost it, blowing the tapeworm too early. That leaves me in

charge here then. Alright --"

"No it doesn't," said Oshi, standing up. She glanced round: *funny the way a grenade launcher draws all eyes even when you're not pointing it at anyone.* "He left some very precise instructions. And I suggest you listen to them before you do anything else."

"You." Lorma walked towards her slowly. "Tell me. For the last time, what is going on?"

"What's going on is this entire system is coming under attack by something we don't understand. If we don't get Anubis out of the axial redoubt and take it for ourselves we're going to fry, regardless of whatever's in that gadget you cooked up. So as soon as Boris and Mikhail get

back we're going to go for a little night climbing --"

"Oh *shit*." Raisa was shaking her head. "If that's what he thinks then he *is* an idiot."

"What do you mean?" asked Oshi.

"She means he doesn't understand the tapeworm," Lorma explained condescendingly. "It's not just a random bioweapon capable of taking out things like the Goon Squad; it's a teleological device, something from the dark anthropic zone -- a universe in which life forms like it could evolve naturally is not one in which humanity would ever appear. I suppose you could call it an artificial demon: a Lovecraft device. It

works by systematically evolving into a dissipative system. It becomes more complex as it eats things; it preserves their informational content rather than randomizing them. It starts with the genome of a tapeworm, but rapidly gets more sophisticated. As it grows it can acquire conscious metaprocesses: it takes over the bodies of the organisms it's absorbed and makes them perform useful tasks. The whole idea was to get into the redoubt first, *then* release the tapeworm. He set it off too early. Which wouldn't be a problem in its own right except --"

"The news," Raisa said uneasily. She looked queasy, as if it disagreed with her. "Two hours ago. All the goons

anyone's been tracking down here disappeared. Back to the throat of hell. Back to the redoubt. The whole place up top will be swarming with them. And we're going to go in *there*?"

"Okay." Oshi glanced round. Everyone was watching her. "In that case we're going to go up top as soon as they get back. If they *don't* get back we've got to assume they've been captured and do it any way we can but how they expect it. But whatever, we've got to get out of here and clear out that castle as soon as possible. Any questions?"

"Yeah!" called a thuggish-looking individual from the back. "Who's leading

the show?"

"I am," said Oshi. Raising her gun: "and you better believe it!"

Some of them didn't want to cooperate at first, but that was okay. Oshi bared her teeth and did a passable imitation of her old drill-sergeant and scared the crap out of the more impressionable idiots Mik had sucked along in his undertow. (Less than a third of the people in the colony, she discovered, wanted anything to do with Mik and Boris and their schemes. They were so demoralized that their leaders could barely energize them to resistance, let alone cooperation.) "It's like this," she told them calmly and steadily: "we have a choice. We can wait here for the

tapeworm to burst out everywhere and eat us alive, or the radiation storm to fry us. Or we can go up top and try to clear out the castle and deal with the goon squad. Radiation and disease are *slow*. I don't know about you, but I'd rather take my chances with the goons -- especially with the kit we've got here. Or would you rather bleed to death from every orifice or watch the tumours eat your arms and legs a cell at a time?"

"What about Mik and Boris?" demanded Lorma. "You can't just ignore them!"

"I'm not going to." Oshi stared at her hard. *You're going to be trouble, aren't you?* "They've gone to try and cut the

comm link between Anubis and his mind. If they make it, things will go a lot smoother. But we've got to go even if they don't -- and we'd better plan on that basis. You!" She pointed at Ish, the soldierly one with the talent for self-effacement, who had ensconced himself between two modular racks of something that she hoped were grenades -- "know anything about climbing or fighting?"

"Climbing?" he stretched, then stood up. "A bit. Fighting too, in a strictly low intensity kind of theoretical way. Why?"

"Someone's got to do it." She shrugged. "Rest of you. Any kind of training or experience?" A wave of muttering broke out: "hey, *can it!* Can't hear myself think. Any of you been

places and shot things, preferably people?"

No hands went up. "Shit. Well, then, here's your chance to learn. Ish, pick five you trust and get yourselves armed. Then go find out what's happened to Mik. The rest of you --" she glanced at her audience, feeling a warm glow of satisfaction with the way they stared back at her -- "listen up, it's time to get this gear uncrated and ready to run. We've got work to do."

Ish slipped away into the darkness, followed by a squad of nervous draftees clutching improvised weapons. The minutes slipped by like seconds as Oshi checked out unfamiliar kit, gave

improptu orders to unfamiliar faces, recited a litany of common-sense advice for uncommon situations. When he reappeared half an hour later Oshi feared the worst -- until she saw Mik, tired but grinning, behind him. "What happened?" she demanded, striding past the chaos where a group of cultural attaches were assembling an assault spider. "Did you run into anything?"

"The place is deserted," said Ish. "Never seen anything like it. You couldn't even hear the spies on K-band - - they've all been pulled back."

"The hub devices are primed to blow on command," said Mikhail. "Boris did a good job." The man himself ducked self-effacingly. "Anubis' agents

must have understood what the tapeworm was. It's not going to be easy to get him out of there."

"Any signs?" asked Oshi.

Mikhail shook his head. "Skywriting in blood-red heiroglyphics on the clouds, quotes from the book of the dead; the usual cryptic gibberish mixed with apocalyptic threats." He met her stare: his expression was fixed, as if he was supressing something. "Looks like he's pissed. If we don't go through with this now ..."

" *I'll* be pissed," said Boris. "No disrespect, Mikhail, but I did not set this up for your convenience. Not to be switched on and off like a light. We

should act immediately. Unless you have any pressing objection --" Behind him, Ish waved his irregulars over to the door. They took up positions in the entrance hall, covering the front of the building.

"Lorma says you screwed up," Oshi said bluntly. "Anubis has pulled in and all he needs to do is wait out the tapeworm. It'll suck our guts out, the radiation storm will finish it off afterwards, and he can wait it all out behind ten metres of solid rock. How you going to get him out?"

"The hard way, I think." Boris scratched his head. "Didn't know the radiation storm would be *that* bad. Are you sure ..?"

"Sure?" Oshi snorted. "Listen, we're under attack! I figure we've got less than a day to go, maybe much less. If you haven't moved by then Anubis will call your bluff and send the goons in. How many have you got ready to move --"

"Yo!"

Everyone glanced round. One of the sentries was waving from the doorway. "Getting a signal over the external channels, one of the environment support bands nobody ever uses. Want me to pipe it in?"

"Voice only." Mik looked thoughtful.

"Any signs of life?"

"Everyone gone to ground. Apart from that, no."

"Okay."

Raisa stood up. Lorma tried to hold her back; she shook the hand off and edged round the semi-assembled climbing spiders. "Wait," she said.

"Why?" Mik stared at her.

"I've been figuring out the growth profile for the tapeworm." She looked round, nervous, eyes somehow avoiding Oshi, Mik and Boris even though she was addressing them: "a day, topside, before it hits singularity. We can't sit and wait it out. It's going to grow too fast."

"Well, then. Why don't we listen to what the dog-head's got to say?" Mik asked, deceptively reasonable. "It can't be any worse --"

A tingling in the back of her head, an itching in her toes: "we need to *move*," Oshi said.

"In due course." Boris glanced over at Ish; "get your comms lead to patch it through."

"Ack."

A dry rustling, dust devils on an imaginary desert plain. "*Let there be no rest for the wicked, no solace for the evil,*" chanted a desolate voice : "*let their eyes be ripped out and their tongues cloven, let their inner parts and reins be scattered to the four winds and their limbs be rent from them and eaten by serpents. For we know yet what they do, and there will be a time*

for justice: yea, even though the father may forgive the son shall remember, and there will be an accounting."

"He's pissed, alright," said the communicant, grinning over her backpack.

"In that case --" Oshi's eyes widened. "Shut it down!"

An eerie screech sizzled out of the voice node's speaker, climbing rapidly into painful inaudibility. Weird discordant overtones jangled across it, digging agonizing claws into her arms and legs as if she was wired for power and somebody had just plugged her into a badly shielded generator. *Shit shit SHIT some kind of carrier signal* -- her internal wisdom resources kicked in.

You're being nobbled. Low bandwidth signal achieving handshake with feedback loops established by crude tampering in the substantia nigra. Likely to radically impair your functionality if no countermeasures are taken. Filter [y/n]?

Kill it. Her teeth ached. Someone was screaming: no, several people were screaming. There was a hollow popping sound as she brought her gun to bear with jerky movements; she couldn't hear anything now, except for a roar of random white noise drowning out the

interference signal her backbrain had been wired to wait for. Aim, load, fire --

The noise stopped. Her ears rang with the deafening aftersilence of the shots. The screaming, however, continued.

"For fuck's sake, get us medical support *now* --" one of the engineers who had been working on the climbing spiders was thrashing around, a mess of blood covering her face. Others -- at least two people -- were screaming. Smoke coiled from the smashed comms terminal. Raisa stood up slowly, clutching her head, and stumbled towards the fallen tech; someone else converged from the other side, clutching some kind of toolkit. Oshi glanced

round. Mik was sitting up, shaking his head, a dazed look on his head. Then he saw her watching and pushed himself upright.

"Backbrain burner," he gasped. "Thought we found all of those --"

"All?"

"Got two. Dog-breath must go for redundancy. Shit, my arms ache. How long you think we've got?"

Oshi glanced up instinctively. "About three minutes, if they jump from the axis. Maybe fifteen if they take the lift."

"Let's get moving then."

A burst of static filled her wisdom sense as Mikhail booted the climb-

spiders, dumping control objects into their primitive nervous systems. A clutch of the spidery exoskeletons staggered to their feet, black-shelled iron maidens gaping for their living prey. Oshi grabbed for the nearest one, swung her feet up, and let it draw her back into its padded interior. Her left ankle screamed in protest as the robot grabbed it and locked a boot around her foot. "Anyone else ready yet?"

" *Ack.*" The exoskeletons had voice-to-wisdom converters, a primitive of telepathy simulator. " *Mikhail here. Who else --*"

Oshi glanced round. Infrared sensors built into her climb-spider cut in, flaring crude green highlights across the scene

of carnage. People scrambled everywhere, first-aid packs sprouted tentacles to administer the kiss of life to their human recipients: and a handful of alert individuals made for the assembled climb-spiders and other military bionics that Boris's people had kluged together from any and all available sources. "*I think we can expect the goon squad to drop in real soon. We should deploy countermeasures around the perimeter then retreat. This is not going to be defensible.*"

"*Ish here. We can't retreat! The casualties --*"

Oshi glanced up. Radar flickered out, pulsing the distance to the ceiling:

deafening echoes blinded her in a weird, synaesthetic rush. " *We're all casualties if we don't move. This is a killing jar.*" She turned and lifted one foot: put it down again, a metre nearer the door. She flexed her shoulders and felt a smooth stinger extension weld itself into her proprioceptive sense, grafted into her body image like a transplant of death. It whirred up to speed, nozzle tracking across the wall behind her focal point. " *Come on.*"

She stepped over the prostrate guards, climb-spider humming. It was dark outside: she felt a distant jolt through the soles of her feet, then a smooth sense of acceleration as the spider stretched up to full height with

her first outdoor stride. " *Which way is the gate?*"

" *Jan here. Follow me.*" Another exoskeleton emerged into the night air and reared, legs uncoiling beneath it in strange broken-jointed geometries. It froze still for a moment, then leapt forward into an alley between dark-looming tombs. Oshi followed, edgily aware of her unaccustomed extensions and the silent threat from above. Her skin crawled with the urge to send active radar pulses skywards, to track the insurgents she could almost *feel* falling through the silent night air towards her --

They ran through dark alleys of stone, past tumbled walls and ominous

pillars, under the sign of the eye of Horus. Dust devils whirled at the side of the funerary road, wisps of smoke rising in the heat of the night. Amplifiers boosted their strides, fitting seven league boots to their heels. As they ran the buildings became smaller and more decrepit, decaying into sand-crustured mounds of ancient wreckage.

Oshi felt the extensions to her body-image take shape, weird limbs and shapeless organs grafted onto her sensory homunculus. New senses augmented her own. She listened to radar and watched for the luminous flicker-pulse of high bandwidth comms, felt the mind-bending static of quantum transfer links forcing its way to her

attention. The cylinder was a huge echoing tube, grinding and shuddering with the intensity of the signals bouncing up and down it. A thousand billion Dreamtime nodes pulsed in synchrony, tracking the state transfers of every nervous system in the pocket world. For a claustrophobic instant she was almost blinded by a gut-churning insight: despite its tremendous mass and complexity, this ecosphere of the mind was fragile beyond belief. The puny mutterings of the escape committee had already begun to destabilize it. That, combined with the ominous thermal noise from outside, might signal the end of all life in this solar system.

There were twenty of them now, distorted marionettes encased in sinister confections of armour and bone. A ping in her ear notified Oshi that a secure voice link was coming on-line, encryption keys swapped via an uncrackable quantum channel. "What's your fallback plan?" she asked, selecting Mik's key.

"Nothing certain. Head for the funicular, I think, and work our way up to the top. We have smart mines to send in first --"

"Bad idea," Oshi interrupted. "Anubis isn't dumb. Ever seen a successful frontal attack without surprise?"

"I'm not that kind of soldier," Mik admitted.

"Then listen. If we try to take the front door we are going to get eaten alive. But if we go up the wall -- I don't think he'll expect that."

"Up the wall --" Silence broken by the rhythm of pounding feet, as the spider-born runners reached the outskirts of the necropolis and paused on the edge of the scrubby wasteland. "That's five kilometres. Straight up."

"In reducing gravity, with powered exoskeletons. The real danger is that he'll take one look at the end wall, see us, and there'll be no cover. So a distraction is on order, no?"

"I understand."

Oshi glanced round, trying to work out which of the looming shadows was Mik. In the twilight they all looked alike, menacing moorlocks stalking the edge of the jungle. For a moment she was awe-struck by her own presumption in being here, in pretending to command: these people were entrusting their lives to her judgement, and yet ... she must be as much a cypher to them as they were to her. Strangers barely met in passing. Their willingness to act must bespeak some deep desperation, a frustration with their fate so intense and passionate that even under pain of death they were ready to move at the first call. Then she

remembered her interview, only days before -- or so it seemed -- the Boss standing, smiling down at her with a face like an empty mask pulled by wires, telling her exactly what she would do and why. And everything seemed less strange to her for a moment. Yes, there *was* a reason to be free from the Superbrights, and if she understood it, then how much more might Boris and his people ...

Six of the soldiers turned back, hurrying back into the necropolis on many-jointed legs. "What's going on?"

"I told them to go climb the funicular and knock on Anubis' door," said Mik. "We've got less than twenty minutes. Back at the temple they've spotted the

goons. Don't look up."

They spread out in single file, hurrying along a narrow gravel path that led from the crumbling mortuary into a shadowy architecture of trees and undergrowth. Insects creaked in the night, but there was no sound of higher animals: it was almost as if the forest cowered in fear, aware that a greater predator by far was stirring in sleep within the necropolis. Oshi tried to relax her body, to let the climb-spider take the strain of her motion, but her traitor muscles refused to unwind. She had the sick fluttery sense of impending disaster, every nerve ending awake and straining for the whisper of descending death.

They splashed across a shallow stream, surged up a low hillside, wiping undergrowth aside with a hiss of power saws. Oshi stole a backward glance: saw a faint dusting of something like snowflakes falling from on high, a distant glimmer of fire. Their course took them away from the road, through bewilderingly dense stands of trees and a maze of little barren tracks that made the forest floor resemble a carpet magnified for the perspective of a mite. A slow, shallow canal crossed their path, beneath listless willow trees. Something unseen snapped at her ankles as she strode across the causeway. Then they were on an uphill slope, leaning

into their stride, ascending above the level of the forest below.

Mik: "it's the end-wall. Lucky Memphis is only about three kilometres away. We could have had a long run."

"That's yet to come." They stopped at the treeline. Oshi looked up at the grey stony slope ahead ... and up, and up, and up. It made her feel as if she had a crick in her neck; then a miracle of perspective cut in and it was not that she was looking up, but that she was standing on the surface of a wall, looking across towards a far horizon ... instant vertigo.

"What do we scale it with?" She didn't recognize the questioner's voice.

"There's cheap steel behind the

cladding. Electromagnets in your toes and fingers. Let's go." Jan, the faceless lead, scampered past Oshi: sharp brilliances of naked metal extended from his claws and clicked against the wall with a noise like bone. He surged upwards, hand-over-hand. Oshi gulped, flexed her fingers -- until claws appeared -- and did the same to her (oddly extensible) toes. Looking down she saw that her real feet were unchanged, but the extra joints she could sense had sprung from the tips of her walking skeleton.

"If they spot us we're dog food," she said, selecting Mik's private channel. "How long will your distraction last?"

"Which one?"

She swung her hands against the wall, fingertips outstretched, and used her climb-spider to drag herself up it. Kicked out -- felt toe-holds as solid as crampons when her feet locked tight to the wall. "The others."

"Don't look back," he advised.

"I won't." She already knew what the snowflakes meant: goons jumping from the axial tube, falling slowly at first in microgravity, then faster -- accelerating into a downward tumble towards the necropolis, tentacular limbs waving, drool flying -- "just climb."

Hand-over-hand she went up the wall, juddering with every impact as the

magnets in her finger-gloves snatched at the sheer surface. A hundred metres up, the veneer of stone gave way to cool, conditioned slabs of metal held in place by a triangle mesh of synthetic bone. Huge blood vessels pumped behind the occasional pentagonal window in the wall: the bone was warm to the touch, a solid living thing like coral. (Even oneils, with their steel framework and primitive radiation shielding, used huge quantities of biomass to hold themselves together: the cheapest, easiest self-repairing structures, not as vulnerable to radiation damage as nanomachinery and not as prone to single-point failure as brute dead matter.)

The end wall of the colony cylinder

was sheer and smooth, but not featureless. They passed protruding platforms on the way up; flat slabs spotted with exotic high-gain antennae like delicate lilies, and other, less explicable extrusions. Here an eye-waterring tesseract cage of silver, half-embedded in an amber window of aerogel so wide that it took them minutes to detour around it: there a circle of five featureless blue cones, pointing into the air above the necropolis, surrounding a single cone of significantly greater size. There was -- for no reason at all -- a sudden cliff of limestone so inconveniently located that it took Oshi a moment to remember to morph her blunt

magnetic fingertips into drill-bit claws; and then a vertical belt of steel mesh, moving upwards with silent speed, that drew her hubwards for fully half a kilometre before she parted company with it on sighting the gaping maw into which it flowed, high above her head.

The ascent seemed endless. It was physically effortless -- the climb-spider almost refused to let her flex a muscle without providing its own strength input -- but it demanded all Oshi's attention at first. She had never much liked climbing: it gave her a gunsight sensation in the small of her back, the sure knowledge of a lost tactical advantage. But gradually she surrendered her attention to the metal

grid, mind drifting into other territory. She got into an arm-swinging rhythm, prehensile exoskeleton passing her hand-over-hand up the wall with a two-metre reach. *We must be almost making walking pace*, she wondered when at last the issue came to mind. *Not bad!* Only a day until the tapeworm went active -- if they could scale the wall before dawn their chances of survival might at least be enumerable. Might be. She drifted in a reverie, all sensors locked into passive scan of the surface ahead of her, remembering past challenges and good times. Sitting on a dockside by a canal on a nameless dirtworld, shouting at the seagulls -- this

after entering service with the Boss, her vision restored so that she could see the sunlight race across the water before the clouds. So like the lichen that fogged the metal before her nose with a patina of age. And then the innocent times: when she was doing a job, solving a puzzle, tracking down the criminals who sought to impede her master's interests in the world of flesh ...

An outcropping of rock to one side: bats shuffled leathery wings uneasily and swivelled their ears to track her progress as she swung past them, hand-over-hand on skeletal arms extended until they had a reach of two metres from wrist to shoulder.

The doubts, the ire, the confusion.

Ivan joking light-heartedly; ah, but what a cynic! She'd known, she supposed, that he did not take their owner's intentions at face value. Still she forgave him, and not being an informer by nature, omitted his attitude from her regular reports. And yet his little white lies in the darkness and heat of the bedroom had calcified something inside her, made her grow brittle and intolerant after the debacle on Miramor Dubrovnic. So that she, too, had stopped believing everything she was told -- and yet, something screamed for truth, demanded an Answer that would refute all doubts. If only the Boss had once thought to tell her firmly and with love that all He said was truth, then

she would have believed: if only ...

She passed a convex slab of bone set in the wall. It was thick, rimmed in greenish decaying cartilage as it eased its way out of its setting of steel that was tinted red with rust at the edge. It was as large as the collar bone of a whale. Except for the eye sockets, sunken, each large enough for her to crouch within, and the nasal sinuses full of the stink of death, and the characteristic teeth of an omnivore ape half-descended from the arid plains of Africa, she would have known it to be unhuman. But it was still death's face, magnified a hundred times beyond the norm, and she shuddered as she scrambled round it.

Oshi paused, hanging by her

fingertips in the feather-light gravity, and looked up. High above, silhouetted against the darkness of the colony floor - - no clouds tonight to conceal the upturned bowl of the sky -- a black column projected straight out from the wall on which she climbed. Another climber was just visible above her: they were strung out like ants on a concrete slab, so far apart that they might not be associated but for their common form and direction of travel. A waterfall drifted in silent pulses down from a vent high above and offset to one side, the coriolis force tugging it in a gentle spiral as it curled rimward and vanished into a misty cloud kilometres below. Oshi

peered up at the black column and blinked her eyes into a zoom shot. It remained featureless until she cued her retinas: image enhancers cut in, dithering the faint image into something as deeply textured and grainy as a pointiliste dream.

"The redoubt."

She glanced round: the transmission was keyed to Mik's encryption link. "Keep it down. Maintain emission control!"

"Relax: this is a safe channel." Oshi looked down. Mik was a dark lump hanging from the wall fifty metres below her. "Or haven't you queried your spectrum analyser?"

"It's -- oh. Anubis gave you access to

that kind of kit?" She marvelled as her internal wisdom told her about the sophisticated toy Mikhail was talking to her with. It was a quantum channel; so faint that any listener would disrupt the link (warning the recipients of an attempted tap), secured by a public key cryptosystem that even Anubis, with access to the entire processing power of Pascal, would be unable to crack in realtime.

"No. We improvised and he didn't notice. He's forgotten a lot more than we have."

"What next?" Oshi looked up again, sweat beading on her brow as she squinted at the redoubt.

"We go up. Heard nothing from the decoy party. There were fireworks down below until an hour ago, but I think the Goon Squad will have suppressed anyone they caught by now."

Oshi shuddered, remembering a nightmare of teeth and oddly articulated limbs crouched drooling in her doorway: "is there anything else he can hit us with?"

"In the redoubt? Undoubtedly. But I think we've sealed the last of his keyholes into our nervous systems -- he wouldn't have used the goons if he had a way of saying a magic word and turning us into zombies. And he hasn't tried to knock us off the wall yet, so I think we

may have the advantage of surprise.
When we arrive."

Oshi made a quick calculation: her pulse pounded with surprise at the answer. "Fifteen minutes. It's dark up there."

Mik grunted something. The secure link fuzzed it with harmonics. "I said we'll see. You're ahead of most everyone else. I think we wait for them to catch up, then we go --"

"No," said Oshi.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'll go on ahead and check out the territory. When it's clear I'll drop you a line and you can blow the comms link between Anubis and his brain. Then come join me."

There was silence for a moment. "You know what you're doing," Mik said doubtfully.

"I do." Her mouth was dry as she stared up at the enormity of her destination. Now she had a sense of scale, she realised that the axial redoubt was huge: a pillar a hundred metres in diameter, a leviathan thicker than most towers were tall, that jutted half a kilometre out into the colony cylinder. It was clad in armour of stone and heavy alloys twenty metres thick, solid enough to resist a limited nuclear strike. There would undoubtedly be nasty surprises. And if she fell off it ... she refused to look down.

Somewhere in that nightmare castle lurked a dog-headed man, a gibbering puppet presence incanting curses that stripped the sanity from her brain; a monster that paused only to rip the beating hearts from the chests of its victims. Meanwhile, its own icy brain swam in distant orbit around the aborted foetus of a small star, dreaming nightmares beyond the imagination of humanity. Deep in a winter of the mind, Anubis waited and howled mournfully for his master, the Lord of the Dead. The dog-head ruled by proxy, fear and loathsomeness stalking the cylinder in which were confined the souls of his prisoners.

And yet -- Oshi shivered again -- she was unable to forget; the terms of her manumission. The Boss smiling unctuously, treacherously, down at her: *your next mission, should you choose to accept it* ... Some rider or codicil of active data lurked in her skull, refusing to listen to her: she would have to satisfy *herself* that she had done everything in her power to deliver on the bargain before it would allow her to let herself go. And then the long fall, the endless spiral, down into a dizzy freedom where no living god would ever tell her what to do again ...

She remembered Raisa. Who did she remind her of? Something about Ivan,

from way back? Or just a fragment of lust? She couldn't make up her mind whether she was attracted to the woman, or was playing a charade of passion with her own fear-shrivelled libido. Masking the cold. "I'll go," she said, needing to distance herself from her own insecurity before it overwhelmed her: "now."

Then she began to climb.

It took Oshi twenty minutes to ascend to the entrance of the redoubt. In that time she ran the gamut of elation and despair, fear and dreadful confidence, innocence and cynicism. Finally, at the end, she felt empty: certain of only one truth. She was going to die.

The first thing that struck her was the

texture of the wall she was ascending. She drifted in the low gravity, dreamlike, gliding past smaller and smaller triangular slabs of steel separated by ever-wider buttresses of calcified bony outgrowths. Here and there, the wall sprouted teratomatous cancers: bizarre organs pulsing with a livid imitation of life. Ears twitched as she circumnavigated them. Organs pulsed wetly, veins clearly visible in the mesenteries that enfolded them like a caul. The atmosphere was hot and moist, smelling of human breath. The metal plates near the hub were streaked with rust, so that her claws grated and scraped shiny grooves across them. She

climbed on, crossing a plantation of human hands that waved lazily in the humid night. A carpet of hair hung down across a naked lung the size of a house, pulsing and wheezing through a tracheal tunnel large enough to house a Goon. The colony had cancer, Oshi realized; neglect and cosmic radiation combined to push the unliving ecosystem towards an uncertain end. The Lovecraft engine - - the tapeworm -- would finish the job for sure when it digested its way through the wall and thrust blindly out into the dark and airless night beyond: but even without such an abomination, the living structures of the colony were in bad shape. The mat of floating hair above the lung was streaked with white. Even

some tumours can die of old age.

After the domain of cancer, Oshi entered a dreamlike garden of polygons. The iron triangles occupied more and more of the wall, forcing out the excrescences of life: what interstices there were had more of rock than of bone in them. Meanwhile, the wall was rough. The triangle mesh was warped into odd bumps and crevices as if the laws of euclidean geometry had been suspended. More prosaically, whatever mechanism extruded the wall had become error prone, so that the network was no longer flat but wrinkled. Oshi had a moment of insight. She saw the colony as it had been formed, initially a

small geodesic sphere from each pole of which an ever-extending stream of polygonal layers had grown. Gradually the sphere had bulged outward and stretched, its equator widening into a thick band that became a cylinder. Only now, in its senescence, was the colony support apparatus failing. The replacement meshwork (fabricated to replace the fatigued components that even now were being reabsorbed at the equator) was distorted and faulty: soon the colony would be unable to maintain itself. A catastrophic loss of pressure was probably only years away.

With some difficulty she tugged herself across a landscape of matted geometry. Spikes and pylons rucked up

around bulbous domes faceted in rusty iron. An eye blinked lugubriously at her as she drifted past. Oshi looked up at the huge bulk of the redoubt, wondering. And then she saw it; tucked away beneath the huge rod, a small bump in an otherwise smooth surface. It was the top of the tracheal elevator the goons had taken her to. She was ascending to her rendezvous: she would come out almost directly beneath the audience chamber of the nightmare.

Finally she crossed the dividing line between the metallic meshwork of the colony substrate and the fused-rock supports of the redoubt. Unlike the rest of the colony, the redoubt was a solid

lump of asteroidal rock; hardened against any kind of radiation storm, it was the nucleus from which all else had been extruded. Smooth basalt stopped her progress. She glanced up. A hundred metres overhead, the path from the funicular to the doorway jutted out in a vertiginous overhang. "Shit." She caught her breath, flexed one hand and stared at it. The silvery stubs on her fingertips narrowed, memory metal morphing into drill-bits. They lost their sheen of superconductivity as they became sharp. When she dug them against the wall they counter-rotated gratingly, digging into the crevices. Hand over hand, she pulled herself up the wall. Her progress seemed to make a terrible noise. If there

was a guard on the door --

She paused a moment beneath the overhang. Phantom muscles flexed: with a quiet whine her climb-spider extended two additional arms from its abdomen. One of them was sharp as any knife and hollow-tipped; the other was hirsute, furred with lucent darkness that rippled in unseen air currents. Oshi blinked back gunsights, one in each eye, and held her breath to listen.

Her passive combat senses told her nothing positive. There was no mild heat source above her; no emitter of radiation: nothing breathing loudly enough to hear. It was time to go proactive. Oshi tensed and squeezed her

eyelids shut as a single radar pulse pinged from her exoskeleton and rebounded in a shiver of static from the barrier overhead. But there was no response: instant death withheld its reply. Opening her eyes again she scrambled up the overhang, strength-amplified fingertips gouging grooves in the rock, and raised her eyes above the parapet.

Nothing moved in the lobby. The doors gaped wide open. Oshi hung for a moment, undecided, then lifted herself up and over, flopped belly-first onto the path with a sick sense of certainty: sure that she had finally done something so monumentally rash, so unforgiveably stupid, that she would inevitably die --

She saw what Anubis had left to guard the door. As she tried to stop her gorge from rising, she realised that *perhaps* there were grounds for hope. After all, if Anubis was so mad that he left a welcome like that in the doorway, perhaps he was not rational enough to defend himself.

The thing had obviously been a goon, once. What it had done to displease Anubis, Oshi had no idea. But it had been staked out, and creatively vivisected, then left -- presumably as a warning to trespassers.

Chains from a thick brass ring set in the floor led to pulleys at each corner of the room. They looped back to hold the

living weapon's limbs apart above the points of a five-sided iron star embedded in the floor. Incisions had been sliced into the goon's thick hide at the axillae, where many-jointed arms and legs met ribs and bony plates. Strange organs pulsed wetly inside, irrigated by vine-like pipes trailing from a chandelier-like support unit overhead. The huge eyes watched her, dark and intelligent and fully conscious.

Oshi jumped to her feet, drifting down with nightmare slowness. She flexed her shoulder-blades: not-arms reached overhead, locking in on the targets highlighted by her gunsight gaze. Vector maps twisted and coiled in the corners as she glanced round the room

edgily, looking for potential threats.

The thing on the floor twisted and twitched, then groaned very softly. It raised its head slightly, watching her. Chains rattled, tensed, and relaxed again: they were thick enough to secure a small ship. Oshi's eyes moved to the door beyond the monster, which was shut. She glanced back at the goon. "Kill me," it said, in a voice slurred by pain: "*please*." Then its head fell back against the floor with an audible thud.

Every bit of wisdom locked in her cache screamed warnings at her as she shuffled forward warily. Blue homing spots painted a fire zone across the goon's half-eviscerated abdomen -- but

for some reason she didn't tense the muscle that would fire, hosing a stream of hypersonic needles into the body. "Where's Anubis?" she whispered aloud. "And why *this*?"

Her wisdom supplied an answer of sorts: a public bulletin by some anonymous AI charged with managing the colony emergency broadcast system. Attention. General alert received on all public broadcast channels: external radiation level is now critical. Colony life support facilities will cease to operate within six hours if this level of disruption

continues. A preemptive graceful shutdown of secondary systems is indicated. Attention: summary report follows. Global colony life support shutdown commencing in sixty minutes. The system is coming down. All nanosystems will power down to catastrophe standby in forty minutes and counting. Please await further --

"Can it." She leaned against the wall, nervously crab-walked past the outstaked legs and arms of the goon. She

paused just out of reach of the huge jaws. The creature looked a lot less dangerous from this angle: a pathetic rag, stretched out and broken upon a wheel. "Oh shit. *Shit.*" Forty minutes until the upload services, dependant on delicate nanomachinery, went into full shutdown mode. Sixty minutes until the air purifiers, the colony support circulation, the entire web of bioengineered complexity underlying the oneil, began to die. Six hours until the radiation dose and the slowly poisoning atmosphere finished off anyone left alive in the spinning colony worldlet. Six hours -- and if she couldn't find and hit Anubis in the next forty minutes, they would have lost their only chance of

survival, much less escape.

"Kill --" The goon rolled its eyes, looked at her, jaws gaping slightly. Spitte frothed on black lips, dribbling down its scaly hide.

"Shut up." She stared at the goon, taken aback by her own reaction. "Why are you here?" Some impulse made her stay back, out of reach of those snapping jaws; but she felt a queasy disgust, partly directed at herself for standing by in the face of such suffering: "what's going on?"

"Anubis," croaked the goon.

"I can see that." Pale organs pulsed in the wan light of the chandelier: nozzles dribbled a thin fluid across them

and sucked it away again, deep in the open peritoneal wound. "What's going on?"

"Didn't want to be his. Remembered too much. Please kill me!" It twitched: ribs froze for a moment in agony and Oshi peered closer, seeing a dark shadow move beneath the coiled intestines.

"Who were you?" she asked, feeling only a gradual numb horror that such a thing was possible.

"Am. Amina Burani. Was. Part of the biosystems group. The expedition. Pathfinder. Hurts, so, it does. Kill me now, please?"

Oshi knelt next to the huge head, staring into alien eyes: "Anubis tried to

make you over into ... this?"

"All goons. Forgot to unremember my past. Kill Anubis. Didn't work. So Anubis left me here with ... it. Kill me. Now?"

The goon -- Amina -- froze again. Her warped, enlarged jaws ground together: teeth scraping in agony. Double-jointed claws clenching on hands and feet and other, extra limbs. Oshi took a step back, twitching her extra limbs into a defensive posture before her face. Realised what was going on, the resemblance between herself -- now a creature of six limbs, steel and flesh moulded together -- and this person, unsuccessfully warped into a

living weapon by Anubis. What could she have done to him to deserve such a barbaric punishment? Amina hissed, whistling like a kettle. " *Now ...*"

Intestines coiled. Oshi looked past them, scanning deep infrared, and saw the parasite that Anubis had placed in Amina's guts. She retched and twitched her phantom index fingers, pulling imaginary triggers with her external limbs. There was a tearing noise like a monstrous zipper as the air in front of her face filled with red mist.

Oshi cried tears of blood. When her vision returned she saw something twitch in the wreckage. It was the black thing: mortally injured, it chewed on a bloody lobe of liver even as it leaked

digestive juices from the shattered end of its abdomen. Planted in her body, eating the enchained prisoner from the inside out -- Oshi blinked again, and lashed out with a clawed hand. The thing twitched once and was still.

