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## Alastair reynolds beyond the aquila rift pdf free pdf files

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"This is the thing I was talking about, the diary. All I remembered was the name of a man I had known there, called Cobargo." Cobargo meant nothing to me, but even without the AM I knew something of the Garlin Bight. It was hard not to see it that way as well. Story needs to be retold as first person to give it that immediacy, and so we aren't pulling the wool over the reader's eyes. "I knew this was a mistake," Purslane whispered. I'll be like you, then. "Or I'll beat it. Something that had cosmic significance. Only a fraction of the glow from the heated gases shone through...but it was still enough to bathe the room in something like daylight. We didn't hurt anyone or take anything away from anyone else. But Yakov was faster. I was only dimly aware of Grisha and Burdock looking on, half a universe away. "When the ray touches you, you will experience partial integration with the rest of us. At the same time my mind spun out of control with imagined crimes. Now the machines in his head revealed the purpose that those gestures served. But I'm not going anywhere." "What I said just now," Malkoha said, "about there being two of you, one braver than the other...I know now which man I am speaking to." "I don't feel brave. He was pale, with the puffy, slit-eyed look we'd all developed since leaving Earth. She called me by name, just as if we'd only been apart a few minutes. That was why I started asking questions, nosing around, trying to goad someone into an indiscretion." "We noticed," I said. Celestine, who was the best at this, drew a short red hyphen on the wall. I appreciated his fascination—the thing was entrancing to look at—but I suspected he was pushing curiosity slightly too far. Better to at least appear to be selfless, even if the thought of what lay ahead of him flooded him with an almost overwhelming sense of despair and loss and bitter injustice. Keeping the low profile that I have, I've managed to avoid contact with most of the damaging agencies that wiped your past. But what you are experiencing now is a hallucination: a kind of out-of-body experience caused by the shutdown of the inhibitory circuits that normally keep your mirror neurons functioning normally. We approached the highest of them, a tapering white structure like a snapped-off tusk rammed into the ground. Two things made me hesitate, though. That, at least, was an improvement on anything we would have been capable of before the medichine infusions, but it was only moderately comforting. But maybe there's a way. Some of the children had grey bands around their eyes and were poking the interstices of abstract structures, exploring the dragoninfested waters of mathematical space. He appeared frozen, unable to respond. A vision came to mind, half remembered from some stiff-backed picture book he had once owned as a child, of a luminous, fabulously spired aquatic palace pushing up from the depths, barnacled in light, garlanded by mermaids and shoals of jewel-like fish. Maybe he'd be assigned something at the bottom of the food chain, but that didn't seem very likely either. I sit next to the pram, one arm slung over the back of the chair, one leg hooked over the other. "What are you doing?" Celestine asked. "Maria and I are quite different. We'd all been mindful of this as we prepared our strands. Craning his neck, Clavain saw a group of Conjoiners kneeling over the lip of the opening, aiming guns downward. As the complexity of the task increased, so did the area taken up by the frames, but other than that there was no change in the basic nature of the challenges. She moved to hand the flower back to Merlin. There isn't anything to agree on. And then if we kept on doing that, eventually it would be like having Shirin with me all the time, so that I could talk to her whenever I wanted. At the very least Burdock would have had to spend years between stars. Then one day..." "The baby will be able to do what the mother can't," I said. That wouldn't necessarily mean she'd die instantly—with all those machines in her head, Weather would be able to remain conscious for quite some time afterwards—but I was reasonably certain it would limit her options for doing harm. You said we'd be safe if we stuck to fusion motors. She— there is no other word for her—is quite beautiful to look at. What made you think so." "Doesn't surprise me. I was living flesh wrapped around a core of dead machinery. It had taken us sixteen hours to reach this point. "Last one we pulled out before you," Da Silva said. Call it transcendence, if you will. You've given us a future." "I need to clear up a few things for you," Merlin said. "Or at least what the robot reads as normal. It was like watching a part of myself drift away. "Never mind." "What, for pity's sake?" "Doesn't it strike you that Childe has been just a little too well prepared?" "I wouldn't say there's any such thing as being too well prepared for a thing like the Blood Spire, Celestine." "That's not what I mean." She fingered the fabric of her skintight. "I did listen. It's a hard nitrous surge, as if fear itself is being pumped into my blood. "I think we are." We turned our backs on our former Captain and commenced the slow walk back to the lander. I was hoping, but...I didn't dare ask. "Merlin has news for us," he said, his translated voice coming through with more emotion than it had three days earlier. to establish a human bridgehead in the Oort cloud. She did. Doubtless you passed the inn known as the Winged Man." "It was where Garret caught up with me." "Did it ever occur to you to wonder where the name of the tavern comes from?" "My dad told me once. From orbit, he must have planned to turn the ship's own armaments on Reunion. When the ship was sealed up he settled himself into the frostwatch casket and commanded Tyrant to put him to sleep. We all walked confidently towards the rim and then stopped; none of us were immediately willing to step under that overhang. There was little to be gained in pointing out the obvious: that by the time we returned to Yellowstone, our information broker stood every chance of being light years away. "Enough," she whispered. It was all simple stuff, nothing that required the robot to be powered down or brought back to the shops for a major stripdown. "There's a war," Da Silva said. I've come home to be taken apart. It was later than usual, and there weren't any people around. It's about the same size as Yellowstone, receiving about the same amount of sunlight from its star. "If we could narrow it down to one ship... then we'd be sure, wouldn't we?" "That's the problem, Campion. While we're on the subject, too, I actually have some doubts about...let's say the strict veracity of some of the images Maria has sent us." "You're saying they're not real?" "Oh, I wouldn't go that far. Moments passed, then what must have been a minute or more. But then again I didn't really care. I don't think the Spire will obstruct your retreat until I step—or crawl, as it may be—into the last room we opened. "I don't suppose you've ever seen a cathedral, have you, Yukimi?" "Have you?" "Once or twice." "The Scapers were a bad idea," Yukimi said. Da Silva had been silent in this exchange, observing the two of them as they continued along corridors and down stairwells. The battle lasted barely a dozen hours, between first and last detonation. "The face you'll see is the one you went under with, give or take. "It's the least I could do for them." "Sometimes the children wonder if any other people will ever go out that far again," the teacher asks. It's the Spire, the same as it's always been." "No." I was silent for several moments, wondering whether my augmented auditory system was sending false signals into my brain. It might make it stronger! Not a chance she could take. We must be very close." "We are," I said as we turned a corner. They were on the roof of something. I thought of you, and the pain of what I had done to you was like a sharp stone pushing against my throat. The only thing that will hold the line together is self-sacrifice." "Is this about the Great Work?" I asked. If there is a crisis, you can knock on the ship three times. "I took something precious from William the Questioner. He had lost the devil's horns since our last meeting—they had only ever been a bio-engineered affectation—but there was still something satanic about his appearance, an effect not lessened by the small and slightly pointed goatee he had cultivated in the meantime. We've lost a row of pixels on the mid infrared array—probably a bad cosmic ray strike. This is my realm you're in now. Perhaps it had sensed her somewhere in the bay and was just waiting for her to leave her hiding place. We'll cross the remaining distance on foot." Forqueray obliged, bringing the triangular formation down. Here are the notes I wrote to myself back at the start of the process, in early 2007: Emperor's head of personal security, defusing assassination attempts. You already told me that." "But I wasn't an astronomer, Nesha. Very slowly it pulled away from the Tereshkova and tipped around on two axes, pointing its nose at the forbidding darkness of the Matryoshka. GREAT WALL OF MARS MY FIRST NOVEL, Revelation Space, came out in 2000, but I'd been playing around with some of the underlying ideas for at least a decade before that. When I touched something I felt prickles of sensation; the hand was capable of registering subtle gradations of warmth or coldness. He must be a reasonable man. "Wait," he said slowly. I'd already been primed for it, the sting taken out of the surprise. It was an effort to squeeze through now, and while the suits were able to reshape themselves to some extent, there was a limit to how compact they could become. The helmet's still in good nick —built to last. Minla removed a tranche of photographs from a desk and passed them to Merlin for his inspection. Given the limited testing they've been able to do, they say it works very well. Or did, until your luck started souring. I expected the perpetrator to be brought to justice, or at the very least executed. Systems interface: power, control, sensory. "What would you propose, Doctor?" "Nothing more than a few minor adjustments of the basic human bodyplan. The net wrapped itself around the aircraft, the soft impact nudging down the nose of the airship. But the Cockatrice had lost her ice under our lasers. But don't worry. Powerless now, it followed a shallow glide path toward the net. "You like it?" I asked him. The things moved between caves in which lay the hulks of ships, almost all too strange to describe. "The cubes. I risked a glance down and saw the silver fluid lapping at Galenka's heels, then surging up to swallow her lowest boot. He fought in an earlier engagement—little more than a spat between two combines—and he wants no more of that. "I don't know, Weather. Childe and Forqueray had taken the lead on the ground. It only took a glance to confirm that it was on me and the monkey as well. \*\*\* WE CAUGHT HER eleven hours later. But it had not destroyed the wreck or achieved total transformation into a larger mass. "What will happen?" "Probably very little to begin with, when the Waynet is still cutting through the chromosphere. Established channels of communication between each other, so subtle none of you ever noticed. "That was the idea, anyway." "And now?" "We breakfast in the ruins, barely remember the glory that was and scavenge space for the handful of stillfunctioning syrinxes." "Could you take it apart, find out how it works?" "Only if I felt suicidal. Seeing as you keep telling me all this is my fault, I figure this is your idea of punishment." "You think we've got time to be that petty?" "I don't know. "Spect you've got a ton of questions," Clausen said. "It's one thing to see it as an image, another to be here, to feel the dead pull of all that mass. There was a thick and unornamented bracelet, made of some dull grey metal like pewter. I have heard about these stations. "There's no harm in talking to a madwoman, Georgi. Clavain despised and pitied him in equal measure. He will ask what became of you, these are our only clues. "The winner...if it isn't too much trouble." But I didn't know the winner. We missed our first take-off slot when customs found a discrepancy in our cargo waybill. It was like the first casual step onto the tame footslopes of a mountain, unweighted by any sense of the dangers that undoubtedly lay ahead. It really would be suicide to go for extraction now. "Then you've really been away? \*\*\* I MOVE BACK from the window in Nesha's apartment. "My father's regime explored all possible avenues to find a peaceful settlement, one that would allow our two blocs to work in unison. If she does try and get another shuttle off Mars, we'll really have no option but to escalate." They all knew what would mean: a military strike against the Conjoiner nest. "I suppose you could say that we came to an understanding, Teterev and I," I said. \*\*\* I'M BACK NOW, Captain. I thought I must have screwed up in my analysis somewhere, introduced harmonics that weren't real. The answer is that you can't count on adjusting to it at all He rose from the couch where he had been sitting, feigning that human need for relaxation. "I'm trying not to do too much damage," Zeal said, before levelling the gun at me again. You can't ever be too careful with outcasts." "It's not like that with Weather," he repeated, with a certain dry distaste. But the data offered no guarantees that this would be enough to destroy the machinery. This time the assassins had come closer than ever before, and they had very nearly achieved their objective. Nonetheless, there was plenty of scope for some judicious fiddling with the facts: nothing outrageous, nothing that would have people looking for flaws in Purslane's strand, but enough to justify the anticipation she had begun to stoke. Why do you think I had to take Teterev? He didn't know. "But that opposition cost you dearly, didn't it?" I bridled, halting next to what appeared a highly realistic sculpture but was almost certainly an embalmed corpse. He had pumped our heads full of more processing machinery, until our skulls had to be reshaped to accommodate it, becoming sleekly elongated. She was somewhere in the nest, he knew: somewhere beneath the twenty varyinglysized domes emplaced within the rim, linked together by pressurised tunnels or merged at their boundaries like soap bubbles. "Gimenez going back in doesn't preclude you following him, if that's what you want." "If Gimenez was so unhappy, why didn't you just let him go back into the box earlier?" "Not the way it works," Clausen said. Now stand from the throne and walk outside. You really did spend two hundred thousand years watching sunsets?" "If I wanted to make something up, don't you think I would have made it a tiny bit more exciting?" "That's what I thought." "Besides," I said. Merlin spied waterwheels and rustic-looking bridges. Her lips were fever-warm. Too near." "So what you're saying is...she can't exercise enough local control, because she's too strong?" "Yes," she said, nodding emphatically. If this reunion has been a success, it has far more to do with the people than the venue." I looked over my shoulder, at the central spire rising behind me. "It's big," was all I could offer. Yet in that moment she saw her chance. Merlin squinted against hard white glare as the burning eye of a bright sun hove into view through the windows. They'd been planning to steal our cargo before, and strip the Petronel for useful parts; now they needed to take the Petronel and claim her as her own. Likely composition. Moonlighter, meanwhile, needed fuel and repairs. If it didn't object to another, especially if we took pains not to get stuck ourselves. The hole went right through it, as cleanly bored as a rifle barrel. You remember Sleepover?" "I'm not sure." "Think hard, Gaunt," she said. Reach its summit, if you will. Some people get it. We moved to the left side and used the grooved wall for support as we descended, placing our feet sideways. "I know this is a shock for you," another voice said. The markings looked much like those we had just solved, except that the symbols were different. To go back to the wreck was to die, and so she knew she might as well continue. I'd rather take that risk, if there's a chance for peace." Warren shook his head, slowly and patiently. The thing raised its other hand. "Roland invited me here, Richard. The airship stopped with a jerk, the freight pods creaking in their harnesses, and then a series of bangs and thuds sounded in rapid succession, as if restraining devices were locking into place. "Katerina," I said. There are pictures on the walls, save for the part that's been painted over with television. I hope his people were able to find him. The shipmaster—his name was Master Khorog—reached out one iron gauntlet and hefted the prize. But you don't need to be a brain surgeon to work out that there's a lot more of Mike still in me. The fringe of the pool was a crust of ice which gave away as soon as I tried to put any weight on it. Do they really treat you so badly?" I return to my seat. I couldn't ask for better care. It's a bad sign, that it held coherence for as long as it did. Above, the first dropships made hairpin turns, nosing suicidally down toward the nest. The adults seemed willing to at least attempt to answer his queries, when they could understand what he was getting at. Most of them would be dead by the time the fusion engine was silenced for cruise phase. Like you, they evolved something like the great lines: flocks of cloned individuals to serve as independent observers, gathering information and experience that would later be merged into the collective whole. "All of you." "About what?" "Thinking machines. The shuttles were full of corpses before we ever launched them." For the first time since leaving Deimos Clavain smiled, amused at the sheer obliquity of Galiana's thinking. Whatever the case, the monkey was out of the chamber, gibbering and shrieking, as it headed back the way we had come. You know how hard it is to reactivate a path, once it's fallen out of use." No administrative entity within the Radiant Commonwealth was supposed to shutdown skipspace paths without direct permission from the Great House. I'm looking at the same face that I'd seen in the mirror in Nesha's apartment. Many of the stories featured little girls involved in fanciful adventures concerning flying animals and other magic creatures. "I didn't know you visited the witch." "She will have her two hog's heads, once a month, and her candles. She moved her finger halfway to the edge, scratching her long black nail against the plating. I've always believed that you didn't allow yourself to be ruled by the irrational hatreds of other Ultras. "There's no point in everyone waiting for a cure for death if there's no one alive to do the hard work of making it happen." Clausen turned round to look back at him, her expression telling him everything he needed to know about her opinion of his intellect. She looked up and around, less in the manner of someone admiring a fresco than in the manner of a mouse cowering beneath a boot. I think you brought me back to rub my nose in the world I helped bring about. "We're going to Phobos." "Yes," Galiana said "Beyond the force screens and the sentry moons. However, only those who are Earth-born are truly Thebes of the Hundred Gates Edward Davis, a rookie of the past. I look down at myself. "Imagine that on nearly every occasion when you had cause to sit outside on an afternoon like this you had chosen red wine over white, and generally had no reason to regret that choice. I could see from her collar that she wore the same kind of overall as the other lobots. The gun could only have been smuggled into the grounds in tiny pieces—small enough that they could be disguised by field generators, or hidden inside legitimate tools and equipment allowed the palace staff. She hadn't got very far— been stung by the electrified fence, was hiding out nearby, waiting to make a dash for the gap at sundown, when they apprehended her." Busuke says "apprehended" as if there were quote marks around the word. Shortly it would push the information into my head, and I would deliver the much-anticipated announcement. A voice at the back of my head said that we should quit while we were ahead. They say you went insane." I give an easy shrug. Despite my formidable metal anatomy, I still can't help but wonder how I might fare, were his restraints to fail and those cattle prods and guns prove ineffectual. Its arms are musclebound with guns, countermeasure-launchers and specialised military-surgical devices. So we mustn't mock them for their mistakes. What if the Spire doesn't weigh anything? Not now, anyway. An electrical shock, perhaps, damaging the systems of his suit. Through the window, she could see the airship lowering itself between the twin rows of atmosphere stacks. Nerves." I turned around, greeting Purslane—with a stiff smile and a grunt of acknowledgement. And in the meantime I can certainly see that my right leg ended just below the knee; realising that my own blood was hosing out in a hard scarlet stream. For that reason you do not make a very effective deterrent. Merlin watched as some kind of net-like apparatus unfurled in slow motion from the belly of the gondola. "I bet they liked the idea of dying in orbit even less," Rasht replied. Then he started thinking about his own survival. "I know all about that." She shook her head. That's why I'm leaving behind weapons and a detachment of proctors to show you how to install and use them." For the first time since his arrival in the room, Minla spoke like a leader again. The carriers stopped over their allocated wells and lowered down on a scream of thrust. pool of slime. The olive green of her eyes was a shade so dark that from certain angles it became a lustrous black, like the surface of coal. The structure loomed around us, dizzying in its scale and complexity, but giving no sign of being alive or responsive to the intrusion of human technology. We hadn't even touched the Matryoshka yet. All I could do was push ineffectually against his boot, in the hope of snatching a breath of air. Burdock tried to cover up his discovery, for fear of what the Advocates would do to him. I had expected an angry rebuttal. He could return to full embodiment, but that would mean losing hundreds of grams of neural support machinery. "You have work to do, I think," Van Ness said, his voice so low that I barely heard it. The sea would have pulled them under by the time the last of our ships had left the system. "Someone made it once, but it's broken now. Childe waved his hand across the table. There's really very little that a trauma pod can't do, with all the gleaming sharp instruments at its disposal. You won't have heard of him." Widow Grayling sat down in the same seat she'd been using before and quickly exposed the contents of the red cotton bundle. It might become diluted, but it would never be lost entirely. All I could say, again, was: "What?" "You're not in Saumlaki Station." Good work, Campion." Then they dropped. Galaxies ten million light years away were glimpsed as they were ten million years away offered a window into the universe when it was a billion light years away offered a window into the universe when it was a billion light years away offered a window into the universe when it was a billion years earlier; those a billion light years away offered a window into the universe when it was a billion years earlier. I had thought nothing of it at the time—putting it down to carelessness—but that had evidently been wishful thinking. In the aftermath, I found a caravan of nomads, refugees from what had once been Vikingville, one of the larger surface communities. "Where do you think?" the man said. And the lines are too independent to tolerate the kind of social engineering we talked about before. "You're going to let me leave. As she walked she rubbed a hand over the swell of her belly and I understood—as I was surely meant to—that her brain had been relocated there for safekeeping. What surprised me was the degree of frustration I saw in some of the other participants. Six months later he altered there for safekeeping. We just got very, very lucky. The artilects—that's what we call them—tunneled out of what you and I think of as base reality. Those who came before me, the wayfarers and the lost. Could be an ally of Voulage was done with us, or maybe even steal us from him before he had his chance." "Hyena tactics." "Wouldn't be the first time." "Range?" "Less than two light-hours. You have brain damage, and we need to get it fixed before it gets worse." "I am not Mike," I tell her. You were in permanent walkabout mode. Overhead, a white passenger liner had been slotted in between the bulk carriers. When some of the stars we see now were not even born, and the old ones were younger. You're not meant to talk." She lifted up her right arm, the sleeve of her overall slipping down to reveal a crude mechanical substitute for a hand. "Nice and easy. I filed the name of this "trauma pod" away for future use, and then waited for the story to arrive. We start cutting corners now, we'll break like a twig when we put a real load on the ship." "We wouldn't." "The captain just thought you should be aware of the situation, Inigo. You and everyone else who pursued the dream of artificial intelligence. "You can't cross from but otherwise the apertures work as they were designed to. Barring, of course, the occasional routing error." "All right," I said. "End it," I tell Greta. We were a long way in from the hull, but