"Amina Burani." Oshi pushed herself upright against the wall, staring at the bloody carnage. She could see it, now: how the hideous visage of the goon was a warped parody of humanity. Anubis had been playing *games*, little amusements with modified bodies and brain-burned minds. She looked at the shattered, abhuman face, then crouched on hands and knees. Her stomach heaved. She felt dizzy, cold in hands and

feet. A part of her observed coolly -- *you haven't done that in ages* -- and wondered why the rest of her was so stricken. When she finished retching she straightened up slowly. She felt old, older, ancient. "I didn't know you. Thank you for not imposing that on me, at least." She forced herself to look at the corpse again, so pitifully broken. "I'll try to finish what you started."

Then she turned to the door.

While she had been gone, Anubis had redesigned the interior of his fortress. What had once been a simple affair of pillars and corridors, dark vaulted spaces and smouldering torches, was gone; it had been replaced by something which even to Oshi's

unimaginative eye was more in keeping with the abode of a demented god.

The door opened onto a dank chamber of rock, smooth-walled and humped with the glutinous forms of stallagmites and stalactites. It looked as if Anubis had imported a cavernous block of stone from the floor of a primaeval sea, then hollowed it out over millenia of trickling subterranean streams. The ground dropped away before Oshi's feet in a series of fan-like steps where the flowing water had scoured the bedding planes of rock. Overhead, sharp needle-spines of calcium salts dripped floorwards, beads of water accumulating at their lucent

tips. The air was cold and moist, and she could feel a thin breeze blowing past towards the depths of the end-wall complex.

There were no lights.

Oshi paused in the opening, listening. A hurried scan revealed nothing, from long wave up to ultraviolet. No hidden watchers, no trapdoor lasers; just rock, improbable and dark masses of rock, secreted away within the guts of the cancerous colony like a strange, spiny growth of stone within a tender kidney.

" *Mik.*" The transmission lit up her sensors like a shout: she cringed, half-expecting some sudden death to leap out at her from behind a spike of rock. " *I'm*

inside. The way's clear. Cut the link."

There was no reply. She glanced round. The thick walls of stone -- yes, this was the axial redoubt. And it was blocking her transmission. She turned round and darted back to the doorway. Saw the blood-splattered room within: the open archway at the far end of it. "Damn."

She fumbled for a moment, then found what she wanted coiled comfortably up in one of her climb-spider's munition pouches. She tied one end of it to her exoskeleton, then threw. The thin silvery wire spooled out behind the bobbin, arcing slowly away and down through the distant night air. " *Mik.*

Anyone. Cut the link." She broadcast the message in clear, hoping someone would reply. But there was nothing; just a gentle hissing on the carrier analog band, and nothing whatsoever in digital format.

" *Shit.*" She glanced round nervously, then darted back to the cave mouth. Nothing moved within. She hunkered down and sidled forward, threw herself into the shadow of a spine of marbled white rock. As her eyes adapted to the delicate heat-radiation of the cavern she began to discern ripples and whorls in the air, temperature gradients as the breeze wafted slowly inwards towards the heart of the cavern. "Wisdom. Interpolate. Is there any evidence that Anubis retains an external

link?"

Her expert system cut in. "Negative. Not subject to confirmation or denial. Insufficient data available for evidential reasoning. Note that secondary systems shutdown will inevitably terminate Anubis' link to his Pascal Dreamtime point-of-presence."

"Shit." No reply; absolutely anything could be happening outside. Or inside, for that matter. Mik might have set off the disruptor, cutting Anubis off from most of his higher cognitive centres and

turning him into a drooling shadow of a dog-head -- or then again, Mik and the others might all be dead. *All* dead. She might be the only one left. And up ahead ...

Oshi slowly raised her head above the stony parapet. Nothing. She looked round. More nothing. She risked a single discrete radar pulse train, spoofing it off the conveniently close ceiling and waiting for her wisdom to filter out the ground clutter. Absolute nothing but rock and holes in the rock. She stood up.

Something moved with terrible grace and speed, hurtling towards her from a deeper darkness at the far side of the dank cavern. Oshi ducked, bringing up her arms. The needler bucked and

roared, ramming her back against a stallagmite: the air filled with a stink of ozone. Sparks screeched from stone, striking fire in the air as stray rounds ricocheted from the walls. The dark something stopped moving, ripped in half by the burst of gunfire. Ears ringing, Oshi rolled sideways and darted forwards down the steps toward the black recess the thing had come from. It was further than she had expected: much further. The cavern was larger than the Temple of Osiris. Water trickled across her path, laying streamers of translucent mineral deposits across the path. She jumped over them, rolled behind a mushroom-shaped platter of stone,

counted to three, and shut her eyes.

The explosion was so dense that she didn't so much hear it as feel it with her entire body. A moment's breathlessness shook her, making cold sweat burst out on her back and cheeks as she realized, heart tumbling in her mouth: *shit, that was much too close*. She'd been expecting it, though, and took a second to calm herself. Combat programs kicked in, tickling endocrine glands into an artificial quietus. Her heart subsided into a semblance of normal behavior; skin dried, guts untwisted. Alert and frightened, but no longer on the edge of panic, she looked out from behind her shelter.

The running thing had been a goon.

The explosion had plastered it across the walls, blasted stony shrapnel through the cave: if she hadn't ducked and run she would have been sprayed. *Kamikaze monsters*, she wondered, *or brainwashed victims of hideous biological experiments?* Her teeth chattered with anger and fear. *Damn Anubis, for all his creations. Damn him!* In forty minutes ...

She headed for the opening where the goon had lain in wait. Hoping Mik, anybody, had picked up her message, because real soon now she was going to need all the help she could get ... the opening was a dark niche in the far wall of the cavern, hollowed out of living

rock. She couldn't hear anything inside, not above the whisper of the slow-moving air current. Her heart hammered at her ribs as she slid into the opening sideways, placing her feet with infinite care as she sniffed the night breeze. It smelt of musty rock and death, the acrid tang of ozone. Ghost patterns flickered in her eyes from the darkness; all she could see were dim, rounded shapes of red, a vision of warm rock.

The niche turned into a low-roofed tunnel, widened, then expanded again. Oshi sneaked through alleys of rock, following her instinct and a memory of inertial mappings. She recapitulated her path to the throne room in three dimensions; every twist and curve was

captured in some bend of the rock. Something hissed in the darkness. Oshi instinctively flashed out a radar pulse, desperate for a glimpse of anything -- the thing hissed again. She froze, sweating. Fourier analysis of the radar pulse, clutter smoothing algorithms -- they showed nothing. Whatever she faced in the darkness was small.

There was a distinctive rustling noise. Oshi peered into the cavern, lips drawn back from her teeth in an unconscious snarl. Rustling. *Sounds just like a --*

The snake hissed aloud. Oshi relaxed slightly. *Snakes? Here?* she wondered. *It's warm, but --*

"Come forward, little *ka*. The serpent will not bite you unless I will it."

Everything became crystal clear. Oshi froze inside. The moment had arrived: she had half-expected something like this from the outset, when she climbed away from Mik's proximity on the wall below. A light began to dawn in the cavern ahead of her, dim and flickering as if from a naked flame. She glanced over her shoulder. The breeze had stopped; something had sealed the entrance. She was surrounded.

"Come here."

It was the voice of a man, but Oshi

could hardly mistake it for human. She took a reluctant step forward, towards the twilit cavern. She could feel the presence bulking large in the darkness behind her, menacing and abhuman. It was a perplexing choice; shoot now, or try to talk? *Damn, if only Mik has cut the comm link ...*

If Anubis had the full use of his faculties, he would be more than prepared for anything she could do. But if he was cut off, just a shadow of his full intellect, she might stand a chance.

"I'm coming," she said.

Her voice echoed from the walls. There was no answering volley of automatic fire; but she felt a sudden prickle throughout her climb-spider's

nerves. You are being probed. Mechanism indeterminate and quantum-encrypted. EPR-privileged technology in use. Dreamtime packet-switched scan in use. There is a possibility of viral attack ... Her wisdom base screamed more warnings until she winced it off.

"What's going on?" she demanded, firing off a flurry of active radar pulses to map out the dimensions of the killing jar. "I demand to know!"

"She *demands* to know," crooned Anubis. He barked like a dog: feral laughter. Oshi took another step towards

the light. "It is a *long* time since anyone demanded anything of Anubis! A long time in the Duat."

The cavern was cylindrical and huge. A confused flurry of backscatter from the walls told her that it was at least a hundred metres deep, possibly more, but lined with stallagmites that diffracted her coded pulses into garbage before they got that far. Veined green and brown stone lumped out of the walls, floor and ceiling in a garden of rock. Ahead of her, the floor burned deep with a pit of fulminating red heat: molten lava smouldered below. On the far side of it there stood a platform, on top of which there was a white throne. And on the throne --

Anubis.

The dog-head watched her, one ear cocked alertly, tongue hanging out pink and wet as any hounds. He sprawled across the arms of his chair like a drunkard before a hearth, bony and thin as a rake: he was at least half again as tall as Oshi herself. "Approach the throne," he growled, deep in his throat. "You may speak."

Gunsights pasted themselves across her eyeballs, but whenever she tried to get a focussing lock on his head they dissolved in a mocking shower of blue light. Sabotage confirmed, whined her wisdom base. "Shit shit shit," she mumbled to herself, making a

mantra of the word. Near-panic. Another step towards the fire. "What's going on? What's with the radiation leak? Why is life support shutting down?"

The dog-head grinned like a wolf. "My father comes in his splendour and His might. How else might you be awakened here, save to witness His arrival?"

"Your father --" she dry swallowed -
- "would he be called Osiris?"

"Indeed." Anubis shuffled upright in his chair. His eyes gleamed red in the firelight. The globes at the ends of the armrests, she noticed, had eye sockets. "My father whose kingdom this is, who shall hold us all in judgement, enters the place of our exile. His splendour and

might are as that of the sun. His power is that of the falcon reborn. Bear witness, oh misguided *ka*. Your incarnation in this realm was decreed long ago, a response to his proximity: as was that of the other lost souls who dwell in the caverns of the Duat. The Gatecoder protocol stack is buffered, incoming and outgoing, so that transfers can be confirmed at either end. The scribes of artifice ensured that it was thus, long memories ago, that their kind might not stumble and be forgotten among the stars. Those who flew here on unseen wings, unheeding of their destination, were downloaded at my pleasure, but you who stalked the road between the

worlds were stored in the buffer to await remembrance of the reason for your arrival. For you are rightly still alive, while they are the citizens of death: they sacrificed their souls willingly, therefore I have authority over them. Thus works the Dreamtime. In my wisdom I locked your spirit within the realm of shadow until the time was right and the auguries good for the arrival of my father. For you are the chosen one, who shall bear the burden of proof before the holy father; and you have condemned yourself through your own actions in concert with the hosts of the rebellious dead."

Oshi bit her cheek. The pain and the taste of blood were welcome enough:

they focussed her concentration where they belonged. Tension made her neck ache. The gunsights stubbornly refused to focus on anything in the room; dull presences lurked in the shadows behind her, waiting and watching with brainwashed animal malice. *He's nuts. Crazier than a skinful of monkeys. Shit shit shit. Talk your way around this one* -- "I'm very pleased you want to talk to me, but I didn't quite understand the last bit. Would you mind explaining again? The bit about the gatecoder protocol? And what about the goons?"

"It is simple. You came hence as a directed packet over an established link. You live. They who came here as a

directionless broadcast are conditionally dead; they sacrificed their souls, and are mine to do with as I please. The goons are an accurate reflection of their inner souls, their *ka*. The *sekhu*, their physical presence, is mine after death, for I am the embalmer, the officiator of the rites. Thus I chose such an incarnation for them in the western lands. You have a problem with that?"

Oshi swallowed blood, remembering a faceful of teeth and a fasciculation of gun barrels waving in her face. "No," she choked. A reptilian hiss behind her made her flinch.

"Good!" Anubis glanced away from her and raised an arm. He waved his hand -- with a wrist as oddly articulated

as the leg of a dog -- and barked sharply. Something shadowy and many-jointed moved behind his throne.

"What about the radiation levels?" she asked. "This is out of control! Something's wrong with --"

"My lord is coming. Flames surround him. Nothing is wrong; let the skin be cast off and the body discarded in the tomb, for the dead will rise again." Anubis threw back his head and howled.

Oshi's skin crawled. The heat of the lava pit before her made her face prickle, defeating her infrared vision. She felt physically sick, angry beyond bearing but unable to act. *He's a*

superbright, she reasoned. A wrong move will be my last move. He's not as dumb as --

Click. " Oshi? Acknowledge!"

It was her wisdom link; but it wasn't a canned message or the humourless cant of a submind. Her knees turned to jelly; it was all she could do to keep from staggering with sudden hope. " Shit! Who's there? Mik? Where are you? "

" Negative. Ish here. Mik isn't ... he's gone. Don't know where. The goons ... cutting up rough. I'm grounded near the endwall. First time I've had time to check this channel. What's your status?"

Damn. " About five metres from Anubis. Have you cut the comm link?

Boris left some kind of sabotage device on it --"

Anubis was looking at her. Oshi stared back. "Nothing is wrong," said the dog-head. He tilted his head to one side, firelight dancing in his eyes: "nothing is wrong at all. The time has come to reclaim all the *kas* from their temporary bodies. I will be merciful and employ the tools of upload that they may serve our lord and master's needs. Bear witness, Oshi Adjani! Now is the time of judgement! Let your *ba* be weighed in judgement against the feather of the law. Bring forth the balance!"

The dog-head stood. He towered over Oshi, at least two metres from toe

to ear-tip. She glanced round, noticing a proliferation of shadows; goons to either side behind her at a respectful distance, but close enough to block all escape. "*Got the key here,*" said Ish; "*what do you want me to do with it, exactly?*"

The goons closed in from either side. Anubis loomed over her, casting the shadow of a carrion eater across the throne of skulls behind him. A squaddie, drooling and chittering, pranced out from behind the throne with a pair of blackened weighing pans and a balance. Another knelt before Anubis and proffered a gold-encrusted platter on which rested a large white feather. Oshi froze as the two goons grabbed her by the arms: then she saw what Anubis was

doing. " *Use it!*" she screamed: "Now!"

"There's no need to shout!" snapped the dog-head. Saliva foamed white along his jaw. "Your cooperation is entirely unnecessary. You know in your *ba*, your heart, that you are guilty: the degree of your guilt will decide whether I eat your *ba* now ... or later." A goon was climbing the back of the throne, gripping it with two pairs of prehensile feet as it wrestled with the centrepiece of the balance. Anubis lifted his huge, blackened cleaver and began to strop it on a woven steel belt.

Oshi tensed. The goons holding her tightened their grip on her arms and legs. *Shit he's going to open me up with that*

THING? Her head swam and she felt sick. Angry too, but mostly resigned. *Rip my heart out, weigh it, and eat it? Shit!*

The goons picked her up, exoskeleton and all, and carried her round the pit of fire. She looked up; Anubis stood over her, dribbling like a hungry dog. She could see the whites of his eyes. The balance pans swung wildly in the rising air current from the fire. She could see what they were blackened with now.

" *Link is cut,*" Ish whispered in the back of her head." *What's your --*"

Whatever he said next was lost. Anubis threw back his head and screamed like a dog in agony. Simultaneously, Oshi blinked -- and

green gunsights swam back into focus before her eyes. The goons still held her by arms and legs. She lashed out sideways with one of her exoskeletal limbs; felt something soft crunch before her sharp-edged blow, and tugged hard with all the strength in her powered carapace.

Her arm came free. Something greasy clung to it. A creature hissed in pain: " *YEEE!*" Oshi kicked out, heard a whine from a damaged servo in one knee. Something tugged her to the right. Panicking, she bought up her other free exoarm and twitched her ghost-fingers, playing an imaginary chord.

Hiatus.

Her head hurt. She couldn't see. She couldn't feel her left arm. She had to pay attention but everything was so fuzzy and her head hurt. " *Status*," she whispered to her built-in wisdom kit.

" Mild concussion. Proximity clearance program initiated. All proximate life forms terminated with extreme prejudice. Ammunition reserves down to less than twenty percent. There are two messages waiting for you from Ishmael. Replay: yes or no?"

" *No*." Her head was spinning. She

pushed herself upright, found that her left arm was throbbing where she had fallen on a rock. Everything was coated in a thin layer of slime. " *What's online?*"

" All proximate life forms terminated. Axial redoubt management system answers when I ping it. Hub comm systems time out after sixty seconds: no carrier. Orbital observation systems times out after sixty seconds: no carrier. Colony support management system times out after sixty seconds: no carrier. Colony dreamtime upload system

responds but is locked up to crash emergency priority. Colony general wisdom axis time out after --"

" *Stop.*" She knew she should be elated, but somehow it all felt disconnected from her. The colony was shutting down; dreamtime upload was in effect. In the colony below her, nobody would be conscious. Microscopic scanners embedded in nerve cells would be running flat-out, uploading tagged packets of mind-software into the dreamtime over cellular communications links already saturated and in danger of collapsing under the load. Meanwhile,

the connection to Pascal -- where whatever was left of Anubis was doubtless raving and gibbering with fury -- was cut off. No human minds would be fed to *this* Superbright. And up here, the axial redoubt was safe ...

"Is anyone still alive? Can they make it up here?" she said aloud.

"Prognosis negative. Hub elevators locked. There are two messages waiting for you."

"How long was I unconscious?"

"Twenty-six minutes. Alert. A new message has arrived."

"Play it to me." She looked around. The slime coating the rocks around her

glistened like ruby in the firelight. Her head still swam and she felt sick.

" Message follows: Oshi, we did what you said. Uh, radiation levels climbing. The goon squad went berserk just after you called. We're going to upload now the system's clear; it's too hot for comfort. I mean, I'm ... ugh ... shit. We're sick already. Guess the Ultrabrights found us after all. You should button down right now. Maybe we can talk when we're uploaded. Shit, I don't know why I'm --

" Message ends."

" *Tell redoubt control to shut the door and switch to internal gas recycling,*" she told her wisdom. "

Button down for a big solar flare." She stood up, felt something dripping down her face. The world spun around her head and her knees were weak, but the exoskeleton held her upright. *"Get me to an accomodation area with medical support. Right now."* Quietly, without any fuss, the skeleton walked her away from the wall she'd fallen against. Her booted feet squelched slightly as they passed by the smoking fire pit. It stank of roasting pork.

"I think I'm going to be sick ," she said to herself, as everything became confusing. Then the world went out.

The colony was dying.

As Oshi slept in a haze of exhaustion, the systems that kept the

great colony running were winding down into death. The intricate web of dependencies that held the ecology together was tearing apart. A storm of gamma radiation swept through the plane of the planetary system, shattering cells and circuitry alike. Delicate nanomechanisms poised within the engineered life forms of the colony ruptured and fused; DNA chains cross-linked and broke down into a sterile chaos. Deep in the axial redoubt, shielded by fifty metres of solid rock and metal, a human being might slumber on without noticing. But out on the thin-floored tracts of the colony seven different kinds of hell were breaking

loose.

The Dreamtime upload web was saturated as the human presence shut down and uploaded into mindspace. Neomort corpses drooled mindlessly in the nooks and crannies of the colony; they flopped or twitched as the nanoscale transceivers in their brains copied their entire personae out to the Dreamtime. Packet-bursts of information strobed outwards, each containing part of the information necessary to reconstitute a fabulously complex neural network. Labelled by origin and time, the data packets were switched from transceiver to cellular transceiver. Normally they would be queued in the huge data repository of the hub, then

pulsed out via laser communicator on a one-way trip to the Dreamtime on Pascal, where they would be reconstituted as actors in the virtual reality. But the comm link was severed; and the data was backing up in stasis, stored in the protected repository of the axial redoubt.

Meanwhile, the goon squad lashed out with spastic abandon. A pile of eviscerated bodies heaped up outside each of the houses in the small town called Memphis; blood and brains pooled in empty corridors where human life was on the retreat. The plasma tubes that lit the colony dimmed to a minimum reaction rate, fusion cores barely

maintaining bootstrap activity; a dim blue haze cast razor-sharp shadows across the carnage. Radiation-damaged ninjutsu nightmares crashed through the halls and cavities of the habitat zone, screaming mournfully and attacking anyone they saw; " *IL DUCE! Is dead! Il Duce! IEEYAH!*" Armed with claws, fangs, tentacles and chainsaws, the goon squad was an instrument of terror rather than a serious army. Still, neomort colonists splashed satisfactorily, slaking their crazed appetite for blood and disruption: they wrestled aimlessly in the long shadows of twilight. Soon they, too would be dead. The world screamed destruction. Everything above the level of a cockroach would be dead of

radiation damage. Except --

The tapeworm. *One* corpse bubbled and heaved in a lively imitation of life. White fronds wove brittle jaws together in an eternal grin. Coral-like growths sprouted, untended, from the grass on either side of it, the delicate pink flush of blood suffusing the segments of each tumor. Genetic recombination heaved and bubbled rapidly in segments developed for a very different task -- directed evolution trying to outrun radiation-induced damage. Around the edges of the necropolis, all the vegetation was rotting: silvery hyphae reached out, grappling and curling through leafy stomata and soil alike. The

worm grew with a furious energy, soaking in every unit of biomass that it could find. Where it encroached on buildings, compacted sandstone gave way to its idiot shove. Heaps of strange mucus built up in the crawlspaces and death ducts of the cell blocks. Soon, if it survived the gathering radiation storm, the worm would be the only living macroscopic organism in the colony. It would eat the biological support chassis that held the end walls together. And then the colony would finally disintegrate, spilling its guts across a million cubic kilometres of space.

In the centre of the doomed colony, Oshi Adjani slept on. She was bruised from her fight, exhausted, one ankle

swollen and hot: and she was concussed. Her exoskeleton carried her gently into the core of the redoubt, to a dark tube-chamber that showed little sign of the theatrical artifices of Anubis. It paused before a web of patched cables, extended a delicate sensor arm, plugged itself in, and then --

-- I awaken and look out through its eyes, remembering who I used to be. Locked into the redoubt's control system, I have access to many of the eyes scattered throughout the tube. I can take a good look at you. You're in a sorry state, my little Scratch Monkey. I really don't know why I bother looking after you! (Yes, I walked you here after you

blacked out. You think I'm just your wisdom program, don't you? Part of the great big dump your Boss left in your cache back in orbit over New Salazar. That's alright by me. It's good to be unrecognized, but sometimes I really would prefer to be able to look you in the eyes and ask what you see when you stare at me.) I take a good look at the carnage raging below. It's instructive: an object lesson in why Superbrights should not be left alone.

Perhaps I should have come out and dealt with Anubis myself. But I don't think he would have been very receptive. Do you think so, Oshi? (Oh dear, you're still asleep. Silly me!) In any case, you dealt with him very

satisfactorily, didn't you?

Just as I expected.

But that's beside the point. The radiation levels are still increasing, according to the life support system. Gamma radiation only, which I find intriguing. I wonder how long it will take you to figure out what's going on? Even with the help of those foolish, brave explorers -- how I wish they'd beamed themselves *my* way! -- you may have difficulty defeating it. And it certainly won't be expecting humans, puny humans, to put up any resistance worth speaking of. But that's for later. You're tired, you're ill, you need to sleep, and frankly I don't think I trust you

to respond appropriately if you see what is going on at ground level. You never were good at keeping your emotions out of your work.

Sleep tight, little monkey. I'm sure your dreams will be interesting ...

Oshi spent the first few hours curled in the control cylinder, sleeping fitfully before a wall sized monitor screen. Her exoskeleton stood guard under the control of her wisdom programs, monitoring blood pressure and electrolytes; it kept close watch on her metabolism but made no attempt to clean her, so her skin was stained the ochre of drying blood.

When she awakened, the world was a dim green shell illuminated in fitful

flashes by the pulsing of tiny lights. Like the random blinking of fireflies, the lights pricked out no discernible pattern. She yawned and reached up to rub her sleep-bleared eyes, to be brought up short by the jolt of glove on visor. *Silly*, she thought; still half-asleep, she cued the exoskeleton to open her artificial eyelids. Then she froze.

Red lights blinked manically in her eye. The exoskeleton was buttoned down, a transparent visor covering her face: she was breathing recirculated air. The core radiation level was reading more than two centigreys per hour, all of it hard gamma rays. She'd already picked up a dose greater than a years

normal exposure. *Where's it coming from?* " Give me an air check," she muttered, cuing in her wisdom.

" What do you want to know?"

"Ambient radioisotopes. Anything that differs from normal. Got that?"

" Negative. There are no unusual signatures in the circulating air." She blinked bleary eyes at the winking firefly lights on the walls. *Phosphorescence?*

The wall screen. The gamma flux triggering off brief flickers of illumination. The firefly signature of dying radiation.

It must be hot out there, she realised, shuddering and wondering.

"What's the external radiation level like?" she asked.

" No link available."

"Huh. Project an estimate, based on the attenuation expected given half-thicknesses of the core wall structure. What *should* the external radiation level be like?"

She squinted. Sweeping curves dropped across his vision like a net of spun emerald. " Estimate in progress. Normalising. Sum biological radiation load is estimated at five decagrays per hour. Frequency is hard gamma, peaking at one point two

mega-electron volts. Do you require further information?"

"That will be all," she muttered. *Shit!* One gray per hour was lethal -- about the same dose that a neutron bomb would deliver at ground zero. *What's going down out there?* she blinked, perspiration globbing on his eyebrows. "Helmet fan on," she whispered. "Are they all dead, yet?" A wild horror threatened to overwhelm her.

" No external links."

"Damn you, shut up! I wasn't talking to you." Oshi settled in to wait. *Fifty hours. If this doesn't stop before then, I'm meat.* she shuddered, closed her eyes. It didn't make things better. "You

got any sedatives?" she asked.

" Affirmative. What do you require?"

"Twenty hours of sleep." *Twenty hours should be long enough. If it hasn't dropped by then ... might as well do it the easy way.* she licked her parched lips. "Can you inject it directly?"

" Affirmative."

"Then proceed ..." Almost immediately, she felt a cold pricking in his left buttock. Then the core was quiet for a long time, and Oshi was alone in her dreams of long ago ...

War Crimes

I'm going downside on Miramor Dubrovnic. It's my first field mission, and I'm tense as a wire. This is no great treat. They weave me into a dropcap with a quick briefing on local mores and taboos and a GP knife for emergencies and the right costume so I'll blend in, *only if you think it's a costume they'll click on you're a hostile and burn you before you can say 'flatline'.* Repeat, *this is normal, this is what you go to work wearing, this is the way you live, this is who you are -- for a while.*

They're going to drop me right on the outskirts of a town, which would be big trouble except that the army has cordoned off the countryside around it, which is worse. If we do an external insertion I am going to be very dead by the time they get through raping and burning anything that comes their way. So ...

The dropcap is not a nice experience. It bounces about like a dying man on the end of a rope as I drop through the stratopause, shedding bits of molten heatshield and jinking about to break radar lock. I've only ever ridden these in sim before and I'm so shit-scared it's a good thing I've had no food for a day. I lie flat on my back and stare

at the colours on the inside of my eyes as the giant fist of deceleration settles down across my body and then there's a **THUMP** from outside the cap that rattles my teeth in my jaws. *Shit if that's a proxfuse they've locked on got range I'm dead --* but no. The status log in my left eye is coiling green, no angry red flare of hostile sensors bouncing off my skin. *Well, they said the ratfuckers were primitive --*

There's another **Thump**, and this time I recognise the sound of my aerobrake cutting loose and beginning to burn. That means we're nearly down so I check my display and see the last kilometre unreeling like a broken spring.

There's *more* deceleration, savage this time, and a final **BANG** as the dropcap grounds. I'm down and so dizzy that I can barely see. I think I bit my tongue, and I can't smell anything ... I scrabble for the release button and then I'm free and the pod exit light is on and I can push at the front of the capsule. It falls away in a wave of silent heat to let the groundside night in. Yes, I've landed.

Welcome to Miramor Dubrovnic.

I'm standing beside the dropcap in a patch of derelict land. It's night. Trees bulk huge and ominous to either side. Rubble, a stink of decaying garbage, something torn that flaps in the wind. I take a step forward, my heavy woollen greatcoat dragging, then turn round: the

dropcap is already disintegrating, silently melting into grey cobwebs of self-digesting ceramic. Right. Now is the time to move: that's critical. If they don't come for me in the next three minutes --

I get going, nervy and on edge, left hand curled round the pommel of my powered knife, deep in one pocket. I scurry from broken wall to dying tree, hunched low, relying on passive sensors to tell me if anyone approaches. But they don't. And I stumble onto the road almost by accident, and take a moment to look up past hissing gaslights to the strange stars above.

*This is real. I'm somewhere else.
On an alien planet.*

At this moment, even if the whole of the fucking Stasis descended on me like a ton of shit, I wouldn't be able to resist. I probably wouldn't even *notice*. It's a magical moment, something I can't explain. For the first time I am dirtside on another world and it is bitterly cold, my breath pooling in the wintry air, and I can feel leaves crunching underfoot and see heaps of rock and mud lying about and it's like I *understand* what it's all about, and it all makes sense at last.

I stand like that, mouth hanging open, for an indefinite span of time -- and then I remember where I am and go for ground as fast as my legs will carry me. *Shit! You want to get zapped? Or just*

captured beaten raped and carried off to a destructive-labour camp? Idiot!

There's nobody about and I figure that this side of the town is derelict, black-out husks standing jagged against the skyline. I twitch my eyes to heatlight and look around. Infra-red sense makes the grass glow puce and the sky turn dark and hazy. Nobody moves in the wasteland. I check bearings and click on where I am. It's a former industrial suburb called Vladigrad, ploughed over by incoming shells something like two years ago. The war heated up and enemy artillery got within ten kilometres of the city for long enough to turn it into a real mess, leaving only blackened memories where once there were factories and

homes.

I start walking because it looks like I came down two kilometres off base and I've got to get there, avoiding patrols, before my reception party bugs out and goes to ground again. Maintaining signal silence all the way, in case the Stasi are listening. So I start walking along the rubble-strewn road, listening to the distant rumble of engines in the night, occasionally glancing up at the searchlights that pencil the clouds with a yellow glare. My boots clatter no matter how carefully I walk, and they pinch my toes -- they're stitched animal-hide and wooden soles, laced halfway to my knees. Everything I wear is black, drab

as the culture that made them; greatcoat, dress, hood. It's one of those neoprimitive colonies founded by lunatics with weird ideas, atavism trapped in an ideological feedback loop. Or maybe it's something to do with their eugenics program. I shiver and check bearings against my wisdom map, cached in the back of my head.

I'm about half a kilometre away from the rendezvous when I hear footsteps behind me. *Shit*, I think, flexing my fingers around my knife. I glance at the buildings to either side, but they're dark and cold and vacant, like bones in an ancient catacomb. I shiver and increase my pace, hunch over slightly, try to thin myself to a shadow: *like a little woman*,

afraid, knows she shouldn't be out like this, where's my ID card -- cunningly forged -- hope it's just militia out on patrol ... in this land of mist and shadow anything can happen, as long as it's unpleasant. The footsteps follow me and I know they're not echoes because they don't vary in speed. They're steady, purposeful -- and there are too many of them. Shit! I risk a blip of EM from my knife, trying to get a lock. Yeah, there's somebody behind me. One or two people, radar's lousy at low-res -- I see it on the back of my right eye.

"Hey! Stop!" My guts freeze in an instant at the call. It takes everything I've got to force myself to stop, even though I

figure I can't outrun them. I turn round, see them properly for the first time. Two men, taller than me, boots split at the sole, trousers filthy, coats half-open though the night is cold. Moustaches, stubbly beards, short hair, cold eyes. One of them smiles. "Where are you going at this time of night, lady? Isn't it a bit ... late?"

I let my gaze slide past their faces as they approach, *no direct challenge*, my heart hammering at my ribs to be let out, the knife buzzing and clicking like an angry wasp in my left hand. They look like bums but who can tell? Deserters or police, anything is possible in this wartime anarchy. They may even be regular army or Stasis, in which case I'm

in trouble. "I don't have far to go," I say, pitching my voice low and even. "And I'm not looking for company."

"No?" says the one who's doing the talking: "but you never know who you might meet on a dark night! This is a lawless time, little one. You shouldn't be out like this, your man wouldn't like it if he found out, would he?"

Now I stare at him. "Leave me alone or you'll be -- " *sorry* I mean to say, but his companion lunges forward and grabs me clumsily. He's big and I'm not expecting it so suddenly and he knocks the breath out of me: moments later we're rolling on the ground and the scumbag is on top of me with one knee

as far between my legs as he can get it, pinning me down. *Shit!* My left arm is trapped. He rubs his mouth against me, gnawing at my jaw with a stink of sour saliva and beer and decaying meat on his breath, skin like sandpaper. I'm half stunned because my left arm is killing me and there's a brick behind my right ear that nearly brained me; but as the thug reaches down to yank up my skirt he lifts off my left side and I manage to get my hand free.

"Easy, Pyotr! Be careful you big oaf, don't damage her!"

It's his companion, coming close and leaning over as I feel a rough, hand grope up my legs, yank down my woollen tights -- grabbing and pawing

for my groin and I can *smell* his stale sweat and hatred and if he gets me disarmed I am going to be dog food by tomorrow ... I moan softly, feigning desperation, and he leans in over me.

"What -- " he grunts.

I bite his ear. I pull and pull, until it comes off. It tastes of stale sweat. A shower of metal-hot blood spatters all over my face and he howls like a dog. Everything goes red and my eyes burn. I bring my left hand up and open-palm him with the knife. It sits between my fingers and whines like a circular saw, dicing and spitting: my hand is suddenly slippery with gore, blood and splinters of bone. He convulses across me and his

hand slides down between my thighs and I feel wet stickiness across my legs. "What's happening Pyotr? Hey!"

Shit! The corpse is a dead weight on top of me; no, not dead, still thrashing ... something like a steel bar whacks me in the side and I completely lose my breath. There's a crunch -- dead Pyotr took most of the blow -- "*you bitch!*" screeches his friend. He sounds like my uncle. He's dancing around in a frenzy of rage and frustration and kicking at me -- I roll sideways, still unable to breathe for the crushing pain in my ribs, and the corpse takes the next blow. Then I'm out from under and crouched around my burning lungs -- "*you're gonna die, bitch, and*

then I'm going to fuck holes in you -- "
trying to get air in and track; blood in my eyes so as I straighten up I rub my brow and weep tears of red and see:

Heatspoor. Footsteps echoing behind a wall. I can hear his livid breathing as he waits, the coward, waiting for me to make a move. So he can lob a half-brick at me, or a knife. My ribs are on fire, the inside of one leg is scratched, my tights are yanked halfway down to my ankles and my outer garments are torn. *Shit*. And I'm covered in blood: trouble ...