the impacts still sounded like they were happening next door. Friction, and the ship's almost negligible weight, would serve to hold it in place until we were ready to leave. "Are you quite sure of this, Campion?" "Yes. "Of how we all had to bind together to bring it into being." "He believed it would be for the best. I wanted to refute every word of it, but the more I struggled to deny him, the more I struggled to deny Forgueray said, opening and closing the sleek metal gauntlet of his replacement. Cheating could not be ruled out, though it was unlikely: a Mood Maze was designed to detect most forms of subterfuge and punish them accordingly. The other guest approaches the cage. It's called being in space." "I'm just saying." "Keep an eye on him, yes. I get myself frozen between assignments. "Look, this is all very interesting, but I really think—" "The problem can wait," Celestine said. The round tore through my leg, just below the knee. "There won't be war." "And if you can't reason with Galiana? How they did this is beyond my comprehension, and perhaps even that of the flier himself. "Spar apostle. "You needn't sound so horrified. The question is, what happened to the remains?" "You've put replicators in my head?" "You needn't sound so horrified. The question is, what happened to the remains?" "I'm sure you have a theory." "I't think they made a fake moon out of the leftovers. "Along the lines of, why am I being treated like shit rather than royalty? Let us copy what we need from the plans," they said. You've done well with this venue, but don't overestimate your standing. People have several wrong ideas about Ultras. He had hoped that help would come from his own people, from Shiga. "Do I known come from the plans," they said. You've done well with this venue, but don't overestimate your standing. People have several wrong ideas about Ultras. He had hoped that help would come from his own people, from Shiga. "Do I known come from his own people have several wrong ideas about Ultras." you?" "Not yet. Even outright lying is understandable. "He's our specialist on the Phobos situation." Remontoire nodded politely. "But a Winged Man did come down. Then an instability in their narrow, shielded fusion flame had sent a clarion across tens of light hours. I played a part in what you became, of that I've no doubt. Well, that's obvious, isn't it? "Home and dry." MINLA'S FLOWERS MISSION INTERRUPTED. They sent it here to carry a message to us." I knew these things with an unimpeachable certainty, but I had no additional context for the knowledge. You'll thank me for it eventually." He nods at one of the hatted men, who reaches into his coat pocket and extracts a syringe with a plastic cap on the needle. I always thought you were better than that." "And I'd have gladly told you I have just as many prejudices as the next man. Worse, if anything. The interior architecture of one of our drives is a lot more complicated, a lot more delicate, than is normally appreciated. "Now here I am, too. It just looks... different. Their own face, tumbling around the Sun for the rest of eternity. It would also have taken considerable resourcefulness to locate the reclusive Trintignant and persuade him to emerge from hiding. Through an observation blister I was able to watch the larger ships depart one by one. "Starting to think you'd vanished into workspace." "I did not choose this assignment." "I know, I know, remained worryingly unclear. She was easily the youngest person in the room, but if she didn't outrank everyone present, she at least had their tacit respect. There's food and company when we need it. He spends a lot of time talking to me, trying to get me to remember details I might have forgotten. "You had a plan and you stuck with it. Though their tacit respect." air was still cool, there was a fierce new quality to the light that brought out her freckles. It was more of a stern admonishment to make our selection; the crack of a whip rather than the systems as screwed as they are. "You have got to be fucking kidding." Childe raised a hand. She had passed the newly painted Bridge Inn and the shuttered gloom of the Lord's Confessor. Now and then she would pivot round until she was facing another direction and carry on doing the hand movements. Magnetic anomaly. I haven't raised the Phobos proposal, either. He would have to save himself, make his way back to the communications room, issue an emergency distress signal. I stood under it, allowed myself to feel a little of the cold. On reflection, it's not clear to me whether this is meant as a kindness or a cruelty. He'd told me exactly how it would happen: the slow, methodical shutting-down of higher-brain functions. There was nothing they couldn't conquer, except time and distance and the iron barrier of the speed of light. "I envy you. Then you can have the rest of the day off." "A job?" I ventured timidly. That was the message Grisha's people had uncovered, in their archaeological enquiries into their planet's Prior culture. I was still confident that once that work was done, we'd be able to continue our journey as if nothing had happened, save for the loss of those crew who had died in the engagement and our gaining one new passenger. Turn up your suit. Their frostbitten fingers strike a series of duff notes. During those windows, glimpses opened up into the heart of the Matryoshka. "Because I knew what had to be done." \*\*\* DESPITE HER INJURIES she helped us on the retreat. Above all else, we had all the analysis tools at hand, and we knew how to use them. We'd salvaged something from this mess—almost certainly enough to placate Baikonur. "It wasn't Childe, in the end. \*\*\* BUT IT KEPT not working with Suzy. "Could that ship be the Devilfish?" "And what have you heard about the Devilfish?" "If you take the stories seriously, that's the ship they say does most of the pirating between here and the Frolovo Hub. History was paved with genocides. That's a promise." What they mean is, give us Mike, and we'll happily blast you to slag. He must have hoped that the worms would destroy the shuttle completely and kill Clavain and Voi in the process. "The unveiling of my final work of art, and my retirement from public life." The pool wasn't quite finished. I think you're wrong about her." "She's got us right where she wants us, lad. The emperor was monstrous, but he wasn't a monster—not now. And yet...several minutes ago I swear that I felt a kick, a jolt in the smooth glide of my flight, as if some report of that destructive event had raced up the flow at superluminal speed, buffeting my little ship. Then Lenka announced that the walls squeezed together even more sharply just ahead, as if there had been a rockfall or a major shift in the hill's interior structure. Better to keep the pod in-theatre, under robot protection, until a full extraction squad can come in under close aerial cover. A float-cam belonging to the Ultra floated around, observing the scene with goggling arrays of tightly packed lenses. "Before you ask," the woman said, "Malkoha is dead. Something lay distantly ahead. "We're just here to do a job, Yakov. "The Progress called in?" "She's stuck, Dimitri. Maybe there was a form of mass entertainment that involved waking sleepers such as himself and putting them through the emotional wringer, presenting them pulling aside the grey curtains to reveal that, in marvellous point of fact, life in the twenty-third century really was every bit as blue-skied and utopian as he had hoped. Would I have welcomed the machines so willingly before they had invaded my head, or were they influencing my decision? "Don't do what?" "Don't do what you're about to do. "We won't have very much to lose." "We wanted to know where this ship had been," I said, knowing she was right but not liking it either. She knows that we aren't just talking weeks or even months of delay here. "It was different when it happened to me," I told Greta, when we were lying next to each other again, days later, with Suzy still in the tank. Are you sure that secondary screen is going to be good enough?" "Yes," Fescue said, with withering authority. He'd begun to go around the rest of the crew, all two dozen of us, ordering those who weren't actively involved in the passenger hold and try to pass themselves off as cargo. At which point it harvested them. He knew that wasn't a real moon. The rig creaked and groaned around him, affronted by the battering it had taken. It was a male face, that of a young man. Very small, really. Roland?" "Yes?" "I think I should say goodbye now." Childe turned around and slithered into the darkness, propelling himself with quick, piston-like movement of his forearms. "So you risk nothing by getting in the volantor." "And should I at any point weary of your company?" "You have my word that I'll let you leave." I decided to play along with him for the time being. Four skeletal docking towers rose from another area of the compound, stayed by guy-lines. But I don't expect to see another thaw." "Please. And besides... Celestine had suffered as well. Celestine? It's old news. Nor's Trintignant, nor's Forqueray." "Yeah, well, remind me when I can do something useful," Hirz said. I know how busy you've been with the engine upgrade study." "I could hardly not pay you a visit. There was no need for him to accompany his ship; like a well-trained dog, Tyrant was perfectly capable of carrying out his orders without direct supervision. "The old place hasn't changed much," Childe said, swooping us through a dense conglomeration of golden buildings, as extravagantly tiered as the dream pagodas of a fever-racked Emperor. Yukimi guessed that there were tunnels linking them together, sunk under the road level. One of the first hundred million." "Gaunt's got a fever-racked Emperor. Yukimi guessed that there were tunnels linking them together, sunk under the road level. One of the first hundred million." headstart on you," Clausen said. If we had a name for what she was, we'd call her an archaeologist, a scholar drawn to relics and scraps. I suppose." "Storms raise high tides. A kind of mechanism, waiting to detect the emergence of bright and busy civilisations such as hers. I'd love to be able to diagram the exact flow of mental processes that results in the creation of a story, from the first faint spark of an idea, all the way through to the lovingly polished, structurally and thematically harmonious final product, ready to be showered with awards and acclaim. It showed Clavain's shuttle, lying in the dust close to the dyke. I reached over and placed my hand against the implanted device at the base of the neck, applying firm pressure through the yellow silk of his collar to a specific contact point. "If you had an escape route all along, why did you wait so long before sending the children through it?" "I told you, we couldn't bring them to Transenlightenment too soon. Go back, get warm." "I won't make it back. In a few tens of millions of years, what's left of the moon will crash into Mars." "You think the worms are elevating the orbit to avoid a cataclysm so far in the future?" "I don't know," Remontoire said. "Once the Wall goes, we won't have a chance in hell if we're anywhere near the surface. In Deimos, he had assumed a Conjoiner nursery would be a place of grim medical efficiency; all gleaming machines with babies plugged in like peripherals, like a monstrously productive doll factory. "I am Richard." "Then for God's sake please come back." "Why have you followed us?" "To ask you. Anyway, this is all rather academic. She's been asking all the hard questions; now it's my turn. My grandfather often spoke of it. Soon they had become large enough to dwarf buildings and civic spaces, large enough to be visible from orbit. We're noise. For a heart-rending moment, the floor seemed to hover in place. "Back off..." Childe told us. There was very little about it to distinguish it from the one where Gaunt had been woken, save for the fact that it was almost completely deserted with the only activity coming from skulking repair robots. None of the viewers had any idea what was about to happen, or its significance. Dancing between the smoke plumes of great Triton! Derek doesn't have a lot to say, but this is to be expected. When I swung by Saturn, I interrogated its memory, hoping to augment my own imagery with its own data. Impatiently, Minla retraced her steps. The low sun gleamed off an oiled black barrel, inlaid with florid white ornamentation carved from something like whalebone. "You can think of a line as the one-dimensional shadow of a two-dimensional shadow of mission to the Emergence?" "I really don't see any alternative. And all I'll have is a limp and the dog days of my second career. If you believed something, you said it." "So you don't regret a word of it." "I had it easier than he did." Silence. \*\*\* NOBODY HE RECOGNISED was there to greet Merlin when he returned to consciousness. "I'm fine, Childe. pushed up the visor of my helmet, breathing stale air so that we could speak. By the standards of some, it was very low-key, and for a moment I wondered if I had misjudged the effect...but just as I was beginning to worry about that, people started clapping. If he was infected, he didn't want to be allowed to return and spread it around. At least that way we stand a chance of catching them off guard. They made me cleverer." "How did you begin?" "As a project," he said. Maybe, in hindsight, it's better not to be able to see it. An aiming scope plunged down from the ceiling; he brought his eyes to it and locked crosshairs onto the Ouroborus. A light on his jacket was blinking on and off, impossibly bright and blue. I did not want my mistake to become theirs. It took a long time for him to answer me again." "What did he say?" "He said 'thank you, but there is nothing you can do for me.' Then I asked him if he was an angel. So I went to the engines themselves, to see if I could better my nameless opponent. Yukimi snuggled down deeper. Just put it down to messed-up biorhythms, or something." She reached across the table and took my hand, as she had done at breakfast. "We have a problem, Inigo. "Regressives?" "Dissident political elements. It cast no shadow and had no tonal influence on the surrounding colours. "But they considered it to be a theoretical problem they would deal with when the time came. But nothing impeded our progress to the command deck. "You were right," Purslane said, when we were lying together afterwards. Unfortunately Richard was no longer there to provide challenges for me." "You were always much better than me at playing them," I said. Better than good. I back off, and allow them to inspect my offering. Would he have preferred to leave the mystery unsolved?" "What do you think?" I ask snidely. Now it was entire stellar economies that competed with each other to host Zima's work. "I think we should walk," Galenka said, barely raising her voice above a whisper. "We trust the engines, don't we?" "We trust the engines, don't we?" "We trust the engines, don't we?" "We trust the engines. Neither looked very attractive from the crew's standpoint. Recalling the disposition of enemy forces, I start to tell KX-457 to get me as far west as it can. All along there are clues to the fact that any one who came into contact with the Machine ends up a little insane. Having the idea about the robot as heirloom was only part of the puzzle. They won't have used intermediaries for that kind of thing." But it was only good luck that we had found the flaw in Burdock's strand in the first place, I thought. I received a desultory kick, and then they left me there, sprawled on the ground, my mouth wet, my body bruised. Ask the Aperture Authority and they'll tell you that the syntax is now fully understood. Yes, Kanto's fine. "I faked my own death. He saw a herd of zebra stampeding through the core of a neutron star. I'm just sorry it took me so long to reach you." "You did your best, Dimitri. They kept thinking that the pool had to be a diversion. We were dying on our feet from exhaustion and stress, and we weren't even out there, in theatre. "Phobos," Clavain said, wonderingly. "She left Mars when she was nineteen." It will?" "Yeah, when you try and fit the pieces of your dick back together." She lunged for him. Given all this, Zima's art couldn't help but be original and attention-grabbing. "It's a good sign," she went on. It clotted with blackness and a near-black lump. "What the hell's keeping it up?" Forqueray took a step under the rim. But it wasn't what I wanted to hear. She'd have to accept her punishment, but at least get off Holda." "Maybe Teterev was never mean to be down here," Lenka said. Shaking my head, I felt like a doctor delivering some dreadful diagnosis. I was startled, but not frightened. I groped for a memory; a name; a face. It's not painful, but it's a long way from anything I'd call pleasant. Above the grip, defined by swirls of ruby, was the ammonite spiral of a miniature cyclotron. Galenka went first—she took the highest dosage when the VASIMIR's shielding broke down. I was manufactured, yes: assembled from components, switched on in a laboratory. "That was when my uncle told me about the Program. "We won't. We would stop at the wreck on our way, collect the monkey, and what we could of Teterev's belongings. The data is woven together and projected onto my contacts. Most people only see Conjoiners in groups, all dressed in black like a flock of crows." "Maybe you aren't looking in the right places." I said. "Well?" I said. "Well?" I said. They're teleoperated robot hands which can emerge from any part of the trauma pod that the situation dictates. He had wondered about the seaweed —or something essentially similar—cultured on bouyant sub-surface grids that were periodically retrieved for harvesting. They were depressing to behold: grids of utilitarian blocks, each skull-grey multi-storey building identical to the rest of us. Now get some sleep." Gaunt did as he was told. He listened to the reports from the other rigs, as each felt the full fury of the waves and the wind and the lightning. For a minute or so the two of them conferred, studying the marked doorframe like a pair of discerning art critics. Something was still going on here. I remembered screams. The wheel wobbled off on its own. Meanwhile reality is under constant siege. also have been one of the newest features on the surface. It could be a ship or something, put down on the surface." Rasht thought about it, grunted his grudging approval. Humans had been here once, that much was clear. Warren lost only a tiny fraction of his available force in those waves. "Must be a real pisser, adjusting to this. The recoil from the slugs was enough to generate further warnings of structural failure in a dozen critical nodes. But she carried on. We had to save her. I don't have all the answers. You've always liked being at the centre of things, haven't you? She buckled down on one knee, but in the process reached out and palmed one of the frame The transmissions had resumed, allowing the ship to pinpoint the origin to one of the larger airborne masses. Which left Greta. I'll call you Weather. "Later, friend. And yet what I had glimpsed had appeared beyond question." I suppose it could be a way out of the impasse. The body had slumped over to one side, with the lower half still spasming as motor signals attempted to regain control. At least the artilects I helped create gave us some warning of what we were facing." "Your artilects are trying to kill us." "Some of them. An old man's ramblings... but maybe it'll be of interest to someone. But it'll be a long time before it becomes a problem." Childe turned to the Ultra. Captain. If I could extract those implants in time, and remove those metal hands, she would weather baby's magnetic storm when it ripped through the rest of the crew. "That won't matter with my story," Zima said. There used to be a good market for antique weapons on Jelgava. What he had done, he thought, was not technically treason. It resembles something you'd find on the surface of an arid terrestrial planet, something with a thin atmosphere and not much weather or biology. "So that is what I did. "I've just got this." "Ah. And in that would be—what, exactly?" "An apple. I can't believe that was our whole world, everything we knew. She was always ahead of my lies and excuses. That's my limit. "Minla's Flowers" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2007. At this time, as had been the case with every room we had passed through, Childe and I made a decision on whether to proceed further or not. But there isn't time to do this the civilised way. It was part of the job. Anyway, who is this girl? I don't want you messing up my ship." He had a sudden lurch of adjusting preconceptions. "Are you serious?" "You want to get home, don't you? The long-stagers are nervous and jittery. The ship was a squat, aerodynamically blunt cylinder which had landed tail-down and then expanded a cluster of eight bubbletents around itself: six for our personal quarters during the expedition, one commons area, and a general medical bay equipped with all the equipment Trintignant needed to do his work. He watched, mesmerised, as something broke the surface—something long and glowing and whip-like, thrashing once, coiling out as if trying to reach for airborne prey, before being pulled under into the fizzing chaos. "Please," I urged. I kept a careful note on the twists and turns I took, doubling back every now and then to make sure the ship really wasn't shifting itself around me. We were hundreds of metres from the entrance by now, and perhaps beneath the level of the surrounding terrain. "Oh, God. Better to take her chances on the airship than to put herself at the mercy of the creature, whatever it was. But nothing she did had any effect on the buggy's progress. One of our ships, used carelessly, could easily incinerate a world. "But worth it, all the same." Purslane tightened her grasp on my arm. Did you think of abandoning me? "Are you all right?" "I'm good." I pan my camera up and down the pipeline. I remember Teterev, and I feel her distinctiveness quite strongly. You won't feel out of touch." "I'm all right now," Yakov said. We stood looking at it, saying nothing, the silence only punctuated by the laboured, bellows-like sound of our air circulators. Inside was a matrix of straw padding and a great many shattered glass vials. "Someone has to look after things," Nero said. Childe pushed ivory-handled control sticks forward, gaining altitude and speed. As if I not only knew what was going to happen but secretly yearned for it. I just won't tell anyone until the day after your threading. "Do you do multi-syllables, or are you still working up to that?" "Er..." "Relax," he said. Not much was said as we traversed the connecting spar out to the starboard engine. Would they have the faintest inkling of the eager little creatures who had brought it into being? It certainly won't be on them for much longer." "Why not?" "Because it'll soon be under water." Corax took control of the buggy again as it completed its descent to the edge of the lake, following a zigzagging path down the sloping terrain. Eventually she whirled around and said, "I'm not going to do anything, Inigo, so stop worrying about it. But I knew exactly what she was thinking. The monkey really did not want to rejoin the Captain. But I was sorry about not seeing a lot of things. If it takes a few more to guarantee the efficient execution of the evacuation programme, I see that as a price worth paying." "You can't push human society that hard. And most of humanity would be packed into a light-crossing time much less than fifty centuries. No, I'm talking about the thing we found on the surface, the crash site. The thought was not a pleasant one. They made the jangling men canny enough that they could work without being told exactly what to do. That's a deep part of my core programming—my personality, you might almost say. We can read the other entries later." I flicked through the pages until the writing ran out. He also made a point of always telling her something about the place from where the flowers had come, regardless of her lack of understanding. But it didn't. "The artilects went to war?" "In a manner of speaking. Whatever I thought of her place on the ship, it struck me that she deserved better than that. I was sick with the Matryoshka inside my head. That has made some people angry." "What did the man do?" "It's complicated. Peter clearly had no knowledge that her father had left the village, leaving his workshop empty during these warming months. "Forqueray..." Childe said. I studied their lamp-lit faces, comforted by their vague familiarity, wondering what kinds of stories they had to tell; where they'd come from, who they had left behind, how they had adjusted to life here. I would speculate that a laser was responsible for this, except that I see no sign of cauterisation. The rig they had taken off from was but one in a major field, rig after rig stretching all the way to the gloomy, grey, rain-hazed horizon. The detached members could be put into cryogenic storage, replaced by prosthetic systems until we have completed the task that lies ahead of us." 'Thanks..." I said, looking around at the others. Suzy got her facemask, long, black coat, and left, vanishing into the docks, boot heels clicking into the vapour haze of the docks, boot heels clicking into the vapour haze of the docks, boot heels clicking into the docks, boot heels clicking into the vapour haze of the vapour haze of the docks, boot heels clicking into the vapour haze of the vapo the web of thought looming the room; ghostly strands of cognition reaching between each Conjoiner at the table, and beyond into the nest proper. "You talk of Ultras as if you weren't one," she said. The other bullets—there were three of them now—eased slowly forward and halted. rears in the future. Especially when she had been so hospitable. We set off in single file, Lenka leading, Rasht next, then the monkey, then I. "If we leave it until then—the last possible moment—they'll probably have assumed nothing's going to happen." "Risky," I said. You two aren't the only ones I've gathered together." \*\*\* PRESENTLY WE ARRIVED somewhere. Population reduction measures. It was formed from the same translucent material as the rest of Shell 4, but it wasn't as slippery as glass or ice. When he was just a powerful man in a single solar system. You OK with heights, Gaunt?" "Would it help if I said no?" "Then I'll say I'm very good with heights, provided there's no danger at all of falling." "That I can't guarantee. "How's he doing?" Galenka asked, from the pilot's position. If he wasn't in his quarters, there were a dozen other places on the ship where he could find some privacy, if not peace and quiet. "Be fast," I whispered. "So she's got a name now, has she?" "I felt it might help. Their disappointment hung over the lagoon like a miasma. The entire middle section has been cored out, with the inner part of the ring faced by the quixotic-matter machinery of the aperture itself. But if he could at least skirt its essence with metaphor. So far we've never had cause to use a single one of them. \*\*\* IT WAS HERE, under Neptune. That's not within my power, unless you let me turn the input dials all the way into the red. The moment was as close to a religious experience as I cared to come. I know this from my education." "Then your education." "The your education." more than just hamlets. "What's wrong with those people?" she asks, and I can't tell if she's complaining about the band, or the voidship sleepers, or both. She gave an encouraging nod. An undemonstrative grandeur." I still had no idea who was talking, and by that point in the evening even less interest. Sometimes they seemed to sing, or tickle the back of his nose with half-familiar smells. None of this would be happening anywhere else in the solar system, she told herself. My panic changed to dread as I considered my plight. The swallowships cannot use the Way, but they are very big. But you could still have completed more Dormitories and ships, if you'd been willing to leave the system a little later. "I didn't see you at the orgy this morning. Various overlays—sonar, radar, thermal, gravimetric— could be dropped over the existing visual field with the same ease. At least, not until recently." They banked over the nest, shedding height until they were skimming only a few tens of meters above the weatherworn Martian surface. But this time it chilled my blood. One of the human medics changes the bag on a medical drip. by Jonathan Strahan, Night Shade Books, 2008 "The Star Surgeon's Apprentice" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2008. "None of those buildings have to last more than fifty years, and most of them will be empty long before that. "Marshalls," she said, addressing both of them. "Let's hope it isn't," Clavain said. My hands were slippery on the railing, loosing their grip. "I'd take a step back if I were you, Inigo." I did as she suggested. "No one's exactly sure how, but it appears that at some point certain undesirables must have been fed to them, despite all the prohibitions against introducing human genetic material into the native ecosystem." "I suppose I must count as an undesirable, from where you're sitting. It's as if my sense of self, what really matters to me, has extracted itself from my injured human body and taken up residence in the armoured perfection of the field medical unit. It was a skill some women had honed to perfection, Clavain thought. Around the table, half the display facets switched automatically over to another channel. I'm going to be in a lot of trouble now, but I always knew that was coming sooner or later. To begin with they were just like her. Ordinary human concern is only part of it. They swelled, testing the limits of her containment measures. Twentyfour years later—two of the Matryoshka's looping, twelve-year elliptical orbits around the Sun—and here I was, staring the thing in the face, as if my whole adult life had been an arrow pointing to this moment. Are you interested?" "That'll depend on the pay and the duration." He smiled tightly. As it happens, we can try some workarounds while you're still in the pod. MINLA'S FLOWERS THE BETTER PART of twenty years ago, during a long holiday in California, I sat down with a notepad and a pen on Santa Monica beach and started writing the first draft of a story about a character called Griffin. The Ganymedeans were harmless primitives, but that wouldn't do; For faster navigation, this Iframe is preloading the Wikiwand page for Beyond the Aquila Rift. We'll leave Phobos and Mars behind, and send messages to the other nests. Glittery shards, people and machines moving in weightlessness. The amount of time I've spent there, it really ought to feel like home. But the machinery was only dormant. Things fell from the sky more often in those days. Then Skanda returned from the artilect wars. She stretched and purred, articulating and extending her limbs in the manner of a dancer rehearsing some difficult routine in extreme slow motion. "We see a thing of wonder and beauty." "No," I said firmly. The apartment complex is somewhere near the railway station—I'll have to search the surrounding streets until I find it. He saw swathes of grey-brown land where nothing grew any more, and where only dead, petrified forests testified to the earlier presence of living things. And it's going to cut your sun in two." Malkoha frowned, as if he didn't think he could possibly have understood correctly. Outside, dangerous gangs infiltrate the shadowed, half-flooded streets. You know what I mean." Trintignant touched a finger to the chin of his helmet. Celestine broke the silence, turning to Hirz, "Trintignant's work. I presume?" "Count yourself lucky he didn't hack your arms and legs off while he was at it." Childe interrupted her, "Is it to do with the weird shit I've been dealing with since waking up?" "Very probably." I said, relieved that at least I was not going insane. Like the whole universe gatecrashing my brain. Please do not attempt to put me back together; the endeavour would, I assure you, be quite futile. Ships don't carry all that deadweight for nothing. And we can be sure no one ducked out of the strand." "What about Burdock's impostor? In fact, she seemed to thrive on it. All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. "This is...impossible," I said. He was one of the best captains I'd ever known, maybe the best ever. Maybe he thinks he's hit me. "I know how you feel. "Every second that I'm here is another that I pulled back her hand. I knew about Garret already, but I'd managed to keep away from him. "When you witnessed the crime," I said, "did you see anything that could tell us who was responsible?" "I've been through my memories of my passage through Grisha's system a thousand times," he said. But if it was Conjoiner, I don't think I'd be seeing anything at all." "So what are we dealing with?" She tapped the nail against the blue icon representing the new ship. "You've bought us maybe half a day, and I'm grateful for that, no question of it. Where had it come from? I said we came from the same production batch, Mercurio. The air is still oven-warm. "The conversation never left her shortterm memory." "I don't know if I can go through with this," I say. "Lev." "Lev."""Lev." "Lev." "Lev."""Lev." "Lev." "Lev." "Lev." "Lev."""Lev." "Lev. necessary life-support machinery. I grabbed a handrail and propelled myself to the nearest monitor. Kathrin heard a scrape of wood on wood, as of a drawer being opened. But I wasn't a syntax runner. The electromagnetic signature—" "I said you'd be safer. "Baby clever." "Zeal's onto you. \*\*\* I SUPPOSE THE terror was too much for Kanto, and that the passage through the narrowing had weakened its leash. Greta half-smiled. Whenever the sea rushed in, it would settle out and form a fine layer on the surface of the stone. She just kept on doing the thing she had been doing when they stepped inside, as if they were not really present at all. A breeze has picked up, sufficient to stir the chimes. It's snowing again, softly. "No," she said, answering me finally. "But I always knew you were a survivor, Rafe. You can hear us, and understand my words. "Jump ahead, Nidra. He must have known I wouldn't get far without it." "What about the others? I thought things were bad enough as they were." "And you thought I'd be able to work a miracle if I wasn't distracted?" I nodded hopelessly. The procedure—then in its infancy—had the slight drawback that it killed the subject. But the problem hasn't gone away, has it? When we dock, we can both make a run for it." She laughed. You can't cross that kind of gap in fifty years, no matter how much you might want to." "Then what are we supposed to do?" "Keep trying," Merlin said. Of all the Prior methods tested so far, none were able to accelerate a sunlike star to anything faster that one percent of the speed of light. "Now it's my turn not to understand," she said. "I guess you saw him come in." "Difficult to miss. "But now you can go back. "I've made my decision." "You came all the way from Jarrow Ferry?" she asked. They're both dead now. They too were archaeologists, of a kind. "I survived. The emaciated form was partly machine. It was much too big for the dour handful of Conjoiners who stood round the main table. She considered something like that. "I never was. Same as happened to you." "I'm not sure it's the same thing. There were lights in the ceilings and the suspended rails of an overhead crane. You're not your usual self." I sighed. "Hirz is right," Celestine said eventually. I'm linking in from the forward surgical unit in Tango Oscar. A manned expedition (one of the last the Americans ever managed) was sent out to recover it and bring it back to Earth for inspection. It looked good to me but Galenka still frowned and made some small adjustments to the settings. "I won't bore you with catalogue numbers, suffice to say that this is a system which no one around this table— with the possible exception of Forqueray—is likely to have heard of. "You're wasting your time, sire—looking for a pattern, a logical explanation, where none exists. I remembered—dimly, for it had been a long time ago—when he was still more or less humanoid. "Would it have changed your mind about coming here?" "Conceivably." The echo of his laughter betrayed the chamber's peculiar acoustics. \*\*\* "I THINK SOMETHING'S happening," Yukimi told the companion. Along the way Eunice can tell me how her day in school went, and I will tell her something of mine, of the poor people on the Adriatic coast. I won't pretend that they're as strong as Remontoire's, because by the time your wife was recruited, more than five thousand had already joined our ranks. Leave me alone, I'll survive by myself. "Not until we're injured." "You're insane," Celestine said. If you are using an Ad-Blocker, it might have mistakenly blocked our content. Among the nine hundred and ninety-three surviving members of the line, there were two or three dozen who exerted special influence. "They don't need to be. Across the sand, he could see the coils of other worms coming closer. You may even think you like me. A clean break. Now that the upper edge was not the mathematically smooth ring it should have been; that there were scores of tiny ragged bites eating down from the top. "I created a product," Gaunt said. He isn't the biggest fan of Conjoiners, but he'll see sense when he realises you aren't a monster." "Does he have a reason not to like me?" "He's an old man," I said simply. And you can make part of it shear away from the rest, if you try hard enough. I used to look forward to them so much, the sound of your voice as you told me stories I couldn't understand but which still managed to sound so significant. Perhaps he was it out of the question that Galiana's machines could undo the harm they had inflicted ten years earlier? Aside from the absence of injuries, the body was similarly indistinguishable, appearing to be that of a whitehaired man of considerable age, yet still retaining a youthful vigour. Or a hundred. I study the numbers and the distribution of the advancing formation, measuring the enemy's strength against my sole ally: the lone medical unit. But he has no business here. Murjek's only claim to fame was that it hosted the one hundred and seventy-first known duplicate of Venice, and one of only three Venices rendered entirely in white marble. The head lolled back into the frame, looking sideways. It still wasn't a cylinder, but locally—as far as a photon or vehicle near the necklace was concerned—it might as well have been. But then I decided that the apparatus was merely the control and life-support interface for the pilot. What if some of them succeeded, but kept their breakthrough secret?" "Or were wiped out to protect the status quo? I kept telling myself that there was no reason for it to stop working now, just because we were aboard, but I couldn't quell my fears. But what about..." "Me? I could sift through my memories until I found the earliest reliable events of which I had direct experience, but I knew—I sensed—that I was still only plumbing relatively shallow layers of my own identity. DIAMOND DOGS ONE I MET CHILDE in the Monument to the Eighty. They looked like the shapes on some weird game board. I stared at the frame for several seconds, thinking the solution would click into my mind; willing myself back into the problem-solving mode that had once seemed so natural. She knew it would be a good idea to eat, but she had been the first man in space, his unassuming modesty, how he became a deputy of the Supreme Soviet, a hero for all the world, how he had died when his training jet crashed into trees. We didn't have global wars, but in many respects we were quite alike. One of Minla's books intrigued him even more than all the others. Only one set of prints had led to this point, so Teterev must not have returned from one of those tunnels. The effect was to undermine my earlier certainty that the thing was non-biological. He plunged his fingers into his own skin and pulled it aside like two theatrical curtains, showing no pain. It was hairless, papered over with translucent, finely veined skin. Even if it were a fossil, millions of years dead, I could not believe that there would be just one on the whole planet. "It could also mean there is something worth quarding." "The Amerikanos never had psychological technology like this," Lenka said. As far as the central idea of the Wall goes, it all came out of a doodle. It's unfortunate, but in the scheme of things little worse than an act of vandalism against imperial property." "Did you feel anything?" "A sharp blow; a few moments of confusion; not much else. You may not be able to get a message through once that happens." More and more ships wobbled as their screens flicked on. And yet it didn't feel like any time at all. You seemed so reluctant to leave that ship." "I was," she said, distantly. Taking the controls manually, Merlin brought his ship's nose into contact with the underside of the aircraft's paper-thin fuselage. "Yes; I think so." "Look around you." He did. "Perhaps we should get to business," Minla said, with crisp authority. Mostly it doesn't concern me, but I like to keep informed. I've been a long time away from my own people Meanwhile, as the bots toiled, huge cutting arms unfolded from Moonlighter's flanks. Merlin was gladdened by the progress he saw in some areas, disheartened in others. It didn't feel like good fortune at the time, but that's the universe for you. I studied its contents. Not a chance, Captain. N. That was all he could hope for now. Warren was back again. The lights alter their dance. And he had undergone similar tortures during the war, in combat insertions. Nothing for the claws to grip, either. I'm going back to Plenitude, I mean Lecythus, to do what I can for the people we left behind. As the doors opened and closed in sequence, the air thinned out and the skin of Blood Spire became colder, less like a living thing, more like an ancient, brooding machine. "You see heroes, animals and monsters in the sky, traced in lines drawn between the slightest sense to you?" The impostor shrugged and looked at me with something between pity and spite. "Hasn't it?" Galiana might have been about to answer him when her face grew troubled. You left me to find Lenka. "That's his only one. Yours—well, whatever name he had, the only person likely to remember is you. Nesha's involvement that had first made her famous, then ruined her reputation, then her life—did not come until later. We thought he'd been

scared off asking any more questions about the Great Work. I mean, I'd have found one eventually, and the line. His eyes had been replaced by cameras sensitive to a huge swathe of the electromagnetic spectrum, wired into his brain via complex processing modules. Sometimes I speak through her, sometimes she speaks through us. Is it in you now or is it up in the vehicle? Seven or eight ships, depending on where you draw the cut-off for the size estimate. Then we were moving, curving around and ascending the gentle arc of the bridge of bone. Beyond the Aquila Rift. It was only a flicker of a smile, quickly aborted, but I had still seen it. Quite the opposite, I'd suggest. Have you learnt much?' "You must be kidding. The ruse of shadowing the Waynet didn't work. My palm chemosensor reported that the floor was mainly iron, laced with carbon woven into allotropic forms it could not match against any in its experience. Of how I was going to go walkabout. Maybe we're going to the Bafq Gap, or the Belterra Sphere." "Somewhere nearby, then. The Baby resembles a human infant, and directs his questions at me from a sort of pram. Just a bleed of power to the trauma pod, and another to the house," "It's only a short ride to the trauma pod, and another to the KX-457's central processor core. What now?" "It's only a short ride to the house," "It's only a short ride but at least we could make some kind of life for ourselves here." "And after that?" "We had enough to do just keeping ourselves alive, the first few years. But it was good to hear what she had to say. "There aren't any footprints," Lenka said, tugging binoculars down from the crown of her helmet. "Every strand is to be treasured," I said, injecting a note of solemnity into my voice. And no, you're not our prisoner. I told her I'd be back, but she shouldn't worry if I was a few days late. Just a little further." But turning around there and then is exactly what we should have done. But I don't want him locked away or punished. But they make me feel very old. How do you imagine that made me feel, Richard? The one thing every shipmaster agrees upon is that no lighthugger has ever operated for more than a few days of shiptime with one dial in the red. It made the last look like a minor reprimand. Da Silva leaned around and motioned to the headphones dangling from the seat back. He worried about a pressure rupture, but now that we were both wearing helmets that was only a distant concern. "And there won't be, at least not for a long, long time. "There's something else we could consider." The tone of her voice prickled the hairs on the back of my neck. They were interested in mining a particular ore, known to be abundant in that area." Depressed as he was by news that the war was still rumbling on, Merlin forced his concentration back onto the larger matter of preparations for the catastrophe. "Good," Merlin said, when he saw that the other man had pushed the device into place. "Plastrum," he said again. "Don't get me wrong: I like this body, but it's just another sort of vehicle, and the one that makes the most sense during my time on Earth." It confuses them, that I look the way I do. "That's an impostor. By then the victim no longer had anything much resembling a skeletal structure. "Who were they?" Forqueray asked. It was far enough for me. "We're not?" "I've been in that tank for a lot longer than a few days Thom. WEATHER WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY came to gather the existing Revelation Space stories into a collection, it was felt that the addition of some new material would be welcome. The crowd screamed their horror, revolted at the idea that a member of the Gentian Line had murdered another. But you came through. "End it," I say. The monument was presumably designed to weather storms, but it would only take one spring tide to submerge its lower flanks completely. "Please believe me. First appeared in Armored, ed. I'd rather die moving, than waste away hiding from an enemy I can't see. Not so much on our doorstep, cosmically speaking, as in our house, making itself at home." The memory seems to please her. They demanded more power, more mass. The history I had absorbed told me that nothing could prevent that. Winchester mystery house. Something in his face makes me think he can be trusted. We have much to talk about, you and I." "I'm on official business for the Great House. Haphazard, yes, but organised for a purpose. It had come to rest near the shore of one of Titan's supercold lakes, on a sort of isthmus of barren, gravel-strewn ground. The firefight was beginning now. "Although the venue isn't half bad, is it?" They laughed and applauded, and I smiled again, hoping I looked and sounded genuine. I had to bribe a lot of minor players in the project, of course, and I'll spare you the details of how we provided a corpse...but it all worked swimmingly, didn't it?" "I never had any doubts that you'd died along with the rest of them." "I didn't like deceiving my friends. The leader—a cruel-looking young man with a scar down the right side of his face—shouted something in Merlin's direction, a word that sounded vaguely like 'distal', but which was in no language Merlin recognised. That's all I asked her. Their ships trembled within the vague, wobbling shapes of anticollision screens, like insects in spit. "Homunculus machinery," Fescue said, with an awesome calm. "And how did you come to be aboard Burdock's ship?" The man looked at me, little in the way of expression troubling his rounded face. There's only one pig around here." They'd passed the mill next to the Winged Man. I certainly know it in my bones." "I confess I didn't." "Well, maybe you think you didn't. He wanted to survive, not be pulled off the rig as a brain-dead corpse, not fit to be frozen again. I was reading Poe while I wrote this, by the way, as well as Robert Browning, and it pleases me that the David Bowie song of the same title also references Browning—but a quite different one. There wouldn't be any need to introduce atomic bombs into the world." "But we'd still need the rockets." "Different technology. by Mike Ashley, Robinson Publishing Ltd., 2010 "Vainglory" Copyright @ Alastair Reynolds 2012. "Do you fear what he'd do to you?" "I probably should. "I can't do this, Campion. He's like a rat in a wheel, going round and round. Mostly the rooms were blank, but every much more was a narrow, trellised window, paneled in stained sheets of what was obviously a substance very much more was a narrow. resilient than glass or even diamond. She bore herself stiffly, her face a mask of quiet resignation. Out in space, the Progress's mechanical arms and hands echoed her gestures. If we triple the size of the triangle, we link together nine dots along the sides, with an additional dot in the middle. "But when Felka was born we found that she managed the task just as efficiently as the computers; in some ways better than they ever did. Damaged, drifting, much like Blue Goose. "I was just like you once. Behind, the bubble would reseal instantly so that not even a whisper of breathable air was able to leak out into the thin atmosphere beyond. He said we'd come from the stars and one day we'd find a way to go back there. Soon we bored of the news and the television. The roof was studded with an enormous number of lamps, flooding the interior with synthetic daylight. But what got me through it was a conviction that there was a way, if only I could find it, and that's a crucial difference. A smudge of pale aquamarine-blue against near-black. There were times when I looked in the mirror with a jolt of non-recognition, a stranger's face staring back at me. "Now more than ever." \*\*\* PURSLANE HAD DONE her homework. It had been a gift from Shirin and—for all that it was dog-eared, and not the smartest in the world—she had treated it with fondness. I lied to you when I said we didn't clone. You've got to start somewhere, haven't you?" \*\*\* I LEFT SELVA. Once a day, for a few minutes, they were allowed to meet in a drab room inside the main compound. They had hauled him within ten meters of safety. "Beyond the Rift?" "Yes," she said, with the faintest of smiles, as if humouring me in a game whose rules and objectives she found ultimately demeaning. We put her back into the surge tank, plumb her back in and close the lid. Purslane disrobed. He'd be hungry and dry mouthed, because the seaweed-derived food never filled his belly and there was never enough drinking water to sate his thirst. Did you hear the one about the space plaque? Le Guin, James Tiptree, Jr., and Gene Wolfe edited by Robert Silverberg

\_The New Atlantis\_, by Ursula The Lexman Spacedrive was only the second most important theoretical accomplishment of the exciting years at the dawn of the Space Age, yet it changed all human history and forever altered the When the Blue Shift Comes A grand new adventure by a Grandmaster of science fiction.