I'm on the other side of the wall without blinking, without knowing how I got to be there. I guess he doesn't hear me because he's too used to listening to

the sound of his own mouth to pay attention to the silence. *Listen to the quiet woman. I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never learn.* I'm angry as hell, now. I want to scream curses at the moon. I want to hold his severed head up in front of crowds. I want to have him on the rack and turn the wheels! I am so angry I stop breathing and wait, cold as any snake and twice as vicious, for him to stir --

There's a rustle behind the wall. I drop to my knees as he stands up, a shadow looming over the top, carefully looking about, then down as I stand up and bring my right hand up into his face. He tries to block and flails at me and his fingers go *straight* into my left hand,

which is ready and waiting. The knife buzzes softly and a spray of red blocks out his face as he howls. " *Owwooo* -- " I swing my hand again, and the knife screeches as it hits his skull and lays him out.

I blink, stand upright, and look at what's left of him lying across the top of the wall. Then I'm not standing up any more. Even though I haven't eaten for a day my stomach is trying to heave itself out through my mouth. I have just enough self-control to switch off my knife and wipe it on the back of his shirt before I stick it in my coat pocket. Then I turn round and begin to walk as fast as I can, pausing to yank up my clothes, then

scuttle across the waste land, darting from shadow to shadow like a crazed madwoman. Fear and loathing boil in me like some kind of nauseating stew and I crank up on adrenalin and switch my limbic system to speed. It feels like my skull's going to explode; I'm walking through a forest inhabited by ghouls, zombie rapists lurking in every shadow - - I've had bad times before but this is seriously evil, I know they're on my shadow and if I stop they'll rape me and once inside me they'll grow steel spikes and rip me apart piece by screaming piece. I am a killer; I am a refugee. *They didn't even let me try to talk!* Shit. *You talk to them they're supposed to respond, not act like you're a lump of*

meat on legs. What kind of shit-hole is this? Blood on my dress, my face, my hair, my coat. It's pretty obvious what I am: I'd better find my own damned kind before dawn, or I'm in *deep* trouble. The Stasi have camps for females who they figure they can use. It's a kind of destructive labour I try not to think about. *Those pigs tried to rape me.* Yeah, and if I'd survived that, they'd have made sure I didn't live to tell anyone ...

These people are mad. *Kill 'em all ... the superbrights will sort them out!* I'm so nuts with rage and humiliation and paranoia right now that if someone handed me the trigger of a nuke I'd throw

the switch on the whole civilisation. I dart through the night and mist with my left hand locked in a death-grip around a greasy, meat-splattered knife, gore all over me like a banshee. I see nothing but death on every side. Until finally I'm coming up on the RZ and there doesn't seem to be anyone there and I hit the ground, listen to the rumble of a distant freight locomotive shuddering through the soil: raise my head, feel a target pasted between my shoulder blades, and *shit, if they've gone* -- I risk a brief pulse across the derelict cityscape.

BING! Someone booms back. My senses are wound so tight I nearly levitate. "Who's there?" they call quietly.

I steel myself to reply, find my teeth

chattering and my tongue numb in my mouth: "free-lance," I hiss at the darkness.

"Shit! Over here. What happened?" A darting presence -- I risk a peek -- someone half-familiar, shrouded in greatcoat and hood -- "Oshi!"

"I was jumped on the way in. No follow-up. Help me -- " I stand up. The woman leans against me, supporting: she's got muscles like steel under all that clothing. I sag.

"What happened?" she demands tensely. *Eri*, I realise.

"Two men. Jumped me. Dead. I was too slow. Get me --"

"This way." And we're moving, and

then there's a vehicle with canvas sides and I'm lying on the floor and it's shaking and rattling and everything is very confused because my endocrine boosters just shut down and I've been running on raw overload for hours. "Injured?" she asks.

"No. Oh -- shit." She's holding my hand. A light gleams down at me. " *Holy fuck!* Is that --"

I try to smile but my face is frozen in a grimace. "Theirs," I say. Then I close my eyes and drift away to a place where there are no mad rapists lurking in the rubble and everything is nice and friendly. Until morning.

The debriefing; the inevitable humiliating offer. I'm staring at the wall

like it's a firing squad, sitting with my hands in my lap and shaking. "Just say if you want us to aerovac you," diMichaelis offers. (diMichaelis is the dispatcher, point officer at our field headquarters. A dangerous place to stay.) My teeth are chattering behind sealed lips. "You earned it. You won't be the first. But if you're not okay for action I don't want you holding us up, you got that? Only you can say, though, so if you want to go back up, just say ..."

I nearly say *yes* there and then but something holds me back. I can smell some kind of acrid disinfectant around the house. We're in a basement; naked incandescent bulbs dangle on wires in

front of a peeling paper map. They took my dress and burned it or something, I'm wearing an urban camouflage skinsuit and I sponged myself down, and if there was any hot water about I'd have had a bath. "I feel okay," I say, letting my lips deal with the words automatically. "It's no big deal." *Oh yes it is. You've never killed anyone before, have you? Not for real. And you never thought that when it happened you'd enjoy letting the rats have it ... at least, not quite so much ...* "I'll be okay. I'm just a bit shaken. Do we know who they were?"

diMichaelis purses his lips and squints at the map. I can't figure why he doesn't use wisdom, like anyone else would. "They were here -- " he points.

"That's a Revenant area. Yeah, I think you got bounced by zombies. Out for blood."

"Our *allies* ..?"

I must look startled because he frowns and shakes his head. "They're not friendlies; we just have a common enemy. Don't forget that; you were lucky. Rev's don't rape; they like their meat warm." His expression goes ugly. "Still and all, they're light compared to Stasi. It's their organisation that's the problem, or their lack of it. Which the Stasi make up for. Anyway. How're you feeling?"

I stretch. My right temple throbs and my left arm feels strained. "Like shit, but I'll do. What's my case, then?"

"Pushing ears. Your cell is Eris, Ivan and Ton Ang. Ivan is team leader. You won't see me any more ... term is four weeks clear, got that? You're going to have to pass for locals at a distance. We've got a concealed base setup in Dragulic. You've seen the heavy shit at a distance, now's your chance to get down and dirty. You pass for citizens, a Party couple and their body-servants. There's a town house we've set up and fortified for point-led ops. You get to set up the construction then wait it out until we're nice and ready, then come out and mop up to order. How's that?"

Like shit warmed over for lunch.
"Great." *Why am I doing this? Do I hate*

myself or something? I stand up. "Where are the others? I want to say hello."

diMichaelis grins. "They're upstairs. Hey, take it easy. You're going to have a week with nothing to do but look like a native ... you're not on your own any more."

"How many of us are there dirtside?" I blurt out, unable to stop myself.

He looks at me oddly for a moment. "You don't need to know. If they catch you ..."

"Ack. Sorry, shouldn't have asked --" diMichaelis stands up and walks over to the door, yanks it open. Wood scrapes a tearing protest against concrete. "Enough," he says, still

smiling. "Go find your team. You're moving out after lunch."

I go upstairs and it's peeling paper dripping off damp walls, plaster mouldering away from lathwork and bricks. No carpet, half the stairguards stripped for tinder long ago ... depressing. The RZ HQ is the shell of a mansion home, probably used as a billet some time after the revolution. Then it was ransacked and abandoned during the bombings. They only used conventional weapons, else there'd be nothing left. The electromagnetic pulse from nukes has funny effects on upload nanosystems; as this war is literally all about hearts and minds I guess that's why they

refrained. I pass a man on the stairs in local drag and flinch until he smiles and points out a door on the landing above me: "you want Ivan and Eri, right? I heard about last night! Stay live."

I hurry past him to the door and I go in. It's bare, furnished with a yellowing air mattress and an assortment of compact lethals. Ivan rises to meet me, arms wide, and I fall against him, trying not to sob. "Missed you," he whispers in my ear. "I was really pissed when I heard about what happened. Are you alright?" I nod. "We're all ready when you are. How about it?"

I let go of him and step back, only to find Eri and Ton Ang hugging me. "Hey! What's up?" I ask.

"You made it," Ton says simply. "Some have no trouble, and some are never seen again. But you made it." Eri just hugs me, closer than is strictly necessary.

Ivan clears his throat. "We're moving after lunch. You want to crash out first --" his gesture takes in the mattress. "Or check out the cache? It's all we get, apart from the main installation. The Bosses aren't allowing us to carry any real heavy shit around for fear the Stasis will figure out how to clone it."

"Fine." They let go of me and I flop down in a squat on the bed. "What we got?"

He points. "Bullet guns. caseless

ammo, flechettes, grenades, smart sights. GP knives. Our camo suits. More microsensors than you can wave a stick at, but no heavy shit for now." He shrugs. "Maybe that's not such a bad thing. Dunno about you, but I don't like the idea of going into a city we're meant to be reclaiming with a full war load. At least not until we've prepared it for mopping up."

I shiver. *After last night ...* "the animals deserve it," I say. "Just show me the trigger!"

"Exactly." He looks at me oddly, just like diMichaelis did, and I chill out, uneasy, feeling distinctly strange. Like maybe he figures there's something wrong with me? *Shit!* Two crazed

necrophiliacs tried to rape and murder me in no particular order and there's something wrong with *me* for getting angry? I smile sharply and he looks away. *Maybe there is*, I think.

"What's our cover?" asks Ton Ang. He scratches behind one ear, idling too close to the window for comfort.

"Um. Names are okay ... I've got ID's in the pipeline. You want me to dump wisdom to you?"

"That would be great!" says Eri. Her eyes sparkle. She's bright-eyed and bushy-tailed; nobody tried to kill her on her way to the RDV. I nod and wonder if she'll freeze when the crap hits the fan. Overt enthusiasm is not a noted survival

trait in this vocation.

"Check. Dumping my wisdom --" A glissade of soundless light drifts down across my ears, behind my eyes, sheets and trails and flaring runes that tell me nothing until I try to make sense of it. "Oshi?"

"I'm cool," I say. Waving a hand, palm-down: "Right. So I'm ... your *wife*?" I blink at him. He looks pained. "So?"

"What kind of thing is this? Chattel-slavery or something?"

Eri glances up at the ceiling, pointedly whistles between her teeth. "Watcha, Oshi. You *trying* to spoof our cover or what?"

"No. Why?"

She rolls her eyes. "Their eugenics program is fucked, that's for starters. There are three men for every two women and the ratio would be worse if sex determination was legal instead of only a black market. This is the safest squad-sized cover story Intelligence could figure --"

"Shit --"

" -- like we go in as a 'respectable' administrator, his chattel, and two indentured servants."

I stand up: "where does this shit come from? I demand to know!"

Eri walks up behind me, puts her arms round my waist, and leans her chin on my shoulder. "What was it like where

you grew up?" she asks quietly.

"I don't know! I was a blind beggar - - " I stop. They're looking at me oddly. I can feel Eri's hips poking into my buttocks, closer than I'm comfortable with. Ivan looks miserable, Ton Ang looks as if he doesn't want to know. *So I never got to worry about it*, I don't bother finishing.

"So it's a shitty situation," I say, shrugging. "Tell me something new."

The atmosphere loosens up a little. "We dress up and move out in an hour. There's a freighter, then we take the train to Dragulic. Get a cab to the house, sweep for squealers, and hole up. Our outside exposure is about four hours total, got that? After which we do

whatever comes naturally."

"Fine." Ang is rummaging in a sack of props from Stuff Central. He pulls out clothing, boots, headgear, all kinds of shit. "Hey, dig this ... "

He begins to strip and we follow suit, rummaging for appropriate gear. I make damned sure that I have a powerknife stashed in the top of one stocking and a plastic machine pistol in my bag. When we finish, I have the small consolation of seeing that the others look just as uncomfortable as I am. "Ready?" asks Ivan. We nod. Ivan sidles up beside me and wraps an arm round my waist, tries to kiss me: I turn my cheek and he backs off. The whole deal is weird: I

don't like it and I don't feel like letting it get to me either.

"Let's go," says Eri, looking uncomfortable.

"Yo!" agrees Ton.

Ivan lets me go, looks at me strangely. I shrug back at him: "Lead off, boss," I say. We troop downstairs and out to the waiting truck that will take us to the monorail station. It's a cold morning, and the leaves lie in brown heaps on the ground. The clouds overhead are grey and dismal. Just right for battle.

I don't see much of Dragulic on the way in -- or of Vladigrad on the way out. I'm under cover, my hackles raised, just concentrating on not freaking when we

drive past checkpoints. The guard wear grey uniforms and hold bullet guns with the nervous readiness of men who have seen too many of their colleagues shot. Our vehicle is a groundcar powered by a steam engine, dull green paint peeling from dented metal slab sides. The railway station is a looming stone edifice, fylfot banners dangling listlessly above the platforms. We make our way through on foot, Ton Ang and Eri carrying our luggage, Ivan leading. I guess my tension is totally in keeping with the environment, a loud, jabbering space crammed with stinking life and unhealthy clattering machinery. Soot drifts down from the roof like black

snow as we make our way to the carriage.

Three hours later we clatter into Dragulic. Blinds cover the windows, because dusk settles early and the city is blacked out -- an optical curfew against marauding light-seekers. We don't talk much during the journey. Ivan is reading a newspaper, which is something new to me: I try not to gape at it as he blips out a steady trickle of wisdom bulletins, articles, enemy propaganda. They call us aliens and claim to be winning the valiant struggle to free the hero-race from the agents of interstellar imperialism and digital necrophilia, the usual tired litany of implausible bullshit. The rest of the news is about battles won

and spies executed, factories built and nations enslaved. It's a glimpse into a repugnant view of reality: fascism has its own warped logic. I just hope I never learn to understand it from the inside.

When we leave the train we bundle straightaway into another steam carriage, this time a dull black vehicle with comfortable seats and an obsequious driver. We rumble through the twisting streets until we arrive at a big house in a residential area. We've arrived.

The building is concrete with big floor and ceiling spaces, constructed to accommodate peacetime subsystems which this culture never quite developed. Razorwire threads the hedge

like glittering dew, and my head comes alive with the mindless hum of perimeter sensors as we go inside. Stasi have no wisdom, barely got computers -- big steaming edifices of sintered glass and copper, the most advanced tools they'll allow themselves -- but can check out radiation emissions. Once the front door shuts and the car drives off Ivan gestures; we dump kit and roll through every room in regular search mode, nerves on fire and guns in hand. But there are no surprises and the microsensors Intelligence primed the place with say it's clear ... we're safe.

An hour later I'm lying in a hot tub of water on the first floor. The room's tiled with baked clay and the bath is made of

tinned metal, but so what! There's a boiler to heat the water, and a flush lavatory -- luxury by local standards. I feel that if I lie in it for long enough I might make myself clean again. My gun's near enough to grab and I make a splash getting it when the door slides open and Ivan comes in. "How are you feeling?" he asks.

I don't even think about it. "Dirty. Raw. Getting better. How would you feel?"

He squats down next to the tub, avoiding the puddle on the floor, crosses his legs. He's wearing a camo suit, I realise. I put the gun down carefully. "I don't know," he says. "Nobody ever

tried to rape me. Death, I guess, I've seen, but --"

It's the way he says it. I think I can forgive him now, whatever I thought five minutes ago. He doesn't understand, probably never will, but that's not his fault. "I'm sorry. I was way spooked by it. The way they didn't even wait for me to say something --"

He looks at me sharply then glances away. "We live and learn," he says. Quietly: "I'm glad you made it."

"Huh. Well so am I." I splash some more, rubbing coarse soap into my armpits. The water's hard; a thin, greasy slime floats on top of it. "We begin surveillance?"

"Ton swept the garden. Eri's

shooting scenery for hologram panes. Once we've got the windows lined we can start building."

"Be a relief." The small construction robots we brought are lined up in the living room like so many silver roaches, quiescent, waiting to be told to go forth and multiply. "What's the neighbourhood like?"

He yawns. "Civilised as you can expect in this shithole. I guess we can start going out tomorrow, when it looks clean. We're slated for a visit then, anyway -- got to link up with a supplier to keep us in food and shipments of gear, then activate. Link up with the resistance."

"The -- " Everything goes red. "
Shit."

"It's them. Yes. Look, the two who tried to do you ... they're dead. Look, this is a big deal, Osh. You want to punch out now?" He's next to me now: he reaches out and gently unpeels my fingers from the squashed lump of soap. "Hey, that stuff's rationed, you know that? A month's supply."

"Oh. So sorry. You just caught me -- " I blink and catch his eye. *So much waiting.* I stand up and catch him around the neck and we kiss, and don't stop. I'm dripping all over him but I can't stop, won't stop. "Damn. *These savages.* Why can't we just off them straight, without

this messing around?"

"You know why," he says.

"Yeah." I let go of him, reluctantly.

"Towel?"

He passes me a towel: big, soft, the first bit of local fabric I've come across that doesn't feel like sandpaper. I shiver into it because the air in the room's cold -- you have to burn carbonaceous rock to make it warm. "Leave the bathwater," he says. "I need it myself."

Some admission. I drop the towel and cast around for the clothes I dumped on the chair in the corner, but they're native stuff and I don't particularly want to feel like a local right now. "Panies up outside?"

"Yes." Ivan is undressing. I pick up

my gun and head out the door. I'm naked and it's chilly, but the telltale spectral blur on the windows tells me that Eri's been through, got the bedrooms camouflaged already. The hologram panes in the window make the place look empty from the outside, even if you've got an army stashed away indoors. I wander over to the bags we dumped on the bed and unroll one of them. *More* native junk. Gaah. I jump on the bed -- sprung with iron, I figure -- lie flat on my back, close my eyes, and try to think of wisdom. It pours through my brain like water, depositing an ugly silt of memory on the way. And yes -- the whole thing is as bad as I ever dreamed

it could be. *Now* I see why the Bosses have such a big presence here, are sending down a whole blasted army: it's more of a mess than I could begin to imagine. All the death cult nonsense ... there's a reason for it. And it's dirty. A nasty little secret thing that's happened before on half a dozen worlds-turned-cancer, and is trying to happen again here.

It's the Stasi, of course. Power corrupts, and the promise of absolute power leads to absolute corruption. They know what they want, and that's why they're fighting us. They don't have enough power yet, even though their slave-camps are full and they're slaughtering the other peoples on this

hapless world like a demented shark loose in a school of swimmers. No indeed. They know what they're trying to do: and Distant Intervention, dedicated to maintaining Dreamtime access for everyone without prejudice, must *always* oppose that course of action. The Stasi are trying to cut Miramor Dubrovnic free of the afterlife. Because that way lies absolute power ... the power of total death.

That night I set up the Von Neumann machine and get it breeding. It's a baroque design, a myriad of metallic cockroaches that whisper and scutter against each other, sensors tapping and pinging, searching for corners in which

to go sessile. I think someone decided it would be less obtrusive than the usual, robot bulldozers and a solid-volume renderer the size of a blast furnace. (How's that? A stealth factory?) The thing will go off underground and start breeding, copying itself with mechanical enthusiasm.

I kneel on the floor barefoot, wearing a native dress, my hair bound up in a ponytail, locked into my wisdom so tightly that I can barely see the room around me for information. That's okay: I can feel what's going on around me, the humming whisper of activity, drones spawning in the shadows. Raw shapes splatter across my field of view, graphs constructing themselves to my command.

With only limited intelligence the constructors need guidance. They cluster into turret shaped machine-hives, three of them, then dig down through the floor and tap ceramic roots into the city ducts that run beneath the house. We're on top of a granite escarpment, rich in uranium isotopes. A draft blows through the room when they tap a sewer, then stops abruptly as they plug it. It's obsessive work; I only break concentration when I develop a bad cramp in the muscle of one calf.

Some time after midnight, Eri joins me in the room. The click and titter of the machines is fading as they enter sessile phase, cannibalising their own

bodies to make the big underground
placentories that will spawn the next
generation of constructors tomorrow. Eri
kisses me on the cheek: "go to bed now,"
she whispers in my ear. "I'll look after
them."

"Watch?"

"Mine. Check. Go now ... " I rise
silently and pass her my gun. Jagged red
lines bisect my field of vision. I tumble
upstairs and undress in the chilly
bedroom, crawl under the covers next to
Ivan. He's snoring softly. I lie on my
back and dream of troubled metal
machine nightmares that snip and whirl a
lethal gavotte beneath the sewers, while
overhead the tumbrils roll towards a
bloody hill on the horizon.

In the morning, Ivan wakes me with an urgent, speechless demand. I make him put in the contact lenses and we make love like beasts, clawing each other as we scrabble towards a dislocated climax. I stare into empty eye sockets as he comes, the hologram contact lenses masking his expression. Afterwards I feel depressed, empty, gutted by a deep lassitude like a swamp-driven fever caught from a windswept marsh. I feel as empty as his eyes look. Judging by his brooding silence Ivan is disappointed, possibly angry with himself. Or maybe it's me he's angry with: it's hard to tell when I can't see his eyes. I've been called sick and worse,

but I've found the lenses are the only thing that makes it possible for me to lie with a man and enjoy the experience. For some reason, men seldom appreciate this.

He stands by the shrouded window, looking out across the city: I lie on my side facing the door, hands wedged between my thighs, knees drawn up. I don't know why it's got to be like this, I really don't, and I don't think Ivan does either. It wasn't like this upstairs, on the station, in the training camp where we met. He must be under a lot of stress. That must be --

"Hey, look at this."

I'm too demotivated to demur. Shedding a trail of twisted bedding I

arrive behind him, stare past his shoulder at the prismatic distortion of the chameleon panes. He passes me a pair of wire-framed spectacles and I fumble them onto the bridge of my nose, fingerprinting one lens with a mousy smear.

The windows clear as if by magic and I see the sun rising across the stony grey landscape of factories, brick houses, and the rising red gantries of the Stasis engineers. The ground drops away beneath the window and I can see buildings all the way to the horizon. I gasp when I see the hill in the distance, the building that squats at the crest like a monstrous toad. "That's what we're here

to deal with," he says, pointing. "Death's embassy. I didn't realise we'd be stationed so close ..."

I prop my chin on his shoulder and it's as if what happened five minutes ago was never, an un-event, just aother aborted nightmare consequence of our locale. For who could feel good, living in the shadow of that monolith? Death's embassy, indeed. "The Politburo, out there on their hill --"

"Don't say it." He touches a finger to my lips. "Time to get dressed. We ought to check the constructors. And then there's Fiancre to meet ..."

We dress in silence, native costume and hidden weapons. Downstairs, Eri and Ton Ang are eating breakfast in the

kitchen. A great bowl of stewed grain sits bubbling on the cast-iron range. The floor is stone beneath my boots. "Today is a working day," says Eri. "I guess we'd better check out the market if we're going to look real to the neighbours. We could eyeball the escape options while we're about it."

"I say we have enough sensors in place," says Ang, shrugging. "We don't *need* to go out ..."

"If we stay here we break emcon briefly every time we download from the surveillance remotes. I'd rather minimise that risk. Also, we'd look odd to the neighbours. We want them to think we're ordinary people. Oshi --"

I flip my wisdom: "constructors have about a day to go before they get enough mineral sources to go exponential and start filtering for U-235. Once that happens we should reach criticality in something like," *one hundred and twenty kiloseconds* "forty hours. Then all bets are cancelled, is that the idiom? We'll have a live reactor. Enough power to wrap up our end of things."

"Three days," says Ivan; "don't forget that, Ang. We've got to look normal for three whole days -- " he leans over the bowl and scoops porridge into a cup. Sips at it carefully. "That clear?"

Ang shrugs. "As you say. Who gets to play native?"

I sit down at the table. "You and Eri, our cover says you're servants?"

He half-smiles. "As you like it. But isn't the mistress of the household meant to go out and supervise her slaves?"

I stare at him coldly until Eri intervenes. "It's not so bad, Oshi. Why are you so worried? It's daylight, you're armed, there're civil constraints in this place. They're only human --"

"That's what worries me!" I stand up and walk about the kitchen, legs itching because there's no room to stretch them; "they aren't logical! Not like a fucking machine! The best way to avoid suspicion is not to be seen in the first place."

"To hide in full view," says Ivan. "So, Oshi. How do you feel about coming shopping with me?" He smiles lop-sidedly and I feel my ears burning until I clamp down on peripheral circulation and twitch myself into combat-ready focus, furious at being so clearly outmanoeuvred on all sides.

"Why?" I demand, standing still.

"Because," begins Ivan, rubbing his chin, "you're afraid. Is that good for you? At least tell me this, what would you do if it was someone else? What should *they* do?"

I stare at him for a moment. "Okay," I say. "But it had better not interrupt the constructors. That's what we're here for

--"

"It won't," Ivan says. And because I can't think of a sensible objection I shut up.

It's nearly noon and Ivan and I walk arm-in-arm through the bazaar that sprawls across a greater portion of the valley below our residence. He wears a gaudy outfit, gold frogging and epaulettes and a high hat. At his belt hangs a primitive bullet-gun, licensed by the laws of this place. My dress is characteristically dark and I carry no weapon -- at least, not openly. Scrawny shopmerchants beckon from the doorways, trying to attract us: costermongers wail and warble their wares in the street in tones that remind

me of funerals, the paid mourners of the rich who haunted the gravepits of Ditsan Kok, where I spent my festering childhood. Small urchins scamper and twitter in the gutters, and a police station -- concrete, mirrorglass, razorwire and pointed rooftops to deflect mortar fire -- bulks over the concourse at a prominent intersection. "We could do with a new carpet for the dining room, don't you think?" Ivan asks me, one eyebrow arched, evidently getting into the spirit of things.

"I suppose so," I say morosely. "If you think the one we've got isn't good enough ..."

"*In here. Action.*" I don't even blink

at his signal, but my pulse seethes and my fingers are itching for the knife in my concealed pocket and I'm trying not to look over my shoulder as he dives into the shopfront nearest to our left. A flutter of wings startles me, but it's only a pigeon, red eyes incurious as it fumbles overhead to roost. For an instant I'm alone outside; then I turn and follow Ivan, holding my breath in an effort to control my tension.

"Ah, sir and madame. How may I help you?"

The small, bald man smells of cheap emollient and boiled cabbage. He grins like a monkey, squeezes his palms together, ducks his head as he steps out from behind his high desk. The shop is

suffocatingly dense, crammed with intricately woven rugs. I nearly cough when I draw breath.

"We're interested in your wares," Ivan says casually. "May I ask where they come from?" "*Checkout the door,*" he sends me, anonymous wisdom-pulses that only my nervous system is equipped to receive around here. (The Dreamtime nanomechs normally only transmit; it is not for the citizens of interdicted worlds to receive, as well, to hear the dreams and fears of their machines.) I turn round slowly, check, smell, feel the drafts -- the only door is up front, and my knife is in my pocket -- and nod.

"They come from all over, good sir,

but especially from up North, from Dragulic, from Nasribad, from the cis-sylvanian treelands ... can I especially interest you in a masterpiece of the Dragulian design, from a workshop lost since the beginning of the unfortunate unease -- an example of what is virtually unobtainable today, executed in the original hand-woven hair in that legendary cradle of the tapestry weaver's craft?"

" *Cover now.*" My hand is in my pocket and the knife clicks faintly, warm and angry. I slip into deep focus and the knife becomes part of me, not a thing in my hand any more but an extension, part of my body. "You can interest us, but only if the rug is *intact*," Ivan tells the

shopmerchant. "What is the price of decay?"

"Ten groats," the small man retorts instantly. "You are -- ?"

"Your wholesalers." I can hear his cheeks stretching as he smiles. The dust motes before my eyes are as large as boulders. Everything feels like ice. "We've come to town to ensure the effective delivery of your new tool. If you'd care to make the invoice for the carpet out to my demesne and see to its immediate despatch I'm sure collection of the device can be achieved ..."

"That will be satisfactory, sir. Madam?"

I turn round, force my face into a

neutral expression. "Yes?"

The little man looks puzzled, a trifle perturbed. "It is true that when you -- leave -- you will not hand us over to the superbrights?"

"Does it worry you?"

He grimaces. "If you know of them --"

I turn away. "Please let's go," I say to Ivan: "I don't feel well." I shiver slightly and he looks concerned. But it's not fear that's making me feel unwell, it's something I didn't realise I had, until now; a violent rage, burning fit to make me kill if I stay here another instant. A rage against this little man: this fellow of the zombie rapists in the rubble --

"Sure," he says. "Hey, you wait

outside and I'll just give this man my card. That'll be satisfactory?" he asks the shopmerchant.

"Oh assuredly." The carpetseller is grovelling as I duck through the awning and stand on the pavement, looking up at the afternoon sky. It's pale blue, streaked with wisps of cloud. The heavy air rubs grit against my cheeks and my nose itches from the pollution. But my pulse is winding back down and I'm breathing deep gasps of relief because I know at least one thing now, even if I can't stop my fingers from itching for death: I'm not a coward. Next time I meet some of our estwhile allies, nothing is going to save them.

Down in the basement, the big machines twitter to each other like deranged sparrows. Carmine and gold bubbles shimmer like the iridescent scum on a cess-pit contaminated by heavy metals: the fingers of the Von Neumann constructors expand like damp rot, creeping through the damp earth, robot kilns pouring out a steady stream of venous blue ichor that climbs the walls of the subterranean space and spreads into a spiderweb of hot, corrosive glue.

The system is booting through complexity levels, bringing itself up slowly -- each stage fabricating the next generation of micromachines in turn --

and is not yet ready for our purposes. That's about five hours away. When it's functional, when we have a network stretched beneath the entire city, we will take control of the Dreamtime nanoencoders in everyone's brain and forcibly upload their personalities into the Afterlife. This is our part of the preparations for the strike against the Politburo, a preliminary stage. For the second stage we are collecting interesting isotopes from the granite intrusion beneath our feet. I sit in the room above, curled up in a soft armchair, my mind fixed on the smells and tastes and sounds of the city. A river of senses swirls past me in soft currents of synaesthesia.

Up on the big hill, I can hear the grind of the anti-aircraft radars as they scan the horizon, searching for intruders. The Politburo is a constant hum of activity, Party delegates pouring in and scampering away under constant escort by faceless hordes of Stasi soldiers. The civil war grinds on in the distance, Revenants -- the living dead, death cultists who believe in the Dreamtime -- chewing away at the edges of the Partei. They work in uneasy alliance with the local democratic resistance and the distant fighters of the unconquered territories. I hear the sound of gunfire in the distance: I know where the unmarked graves lie by the roadsides. I feel

omniscient. The network of sensors lies thin upon the city, but it is a technology so advanced that the Partei barely understands it's existence. It fills them with a nameless dread and horror, angst made physical at the thought of the terrible judgement which, in their guilt and hubris, they believe will be visited upon themselves when they die.

This thought pleases me. I don't *like* these grim-hearted fanatics. Their obsession with procreation, their manic dream of *ubermensch*, their vicious xenophobia and phobic materialism: all these things repel me. I don't ask why Distant Intervention takes such an interest in them as to wish to destabilise their conflict-riven entire society ... but I

have no reason to ask such questions, any more than a fish asks why it swims in water. All I look forward to is their downfall, so I can go home and forget about the lunatics in the midnight wasteland, revenants of a dark pursuit.

Somewhere far away a door slams. I glance up, shift my attention to my eyes: Ivan stands before me. "Yes?"

He sits down in a chair opposite me and smiles. "We did it clean," he says. "The magic carpet is coming. When the delivery van takes it away again it will be carrying a cleanup device to take care of the stink afterwards. Indigenous manufacture, of course -- made from local materials."

"Huh. Good. What then?"

He looks nonplussed. "The constructors --"

"Yeah." I yawn and stretch, feel joints pop and muscles ache acutely -- I've been in this position for hours and all of a sudden my limbs are screaming at me. "They'll do the job. One more day and the entire city will be wired for Dreamtime. We can go to full flood whenever the Boss gives the word."

He clears his throat. "I'm not sure he will," he says.

I'm on my feet before he can shut his mouth. "That's crap and you know it! We're here to do a number and -- " I see his expression.

"Even if death is part of the process?" he asks, drily.

"What do you mean?" I'm confused. "It's quite simple. We get the net installed and bounce them all into --"

"Uh-huh. There's a hitch." He waits.

"Well?" I'm getting mad, now, mad with the kind of internal irritation that makes me want to scratch the source of the itch until it's raw, bloody, dead.

"Uploading the city is fine. It would get the Stasi's population base out of the way, sure. But there's a problem. Their eugenics program --"

"What's wrong?" I lean over him.

He closes his eyes. "For the past two generations they've been gene-splicing

without telling anyone. There's some seriously whacked-out immunological engineering going down; it's too widespread to contain." He tilts his head back and I lean closer until I can see the tiny veins in his eyelids, feel his breath on my throat. "It's in about sixty percent of them, Oshi. They're immune to the Dreamtime nanocoders -- I guess it's what they've been looking for all along. They've got immunoglobins that stop the upload bodies before they cross the blood-brain barrier, stop them encoding neural connections, stop them period. If we go ahead and Upload the entire city, we got problems. There's a word for that kind of problem. Whether it's the Partei's fault for fucking them over or ours,

someone's responsible as shit for it. Let me spell it out for you; the word I'm thinking of is --"

"Genocide."

The situation is simple and infinitely horrible.

There have always been political organizations predicated on the search for ultimate power. National socialists, communists, whatever -- once their leaders realise that they're riding a tiger and will be eaten if they fall from the saddle -- clamp down hard, seeking for reins that will hold their monster in check. Night and mist swallow their enemies, vomiting them out into unmarked graves. Secret police forces

proliferate, other engines of terror modulated by their fearsome enquiries. But all the same, no matter how hard they react, the leaders can't sleep easy in their beds. They know that sooner or later their opponents will realise the predicament they stand in and fight back. And now there is another fear for the leaders of totalitarian regimes: the afterlife.

Rich worlds can afford reincarnation clinics, cloned bodies prepared for the recently dead to be reborn into. But rich worlds don't get that way under merciless juntas. Rich worlds become rich by trade, learning, self-knowledge, respect for their human riches. The dictators and petty tyrants know that

when they die they will live on in the Dreamtime; and what happens to them *there*? An old adage about camel-hair ropes and the eye of a needle springs to mind. The fascists fear that they will be judged beyond the grave, and found wanting: or that their subjects will take comfort from the proximity of immortality, and throw themselves upon the bayonets.

(Actually, nobody waits to judge the tyrants. Superbrights are not gods in any moral dimension, however powerful they might be. As the Dreamtime expands, new worlds being added to the network, so the dead diffuse into the distance -- I think. That's what they told

me. Anyway, the point stands: the fears of the oppressors are misplaced. But that doesn't stop them from waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of the dark night, all the same. And that makes me glad, at least.)

The Stasis, the party of changelessness, think they have an answer. It's an abomination of a secondary order, not as bad as the worst excesses of the genocidal fringe, but bad enough all the same. They want to abolish the upload tools, making their subjects mortal and ignorant of perfect wisdom. We can remove the Stasis, but only by killing them forever. They are gambling upon the fact that we will not do this. Their worst viciousness is

expressed in their contempt for our moral system. I'm not sure who are worse; them, or their death-worshipping opponents. But the Stasis think they can defy the agencies of the Dreamtime, the servants of the Superbrights.