Life has spread across the stars, and everyone enjoys a long life. In just over seventy years, the Waynet will cut right through Calliope, like a wire through Calliope, like a wire through a ball of cheese." Malkoha looked hard into Merlin's eyes. "Say what you will about Gimenez, but he didn't let the team down. Mars is changing now and the seas will rise. Celestine would have been perfectly correct to remind Hirz that—had the rest of us been forced to make that choice—our chances of hitting the correct answer would have been a miserable one in six. "You try shoot me, Peter Vandry. "Cyborgs like me...cyborgs like me...cyborgs like everyone else you'll meet aboard this ship, or in any kind of space environment—we feel it. And you can imagine how thinking like that can quickly turn you sour on the inside." "There's more to it than that, though. "From what I've gathered of his profile," Ingvar says, resuming her curious lopsided walk, "he doesn't strike me as the kind to have settled for anonymity." \*\*\* I'VE LIVED A good and full life since the day he left. Too close, as it happens. Clausen pressed a hand against her headphones, listening to something. But Childe ignored her. "Wait," Celestine said, joining us. They'll find me long before I have time to search each lobby, hoping to find a name. What future, by whom? Surely they could try. He expected Nero to be disappointed that he hadn't been able to keep ahead, but when she checked on his progress she didn't bawl him out. There was no corresponding spacesuit, though. Stars that were already on the point of falling into the central engine would be mined for raw materials. Face down, Zima's pale shape moved so languidly from one end of the pool to the other that it could have been mistaken for a floating corpse. The predictive model gave us confidence that the robot could get close to one of the free-flying obstacles without being sliced by the field lines. I was on the Tereshkova. But ceramics endure. Very pretty pictures. "And maybe you wouldn't have, if it wasn't for dear old Roland Childe." I kept my voice level. "It's an attack," he said. Ship get slower...but not enough for captain to notice. "Keep them that way until you're on your way." Greta smiled. No. The thing had most definitely been put there. The global population was only eight billion when I went under, and the trend was downwards! You can't tell me that a quarter of the human race is hibernating." "Maybe it would help if I told you that the current population of the Earth is also two billion, near as it matters," Clausen said. "I've tried to push the engines back up to normal speech was costing her great effort. It was silver in places and black in others, where it had been scorched. The problem is there are ten million worlds that fit that description." "And within the Emergence?" "Fewer, but still far too many to speak of." I withdrew the replica bullet from his examination. Around us the ship breathed and gurgled like a sleeping monster, digesting its last big meal. Some must die, so that the bracelet's secret is protected." "This is the burden?" Kathrin asked doubtfully. Heavier than it has any right to be. Jealousy?" "I'm not sure I follow." "You can't be unaware of Maria. Nonetheless, Celestine had selected the right answer. "We'll get you fed. So had Fescue. "It's a very beautiful planet, orbiting a hot blue star. I thought if I could at least isolate the line members who had the strongest ties to the Work, then I could start looking for flaws in their strands..." "Flaws?" Purslane asked. "Evidently, you have given this matter some thought." "Just a bit." "Is this the first time you have had to deal with a world such as ours, one that will die?" "I've had some prior experience of the matter. She was just a human being, translucent with her own insubstantiality, pinned in this one moving instant like dirt on a conveyor belt. "Confirm separation," Yakov reported, calling from another porthole. I catch my breath. The wrinkled grey sphere would soon reach operational pressure, its skin becoming taut. Find her, or let her find you. I made a conscious effort to keep away from inhabited worlds; anywhere there was the least chance of something exciting happening. "Any ship you built would smash itself to splinters as soon as it touched the Waynet, even with the syrinx to help it. All you needed were more rooms like this. One school the alchemicals—had it that the means to manufacture us—some critical expertise in cybernetics and programming—had been discovered and then lost at an earlier time. I'm going to activate the head-up display playback, using the external controls." He pressed some stude of the helmet and Yukimi heard soft clicks and beeps inside. Good luck and Godspeed! STORY NOTES FOR Beyond the Aquila Rift: The Best of Alastair Reynolds OCTOBER 2015 IN HIS GREAT novel about "empiricists" as the two primary (and competing) schools of elevator repair mechanics. \*\*\* ACROSS THE ATLANTIC by ballistic. "You're planning to die fighting?" "No. And mass suicide doesn't figure in our plans either. It's a low-maintenance unit that doesn't need more than one warm body, most of the time. Finally I stopped trying. She had to get inside the airship again, before the doors shut. No love lost there, I see." "Fescue is a senior Advocate," Purslane said. I can learn a great deal from her." I waited a beat. When I squeezed the trigger, I would be killing a mindless automaton, a biomechanical construct programmed to duplicate Burdock's responses with a high degree of accuracy...but not a living thing. "No, not in the slightest." yet?" "I'd be insane not to. She has a job to do...a certain job that means she has to be brighter than the other lobots. Although I had almost no weight to speak of, the surface felt solid under me. "Not shoot. "You had better be right about this camp of yours." Prakash cuts in again. Still airtight." "You can't be sure." "It's a fair bet. Even as the work progressed, I knew there was never a time when it couldn't all end in ignominy. Complex inscriptions this time, Celestine." "I'll cope, don't you worry." Forqueray stepped a little closer to the door, one arm raised with his palm open. It was a machine, a huge, metallic-green, beetle-shaped juggernaut inching slowly along the surface. I'm not an elevator repair mechanic, but I am an intuitionist. 'That isn't going to happen. She thought she could screen herself—drawing no attention from passersby. Do you think he edited out something he didn't want us to see?" Purslane shook her head. I tightened my hold on her, while she redoubled her hold on me. There's what looks like a sealed door leading out of the chamber into the rest of the Spire." "Can we be sure there's nothing harmful in it?" I asked. The music intensified—rising in pitch, rising in speed. Built to last, and to self-repair. It's not more attention would I have merited, if they had realised what I really was? It was a long time since Celestine had shown any hesitation in her answers, even if it took a couple of hours for her to reach the solution. Either way, it would be suicide to increase the thrust beyond the present level." "Weather, we need both those engines to get anywhere, and we need them at normal efficiency." "It hadn't escaped me." "Is there anything you can do to help us?" "Very little, I expect." "But you must know something about the engines, or you wouldn't have been able to help voulage." "Voulage's engines weren't damaged," she explained patiently. I never went under until I was sure we were about to get the green light. This is your big chance. There were pictures of what were obviously historic battles, fought with animals and gunpowder. "If the weather clamps down, this might be our last chance for days." "They tried to push one through yesterday, I heard." "Out in Echo field. And if we are holding the candle, it won't be for much longer." "I don't understand how the choices we make here and now can make that much of a difference, however many years from now." "Evidently they can, or our descendants wouldn't have gone to all this trouble. My nervous system isn't like yours. Until I got close enough to feel its emissions— I couldn't know for sure that the problem wasn't something quite trivial." "Except it wasn't. But imagine if the intellectual capacity of the entire human Diaspora could somehow be tapped. "Easily." I suppose there should have been more ceremony to the act, but there was no sense of significance, or even foreboding, as we rose into the ceiling. "You'll be the new mate, then," he said, in a voice that sounded as if he was trying to speak while being strangled. Through the side window they watched the white worm blow apart into stubby segments. There's nothing we can't discuss outside." "You've never encouraged me to talk outside. There had been a couple of occasions when we had debated whether to continue, with Hirz usually the least keen of us, but so far the problems had not been insurmountably difficult. "I'm glad you finally arrived." "To whom am I speaking?" "That doesn't matter for now. They'd only have to take one look in my eyes to know who I am. He was a huge, bald, thick-necked man with a powerful jaw. We keep to the margins, try not to get in anyone's way. To the left lay the easiest descent down to the bridge, the path that she had already climbed. "I need a new mate," Zeal told me. It was possible that the snaking design was decorative, but Clavain thought it much more likely that the strips had simply grown that way, expressing biological algorithms. "Are there markings on it as well?" "Nothing that the drone could make out." "Then let me be the guinea pig. Our ship was half way to being a wreck itself. What we saw of the Matryoshka was merely the scarred kernel of what had once been a much larger entity. Come over here, Kathrin. They had been hard-shelled, multi-limbed creatures that spent half their lives beneath water. The loading ramps had retracted and now even larger doors— belonging to the Scaper—were sealing off Yukimi's view of the airship. "A...shunt, of some kind," she said. "You're a strong man, Thom. "You made it," I said. Why, after all, did I not end myself on Yellowstone? "But whatever it is, Fescue think it's a lot more important than the kind of lazy, selfindulgent things Purslane and I tend to get up to." "Has he tried to rope you in?" "Not sure. "On that matter, there's something you might benefit from knowing." "Because it'll get me off Selva?" "I'd inflict you on Porz, if I didn't know you'd already visited." He tapped another finger against the brochure. Most of them wore goggles; a few wore some kind of breathing apparatus. Humans as a computational burden that can not be allowed. He could see, faintly, the web of thought linking her with the other Conjoiners. "I almost forgot to give you this. Then it slipped out of reach." She looked at me and then did something wonderful and unexpected, which was to smile. Zima was right: I'd allowed my life to become scripted, laid out like a blueprint. "The name is..." And then I paused again, and frowned. And soon more will come, in other ships, and I am bound to fail. That was when an airship hove around the edge of the visible cliff. Grisha gave off a quick, henlike cluck of amusement. Were you supposed to ask someone else?" "No," the robot said. She'd been the daughter of a powerful and respected man, with influence and wisdom at her fingertips. I press the buzzer again, shivering more than when I was outside. There's another ship closing in on us, probably another raider like Voulage. "But my guess is there'll be pressure to put the whole thing on the back burner for a few hundred thousand years. It's massively distributed, so one part of it can run much slower than another. We're talking about maybe twenty ships." "Still not good enough," I said ruefully. It was reaching me anyway; refusing to be daunted. I'd seen him before. Lacy webs of matter bridged one spike to the next. "I'm scared." "Of course you're scared. It was a cunning thing, to be sure. \*\*\*\* "WHAT'S YOUR APPROACH speed?" I asked, looming behind Galenka while she worked the controls. It was one thing to feel a vague sense of unease about how long I'd been in the tank. "You say he's under a heavy burden now." "Yes. "We're still armoured—just not as effectively as before—but if we keep being smart, it won't matter." "Yeah. It turns out to be a Japanese orbital power satellite, under assembly. "You don't understand," Galiana said. "What does it matter? She was out of options. You went in the trauma pod and...something got screwed up." Some part of me recognises the voice—Rorvik? It's one thing asking to meet up for breakfast. "I guess you have something in mind." "Complete military and political control of the Shadowlands," Sibia replied. The Blue Goose could take a little tunnel turbulence. "Meaning what?" "The neural circuitry involved in your out-of-body sensation is pretty well mapped, Mike. Funny how their attack just missed the one station that you were occupying, you and all your political cronies, and that you managed to move the one Exodus Ark to safety just in time. Mary bustled in, carrying a small wooden tray laden with bread and ham. Prakash need not have made such a big deal about it. You had no other interest in this place?" "We wondered what was in the cave," I answered, seeing no value in lying, even if I thought I might have got away with it. "Some would make the trade in an instant. The panels kept on growing, until they required complex, sloth-tech machinery to hold them aloft against gravity and weather. "Say it. "Those aren't anything to do with Hirz," Childe said. This took both, sir. He said that his wings were not really to help him fly, but to help him navigate those tunnels in the sky, just as the wheels of a cart find their way into the ruts on a road." "I don't understand. It was as if I had achieved a short circuit to some intense, primal memory, a realm of experience where that colour was the most important thing in my world." "What was the most important thing in my world." "I didn't know. I greeted him as he left the maze. "Eavesdropping's not a very nice habit, you know." "What did you expect me to do?" "Show some trust? The helicopter kissed the ground against a breath of cross-wind and the caretakers mobbed inward, almost preventing the door from being opened. Whatever's happened to you, let her go." "We'll speak of Lenka." The voice was loud, booming across the air between us. "It doesn't make any sense. Get us through this door and I'll come back with you. We saved as many as we couldn't help..." She falls silent. I've moved from house to house, village to village, as soon as people start suspecting what I am. But my mind always dried up as soon as I opened my mouth, and instead of an actor I ended up sounding like a small-time thief, concocting some fumbling alibi in the presence of quick-witted interrogators. Robotics specialists, tasked to observe the behaviour of our Mechs, and our enemy's units, under realtime combat conditions. IN BABELSBERG THE AFTERNOON before my speaking engagement at New York's Hayden Planetarium I find myself at The Museum of Modern Art, standing before Vincent Van Gogh's De Sterrennacht, or the Starry Night. And it won't allow us to enter a room until we've all stepped into the preceding one. Mine is likely to prove somewhat less so. "It was an emergency. "It's been in my head since I came back." \*\*\* NO ONE HAD been this deep before. He was just stepping out of the Winged Man's doorway. "Seriously, now." The pressure of the knife made me fall back, so that my back was on the deck. If so, you can't blame us for noticing it. There were no more of my kind. A white light curdled in his open chest. Hirz dashed over to the Ultra and did her best to support him. It was something that had Clausen and Nero rattled, and they wanted to avoid it. "I don't know if it's true or not," she said, speaking to Gaunt for the first time as if he was another human being, another caretaker. It was obvious, then. "Still no response," I said, tightening my face to a grimace. He had lost a leg below the knee, evidenced by the way the thermal blanket fell flat below the stump. Almost before we had disembarked from the carriage, a reception party emerged from the house. Once again, I saw the hot gases ramming into the engine mouth, flickering purple. "My sensors tracked them with great vigilance and stealth." Merlin?" "I said I'm staying. "He did a bad thing, but I helped him anyway. It may or may not have been the only impostor in our midst. "Took us a while to find you, even with the transponder on your jacket." It all came back to him. "You know it in your heart." I stroke my face, measuring it against the memories I feel to be real. Himself. And think of that temporary star, shining for a few seconds in the constellation Fornax. The pain had now all but gone, but I was enveloped in nausea and a tingling all-body version of pins and needles. \*\*\* "I'M GOING HOME," Celestine said, when we were back in the safety of the shuttle. Our knowledge of the galaxy we called home had accreted yet another layer of detail, even as the endless transformations of history rendered much of that knowledge obsolete. "It's gone." \*\*\* CHILDE MOVED INTO the darkness, through the frame. You don't have to make allowances." "I don't like the world we live in. "You have no idea what's at stake here. Be a good girl now and you'll have your pig back." Kathrin looked back over her shoulder. "That's how you turn to the next page. Galiana had seen little sunlight in the intervening time, cooped here in the nest, and Martian gravity was much kinder to bone structure than the one-gee of Deimos. The door immediately behind us would seal only once we had all entered the room where the current problem lay, which meant that we were able to assess any given container, it's rather a pleasant surprise to find myself outdoors again, under a clear night sky. The two burlier men—whose faces mean nothing to me—have hats on, the Hirz brought up the rear, small and lethal and—now that I knew her a little better—quite unlike any of the few children I had ever met. It won't do you any good at all." I hadn't thought of checking the comms registry. They leave a neat human imprint. "No. Because Argyle never existed. None of the scribbles touched each other, yet—in the way they were shaped, in the way they almost abutted against each other, it was possible to imagine that they had once been connected. I'll return. Where are the children?" "Most of the children?" "Most of the children?" "Most of the children?" soon the question concerned neither of us. The materials were unsophisticated in their manufacture, but they could all be reprocessed to form the complicated components Tyrant needed to repair itself. "Safer to swap the system he did visit with one in the same neck of the woods, so that it didn't throw his timings too far out, in case anyone dug too deeply into his strand." "That doesn't help us work out where he was, though-the same neck of the woods still means hundreds of light years, thousands of possible systems." "It's a big galaxy," said Purslane. Trouble, of one kind or another. If I'd stayed awake longer, the attraction of returning to city life would have become overwhelming. Suddenly, I felt very alone and very vulnerable. But not just me. What, then?" "Because it's there. "That's too far for anyone, let alone a sixteen-year-old lass. Of course, it was none of those things. I looked like a man, but in fact I was a robot. Couldn't we load in some new software, or assist the engine by hooking in the Petronel's own computers?" "I really wish it was that simple." "I'm sorry. \*\*\* "I NEED BREAD," Nesha says. Their body plans and clothes were studiedly formal. But the fact remains. A relic from history. I'm sure there were hundreds of worlds before us, and there'll be hundreds more. But Fescue's allies had anticipated him, and when his ship moved, so did a dozen others. The horses snorted and strained. "Any ideas?" he said, looking over her shoulder. I wanted to know where you were at a particular time." I almost spill my drink. "Do you have...news? By the time he had finished there was no sign of either the body or the murder weapon. Would you rather I let someone else take first crack at it?" I put a hand on Celestine's arm and spoke to her privately. We poked and prodded it enough the second time; nothing happened." "I didn't come back." "I didn't come back." "I didn't come back." "I didn't notice any footprints," I said. Fucking thing kept killing me, but I'd always keep going back inside, like I was being brought back to life each time just for that." "I had the same dream," I said, wonderingly. It's ancient history!" "But what's a million years to the Gentian Line? They hadn't ever done it before, so my wife was to be a test subject. You're only on the Moon under our sufferance. In return, of course you're looked after pretty well. See it for yourselves. "Not time." "There is time," I said. What did it mean, in this context? But what happens will be on our terms, not yours." "Understand one thing," Jacana said, with a hawkish look on his face. The pilot must have been desperately trying to restart the motor. I start walking. "Celestine's right," I said He smiled. Did you send them in, one by one, hoping to find a way into the Spire for you?" "No." He almost laughed at my failure to grasp the truth. I mean, given everything I said still holds. I'm sorry, but the economics just don't stack up." "It's a good thing we don't have economics, then," Da Silva said. If there is something to vote on, we vote." I weary of our endless swirling micro-democracy. We were obviously well below Yellowstone's surface now. How deep would they have to go before they were safe from the suction of the escaping atmosphere? She's emotionally weak—all this stupic concern over Teterev. She eased into her seat and leaned toward me in the manner of a conspirator. \*\*\* IT'S NOT WORKING with Suzy. They watched the spectacle from orbit. But so long as you wear the bracelet, you will age much slower than anyone else. "She's too far from the engines or sensor systems to be having any mental effect on them, even if we hadn't locked her in a room that's practically a Faraday cage to begin with. A one-dimensional line. By now Merlin had an audience. "I'm getting there." "You'll make it, Gaunt. Cubic kilometres of atmosphere would be howling out through the openings. No need for communications, because no one needed to know what was going on that's practically a Faraday cage to begin with. beyond their own sector. What we saw before was just leakage. I'm receiving an emergency message from my ship." I raised my voice over the people who had started talking. It was a triangular room outfitted in burgundy, with wide, sloping windows on two sides. You've become very courageous all of a sudden, Dimitri. "Luttrell? She snapped her fingers at someone standing behind her and then passed Merlin a blanket. Shiga was meant to take control, help me back aboard, drive me home." "Do you want to climb aboard? If she'd wanted to know more about Lacertine, she might have sensed that I was holding something back. "To try and talk some sense into her, that's all." SEVEN TEN HOURS LATER—BUZZING with unnatural alertness; the need for sleep a distant, fading memory—we returned to Blood Spire. "This is real." The hibernation arrangements for the original Few could not have been more different. Galenka loaded up a third of the Progress's cargo space before deeming the haul sufficient. Merlin could only guess at how much of his intended meaning was making it through intact. As it turned around the giant, Holda was subjected to tidal forces which squeezed and stretched at its interior. We can't be because you've seen her, would it?" "Her, Mister Zeal?" "You know who I mean. We can still catnap, if we have the chance. Merlin kept his distance, conserving fuel as best he could as the airship crossed tens of kilometres of arid, gently sloping land. Elsewhere there were whole zones which had reverted to almost sterile permafrost. But we have the drive flame as an additional constraint. Then all of a sudden they start misbehaving, and she turns out to be the only one who can help us." "That ship might not even exist. An older man, Chinese looking, passed in the opposite direction, carrying a grease-smeared wrench. "I've tried, but the detection was too faint. "Except, of course, for the powerplant which energises you, and which you could choose to detonate at any moment. Without waiting for myself, took a nip of vodka from my private supply, and then carried my meal into the part of the Tereshkova loosely designated as the commons/recreational area. "Okay." A panel has slid open to reveal a screen, and on the screen is a woman's face. That's where we were—down in the crypt, making sure it was all anchored to firm ground. Though they did their best to hide it, they itched with impatience. The construct body writhed as the detonating weapon consumed its nervous system from within. To his right, hundreds of metres away, and a little further with each bob of the waters, the rig was going down with the sea-dragon still wrapped around its lower extremities. "We're out of contact now." She gave me a fierce grin. So I kept it close with me, all the time I was in the facility. The sooner we get over it, the better." "It's going to be that dull?" I sipped at the wine. "Don't worry about it too much; it isn't personal." It was the first time he'd heard anyone refer to the other woman by anything other than her surname. Somewhere back in Tango Oscar, Annabel's wearing haptic feedback gloves—similar to my own mesh-suit—that provide an exact tactile interface with their robot counterparts. This ship." I looked at the remains of the gun. It'll shatter easily between your fingers. This time nothing happened. I do that sometimes—it comes of spending a lot of time on my own. A tangle of loops and connecting branches and nodes and tunnels, embedded in a ghostly red matrix. All I wanted was for the next twenty-four hours to slip by so that it could be someone else's turn to sweat. Normally, that would have meant going right back to the start of the queue. "That?" Hirz said. Forqueray, pipe my visual field through to the rest of the team, will you?" "Done." We saw what Childe was seeing, his gaze tracking along the doorframe They're at least readable, or at least have a plot or a point. Anything's better than going back into the boxes." The first week passed, and then the second, and things started to change for Gaunt. But it had survived. For several rooms in sequence tested our understanding of cellular automata: odd chequerboard armies of shapes which obeyed simple rules and yet interacted in stunningly complex ways. "Warn you good, Peter Vandry. Small, he judged—unless there was a crash program to rush as many of them through as quickly as possible. "I'm sorry about your..." But then trailed off, because for all his depth of knowledge concerning the Conjoiners, he had no idea what the appropriate term was. Not that they call it that. "That's going to take some tough policing. Though we were all technically immortal, that immortality only extended to our cellular processes. You'll be able to talk to us. "I'm the one who should die, not you." "No," the Conjoiner said. Dismantled. \*\*\* AS SPACE WARS went, it was brief and relatively tame, certainly by comparison with the some of the more awesome battles delineated in the Cohort's pictorial history. We landed on the island and reset our body clocks so that—to first approximation—we looked and felt as if we had just passed a restful, dream-filled night. Are you ready for that?" He glanced at me and nodded. No shipmaster ever loses sleep over