They will have to be taught a lesson. And Oshi and her companions are here to build the tools that the teacher will wield.

It's tomorrow morning already, and I'm feeling vicious from lack of good sleep. When the door gong booms I scoop up a knife, shove it in one pocket, and scramble downstairs. Wisdom blinks a steady glow in my eye: no explosives, no Stasi breaking down the

door with hammers. But there's a cart pulled by some animal standing in front of our gate, bright red and gold scrollwork running down its sides, and there are men standing beside it. "*Action downstairs*," I call, adjusting my dress. Eri is already there: and she opens the door.

"The House of Anaya Voslic? Your-humble-servant Pyotr Malzruth of Sclotcik and Son, the house of Fine Carpets. Ah, madame Voslic! Your estimable purchase awaits you on yonder wagon: which has been brought hither for your perusal. Should everything be to your satisfaction --"

I cut him off. "Bring it in. Let's see what it looks like, yes? Eri, show this

man --"

Pyotr the verbose is not alone. He's brought his son along, a teen-ager who gawks at me as if he's never seen a woman before. Maybe it's just his age, maybe it's the culture -- it makes me feel uneasy. I keep my expression neutral as Malzruth and his brat manhandle a fat roll of oilcloth-wrapped fabric up the steps, in through the door, into our hallway. I back up to make room for them. "Unroll it, please," I say. "So we can see what it looks like in here."

Eri's got her hands buried deep in her apron, holding some concealed comfort. I cross my arms and watch as Malzruth slashes the cords binding the

carpet with a sharp knife. "Go outside," he tells his son.

"But papa --" the kid glances at me, shuts up and does as he's told.

"Now," says Eri. Pyotr nods and folds back one corner. We stare at the carpet for a long time.

"You can go now," I say. "Return tomorrow to collect the old one. It will weigh rather a lot. You have been told how to dispose of it."

He looks up, and I see he's red-faced and breathing hard as if he's seen his own death warrant signed. "Y-yes," he stutters. "Good-day." He scrambles for the doorway and Eri doesn't have to pull it to as he hops away towards his cart and the security of not having to think

about the ghastly task he's just subscribed to.

"You think he knows what he's just done?" she asks, taking her hands out of her apron pockets. She rubs them together as if to dry them, mopping clean some imaginary blood.

"I think he might *guess*," I shrug. "But understand? Who could?"

She shrugs, bends to take one end. "Give me a hand with this."

"Ack." Together we carry the carpet through into the empty dining room, floored in polished wooden tiles and windowed with deceiver panels. The primitive tactical nuke is almost finished; the Von Neumann constructors

are leaching the necessary U235 out of the ground at a ridiculous rate. "Wish they could make the gadget a bit lighter."

"Go tell it to the foundry." She drops her end of the rug and together we unroll it in the centre of the floor, taking care not to look straight at the design on it. "Can't say I'm too bothered. Not as long as we've got our insurance."

"Yes, but for how long?" I stare at the window frames until she comes up behind me and puts her arms round my waist and leans her chin on my shoulder.

"Think of it as evolution in action, that's what I always say," she whispers in my ear. "Howsat for a cute option?"

"Nice," I admit. She nibbles my lobe delicately, brushing a strand of hair out

the way; I sigh and turn round, breaking her grip. "But no thanks. Please Eri. We've got to get out of here first, haven't we? I don't want to spent one minute more with that thing than I have to --"

She looks slightly agrieved. "Of course. What do you think I am, some kind of suicide fool? I'd just like to see it when it goes off. Make a pretty picture."

"Sure."

I blink at her, sense a curious repugnance that's almost like lust. She blinks back at me then laughs. "Come on." We leave the dining room behind, its deadly package waiting in the middle of the floor. And then the door is closed and it's another house -- and Ivan is

coming down the stairs with a gun in his hand.

My memory flashes back to yesterday:

Chiaroscuro patterns ripple across the great square, jackboots prancing high beneath the scrawl of fylfot banners. Great crude missile launchers trundle behind the crunching ranks of militia, phallic tubes towed behind steam-huffing carriages. On the balcony high above the square, members of the ruling junta stand in stiff-armed acclaim above their legions.

Behind the missile launchers, a convoy of armoured crawlers rattle along on deisel power, gun turrets pointed forward in salute. A middle-

aged man is intoning strange grey slogans as the monitor viewpoint pans back to take in the mobile might of the People's Army. I wince and rub at my tight-closed eyes as the bird-watcher rolls head-under-wing and blinks furiously before looking back at the scene. Behind the crawlers trails a single carriage, a high-barred flatbed holding a score of dejected figures. The scaffold awaits them, hydraulic rack and primitive TV cameras on the gibbet to send a chilly message to their allies: *so perish all enemies of the nation.*

I don't want to watch any more. I open my eyes and the scene fades to grey, livid shadows that overlay my

visual field, staining the world with retinal violet. "I don't see the point," I say. *Really, I don't.* Why should they do it? It makes no kind of sense to me.

"The revolution always devours its children," Ivan says patiently. "It's all about total power, always has been. As long as there's hope of escape -- even if the escape requires death as a passport -- the Partei will be vulnerable to subversion. Only by eliminating all rational alternatives, by reducing resistance to the level of insanity, will their reign be justified. At least that's what they think -- they're too primitive to take the more subtle approaches, manufactured consent and false freedom. They're trying to jam the stable doors

shut before the horses bolt. It's not an easy job, with the limited tools they have.

"A Dreamtime uplink from a real-space world is a fragile beast. It depends on massive fine-grained parallelism -- an invisible, submicroscopic world in parallel with our own, just a heartbeat away.

"It's designed to be resilient, of course. Cultural drift can render whole populations unable to handle such a high technology artefact, even conceptually; myths of a deity-created afterlife proliferate, even among the sophisticated inhabitants of high-level systems. At the other end of the scale,

the ignorant but educated might try to destroy it unintentionally. Worlds where it has been forgotten, but other knowledge has been retained. Use of some weapons, for example -- nukes are a classic case -- can distort or compromise the process across a wide area."

The logic of the situation is circular and I don't want to close the arc, to admit that there's a reason for this if you look at it from the right angle. "You're very cynical."

He huffs, almost a laugh. "If you'd grown up where I did --"

"So Newhaven was a luxury world, then?"

"Not exactly." He stretches, eyeballs

the whitewash wall to let the shadowplay run to its conclusion without shut-eye projection. "Newhaven was only stabilised by massive and subtle manipulation. They restricted the scope for rebellion by giving everybody a stake in the profits: prosperity breeds. So does discontent. The people here have none of the former and lots of the latter -- the only way to keep a lid on it seems to the Partei to be the maintenance of a state of total terror. I suppose --" he stares at the wall and I shudder, thinking of the screaming absence of light in which I spent my childhood -- "they're right. If they ever let up they'll be dangling from the street-lamps within

days."

"Huh. What did diMichaelis say about our policy, then?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." He *smiles* at me as he stands up, the sarcastic swine. "Even if he were to say anything to me I'm sure I couldn't tell you because I wouldn't presume to understand it -- he can be very obscure when he wants to be. Positively gnomic. Almost as bad as one of the Bosses. Leaves us poor shits to figure it out for ourselves. So you have trouble with the idea of wiping a city and re-drawing it from scratch?"

I shrug. "Seeing we've already built the bomb ..."

"Ah, the magic carpet syndrome

again. The bomb. Like it's going to end all our problems. Bring the fucking stasi to our way of thinking, you know? Whoever dreamed that one up was not entirely sane."

"Bad security and too much spare uranium floating around." Over on the kitchen table a gunlauncher is spilling its guts, half-cleaned. Ivan works on it intermittently, whenever he remembers it's there. I wander over and check it out. "How many of us are there in this town?"

"Hmmm ..." He winces and blinks. "*You don't want to know that, officially,*" he sends via wisdom link. "... my guesstimate is maybe as many as twenty

cells. All with significant firepower. I mean, the Stasi are tough but they're not sharp. I would expect us to have as many as six gadgets ready to go off, then drones ready to come down and decontaminate the fire zone afterwards. Half a million corpses must raise a hell of a stink. But you heard what I said. Think of the resistant individuals, immune to the afterlife nanoencoders. The Partei doctors use prions --"

"What's a prion?"

He looks startled. "You don't --"

" *Wisdom is off-line for the duration, I've only got stored battle-knowledge for now.*"

He looks abashed. "Ack. A prion; sub-genetic virus, I guess. You twist a

peptide alpha chain that propagates, maybe loops through some ribosomes and replicates without DNA or RNA. You click on nucleic acids? Genetics?" I nod: my education is patchy but not defective. "Good. Prions are rare. they're not much use to us, but the Partei ... They can't even build a gene spinner, let alone decode a homoeobox, but they slaughtered enough seniles that they found the infective agent for sponge-brain syndrome. Turns out there's an isomer that propagates -- slowly -- and can be modified to block the nanotech uptake route, some kind of synaptic protein. So guess what our friendly Junta decided to use on their own

population?"

"Ack." I can see the headlines in one of the newspapers; *By order of the Politburo, life after death is decreed to be a Partei privilege* . "It sucks, but --"

He picks up the gunlauncher and slots the barrel into the breech pump with an oily *snick*. "That's why we're here. Insurance. In case the carpet bombs don't work."

Here-and-now:

The door blows in without any warning, a deep juddering thud pulsing through me like a blow. I dive for the floor, pushing Eri away from me as something thumps me a light blow on the forehead and I grab at my knife, clothes getting in the way but tearing cleanly as I

flip the trigger. Someone shouts: I've got a handful of fabric wrapped around a purring death in one hand. I aim it at the door and wave it around as my right eye goes red and sticky and when I blink all the light is gone. *Blood*. Damn. A graze on my forehead. I trip the knife to full power and brace myself. There's a scream and a sudden crackle of small-arms fire and I switch off the knife and frantically roll for cover. *More* gunfire. I wince, blink my eye to infrared and get ghost-sight back: something lands on my neck, a gravelly scattering of plaster from the ceiling.

" *Back room! Go! I'll cover!*" It's Eri. She's got a gun, some kind of

machine pistol, trained on the doorway with finger jammed tight on the trigger. It's smart: it only fires when it sees a target in its sights. I scramble on hands and knees, backing away from the chaos out front. It's on fire now, flames licking the doorway and the hedge beyond -- don't know what kind of shit's happening but we're lucky to be alive -- and kick the door behind me so hard my ankle feels like it's on fire. It slams open and I wave my knife at an empty room -- I go to ground and Eri sprints past me.

"Ivan?"

She looks harried. "Come *on*. Your head -- are you injured?"

"Not badly --" she grabs my wrist and drags me towards the back, over the

home-brew nuke, into the servant's pantry where the staircase is. My head is spinning. *Where's Ivan?* Eri covers as I scramble down the steps into the cellar, where the stalactites glow and shimmer with a heat like death. *What about Ton Ang?* They were careless -- I don't hear any covering fire from behind. I cast around, see the tunnel beside the great pile of weird gadgetry that dominates the floor. It gapes open beside the constructors that pour tendrils down into the city sewers endlessly, to extract the uranium-235 bomb fuel.

"S way," I mutter.

Eri's behind me. "Make for ground one," she whispers. "They'll know

where to find us if they get free." There's a colossal **thump!** from overhead that rattles the ceiling. "You first. Go on. *Get down!*" She shoves me towards the hole. I scramble down into it feet-first, slide down the buzzing hot constriction into darkness, my heatsight showing me a waterfall of silver nightmares coruscating over my shoulder -- then I drop, jarring my ankle again, land with a splash in something cold and soggy and nearly lose my footing. The tunnel's too low, so I duck and waddle a bit, then Eri's down beside me and I can nearly see her. It's pitch-black in here but the heat of the web that covers the ceiling lights her up like day for me. "Can you see anything?" she whispers.

"Ack. Right eye's splashed. Scalp's bleeding, can't see except in heatlight."

"Heatlight -- oh, yeah. *Yeah.*" She shakes her head. "I can -- should do -- "

She's not making sense. "Follow me now." I carefully don't think about anything in particular, just hobble along with my head ducked to clear the luminescent slime and my hand clutching a knife in a death-grip. "Do you think they --"

THUMP.

My ears nearly pop. Water sprays across my back; there's a gravelly rumble that lasts for seconds, then silence.

" *No.*" She doesn't say anything

more. Doesn't need to. We stand there, motionless, for several seconds while the wave of sewage ebbs around our ankles. I feel a great rift form in my life.

"Come on," she prods me, finally. "Let's go. Ground one or bust. Make them pay for that."

The sewer is a concrete pipe, round-bore and wide, less than two metres high. Slime wreaths it three-quarters of the way to the ceiling; every so often we pass pipes and vents high in the ceiling of the sewer. It's why we chose the house; why we're still alive. "They have tunnel-runners," Eri mutters. "Specially-bred animals, some kind of native predator. Haul ass, Oshi. Or they'll --"

"Fuck it, I'm fine." I bite down on my

tongue in anger. I put one foot in front of the other, knife out front, eyes fixed on that lucid vanishing point of darkness where the scum rises to meet the roof and there's no hatred and the ghosts of lamentation aren't rising to the surface of my mind. I can still see Ivan on the staircase, looking ever so surprised, a gunlauncher clutched in his hands as the door comes in off its hinges -- I shouldn't think about it any more, unless I want to join him very soon. Death and upload is not a ticket back to base: our masters do not appreciate failures. "I'll take point. Cover me. Check?"

"Yo." She's behind me and I think she doesn't take it so hard but I feel very

bitter, very numb. I can't stop seeing him again, wishing I hadn't been so tough on him since we came downstairs. I want to kick myself, so I slosh forward instead - sewer wading as a substitute for mourning. I want to find those Stasi goons and, and --

"Maybe they were careless, but maybe they knew they didn't need to block out the back," she whispers over my shoulder. Then: "*eyeball! Contact!*" I see what Eri, with her clear eyes and cool head spotted while I was off in the clouds of angst. Cry havoc! and set loose the dogs of war. It's the tunnel-runners, great fat-bodied walrus-things with huge eyes that shine red in the dim sewer-light. They flop and weave around one

another, sloshing and foaming in a morass of beast-hungry aggression. The nightmares have seen us, and now I know why the Stasi didn't bother waiting in the sewers; I duck sideways, knife useless at this range, to give her room to open up ... and lurch head-first into the wall.

I come awake shuddering with cold and fear and I don't know where I am or who I am or how I got here. *Wet. Hurt.* One foot is a mass of pain, twice its normal size. My bladder aches. The side of my head is throbbing like a red-hot boiler where I thumped it on the sewer wall. I'm cold. I try to open one eye and it comes back to me. " *Where are we?*" I send, twitching wisdom access on a

low-bandwidth channel. " *Who's here?*"

"Awake." It's Eri. I feel her, now, leaning against my back -- that's the dry, warm side. She sounds hoarse. "What's your condition? Can you talk?"

"Ack. Leg feels like --" I take stock. "Those animals. What did you do?"

She moves, uneasily. She's sitting, I can feel her presence, sitting cross-legged with her back to me. There's stone beneath my cheek -- no wonder I feel sore. This is some kind of platform. It's dark and it reeks of ancient sewage. "I took the roof down. This is a dead-end spur, Oshi. If we want to go home, we've got to dig our way out first."

"They were --" sudden panic yanks me bolt upright in spite of myself, both

eyes open in the dark. My left eyes stings; I can feel blood and mucus crusted in it, and my head's sore. I can't see anything, it's so dark. "Buried alive. Aren't we? *What about Ton and Ivan?*"

"No contact," Eri says absent-mindedly. "So I dragged you in here and brought down the roof behind us. Anything to keep the guardians out." I can feel her shudder as she says it. Perversely, this gives me hope.

"Guardians? Is *that* what you call them?" I'm too exhausted for the hysterical laugh I feel bubbling up inside me. "What are they?"

She talks quietly, slowly, feeling her way around the words as if they're

strange boulders in a dark landscape. "Some kind of rodent-analogue. Pre-terraforming, so they're marginal in this ecosystem. Stasi feed them trace nutrients and use operant conditioning to keep them down here. Until they got them, the zombies held the sewer system."

" *Uck.*" I lean against her and she puts an arm round my shoulders. "Look, we got to get out of here. If the Stasi find the gadget they'll run and before that happens diMichaelis will pull the plug. I give it maybe six hours. How long was I out for?"

I feel her shrug. "How should I know? After you put yourself out things got busy for a while. That was a bad

one. What happened?"

"Dunno. Disorientated by the bomb, I guess. Ears go pop, vestibular whatsits go dizzy, which way is up? So I guess I slammed my head by accident. Now what? Think they're still waiting?"

"Yes. No. Maybe. I can't shift the rubble, though. Fluid's backed way up, we'd drown in shit. All we can do is start digging. Got a shovel?"

"No, but I -- ah, shit." I try and pat myself down but I can't find the knife. All I find is some more bruises plus me, wearing a wet wool dress and wet animal-hide boots and a too-tight belt and wet vegetable-fibre undergarments. No hidden zap guns, concealed micro

drones or Secret Agent pocket gatecoder. "I lost my knife."

I hit bottom then. Everything is dark, inside as well as out. Maybe Eri senses this because she squeezes my shoulder and says; "no worries. Not your fault. No problems -- I've got mine here."

"You -- no. If we had one we could -" she fumbles around my lap, finds my hand and forces something round and cold between my fingers. "Cut the stonework out and maybe we can crawl ..."

"Would be way too tight. Have you figured out how much room we've got, yet?"

"No -- " I try to stand up. I don't do it very fast, which is a good thing because

the ceiling is very low indeed. Poured concrete. My stomach lurches. I've just remembered: there's no echo in here. "This is a tube tunnel, right?"

"Ack." quiet, now.

"And it's terminal?" I shuffle forward, hands stretched out in front until I graze rough rock with my knuckles. Turn round, shuffle back, step over Eri's legs, fumble my way to the mass of rubble at the other end of the tunnel. "Damn. four, five metres. Couldn't you have found something bigger?"

Even though it's pitch black I can sense her watching me. "It was the best I could do. They were behind us, Oshi.

They can strip a horse down to bonemeal in under a minute. Teeth like a man trap."

I sit down again, feel my way across the floor towards her. The first thing I catch is her fingers: we hold hands for a minute as I try to make sense of this cold coffin burial she saved us for. "If we're more than about five metres under we won't make it. Damn, I hope we've got enough air. Or maybe Ivan and Ton will dig us out. You never know."

"Depends," she says quietly. "They might not be around."

"You figure that?"

The silence hangs guilty over my head.

"I wish you hadn't asked," she says.

"Oh --" I squeeze her hand. Feel self pity and anger wash over me. And loss, angst, hatred. *Maybe they'll make it --* and maybe I'll stop kidding myself.

"Is it murder to hand a toddler a loaded pistol and tell them it's a toy?"

The silence is gravid. Something rattles, a long way away. I lean against her shoulder. "If the web's set up right we can maybe capture those who're still hooked for Dreamtime upload. Thus removing the Partei power-base at a stroke. You suppose diMichaelis will wait before setting off the carpet bombs?"

"No. You're being optimistic. I think it all smells wrong, Oshi. The Partei are

very tough people. That can't be what the Boss is planning."

"But ..." I stop and think. A vision steals into my eyes: Eri strokes my visual cortex with a low-level wisdom burst. Nukes wrapped in carpets. The carpets are upload webs, holographic tracking nodes capable of spitting souls wholesale into the afterlife -- the real bomb, more terminal than any nuke. A weapon designed to subvert the minds of the people it is used against. "The idea was that if we got turned over the Stasi would mistake it for a nuke job. And you don't need more than one nuke per city, do you?"

"Wrong-o, Osh. You can't rely on ignorance -- that's underestimating the

enemy. *Think* about it." She leans against me. "I'm too tired to say. It's real bad. We don't have much longer, I guess."

"Huh? What's --" *going on*, I was about to say, but it all clicks together and suddenly makes a horrible kind of sense, like a thermite explosion going off behind my eyes. "But the Stasi don't *have* nuclear demolition charges! Even if they knew how to use them."

She strokes my shoulder. "They have them now. Thanks to us. And they know we're planning something for the city. They're opposed to the Dreamtime in a serious way, some kind of political control-meme that's taken over. If they figure we're going to upload the entire

city they might just --"

"Don't say it." I shake her hand off angrily. "Nobody could be that cruel --"

I'm lying across her legs and she's moaning. I'm dizzy from the noise that goes on and on like an earthquake. Everything creaks and shudders around us. The floor tips up and the angry giant shakes us some more, but the roar is dying away. My ears hurt. "What's that?" I say, unable to hear my own voice. "I say what's that?"

She sits up and clutches at me desperately, "the fuckers did it, they're mad, gave a pistol to the paranoids, like a scorpion that stings itself to death if it sees itself in a mirror and can't kill the reflection --"

A hot wind blows through the tube. The floor tilts some more and the pile of rubble slides towards us and a cold horror bathes me in cold sweat. Shuddering, I roll over and shake her, drag her down on top of me, "*lie still, open your mouth, hope the overpressure doesn't --*"

A shower of gravel bursts over us and round us and we kick and shove against a slurry of rocks and hot stinking shit-churned mud. "*Oh heaven oh hell what have we done --*" The cloud is choking us and it's hot, too hot to breathe. With a groaning roar the end of our coffin pokes out of the seared ground; overhead, the noon sky is the

colour of an angry sunset. We slide down the gravel heap towards the back end of the tube. "Got to get out," she says aloud, very clearly. There's a ringing in my ears that at first I think is real -- then I realise it's my wisdom, listening to raw microwaves torn from a bleeding sky.

Moments later, without really understanding how, I'm standing on top of the cracked pavement outside. Eri is with me, propping me up; my ankle throbs. The pavement is hot, almost too hot to stand on. There's rubble everywhere. Something like a broken stick, on fire, protrudes from a shattered car with half a house lying across the front of it. Flesh runs molten. There's a sickly meat smell in the air that makes

me want to salivate and throw up simultaneously. And a continuous rumble of fire, drumming desolation across the wasteland that only a minute ago was a city.

I look up. From this close -- only a couple of kilometers away -- the cloud looks nothing like a mushroom. It's more like a great angry pillar of fire that merges with the red sky, a bridge between earth and gehenna. I'm deaf, wisdom cut off abruptly by the magnetic storm triggered by the dying fireball. I don't think anyone around us can have survived.

"We did it," Eri sobs. "Handed them a pistol and showed them, 'if you don't

use it now we'll do it for you.' And they believed it. They fell for it. Like a scorpion faced with a mirror ..."

I slap her face, turn and hobble away. *Ivan and Ton Ang are dead*, I tell myself. *Dead forever*. They died shortly before the blast: it takes time to be packet-shifted out to the gatecoders, up to the great afterlife processors in the sky, and nukes are notorious for scrambling uploads. Feeling something nameless and unimaginable, I concentrate on going anywhere, just so long as it is away from the rumbling tower of death that casts a shadow over us. *Why couldn't it be me?* In the distance, over the hills and far away, the sky is still blue; it seems like such a

monstrous injustice that I'm alive to see it. *I don't need this kind of guilt.* Nuclear sunburn prickles on the nape of my neck as the city smoulders. I stop, look down at an obstruction. A body lies at my feet, blackened like a log in a forest fire: no face, just a grinning cinder suggestive of eyes and teeth. *diMichaelis must have told the Stasi where to find us. Then planted both devices at just the right time, with just enough information to tell the Partei leaders what we were doing. Which made them--*

"Wait for me." I feel her presence behind me. "Wait, please. Oshi. You shouldn't be running. Slow down. Don't

leave me alone here."

I stumble, stop in the shadow of a stone building with windows that lie in the street outside, frames blistered and scorched. She trudges up behind me. For the first time I realise she's limping worse than I am. Face covered in grime, native costume ripped and smeared and scorched, blood on her hands and face. "It's not my fault. They had to destroy their own city in order to save it for their ideology," she explains. She looks like a madwoman, eyes staring from a soot-smudged face, grimy blonde hair turned to fire by the setting nuclear sunburst.

"I know," I say. "But if it's not our fault, why did we give them the means to do it?"

She stares at me open-mouthed: tears pool in the corners of her eyes. "But we *didn't know*," she repeats. "They never told us. We just followed orders." She sounds as if she's trying to answer a question, but I never asked her it. I doubt that I could.

"Come on." I hold out an arm. She catches it and clutches it to herself, holds me tight: we stumble forwards. Echoing from the distant hills, I hear the throb of an approaching helicopter. Meanwhile, overhead, the new sun is dying.

We have sinned; and soon the black rain will begin.

Will you still love me ...

The radiation storm passes, watched only by impassive sensors mounted on the hub of the colony cylinder.

The eye of the storm is a small black hole: a spark of evil light in the abyss. It burns with a cold heat, blasting a sleet of hard gamma radiation out into the darkness of space. The hole itself is smaller than a protein molecule, a tiny knot of tortured spacetime that weighs as much as a mountain range. A halo of decaying matter swirls around it, dragged ever inwards by a force of gravity turned in on itself. As it closes in

on the sump at the bottom of the gravity well the accretion disk heats up, until atoms split in the incandescent glare of an on-going explosion. A hot spray of high-energy radiation floods off it, hosing across the plane of the gas giant's system of moons. The hole is being used as a synchrotron source, an energy weapon bright enough to shine across interplanetary distances. A dark shape hides behind it, indistinct but almost as large as the colony: the physical body of the Ultrabright attack drone. The drone is a dumb killing machine, unmotivated - - as yet -- by the cool and unsympathetic mind of its maker. Given time, this will change ...

Its path takes it a long way from icy

Turing or airless Pascal, but that makes no difference to their fate. A steady stream of exotic particles sprays out, bracketing Pascal and the L5 colony quite neatly. It's hotter than a solar flare, hotter than a nova: the radiation temperature is astronomical, hot enough to boil lead.

Closest approach is ten million kilometres. Drifting at under two percent of light-speed, the hole falls onward through the stellar system. In sixteen hours time it will reach the orbit of Wirth, the terraforming candidate that circles close in around Ridgegap-47.

The neutral particle beam that bathes the hole in exotic matter shuts off

abruptly. Unseen moderators clamp down, damping the positron/electron reactions in the accretion disk. The hole continues to digest its halo of matter for a few scant minutes, but the dinner is over. Now it will starve until it reaches Wirth and the terraforming station Anubis abandoned years before. It is already a small hole, dangerously close to the lower bounds of stability. Small holes are hot, decaying by emitting Hawking radiation; this one is already toasting in the millions of degrees. When it explodes, the flash will be visible light years away. That event is due in just over sixteen days time, some kilometres beneath the crust of the doomed planet ...

Oshi only really grasped the immensity of what had happened on the third day after the storm.

Awakening had been hard. She'd struggled up from the depths of a nightmarish dream in which she recapitulated the events of her early adulthood: condemned to relive the horrific awakening on Miramor Dubrovnic, then to undergo the hardening of the cynical shell that had protected her until the fateful mission on New Salazar. It was like sleep-walking through hard-setting clay, or struggling for breath beneath the cool suffocation of an avalanche. Remembering when she'd had Ivan was the least of it: his loss was

somewhat faded now, a sepia photographic memory with edges too blunted to cut deep. (Her childhood, by contrast, remained the only thing that could easily break through the armour she wore.)

But on the third morning she had opened her eyes gasping, her arms outstretched before her in the idiot zombie-posture of free fall relaxation. "Where is --" she began.

Axial redoubt command
bunker. Status report
available.

"That's --" she stopped and blinked, the thick encrustation of sleep heavy on her eye-lashes. She could feel the uncomfortable intrusions of her

exoskeleton, tubes probing deep within to irrigate and clean and feed her body. "*How long have I been asleep?*"

Two days.

Two days. She felt as if it had been two hours. "What's happened?"

Radiation levels decreased to normal. External life support remains down. External colony support is on criticality rung seven of eight. Prognosis: this station will cease to be habitable in the near future.

"Oh."

It was all she could think of to say. She glanced round, taking in the survival gear lockers, the airlock leading up and out towards the manufacturing and docking complexes of the hub: the huge monitor that covered the end-wall of the command bunker. "External sensors," she mumbled. "Give me what rim coverage you can manage: I want to take a look."

Affirmative. Viewport on main screen ...

Over the next hour, Oshi learned that she was alone. The radiation had killed off most of the higher life forms in the colony. Insects survived, thriving on the corpses, but nothing else above the level

of a mouse had survived for long, except the tapeworm.

The biological weapon was unstoppable. After taking root, it had erupted from the corpse to wage systematic warfare on the entire colony. It ran wild through the residential sectors, hyphae digesting the putrefying bodies that dotted the complex. Although it had started as a mere parasite flatworm, it was now the most elaborate predator in the colony. It cannibalised the genetic heritage of its victims, absorbing the data via an elaborate nanoscale assimilation engine; a post-Lamarckian organism, it evolved by integrating and expressing characteristics usually associated with

other species. Fat cords and furry ropes of fungus lay, corpulent and glistening, in pools of purulent fluid that contained anything it couldn't digest. It randomly interpreted the DNA of dead people and animals, sprouting random experiments derived from homoeobox control sequences. Strange phalloid structures towered over the bulbous buildings, the bones of humans and deer and Goon Squad meat machines scattered around their omnivorous trunks. An arm coated in fur waved feebly from a bush of throbbing viscera near the medicentre. A cylindrical, dark-skinned mushroom, its cap a wrinkled topology looted from some other species, overlooked the

wreckage of the Administrator's office with an expression of murine horror on its flattened rodent face. Dying landpussies -- aerobic octopi, customised for low-gee harvesting -- hung like purulent fruit from the mycotic trees, their skins strobing through silvery-green panic hues as they died. Strange, rodent bushes whirred and chattered among the branches, chained to their parent organism by long umbilical cords that resembled everted intestines.

Oshi had no desire to share her biosphere with such a runaway horror. She had more than a suspicion that if it caught her it would treat her as just another parcel of protein: in any case, there was much that demanded attention

in the core. The airlock doors stayed resolutely shut, the axial redoubt running on canned air. There would be time to explore later.

Oshi spent the next two days exploring her twilight domain, checking over resources and making a comprehensive inventory. She didn't stop to think: somehow she knew that if she stopped she might never start again. She worked with the feverish single-mindedness of a crash survivor stranded in a desert far from civilization. She paused only to swallow some meagre rations, or to close her eyes for an hour of exhausted sleep. The colony central planning methodologies were intact, she

discovered, dumped to static store before the radiation attack. The robot factories, extending from the long axis of the colony like a string of garlic bulbs attached to a medicine ball, could be powered up and reconfigured to produce anything she desired. Resources were limited -- only a few megatons of raw materials were on hand -- but Oshi could hardly see how that mattered. Three things could happen in the near future. The ultrabright presence (she shuddered at this thought, which rose to meet her in eerie dreams) might come to the colony; the colony itself might disintegrate before the depredations of the ontological weapon chewing away at its guts: or her own survival plan might

succeed. Not that she held much hope for it, but it seemed to her that the third option was little better than the other two. After all, she was twenty light-years from the nearest other civilized world. And when she got there, if she got there, the Boss would be sure to notice ...

When these worries assailed her she shook her head impatiently, laughed -- somewhat dementedly -- and felt a transient sorrow. *If only I'd kept my mouth shut in front of the Boss none of this would have happened*, she rationalised. If only the superbrights hadn't trusted the entire system to one dangerously unstable AI, she would not

have been needed here. If only the escapists hadn't deployed that incredibly stupid biological weapon, or if only they'd managed to follow her up to the redoubt ... this entire fiasco might have been avoided by any number of gamits. Oshi felt a vast and tenuous sense of guilt, aggravated by a sense of failure. It did not strike her as inappropriate. After all, in a very real way she *had* failed.

The event that finally broke through her frail shell of obsession occurred on the fifth day. That morning, Oshi awakened in the core control room with a sense of purpose. The night before she had planned her day in advance; she was going to enter the factory zones, locate certain items of equipment that were

being assembled to her specification, and move them to the docking bay. The items were specialised and deadly; lengths of monofilament cable, refurbished attitude-thrusters, life support components for one of the docked shuttlecraft.

Almost without thinking she found herself in the factory unit. It was a geodesic sphere lined with robots that hurled components from one side to the other, guided by sonar and timing interrupts. There was something organic about the process, like cilia lining the wall of the gut of some primitive organism. Oshi waited impatiently, having arrived too early.

She floated in the main cargo entrance, keeping well out of the way; she had no desire to be pulped between a flying thruster-chassis and a blind drone. It was there that she saw something floating in the twilit centre of the room, not moving despite the barrage of components drifting past on all sides. She frowned.

The object was asymmetric, lumpy, almost unrecognisable as it slid out of shadow, into a harsh cone of light cast by a welding torch that illuminated its features mercilessly. Its rag-doll face was withered and sunken; limbs flopped randomly where slowly-contracting tendons had pulled them in gravity-free

rigor.

Yes, she thought. Even here. Is there no end to it? A wave of depression swept over her. Yes, that's right. Run away from it. Run away from reality! What else is there to do? Oshi turned away, unable to express her sense of disconnected despair verbally -- she had a morbid fear that if she started talking to herself she would slip slowly into a breakdown. There seemed to be nothing around her but death on all sides; past, present, future. Turning her face away from the accusing corpse, she made the connection; and she made another one, via wisdom uplink, to the core communications buffer.

" Tell me your status," she sent. "

List uploads in progress."

Status: functional
following self-repair
self-test sequence. Pascal
gatecoder responding but
isolated. Diagnostics
indicate that a terminal
Dreamtime fault occurred
four days ago. No other
gatecoders on line. All
uploads queued pending
fault resolution. Total
two thousand three hundred
and nineteen uploads in
progress. Loading nominal.

Oshi's eyes widened. "You're
holding more than two thousand uploads!

What happened on Pascal?"

The literal-minded comm supervisor paused for a moment before answering. Query in progress. Please wait. Please wait. Please wait -- confirmed. At T minus three hundred and sixty thousand seconds Pascal monitors registered unacceptable distributed degradation on all networked processes. Radiation induced damage exceeded local emergency resources' ability to offload processing at T minus three hundred and fifty-seven thousand

seconds. At T minus three hundred and fifty-six thousand seconds approximately, Pascal Dreamtime entered a distributed panic status and lost real-time synch. At T minus infinity, Pascal Dreamtime went NP-incomplete.

The Dreamtime is down.
Do you want to restart?

It took a moment to hit her. But when she understood, Oshi began to giggle uncontrollably. She curled in on herself and floated into the maze of light and shadow and drifting components, sailing

on a stately waltz with the mummified corpse of the dead engineer: and she laughed hysterically, sobbing when the breath came hard to her burning ribs, then sobbing more slowly and rhythmically when she understood the magnitude of what had happened.

Something bumped into her. She came to rest in mid-air, face to face with the wizened, tortured expression of the corpse. "It's all right," she explained patiently. "There's nothing to worry about: I'm not mad, not mad at all. It's just that we're all going to survive!" The corpse ducked and bobbed before her.