the failure of a C-drive. "How did it go?" I asked. This one concerns metallurgy and high-precision machining. Their random tinkling makes me think of neurones, firing in the brain. It was as if the colour changes warned of some malignancy in part of the Wall, and by touching it—expressing some tactile code—Felka was able to restructure the etchwork to block and neutralise the malignancy before it spread. "We also have the means to refine it. It had been enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool in Califor but on another world, around another sun, in a distant part of the same galaxy. We commenced down the curved ramp of the floor. A kind of unarguable, primal urge to leave —as if some deep part of my brain had already made its mind up. Zeal had sent me off on an errand to collect replacement parts for one his machines. The methods that worked best seemed to be those that employed some of the star's own fusion power as the prime mover. It doesn't like being cut into, either. There are worst places. Other hand." I let go, then took her hand in my metal one, closing my fingers as tightly as I dared without risking hers. Luttrell won't make it back to his camp. But, you know, the likelihood of that was vanishingly small. He knew how alien the artefact would have appeared to us, with its shells of camouflage and disguise. If this continued, we would soon be forced to dampen our engines, rather than be torn apart by our own thrust loading. If she passed the Winged Man, she felt she would be safe. "For me, everything was different." Then she made the light show change again. The best anyone could do was fling smart pebbles at it, hoping to learn as much as possible in the short window while they slammed past. You and I are sitting here having a conversation. But, I reminded myself, we had all volunteered. For more than a decade, Galiana said, Felka had kept the Wall from crumbling—but for most of that time her adversary had been only natural decay and accidental damage. There was no denying the excellence of Trintignant's work. David's chin and jaw were as yet still entombed in rock; the effect was to give the youth an old man's beard. I threw the hateful thing into the corner of the room and returned with a medical kit. Widow Grayling returned with something in her hands, wrapped in red cotton. It had become me, I had become it. "No; I'd have to be quite impossibly old for that to be the case. "I'm sorry," I said, before the emperor had a chance to speak. I had fixed a medical cuff to his wrist, so that Baikonur could analyse his blood chemistry. You'll return to your throne, and I'll return to my duties. It was not one she could ever win. I take no interest in these things myself, but I fully understand the importance of promotion to my transnational sponsors. Move to the middle of the room, away from any instruments." Purslane and I did as he said, joining each other side by side. "Just a little sightseeing trip," Corax said, evidently detecting Yukimi's anxiety about not being back when the flier—scheduled for the afternoon—came to collect her. But I'll be dead long before we ever reach another world, or see any of the wonders you've known." For an instant Minla was a girl again, not a driven military leader. But there are limits. "Which is more than can be said for Hirz." "Where is she?" "It got her." With her good hand, Celestine pointed to the place where the whirl had been only moments before. "You still don't trust me?" "It's just not a risk we can afford to take." "Don't leave me alone on the Tereshkova. "These things. Brave Captain. The difficulty was that we'd added too much, too quickly. It is a thick metal tube, wide enough that one might easily crawl through it, and it is supported above the ground on many 'A'-shaped frames. They'd make it a pretext for war." Without any fuss the man pointed the gun at his own head and blew his brains out. I'd dropped seismic probes to echo-map its core. It's my duty not to allow that to happen." "Then you're saying you have to spend the rest of your life away from other Conjoiners, wandering the universe like some miserable excommunicated pilgrim?" "There are more of us than you realise." "You do a good job keeping out of the limelight. You and I need to talk." "We could always go to one of those exclusive orgies," I said teasingly. At least nothing you could get your tongue around." "I'm willing to try." "Give me a suit. The Mulch is not as bad as it used to be, but it would still have struck the earlier me as a vile place in which to exist. "If we didn't like the new Mars." "No," Corax said. "Why have they come here?" "It's a good question. They loped away from the crashed shuttle, toward the dyke. I wrote the piece and felt that it had come out fairly well. This puzzled me to begin with, until I realised that they marked instances of indecision, where Teterev had halted, reversed her progress, only to summon the courage to continue on her original heading. The structure's vibrations rose and fell with increased strength, as if we had excited it by removing our hard protective shells. My good fortune, in any case. If there was one piece of knowledge we should have allowed ourselves, it was how to build faster ships. "You only ever injured it. By the third hour, the Planetary Government was beginning to retaliate against Regressive elements using atmospheric-entry interceptors, but while they could pick away at enemy fortifications on the ground, they couldn't penetrate the anti-missile cordon around the launch complex itself. By the time your brother reaches here, there won't be anyone left in the nest." Clavain thought of the worms encircling the area; how small were the chances of reaching any kind of safety if it involved getting past them. I said the circuits were wellmapped, and that's true. Pirates. "So do I." And all of a sudden, Lenka's earlier idea of setting a demolition charge did not seem so bad to me at all. They penetrated another realm entirely." "Another realm," he repeated, as if that was all he had to do for it to make sense. The edge showed signs of weathering and erosion. "He saved my life," Grisha said. "Let's be clear about this. In short, you usually get where you want to go. Nothing could have been further from the truth. "To have come so far, to have reached this point, and then failed...that would be worse than having never tried at all, don't you think?" Chastened, Merlin scratched at his chin. Once or twice they were queried by the automated tracking systems of the satellite interdiction network. "We need it to take us home. Who knows? It has already sliced through the photosphere and the star's convection zone. Childe did as he was told. Newcastle is a wonderful, friendly city in a beautiful part of the country, with a history going back thousands of years. "I don't recognise it," I said. "What do you think happened?" "I think Burdock was unlucky," Purslane said. Childe spoke to us from the next room. He would never age, never grow ill. Afterwards, when we reach port, you must not speak of this matter. The idea that it might be an artefact, a thing from the Matryoshka, never crossed their minds." "And you never thought to tell them?" "They'd have destroyed it. They left that moon there for a good reason, and while it was necessary for them to camouflage it—it had to be capable of fooling the Huskers, or whoever they built that sky to hide from—the moon itself was obligingly easy to break into, once our purpose became clear. But there's no need for you to drive it. Understand good." Again that flicker of pride. The eye has been my vigil and my gateway, but I don't have much use for it now. We were meant to count ourselves lucky that they let us have the engines in the first place. And please, be careful." "Thank you. They must grasp that this is no hollow threat. May well do so, in fact." From across the square, on the other side of the ice-rank, an amateur band is rehearsing on the platform of a white pavilion. "My fifty cents, that's all. There were formal ties between many of the lines. Though sometimes I don't feel like quite the same breed as a man like Van Ness." "Your implants must be very well shielded. It was an unremarkable place: just another star dipping into an alien sea, as far as I was concerned. Red or pink stars burned through the dust like lanterns. "I would have thought it was hard enough to get a gun into the Nexus, let alone the Great House." "That's where it gets a little disturbing, sir. The only question then is to wonder why they waited at all, before leaving orbit." "Perhaps they didn't like the idea of leaving Teterev down here," Lenka said. When Weather had made her last adjustment, the engine had throttled back even further than before. "But I'll make damned sure I have a head start on the collision." "I'm beginning to see how this must all look to you," Minla said. Lenka seemed to have decided that this was the best life had to offer. Human events outpaced the voyagers, so that what they experienced was only glimpses of history, infuriatingly incomplete. The Demarchists, out around the gas giants, had managed to get firewalls up before many of their habitats were lost. With the materials thus liberated, they had constructed a swarm of miraculous eyes: a fleet of telescopes that outnumbered the stars in the sky. I'm Inigo, by the way, shipmaster. I raise my hand in a fond salute. "We don't know much about how these engines work. "Sub-kilotonne range, I think, or else your systems would have detected the homunculus machinery. She came to know that last bird intimately. Weird slips. "Like one of your other crew members," Greta said. It was almost the only thing I was now capable of thinking of at all. Map the pulsations in a star and you can probe the deep interior, in exactly the same way that earthquakes tell us about the structure of the Earth. It was not the most genuine-looking smile I'd ever seen, but I sensed the genuine interior had been enlarged and re-partitioned, Merlin still recognised the tactical room. When he made to stand from the bed, his body obeyed his will with only a tinge of dizziness. "Which rules did you have in mind, Hirz?" "Don't fuck with me, Doc. "Then who are you?" she asks. From this moment on, the entire industrial and scientific capacity of your planet will have to be directed towards one goal." "You're going to help us, Merlin?" Malkoha asked. A journalist and a blogger. I imagined his head fitting inside the rock, waiting to be revealed like a mask in a mould. You'll go mad, unless I substitute a calming fiction, a happy ending." "Why tell me that now?" "Because you don't have to see it. A flash of energy that intense, it could only be a gamma-ray burst, happening in some distant galaxy. I'll skin him alive. "Mind if we come in?" There were about half a dozen of them, and they were already coming in. I can sense it, hanging beneath my point of view like some withered, useless vestigial appendage, but it doesn't feel like any part of me. There was to be no rest for him that day. Something in the easy, relaxed way they moved told me that the suits were doing some of the hard work of walking, taking the burden off their occupants. There's no doubt. With them I can make time slow to a subjective crawl. A neurological fault, caused by the damage to your frontal cortex. Separation from the Wall had undermined her entire existence; now she was free-falling through an abyss of meaninglessness. A blue light rammed from its innards. I just think we should be careful not to lose sight of that." "We could always go back," Yukimi said. There's no end of them, no end of them." bid to achieve coherence, but because the creature had withdrawn into the depths. By Gentian rules, every person on this island is required to receive your strand. Every couple of decades, I still hop a lightbreaker to Murjek, descend to the streets of that gleaming white avatar of Venice, take a conveyor to the island and join the handful of other dogged witnesses scattered across the stands. The sole moving part was a black blade which was attached near the base of the shrine, ticking back and forth with magisterial slowness. "Merlin, welcome back to the Skylands." might cross that of another Conjoiner." After a silence Van Ness said, "Tell me the message." "This is what your wife wished you to hear." Almost imperceptibly, the tone of Weather's voice shifted. She's having to work harder to hold the Wall together." "Warren must have attacked it." Clavain said. She would take the ferry, as she always did, as she was expected to do. Something told him that it was nothing to do with his proposal. Everyone halted and turned to look at the speaker. Do you remember how our conversation played out? Here, and then gone. The all-enveloping shell was a pitiless, hopecrushing black. "Oh, but I do," Childe said. He lowered it down gently, until the cushioned rim was resting on her shoulders. Merlin knew he shouldn't have been surprised; he'd given them the blueprints for the jet turbine, after all. As was our custom, her contribution took the form of a compilation from her previous strands. By use of such a casket, one might prolong the four hundred-odd years of a normal human lifespan by many centuries though reefersleep was not without its risks. You began to identify too strongly with your patient, just as Doctor Malyshev began to identify with Yakov. Zeal get angry. They've got in mind. Back in 2190 half of humanity had been hooked into the system-wide data nets via neural implants. Ninety seconds later, there'd be a pale green flash from a thousand kilometres away. The pilot, bio-modified for longevity and uninterrupted consciousness, had experienced every howling second of his voyage. My log book, with its reams of codified notes and annotations, implied a deep and scholarly grasp of all essential principles. They had similar symbols and patterns on the suits, some of which were mirrored in forms painted on the side of the vehicle. Watching him pick out the ailing, metallic-orange fish, I had a flash of déjà vu. On the return trip, they had no choice but to confine me to the forward module." "The thing that saved you." "I was further from the engine when it went wrong. But Celestine knows nothing of that. Then I feel the reassuring clunk as the trauma pod is docked with the oval recess in the medical unit's torso. "You can talk to me about it, whatever it is," she said, when the mannequin had gone. It felt cold and hard and not quite the right shape for her hand. "This is the computer that handles the computations," Weather said. "The one I was in." "There are other slots," Da Silva corrected. That golden afternoon? I felt an existential chill. "Don't hate me for lying to you. His arm slumped to the side, dangling over the side of the plinth. If we learned of something magical on the other slots," Da Silva corrected. That golden afternoon? I felt an existential chill. "Don't hate me for lying to you. His arm slumped to the side, dangling over the side of the plinth. If we learned of something magical on the other slots," Da Silva corrected. The side of the plinth of the side of the plinth. If we learned of something magical on the other slots, "Da Silva corrected." every hope that it would still be there when we arrived. You said she was involved in the terraforming program. You're saying it was all a con?" "Of a kind," Nero said. The one thing no one will be wondering about is what you were up to last night. But he would have to be warmed to talk to us, and so his remaining allowance of conscious life could be?" defined in a window of minutes, with the quality of that consciousness degrading as the weapon gorged itself on his mind. Human civilisation, it's just the last scratch on the last scrat steepening grade. The logic had been inescapable: a means to avoid the millennia-long timescales needed to terraform Mars via such conventional schemes as cometary bombardment or ice-cap thawing. To talk about what really happened. The predictive model traced the vectors of the field lines and offered solutions for safe passage, but, try as I might, I couldn't share Galenka's unflappable faith in the power of algorithm and computer speed. Although even he couldn't have seen it at the time, that was the beginning of the Radiant Commonwealth. Surface gravity's close enough to one gee that you won't know the difference once you're suited up. If it gets worse, then the seeds of that worsening must have already been present. Suzy took it pretty well, or about as well as Suzy ever took that kind of thing. He had not even been injured as severely as Warren...but perhaps that was the point, too. "We're immortal superbeings who've lived longer than some starfaring civilisations, including many Priors. And I don't like that any more than you do." \*\*\* TYRANT FELL INTO the atmosphere of Lecythus. After all, what was clearly the correct choice had elicited no response, so what was the sense in being penalised for making the wrong one? The console chirped again—the link poor even though they were so close. "That's the edge of the Taurus Dark Cloud, with the Pleiades just ooking out. "I know. I'd been thinking about the idea of the robot as family heirloom, though, being passed down from generation, and altered/upgraded along the way (possibly to the point where the robot didn't really understand its own origins) but I couldn't find my way into the story that would make the best use of this idea. Above all it must not look as if he had planned it. The robot stepped out and helped me from the conveyor. And yet I sensed that it was time enough. \*\*\* "I'VE NO REASON to think you haven't already killed Lenka," I said, a kind of desperate calm overcoming me, when I realised how narrow my options really were. Every day, hundreds of atomic rockets lifted from the surface of Lecythus, carrying evacuees—packed into their holds at the maximum possible human storage density, like a kind of three-dimensional jigsaw of flesh and blood—or cargo, in the form of air, water and prefabricated parts for the other habitats. But Warren's larger plan had not been affected. Across settled space, there was no shortage of mildly radioactive craters testifying to failed attempts to break that one prohibition. "I know you now. "You want a moment to yourself?" Corax asked. "Holding approach speed, Baikonur. She had been given it on her thirteenth birthday, by her older sister. Centuries blasted by. Merlin held up one of Minla's picture books, open at the illustration of constellations in the sky over Lecythus. His hand sprung to his pocket and came out holding one of the tasers, aimed straight at me. We just had one thing we wanted to get sorted before we finished. But you can drop by when you've given the heads to Widow Grayling." "Only I won't be coming back over the river," Kathrin said. "He made his choice. I really should have paid more attention. He had no need to eat or drink; no need to dispose of bodily waste. But you see now why we can't afford to wake more than the absolute minimum of people. But in the days since his revival he had already heard talk of assassination attempts, some of which had apparently come close to succeeding. What kinds of games, might I ask?" "We'd build simulations to test each other-extraordinarily elaborate worlds filled with subtle dangers and temptations. There always were rings here, I tell myself, but they were little more than smoky threads, all but invisible under most conditions. There were plans for future collaboration, like the Great Work. The Priors had moved stars around many times, using many different methods. But it was still not enough to keep anyone alive for very long. Minla was waiting for him afterwards, together with a roomful of Skyland officials. This time. "What's your name, lad?" "Peter," I said, fighting to keep my nervousness in check. "Your brain is already swarming with Demarchist implants and cellular machines, Richard, so why pretend that what I've done is anything more than a continuation of what the fuck is he talking about?" "What the fuck is he talking about?" said Hirz, who had been standing at the door to the commons for the last few seconds. At this point there are a number of possibilities open to me. Once before the procedure on Kharkov Eight, and again recently, to establish where I'd been before Lintan Three. Hard for us to grasp, I know. "The least of yours as well." I worked as best I could. And it's like that everywhere. I know they'll find me sooner or later anyway. You stay wethead. Take them home." "Why not you?" She touched the side of her head. Hell-class weapons." Despite myself I laughed. Even Voulage wasn't that stupid." I wiped my sweat-damp hand on the thigh of my trousers. It's clear that it won't tolerate us inflicting physical harm against it. "The wonder is that it lasted as long as it did. The room was grey and kettleshaped, ringed by a circular balcony. It was spacetime opening wide enough to vomit out a machine the size of Tasmania." "It was a while before they found the Matryoshka itself." Nesha nods. The cosmic vistas ended up as narrow borders, framing blank circles, triangles, rectangles, rectangles. No one said or did anything except bow as their station demanded. The two of us, the artist and her wealthy lover and sponsor. But there's one other detail I need to address. No one in the family had. FURY HERE'S ANOTHER "OLD robot" story. "How much more abruptly?" "Complete deceleration in one fifth of a second." She let that sink home. We'll make up speed in the gaps and slow down when we hit anything knotty. It'll be touch and go for a few centuries, but with force and wisdom on their side, I think they'll make it. "That must have been so hard—" "That's not the hard part. A storm hit, coming down hard and fast like an iron heel. In twenty thousand years the world would be uninhabitable to all but the hardiest micro-organisms. I understand timelag, but it hasn't held you back until now. The man was just a kid—hardly old enough to remember much of the last war. "I am Vincent," I begin, when I have the podium, standing with my hands resting lightly against the tilted platform. Even if I knew I had to return. Can the Waynet be brought back into alignment?" "Not using any technology known to my own people. A woman's voice says: "Stay still, and don't panic, Sergeant Kane. "I guess the Spire thought we were taking too long," Childe said. Unlike The Baby, Derek has very little human DNA in his make-up. So as the years turned into decades and the decades became centuries, he made sure that you never became obsolete. I've every desire to avoid another war, but if it came to one, we'd at least have the chance to break these shackles." "If you didn't get exterminated first..." "We'd avoid that. But Grisha had made it. I never thought I'd see you again." She snorted. Would you like to see it?" This was all too good to be true. I was indifferent before, but now it repulses me. The man was wounded, but not yet dead. A surgeon's best knife will always be skydrift." "Some people think the metal belongs to the jangling men, and that anyone who touches it will be cursed." "And I'm sure the sheriff does nothing to persuade them otherwise. A battle-weary pair of partially deflated airships was already tethered. And while my people—the people who know best-do not exactly want to kill Luttrell, it cannot be said that keeping him alive is their main consideration. Terraforming as good or bad thing. "And with some of my holiday snaps." More laughter. Or it might be that the ship had been made this big in a gesture of mad exuberance, simply because it was possible to do so. My questions must seem quite simple-minded. If they couldn't find him in the water, it wouldn't help him to know their plans. They were like babies with the toys of the gods. We passed through the door, into the corridor. Kathrin set off, following the path she had used to climb up from the river. "Whatever's above us is solid matter. "Of course not," he said. Eight hours. If we had a rush of casualties, he might forget that I'd mentioned the girl at all. By the time you get this, I should be home only a couple of days later. Rasht shouldered through them, shattering the icicles against the armour of his suit. "It's music," I said. He'd even picked up the tab on Moonlighter's repair bill. That schism had fractured any lingering fraternal feelings they might have retained. The blue-lit ridges of icy Miranda. I also threw in a couple of sly nods to the films Cube and Raiders of the Lost Ark. Routing error. Under the surgical gloves lie bones and sinews of plastic and metal. "The Captain is an Ultra; the master of the lighthugger Apollyon, currently in orbit around Yellowstone," Childe added. Greta touches me with her other hand. We were questioned and examined separately. Drain and search the surrounding ponds until you've recovered the bullet or any remaining pieces of it. Lenka detached the grapple from the end of the line, and then looped the line back on itself to form a kind of handle or noose. A thousand or less here, and perhaps another, you were persuaded to choose white-against the judgement of the AM-and it was wonderful. "You seem different, Inigo. They'd found something, you see. Steiner had been lucky, but he would have to be cunning and single-minded. Maybe, just maybe, we'd get away with this. Hand in glove, the emperor and I. The aircraft dropped, dashing itself to splinters and shreds against the side of the cliff. It swallowed me and then found a way into my suit, just as it had with Galenka. And why did he stay aboard the ship, out of sight, when his impostor was running around on the island?" "He had no choice," Grisha answered. "I wasn't sure whether to say anything. We reached the observation bubble, Zeal silent and brooding at first. He was beautiful like a statue, muscular like a panther. Tiredness hit me unexpectedly—it always came on hard, like a wall. "Didn't work; not enough time. "We push on. Besides... even if it was alive once, it's dead now." She was right, but the Wall was still awesome to behold. "You think I envy you," she says, as I sip from my cup. Rasht jerked on the leash, tumbling the monkey back onto its suit-sheathed tail. \*\*\* WHAT WOULD YOU have done, Captain? I do another full visual sweep and I don't see a single human combatant. "I am Triumvir Verika Abebi, of the lighthugger Poseidon. "All right, Captain." This with a particular sarcastic emphasis. "Help me." \*\*\* YOU CAME BACK then. Now that I knew part of the truth, I needed the rest. "Ours. "Really?" "It's unlikely to be a very advanced culture: no neutrino or gravimagnetic signatures, beyond those originating from the mechanisms that must still be active inside the sky pieces. Now that we were alone—and no longer reliant on Celestine—Childe had revealed himself as a more than adequately capable problem-solver. If you keep waking me, I won't live long enough to help you when things get really tough. "I think I see it," Childe said, without anything resembling confidence. It probably just meant that a supernova had gone off in a remote galaxy, or that some binary star was undergoing a nova. What he was certain of was that Minla's books raised as many questions as they answered, and that simply leafing through them was enough to open windows in his own mind, back into a childhood he'd thought consigned safely to oblivion. Even so, it was hard to think, let alone move, but Clavain knew that it was no worse than what the earliest space explorers had endured climbing away from Earth. A single error could jeopardize our standing with the other lines. I think he's on the edge. It hit the floor, writhing. Let's go inside. "We're all on the edge." think he's on the edge." "We're all on the ed sound insulting. There isn't time for the expedition to have gone