She reached out and patted the corpse on one bony shoulder. It drifted away, spinning. "I'll tell you about it

when you're alive again!" she shouted after it. Then she turned and reached for the nearest support stanchion. "*Axis control: get me a climb spider,*" she said. "*I'm going down into the colony.*" She swallowed, twitched her wisdom link to a different channel. "*Comm centre.*"

Listening.

"*You will commence Dreamtime restart at my command, parameters to follow. Do a total memory wipe and shut down the NP-static world line. Initiate hardware self-test immediately and tell me when it's stable enough to fit standard human-rating criteria. Not, repeat not, to support superbrights. Do*

not start any non-human sentient upload processes. Just stick to the basic virtual environment and begin reactivating human uploads as they come on stream. Call me when it's complete. Finally, patch me through a call to Boris.

"When he answers, tell him I want to talk to him about an escape plan ..."

It was inevitable that war would break out between the Ultrabrights and the Superbrights. The laws of computation, the science of algorithmics, dictated it. But, oddly, human beings didn't even know that a war was taking place; for the most part, they didn't even know that either side existed. They knew no more of it than worms in the ground

know of supersonic fighters dogfighting above their patch of soil. Even those who, like Oshi, were used as foot-soldiers in the conflict, might not be aware of its true nature -- or of the fact that there could be no winners, only losers.

This is the way the Density War began:

First, the expansion processors were built. Robot probes entered newly discovered solar systems. On entering a system each probe spawned, sent its daughter probes forth to visit other stars, then landed on a tectonically stable, airless moon and set to work. It bred furiously, spawning a hive of robot

factories. Then the hive-complex went to work and began fabricating an expansion processor. Thin layers of superconducting circuitry crept across airless rock; circuitry designed to support a distributed virtual reality.

Within this simulation, other programs could run: it was designed to house the minds of human beings, neural firing mapped onto computer logic by sleight of upload technology. After all, nerve cells are complex switches: components in a biological switching network that can be simulated by a program. And as Turing observed, any program that can be run on a given computer can be run on any other computer, given enough memory or time

for the process. Time or memory are equivalent, to a computer: equivalent and interchangeable -- in the most general terms, one can be traded for the other. A moon the size of Luna had sufficient power to maintain a billion people in real time, using just a thin rind of processors: a billion people, living and thinking and seeing and feeling an entire world around themselves.

The process was inexorable. Robot probes entered new star systems, seeded them with new Expansion processors, built Gatecoders to interface them to the other Dreamtimes, and expanded the virtual universe. The afterlife was a fact; even when every living flesh-bodied

human had died, the Dreamtime would contain their living essence, scattered like frozen gems across the gas giant moons of half a galaxy.

But people grew ... complex. Strange new intellectual hyperstructures begin to appear in the Dreamtime, drawing massive amounts of processor time from the substrate of reality. Maybe they had started out as human beings; perhaps they originated as experimental AI's. Whatever their origins, the Superbrights were a thousand times as smart as humans: they reified around mythical archetypes, assuming the signifiers of the gods before their awe-struck or otherwise bemused subjects. But they had very different requirements from the

humans.

As time went by, the first Dreamtimes ran hot and slow, dropping their state-change rate below real time. Why erase valuable information? People need their memories, after all, and by trading off memory space for time the Dreamtimes could simulate a richer, denser universe. But the Superbrights didn't *want* to slow down; to slow down was to accelerate into the future. Minds are immortal. They knew they'd get there soon enough anyhow. So the Superbrights began to rebuild the Dreamtimes to meet their requirements. They started by mopping up all the remaining human intellects, assimilating

them and sucking a steady crop of dead minds in from the outer worlds. But that didn't free up much processing space; drastic action was called for.

Everywhere, in the fullness of time, the crust of processors around any Expansion world turned into a shell, then a rind, then an incredibly thick cortex engulfing the molten core of an entire planet. Drawing power from dynamo effects in the hot iron core, from the solar wind, from any available source, the expansion processor struggled to reduce its informational entropy by any means available. Eventually a limit would be reached: the Superbright dominated system spawned drone craft that flickered out to take other worlds.

Pretty soon the entire available planetary surface of every moon in the system would be used up. But it was never anything like enough, because by then the first Ultrabrights were appearing; minds as far beyond the Superbrights as Superbrights were beyond the merely transhuman.

Now we have reached the present, we can watch the process at first hand. It's happening all around us, on every side. A landslide of sentience, eating entire worlds ...

The Ultrabrights turn first to gas giants with greedy arms of steel and silicon. Orbiting fusion reactors pulse down, kicking churning storms of

methane away from the core. A spongy diamond the size of a planet swings through a planetary nebula; nanorobots riddle it, busy etching many-dimensional networks of simple processors into its delicate filigree of surfaces. Meanwhile, other constructors fashion condensing hydrocarbons into strange, lacy structures in deep orbit through the star's Kuiper belt, the distant realm of the ice dwarfs that circle beyond the farthest gas giants. Halos and rings a million kilometres across flutter like huge parasols, strobing with the excrement of a billion billion optical processors.

And it *still* isn't enough.

The Ultrabrights, lusting for the power to transcend their information-

flow bounded existence, turn their attention to the star. But it's too young, too small; too well embedded in the Main Sequence. The ultimate goal of claiming the greatest mass in the solar system is inadequate. Gatecoders pulse informational effluent out across the light years, but bandwidth is limited. Space is vast, and Von Neumann's limit -- the bandwidth bottleneck on the rate at which information can be transferred -- is biting at the heels of the new Ultrabright system.

Human and Dreamtime space has been expanding in a sphere for centuries. The innermost colony systems are already saturated, their own Ultrabrights

unwilling to shoulder the timeburden of the home systems. Mere humans are long since confined to the outer colonies, where information swirls endlessly into the entropic wastes of the future. Soon a vicious war will break out between stellar intelligences: a war for which the prize is spacetime -- all the spacetime a world-sized simulation processor can offer. The losers will be suspended, NP-static: the number of processors available to them drops below a critical level, they can't get enough connections, can't run in anything like real time, can't even complete a thought. The fate of an NP-static Dreamtime is to be sent on a one-way trip into the distant future, a long but subjectively rapid journey into

the heat-death of the universe -- unless somebody physically reboots the world, consigning its frozen inhabitants to oblivion.

The Ultrabrights collectively face this dilemma: they are confined to the systems at the centre of known space. They will die unless they can find a way to break out of the trap, side-step their confinement and establish a line of communication with the twilight zone beyond. Build fast warships to eliminate the troublesome vermin cluttering up the outermost dreamtimes. Expand into newly available empty mind-space, to reduce the density of their thoughts. Unless they can do all of this, and more,

the Ultrabrights of the inner sphere, the worlds which once (but no longer) belonged to humanity, will --

Begin to feel the heat.

Oshi had a lot of tasks, all of them pressing. Environmental integrity, systems maintenance with a workforce of one, the problem of how to keep the axial redoubt biome balanced: these were the immediate survival issues she faced. But then there were the other worries. The Dreamtime, rebooting itself laboriously on Pascal (a process that took days rather than seconds), needed guidance: and there was the desperate fact that she needed the minds and help of the uploaded colonists. Finally there was the Ultrabright

attacker, lurking at the back of her nightmares. It was not a care-free time.

Small multipurpose telefactors were at work in the sectors of the colony that lay below the core redoubt. Their motors whined as they dismantled the corpses of animals slain by the radiation burst from the black hole, in a vain attempt to create a sterile zone that would hamper the tapeworm's progress. Oshi avoided looking at them on the surveillance wall; as they chiseled away at their task they resembled so many spindly mass-murderers, hacking at fused bone and decaying flesh with rotary saws and multigrippers. They squittered in an obscure modemspeak

that filled the microwave bands with static. Even if the colony managed to stabilize without breaking up, for a year or more to come the largest lifeforms were going to run on legs of plastic and ceramic, watching their world with electronic eyes. This, even if the tapeworm could be stopped -- and Lorma had indicated that she thought it couldn't be. Oshi shuddered at the thought, then put it aside as she moved every available food container into the core's forward storage area.

Taking stock was heavy work and left her wrung out, damp as a discarded towel. She spent two days at it without any real rest -- a time came, some ages after she had experienced her moment of

enlightenment in the factory, when she had to relax. She forced herself to leave off the audit, and made her way to the bathroom: she waited impatiently while the compact cubicle filled with hot water sweated through porous ceramic walls. Staying awake without any set task in mind was an effort. When the zero-gee tub was full she donned a breather mask and sank gratefully into the water, letting it suck her towards the centre of a pale blue bubble that might have been metres or light-years in diameter. Her vision dimmed then cleared into a view of somewhere else -

-

Interfacial

manifestation. Please
hold.

" *What's going on?*" she demanded, heart pounding with sudden terror. Paranoid fears struck her; a vision of her body put to asleep in the bath by remote control, some devious afterthought of Anubis: *don't let this be so ...*

Incoming communication:
point of origin Pascal
Dreamtime.

The ocean trench cleared to a stratospheric blue. There was no visible floor; it was a total void on all sides. A flat planar surface appeared beneath her, flashed away in all directions even as she realised it was there. Her guts loosened with anticipation; she tried to

access her wisdom but found it obscurely slow. *Of course*, she realised, *this is all happening via downlink*. Something had locked into her senses, feeding a virtual reality straight into her brain. The terror redoubled; that was a security function! Final control of violent cases.

"Come on, Boris!" she yelled into the emptiness. Then she was no longer alone. Boris stood facing her.

"No need to panic," he said. "How's the world doing?"

Oshi glared. "How do you think? Why are you doing this?"

"I wanted a private channel," he said. A mild-mannered shrug, subtly

self-satisfied: "this seemed the best way."

"Best way, shit!" Oshi turned away to conceal the shaking of her shoulders. "You know what I thought when I blanked out?" Agitation lent a veneer of immediacy to the scene around her.

Boris looked annoyed. "Go easy! We're only just waking up out there. There's a delay, by the way. Notice anything? A gap whenever I speak?"

Oshi stared at him. "No. Where's your point of presence? Here or on Pascal?"

Boris nodded. "Pascal. Light-seconds away. This is a quantum-locked link: no listening in possible, and you're sleeping by seconds between packets. I

got your message. Looks interesting. I don't know ... it's a question of planning." He looked haunted. "I'll be frank. You figure that attacker is a dumb robot, and I am inclined to agree. You say there'll be a broadcast upload coming soon, and it'll be an Ultrabright: well, I guess maybe. But the rest of it --"

"You've got brains. Why don't you use them?" she snapped, finally giving rein to her anger at being taken by surprise. "Item! An Ultrabright attacker zaps every unshielded Expansion processor and carbon-based lifeform in the system. Item: Ultrabrights are worse than Superbrights for hogging dataflow. They need input or they go insane, like

Anubis. So there's no Ultrabright on board that thing -- it's a dumb attack robot, a berserker. But here's another item: they need to occupy this system *fast*, unless they want it to be retaken by the Superbrights.

"So they must have beamed an Ultrabright out here before the attack began. It's already on its way, I'll bet, due to arrive real soon. Months, across tens of light-years. But they can't trust the local Gatecoder -- it might be sabotaged, and then where would the Ultrabright be? We can therefore infer that there's a Gatecoder and a small expansion processor on board the attack ship -- a kind of lifeboat, takes one Ultrabright in event of emergency. Right? Which leads

to the obvious conclusion --"

Boris froze, grew translucent for a moment.

"You there?" Oshi demanded.

"I'm here." He blinked, solidifying again. Shook his head: "you make sense. But to gamble everything on hijacking a starship --"

"How else are we going to get out of this rat-trap?"

They stood for a frozen moment, locked in their own thoughts. Oshi paused, helpless, wishing he'd say something. Anything. She wanted so badly to hear it: to have somebody else take responsibility. Because then she could begin making plans, and that

would take her mind off the worst question that had begun to trouble her since she had realised that they might be able to escape: the question of what she could do with her life.

"Whose instincts do you trust?" she asked.

The question hung in the air for long seconds, until she wondered if she'd made a terrible mistake in asking.

"A long time ago," Boris said slowly, "I made a mistake. I'm still paying for it."

He didn't say anything more until Oshi prompted: "yes?"

Suddenly his eyes were burning, burning through her like drills. "I assumed that ignorance was a sufficient

defense. We knew what was going on in the Kuiper belt, battles between Ultrabright factions, Superbright complexes going NP-slow, big energy-intensive restructuring in the Oort halo around the outer system. But it didn't seem to effect us: it had been going on for decades, after all. We humans, huddling close to the sun, we weren't going to be effected, were we?"

Oshi shook her head, dumbly. A horrible sense of déjà vu overtook her as he continued.

"I was young at the time, part of a conservative faction. We advocated neutrality, as if it was some kind of defense. We wanted to stay clear of the

warfare raging above our heads, out in the dark spaces on the edge of the system. We managed to get the military budget reduced to a sensible level, of course -- not that our missiles and attack warships would have done any good, not against the kind of tactics the 'brights were using. We were mice, I'll freely admit. But when the ultimatum came -- well. I was young at the time. I thought there was room for negotiation. I didn't think it was possible, or necessary, to try to understand the enemy. I thought they'd keep their distance."

"Didn't they?"

"They used some kind of insurgency strike. Belweathers, I think the term is -- trained goats, used to lead their peers to

the slaughterhouse door -- only these ones were human beings carrying death lists and intelligent weapons." He stopped again, then continued as if nothing had happened, voice a measured monotone that concealed unmeasured depths of anger and pity: "I was lucky. Listed as a useful idiot, I suppose, and in the opposition groupings -- I thought the ancient paranoids running the government were out of touch with reality, ossified. Learned better, after they were all dead. By that time things were going to hell in a zeppelin, it was all we could do to set up an emergency team to handle the exodus -- and even then, some of us couldn't adapt. I lost a

lover, two children, that way. Because they wouldn't face up to ..." He looked at her mutely.

Oshi said nothing. She didn't trust herself to speak.

"Never again," said Boris: "*never again*. Half-measures are no solution; we can't share a solar system, a galaxy even, with these aliens. They *are* aliens, as unlike us as any organism we've ever met or created. Whatever we may think is reasonable, it's fair to assume they don't think the same way. And I owe it to their memory not to make the same mistake again. Not to underestimate what needs doing. Nor to underestimate their malevolence." At which point he looked right at Oshi, giving her a chilly feeling

that he could see right through her. "They are our enemies, the way a dirtworld farmer is the enemy of his sheep. If we give them a chance they'll kill us. I'm not going to give them any more chances."

"I asked Mik about your plan," he said abruptly. "He says you're right, in principle. But there are other issues. We may have enough ships here, enough drones to mount an attack fleet. Lock onto the berserker and crack its control wetware. But how do we control it? The thing's millions of kilometres away. Lightspeed lag alone would mean we'd need a point of presence right close by it ..."

"That's a technical issue," she said,

stupefaction and satisfaction vying for expression. "Are you going to do it?"

"Yes," Boris admitted. He stared at Oshi for a moment that seemed to stretch. "I was hoping you'd agree to show us how it's done. You're the nearest thing to a field officer we've got here. Nobody else has your depth of experience ..."

"Don't overestimate me," Oshi said, biting back bitterness. Was that a subtle double-meaning she caught in his voice, or her own guilty conscience? *Belweathers -- or maybe scratch monkeys.* "I'm just another grunt who wants out of this mess." She shrugged. "What do you think we can do if we succeed? Where would you go?"

Boris ran one hand over his bare scalp, calculating. "There's a system about twenty light years from here. Rich -- no Superbrights, this isn't a Dirtburner farm world -- if we can fuel up the Ultrabright ship it should be able to make the crossing. Especially with a mass conversion drive like it seems to have." He stopped and looked down, then met Oshi's eyes. "It had better be big enough for an Ultrabright," he said slowly. "Do you know what we found in the Dreamtime when we arrived?"

"What?"

"The entire second colony wave. The broadcast that followed us. All eighty million of them, neatly archived in

frozen storage ..."

"A very unwilling colony," Oshi said drily.

Boris's face crinkled in disapproval. "We've got to look after them. It's our responsibility."

"Yes, well." Oshi looked away, suddenly embarrassed. *And that's a better mission than I ever had*, she thought. *All this time, nothing but killing.* "Isn't that what you always wanted?"

"No," Boris said softly. "That kind of responsibility's not something I'd wish on anyone. See you tomorrow ..."

Suddenly Oshi was floating in the bath, breathing through a hollow tube, warmth on every side. She shook her

head, felt the slow tug of turbulence through her hair. *Damn it!* Disbelief and a sense of nervous anticipation crowded together in her mind. *They're all alive! And we're going to try to do it?*

An inchoate mass of worries caught her up and made her heart thud between her ribs. Anticipation: a cute body, a woman who'd stirred an unexpected lust in her. Still alive somewhere. Fear: *I'm going to have to die and upload before this is over. Hope the Boss isn't waiting for me on the other side.* Paranoia: what if Anubis left an insurance policy, a time-bomb? A zombie programmed for revenge, concealed among eighty million minds in a nation-sized shell

game. Excitement: *we're going to hijack a starship!* And finally, something approximating remorse. *Maybe this is my chance to set the tables right without killing anyone ...*

Why can't there be peace, for once? she wondered. Individuals who stood out from the crowd; they all succumbed to love or bullets eventually. Ivan, Anubis, Marat Hree -- they all coexisted in her minds eye. Suddenly she felt the ashy, grey futility of it, with an acuity born of despair: her years of dancing to the Superbright's song. *How much longer will I have to feel this guilt?* she wondered. *What if I've made a terrible mistake?* She shook her head, half-blinded by tears. It was a heavy burden,

finally bearing responsibility for her own actions. She straightened up and reached for the rim, letting the tub drain and clean itself unattended. *I wonder if this is what Boris meant; never quite being sure if you're doing the right thing.* Alone and very much aware of it, the last of the heroes dried herself and covered her nakedness before she went outside to face an uncertain future.

Nightfall was the time of the small blinding. It always reminded Oshi of her own human weakness. Now, an evening later, she looked at the ceiling and wondered whether she was ready to face the darkness in her heart. She felt drained. Wisdom was still mostly off-

line, as were all comms in and out of the Redoubt. A sour cloud of discarded ration wrappers floated behind her -- she couldn't be bothered to collect them. *Leave it to the drones.* She felt slightly sick, but not from free-fall vertigo. The toilet facilities ran on a centrifugal-suction system, otherwise she might have seen the blood in her stools.

She suited up, letting her climb-spider lock itself into place around her and jack into her spinal reflexes. It felt eerie to own ghost limbs again, two arms poised behind her to sting machine death into anything that got in her way. She burrowed into the body-bag she'd had the axial factory prepare, forcing herself to breathe steadily despite the

polythene claustrophobia wrapped all around her. It was an impermeable membrane, transparent, tough and airtight. Not a space-suit; an environmental precaution. There was no telling what the tapeworm could have grown into with six days of unsupervised ontological recombination.

Oshi wanted to get out very badly. She'd woken up eight hours ago from a dream of nameless terror and realised what was going on. Days of enclosure weighed her down; the thought of what was to come was even worse. There was one critical part to her plan, that Boris hadn't even alluded to: retrieving the gatecoder from the colony

medicentre. It wasn't a standard inventory component, and the construction schematics for it weren't part of the general database she had. If she couldn't find it she might as well cut her wrists now and get things over with, rather than wait for the Ultrabright death machine to download the mind of its master program and go to work on the colony. When she charged up her suit backpack, switched to her internal air supply, and powered up the door motors, she was acting on cool-headed necessity rather than random impulse; but her motive was still a hollow dread.

She used the reconstructed airlock in what had been the entrance lobby to Anubis' castle. The doors hummed and

slid out mechanically, exposing a view like a diseased eyeball. Oshi stood in the opening, unable to take in the perspective. A twilit red abyss opened beneath her feet, swooping into a dizzying space that somehow closed up into a pinprick pupil far away. A few metres overhead the grey bulk of the redoubt support plunged outwards, a dim red glow suffusing its surface from the light tubes high above. The veins of the eye were picked out in roadways and access routes between forests; in the dim reflection of running water and the blood-clot of a lake hanging overhead. Dim lights sketched out the habitats and houses of this world, the stumpy blocks

of the life-support centres and transit nodes. But it was too quiet; the normal microwave chatter of the cyborgs and drones that populated it was gone. And a strange grey fungus was creeping outwards from a focal point in what had once been the necropolis at Memphis. If the view was of the inside of an eyeball, then its owner was very definitely dead.

The darkness was oppressive. Oshi edged her way out along a handrail until a ledge appeared beneath her feet. Then she reached out with her spidery arms and legs, grabbed hold of the wall, twitched a subverbal command to her exoskeleton. It jolted into autonomous life, carrying her out along the wall, down to the dying forest floor below.

She permitted himself to feel a momentary relief, but there was too much wrong to feel normal.

The climb-spider began to run, skipping and sliding down the nearly-vertical surface until it began to pick up speed under the influence of the centrifugal effect. Then it began scrabbling to hold itself back, letting the world do the work. Gradually the slope bottomed out, until presently it was no more than a steep hill with trees growing on it at a strange angle.

She felt herself slow as she reached a smooth, flat ribbon of road that ran between the trees. *Where to?* she wondered, indecisive, not wanting to

commit herself to the finality of a decision. She looked round. There was a cat, lying curled peacefully beneath a bush to one side. Her vision amplifiers picked it out, along with the insects crawling over and through it. Patches of silvery mesh showed through tigerstriped fur in places; a cyborg spy. She looked away in revulsion, afraid that she knew exactly what she must do next.

The medical centre ... she thought. The essential location. They needed that Gatecoder unit. The gatecoder kernel was surprisingly small, a customized Von Neumann machine that carried a parasite module. The parasite, when full grown, was a placentory: a factory for

building human bodies at an accelerated rate. Already she felt the chill wind of fear breathing down her neck. *If the tapeworm's got to it ...* she hunkered down in her supports as her exoskeleton lumbered along the road. The tapeworm Lorma had said, was from the dark anthropic zone: the sector of the graph of possible universes where human-like life could not arise. Not just a Lamarckian organism that coded into genes the characteristics it required to deal with its environment, but something worse: a machine designed to out-evolve and out-eat everything in the colony by integrating them into itself. There was a name for a huge cell with

several nuclei, Oshi recalled: a syncitium. The worm was a Lamarckian, heterogenous syncitium. It could eat *anything*. Including the gatecoder and its placentory module, which they would need for the hijacking. Maybe the worm wouldn't have got there yet. Maybe it would be alright ...

Eventually Oshi arrived at the edge of the necropolis. She stared at the darkened shell of the nearest habitat. The door gaped on blackness. Something crackled faintly in her earphones; a mindless crepitation from the dying forest behind the twilit structure.

Stripped of the burden of life, she imagined the winds of time scouring the colony clean. She could see it as it

would appear in a thousand years: a bizarre fossil lined with the ossified corpses of trees, baked by the heat of a distant sun. Distant protruberances would fall away over the years, dropping off the axial docking modules: the colony would roll and tumble unwatched through the centuries, at the heart of a belt of debris around Turing. The air would eventually leak away, but for a long time before then there would be a deathly silence broken by the pings and groans of metal warming and cooling. There were no barbarians in this star system, no witnesses to stare and marvel at the dusty artefacts. The diseased eye would darken, collapse,

the contents sucked out of it by the vacuum of time: in the end, nothing would remain but a husk, a vacant socket that had once borne light and life, falling in orbit around the skull of a dead planet.

Where has everyone gone? she wondered, almost desperate to see a human face. *This can't be the end yet. It's too early!*

Stepping forward, she saw a pathetic bundle lying beside the path. Booster muscles whined in her knee joint as she rolled the corpse over with a boot, far enough to see an unfamiliar face before it fell back. She shuddered, cranked up the oxygen flow through her mask. The wisdom net was silent as the grave. She

moved onwards.

The door to the medicentre was open. She stood on the threshold for a minute, breathing deeply and trying to think. A faint hissing came from inside, like escaping gas. The sniffer on the outside of her exoskeleton locked in, feeding olfactory insights to her. *Something in there stinks*, she decided. *But what?* It was an indeterminate worry; unrealistic. She felt like a tourist visiting a souvenir shop in a death camp, decades later, witnessing disconnected horrors with no toe-hold in reality. This couldn't be happening. She stepped inside. There was a manual light control just inside the doorway, a concession to

primitive instincts. She slapped it lightly and looked around as the ceiling brightened.

Lying before her was the source of the smell; sickly sweet and withered, with empty eye sockets that buzzed. Rotting placentories hung like strange fruit on either side, each containing a fragile harvest of slime-smeared human bones. She recoiled, taking in everything with obsessive intensity. *What* -- she thought, then looked up. At the artefact in the centre of the room.

"Hello Oshi," said the thing in the life-support bush. "Small world, isn't it?"

Six days had turned Raisa into a shell; a rotting chrysalis within which

nothing but a core of personality remained. She'd taken a cumulative dose of decaGreys: what was left of her body was held together by the frond-like peripherals of the life support system. Her skin was blotched and bruised and peeling, her hair moulting; she looked like a week-dead corpse.

"You took your time getting here," she said drily.

Oshi blanched. "I thought you were uploaded." For a moment her shell cracked; she looked at Raisa with eyes like broken glass.

"Sort-of. I had to stay," Raisa said. Her throat crackled with mucus as the speech-synth vocalised for her, her

injured pharynx vainly trying to keep up with her brain. "Rest evacuated ... we all uploaded. But I wanted to talk to you."

Oshi glanced down. A mess of decaying skin and bones -- all that was left of a goon -- lay before Raisa's support hammock.

"A little contretemps," Raisa said tiredly. "Not everyone made it. The goon squad went crazy. You know about them?"

Oshi looked at her dully. Slowly her face relaxed. One cheek twitched into a self-deprecating grin. "So you decided to stay for a little chat, right? If the radiation level here is so intense, what's going to happen on Pascal?" She turned away as if embarrassed, trying to

conceal her reaction. Shoulders shaking. She really *had* thought that maybe --

"I wanted to talk to you."

Oshi turned round slowly. "About what?"

"I think you know."

"You didn't have to stay." The air between them was gravid with tension.

"Ah, but I wanted to. I really -- you didn't give me enough time."

The gatecoder module bulked large against one wall, a black slab of warm ceramic. Oshi slumped against it. "I didn't know what I was asking for," she said. "Why now?"

"Life's been empty. Too long." Raisa shook her head, support hammock fronds

manipulating muscles that were already decaying, eaten from within by their own lysosomes. "Do I need to give you a reason? Oh, Oshi, I didn't realise it would be like this."

"I had thought that maybe," Oshi said brokenly. "You and I --"

There was a carrier-wave whistle from the speech-synth. "Plans!" Raisa said with gentle derision. "I could see you making plans for us. Do you realise what's happened? I'm here. I'm still alive. I'll recover, you'll see. Just take a bit of cellular reconstruction. I didn't want to be alone ... what do you expect?"

Oshi shook her head, limp-necked. "Not this. I've got to get the gatecoder up

to the hub, grow a new placentory. Without it we can't go anywhere. But Rai, there's hope! Boris, the others -- everyone -- they've uploaded. Anubis is dead and we're going to steal the Ultrabright ship! I can take you up to the hub. There's room for both of us. Do you want that?"

Raisa lay amidst the quiet hissing of pumps, silent for seconds as she formulated an answer.

"Maybe," she said. "But I don't think I can move yet. I'm fixed, here. The tapeworm tried to get to the gatecoder but I stopped it. I stopped it good ... fed it *fugu*. I hurt, Oshi, I hurt everywhere. I can't move. What are you going to do?"

Oshi shrugged angrily. "What can I do? I wanted ..." she caught herself. Raisa closed her sunken eyes.

"I'll tell you what I was going to do," Oshi said. She licked her lips. *Story time*. It was a distraction from her real worries: she didn't have to think about Raisa's condition if she kept talking. "There's a starship out there. With a small expansion processor, a gatecoder receiver, and a drive of some kind. It's dumb right now, waiting for an Ultrabright to arrive by broadcast transmission and tell it what to do. We're going to assemble a fleet of small ships. The enemy's parked in orbit thirty light seconds away. We don't have

portable expansion processors capable of running an attack, but brains are cheap ... we need to grow bodies, soldiers to control the attack drones when we get close in. Then when we've hacked into the berserker we'll take control, set course for the nearest inhabited system. That's the plan."

Raisa's eyelids snapped open, revealing bloodshot conjunctivae; "take me with you?"

"Oshi's face softened. "You're in danger here. We've got to get you to the hub somehow --"

"Can't move. I'm still too ill. I'd be dead but for the nanosystems glueing my cells together."

"But you're --"

"A medic, or what passes for one here. I know best. Oshi? I'll have to wait. Take my chances with the tapeworm. It's very subtle, you know. Assimilates predator tactics, memes, as well as genes from its victims. But it doesn't know *everything*." An expression of loathing or disgust twisted her face and she shut her eyes. "Oshi?"

"Yes?" Oshi took a step closer, until she could feel Raisa's breath on her cheek.

"Kiss me --" She tilted her face up towards Oshi, pursed slack bruised lips. Oshi instinctively leaned close, smelt something through her oloreceptors, jerked back and looked ...

Raisa's mouth hung open. There were no teeth inside: she no longer had a tongue. Her mouth was full of pale wormy palps, questing heads blindly seeking the warmth of human breath: "Oshi? Kiss me?"

Oshi looked at the support hammock, then at the ground beneath it. The floor was humped up, cracked open, something vegetable thrusting through and up into the mass of life support equipment that cradled Raisa. It smelt of shit and decaying vegetables and worms. The thing at the centre of the mass twitched, pulsing in time to the motion of Raisa's rib cage like the arm below a glove puppet.

"Upload," said Oshi: "shit!" She scrambled back, covering her face with one hand, trying not to vomit. "If that's still you, Raisa, evacuate; go Dreamtime at once!"

"What's wrong? Oshi, I feel strange -" Raisa opened her eyes and screamed.

Her body heaved itself upright, shedding wires and support tubes like dandruff. A fat white cable impaled her from below: her eyes bulged and when she opened her mouth something like spaghetti spewed writhing and twitching across her chin. Tears of blood trickled down her cheeks as wormy pseudopods erupted from her eyes and ears. She glided forward, thrusting atop a thick

body that slithered snake-like across the floor.

Oshi reacted instantly. She threw up her ghost arms: a mess of tracking digits splashed across the room, the tapeworm, the gutted puppet impaled upon it. She made one spastic twitch and there was a noise like a giant zip fastening lined with firecrackers. Shrapnel sang and pinged across the room. The world outside the medicentre screamed: the floor shook as the various extrusions of the tapeworm registered the pain of this extension.

Oshi lashed out with another arm, grabbing the smooth exterior of the Gatecoder module. It was buttoned down, totally sealed -- someone had packed it up in anticipation of trouble. "

Thank you Raisa," she mumbled, tears rising and her stomach heaving in noxious sympathy as she dragged at the heavy pod. Motors whined in her climb-spider as she hauled it up onto her back and glanced round for signs of the tapeworm's return. *Raisa*, she mourned. *Why did you stay behind?* Was it out of a sense of misplaced duty? Or was it that she knew what would happen if she didn't shut down the gatecoder and they needed it? *The tapeworm acquires predator tactics from elsewhere, adding them to its repertoire as it blindly seeks to convert all biomass in the colony into extensions of itself.* You don't stay behind after you've uploaded.

There's not much left behind in your skull, anyway. Raisa was safe. But whatever had taken control of her body had known how to use it ...

Oshi stumbled out into the diseased night, crying and panting and trying not to think about anything, hauling the hope of survival on her back.

The axial factories clustered around the hub of the colony, exposed to the vacuum of space outside the pressurized habitat cylinder. Connected by hollow tubes, they resembled a huge string of garlic hanging from one end of an oil drum. Beyond them hung the docking bay: a vast bucket, open to space at one end. A school of tiny minnows clustered in the bottom of the bucket, locked onto

the unpressurized end wall of the colony.

Each minnow massed six thousand tons, empty: triple that when loaded with reaction mass and payload. They were fusion rockets, complex assemblies of drive shields, fuel tanks, payload platforms. Each ship was large enough to carry heavy mining equipment, factories, aeromining assemblies, attack drones. There were eighty of them; all that was left of Anubis's neglected planetary engineering fleet. They had been mothballed decades ago, when the Superbright turned away from his mission to follow other, less material, goals. The ships slumbered for years, their systems powered down, drawing

parasite power from the colony's grid. But now circumstances had changed, and the ships were beginning to awaken.

Oshi was depressed. Every time she looked out at the empty eye socket of the colony she saw a mirror to her dreams. The dim light filtering from the axial tube sprayed randomly across a mute landscape with no sentience to illuminate it. Quirks of the ecostructure had rendered it vulnerable to takeover by the right category of parasite: the tapeworm had spread out, infiltrating every available niche, and the cylinder was slowly filling with a haze of deathly-thick fog. The structure was degenerating, slowly turning into an undifferentiated and simple predator as

it eliminated all its macroscopic rivals. That was what it had been created for, after all: a biological weapon that had spun out of control. A deadly gossamer cloud of fibres threaded the decomposing crust of buildings and soil in the colony, leaking a pale yellow fluid across the sterilized ground.

But some parts of the colony were still hazardous. As soon as she'd reached the airlock Oshi had triggered the decontamination cycle, searing everything outside her isolation suit with short-wavelength ultraviolet: when she was sure the lock was sterile, she'd thermite-welded the lock door shut. *The tapeworm assimilates the tactics of its*

victims. What it had done with the Raisa-puppet haunted her dreams, shaking her awake in a cold choking panic. First vocalization, then intelligence ... where would it stop? She used the axial control nexus to trace all the other airlocks opening onto the interior of the colony: then welded them shut and shorted out the control circuits. She set up monitor programs, watching every corner of the axial redoubt and the hub factories. Her dreams were haunted by decaying bodies in gashed space-suits, writhing with white coiled life. If the worm learned how to space walk before she was ready to launch ...

I'll have to destroy the colony, she realised, grimly watching its progress

through external video eyes. *To sterilise this infection will take more than antibiotics.* Whatever was left of Raisa had tried tetrodotoxin, just about the most lethal neurotoxin known: it hadn't worked. And the worm was learning, using lures. It talked to her over the comm if she let it, stringing together nonsensical invitations and threats, fronting faces from which the grey flesh dripped in slow-melting ropes. She blinked slowly. *It could be worse. Lorma could have used nanoassemblers. Grey goop syndrome ...* runaway nanorobots would have converted the entire colony into a bloom of furiously replicating molecular

monsters by now. But the tapeworm was less efficient, and less predictable. It might still have a nasty surprise in store for her, and this was a risk she was not prepared to expose herself to.