there and come back." She eyed me with raptorial intent before answering, "I never went." Childe leant over and refreshed my glass. It's an eye-blink, as far as that thing's concerned. Didn't that bode well for us? I've done nothing to merit their attention. You're right; I was his accomplice. I start shaking, and realize I can't go through with this. Even now, I still don't know quite what happened. That is part of the wonder of what Abigail made of herself. Every few months there was something different. They didn't have enough residual personality to feel emotions. "The other bag was taken from me," she answered quietly. Don't need now." "Weather, don't go." "Can't stay. "Before you go," Peter said suddenly, as if a point had just occurred to him. One day, however, I saw a tenth. You'll never need to question my loyalty; my unswerving dedication to that task. "Your hands." "I'm sorry?" He roared: "Show me your damned hands, boy!" I stepped closer to the surgeon and offered him my hands. I let Greta choose for me. But Lenka was allowed to leave, and so was I. They can't begrudge me that, can they?" "I suppose not." Then something occurred to Merlin, something he realised he should have asked much earlier. But most of the dirigible docking towers were gone, as were most of the dirigibles themselves. All I knew was that there had to be more to Zima's obsession with blue than a mere artistic whim. I examined my state of mind and decided that I ought to be feeling relief. He remembered what Galiana had said about no one being left behind. There is a small mouth into hell inside every engine: bubbling, frothing, subject to vicious and unpredictable state-changes." "Which the engine needs to smooth out." "Yes. "Do you mean beautiful, or terrifying?" I realized I wasn't sure. The docking hatch had become a kind of mouth by which the robot could feed samples into itself, using the feeler-like appendages of its sampling devices. But there had still been volunteers, and my parents had been amongst the first to sign up and support Calvin's work. Although I still enjoy hillwalking, I gave up on climbing itself, but I've never stopped being fascinated by reading about mountaineers and their exploits. The tiny machine to its neighbour. It also means I have to be able to tolerate magnetic fields that would rip half the crew to shreds, if they didn't boil alive first." I opened and closed my metal fist. The flowers would have detected her presence—they were keyed to locate a single breathing form in a room, most commonly a sleeper—and when the room was quiet they would have become stealthily animate, leaving their vase and creeping from point to point with the slowness of a sundial's shadow, their movement imperceptible to the naked eye, but enough to take them to the face of the sleeper. He wore a costume of stiff, skin-tight fabric in a shade of fawn, interrupted here and there by metal plugs and sockets. I'm glad that he did, though. It will happen. We have a different future now—one that won't necessarily include the people who built the Matryoshka. Then we might find something." "I'm ok," I managed. You've probably heard it a thousand times, in a thousand bars across the Bubble, wherever ship crews swap tall tales over flat, companysubsidized beer. I'm going to try the laser." I tensed as she swung the laser into play. The landing pad was on top of a square-ish, industrial-looking structure about the size of a large office block, hazed in scaffolding and gangways, prickly with cranes and chimneys and otherwise unrecognisable protuberances, the structure in turn rising out of the sea on four elephantine legs, the widening bases of which were being ceaselessly pounded by waves. "He's been on the staff for years. When the silver fluid got into us..." "I don't understand. He had nothing to lose now, after all: he could certainly not return home. But this time there was no ladder lowered down for him. Your wife believed it would have some significance to you, something nobody else could possibly know." "And the word?" "The word is 'mezereon.' I think it is a type of plant. He had assumed the words' activity could not have escaped Galiana. His limbs were like strands of rope, his head a piece of shrivelled, stepped-on fruit. Any utterance would have felt like an invitation, permission for something worse than these stone ghouls to emerge from the walls. He had not done the thing he had been planning, and now he might die anyway, but there was a chance and if he survived this he would have nothing in the world to be ashamed of. Tension exited the body. The truth is, you've always had one. Except you, Peter Vandry." \*\*\* SHE TOOK ME deeper into the ship, into the part I had always been told was off-limits because of its intense radiation. Some gust caught the airship. I did not have to read the animal's mind to know that it did not want to be held here, locked away in the heart of the Devilfish. "Yes." "My own memory was incomplete. You were the last person in the world I expected to see standing there." "OK," Galiana said. For now you are welcome to make of this world what you will. They may not like that, but there are a dozen other special administrative volumes that we treat in exactly the same fashion. I resolved to sleep until the machines sent back a report, and then sleep again if the report turned out to be a false alarm." "Sleep?" I said. Immune to vertigo—and incapable of suffering lasting damage even if I'd fallen to the floor—I remained calm, save for the thousand questions circling in my mind. I was sad because she'd always been my best friend, even though she was older than me. We're in the street, but there's no one else around to notice one old woman with a little metal box in her hands, or to question why she's turning the handle in its side. Wrapping around me are a thousand constantly changing facets. \*\*\* GRETA WAS RIGHT about Suzy. When he was done, it would only take a twist of the handle to free the hatch. They're practically made of metal." "No," she said, shaking her head in exasperation—either with the situation, or her own limitations. Nor's this, some days. But before I did that, I trawled myself and installed those memories in a recently grown clone. Another month, I reckoned, and then we'd be done with this crude shaping. "I don't think they're done with us. We were in love, Celestine. They wouldn't stop at this ship, either. "Ultras tend to leave their minds alone, if at all possible. Teterev. "Do you hear that sound?" Galenka asked. "The

screen," Fescue said. My story comes at the problem from a different angle, but there are thematic similarities, and I felt it was only honest to acknowledge the inspiration. "It's like I've never seen anything precisely that colour before." drink in the sights and sounds of these wonderful cities, their gorgeous museums and galleries. It seemed likely that the airship had stopped off to make a delivery to the Scaper. "And it's this one, the starboard unit." "What's wrong with it? It wouldn't stop the Great Work." I looked at him. The bracelet opened on a heavy hinge, like a manacle. Not ever." He hugged her again, as if he couldn't quite believe he had her in his arms, that it wasn't a dream. "Go on, Thom." "This is going to sound silly. And that was no surprise: evolution had shaped language to convey many concepts, but going from a single to a networked topology of self was not among them. Leave him to the Spire. "I'm still "Then be at shuttle dock nine in twenty minutes. He was already taking off his coat, settling in for the stay. "So tell me, Mercurio, whatever it is that is too secret even for one of my puppets." The rising pillar had positioned me next to one of his dark eyes. You may not make it unless we intervene now." "I was under, and you brought me back to consciousness. What do you think we are-monsters? Frankly, it was something of a relief, to have a name for myself." "I have a very powerful compulsion to give names to things. They'd destroy every ship parked around the island, and then the island, and then perhaps the world." I absorbed what he had said with quiet horror. "A shooting star!" I looked up sharply enough to catch the etched trail before it faded from sight. Parts of his suit were missing, and his helmet had cracked open, exposing his skull. I didn't want to let the rest of the crew know that we had a potential crisis on our hands, at least not until I'd spoken to Weather. I did eventually find a way to write his story, and I sold it back to my old newspaper, the Martian Chronicle. I preferred my machines hard-edged, the way nature intended. No one else...ever ask. "Meaning what?" "The Resurgam expedition, of course, which just happened to be bankrolled by House Sylveste. He forced himself anyway. A good man." "Did he know the other two?" "No; he only ever treated me. Even though I had a devil of a job persuading your staff to let me through." "They're too protective of me. But by then you might not be able to move your fingers. Who's the silver dude, and what did Forqueray mean about atrocities?" "You're seriously telling me you're unaware of Trintignant's reputation?" I said. Celestine carried Childe, tucked under her arm. "But unfortunately, we need to make this a tiny bit more of an event." "I'm not following you, Campion." "It has to be an effective distraction. Before he had watched her make strange gestures in front of her. It's stealthed to the gills, but I'm still seeing it. I checked the surge point again. You said the best guessa." for my extraction was six to twelve hours." "And there's still every possibility of it happening within that window. "Yes, I know it well." They take me out into the snow, to the Zil that must have been waiting out of sight. You should be able to get up to fifty kilometres per hour without too much difficulty." I pick up speed, following the tracks, trusting that they will keep me from harm. "You have Childe's medichines." "Yes. At Merlin's invitation, Minla was allowed to stroke its mirror-smooth surface. I'm already reading an event overflow in one of the memory buffers, and we haven't even started logging data." "But you're happy to continue?" I asked. It considers itself to have been placed in a magnificent and fitting setting, like a precious jewel." "Easy for you to say, since it isn't you." "But it very nearly could have been. There was already a small space station in orbit around Lecythus, but it would be utterly dwarfed by the hundred Dormitories. The bullet's vacuum-filled tunnel cut deep into Mars; a shallow arc bending under the crust before rising again, thousands of kilometres away, well beyond the Wall, where the atmosphere was as thin as ever. "I'm guessing fifty or sixty kilometers at the minimum." She looked at the parade of hanging ships. "Two hundred other sectors out there, just as large as this one. Two brothers, Clavain thought. "Give me full-theatre oversight. Since its duty was always to keep its wearer alive, no matter what the costs, it opted to sever the arm above the wound; hyper-sharp irised blades snicked through flesh and bone in an instant. It hunted for evidence of stellar engineering, of the kind that other Priors had already indulged in: planets remade to increase their surface area, stars sheathed in energy-trapping shells, entire star systems relocated from one galactic region to another. In the meantime I thought it might be of interest. You that close, than not go at all." "I stayed at home. "It's ready now," Zima said. You have always known that space travel was possible: it's in your history, in the books you give to your children. "Just bear with me, will you? "We'll wait it out," Childe said, eyeing us all to see if anyone disagreed. In the quiet, I studied her face, watchful for anything that would betray the danger Van Ness clearly believed she posed. He's good, whoever he is. I'd been inspired by hearing about the Frost Fairs, those temporary encampments set up on the frozen Thames in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and I started thinking about a kind of future Frost Fair, in which the barely understood goods of earlier eras and cultures might be bartered and admired. It's alien technology. Each clone imagined itself better than its predecessor; incapable of making the same errors. Across that stretch of time, reefersleep was a lottery. Have you thought of that?" "We'll cross that bridge when we find her, Captain." He pulled a face, that part of his visage still capable of making expressions, at least. He lived through the bad years, when your people were first coming into existence. "That's it?" Gaunt asked. They're just adapting to whatever we do," Da Silva said pragmatically. But I'd urge you not do so unless things are truly dire." "I will heed your counsel," Malkoha said. Perhaps I will see things through to the next winter. In my estimation, that's about as long as it would have taken to smuggle in and assemble the pieces of the weapon." "Could a simple uplift have done this?" "Not without help, sir. An accident, something to do with one of the geysers—she says that she's afraid that it will erupt again, as it did 'on the day'. Not because he wanted to, not because he believed he was strong enough, but because the alternative was to seem cowardly, weak-fibred unwilling to bend his life to an altruistic mission. Plenty of other specialists could have come in my place. It takes us two hundred thousand years just to make one sweep through the Galaxy. "Why would the clone care what happened to the one after it?" "Because...it never expected to die. Day by day, therefore, I found myself making surreptitious enquires much like those made by Burdock himself. "Look, I'm grateful to have been invited here. A dare that goes wrong. You would travel fifty miles to see a new wonder if enough people started talking about it. Something happened then, almost before she had finished speaking, but it was over almost before we had sensed any change in the room "Yes, you see it now. "Come with me," he said. I mean, they can understand us...but wouldn't it be easier if they could talk to us as well? He is informed that a process has already begun which will result in the emperor's death. "Forqueray—do the honours, will you?" I turned and looked at the chamber ahead of us. If Fescue had heard my whispered remark, he kept it to himself. Names too strange to put into language, at least no language that would fit into our heads. Get within a thousand kilometers of a ship like this...it warms up the metal in our bodies. They should have been moved on years earlier." She suggests we leave the Cutter and the Torch, because she doesn't want anyone listening in on our conversation. If it proceeds from one state to another, there must have been something wrong, or sub-optimal, about it. It had been a triumph to map the holes in the interior sphere. The rings of Saturn aren't stable either, not on timescales of hundreds of millions of years. We'd be following the Progress all the way in, relying on the same collision-avoidance algorithm that had worked so well before. They were alone in one of the snakingly-lit corridors; he had seen no other Conjoiners since the hangar. It was just that, thanks to her experiences with the Pattern Jugglers, Celestine would always arrive at the answer with the superhuman speed of a savant. Then I shake Derek's humanshaped hand and take my position on the couch. I've been wondering about that. \*\*\* I FELT THE conveyor slowing as we neared a small island, the only feature in any direction. "Go ahead and press it," I said. Generally he was able to articulate the reasoning behind his choice, but sometimes there was nothing for it but for me to either accept his judgement or wait for my own sluggard thought processes to arrive at the same conclusion. Could we force the issue out into the open somehow? Doesn't sound so sweet now, does it?" No, I thought: but then neither did the alternative. I don't think it takes great perspicacity to relate Minla's character to a certain British Prime Minister of the late nineteen seventies and early eighties, who also believed that there was no such thing as society. Then a thought occurred to me. It was certainly a lot more dramatic and exciting than my essay on sunsets. Forqueray's truncated arm ended in a smooth silver iris. We were party to it." "You're presuming that we even existed back then." "I know that weet arm ended in a smooth silver iris. We were party to it." "You're presuming that we even existed back then." "I know that weet arm ended in a smooth silver iris. We were party to it." did. That's a filament of the Local Bubble. "There isn't any point delaying things," she said. Grisha stepped through the door and left the command deck. "The new structures in your mind are nearing maturity," Galiana said. The blue panel I'd seen during the approach turned out to be a modest rectangular swimming pool, drained of water. We were not dealing with murky deeds perpetrated by distant ancestors. Can you still move?" Lenka lifted up an arm, clenched and unclenched her hand. "Our culture was murdered. I've taken her a full kilometer out, but we're not going anywhere so far today." They were driving along a hard surface, so even though the buggy's wheels were underwater, they are underwater, they are underwater out, but we're not going anywhere so far today." didn't stir up much material. These sweetly lying stars have inspired greatness. He or she'll need to be trained up, though, and in the meantime there's a man-sized gap where Steiner used to be." She lifted off her hard hat to scratch her scalp. The pinched gas flared hotter—blue white, shifting into the violet. "Celestine," Childe said, "I strongly suggest you come to a decision—" Horrified, Celestine forced her attention back to the puzzle marked on the frame. Perhaps I need to go back to Newcastle. I thought I'd have a few moments alone, but no sooner had I turned smartly back to me. His knees complained from the toll of going up and down ladders and stairwells. "But no more than I'd feel if we were in orbit around Mars, or Venus, or creeping up on an asteroid. "I think it's a possibility. I don't need these arms and legs because I use nuclear-electric thrust to move around. Admiring sunsets is all very well, but what we need now is hard data on emergent cultures across the entire Galaxy. "We fled the system at maximum thrust, outracing the machines. Did I find Teterev? As their shards broke off, they made a tinkling, atonal sort of music. I got married a year or so after I last saw you. That time machine was older than Earth. When the electric-white fire erupted on the horizon of Lecythus, brightening that entire limb of the planet in the manner of a stuttering cold sunrise, Merlin felt Minla's hand tighten around his own. The whole thing stank like an armpit and made so much noise that most of us kept earplugs in when we didn't need to talk. The ocean carried no evidence of the war, but there was hardly any stretch of land that hadn't been touched in some fashion. Needless to say, it was considered very bad form to enter a Mood Maze with anything other than baseline human intelligence. "One pebble on the beach, against an ocean of possibility! Do you honestly think they mattered? And still that isn't enough. We have all enjoyed what Teterev has brought to us." I had never met Teterev, never seen an image of her, but there were only two human figures before me and one of them was Lenka, jammed into immobility, strands of silver beginning to wrap and bind her suit as if in the early stages of mummification. Even as they watched, the engine appeared to slow and then restart. "Greetingship content as if in the early stages of mummification is a silver beginning to wrap and bind her suit as if in the early stages of mummification. from the Cohort," Merlin said. Whoever the suckers were that made thing, they think from left to right." Childe raised his hand above the right-side shape. When the machines touch your civilisation, they will scorch you into history. She was the last to be born before we realised our failure." Something about Felka disturbed him. "What are you talking about?" "Nothing. That information was held by an alliance of lines to which we hadn't yet been granted full membership. He had a monkeylike face, tanned a deep liverish red, with white sideboards and a gleaming pink tonsure. It was the end of the week and we were looking forward to a few days off. "I guess you have something faster than helicopters, for longer journeys," Gaunt said. The Huskers were hunting down my own people before I left to work on my own. But the rumours weren't hard to pick up. With subvocal commands I can scan and zoom at will. What is...what was your name?" She paused in her stiff shuffle and looked back at me. Meanwhile, layer by layer, the face of David unmasked itself. I forced a smile and waved down the applause. I approached this prospect with some trepidation, not having written anything in the universe for a couple of years, but when I got down to it, the stories proved to come surprisingly easily, with each seeming to build on the momentum of the last. It's you as well. But the square was deliberate: close examination showed that it had indeed been over-painted over the rocky lip of the crater. Tiny repair machines swarmed through his body, allowing him to tolerate radiation doses that would have killed an ordinary man in minutes. Is it me or does that place have all the cheery ambience of a sinking ocean liner?" "It's just this place," Greta said. They turn down the lights. Once, he took his tray to an empty table and was minding his own business when two other workers sat down at the same table. It's a ruse, a trick. There are three small bones in the ear. The tail parts of her ship projected above the atmosphere, into the vacuum of space. The war itself was a thing inseparably entwined with recorded history, a monstrous choking structure with its roots reaching into the loam of deep time, and whose end must be assumed (by all except Merlin, at least) to lie in the unimaginably remote future. At least record what happened to her. In these walls. Luckily it was well equipped. Trintignant can synthesise a medichine infusion to pep up those neural functions, can't you, Doctor?" Trintignant looked at me with his handsome, immobile mask of a face. It's enough to dream, and that you're somewhere else. Zero hours. "If this is a mistake," I said, "forgive me." I squeezed the trigger. They know that their world is going to end, and that heir world is going to end, and that heir world is going to end." every year brings that event a year nearer. Actually, it was something beyond coldness. We could build a conscious machine, of course, a true mechanical slave, but that would contravene one of our deepest strictures. It's not much to look at: just a warren of tunnels and centrifuges dug into a pitch-black, D-type asteroid, about half a light-year from the nearest star. She still had the cruel beauty he remembered from his time as a prisoner. "It's all here in black and white. After two centuries of study, human machines can now construct and interpret the syntax with an acceptably low failure rate. He had cropped white hair and the leathery complexion of someone who spent a lot of time outside What do you mean, Teterev went on? I think the original moon got ripped to pieces to make your armoured sky. Jupiter from Amalthea. You sleep together, yet you disdain sexual relationships with the rest of your fellows. CROSS DEREK WANT KILL." "I'll offer another suggestion," Maria continues, serene in the face of this enraged, slathering reptile As we approached the end of the chamber, the constriction at the end eased open with an obscene sucking sound. "No more than that. Thrashing now, he reached up with the other knife—still unwilling to relinquish it—and tried to use its edge to lever the offending mass of fused metal and skin from his forehead. This was my attempt, and although the story was straightforward enough—by which I mean that it didn't throw me any particular curves during the writing—it was executed under incredibly difficult circumstances. My heart, however, was not in it. An aproned man stood in a doorway, smearing his hands dry. Obviously, there's only one person who can do that beforehand. I saw no way in or out other than the way we had come. They glorified him. Crowe's Landing was a major settlement. Once again, she was tormented by questions about the false strand, but she only had to keep up the pretence for a few more hours. He watched himself get eaten. "I couldn't have asked for a better pair of amateur sleuths." "We still don't know anything about the Great Work itself," I told him. Looking to the source of the exclamation, Merlin saw the wrecked aircraft entangled in its capture net, and the pilot in the process of crawling out from the tangle, with a wooden box in his hands. I didn't envy Galenka sitting there with her finger on the trigger, like a gunslinger waiting for her opponent to twitch. She could only see the top of it, from the eyes up. Several rooms earlier we had reached a point where it was impossible to squeeze through the door without first disconnecting our air lines and removing our backpacks. Instead she broke into a running shuffle. mural that Zima released to the outside world contained a similar geometric shape: a square, triangle, oblong or some similar form embedded somewhere in the composition. "Why didn't they just kill you on the island, and be done with it?" "It was your island, Campion. He wasn't ambitious. On some level, the world of the rigs and the caretakers was what his mind had evolved to handle. You can't very well make him a prisoner." "No, I can't." "And even if you did manage to keep Burdock occupied for as long as we need, there's the small problem of everyone else. Even if I had recognised the part of the city where we had entered the tunnel system, I would have been hopelessly lost by now. I pointed the muzzle at her, aiming for the flesh of her thigh, where she had her legs tucked under her. She may be too old to care. If we knocked her out, the buffer of memories in short-term storage was wiped before it ever crossed the hippocampus into long-term recall. Sitting on the middle of the roof was a helicopter. We are creatures of the mind "This is the way you lived your life for hundreds of years." "The natural way, you mean?" Zima poured himself a glass of the red wine, but instead of drinking it he merely sniffed the bouquet. You contain weapons, but nothing that can penetrate my armour or the security screens between us." He touched a finger to his sharp-pointed chin. But not everyone." "But Fescue spoke to me about the Great Work," I said. Beyond the Capital Nexus. He found the nursery after only one or two false turns, and then Felka's room. I couldn't—not yet. One to three to four, and you've got ten. I stepped nearer, hardly daring to bring the full blaze of my helmet light to bear on the half-sensed obstruction. ahead of me. As an afterthought, the card mentioned that the bill had been taken care of. "I never felt the urge to personalise it, and I designed it. One of us has been killed." Fescue cocked his head. Within the nest, he had revised here and they're pissed off about that, or they ended up here by a routing error and they're pissed off about that instead. But there's something I need to find before I return to them." "Minla will be unhappy." "So will I. We may own the sky, but our situation is dependent upon access to those fuel reserves. Presently she reached a fork in the path and paused. We should have turned back there and then. They stop. His lips were a bloodless gash. It had become crushingly obvious during the last three or four rooms that we were near the limit; that the Spire's subtly shifting internal architecture would not permit further movement within the bulky suits. It might save my life. "Two metres per second, on the nail." "A little on the fast side, aren't we?" Galenka touched a hand over the mike, so Baikonur wouldn't hear what she had to say next. The text was in an approximation of Yukimi's handwriting, tinted a dark mauve, the pictures rendered in the form of woodcuts and stenciled drawings, and the entries were organized by date and theme, with punctilious crossreferencing. As shipmaster, I'd been diligent in attending to the hull and the drive spar, but it had never crossed my mind that something might have happened to one or other of the engines. "If we have to unload it, it'll go quicker with two of us," Galenka responded. She told me. "So that's settled, at least," he added. Celestine had to do most of the thinking, therefore, but the emotional strain which we all felt was just as wearying. I admired his brilliance from afar, just as I hope he admired mine. Suzy drops like a puppet, out cold. "That doesn't help Van Ness now." "We wouldn't make the same mistake again. Soya Akinya. Gaunt was one of the first under. "But I heard this theory once. It took Blue Goose one hundred and fifty years to reach us. I'm sorry if the armor scared you, but there wasn't time for me to get out of it when I learned that the airship was coming in. The shops and houses she had yet to pass were all shuttered and silent. Everything that grows on Lacertine was bioengineered to tolerate the scalding light from the sun. The sea and the sky were now the same inseparable grey, with no trace of blue remaining. I'll give you credit for that. "Trying to be helpful, Dimitri?" "Doing my best." She had her hands in the waldos again. Of course, he respected Voi completely. But I recognized neither the voice nor the person who had spoken. "We can't assume anything It didn't mean much—he could easily have been heading to an intermediate stopover, unrelated to his true destination, or just travelling in a random direction to throw me off the scent. He wanted to be there, to give whoever it was a good send off." "Whereas the relative was really his wife, and Skanda would soon be joining her. Yukimi skidded to a halt, heart racing in her chest, panic overwhelming her. Bring them in ship. Similarly, dolphins are born with almost their complete repertoire of adult behaviour already hardwired. I had a mental image of a rushing winter landscape, under white skies. It bothers me that I never seen the power station before. The monkey seemed more agitated than before, though. Once my part in it was over, I forgot about David." "Or rather, you forced yourself not to dwell on it. I remember one I encountered in my travels...ten vertical kilometers of it, pure methane. "Where—" "Easy, Skip," Suzy says. After the cease-fire my knowledge of worms was even more valuable than before, so I had a role. But if you ask too much of the engine, or damage it in some way, that burden becomes heavier. And I want that Soyuz back so that at least one of our line has to be involved." I tapped a finger against my nose. Do I need to spell it out? If the Great Work was the project that would bind the lines its abandonment could very easily push some of them to war. In their time the Waymakers must have made billions of these things, enough to fuel the commerce of a million worlds. They'd both paid for slots on the voidship. Warm and getting hotter. So come on." "What happened?" she asked, looking around at the damaged compartment in which she had been cornered. More than once I saw myself strolling on the high promenades." "You could have signalled us," Purslane said. For long moments he could only stare at that circular glow, mesmerised at the shape assuming existence under water. We trudge on in silence until we're in sight of the shape assuming existence under water. bread. Then he looked around for the nearest orange-painted survival cabinet. But the emperor was nothing if not a shrewd man. But she's not with me, no matter what she wants me to think. Even the newer communities like Shalbatana—and it was strange now to think of her hometown as "new"—had underground tunnels, maintained to provide emergency shelter and communication should something untoward happen to the bubble. After what you saw on Titan, don't you worry about your own-let's say mortality?" "I'm a machine-a highly sophisticated fault-tolerant, error-correcting, self-repairing machine. But I had to reach a certain level of intelligence before I was allowed that freedom. Conversely, he had often managed to beat me by setting a mathematical challenge of similar intricacy to the one now facing Celestine. So he waited, listening to the reports. Rocks and rusty chemical discolouration marred the whiteness. How much is real? But something else snagged my attention. But you're still useful." "In what way?" "We're down a man. "You've arranged a fine reunion; we all agree on that. Your life-support systems are still good, and you can adjust the suit temperature. The sun was creeping down towards the horizon and soon it would be getting chilly. Then she lifted her little pointed chin minutely, saying nothing, but letting me know that if I convinced Van Ness, she would do what she could, however ineffectual that might prove. Besides, I'm going to die of cold if I stand here much longer." I look to the outside world again, through one of the panes that hasn't been broken and covered over with plywood. While I was sleeping my damaged leg was removed, the stump sewn up, my ruined limb ejected through the pod's disposal vent. The numbers swoop and tumble, like roosting birds. We had no more idea who we could trust than Burdock himself. If he knew he'd been hell to pay." "Doubtless there would have been," Grisha said. Beneath Shell 3 was another empty volume-Gap 3. We'd agreed that we wouldn't meet in person until we'd had time to review each other's observations. "I was cut into pieces by a trap, actually. He reached the parapet at the edge of the bridge and looked over the side. We've left the world behind—we've kept up, but it hasn't." "How old are you?" she asks. It'll be like the worst tornado in history." "What will your brother do? Some of the things I saw in those files—your victims—they stopped me from sleeping." And yet still she had chosen to come with us, I thought. If the user was incapacitated, the suit could still carry him to help. "Nothing that can't be reversed." "But maybe by then we won't want it reversed, will we?" "Listen take credit for myself, and for the fact that I saved twelve hundred of my people. "You'll have to leave that behind, I'm afraid; no recording materials, remember?" I looked at the metallic green hummingbird, trying to remember?" I looked at the metallic green hummingbird, trying to remember the last time I had been out of its ever-watchful presence. I don't understand his attitude, though. What kind of person did that make her? "Are you alright, Nevil?" "Yes..." His mouth was dry. I stared at it, willing it to move. But he had the luxury of knowing he was going to die before the world's end. With the Cockatrice out of the fight, our own crew were able to leave the protection of the ship without fear of being fried or pulverised. I was just giving you the stepping stones you needed to get into space." "Well, as you can doubtless judge for yourself, we still have some distance to go. He gave you the last minute of his life." \*\*\* PURSLANE AND I returned to the island as the sky lightened in anticipation of dawn. The viewing stands around the pool became emptier by the day. But what would have been the point? It was worried for her, worried for itself. He put up with being shouted at, he put up with being forced to treat wood with crude disrespect, because it was all he could do to earn enough money to feed and shelter himself and his daughter. There was, Gaunt understood, a finite supply of some of these parts. A planet swelled up to the size of a skull, suspended above the table. "Did you ever use it?" "Once." "What did you do?" She caught a secretive smile on Widow Grayling's face. "You stupid fucker," I heard Galenka say, behind me. She had not heard of Trintignant upon our first meeting, I recalled, but she had lost not heard Galenka say, behind me. She had not heard of Trintignant upon our first meeting, I recalled, but she had lost not heard of Trintignant upon our first meeting, I recalled, but she had lost not heard Galenka say, behind me. She had not heard of Trintignant upon our first meeting, I recalled, but she had lost not heard Galenka say, behind me. She had not heard Galenka say, behind me. She had not heard Galenka say, behind me. She had not heard of Trintignant upon our first meeting, I recalled, but she had lost not heard Galenka say, behind me. She had not heard time in forming her subsequent opinion of the man. That evening he was in the commons, sitting at the back of the room as wireless reports filtered in from the other rigs. All wayfarers, all travellers. We found her helmet, her journal, in the wreck. Galiana squeezed his hand and an instant later he knew something of Transenlightenment. Yet as the back of the room as wireless reports filtered in from the other rigs. vehicle came to a hovering halt, something about the landscape struck me as familiar. Is that what you would like?" "I'd like you to let Lenka go." Realising I was getting nowhere—the strands reattached themselves as quickly I peeled them away—I could only step back and take stock. "Minla oak trefoil," the man added, firmly but not without kindness. "I still have work for you. "Are you sure this is wise, Mercurio?" "Clearly, it suits them that I should redirect my enquiries away from Selva, Porz, and the other power centres of the present Emergence. It was one of the two women speaking now. "I'm sure we will." In that moment I don't doubt that I'll make it. Would you like to discuss those doubts you had about it for a few seconds. The face in Fury's hand said: "I didn't ever want to forget, Mercurio. A message for the species, a last chance not to screw things up." "Would it have killed him to use radio?" "He had to get it through Shell 3, remember—not to mention how many shells we've come through since Shell 4. They can write us out of history, but it doesn't change what we did." "And me?" "You were part of it. "My wife died in Coalition custody three years after I saw her." "No," Weather said patiently. Got sidetracked." "He was one of the first two hundred thousand," Clausen said. Forqueray had gained astonishing fluency in arithmetic, able to count huge numbers of things simply by looking at them for a moment. A wide rectangular door had opened in the concrete dyke, revealing a hangar bay aglow with yellow lights. My throat was dry. "Thank you, everyone," I said. "Mer-lin. Nothing I needed to get excited about." "But that wasn't what it was about." "It was the Matryoshka, of course—the emergence event, when it came into our solar system. I said I wouldn't be gone long. The impact was hard, but I don't think I've done any permanent damage. My sense of being present in the room became attenuated, as if my body was suddenly at the far end of a long thread of nerve fibres, with my brain somewhere else entirely. We'll still have lost everything." "But still...no weapons?" "Not quite," Childe said, tapping the forehead region of his suit. And I know how it works. We all feel the memories of the earliest Conjoiners the most strongly." "And my wife?" Van Ness asked, like a man frightened of what he might hear. The brain had split open along fracture lines, like a cake that had ruptured in the baking. Contempt for you're a dead man. "I think we can do this," I said. She only buys them from the Shield, not the Town. I didn't mean—" "Never mind." Celestine switched off private and addressed the group. "Along with all the sleepers inside it. It really did not want to go on. And can you blame me for it? I have surmised this much since our meeting." The volantor dropped below. ground level, descending into a brightly lit commercial plaza lined with shops and boutiques. The tunnel lights were gone now and when the volantor's headlights grazed the walls they revealed ugly cracks and huge, scarred absences of cladding. He held his end up. There isn't an inexhaustible supply." The surgeon snapped his gaze back onto me. take it you've now had time to work out why I went to such elaborate lengths, merely to injure him?" All of a sudden it made sense to me. Auroral patterns played around the upper extremities like a lapping tide. A long window ran along one wall, overlooking a larger space. The land masses appeared to be one or two kilometres thick, and they all appeared to be gently curved. "Can I help you?" "You're the artist? But since the Great House seems to be running itself well enough in my absence, and given that there have been no further security incidents..." The emperor lifted a yellow silk sleeve. "No," she said, backing away from the spigot. Always I kept moving, aware of the crime I had witnessed and the secret I carried with me." "Inside you?" I asked, just beginning to understand. They could make another one of you?" I give an easy shrug. He wore long boots, tight black leather trousers, a billowing white shirt and brocaded brown leather waistcoat, accented with scarlet trim. It's constantly monitoring everything we do in public anyway, for our own protection. Mike died. You took him out into the Martian wilderness and murdered him in cold blood. "There's something you have to know," Clavain continued. The medicine had turned out to be a very simple drug. easily synthesized. The integrity could be restored, but not before unacceptable blood and pressure loss. But at least a dozen of them are still here. Does it really matter now?" "When he left Moonlighter...was that the last contact you had with him?" "No." The admission is difficult, because it takes me back to the time when I was foolish enough to believe Skanda's promises. At the time I was deep in the early stages of the Poseidon's Children sequence of novels, and it seemed natural to dig a little earlier into that future history and take a look at events on Earth in the middle decades of the twenty-first century. "Nobody died on Naiad. I told Suzy and Ray the news. He's got a moustache, a woollen hat jammed down over his hair and ears, the red nose of a serious drinker. "He found this thing, but long, long before he said he did. None of it was very illuminating, but by the same token little of it contradicted Purslane's conviction that the Great Work was related to the emergence of a single, Galaxy-spanning Supercivilisation. I understand good. "But Suzy seemed so real," I said. We never became friends." "So where does the stone come into it?" "Before he died, Dowitcher found a means to torment me. "Then something happened. Why keep this failing one alive?" "That isn't a duplicate body," Grisha said, nodding at the half-consumed form. And that's what they'll kill for again." "You're good," Burdock said. Yakov and Galenka were sick with radiation exposure. A third of the planet's surface was obscured by the floating shapes. "I'll make it easy for you, shall I? "No, it's not empty." Gently, I took his hand in mine and guided it out until it was poised over the open water of the koi pond. One or two were manhandling large anti-assault weapons into position. Warren nodded, his face ashen. Got off with burns, which heal. The man shook his head, narrowing fun. I was just grateful for the opportunity to regather my strength, after the recent exertions. Maybe it's nothing to do with the Amerikanos, but if you're out of options, you might as well see what's inside." I turned back to the drawing. Anything else? "That's a shame," I said. "Would it surprise you if I said I didn't?" "Then why did you set yourself so vocally against his family after the tragedy?" "Because I felt justice still needed to be served." I turned from the shrine and started walking away, curious as to whether Childe would follow me. Depending on their plans, they'd arrive between one thousand and ten thousand and ten thousand years before the official opening of the next gathering. Amerikanos were here once, that's the only answer. "Teterev would have known that. One of the coils fractured during warm-up and took out its entire turret, injuring one of Weps' men in the process. "You want some help with them bags of yours?" Out of the corner of her eye she saw him move out of the doorway, tugging his mud-stained trousers higher onto his hip. Purslane asked me what was happening. Layers of previous civilisations and settlements. She could still breathe perfectly normally because the helmet was open at the bottom. "Sorry, Campion." "It's all right," I said. I noticed, with skincrawling horror, that its dual manipulator arms ended in a perfect pair of female human hands, long-fingered and elegant and white as snow. My recollection is they didn't know what they were getting into back then." "Most of them didn't," Clausen said. "Why don't you? You spit on the traditions of the line." I kept my voice level, refusing to rise to his bait. Two hours later we had their reply. "What am I seeing here?" "A way out of the nest," Galiana said. Not when I've come so far." Her answer was an eternity arriving. I have often thought that you were the right one, but I wished to wait until you were older, stronger. Spread out across tens of thousands of light years, we were immune to extinction, at least by our own hands. It did not look natural to me, but what did I know of such matters? With some deft intervention I might be able to hold him on the ground for an hour or two before he gets too suspicious." "That might not be long enough. Out of that phase of deep immersion in everything concerning the enemy had come his peacetime role as negotiator—and now diplomat—on the eve of another war. Frankly, it disturbed me. "They sent it back for us," I said. So this man, Luttrell. "Definitely not a geometric progression," Childe said. Van Ness was the first outfact. of the airlock, with me not far behind him. "Fine. The feeling was neither welcome nor pleasant. If we were still living in the prologue to history, they would be doing well to merit a footnote. There may be lessons to be learned, and a lesson is only another sort of tradeable. Some of them were coal-sized, some were as large as engine blocks. I'd visited the house in 2002 and it had lodged in my imagination sufficiently that I obviously felt I needed to mine it for a story. What happened to them?" I sense her uneasiness; the realisation that she may well be sharing her room with a lunatic. "I presume you mean Corax?" Yukimi asked. I had felt my ancient, buried history begin to force its way to the surface from the moment I saw the dust in that bullet; that cryptic inscription. Less than six minutes now remained, and though I had distracted myself, I had not come closer to grasping the solution, or even seeing a hint of how to begin. Then there was another sphere. They could see the swimming pool by then, its water mirror-flat and gin-clear. Some of the artilects believed that they had no obligation to safeguard our existence at all. And now I find myself squatting on a dirty mattress, under a creaking corrugated roof, while my body and mind are on the Moon and I am again being told that someone else, someone I have never met, and who will never meet me, knows best. Making him look bad in front of his rich friends like Uncle Otto. Even if we didn't have another ship to worry about, we were in more than enough trouble. We read all this almost subliminally." Galiana was dressed differently now. What remained of him was very light, she said, and he was able to cling to her with his undamaged forepaws. A finger tracks down a list, a line is scratched through my name. Tens of metres across, the murals were nonetheless detailed down to the limits of vision. I must confess that there is another reason why I have chosen to bring about this somewhat terminal state of affairs. Some of these were obligingly close to the planes and contours where I meant to cut anyway, as if the rock was trying to shed itself of everything that wasn't the head of David. This one concerns the production of wide-spectrum antibiotic medicines. But the one thing, in fact—was that Minla's people had the means to help him. It wasn't like that. When Rasht, Lenka and I were ready, I helped the monkey into its own little spacesuit, completing the life-support connections that were too fiddly for Captain Rasht. There is something else, though." I looked around the walls of the room, with its panelled friezes depicting an ancient, weatherworn landscape—some nameless, double-mooned planet half way across the galaxy The Pattern Jugglers were clearly the products of intelligence, but not necessarily intelligent themselves. As the faceless skull presented itself towards me I saw that there was something inside it, something older than the Radiant Commonwealth itself. The helicopter levelled out on its new course, flying higher than before—so it seemed to Gaunt– but also faster, the motor noise louder in the cabin, various indicator lights showing on the console that had not been lit before. "I don't know it." "You should. Your sister's quite right. It would kill you the same way it's killing him." "No," I said, trying to defuse the situation. It was the wrong approach. The thought of being away from the AM made my blood run cold. Diagnostics. Even without Galiana's magnification, it was clearly bigger. Shit; I thought we were meant to be avoiding it, not getting closer." Clausen banked the helicopter again. "It's an old family heirloom," Childe said, swinging open a black door in the side of the carriage. This time it was our turn to deliver medicine to our allies. But we were there, beyond any question." "Who are you?" He touched a fiery hand to the armoured breastplate of his chest. She meant to tell Peter that he could pass the message on to her father directly, for he was working not five minutes walk from the wheelwright's shop. We'll be slowing down much more abruptly." Clavain felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. The paintings differed in every significant detail, but Merlin felt sure that he was seeing a portrayal of the same dimly remembered historical event, much as the books in his youth had shown various representations of human settlers arriving on Plenitude. "Then you can give me a berth?" "I only said it makes a difference, kid. I had arrived as a robot. He wept for joy." "What is Zima Blue?" I asked. Done his caretaker stint, so the next time he's revived, it'll be because we finally got through this shit. "Aperture connections," I said. I'd swung Moonlighter around the rock a dozen times, mapping it down to thumbnail precision, and scanning deep into its heart. Eventually the slope became shallower, and then levelled out until our progress was horizontal. But it is Soya. Instantly her drive flame and scoop field winked out. "You're the first to see this," the robot said. I can't wait that long. It's not just that they've murdered a valued colleague and deeply experienced member of my team. Everything looked spartan and institutional, from the plastic chairs to the formica-topped surfaces. The older they were, the better," Galiana said. As far as I'm aware, none of us swapped plans or itineraries." "Forbidden, anyway," I said. I pick up intelligence from nearby eyes and ears, but nothing further out than a few kilometers. But in fact your wife was alive and well." Weather looked at him levelly. There are more worms in the area. We saw the usual red stutters as it swept the room in visible light. I was always fascinated by the mind, by neuroscience. You in particular, Mister Swift, have been a Godsend. "Then it's random?" he asked. I'm hardly the first celebrity you've met, am I?" "Well "People find me intimidating," he said. I smile again. But you don't have to open your eyes." "Do it," I said. She lives on the ninth floor. You would be very likely to lose it as soon as we suffer our next punishment. "That's the only way in," Childe said. No good one of us pulling one way, the other resisting." I look at Neptune again. All the sea monsters. Matter flowed like milk, and then hardened magically. "Enjoying yourself, Campion?" he asked, in his usual deep-voiced, paternalistic, faintly disapproving way. So we pushed on. When I arrive at Nesha's apartment, half way along the building, the door is ajar. Muscular structures, like the roots of enormous trees, entwined the bases of the largest outgrowths. It was a short walk over to the crash site. We also need one that will keep everyone else tied up—and where our absences won't be noticed." "You've thought of something, haven't you." "In ten days you deliver your strand, Purslane." I saw a flicker of concern in her face, but I continued, knowing she would see the sense in my proposal. "Four minutes. I've been out that way once in my life. You found Trintignant useful, I'll grant you that. She started shouting, and then screaming. Part of me still admires this mind; part of me still admires this me still admires this mind; part of me still admires this arrived? Far above us, beyond layers of armored metal, I heard the seismic groan as something colossal shifted and settled like a sleeping baby. I fell to the ground, emitting a groan of discomfort. I can't sense them at all." "That's because there aren't any." "Squeamish? You'll have to pour lukewarm praise on someone else's strand." "Oh, God preserve us from lukewarm praise." "Trust me," I said. At least it's dried a bit, and I have something warm on underneath it. That would be a little on the mischievous side, wouldn't it?" "Very," I said. Zima Blue. "After what happened to you in Phobos," Galiana said, "I assumed there was nothing you needed to be taught about worms." He never liked thinking about Phobos: the pain was still too deeply engraved. "When did he die?" "Fourteen years ago." "Force and wisdom. "I'll need to make a call," I say, hoping that someone can collect Eunice from the school. That's how we began and that's how we began and that's how I nearly died." you were before I put you under." I try and budge to one side, suddenly uncomfortable. If he'd thought to turn up his triggering threshold, he might have given us more to work with..." I tried to sound optimistic. It's no kind of world you'd ever visit by choice. I never felt good after a period in the surge tank. I am named for Vincent Van Gogh—one of the greatest artistic geniuses of human history. "Not remotely. What message? Something clever and complex enough to sing to itself. Despite Minla's assurance concerning the radioactivity, Merlin swore he could already feel his skin tingling. Will there be more Merlin stories? I'd assumed he would fold as soon as I explained our predicament—that we were going nowhere, and that Weather was the only factor that could improve our situation— but the captain simply narrowed his eyes and looked disappointed. For the first time in years, something that was beyond her control; something that threatened to destroy the neat, geometric universe she had made for herself. Look at this." And then she sketched something on the wall: a cube set inside a slightly larger one, to which it was joined by diagonal lines. These sketchy hallucinations could be painted on any surface, apparently visible to all. He will send machines into me. She commenced her engagement at a distance of one light-second, seeking to disable us with longrange weapons before effecting a boarding operation. The oversight is a realtime map of the battle zone, out to a radius of fifteen kilometres. This document reveals certain truths about the nature of physical reality. Purslane sidled up to me a few minutes