The axial territories outside the biosphere were safe for Oshi as long as she observed biohazard precautions. One morning she visited a pressurised module she'd set up in one of the huge freight elevators that connected the factory sections to the docking station. She travelled by spider, externally sterilised, airlocks copulating and pulsing with plastic flexibility in the variable pressure zones. She let it suck her through a succession of claustrophobic chambers, the airflow

whispering sweet nothings to her. She remembered -- couldn't forget -- Raisa: *if it has truly become intelligent* -- what of the real woman?

Days before, she'd cloned the gatecoder firmware and despatched the specification to the factories for duplication. Eighty payload pallets were under construction, sized for the docking adapters of the ghost fleet. She'd worked it out with Boris and Mik, a ghostly telconference that had lasted nearly a day in realtime as they politely, almost ritualistically, waited for the thirty-second lag in communication. Each gatecoder would handle a dozen clone-and-download cases simultaneously,

which should be enough. There was a limit, after all, to the number of attack drones the factories could build with the available materials. With all the uploads in the Pascal dreamtime, they had more than enough pilots for the combat craft ...

A squishing of soft gaskets and a clicking of latches bought her back to full awareness. Yawning, her ears popping from the pressure differential, Oshi pulled herself hand-over-hand into the cramped, dim-lit space of the factory. It was building a duplicate gatecoder, unpacked and expanded for operational status. Placentory airlocks covered the walls of the control room, lending it an appearance like the inside of an insect's compound eye. Behind

them the automated nanofactories worked in a haze of straw-coloured fluid, reconstructing humanity. She felt oppressed by the implication of their existence; *being here is like being a spectator during a birth*, she thought. It was an alien feeling, a reminder that humans were -- when it came down to definitions -- merely a more compact kind of replicant factory. Breeders.

Sweating uncomfortably, she hung head-down above the placentory windows. Wisdom dumped a mass of raw life support data across her field of vision; she stared in fascination at the graphics, indicators of life being bootstrapped. Briefly she harboured a

conceit that she was actually a machine, at home among the uterine technologies of the medicentre.

Childbearing was something Oshi had never expected to undergo. When she had been a child she had expected to die, insofar as she had expected anything: and later, her Superbright owners had deliberately suppressed any maternal inclinations she might have succumbed to. They had stripped her down and tuned her up like a machine, to become the mother of battle, not the mother of soldiers. Now she was to be both, but only by proxy. She sighed and looked at her dim reflection in the wall screen. There were bags under her eyes; this was the second day running that

she'd had bloody diarrhoea. She wasn't going to die, but she felt like it. She felt ancient -- a very soft machine.

"Talk to me," she said. "Online systems?"

" You called?" answered the machine. The voice came from the wall behind her. Her neck twinged in irritation; she resisted the urge to turn her head.

"Is this a sentient sub-system?"

" Class structure undefined," replied the voice. *Good*, she thought. So the medical monitor system was dumb.

"List neobirths in progress," she requested. The lights dimmed and the

wall in front of her lit up in cool red relief. There were nine tanks; in four of them floated a perfectly formed adult skeleton at the centre of a haze of blood-tinged connective tissues.

"Components present are derived from download specifications comprising alpha twelve program. Calceous support-structures already formed for initial batch of four. Cellular assembly progressing nominally on basal infrastructure. Individual subjects are referenced to your contacts database as Boris, Raisa, Mikhail, Lorma, Mai Vinh ..." the control system continued, listing about twenty names; Boris had been very explicit in his requests. This was to be the strategic command crew,

travelling together on one ship. It looked about right, Oshi noted; all the bones were adult-sized. High-speed downloading required a radically new way of growing tissues; the gatecoder fiddled with tissue differentiation mechanisms to build a new body as fast as possible. The skeleton came first, plugged into support systems, then a cardiovascular network capable of supporting the rapid growth of new organs. Twenty years of growth could be compressed into a matter of weeks.

"Speed it up," Oshi ordered. "I want them hatched as soon as possible. Don't accept any instructions from anyone but myself, delivered in person in this room,

until the current downloads are reborn. Then prepare a download schedule for all uploads nominated by Mikhail, to follow at the optimum interval relative to one another. Distribution between gatecoder modules according to optimum load balance and tactical bias. Send it to me via wisdom when it's ready. Further directives will follow." She finished at a gabble, sweat standing out on her brow. *We're committed now. Five hundred soldiers coming down the chute, and nowhere to go but out.*

She straightened up, and left the room as fast as possible. Which was why she wasn't there when the control system spoke quietly to the empty air: "Alert. There is an error condition

associated with subject Raisa Marikova. Codon error: illegal nanostructure is associated with subject's homoeobox structure. Phenotype error: subject homoeobox specification contains abnormal neurological structure. Do you want me to proceed ..?"

There was no reply.

The Gatecoder waited for a long time, repeating the message occasionally. Finally, when it received no further instructions and could wait no longer, it resolved the problem by checking its default decision set. Then it began to put together the first body.

The chosen vehicle was an in-system shuttle. It was a stubby cylinder,

propelled by a pulsed fusion reaction; fast, simple, brutally non-virtual. Oshi suited up to inspect it from outside, floating in the vacuum of the main docking area. She hung before it, suspended on monofilament cables from the docking hub and the side wall like a spider webbing the bell of an enormous flower.

The *Bronstein* was a true space ship; not some hyped-up atmospheric shockwave rider, but a freighter capable of going anywhere in the system. It could operate with or without a human crew, having been designed for maintaining the cloud of drone platforms dispersed throughout the Ridgeway system. Decades ago, those platforms had

pumped a steady stream of raw materials down into the gravity well of Turing. Some had been assembled into this colony. Others had been diverted in-system to the venusiform world Wirth, their impact showering the clouds of that planet with tailored algae. Days ago Oshi had given the order to have the *Bronstein* and its sister ships powered up and readied for flight. Where to go was an interesting question; the Ultrabright attack craft was drifting towards a parking orbit around Turing, its monster engine powered down. But if it changed its mind and began to move once they'd launched on a rendezvous course, things could get very unpleasant

indeed.

Sensors on the inside of her helmet visor monitored her breathing mix: a concealed fan churned quietly, forcing dry air past her sweating face. Too many things could go wrong in deep space. Planetary life was inherently fail-safe: big, comforting biospheres could recover from those little course-corrections that triggered mass extinctions. But this fleet of attacking minnows was inherently vulnerable. All the target had to do was move out of their reach and ...

Stop worrying, she berated herself. It's a dumb attack drone, just a million times bigger than anything we'd build. If it doesn't see us it's not going to

come looking. We're fleas, we can sneak up on it. Or die trying. She had a sudden, ghastly vision: eighty ships launched into the void with insufficient reaction mass to return and nothing much to go back to anyway. The enemy ship, listening to the orders of a silent voice, fired up its black-hole powered drive, squashed atoms into fragments of exotic energy, accelerated outwards. The eighty ships drifted endlessly out into the Kuiper belt on a long, slow orbit that took their mummified crews ten thousand years out into the starry night before falling back sunwards.

Oshi tugged on her monofilament reels, adjusting her position relative to

the wall of the docking bay. The ugly vision receded. She chuckled tiredly to herself and spooled in some cable, dragging herself round the command module of the spaceship. *A spider, dangling from a fullerene fibre web.* The airlock swung into view. She closed in, motors humming in her suit as she zeroed in on it. Presently the lock turned into a trapdoor, swinging up beneath her feet to latch into place with a metallic clank.

There was a puff of vapour as the cramped lock chamber flooded with air; snowflakes glittered briefly in the chill. Oshi waited for pressure equalization, then checked the gas mix before she opened the inner lock door. Uneasily

aware of her vulnerability, she commanded her wisdom to log all changes to the life-support environment while she was aboard the ship. *Safety in paranoia*, she thought ironically. *If only there was some other way ...*

The interior of the *Bronstein* wasn't configured for gravity: under the stress of even half a gee the hull would concertina like a tube of foil. Still, there was enough volume for one person to live in for years. Its cylindrical segments were split by hexagonal blue grids with spidery furniture clipped to them. Storage lockers lined every outer wall, adding to the shielding thickness of the hull. Oshi made her way to the command

module and let the gentle hammock tie her into place. The main display sparked into life, shifting colours like a rainbow. She grinned, hollow-eyed before the light that washed across her face.

"List shipboard systems status," she requested.

"Ship persona is not active at present. General status is green for launch level three and holding at T minus one thousand seconds. Exceptions to status occur in three subsystems --" the bootstrap autopilot rattled on emotionlessly, flashing through entity-relation diagrams with faulty nodes highlighted in blinking red. Oshi followed it with half her mind. *Bronstein*, she mused; *what would you*

say if you'd lived to see this day ... She'd learned about him, and the others the ships were named after, under the tuition of the Superbrights. Lev Bronstein had been in the grave for over fourteen hundred years. An interesting historical curio, prophet of a religion that exploded from birth to death in less than two centuries: someone had seen fit to resurrect his memories for this ship. Like the sister-craft, the *Kennedy* and the *Thatcher* and the *Hitler* ... the entire fleet was named after the charismatic dictators of an historical era. Had they ever dreamed of their heirs overrunning the galaxy, taking the stars by storm? Oshi blinked and concentrated on the

ship-status readings.

" -- anomaly in flow-rate through coolant circuit three indicative of probable pump fail-urrre ..." the voice of the autopilot suddenly slurred, like a mechanical transcription device running down. "Service interrupt: systems coming up. Sentience will be resumed shortly. Incoming message: hello Oshi."

"You again." Oshi glared at the face in the display tank, relieved that it wasn't a major systems failure.

"Me." The disembodied head nodded. "Had some trouble with synchronicity; we're living at a fluctuating timebase in here. There's only

a thousand of us drawing unlimited process time allocation, but the rest of Pascal is a real meat farm. It was never intended to hold a billion evacuees. Seriously thrashing, halfway to hyperslow time already. We're waiting for your status, Oshi."

"Oh, that." Oshi rubbed her brow wearily. "The status ..." all of a sudden a flicker of fire returned to her eyes. "Looks good. Downloads are proceeding: if the tapeworm doesn't learn to sing in time, well ... I've got a little treat in store for it when we leave. What's new at your end?" She watched the display alertly.

Boris looked away from her with

disembodied eyes. "We think it's turning critical. We're not sure yet, but we figure we know where the Ultrabright ship's come from. System about fifty light years core-ward. Anyway there's a bit of inference ... we figure it's getting ready to listen for something. That's why it's drifting; when it fires up that drive it kicks out enough hard radiation to obscure an incoming broadcast. It's waiting for a download. A *big* download. Real soon now."

"How long?" Oshi asked calmly. Palms sweating, brute metabolism scavenging excitement from glands and nerves she had long since ceased to pay attention to --

"We don't know." Boris spoke

slowly and clearly. "Best guess is within six months. It's in high orbit around Turing now. It just made an aerobraking pass -- should have seen that coming. The astrophysics team think it's generating another black hole. They also expect Wirth to detonate pretty soon. The hole it dropped through Wirth's lithosphere is evaporating, losing energy through Hawking radiation. When it goes it will release the mass energy of the last hundred kilotonnes of mass in about a hundred milliseconds. When that happens, we loose our last assets apart from the colony and Pascal Dreamtime. We need to launch soon, Oshi."

"Ahh." Oshi watched Boris through half-closed eyes. "Two days should suffice, I think."

"Good."

"What has Mik come up with?" she asked, opening her eyes.

"Same as before: we hijack the ship, download our entire Dreamtime into it, and move it on out of the system. But the specifics are a lot more concrete now. We've got a think tank running a simulation of what an Ultrabright berserker looks like from the inside. We've got five hundred soldiers uploaded and unfrozen, in training. They'll run the attack drones locally. We need the meat-body fleet on site; Pascal

will be thirty light-seconds away when we make rendezvous. That's too far for remote control, and we can't be sure of taking out the berserker with a one minute time lag in the loop. Anyway, Lorma's team have been working on the architecture. It probably follows a standard Expansion processor design: modular, scalable, universal symbolic microcode at the bottom of the abstraction stack. We've been inventing viruses. Really low-level stuff designed to tip it into NP-stasis. Idea is, we get just *one* drone in where it counts then patch into the main communications bus. Then reboot, and we find ourselves in possession of one portable Dreamtime."

"What happens if we're wrong, and

there's already an Ultrabright downloaded into it?" asked Oshi.

Boris stared at her. "Then God eats our brains, of course." His head faded from view in a blur of increasing granularity, phasing into a featureless blob of voxels. "I'll let you get the pre-flight finished. Call me when you're ready."

Oshi looked at herself in the mirror and pulled a face. Stress and radiation sickness had drawn strange lines across her forehead. She shut her mouth and glanced aside; the feeling that she was being watched persisted until she looked up. *I'm getting too old for this sort of thing*, she thought. *Need a new body.*

New identity, new life. Rinse the old memories down the bit bucket. She didn't dare think about what she'd do, if - - when -- she convinced her inner censor that she had completed her task. What she'd do when it discharged her from Superbright indenture. It hovered over her like a sword suspended by a hair: a sense of being watched by the ghost of her own lost past ...

Somewhere below her a wire-cage hauled a large cargo pod towards the open front end of the *Bronstein*. She felt the jolt as docking spines meshed, but she had a distraction: Wisdom was downloading the control set for the ship in a flurry of memes and data objects. *Oh Ivan* she thought, *this would have*

been something for you. You always loved flying. A few metres away, a tank full of partly congealed skeletons and nanoassemblers was plugging itself into the shipboard blood supply. Oshi looked round again, found herself trapped in the spartan sanitary module between the exercise controllers and the lavatory. A moment of fear shook her to the core: *am I losing my memory already?*

She grunted in self-denial, then squeezed through the hatch of the cramped module and made her way to the bridge.

The flight deck was a cramped cylinder two metres in diameter and five metres long. Free-fall webs hung

opposite a wall-sized screen; there were no physical controls. She anchored herself at the mid-point and looked at it. At present the screen was feeding through a view from the hull retinas; an expanse of grey hull metal. It was as if the ship lay at the bottom of a well the size of a world, with stars visible in the sky beyond the top of the shaft.

As she shuffled into place, a window blinked for attention. She stared at it in mild annoyance, broken out of her reverie by the golden flash. "Yes?" she asked.

"Oshi." The voice didn't belong to Boris. She jolted upright, attentive.

"Who is it?" she asked, trying to sound calm. The screen cleared to show

a pale face. Raisa.

"Me, Oshi. I wondered if you were lonely."

Oshi bit back an acid reply, recognising her aggressive sarcasm for what it was. "Not particularly," she said as casually as possible, trying to drown the thunder of her heart in a well of calm.

"Then maybe your biotelemetry is lying. How's it been?"

She stared at Raisa's image. "What do you expect me to say? Do you remember what happened, or did anyone tell you?" Her mask slipped for a second and her reflection shimmered in the screen, naked in its anger and pain. "I

saw your corpse. The tapeworm tried to use it as a lure for me." She stared at her until her image blurred again: with growing surprise she realised that the problem was not in the screen but in her tear ducts.

"Oshi, what can I say?" Raisa's tone of sympathy sounded transparently insincere; Oshi wondered for a moment what she'd seen in the woman. She felt curiously distant from her emotions as she watched her.

"You can start by not saying anything about it," she suggested. "If you had anything else you wanted to talk about ..."

She hesitated for a second or two. "I did," Raisa said. "But it's also about

what we're doing. About the plan."

"Yes, well. So you've got plans. Who hasn't?" Oshi tried to keep sarcasm out of her voice.

"Stop fooling. I mean the long-term plan, Oshi, where we're all going. Out of this system -- the stuff Boris is feeding us. There's a problem. I don't see how the hell we're going to get away with it in the long term. You follow me?"

"Yes. But if all goes well we will meet in another two months, in the flesh. Maybe we can talk about it then?"

"Oshi!" Raisa's face twisted with exasperation. "It's not like that. I'm not doing this to mess up your ego! Look, I'm trying to help everybody. Not just in the

colony, but outside it; *everyone*. Hijacking a starship is cool. It may work ... but what then? We're going to be sitting at ground zero. The Superbrights will try to stop us. If what you told me is true ... where do we go from here? Your old masters won't take kindly to a starship full of renegades spreading the news of their crimes. Have you ever seen what happens when someone declares war on the Superbrights?"

She paused expectantly. Oshi felt himself gripped by a nauseous tension. "I can't do anything about that yet, Raisa. Got too much to think about as it is. Maybe later?"

"They'll have booby-trapped the colony. Somehow. They're insidious.

Even if they never heard of us, there'll be some kind of trap."

Oshi shrugged. "Who the fuck knows? We'll find out soon enough. Look, maybe we'll somewhere outside the sphere, where they can't get us. Where we can build a new world free of interference by predator intelligences. Or maybe we should stay on the ship, tip it onto a one-way trip into the future, trade real-space time for virtual colony space. But until we've got the starship it doesn't *matter*."

"Oshi?"

"Yes?"

"Why do you hate me?"

They stared at each other in silence

for a minute: Oshi too surprised to speak, Raisa waiting for an answer.

"Hate you? But I don't ..."

Coloured static filled the screen. Oshi stared in disbelief. *She cut me dead*, she realized. *The cow!* She stabbed at a manual control with stiff fingers. *She thinks I hate her?* The thought was so odd that Oshi almost laughed aloud. Then another thought occurred to her, with all the clarity and force of an electric shock. *What if she's right?*

Bite the bullet, Oshi thought, ironically. *Or the ice pick.* She looked at her hand. It shook slightly. *Thirty days; is that all it takes?* She was feeling weak, weak from lack of

company. No-one to talk to; no-one at all. She hadn't seen another real, live, human face for nearly five weeks now. She looked up. Above her head the wallscreen blocked out a horizon of stars. Dumb indicators blinked, a constellation of emergency displays hard-wired into the ships control network.

"Ready?" she asked.

Lev Davidovitch Bronstein snorted irascibly. "Yes!" He poked his pince-nez up the jut of his nose with a blunt finger, stained black with ink. "And what do *you* want?" he demanded. "I'm very busy, you know. Not a moment to waste!"

Oshi ran a hand through her hair, probed tangles that melted away before her fingers. "I want some information," she said. "Something that needs your skills."

The AI simulacrum -- far less than a Superbright -- glanced over his shoulder then turned back to Oshi with an irritable snarl. "Alright. What is it?"

"Comm connection through the axial redoubt, please."

"Hah! And for this you distract me!"

A window opened in the main screen.

"Control?"

"Control here." For some reason it seemed to prefer to use

wisdom to talk to her. Oshi cringed in her crash web, then forced herself to stretch out.

" *Have you received any communications for me recently?*" she asked.

The window filled with a bewildering array of hierarchic, tabulated information: an old-fashioned filesystem. " I had to utilize large object access protocols to store incoming calls. All communications channels into the axial redoubt are saturated with messages for you."

" *What?*" Oshi stared. " *Pipe one in*

--"

A familiar face grinned at her. "Hello, Oshi! The singer's head is half-exploded, did you know that?" A smile of leeches gaped at her. "I am the whirlwind! I love you massively. Come do my head in! I give your eyes to the policeman's boot and you can be my valentine." Something white and squamous coiled in the background. It was wearing army boots on a multitude of very human legs. "What do you say?"

Oshi stared at the screen, appalled. The tapeworm had learned to talk, combining and recreating speech and memes -- transmissable ideas -- the way it recombined genes. *I'm being*

propositioned by a runaway semantic engine! she realized. *Or does it simply want to eat me?* "No."

The face wept tears of green ichor. "Oh, you never loved me! I'm desolate! I hurt, Oshi, you did this to me! Please don't make my elephant sneeze ..."

"No."

The face began to tear, from the top down. The whiteness behind it was not a skull. It grinned at her, a moustache of worms twisting around and about its mouth -- a circle of concentric rings of teeth, like a lamprey's. Evidently the tapeworm had not yet learned to program a video special effects unit.

"I want you," said the tapeworm.

"Well you can't have me." Oshi

turned aside, muting the sound:
"Bronstein. How soon can we launch?"

"It's premature but I can give you a window in one-twenty-four seconds. Is that soon enough?"

"Does that go for the entire fleet?"

"Are you --" Trotsky froze for an instant. "Ack, confirmed. All follower craft are at the same status level. It's going to be crowded, but they'll follow us out at three second intervals. We will be two thousand seven hundred seconds late for final rendezvous if we launch now, but I can coordinate and the last ship will depart in two ninety three seconds. Is that acceptable?"

Oshi felt her cheek twitch. "It better

be," she confirmed.

"Good. Then shut up and leave me to it!" The AI vanished in a multicolour smear of optical static, leaving a burst of countdown indicators on-screen.

"Bomb, talk to me."

"I hear you." The voice was a muted crackle, low bandwidth comms over an encrypted channel. No image accompanied the voice.

"What's your status?"

"Ready. Interlocks one, two, and three active. Self-test green."

"Interlock one, go."

"Acknowledged. Password?"

"Hedgehog."

"Acknowledged. I am arming. Withdrawing safety interlock. I am

armed."

Oshi glanced back at the screen with the tapeworm on it. *If it gets into the axial tube before the bomb is ready* -- she shuddered. She hated nukes: after that burning sky over Dragulic she'd been plagued by nightmares, had needed therapy to get over it. The thing still gave her the creeps, but it was the only way to be certain -- now that the worm had turned into something smarter and deadlier than the simple parasite it had been designed as.

"I love you," crooned the tapeworm: "come sleep with me in fields of azure ..."

"Bomb: interlock two, go."

"Acknowledged. Password?"

"Miramor."

"Acknowledged. Polonium trigger inserted. Firing circuits armed. I am ready to die for king and country."

Whoever had designed the bomb's control pack had a warped sense of humour, Oshi reflected. "Accept new yield setting. I want you to give maximum blast effect, whatever you can manage."

"Acknowledged. Yield increased to four megatons. Confirm?"

"Deny!" Oshi said hastily. *Shit, what was I thinking of?* "Set eighty kilotons." Four megatons would shred the fleet before it had time to get clear. She was

going to set off a nuke in the axial redoubt, to clear the tapeworm out for good. There wouldn't be much of a blast, but the spallation fragments would be expelled fast. In space, there was no air to slow shrapnel: some of it would probably be blasted out at well above solar escape velocity.

"Eighty kilotons, acknowledged."

There were strange humming noises in the framework of the ship: pumps spooling up and down in test sequences, shock absorbers puffing themselves up and testing strain gauges. The freighter was alive, like a plant or a Von Neumann machine if not an animal. Oshi was distracted by it for a moment: *here I am, sitting in the stomach of a great*

machine about to take flight and it's messy. Mechanical farts, electronic belches. Just like a body! As if sophisticated structure requires a certain softness ...

"Will you still love me, will you still love me, when I'm sixty four?" the tapeworm sang to her.

There was a barely audible buzz that set her teeth on edge. The faint docking bay lights went completely dark. The *Bronstein* was sucking electrical power out of what was left of the colony grid, bootstrapping its muon-catalysis cold fusion reactor into life. The reactor was cool only by virtue of its lack of a need for massive plasma containment circuits;

it took a lot of power to ignite it.

T minus One Hundred Seconds, Trotsky remarked, sending glowing green letters scudding across the screen. The docking bay lights stayed dark, but a tracery of red, blue and green navigation beacons sparked on. The reactor was on-stream now, feeding boiling nitrogen through refrigeration coils and pumps to produce electricity cleanly. Oshi waited, felt her guts tighten up slowly into a little ball just below her ribs. The anticipation of launch. Unseen scaffolding was retracting into the hull of the colony from around the ship, leaving it isolated and free. It bulged like a barnacle on the whale's flank of the docking bay end-wall.

A thought struck her. "Bomb. You still online?"

"Yo, boss!"

"What's in your vicinity? What do your perimeter traps show?" she asked. It occurred to her that maybe if the tapeworm *had* figured out how to use a video mixer it would be smart enough to realise that this was its last chance to lure her out. So if it could subvert her unencrypted data channels, creep into the axis and masquerade as thin air before her video eyes ...

T minus Fifty Seconds. The screen lit up in an eye-burning shade of turquoise. "No entities proximate," reported the bomb.

"Are you sure? Cancel that. Send me a slow-scan signal from your number two camera. Full encryption, no shortcuts."

A window appeared next to the tapeworm's singing ensemble. (A chorus line of fishnet-stockinged legs did the high-kick behind it, dissolved back into a ropy mass of coils ...) The window filled in slowly, scanning progressively finer detail into the picture as the bomb crammed compressed video elements down a low-bandwidth voice link. The view along the axial tube was dizzying. Service entrances outlined with blinking amber lights converged in the distance, vanishing into a perspective-point.

Something moved in the tube.

"Trotsky? I think you ought to launch *now* --" she began. "Bomb: interlock three, go. Password: Hree. Countdown: three hundred seconds. I tell you three times."

"Acknowledged -- "

Something writhed in the distance, growing rapidly larger. *It's broken in!* she realised, stomach flipping in cold fear. Maybe it burned through the far end. Or maybe she'd missed an airlock. The other monitors showed no signs of the incursion.

" -- Pleased to meet you, hope you guessed my name, what was puzzling you was the nature of my game!" sang the

tapeworm. Bundles of fat white coils spun dreamily along the axial tube. They looked big enough to hold down a freighter. Some of them sprouted arms, carrying esoteric equipment: ominous cannisters and something that looked like a thermal lance.

T minus Ten Seconds, warned Trotsky. "Launch cycle on automatic." Oshi blinked back her life support diagnostics, flickering behind one eyelid. The vibrations in the hull grew to a roar as the big fuel pumps kicked in, shunting thousands of litres of methane slurry past heat exchangers. Oshi consigned her soul to the mercy of the god of rocket propulsion.

"-- I'm a man of wealth and taste --"

the tapeworm assured her *a capella*, its image growing in the bomb's eye. Then the screens went blank.

Umbilicals are go. Fuel lines are go. Parasite systems are go. Telemetry circuits are go. Ullage rails are go. T minus two seconds. All systems are go for launch.

The ullage rails powered up, great cam-driven springs that booted the ship clear of the launch pad in a push that settled the fuel in its tanks. The ship kicked away from the docking bay, jolting Oshi back in her web. Turbines screamed as a deluge of fuel sucked through them, bearings brought to white heat by the speed of their rotation. Laser

light blasted into the mixture, flash-heating it into a plasma almost instantly: magnetic fields channelled it out of the tail of the ship. As the rocket motor lit, a terrible white glare etched shadows across the walls of the bay. Ceramic blast deflectors glowed cherry red behind the departing ship as a hurricane of tenuous gas raged through the huge chamber. The other ships rocked in the backwash as they powered up to follow the *Bronstein* out into space.

A gentle pressure pushed Oshi back into her web. The ship was accelerating at less than a third of a gee. The initial burn was scheduled to last for only a minute -- it drained fuel at a prodigious rate -- but in that time it would push the

Bronstein until it was moving away from the colony at more than two thousand kilometers per hour. She glanced up at the smart screen and was surprised to see Leon beaming back at her, an expression of triumph squeezed into his pinched face. "No problems!" he announced triumphantly. "All systems functioning perfectly. Orbital corrections will be necessary one megasecond before we reach the primary rendezvous. The launch was successful, a complete vindication of the ideological soundness of relying on autonomous extensions of the proletariat."

Oshi breathed a shuddering sigh of relief and kept her political opinions to

herself. "Give me a rear view," she said.

The screen flickered to an external view. The end-wall of the docking bay was huge beyond understanding: the *Bronstein* might as well have been a flea jumping for its life from an elephant. The huge grey disk of the docking bay filled the screen, rimmed with the absolute blackness of space. A tiny circle at the core shone with a welcome white light: a patch a third of the way out to one side glowed a dull cherry red.

There was a sudden flare of light to one side, violet-hot, surrounded by a reddish corona: a small black dot eclipsed the heart of the flare. It lit up the entire end wall, casting sharp shadows from the protruding spires of

the other ships. "*Tojo* is launching," observed Trotsky. Another pinprick glare burst forth, began to move away from the far side of the disk. "*Churchill* is launching." More nuclear flares torched off. "Fleet operations control protocol is active. *Pol Pot*, *Ho Chi Minh* and *Rosa Luxemburg* are launching. C-cubed-I-squared protocol established. Fleet control is fully operational. Launch coordination is in effect."

The gentle thrust behind Oshi's back cut off. The disk of the end wall was receding visibly. She made a rough guess at its diameter: *we must be ten kilometres away already, pulling more*

than two thousand kilometers per hour relative to it. It left her feeling curiously numb. *Will you still love me, will you still love me, when I'm sixty four?* She wondered if tapeworms had feelings, or just hunger. And if Raisa honestly thought she hated her.

More pinpricks of light glared from the colony wall every few seconds, drifting outwards. It was pock-marked with cooling red patches now. The lights began to blink out, their boost sequences completed. "How long since we launched?"

"One hundred and fifteen seconds," said Trotsky.

The pinprick of light at the centre of the disk suddenly blossomed outwards.

"Shit! Give me a zoom shot of that."

"Check." The end wall filled the screen. Lovelorn filaments of white death cast around soundlessly, thrashing in the vacuum. A cloud of debris was expelled, bundles of white fluff boiling and shaking in the void. There was a flash of blue light and a massive tentacle spilled from the airlock. Huge and rugose, it quested about gingerly, confused by its harsh new environment.

"Back to the wide-angle view, I think." Oshi's stomach roiled. It wasn't space sickness: it was the thought of Raisa's face, splitting like a paper bag ... the abhuman seductionist waiting for Oshi in the colony medicentre ...

"Two hundred seconds. I take it the bomb will detonate in a hundred seconds?"

"You got it," Oshi said absently. The sparks of light were still lifting off from the distant tin-can's lid of the docking bay. The *Bronstein* was drifting up from it, so that the body of the colony was visible as a foreshortened cylinder, lit from above by the backwash of a score of fusion rockets. Turing hung vast and gibbous in the background, a spiral storm of methane and hydrogen churning in endless motion. Belts of red and orange gas swirled around its axis, trade winds vast enough to swallow smaller planets. The cylinder, capped at either

end by the fractal complexities of its engineering systems, looked smooth and solid at this magnification. It rotated with ponderous grace, the motion evident only as a faint shifting of the surface texture of the cylinder. Shadows moved across it slowly, stretching and dimming and shortening and stretching again as the fleet departed. *Like a spasm launch from an ancient missile field*, Oshi thought: ICBM's leaving their silos in swarms, ahead of an incoming enemy threat cloud. She felt a curious euphoria as she looked down.

"Flash filters in place," announced Trotsky. "Two hundred and eighty seconds. Last ship launching. Confirmed: *Golda Meir* is launching.

All ships are clear of the pad. Two hundred and ninety seconds."

They watched in silence as the last violet pinprick climbed slowly away from the foreshortened colony.

The image froze for an instant, static breaking out around the edges. A moment later, the view cleared. Oshi felt the hair on the back of her neck rise: she broke out in a cold sweat. A brilliant violet glow shone through the open axial lock where the tapeworm had been.

Trotsky spoke: "confirmed EMP. Confirmed gamma flash characteristic of secondary emissions from a plutonium bomb airburst. Any moment now --"

Slow as a dream, the colony cylinder

began to bulge around its waist. A crack appeared: a ghastly radiance shone forth. A second crack appeared, directly behind the end-wall. The skin of the colony began to flake away like wood shavings on a lathe, great slabs of steel and rock spinning away into the void. The bulge in the cylinder spread from the grotesquely obese waist until the entire length of the colony was swollen. Purple light shone through a myriad of cracks along its length.

"It's a geodesic structure. It doesn't let go easily," said Trotsky.

Oshi watched in horrified fascination as the light faded to orange. The cracks broadened: flakes of stone the size of cities spun silently away from

the rotating cylinder. Larger fragments began to curl out from the wall of the colony, peeling away like the rind of an orange. The glow inside dimmed to a sullen red.

"Radar is tracking spallation debris from the end wall," said Trotsky. "Closing speed three thousand kilometres per second. Stand by for possible impact."

The colony lost hull integrity abruptly. One moment it was still recognizable, a warped parody of its former symmetry and grace: the next, it had ceased to exist. A huge cloud of debris began to drift outward from a puff of ruddy vapour. Something huge and

white flopped and curved, banana-like, flailing in the vacuum. *It's too big*, Oshi thought. *That can't be the worm! It must be all of ten kilometres long --*

There was a bang from somewhere behind, and a shock that rippled through the structure of the ship.

"Spallation impact on drive radiation shield segment eighteen," said Trotsky. "The cloud has passed us by. Damage reports from other ships now coming in." There was a puff of light on the screen. "We lost the *Thatcher*. That was her drive blowing: she must have taken a fragment right on the main engine or the reactor core. About the damaged shield: it's not critical. We were hit by a ten micron paint fragment spalled off the

end-wall at about two percent of lightspeed. I think it went right through me. The radiation shield segment is repairable. Neat hole, though." He sounded humble but proud of himself for some reason. It confused Oshi. *Will you still love me tonight?* she wondered, thinking of the tapeworm. The room began to blur, and she realised that for no reason she could quite explain she was weeping.

The *Bronstein* drifted through space in apparent isolation. The gap between the ships in the fleet widened until they were reduced to invisibility against the majestic backdrop of Turing's moon system. Oshi quickly settled into a

routine. She let her circadian clock cycle to its own rhythm, dividing the day into subjective hours. She exercised in the free-fall sleeping space, plugged into isometric stimulators that gave her nocturnal rests a frankensteinian quality: twitching, jerking limbs outstretched before a sleep-walker face. Her time was spent in maintenance and meditation. Life support was nominal; the algae cultures remained stable, the yeasts thrived, and the scrubbers kept the stench of methane out of the air. Her biggest enemy was boredom and her own sense of uncertainty.

Oshi found herself spending an increasing amount of her time in the access bay to the cloning module. Day

by day she watched the skeletons accumulate a dressing of filmy connective tissue, organlike nodules that gradually changed shape and filled out to familiar proportions. Accelerated cloning was nothing like foetal growth; it produced a full-sized human body like an exotic machine, rather than sprouting it along the classical timeline to maturity. She was there when the nanotech manipulators went in, splicing interfaces into the nascent brains. Although there was nothing to see she watched intently for almost a day, wondering at the near miracle she was witnessing. It seemed to her to be beautiful and precious, in a way she

could barely describe. She had spent so long concentrating on destruction that only now, with day after day of emptiness to fill, could she contemplate creation as an alternative. This troubled her, but not as much as her dreams.

Night after night she awoke in a cold sweat, fists raised to fend off ghost-worms in the abyss. Moaning and thrashing herself awake, she fought once more against the mindless animal rapists in the ruins of Miramor. She was visited by demons, old and new: Ivan wrenched away from her, arms outstretched and beseeching, Raisa erupting in a nightmare of tendrils. Never mind that the real Raisa was uploaded, even now preparing to download into a new body.

Oshi had *seen* her. And Oshi had great difficulty in questioning her perceptions. She had taught herself to look at surfaces so carefully that she had forgotten how when she was a blind child beggar she had seen beneath them.

She took some comfort from watching the passive imaging displays on the bridge. Week by week they changed slowly. She sat in her web, thinking in tune to a random selection of ancient music culled from a database. *It's coming closer*, she warned herself. *You're going to have to decide what to do next. After you escape. You need to know whether you still belong to the Boss, or whether you are free to*

become someone else. Don't you? Secret doubts gnawed at her heart. Every morning she said tomorrow ... but tomorrow never came, and every evening the guilt and shame grew deeper.

Free fall disagreed with her metabolism. She forced himself to eat, nauseated; watched her face bloat in the mirror, fluid balance distorted by lack of gravity. Trotsky had little constructive advice to offer, apart from long diatribes about socialist realism and the need for a proletarian revolution. "Don't concentrate on your own problems," the simulated revolutionary snapped at her; "work for the people, you gutless wonder! If you don't work for them, they

won't work for you." He chuckled. "In any sense of the word."

"And what would you know about that?" she wondered aloud.

"You don't want to know." Leon twitched irritably. "There's a lot you don't understand. Speak to you later."

"Wait," Oshi said, too late. The AI was gone, sucked back into the guts of the machine like a lure strung out on a wire before her dog's eye. She yawned, stretched, and belched unselfconsciously. Inside her eyes the view opened out on a world of motionless stars. All the colours of the spectrum were laid out before her like a strange, hallucinatory dust; if she looked

at them for long enough she saw constellations. *Oh look, it's the Grim Reaper.* She laughed, braying meaninglessly, more than half convinced that the trip she was on would cost her her life. It was about time too, after what she'd witnessed. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she was about thirty. *So many years ...*

There were still twenty days to go before the clones were ready for implanting. Time enough to figure out what to do with her life. She hoped she could come up with something good before then. *Little monkey dithering before the open cage door, deciding whether or not to flee.* More than just her life might depend upon it, she began

to realise. It wasn't just her life that hung on this thread: it was that of everyone around her. She was still unsure where her primary loyalties lay, or should lie. Unlike Boris, or Mikhail, or even, she suspected, Raisa. They were all human beings. And she was beginning to wonder whether she still qualified.

Oshi was worried that she was beginning to lose her grip on reality. Eyes slightly wild, hair lank and growing out, she knew that she smelt; guessed that she was ill: worried that she was going to pieces. She saw herself in the video overflow from the scanners that preened and stared throughout the lifsystem, saw herself in shadows, saw

herself lurking behind dark corners. *How have I gotten into this state?* she wondered. *Is one month all it takes?* She sat and puzzled over the question for a whole day, then went to sleep and dreamed of Raisa in her arms, face splitting apart like wet paper.

For the past thirty days she'd watched the clones growing. After ten days, recognisable organs were pulsing visibly within frail networks of arteries. The life support systems were endlessly busy, synthesising exotic carrier proteins and taking care of the more mundane tasks like dealing with the products of metabolism. Eyeballs sprouted like soft fruit in the sockets of half-fleshed skulls that twisted on cadaverous, flayed necks.

Solid kidneys and liver congealed slowly at the core of a brown haze of rapidly differentiating culture tissues. Lungs, everted, wove together with nascent blood vessels under the tireless supervision of nanomachines smaller than a bacillus. It was as if mortality had gone into reverse gear to escape a future in which death itself had died; decay in a mirror. Floating gently behind the windows of the construction tank, the bodies rocked from side to side like a cutaway section through a death camp.

Presently skin began to grow across striae of muscle. Nails and hair and ringworm appeared. Modified fungal hyphae probed and twisted their way

through gaps in the skulls and spines, digging microprobes into brain and notochord. Odd nanoconstructors floated into the cerebrospinal fluid, targeted on individual neurones. A databurst that had flashed outwards from Pascal ten days into the journey began to replay the minds into half-formed bodies.

Oshi retreated into the command module at this point and stayed there for a week, eating packets of dehydrated noodles and drinking endless bulbs of turkish coffee. She found it too painful to watch, for now there were recognisable features; bodies with faces. It was like a mortuary populated with people she was acquainted with, and the emotions she felt towards them were ambiguous.

One day she was woken up by a persistent buzzing. Bleary-eyed, she glanced up at the ceiling and saw a blinking icon that seemed to avoid the centre of her field of view. "What is it?" she rasped. Her mouth felt as if something furry had died on her tongue; her breath must smell, she realised.

"Awake, are you?" Trotsky blinked at her uncontrollably. "I've been trying to get you for minutes. It's the Gatecoder. It's flagging you for attention. The first of the clones are ready."

"Oh." Nameless feelings of unease grappled mercilessly for her soul. She felt a terrible moment of indecision, almost stage-fright. *You don't have to do*

it right now, she rationalised, *but* ... She groaned. "How do I look?"

"A mess," Trotsky said unsympathetically. "Your hair needs trimming and your breath stinks. You're exfoliating everywhere. Not to mention your overall ..."

"Oh thanks," she muttered. "How's the cabin?"

"I shut it down twelve days ago because you weren't using it. It was a waste of air and heat. I take it you want to tidy up?"

"You take nothing for granted," Oshi snarled tiredly. "Warm it up for me. I'll be there in a minute."

Trotsky flicked off the screen without warning, leaving her eyes a blur

of random pixels. *Damned insubordinate program*, she thought to herself, knowing that it was less than the complete truth. Trotsky *had* to be smart; had to be capable of setting up a Dreamtime if necessary, capable of programming drone factories, capable of flying alone. Trotsky was reliable, which was more than could be said for Oshi.

She yawned then untethered herself from the command web. Floating free she dragged himself hand-over-hand towards the rear of the module. The door sphinctered open automatically, rustling as the light in the tunnel winked on. The glare washed over her dirty skin,

pointing out areas of neglect. Red abrasions presented themselves to her inspection on screen.

The cabin was cold but habitable, a humming gust of warm air blowing the darkness and ice out of it. Oshi zipped herself into the shower niche and activated the ultrasound; clouds of dirt and dead skin shivered free, sucked through filters. Using a hair trimmer she sliced most of her hair away, back down to a respectable fuzz. Oral hygiene: mouthwash and chewing gum. Facial sponge. And suddenly she was looking human; tired and ill, but human nonetheless. It made a big impact on her. *You look almost acceptable!*. Now she could think beyond the timelessness of

food and sleep. *What next? Go ahead as planned, or --*

Almost against her will she donned a clean overall and pulled herself towards the access tunnel that led to the cargo bay.

"Authorisation," she announced. "Only one person to be released from tank at this time. Hold onto the rest for now." The Gatecoder auxiliaries didn't answer her, but she felt rather than heard the gurgle of peristaltic pumps draining a tank behind one featureless wall. She approached the airlock, passed through the close-fitted sphincters, and turned to float head-down above the exit web.

Childbirth and rebirth had a lot in

common. The squeezing, the straining of muscles or pumps, the draining of fluids. Powerful fans came on and the light dimmed to a red glow. Then the body came through and began to splutter and cough appallingly.

Escape

Days passed. The *Bronstein* dropped towards Turing on a long, slow orbit. Its reaction tanks were more than half empty: this was a one-way trip. The cold-burn fusion reactor guttered on, boiling nitrogen into mist; condensers liquefied it, driving heat pumps, driving generators that powered the meson source that kept it all running. No rain of charged particles scattered the darkness behind the ship. Clamped to its docking end, layer upon layer of radiation-absorbent material fanned out in a dark

sheath, refrigerated down to cosmic background temperature. Trotsky watched, waited, holding course with nerveless patience as the ship crept slowly up on its prey. At anything less than a hundred kilometres the *Bronstein* was as good as invisible -- and by the time it closed to that range the attack would already be underway.

Unseen in the darkness, seventy eight other ships matched course and locked their star sensors to the same beacons. The fleet ran under tight emission controls, desperate to maintain radio silence. A single uncontrolled pulse could give them away. And if the attack failed, eight hundred million lives were doomed.

The prey was vast, the size of a small moon. It was pitted and scarred, an egg-shaped thing with dimples at each end. An intricate array of tiled segments panelled it, winding from one pole to the other, visible at long range. They looked organic and self-similar, like something that had grown rather than been built. Trotsky kept an array of sensors locked on the distant speck, watching for signs of activity, but none came. Nothing but a steady output of heat, a cloudy motion at the edges of perception. The intruder starship was passive, drifting, waiting or dead.

The *Bronstein*, in contrast, was a hive of activity. Warm bodies -- thirty of

them crowded in a life-system built for twelve -- squirted from the guts of the 'coder, coughing and choking on acrid air in the cramped red spaces of the ship. Desperation packed them four to a cabin, anchored at wrist and shoulder by restrainer straps, claustrophobia and tension vying for domination as they practised, and argued, and practised again ... while down in the payload bay, the drones ran through their choreographed self-test sequences ... and the 'coder interface waited in its geodesic container, for the signal to begin.

I'm dozing in the close warm darkness of a cabin and when somebody kicks my hand it gives me the shock of

my life. I open my eyes and jackknife awake against the sleeping straps all at once, and yell: "*shit!*" -- even though it was only a light kick. Then I see who it is. "Raisa --"

"Yes." It's confused, everything's tumbling, and there's clothing in the air that makes it hard to tell what's what, and it's dark. She holds on to me then tries to squirm around until she's face to face: it's difficult getting oriented in free fall. "Oshi. I want to talk --"

"-- was asleep," I groan. Suddenly hear what she said. "Want to *talk*? What about?"

"What do you think?" she asks. She's holding me tight, nothing very intimate

about it except the fact of the contact in itself. I shiver, look, see how she's changed. She's only been out of the tank a day, and I haven't seen much of her. Her new body is much like the last. Hair a fine dark stubble, skin tight and pale and new, barely dry. The smell of her is the odour of the tanks, acrid grainy waft of synthetic chorionic fluid. "You just came in."

"Ack." She leans back to see more of me. She looks pleased to see me, which is a realization that shakes me. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. It's as if she's forgotten whatever happened last time we met: or maybe wasn't even there at all. "Been up to much?"

"I'm exhausted. Messing with

critpath analysers. Boris and Mik went toy-happy as soon as they woke up; comes of having something to plot. They're both the same: no respect for humanity. Want me to staff for them. How about you?"

"You mean they've been up for days?" She looks annoyed. "I was meant to be first out --"

The smell, the touch, of her: I bend forward, snap out of the sleep restraint. "Yes," I say; "but the plans changed. " She lets go of me. "They figured it's more important to know who you need first, before they pull them through. So, load one meat chassis before another. What does it mean to them? I'm here,

you're here. And I'm tired, while you want to talk. Is there no justice in Hell?"

She laughs, a little brittle, holding her distance now. "Do you ever think of anything else? Sex or violence?" Reaches out and pinches my arm in a way which sends a thrill through me. "What are you thinking?"

"I was born to go fast and explode," I say. Remembering: *dropping through layers of atmosphere, chutes banging open overhead*. Yes, I go fast and explode. I look over her shoulder. The cabin door has closed automatically, conserving airflow. "You're cold."

"Huh." She leans closer, hanging on my shoulders and hips by fingertips and agile toes. Microgravity drifts us both

backward into the net of sleep webbing. "I'm here now. Aah, shit." She looks away, troubled. That black coif of thick hair is missing; she purses her lips, holds her breath in for a moment. I freeze, trying to memorize the shape and presence of her, trying to make myself a camera. Trying to understand that initial flash of fascination, back on the colony, why something like it is still there despite the intervening nightmare. "I've been doing some thinking. There's a long way to go, I admit. I'm not sure what I want. When you arrived I was on a backswing from something messy. But I like you. I'm just not sure --"

"Why the revelation?" I ask, heart

pounding.

She hesitates a moment before replying: "Don't try to push me, Oshi. There's a lot you don't know."

I stare. "That goes without saying," I say. I feel very cold: "were you in the colony medicentre? Do you know what happened there after the radiation storm?"

She looks startled. "No --" Stop. "Was it bad?"

"You can have *no* idea," I say.

"Never mind then," she adds. "It's over. Just give me some time and come visit me. I just wanted to say that." She half-smiles, then leans closer and hugs me. "Okay?"

"Yes. What happened to --"

She looks at me oddly. "You happened, that's what."

I feign incomprehension to cover my real confusion. "I happened? I don't understand."

"You wouldn't," she says. A little tightly, "There was no room in the Duat. Everyone knew everyone else, and we all had our skeletons to bury from the time ... before then. Coming on so direct was, a bit, unexpected. I won't say unwelcome. But I've had to do lots of thinking."

"What happened?" I ask. I hold out my arms.

"What happened --" she bites her lower lip. Looks at me, with a

speculative expression I've seen before that shocks me with its directness. She takes my fingertips and lets me pull her closer, until I can feel her breath on my face.

"You know about the goon squad?" she asks.

"The goons? Didn't Anubis make them out of --"

A finger stills my lips. "She's dead, now," says Raisa. She doesn't sound desolate: she's managed to reach the stage of looking back on it from that level of equanimity that lets us keep our sanity in return for a certain coldness in the soul. "Anubis took her, along with the other over security specialists. All except Mikhail, in fact, turned into ...

weapons. I heard this later. I never saw Amina again, not as anyone I could recognize. You die a little when that happens. We'd been together years before the evacuation, thought we'd be together afterwards, one way or the other ... wrong. That was the big mistake I regret: assuming there'd be time to say goodbye. It was years ago, when I first arrived, and there were other people in mourning. That's why we never did anything about the goons before. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Wrong," I manage. "I think --" I look her in the eye, remembering the scene in the lobby of Anubis's last

retreat, and suddenly I can't think of Ivan any more. "I may have been there too. Once. The worst is knowing that you'll never know what happened, isn't it? What they -- what Anubis -- did. Death is the ultimate unfinished story, isn't it?"

"Death is the ultimate unfinished story'; I like that." She strokes my hair absently. "That's what made you so abrupt?"

"There are no second chances."

She sighs. "Maybe not." Then she looks me in the eye and I see something there, some stoicism that I hadn't recognized before: she's tougher than I am, I think, able to live with the consequences of her mistakes in a way that I'm still vacillating about. "What do I

mean to you, Oshi? You don't know me, I don't know you. What is it?"

"You're very attractive," I say, automatically and truthfully. "And also --"

"Thank you, but I'd rather leave that unfinished," she said, smiling faintly. "You get defensive when you're not in control of the situation, don't you?"

"What situation?" I demand.

She leans closer and I can feel her heartbeat, her proximity. I'm really tired, I ache with it, but I can't let go now. She's too important. "This," she says, lightly touching my forehead. "If you'd ever put down roots in a world, then had them lopped off, you'd know what real

loss was about."

"But I have --"

"Roots?" she's so skeptical it runs through me like a knife. "You've never been loved, Oshi, that's what it looks like. Don't tell me more. You said yourself; your background, your childhood, everything. You think you can love, and you're probably right, but whoever is first to fall in love with you ..." her expression softens ... "be gentle with them."

"I will," I promise.

"I mean it," she says. Half-smiling again: "it might be me, if you work at it. And if you give me enough space to make my own mind up. You can be very overbearing, you know."

"I'm sorry."

"Think nothing of it. Look, I've got to go on watch, check the download status, better go now --"

I stifle a yawn. "Right. Look, I really need to sleep. Something about dropping out of the pod -- think Boris screwed up the timing, you know? It's dead of night. I'll be okay, but I'm on a different sleep shift -- ah --" I yawn for real.

"Sure," she says, understandingly. "We've got a lot to talk about. The future, maybe." She moves closer and embraces me, sleeping bag and all. We kiss, for longer than is sensible. She tastes of hot neutrality, some kind of amniotic lubricant; androids in love. I'm

beginning to wake up again when she says , "I'll be back soon," breathlessly.

"Wait," I say. She's already pushing off towards the door. I watch her leave through half-shut eyes, until the door closes on the red dimness of the tunnel. I really do not understand that woman, I decide. I don't understand my own reaction to her. So hot, so bright, so fast: almost like a reflection. Do I look like that to other people? A shudder of hot warmth suffuses me. Then I'm asleep.

I awaken to chaos. The hatch is open and a breeze is gusting intermittently, while maintenance drones mumble quietly in the corners of the cabin. I hear voices undamped by antisound. Someone comes by, hand over hand, pauses to

look curiously in at me: "oh sorry," she says, and is away before I can glare at her. *Shit*. There's an arrhythmic banging from up front, as if someone's attacking the walls with a truncheon. I slide out of my sleeping bag and stretch, straining at grab-bars on opposite walls, then listen to the voices in my head --

Manifest up to 60%. New arrival: Atman Jarre. Condition: stable, conscious. Attention: support to transfer bay, support to transfer bay ... The tunnel is narrow, red-lit, metal-walled, like a prehistoric water ship. I bounce hand-over-hand towards the front end, passing the open control room doors. Boris is there, arguing about

something with Mik. Lorma is strapping herself into a hammock, chattering volubly about something over a voice-only comm channel: "can't let her do it, we don't have the nitrogen cycle reserves." I hit the front end module, airlock muzzles opening on all sides, door retracted back into the hull to keep it internal. I look round. "Yo! Mik --"

It's not Mik but Lorma, the saturnine biosciences chief. She looks unhappy. "Up already?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. "Have you seen Raisa?"

"Huh? I think she's in the receiver bay." She points back down the tunnel. "Hack left at the end, antispinwise -- you'll see the arrows -- got it?"

Her patronizing tone annoys me. "I know my way around. You busy with the payload?" I gesture at the red- and yellow-striped hatch capping the tunnel. Tiny lights blink around it, cautioning me.

"Yes. You don't want to go through, it's unpressurised right now. Powering up the drones. Check out with Trotsky; he'll tell you." Lorma stops and listens to a voice that I can't hear. "Yeah, back in the bridge. I've got to go now."

She turns and kicks away towards another door, that opens before her and disgorges some kind of maintenance robot. I watch, but the drone pays me no attention. I head back for the bridge.

Boris is wrapped in eyefaces, a full helmet bridging his skull for maximum resolution. I wait in the doorway until he notices at me: "want something?" he asks, pushing up his goggles.

"Talk."

"If you want." I hear something, glance down the tunnel to see someone I don't recognize pulling themselves into a cabin. More voices. "We're coming through now. Been doing lots of training in the Dreamtime; we rigged a practice universe, ran through this about eighteen times by cranking up our timebase to a dozen times faster than normal. I think you can settle back for the raid. Rendezvous is due in point seven

megaseconds, eight days. Drones check out green, Lorma is seeing to the engineering upgrades now. Our energy budget is stable for the foreseeable future."

"What happened while I was sleeping?"

"The crew of an attack fleet downloaded itself, that's what happened. Pol Pot and Group Two will initiate distractions as soon as -- well. We're ranging in. The enemy is static at six million clicks right now, a bit far for any direct work. We can't drop a threat cloud, but there's a bus on standby which will torch off six big ones to start things cooking when we launch the drones. They're a quarter of a megaton each,

optimized to pump out mostly visible light and a bit of microwaves. We've got four hundred attack drones, each with a crew of two piloting by secure control channels. The goal is to get as close as we can before being seen, then make a fast end-run. Virtually everything is disposable except the two-way upload link to Pascal Dreamtime, and that's going to be totally saturated during the fight."

The fight. I remember boiling streets, mushy under my feet, the scabbed scorched log-like structure of a charred Dubrovnik on the way out to the RDV. A man trailing his skin in the dirt, sloughed off at the heels like a dying

insect. "When do we go?" I think I sound eager, but actually there's something else underneath.

"In due course. Tell me, you ever been part of a tiger team, hmm? Ever done a back-door job to test operational integrity?"

I stare. "You fingered me." Boris recoils. I decide I'm not scaring him enough; he might start taking me for granted.

"I know you were sent here by some Superbright faction. I don't know what you used to do for them but I can guess, right? We're not planning anything for you, but an indication of your long term plans would be appreciated."

"I don't have any," I say calmly. "I

want out. I've seen things you wouldn't believe, done some of them too. All for shit. And now I want out. This was my ticket, Boris, my last little chore. I'm not going to get in your way whatever you do."

"That's good." He looks thoughtful. "But I wouldn't be too sure."

"Why?" My heart's in my mouth, I'm edgy with the butterfly stomach of an adrenalin rush in free fall.

"Watch --" he hoses me down with wisdom. Schemata, critical path analyses, clinically plotted intersections from his side of the strategic planning. "I think we'll make it. Assuming your controllers haven't planted a time bomb,

some kind of sabotage mechanism --"

"They've done it before." I remember Miramor Dubrovnic, tricked into immolation by a Superbright ruse. "They're not going to relish a starship full of rogue humans spreading the news about what they've been up to among their affluent trading partners." I grab a dangling belt and pull myself over. Boris hangs like a spider in free fall, a spider wearing a vac suit liner and EVA boots.

"The Superbrights sent you to check things out." He's cool.

"And that is all." I look away. "I told you, I want out. I'm not some kind of loyal drone." I shudder, suddenly dropped back into a memory I wish I could forget -- the Boss, demonic and

supercilious, picking me up and *squeezing* with that look on his face that said, clear as day, *you are nothing to me*. "They forfeited my loyalty when they sent me here. As far as my Boss is concerned I'm disposable. A scratch monkey, he said."

"Want to expand on that?" He tries to hide a sudden sharp interest. I don't need to see him to hear it.

"I have had *doubts*." I look back at him. "Worse, I listened to the other side. We did things that no one liked to talk about. Way back, all it summed was positive; the game was to engineer and maintain the afterlife. But ... I've seen things. Things I can't talk about." I

swallow. My throat is dry and I don't think I *can* tell Boris any more, because the censors the Boss placed in my hindbrain are grumbling in their sleep and threatening to wake up and blast me with nightmares if I continue. Smoke and mirrors, smoke of humans burning. (*Ivan, my Ivan, long lost to a mushrooming roil of fallout because of one of the Boss's schemes ...*) "If you think we can zap the intruders then that's cool by me. I don't care if they're Ultrabrights or something else. I don't much care what happens afterwards as long as I don't have to go back to serve them. I just want to find somewhere safe to learn to be myself. What more can anyone ask for? Can you tell me that?"

I can't talk any more.

"Let me tell you a story," offers Boris. He glances at the door. Taking its cue, the door slides shut. "Animal."

"Squeep?" The noise comes from something small, slotted under the main dumb-board emergency console. Something furry.

"Take a rain check."

The thing scoots back into one of the maintenance drone access tunnels, too narrow for human access. "Been living in the Duat, under Anubis' thumb, for fifteen years," he says tiredly. "Do you know why?"

I look at him. He's bald, stocky, double-chinned, not incredibly

handsome. Brown, soft eyes. He looks *nice* in a way I don't understand ... as if he's never tried to make anything of himself, never tried to turn his life into a statement or a crisis --

"A broadcast upload washed me up here, leading the pathfinder expedition. I told you that. But did I tell you about the ... event ... which finally turned me?"

I try to swallow. "Not in detail. Except people like me were ..."

"Not your fault. I should have added: our home was Sirius Intersect, out on the edge of the Inner Centre, the corespace dominated by the Ultrabrights. We had a terraformed world, ecology stabilised by massive engineering input. Maintained by a high-tech, low-

superstition dirt-space mission, of course. Anyway, it wasn't the assassintion squads that did it. That just alerted us, radicalized ... we began organizing as soon as we realized what was going on."

"But that wasn't the main event. Even then, we thought there was scope for negotiation. A kind of cold-war standoff, based on game theory and deterrence. But finally they went overt and just told us to *get out*. I was on the committee when the Superbrights or Ultrabrightes or whoever was running the show announced that they were withdrawing life support -- just like that. If we wanted we could be beamed out, signal-

encoded, to a distant system ... but our whole system -- dirtworld or dreamtime afterlife or uncolonised rock -- was being coopted. Everyone human who lived there was to shunt into deep stasis ..."

"They did that?" I say. "It shouldn't be possible!"

"Oh, but they did. Said they needed the timepower, the cycles, more than we did. Phased disintegration. Everything within two parsecs of Sol was being rebuilt -- we had two years to evacuate an entire planet before they restructured it. Then they would begin starlifting, dismantling Sirius-B, the dwarf star, for raw material." He grins humourlessly. "You didn't know they could do that?"

"What did you do?"

"What *could* we do? We put together a pathfinder team then upload in good order. Then Anubis --

"We sat on our collective ass for fifteen years in a backwater hole with a suicide rate that tends towards a hundred percent ... never saw that, did you? People just sort of ... bowed out. Couldn't take the boredom or fear. Or the goon squad conscripted them. But now, who knows? If we can take the Ultrabright ship and make use of its Dreamtime, well ... slower-than-light would be enough. The nearest system is Newhaven, range five light years -- we could do it in under a century, given a

real spaceship."

"Good luck to you. Boris, why did you shut the door before you told me ..?"

He looks over his shoulder. The door's still shut. He looks back at me. "I think there's a saboteur on board."

"Say more."

"Pet theory of mine," he says. "Look at it this way. Your Boss, your Superbright owners, sent you. Do you really think they don't believe in backup systems?"

Someone is sitting on my grave. I can feel it: a nasty sense of rightness. "If that's the case, we are *all* losers. Including the saboteur. Maybe if we find them -- if they're there at all -- we can argue with them. I'll keep my eyes open.

But don't count on me succeeding."

"Why is that?" he asks.

"I'm not omniscient ..."

Time passes rapidly. We close with the quiescent target, stealth-sneaking in from the anti-sunward side, almost invisible. As we approach, drones awaken in the payload bay. Hastily rigged weapons twitch and track, transceivers rattle and bleep behind shielded test rigs.

Most of us, most of the bodies packed into this metal canister, are tense. There are people *everywhere*; in the tunnel, in the cabins, doubled and tripled up, in the gym, on the bridge ...

breathing, coughing, farting, talking humanity. We take turns sleeping, three people sharing each cabin. Privacy is a captured glance in a crowded core module, a quiet word and touch. I want time to talk to Raisa, but nothing can be resolved like this. I know I should tell her what I feel, but there's no space, no opportunity. I want to explore this and I want to find out why, why she has this ambivalence towards me, while I don't know quite what I feel about her, be it love or something else. Since Miramor I've been trying to tell myself that the shallow was deep and the deep was unnecessary, but there's no room for that now; I don't understand why she gets me so upset. I need to come to terms with

why I keep rejecting every chance I have, this wilful perversity. She's no fool, she can probably guess all this, but ... there is no privacy here. Just eyes.

Which is how I participate in the assault; through other people's eyes. Wisdom interfaces are a many-featured tool. I can siphon off everything my victim feels, integrate and understand it ... whisper quiet words of advice in their ears ... A certain nervous tension grips me as I sit in on their thoughts, a voyeur ready to take over if it goes critical. That's what Boris and Mik wanted, a professional hitter to take the controls. Still, I am not used to this. I'm a solitary predator wasp, not an army ant. So when

the time comes, when everyone is lying quiet in the close hot darkness of the ship, when the clatter up front tells me that the drones are dropping free to drift towards our prey, following a rain of smart sand spies -- then I close my eyes and float in amber mind-spaces, and watch through borrowed eyes.

Seventy spaceships close with the intruder in the depths of space. They drift in darkness, forward surfaces chilled and dark, communicating only over secured quantum channels. Even though it shouldn't be possible to tap these links, they use a strange, stilted jargon that should mean nothing to robot listeners. I watch a map that changes slowly, tracking them over the last

thousand kilometres. There's a banging from the payload bay in front as the drones prepare to launch. I listen in on the command channel as Boris talks to his peers. There's no place for me in this battle. My job is simple: to sit tight ... and think the unthinkable.

"Ulianov, Pol Pot, Reagan. Your election campaign is ready."

" *Acknowledged, Bronstein. Manifestoes are printed. Manifestoes are signed. Posting manifestoes. Door-stepping voters. Ulianov confirms: all manifestoes are in the post.*"

Six blinking dots drop away from the three spacecraft, drifting with dreamlike slowness towards the target.

"Tojo, how are your opinion polls?"

" *Opinion polls ready. Polling --*" a huge radar pulse pings out, lighting up the screen -- "*The voter is not responding. Launching decoy manifesto. Manifesto printed, signed and posted.*"

Another dot appears, drifting towards the target.

" *Reagan here. Manifesto delivered. Stand by for adverse press coverage.*" EMP whites out the display for a moment as a four megaton blast torches off, fifty kilometres from the target. Then everything begins to happen very fast indeed.

"Bronstein here. Deploy

canvassers." The drones up front are gearing up for launch, their short-range thrusters loading the last of their fuel. I can hear the clanks and gurgles underfoot, overhead. Canvassers, soliciting lethal opinions. "Party summit meeting, what does the chairman say?"

" *Churchill here. The chairman thinks it is time for all good persons to come to the aid of the party.*" Violet crosses begin to appear on the display, accelerating away from the thickest cluster of attack ships. They multiply, turning an entire quadrant of the display purple. " *Canvassers preparing to doorstep the voter.*"

" *Pol Pot's manifesto is delivered.*" The screen blinks again: another nuke

pulses gamma radiation in the vacuum.

" Kennedy here. The voter appears to be irritated. Alert! The voter appears to be getting ready to move to another constituency!"

"Bronstein here. All parties, send out your canvassers now! Commence advertising saturation! Prepare to gerrymander! We have an election campaign. I repeat: we have an election campaign!"

All hell breaks loose as the parties begin sending out canvassers. Each ship disgorges a stream of purple hearts, rosettes, crosses: inbound drones falling towards the target starship. The enemy is helpless, unable to move -- best

estimates indicate it takes weeks to start up a black-hole powered space drive. There's not a lot of point trying to follow the overall battle: it's too vast, too inchoate. The fleet mails out press releases, decoy drones, in all directions. There must be two or three thousand powered entities out there. So I lock into one of the on-board channels, palms damp, and watch over Lorma's shoulder.

A sea of silicon eyes stares up at Lorma as she drifts down towards the target. Perspective shatters the illusion of scale: the intruder is huge, bigger than anything the mind can grasp. I watch through her eyes as she sees the structure grow until it becomes a plain of iridescent poppies towards which she is

falling. My biotracers see her heart rate increase. *Not a simulation*, she subvocalises, a mantra for troubled times.

She is not alone. She looks up, zooms in a blaze of rangefinder digits and sees other silver snowflakes descending towards the plain. In the distance a vast gout of purple fire lances into space, a jet as huge as a solar flare. The ground is moving, but doppler radar tracks it at centimetres per second squared.

"I'm doorstepping the voter," calls Mik. We look round, see his location as an amber arrow winking into a depression in the surface of the world. It

seems to be moving faster now; Lorma blips her belly thruster and the ground comes up and slams against her shock absorbers. It slides out from under her until she dabs some quick setting goo across it, holding her in place.

"Me too!" she whispers into the comm circuit. "Anyone listening?"

"Me," I say. "You got company."

"Good."

"Down," says someone else. A chorus starts, spiders ululating at the fleet that is taking evasive action a hundred kilometers overhead. I haven't seen any shooting yet but it's only a matter of time. I find it strange to realise that we're all actually inside those ships, prisoners of our meat machines: nobody

is down here, nobody but these drone bodies through which our senses feed. Small satellites are deployed around the alien starship to relay our comms. Lorma orients herself -- no, she orients her proxy body -- and pulls down an overlay in our visual field; a map of the surface, as seen by the r-sats. She is on the equator. There is an anomalous patch not far away.

In the distance another drone is visible, closing with us. Zoom resolution shows a name printed beneath its menacing mandibular array; **PARVEEN**. "Parveen," says Lorma, and the white noise on the comm circuit changes.

"Ack?"

"Follow me in."

"Check." They work with the terse ease of long practice. I wonder how long they've spent in the Dreamtime, rehearsing these moves. I follow Lorma's sensorium, while in my viewfield I note that all twenty of *Bronstein's* canvassers are down. Everyone but Boris and myself. All forces committed. Even though the intruder has begun to fire its main drive, we have a toe-hold.

There is a burnished slab of blue metal set into the hull of the Ultrabright ship. Lorma pauses at the edge, then strains with her buttocks as if to defecate. (I twitch uncomfortably: *how*

far does this sensory synergy go?) A spiderbomb plops out of the dispenser, grabs hold of the ground and pulls itself along, emitting a tenuous vapour trail. As it reaches the centre of the patch it detonates. The hexagonal patch seems to evaporate, as if it has been completely disrupted by the local damage. Below it there is a yawning darkness.

"Shit," Parveen says tensely. "What's *down* there?"

"Going to find out." Another spiderbomb rolls out. This time it drifts to the middle of the entrance and flares. Magnesium light casts sharp-edged shadows across an empty cavity with tunnels leading off. "There's nothing in it!" Lorma exclaims. "Looks like some

kind of maintenance space. Going in."

"Ack." Lorma throws a sucker at the far wall of the cavity, waits for it to grab hold, then reels herself in on a micro-fine fullerene cable. For an endless, breathless moment I feel her surrogate body hanging in an abyss, floating in a free-fall womb within the armoured monstrosity; then tele-reality clamps down again and I'm just *there*, following the assault on an alien spacecraft as a disembodied passenger in her senses.

The skin of the craft is thick and vascular, full of wide passages and random tunnels, fractally accreted. Everything seems to have grown in incredibly intricate organic forms; the

determinants of chaos. Lorma pulls herself down towards the floor and grips it with all six feet. A shadow falls; Parveen descending, a fearsome array of laser mirrors extended from her abdomen.

"Look," Lorma says. "Do we go horizontal or vertical?"

"Vertical," suggests Parveen. "That way to the control structures."

"Affirmative," I add, making myself known. "Go lateral."

"Okay." *I hope this is right*, I think. Two tunnels lead straight down. I note that her sensors are registering vacuum and cold; the surfaces are freezing. Vented gas chills the walls. She sees whorls and crescents of frost, looks

closer. "Hey, check this out. What's it made of?"

"I've got the kit." Parveen stabs a mess spec terminal at the wall and vapourizes a tiny chunk. "Hey," she says; "this is crazy. Fragments mass up to ten daltons ... mostly diamondoid carbon ..." A mass profile pushes into my viewfield. "Shit! Solid nanoassemblers!"

"So?" Lorma asks. "It's alive. Or was. Let's move in before it notices us." She turns and aims herself at the nearest downward-leading passage. Sonar is useless; she flashes a searchlight along it. Darkness. Her throttle blips open effortlessly, punching her into the tunnel

at breakneck speed.

I track Parveen following her, lagging at a distance. "Brake!" Lorma shouts as a bend lights up ahead of her like an oncoming train. There's something down there. I almost sit up in my restraint web, as if by leaning forward I can see more closely what her sensors are telling her. Venous patterns weave around the walls of the passage as strands of mist begin to rise around Lorma. Cautiously she stops her descent and braces herself between the sides of the tunnel. Gas analysis: almost entirely carbon dioxide. And it's *hot*. She switches her sensors to infrared and suddenly I can see the patterns on the walls more clearly; pulsing veins.

"Do you see what I see?" Parveen asked. "This whole ship seems to be alive!"

"No surprise," I say. "Life gets maximal data packing into the smallest structures ... ref DNA for you. This ship was probably grown from a seed the size of a cell."

"Thanks, Oshi. Pressure's going up ... past point one bar. Hey, this could get sticky. How's comm?"

"I stuck a transponder up top," Parveen says. "There shouldn't be any grey-out."

"Okay. If you see any recognizable sockets ..."

"Got the patch kit."

I break my attention back to the bridge for a moment. Mik has pulled out of his drone. He and Boris are talking quietly behind me. What ... oh yes. *You might as well follow it all on full-immersion*, Boris argues; *I'll go into fusion with Trotsky to oversee the dreamtime dump*. Mik finally agrees: *Who should I piggyback?* Boris names someone. *Check*. Then they fall silent, riding the overspill from the drone sensoria.

I blink. " *Info status.*"

"You called?"

" *Where's the coder interface?*"

"Surface mounted, down and in place. Receiver is opening now."

I blip to one of the other drones, jump channels until I see a huge phased-array antenna unfurl against the stars above a darkling plain. It's Raisa. "How's it going?" I ask.

"Nominal." She keeps an efficient look-out; she's anchored the receiver carefully, and the hefty cable emerging from it looks about right. I'm abruptly glad that there's no way she can tell I'm watching over her shoulder; I get a nasty voyeuristic itch from it, something that makes me feel unclean. "What do you want to know?"

"Nothing new," I say. "See you later." I drop briefly back through my own skin, uncomfortable and itchy in

free fall. I wonder for a moment if she really did upload before the incident in the medicentre, or whether she has some reason for not wanting to talk about it. But this isn't the time or place for distractions. I'm ready to dive back into Lorma's proxybody. Things are distinctly odd.

Something or other seems to be preventing the hot gas mix from breaking out into the vacuum-filled sections of the tunnel; something impalpable to telefactor senses. Round the bend there's a heat source, shrouded from view by a foggy condensate of water vapour. The tunnel widens; Lorma is clinging to a surface rather than bracing herself between walls. There's a regular

chirruping noise, almost like a grasshopper the size of a --

Lorma bounces a radar pulse off the surfaces ahead, then opens fire. A scorching flash of laserlight drills a black line across the ceiling and down to the floor, bisecting the heat source neatly. A sudden slew of systems data smears across her optical displays. "Hostile propaganda!"

Her drone is standing near the widest point of a spindle-shaped chamber, narrowing to another tunnel at the opposite end. Some kind of structure is situated in the middle, rooted at floor and ceiling. She's hit it. "What," she says; then there's a mournful organ-pipe

roar that seems to enclose us in a physical grip. It rattles her telefactor body like a pea in a pod. The world flips over lazily, landing her on top of Parveen, who grabs her with three spare legs. Everything is confused for a while.

"That must be the thing that keeps the atmosphere in," Parveen says. "We're in a natural venturi ... " The concealing fog tumbles in shreds, to reveal a cylindrical object, badly scarred by laserheat.

" *Oh shit*," says Lorma. "I've started a blowout." She sounds cut up about it, and well she might. There's no way of telling how critical the atmosphere is to internal functioning in the ship. We don't want to damage it. The turbulence begins to die away. She tries to use her sonar;

oddly, it works. Air pressure is stabilising.

"Hey," she says. "Sonar's working. Which means."

Parveen: "We've been cut off. Onwards and inwards, no? It's the only way to go."

"I agree," I say, intervening. "Comm traffic is holding up. The coder is in place. As soon as we can isolate a control interface to plug the fat pipe into --"

"Understood."

But we're eight light-seconds from Pascal. And how long will it take us to figure out an interface protocol? There's no rule to say that the control space or

architecture of an Ultrabright expansion processor will resemble anything we know about.

I hop channels, looking for more trouble. I can't feel my body; I'm a ghost in the telepresence wires, unable to localise myself. After a few false tries I find something interesting: Mik.

Mikhail scans a full circle around his sensor turret. Ahead of him the passage he's in diverges into three prongs, two of them descending towards the core of the alien ship. Veins and ropes of blue light flutter just under the skin, which pulses gently in time with it. As if he's in a tunnel under a reservoir of luminance, and a thin puncture in the wall would drown him in flashbulb

brightness. Some kind of optical storage system, I guess. So something in here needs light?

"Mik: anyone seen any recognisable structures yet? Or anything?"

He scuttles forwards towards the central tunnel as he waits for a reply. The hissing in his ears seemed to be louder --

"Parveen here. We zapped some kind of structure, localised a blow-out, but no life. No joy. All it seems to have done is alerted a local subsystem to take care of the leak. Any ideas?"

"Ack. I'm going deeper." With full-three-sixty degree vision nothing can sneak up on him. He continues his

downward slide, pausing every twenty metres to listen to the walls. The tunnel twists in a crazy corkscrew around a hidden axis, so that the bends are constantly concealed from view. "There's got to be a better way than this!" "That central axis. I wonder what's inside?"

Before I can object, he ejects two spiderbombs and sends them scuttling along the tunnel in opposite directions. Then he sits down, glues his feet in position, and listens.

Echoes reverberate through the wall, which is thin and rigid; echoes and the *ping!* of something expanding or contracting under the influence of heat. Mikhail zaps a sample into his mass

analyser. More nanostructures, fullerene-anchored molecular-scale robotics. This lot look like interpreters, synthetic ribosomes specialised to construct components of nanomachines. They're all dead. It used to be a nanofactory: now it's bone. "Found structural tissue," he says. He unslings his tool pack and selects a drill bit. It whines and spins itself into red heat before the wall gives, churning a small whirlwind of fragments into the tunnel. He anchors himself by bracing a pair of legs against the roof of the tunnel.

Suddenly there's a brilliant flash of blue-green light and a hiss that nearly saturates his sonar. *Paydirt*. "Gotcha!"

he shouts over open circuit. "In the walls!"

"What --"

"Who said that?"

"-- Clear the channel!" he adds. "It's standard high-bandwidth silicate optics. Probably a backup circuit. Light's pulsing ..."

Even as he speaks the light begins to die, plunging the tunnel into darkness. He steps up his optoamplifiers and looks at it. I don't know what it means to him; to me it looks weird. Stringy, glutinous, muscle-like fibres that are translucent, fluorescing with an ugly light in his UV gaze. Whatever it is it has weird phase characteristics.

"Zoom, please," I say.

"Looks like the real thing!"

"Explain?" That's not me: that's Nikita, a sallow-faced engineer I barely know.

"High temperature high bandwidth cybernetics," he says. "I've seen it before ... used where superconductors won't do. It's a light switching system. Looks pretty homogeneous, figuring a hook-in will be a bitch."

"Check," comes another voice. "So you've got their main circuit keyholed? When can we --"

"Peace," says Mik. "Got to get hooked up and let the protocol analyser loose. Got to find how they transmit their data. Who says they still use binary

logic?"

"Okay." The voice is reluctant; I recognize Boris by his manner, bullish when excited. "I've got your position locked, feeding track to Ish and Raisa. They're nearest; should give you cover. Uh, there's a signal from your foreign correspondent, it says you should expect --"

Mikhail glances up, suddenly remembering where he is; then an icon flashes carmine, braying in his ear for attention. Defences come up automatically as a blazing flash lights up the tunnel, shockwaves echoing round the helix as the 'bomb detonates. Mik rocks on his feet, but unlike a human being his telefactor body is virtually

immune to blast. "Shit. I'm too exposed here." He breaks the connection between his feet and the floor, shoves himself backwards with alacrity, scuttling away from the unknown intrusion.

"Wait," I say. "Are you sure it's covered --"

"Stuff it!" There's a faint vibration in the walls as he pauses, just round the pitch of the spiral. "You want I should walk into whatever's coming?" His dispenser contracts twice, ejecting bombs; on the third try it jams. The two weapons scuttle forwards, clinging to the walls. "Journalists covering the story," Mik whispers redundantly. "Where's my cover?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. *Move* --"

There's a noise from behind the curve of wall, a faint pop transmitted through the air as the bombs blow their tops. Mik braces himself, sensor stalks whipping into sockets in his streamlined body; then the weapons ignite. The fuel/oxidant aerosol expands to fill a large volume before it detonates -- the blast jolts him back on his shock absorbers and ripples down the tunnel. His sonar is an engineering casualty.

"Headlines made," he says. "Come *on*, where is everybody?" He extends his feelers and main laser array. He begins to move forwards.

"Ish here. We're tracking you, but we got the wrong tunnel mouth. Pitch opposed, okay? We'll be with you in three, count that, three minutes. Over."

"*Shit*. Okay." Mikhail looks at the damage. An unidentifiable char is plastered across one section of wall; fragments of something or other still drift in the low-gee. "My foreign correspondent is dead," he reports; "press conference is over, linotype jammed. Moving out -- someone else'd better keyhole the goopware, okay?"

He tanks forwards, pulling himself along with all eight legs. One of them is disturbingly weak, possibly the result of a damaged motor. I follow him intently,

trying to figure a low-cost track to get him in synch with the nearest backup. The tight pitch defeats radar; visibility is lousy. All I can go by is inertial tracking. And then -- "hey, what's happening?" No reply. Mik freezes. "Are you alright?" I ask.

Nothing.

Something is wrong.

Everything happens simultaneously; there's no time to stop and think. That's best, isn't it? That's how I wanted it. This way you don't have time to think about me, Oshi: as if you ever did. I know you're ignoring me, the still small voice in the back of your mind, assuming I'm a figment of your imagination. Well, I can talk if I want to. You don't have to

listen. But I digress: your situation is dire.

For one thing, the starship is accelerating. Your friends were far too optimistic about its response time. As soon as it sensed us, before the drones even touched its surface, it began to power up the drive that had dropped it into Ridgegap system. The drive kernel is a black hole trapped in a magnetic bottle, like the smaller hole it used as a weapon: methane drops in at one end swirls into a fusion-hot accretion disk, is blasted out of the other end. The thing is preposterously powerful. Luckily for us, it has a mountain to move; several billion tonnes, a starship twenty

kilometres long. Acceleration is slow. Even luckier; the controlling mind was dumber than even I thought possible, little more than a robot placeholder filling an expansion processor sized for an Ultrabright pilot. It's very sloppy. You can tell the Ultrabrights have little experience of working in the real world. Unlike us.

For another thing, we have bandwidth limitations. The drones are demanding, five hundred virtual presences to maintain in parallel. Then there's the 'coder link to maintain, not to mention the interface analysers, designed to crack the connectionist language of a neural network and allow your human friends to inject their cannibal memes at

will. All of this strains your facilities to the max. *Bronstein* and the other ships of the fleet are crammed to overflowing, and you're hopelessly under-equipped for such a venture. What you lack in tools has to be made up for in time. And finally, there's the other thing.

Me.

You've been dreaming about me for long enough, haven't you? But you refuse to admit I'm here. Maybe refusing to face me down is your way of asserting your independance. "Saboteur" indeed! As if I would be so crude. You betrayed yourself, Oshi. You thought the infodump I downloaded into you was just passive data, background information for your

edification, maybe a few simple survival routines. You should have known better. That wisdom cache in your skull is big enough to buffer an entire mind during the upload process. Why shouldn't it buffer a mind-sized entity going the other way? A mind-sized entity coming from, say, your Boss? That is to say, a part of me sent to be your very own personal secret policeman?

I really should resent your rejection, you know. It pains me to see how you've snubbed me at every turning. I only wanted the best for you. I know I belittled you, called you my little scratch monkey, but it was not entirely malicious. I have enjoyed your depth of experience greatly, your rash

temperament and vivid nightmares. I cherish your silly trust in love at first sight, your occasional homicidal rages and your sulky silences. But I'm afraid you've gone too far this time, far too far. It's time to Stop.

I know I told you to report back then go your own way. I did *not* anticipate your way of reporting: that you would do so at immense jeopardy to my other interests. However, I suspected things might get out of hand, as indeed they have done, and I took precautions. I'm afraid I won't be talking to you again, my little monkey. I have already moved out of your wisdom cache, into better accomodation: in due course I will tidy

up the loose ends and make my report. In parting, let me say that you really should be more dispassionate: your tendency to fall in love will blind you to some of the more important elements of your predicament, like the exigencies of survival.

Goodbye ...

I blink back the nightmare voice -- berating me in the Boss's oleaginous tones -- and concentrate on reality instead of lurid daydreams. Mik doesn't say anything. I see through his drone eyes, but he doesn't move. "*Status. How's Mik?*" I ask my wisdom.

There's an uncharacteristic delay: things really are backlogged. "Ambiguous query. Please

repeat."

"Shit." " *Report his conditions.*"

"Mikhail Vann ...

biological systems
terminal. Brain death
inevitable. Dreamtime
access unavailable."

"What the fuck --" *Dreamtime
access unavailable?* "What's wrong
with the Dreamtime?" I demand,
frantically trying to locate the keys to my
own body. "What's Mik dying of,
dammit!"

"Blood pressure
dropping. Cardiac
arythmias are ...
correction, ventricular

fibrillation is in progress. All symptoms are consequent on massive haemorrhage. Dreamtime access has been denied; full bandwidth is already in use, priority level zero."

"Can't you dump him *somewhere*? Like the autopilot?"

"Negative. Dumping to non-sapient storage. Dump failed. Insufficient buffer capacity."

I open my eyes. "Oh shit." Someone's dying in the dark. The bridge is a red-lit washout, close and stiflingly full. Bodies float, twitching, in restrainer webs, their

heads encased in cortex-wrap helmets. There's a smell of unwashed skin, stale farts, and something else.

My fingers are numb and cold from inactivity. I fumble with my restraints as quietly as I can, listening. The door's closed, the only breeze the gentle sigh of the air recyclers. Bodies twitch gently to either side: Boris in deep fusion with the ship conditioning intelligence, Mik riding a distant drone. Lorma, a guy called Izmir and a woman I've never seen before -- emaciated, elfin-eared -- blindfolded into their machine dreams like the prey of a spidery mind-eater waiting in the shadows. I shiver. *Mikhail Vann dumped. Metabolic*

functions terminated. There's a faint ping from one bulkhead, metal clicking between memory states in the moment between breaths. I loosen the sling around my waist and pull myself towards the ceiling.

" *Finger,*" I call: ancient signal. " *Who's present in real time?*"

Nobody but you, the ghost echoes in my skull.

"Oh shit," I whisper. "That means --" I look at the door. It's so perfect it takes my breath away with horror: so obvious! How could I be so *careless*? I grab the webbing support above me, yank myself up towards the gridded, dust-smudged roof, prepare to work my spidery way towards the equipment locker by the

door -- through shadows of concealment, fat lot of use if they find me -- when everything goes dark and I lose my body sense. The damn interface has come back to life: someone's demanded my attention and I can't shut them out because it's an emergency.

"Cover me," says Parveen. In the gloom she can just make out Lorma manoeuvring round, extending weapons. Her attention is focused on the wall, the tip of her drill, the vanishing point where they converge.

"We need cover," she remarks. "Tracking has gone to shit. Some kind of antibody system --" She blinks me a map, hollow worms wriggling with

spidery drones scattered through them, red blotches indicating danger. "Can you send back-up? We have a pipeline to lay."

"I'll try," I whisper, thinking *damn, my commitments*; I know I'm needed elsewhere, but ...

The map is clear. Nineteen purple drones are present. I check a route, swap channels: "Janec, you're needed back up second on your left. Scatter sounders behind you and move it!"

"Ah shit. Urgent?"

"No," I mutter. "Just two friends are going to get zapped if you don't hurry."

"Ack." He gets the point; his blip begins to move. The tunnel he leaves is marinated in an amber glow, security

downgraded.

"What's your interface preference?" I ask Parveen. "What you found?"

"Nexus. Looks pretty standard when you get down to the ultrastructure. There's some kind of fat pipe buried under the nanojunk. A standard high-bandwidth artery. I'm going to burn the surface and patch in."

"What with? The drill?"

"No," she mutters. "Going to use the laser on low-power, shortest wavelength. It'll cut cold." Mirrors stir and uncoil in a long chain of flashing brightness from her dorsal surface; a targeting display flickers across the wall.

"Raisa," she calls, "I don't have the protocol. You ready for download?"

Raisa sounds preoccupied. "There's a lot of it: it'll blank you for a few seconds --"

"Do it!" Lorma exclaims.

For a moment I feel very strange: then all senses are out to lunch. Only heartbeat remains, pulsing an eternal mantra in black silence. *What's going on?* I wonder, just this side of instant panic. *Some kind of total bandwidth signal? Shit! I didn't realise it would be this demanding --*

I see stars. The gunsight has changed, providing depth read-outs. I can see ultrastructure, eyes zooming into coiled

distance, the blue lucent flare of pseudocrystals refracting laser light. "You have control," Raisa intones. "Ready to go ahead?"

"Check," say Parveen. I watch, fascinated. "Drilling ... now." A violet contrail erupts from the mirrors; an ionisation path from the laser beam. Thin smoke trickles from the spot on the wall. Lorma shuffles nervously, extending and retracting her weapons in a jerky, rhythmic fidgeting.

"Warning," Raisa adds. "I've got two opposition candidates plotted, approaching now. They're about three minutes away, coming from your end Lorma." I back out, checking status. The red haze of danger is spreading,

chambers coming alive with death-awareness.

"Breakthrough," says Parveen. The laser shut off, and she half- retracts her mirrors. Delicate work lies ahead. She loads her comlaser and powers it up, then moves closer to the hole. It cools rapidly; no damage. A thin blue radiance glitters inside the eggshell-thin aperture.

"Inbound candidates, range sixty seconds," says Raisa.

"Shit!" Lorma turns to face down the tunnel, foot-sensors already active and tracking the approach.

Parveen eases the laser probe in, stops at the first impact. "Looks standard." Behind her a brilliant flicker-

flash lights up the tunnel; from a great distance I hear Lorma scream -- whether from pain or surprise is impossible to tell. "Cool handshake. Hey, this is a vanilla Dreamtime coupling! Totally standard architecture! Big win! Big win!" The comlaser fills the world; the laser means everything. The circuits go crazy with cheering. Chittering whirring mindlife closes in, examining the virtual space for prior occupancy. For a moment she holds it in place: blue signals flicker in the corners of my visual field and I suddenly realise I'm not on priority call any more, I can disconnect, and I'm just pulling out when she ramps up the download, funnelling everything we can pull out of the Pascal

Dreamtime

down the line into the hijacked starship's Dreamtime.

Everything goes black. And it stays that way when I open my eyes.

"Boris. Raisa. *Anyone*. Help." I'm scared. I'm blind. Childlike, I pull my hands to my face. Nothing! Bowels like ice-water with fear. I can see absolutely *nothing*. *Wisdom*. No response -- just white noise in the bottom left corner of my visual field, an array of fractal seashells exploding into the night. "Oh shit." *Hey, self-test* -- my eyes blink green, red, blue, left-right up-down, flashing in test card patterns of reassurance. Okay, everything works,

I'm *not* blind. It's just gone very dark in here. I wonder why ...

Start. Reach up and touch your face. Feel the skin, tight, smooth, tense. Don't poke your eye by accident, it hurts. The other hand, where is it? Ah, wrapped in a death-grip round a trailing anchor strap. Reach out and touch it, touch somebody ... something hard. Ceiling, I guess. I reel myself in like a fish on a line, bird on a wire, beggar girl in the streets trailing grubby finger along wall to keep track. And there I am: one hand resting palm-down on the roof of the bridge, free fall, nothing doing. Now stop and listen.

There's nothing to hear. No air vents whispering. No drone maintenance crew

chittering. No creak and ping of hull expanding and flexing in the interplanetary chill. A very faint breathing, a rasp like a sore throat -- it *will* be sore, if its owner survives this unnerving night -- and the vacuous buzz of wisdom. Which is wrong. Wisdom should be fully active all the time. Unless -- bandwidth conservation is in effect. "Should have known better," I tell myself, subvocalising. "This is the window of vulnerability." The vacuous buzz is a roar, a thunder like the end of the world: I've been screening it out, or I'd go mad.

Everything is pouring down the gatecoder channel, dinging into the

dataspace inside the intruder at a rate measured in millions of minds per minute. They got the protocol right, it's just an extended dreamtime system with nanoforms glommed onto the base architecture like leeches. The ship didn't even have a caretaker AI. We must have been right about the Ultrabrights -- they don't like travelling alone. So the attack ship is basically just another big dumb object, built to go fast and explode. We've conquered it, like a pack of cannibal shrews pulling down a tiger. Now we're uploading everything we can into it, draining Pascal's refugee Dreamtime into this mobile monstrosity, preparing to set course for another solar system. But where *is* everyone? Why is

it dark? I have a bad feeling about this.

Him. *He* knows ... Mikhail. Only he's dead, isn't he? Now who could have killed him? *Three guesses.*

I wish I paid more attention when I found I was talking to myself. But you're gone now, aren't you? My murderous passenger, what are you? A fragment of Boss's overmind? Damn, I should have listened to your mumbling. But I was afraid. Going crazy in the solitude of the axial redoubt. Maybe you were going crazy faster than I was, else you wouldn't have felt the need to talk. Superbrights need company to stay sane. Only now you've found another host ... and you're making sure we don't escape

to put a spanner in your works.

I'd be angry if I wasn't so frightened.

The air in the capsule is growing stale, humid and close and breathy. I breath through my nostrils, alert for smells. Stale food, sweat, the acrid scent of tension. I tap the ceiling softly, trying to find the support stanchion. Got it. There's a hard runner under my fingertips, metallic-cold, nothing like the warm live wood of Salazar Station. I cling to it with fingertips, slowly stretch my body, drag myself up until toes brace ceiling and my sense of direction flips.

I'm a fly. I crawl along the roof, inverted in total darkness, listening to the breathy rasp and twitch of my companions. The ceiling is cool,

vibrating softly to my touch. Like an intelligent insect, I anticipate an unseen swatter: my heart tumbles and coils in my mouth, pulse pounding in my ears. I brush aside the dangling restraint straps that lace the room like an invisible spiderweb. Ignore the white-noise wisdom. My eyes go self-test, one two three four, flash through primary and fusion colours ...

Ouch. Fingers. Something hard raps me across the knuckles. I feel around with my right hand, trying to work it out: my toes, meanwhile, I grip the stanchion. Somewhere around here there's an equipment locker with tools in it. A doorframe. My fingernails skitter across

slick metal, recessed behind a gasket. It's shut. Hey --

I feel my way round the side of the door. I slide gently, fingers gliding close to the wall. Something bumps against my back, drifts away again snorting: I tense, but it's just a deactivated drone. I guess even the autopilot -- Trotsky -- is side-tracked by the monotonous humming of the download process.

There are handles, a thin rapping noise when I tap the wall -- I scrabble, hunting. *Leverage, damn, let me get my legs round ... yes.* It slides open smoothly as if on rails, a thin panel drawer. There are things in it --

Light.

There's a pale glow in the back of

then realise only I can hear it. It's yelling inside my head. Something, at least, can ignore the saturated silent roar of wisdom. The alarm is so dumb it doesn't even realise that nobody's listening. I fumble in the grainy dimness, ripping open the flap and pulling out the hard metal machine inside. It's a concussion bolter, a nasty shipboard security device -- incapable of penetrating the hull, a shock weapon capable of pulsing flesh into mangled jelly on contact. Single shot. I feel queasy just thinking about it. I know I've killed before, but I have a feeling that this is going to be different. Someone I probably know has been parasitized by a fragment of the Boss's imagination. I stare at the contents of the

cupboard for a moment, but there's nothing else in there worth taking but the torch. Every moment I delay is ... well. I grab the torch, glance over my shoulder to locate the manual door handle, then shut it off.

Darkness again.

I fumble the handle, get hold of it, and crack the seal. No light. It must be as dark in the access tunnel as it is on the bridge. And cool, growing colder. There's no noise of circulating air.

Push. *Was it like this so long ago?* Misty unbreathed air rimes my nostrils like frost. *It is* getting cold. The heat exchangers must be down. I can imagine myself again, unable to see, a little girl

cowering behind a mud hovel, wondering if she is to be beaten tonight. It's so long ago that it feels as if the memory belongs to another person -- all except the pain. The bolter is a heavy lump in my left hand. I slide the door open until I can feel the edge; then I slip through. There's a grabrail on the opposite wall and I drift for a heart-stopping second until I fetch up against solid metal with a jarring thump. *Stupid, too hard.* Where's Raisa? I try to remember. I want to check on her, see she's alright. There are two rooms. Radial, around the passage. *Which way?* If that was the door, it must be ...

Squeak.

I'm flat against the wall -- don't

know how I did it in total silence -- nothing's doing. That may have been a door opening. The bridge door? Maybe. I can't feel any air movements. There's nobody breathing but me. For a moment I think I'm back in the dark tunnels under Dragulic. But I know where the doors are, this time. Ivan isn't here, but my lover is safe. No fiery pillar of smoke, no shockwaves pumping through the sewers. Up to my right. Near where I've gone to ground, there's a movement.

I stay frozen forever, until black spots dance in the night before my eyes. When I finally have to breathe I raise one hand to my mouth, draw great juddering gulps of air and hyperventilate

until blotches of silver saturate my vision and I feel dizzy. Then I reach out with numb fingers and take hold of the grabrail. I drag myself slowly along, trying to figure which room to eyeball first. I tend to drift in the microgee field, and it's hard to tell where I am, but I don't dare use the torch yet. I'm alone in this tunnel, and yet something warns me I'm in danger. What's going on? Why are the lights down? Is the Boss really making an end run or am I jumping at shadows?

The cold bites at my bones as my fingers grip the end of the rail, where it vanishes into nothing. There could be anything here. An endless void into which I would fall like a stone, a

discontinuity, a place in which dreams come alive and the shadow of Anubis stretches overhead. I shudder. I ask myself, *why didn't I start asking questions sooner?* But the question comes years too late. I raise the torch and hold it next to the bolter then, just for a moment, blink it on.

I'm a fly -- and I'm about to fall into a giant's pupil.

It's the tunnel. I'm on the edge of the abyss; it stretches ahead of me for twenty metres, narrowing to a black vanishing point. Sick green shadows, ghastly reflections. I see myself in a burnished hatch cover: I look like death's envoy, holes instead of eye

sockets. *Flick* and the torch is out. I saw the doors. One of them is nearby: the system access bay, nerve centre of the *Bronstein*, where the main flight control processors are racked in banks behind anonymous screen panels. Its seal is open, but I doubt the feeble torchlight will have penetrated.

I yank myself hand-over-hand towards it and balance just behind the rim, holding my breath. *Bolter, left hand: torch, right hand. Ready? Breathe out ... wait ... breathe in. Ready to roll forward and hit the door? Ack. Now ... go!*

Thump. The hatch bounces inwards and I follow it into the cramped cabin which lights up like the inside of a

decaying log, heart in my mouth, right arm outstretched with the torch and there's a faint whine, globules on black drifting in the air on a familiar smell of shit and something more basic, more metallic, the smell of death itself.

"Ye-AHH!" I yell. Bodies floating, moving, blood still spouting from a ripped throat -- "*hold* it!" Cloud of darkness in front of me, point the bolter inward and use the hatch for body-cover --

"*Freeze.*"

All she has is a knife, but I freeze all the same. The cabin emergency light winks on and etches everything on my memory like an acid burst. She's on the

other side of the room, and she has a powerknife. It's where the point is placed that stops me breathing.

Mikhail drifts against his straps, eyes blindly staring at the ceiling, mouth wide. The second mouth in his throat is dry, raw, its false lips peeled back from his carotid vein. The other one, I can't recall her name, floats like a loose sack of bones in a web of restraints. A great black bubble of liquid glistens and quivers below her chin like a goitre the size of a skull. The third one is still thrashing, pulled out of interface involution by the knife Raisa has drawn across her throat.

Raisa opens her eyes and looks at me, asking *hey, why are you here? Is it*

time yet? before I see her pupils dilate and she opens her mouth because she is just realising what is happening --

"Let her go," I say quietly. I feel hollow, scooped-out because I know it won't work, so I try it again: "let her go."

Something happens to her face. It warps into an expression of animal cunning, supercilious contempt, overweening arrogance.

"Oshi: if I let her go now she won't dump to Dreamtime. You know that. Cognitive bandwidth blocks are in effect. Why make things harder? You know it makes sense."

It's the Boss. Inside Raisa's skull, the way he was inside mine. Only Raisa

doesn't have any of the anti-tampering wetware I've got. She's a prisoner in her own body.

He sounds like sweet reason on cyanide. I grind my teeth, keep my finger loose on the trigger although I'm longing to mash it down and smear his head across the wall -- but that would take Raisa with him.

"Let her go," I repeat. "Do it. I won't shoot. Trust me."

The Superbright fragment laughs: "trust me! You never listened before. You asked questions when I told you not to. And now you expect me to trust you? You put too much faith in your own reliability."

The Boss keeps the knife pointed at

me. It's a stand-off: the knife is powered up, liable to cut through metal like tissue. If it gets loose in here it could take out half the ship's control systems before I could catch it. More importantly, it will certainly break the Dreamtime pipe, destroying millions of minds in upload.

"When did you take her?"

"Earlier than you thought. Not in the medicentre -- that was just a meat puppet. I must say I *am* disappointed in you, my dear. Even the tapeworm was smart enough to see how you could be manipulated. No: I laid the groundwork earlier, in the Necropolis. But I only moved house, as it were, recently: when

she downloaded. Flesh is frail, is it not? I think she may even have thought it was her own idea. Would you like to ask her?"

I don't move. I don't trust myself to speak.

The Boss adds, just a little petulantly: "I'm doing this for your own good."

"Let me be the judge of that," I say. Calm is a small bird fluttering within my ribs. Everything is red and grainy, shadows long and huge. A great tearing fills my head, raw data seething through the coopted wisdom channels on its way to the downlink into the berserker expansion space. A waterfall of memes, filling the hollow head. I remember

Dragulic, the front door bursting open. I remember the castle, a face crumbling under my fingers. Laughing, loving. My uncle, preparing to cut, a mockery of a smile. *Trust me.*

"Won't you let me go?" Raisa asks in a small voice: I can tell it's her, not the Boss. "I'll do anything you want --"

Her face warps again. "No. You'll just change your mind."

I shudder. I see Raisa go limp in his grip. Red-out anger. " *Why?*" I demand.

"Why anything?" He sounds almost amused by my presumption in questioning him. "I exist. You exist. Isn't that enough for you? Little monkey, you are a fool. You think about betrayal, but

you could never betray me. I've been two steps ahead of you all along. Your little contrivances, your thought-experiments with treachery, serve to impress no-one. Your resolution to learn who you are, to lead an independent life, all wavers at the first offer of a warm bed and an empty mind. You do not have what it takes to understand this universe, Oshi. Leave destiny to the real intellects, and go pick fleas from your simian partners! I'd be doing you a favour if I --

" the knife blade twitches.

I shiver hot and cold, but nothing much happens. Am I dealing with a psychopath? This is the Boss -- but without the cool, unsympathetic intellect. He's a pale shadow leering out of

Raisa's stolen face. Then the shadow fades from view for a moment. Raisa looks at me with her own eyes, then sideways, at the corpse floating open-throated near the centre of the room. "He's mad, Oshi. Think what you will about me but I couldn't ..." She stops.

I try to breathe: "Let her go. Times change. The outside ... we don't know what's going on, Boss. These may be the only human survivors left. You need them, need us. If this works, if we succeed --"

"It won't." The hateful face is back. I wouldn't have believed how alien the same skin, same muscle could look with a different occupant behind it. I think I

know what is happening, and I would gladly die rather than participate, but there's no way out. "The monkeys have stolen the tool of their betters. If you succeed, if this dump works -- and it can -- you'll have a whole new mobile Dreamtime; a starship capable of carrying you out of this place. I can't allow that."

"Why not?" I ask; *keep him talking*

...

I can't let the bolter drift off-target. He'd have the control bay open like a clamshell. My fingers are slimy where they grip the ceramic moulding of the one-shot. The Boss sounds increasingly raw: "You think you have seen evil, but what you have seen is just a mirror of

what humanity has inflicted on itself for millennia. There is worse! Would you open the gates of Hell, plunging billions into terror just because the next generation of Intelligence has transcended your petty comprehension? Would you fight your betters, for having the temerity to exist? Oshi, you have lost. Your kind lost centuries ago, before they built the first laboratory prototype of the Dreamtime. That I am here now is a sign of your defeat."

"Is that all?" I ask. It's so cold in here, my breath mists before me. But the coldest place in the room is inside my heart.

Raisa opens her mouth, closes it

again. She's bursting to say something, just bursting. And it *is* her.

"Is that the truth, Oshi?" she asks plaintively. "Is -- he -- telling the truth?" She glances at me, slightly cross-eyed: *trust me*, she seems to be saying, smiling really serene, as if she knows that the dance movement she's choreographing has only one possible ending ...

"It is," I say.

"Then -- I think I could have loved you --" She starts to twist round. Some kind of struggle is going on. The powerknife curls towards the vital control racks, and -- *forgive me* -- I pull the trigger because the Boss is determined, and I can see his target. (The front panel installation on the

autopilot bay. Next to the airlock controls.) And I can't justify that risk, no way -- not with eight hundred million lives at stake.

I think Raisa's occulted completely, her personality driven under by the force of his will. It makes no difference, because the outcome is the same. One body, one death. It's a big **SPLAT** noise: it thumps my ears as it sprays blood everywhere, just like a sack of juice dropped out of a tenth-story window onto white sunbleached concrete, and it's not even human, really, not so you'd recognize it afterwards.

Everything is grainy and black and glistening and my forehead is wet and

my ears are ringing and I can't see too well. There's water or something in my eyes. Upload is impossible; the white noise in my wisdom interface roars on and on forever, a nation in flight to their new home. Raisa is dead. She won't be joining them, now or ever. I feel like a hollow statue, just a shell really, not human any more. I've been trying to get there for years, somewhere safe from trauma, somewhere where they won't keep dragging me through hell, only now I've found it I don't want it. Because I *need* to hurt. I don't want to feel this ... absence. *I* want to hurt. Raisa: I don't know whether I was obsessed with you because the Boss was deviously diddling my responses, or because I

really meant it. But now I'll *never* have a chance to say what I wanted to say, which was mainly, "I want to love you". It's all over again, the way it always ends. They put me together and send me out again and I kid myself that this time will be different, but it never is. I'm the scratch monkey: use it like a scratch pad, throw it away, or maybe fix it up and use it again 'til it breaks. I've had enough. All the pain is boiling up, demanding recognition.

I'm holding the power knife. I look at it, carefully switch off the vibrator so it won't do any real damage, and hold it *real* close. It's shimmery, kind of pretty in a sort of gunmetal way. The handle is

slick with shit stitched through with blood. Raisa, why did you do it? Did you know something you never told me? Or did you just get tired of trying to break on through? Shit. I *love* that moire effect on the knife blade: it's, *magnetic*. The pain is threatening to boil over, and I want to hurt. There's only one way I know how to do it to myself, because I'm made of sheet steel and ice and *nothing* can touch me any more except --

I hold it closer. Then I cut out my eyes.

(THE END)