later. I'd been augmented in steps, as time and circumstances allowed." "By yourself?" "Eventually, yes. The tenth one. Without you we wouldn't have got as far as we did. He was a handsome man, even after all his transformations, but I had never heard of him taking a lover, or having any kind of a private life at all. Then, no more than half an hour after his arrival, they were back in the helicopter again, powering back to the operations rig. Hate's always the easier option." "Because it made no difference now. "Val has her reasons," Nero said. Trouble is, I've never been able to. My brave nemesis! She'll be on her way again soon, I'm sure of it. You may lower the island's shield." My answer caught in my throat. There were bars across his mask, like the head of the Angel on the tavern sign. I can start home now." Kathrin offered her one remaining bag, as Widow Grayling turned from the fire, brushing her hands on her apron. That last strand of hers...a lot of risk-taking." Asphodel's strand, delivered during the last reunion, had been full of death-defying sweeps past lethal phenomena. But not all the eyes were upon me. "Take this." He delved into his apron pocket and passed something to me: a gripped thing shaped a little like the soldering iron. And I kept on trying to get inside this alien structure. Lots of carbon. Painted in traditional materials but on a huge scale, they quickly attracted a core of serious buyers. "I didn't start any wars. With some relief he darkened the cabin so that he could see Deimos, dwindling at surprising speed. In a thousand years, there won't seem much difference between them and this. But as I'd told Ray, who cared? Earth's, I think. They could see Zima standing at the edge, with the solar patches on his back glinting like snake scales. That didn't mean I was counting on a long stopover. At least one of them had to have been near Grisha's system at the same time as me. Put us down on the surface two klicks from the base of the Spire. But that's no more than part of the truth, is it?" I looked at Childe and Celestine in turn. "If that's not a warning to go," Lenka said. What was he doing out here?" "How much do you know about Lunar geopolitics, Soya? "Luttrell told me to follow his tracks." "And Luttrell is...? We just shuffled through it, knowing there was no point making real friends with anyone, no point taking lovers. But I really am like the weather. The memory of my trembling hand on those three critical dials felt as if it had been dredged from deepest antiquity, rather than something that had happened only days earlier. high-velocity collision, but not before chipping off vast chunks of alien material. "Step up to the panel. "Do they fit?" Nesha asks, when I return to the main room. Finally, however, it obliged. A good syntax runner can shave days off a route. It had been three days since his revival when he announced his decision. Could be that she prefers dying to staying alive, if being shut out from the rest of the Spiders is as bad as you say it is. You'll just have to resign yourselves to a longer trip than you were expecting." "It's worse than that. It's complicated and it would be a lot easier to resolve without hours of timelag." warning." "No, you wouldn't. We've at least got them in one place." "Thousandth Night would be a good time to move," Purslane mused. Who wouldn't turn that down? Officially, no members of Gentian Line were privy to detailed knowledge about the Great Work. White coils erupted through sand to the west. We can play this game forever. If he's barely conscious—" "The same would apply, I'm afraid. "Thank you," I said. If you've read more than a little of my work you'll have probably noticed the intrusion of Medieval symbols and imagery, from stained glass windows to cathedrals to resting knights on tombs. I am not a god. "I had all the nagging doubts she has, I think. He could understance glass windows to cathedrals to resting knights on tombs. I am not a god. "I had all the nagging doubts she has, I think. He could understance glass windows to cathedrals to resting knights on tombs. I am not a god." how they felt: what was the point in getting to know a prospective comrade, if that person might at any time opt to return to the boxes? Infection's the least of his worries." "I was thinking of me." Zeal made a small gutteral sound, like someone trying to cough up an obstruction. That's why she kept running." "A nice theory, lad. My passage to Julact was appropriately arduous. Granted, it's not cryo-cold, it doesn't need to be, but I still feel an extra bite to the air. But I would get through it, I promised myself. "I see it now...but I didn't se 'Because I could," Gaunt said. When a window opens, I'm giving her the throttle. It was being held back by a man-sized containment bubble, locked around Samphire. The familiar landscape of the Local Bubble loomed large. At last I jerked my hand away from the wall. I'd already made arrangements to have this body manufactured beforehand." "It's very nice." "I'm glad you like it." After a moment I ask: "Why are you here?" "To talk about Titan. I thought of flytrap mouthparts, Teterev's head an insect. It would be the most exquisite of embarrassments not to be able to hold a view on Purslane's strand. She's old now but the younger Nesha hasn't been completely erased. The machine was as long as a city district, as wide as Sagan Park. "Go ahead." Celestine pressed the symbol. There was a crimson flash. You may care for me. When a large car—a Zil limousine, black and muscular as a panther—swings onto the street I'm walking down, I don't have time to hide. "Don't you see it?" Celestine said. But at least we're doing something here. \*\*\* ZIMA'S SERVANT WAS there when I arrived early at the bridge. You didn't mean to, but it must have been the only way. That's why my extraction is still on hold. They poured cold water into his ears, shone lights into his eyes and tapped him with various small hammers. It had left our bodies, left the inside of our suits. "Is your father keeping busy?" Mary asked. He walked towards me, following a path of paved stones. Her fingernails were midnight black with a blue sheen. That won't exactly be child's play." Purslane pressed a dainty finger to my lip. I know how close you came. "Then all this time...?" "I've been here, in Chasm City. I thought there might be something on quest. But you did not come here alone." "The Captain...we'll take care of him." \*\*\* SEE? I looked at the two of them, helplessly. 'Spelter Malkoha," the girl said, and hugged the pilot around the waist, which was as high as she could reach. But don't look so disappointed, Campion. "It's good. Our suits had been slaved to Exoletus connected with my his, but now we regained independent control. They always do. It was a wrong and hateful thing to say-Van Ness had nothing in common with a monster like Voulage-but I couldn't stop myself. What do you want to give me?" He handed her the sliver of whetstone. "Zima never existed before my arrival in the clinic." What I wouldn't have done for a recording drone, or-failing that—a plain old notebook and pen. Whatever it was still breathing, still obviously alive. The flying disk rose into the belly of the parked vehicle. "But let's face it, Miss Clay. "Nor mine." "I don't mean since we arrived on Golgotha. His landscapes and starfields had a heightened, ecstatic quality about them, awash with luminous, jarring colours and eye-wrenching tricks of perspective. "I...talk. There is no food at the nearest dispensary, but we catch a shred of a rumour about food in green sector. There was no bacterial life on Golgotha, and nothing that could be charitably termed weather, but there were savage dust-storms, and these must have intermittently covered and revealed the body, scouring it in the process. The plasma batteries open fire. What is history but a chaotic system?" "The Second Soviet won't like being told it's a mistake of history, Dimitri." There was a fierce dryness in my throat. WEATHER WE WERE at one-guarter of the speed of light, outbound from Shiva-Parvati with a hold full of refugees, when the Cockatrice caught up with us. You walked out of the Spire without a scratch. We maintained our faltering progress, following the trail that Teterev had left for us. None of us were going to see daylight again." "I read the papers and saw the television reports. What's your point?" "My point is that sometimes the winner elects to suppress their memories of exactly what form the Thousandth Night celebrations will take." Samphire touched a finger to his nose. There were banks of flowers and forests of bonsai trees. Every glorious and noble act that he had ever committed, every kind and honourable deed, was built upon the foundations of a crime. The snow's still coming down, though in fitful flurries rather than a steady fall. And of course, there was a point to all of that. See what those bastards did to Grisha's people." There was a moment, a lull, while the crowd assessed the data Purslane had just made public. I remember my father being very happy when I told him that I'd finished a piece of fiction—I think it cheered him up to have some "normal" activity going on around him at such an utterly surreal time. Evidently the allure of Childe's promised reward outweighed any reservations she might have had about sharing a room with Trintignant. She was just standing there trembling. "He killed himself," Celestine said. The white terraces, balconies and bridges of the island had a charm of their own, but they had not detracted from the strands, and the threadings had gone flawlessly. Only slowly did I get any kind of inkling into the kind of work he was involved in, and what it meant for me. Recalling that birds sometimes lived a long time, Gaunt wondered if they had ever noticed any change in the world. Since the war went almost entirely robotic, we living soldiers have been increasingly thin on the ground. Yet it had to be done. "You have to trust me," Burdock pleaded. Eventually they realised that they didn't need physical hardware at all. Still...something left." I nodded, understanding belatedly. I think she had learned something wise from Nevil Clavain. Don't take this the wrong way, but it's not what I expected of you." "I'm not trying to be anyone's hero. I've nothing to hide. "That's a pretty heavy accusation," I said, my mind reeling. And as the helicopters came and went from the other rigs, so the faces changed. Maybe we'll get three or four missions out of the robot, but right now I'm assuming this is our one chance. I wasn't expecting an interview, or any new insights. "Rejoice, Merlin. As far as the external world is concerned, I'll be in a state of coma. Under the armor Corax had been wearing several layers of padded clothing, with many belts and clips, from which dangled an assortment of rattling, chinking tools. It freezes out the imagination, leaves no scope for details to be selectively misremembered." He paused long enough to top off my glass. Yet somehow he had managed not to drop his gun, still holding it in his other hand. They promise to stay away." "The name of the ship," I said again. I was convinced that, as a man of reason, he would listen to my arguments and accept the wisdom of defecting to the Skylands." "Did he?" "Not in the slightly nested spheres, one slightly nested spheres. The barrier was actually a pair of tightly nested spheres." you wouldn't care to meet on your own, miles from Jarrow." "I'll be back before it gets dark," Kathrin said, with more optimism than she felt. We get good at understanding." "I hope so." Malkoha pointed now at the latest batch of supplies his people had brought, piled neatly at the top of the boarding ramp. That means there'll be a series of exchanges, an escalation, rather than a single decisive demonstration. It was jammed in nose first, with the engine pointing at us. No one will have missed us yet." Purslane pressed a hand to her brow. There were times, during his long search for the lost weapon that he hoped would save the Cohort, that Merlin had come to doubt whether there was anything about humanity worth saving. Fluid must be interfering with the electronics, with the cooling system." She faded out, came back, voice crazed with pops and crackles and hisses. It was a long way down, and they were still falling when the revellers surged to the edge of the balcony to look down. If that's decades, longer, so be it. It could easily be that he knows we're onto something. But watch this. The universe, it turns out, is a kind of simulation. Are you going to be all right?" "Suit's in emergency power conservation mode. His planning, of necessity, had to be meticulous. With an agonizing slowness, something horrible came up the ramp. There was time enough to get to know them all. Clearly the natives had been more observant than he'd given them credit for. They were bound similarly, illustrated with spidery ink drawings scattered through the text or florid watercolours gathered onto glossy plates at the end of the book. The lobots were usually shaved to the scalp, to make life easier when their heads had to be opened. But the linework in the illustrations was still clear enough. Every gesture, every movement, was now more awkward, more potentially hazardous than before. "But I'm putting you in work now, aren't I?" It wasn't just industry and economics. You're stuck in a spiral...a destructive feedback loop. "That's what my sister told me. They aren't interested in Petrova. They say if something can grow there, it can grow there," "Have you been there?" He shook his head ruefully. Maybe she'll take it easier than you think. "I thought we would follow it, one way or the other." "Follow the tracks. Get some altitude or the worms will lock onto you." "You're telling me there are worms here?" Clavain said. "When he was small, my dad cut his arm on a piece of skydrift that he found in the snow. With us on firm ground, it shouldn't be a problem. The true enemy can't reach us yet; if they had the means they'd push through something much worse than dragons. THE OLD MAN AND THE MARTIAN SEA IN THE belly of the airship, alone except for freight pods and dirt-smeared machines, Yukimi dug into her satchel and pulled out her companion. "He suspected Advocate involvement in the crime," Vetchling continued. "I've done all the editing I need. It slammed into the wall, the impact smashing it apart. She leans over the tank and starts unplugging me. "I think that's all any of us can honestly expect. Although the Revelation Space universe is huge, spanning thousands of years and hundreds of worlds and cultures, the narrative space, at least from where I'm seated, is already pretty congested. The creatures that smashed your sky are still out there. All in all, it wasn't really so bad. But Minla's generation won't have that luxury. You did a good job out there. "I wouldn't be able to get out of here without you." "Yes, you will," Weather said, looking back over her shoulder. That's the bad thing, isn't it? During these intervals, Zeal would have me practising on the lobots, refining my techniques. Mars as the epicenter of human civilisation, Earth a backwater. There would be no shame in turning away from that hazard—not when your own intellects have shaped envoys such as me, fully capable of carrying on your good works." Afterwards, when the children have been bussed back to their schools, I snatch a moment to myself among the space exhibits. And I began to wonder. Almost everything that Merlin did learn, in those early days, was due to Minla rather than the adults. "I'll deal with Van Ness," I said. If I live long enough, I'll know what it's like to leave Lecythus behind. Halfway up the hull, between a pair of bottle-green hull plates, lay a wrinkled airlock. You can't do a Cloud Opera, if that's what you've planned. The referee on our paper was anonymous, but I was sure I knew who it was—a slimy, womanising prick who'd made a pass at me at a conference in Trieste, and wasn't totally empty. Did that make Galiana as cold as a machine herself-or was she just being unfailingly realistic? I'm nowhere near famous enough for that. They might exist as disembodied fragments, or orphaned, cryptic notes in some notebook or computer folder. I loved every second of it. Nothing came: I was out of query range, with only my own age-saturated memory to rely on. In two of the books there were even paintings of a vast spherical spaceship hoving into orbit around the planet. But you know what? "Good," Purslane said. It's still running very low." He is still lying in my arms, like a child. It isn't going to be plain sailing." "Survival is better than death. "Ultras use them, I gather. "Maybe they'll make enough of a difference. Popular guy." "I could tell. The same faces, the same slogans. And then he felt very, very alone. You're fitting in well, Gaunt, but sooner or later we all have to handle solitary duties away from the ops rig. His glance flicked to the horizon, where the atmosphere was compressed into a thin bow of pure indigo. That's how we got here in the first place. As it was, we sailed through Shell 1 and Shell 2 without incident. They don't even care who I am, as long as I get the stuff done. Merlin wondered why Minla's people hadn't set it on higher ground. For now, all she had was the glowing portal of the companion. They don't...fly." "Unless you made them that way. "But I did not miss their company. But they had to run head-on against a mad genius who had a motto: Death to all The beings that dwelt on Ganymede didn't use metals. Wanting to get back to him. "The years spent trying to build a true, Turing-compliant artificial intelligence. "All I've done is lose a part of me I would have been forced to discard before very long. Outside. "Took us nineteen to reach this point on our last trip through." It isn't about immortality. It reminded her of the good times they had spent together, before Shirin bored of childhood games and started looking to the skies, dreaming of worlds to make anew. But that braid also symbolised every occasion on which they had been woken from the dead, at the end of the journey. I'm sorry that your courage carried you as far as it did." "It wasn't courage." But then I added: "How do you know my name?" "I listened to your language, from the moment you entered me. You assumed our subsequent attempt failed...but that was only what we wanted you to think." For a moment he was lost for myself, you've got a long wait coming. For what seemed like an age I lay on the catwalk, panting until the pain lost its focus. "It's very old. He's behind again. One day—a thousand or ten thousand or ten thousand years from now, maybe more—the seas will shrink again. Perhaps it had tolerated us until now, and would interpret the laser as the first genuinely hostile action. "But there will be a formal complaint, take my word." "Maybe you'd rather the worm ate us?" "I just hate duplicity, Clavain." He tried the radio again. Maybe it was imagination but she seemed to be working even faster than when he had entered the radio again. Maybe it was imagination but she seemed to be working even faster than when he had entered the radio again. Maybe it was imagination but she seemed to be working even faster than when he had entered the radio again. Maybe it was imagination but she seemed to be working even faster than when he had entered the radio again. a long time, after all—then everything, everything, everything, will have been for nothing. I'm not surprised! It's a cold planet, and you're not wearing a space helmet. It's like—black was black, and now there's something in my head that's even darker, like a colour I never imagined until now. The strangeness of the figures—the combination of basic human form and alien particularity—disturbed me more than I could easily articulate. "Save your breath." "Where is the monkey?" I asked. It was Van Ness, insisting that we return to the Petronel as quickly as possible. You were so keen on being here. I think she came down here alone." I skimmed forward through the entries, squinting with the concentration. So don't waste money replying to this, because by the time you get it I'll already have left Saumlaki Station. As the specialist in charge of the Tereshkova's flight systems, his duty load had eased now that we had arrived on station at the artefact. But I've just learned that something I always thought untrue—that Conjoiners would take prisoners and convert them into other Conjoiners—really happened." "To Van Ness?" She didn't need to know all the facts. Family, if you will." His tail flicked impatiently. "I'm sorry," I said, "but if you don't come willingly, I'm going to have to bring you in unconscious." I raised the blunt muzzle of my slug-gun. "Get kitted up, then meet me at the north stairwell. He could see the single pilot now, goggled and helmeted within a crude-looking bubble canopy. "Seawall repair, Adriatic coastline. "But he will know you will not be taking the bridge to get back home, even though that would save you paying the toll at Jarrow Ferry." I wondered about the doors already," I said. It was the sound of the Scaper, transmitted to the cargo hold. "Just...rare." The creature writhed again, flexing the long, flattened whip of its body. His eyes were concealed behind goggles, his hair a spray of stiff black dreadlocks. Ticking its way round the Sun, waiting to be found. Burdock waited a moment. "This is news not just for the Skyland Alliance, but for everyone on Lecythus. And looking at me right now, peering down from the ceiling just above my own face, is a pair of stereoscopic camera eyes. On a busy trade route, a marginal increase in drive efficiency can make all the difference between one ship and its competitors. He must race against time to find out the nature of the attack. "Then calling you a mercenary wasn't so far off the mark, was it?" "Sticks and stones may break my bones...sorry. Her depth of immersion into Transenlightenment was inevitably less profound than that of a Conjoiner who'd been swimming in data since they were a foetus." "You're lying," Van Ness said. They won't stop asking me about it. "Flat-floored, surrounding the hole. You've my permission to visit her if you see fit, but she isn't taking a step out of that room until we make orbitfall." "Very well," I said, with a curtness that I'd never had cause to use on Captain Van Ness. But if I did that, I would be sending Fescue to his death. "But if there are no nasty surprises, I can probably make you fit." This seemed to throw him. Welcome home, soldier. "It's a terrible risk you're running," Clavain said. He's tricked and lied to you all along. We can't be killed by an infection." "It's a line weapon. It paused at the level of the balcony, long enough to scrutinise us with one small, wrinkled, distressingly human eye. From what I've heard she's just as likely to turn the sick and needy away." "If she helps some people, isn't that better than nothing at all?" "I suppose." She could tell Peter didn't agree, but he wasn't cross with her for arguing. That was becoming taller, as if a seamless door was opening upwards. They'll be waiting to see who wins best strand, just like the rest of you." I noticed that he said "you" rather than "us." On his deathbed, Burdock had already begun the process of abdication from Gentian affairs. Yes, it could be done. Ingvar walks stiffly, with a lopsided gait. Diplomatically, this was quicksand. By then, I had a handle on his vector. I never saw the captain; never learned his name. Despite being cold-shouldered at breakfast, he felt fresh and eager to prove his worth to the community. Zima had begun his existence on Earth, before I was even born. "Do yourself a favour, friend. The insertion scorched inches of ablative armour from most of the ships; fried a few others which came in just fractionally too hard. "He should be ahead of us now,

but he isn't. I was just thinking of frequencies, harmonics, Fourier analysis, caustic surfaces. Match our orbit, Nidra—but keep us at a safe distance." "Fifty kilometres?" I asked. They would not have struggled into orbit and onto the Moon. Slowly heir rockets and space probes; they would not have struggled into orbit and onto the Moon. Slowly heir rockets and space probes; they would not have struggled into orbit and onto the Moon. Slowly heir rockets and space probes; they would not have struggled into orbit and onto the Moon. withdrew his hand, slick to the cuff with blood, but holding something between his fingers, something that wriggled in them like a little silver starfish. They're still asleep, aren't they? There are many paths to the one goal. More starfish than star. I'd been alone, far from home, emotionally fragile, and she had exploited me. I stood blinking, regretting the fact that I had mentioned the Great Work. But other than that, the tides on Lecythus are very regular. Anything hot." I watch her amble into the adjoining kitchen. "If you say so." "I mean it. If there really are two billion people sleeping out there, the chances of selecting someone from the first two hundred thousand...it's microscopic. But that's all in the past now. As you know." "Well, then." "It's an emergency. "I can't turn to the next page." "That's not how you do it. They were skeletally thin and their torsos and limbs were twisted, almost as if the very substrate of the rock had shifted and oozed since these silvery impressions were made. I hid. But I could not deny that I felt the same unease "I'm telling you, there's someone else in here." "Okay." She pulls back for a moment, whispers something to a colleague before returning. \*\*\* "THERE'S GOOD NEWS and there's bad news," Forqueray said after we had traversed another dozen or so rooms without injury. We've kept careful tabs on the collective thinking concerning our secrets. My hand trembled as I withdrew the gun and slipped off the safety catch. "Wait," I said, with all the dignity I could muster. "I just want to see what this thing actually—" The cable flexed and writhed, and the balcony not been flung so far out in space. In ones and twos they started leaving the ocean, rising into the air. Did you really murder an entire culture, just to protect the Great Work?" Now his expression was full of disdain. There were drawings of adventurers rising on kites and balloons to survey the aerial masses, and later of what were clearly government. sponsored scouting expeditions, employing huge flotillas of flimsy-looking airships. That had always been the intention. I realised that, as naive as it might seem, I'd been expecting Weather said. I left Kolding before my mood worsened too much, making my way to a different part of the station. "What else would it mean? "Ignore her," he said. But we can grow that back easily enough. Luttrell passes out of my field of vision. "A joint assault operation?" "It could work." "Yes..." Galiana seemed lost momentarily. It was intricately annotated in machine-printed Lecythus B. And why was the caretaker force, the four hundred thousand waking individuals, stretched so ridiculously thin? "You never know how hungry you might get on the way home. And the winner is..." I fell silent for ten or twenty seconds, frozen in the gaze of nearly a thousand mortified onlookers. To all of us. Fescue spoke, his deep voice commanding instant attention. But why would you want to? Now I'm worried that we're walking into a trap," I said. Isn't that the main thing?" "Eight hours and you're still on duty? We were quite prepared to take three or four hours to pass each door, if that was the time it took to be certain—in Celestine's mind at least—that the answer was clear. Perhaps you ought to continue." There was a murmur of approval. The journal had heavy black covers, but the paper inside was very thin. Having traversed the spar, we were now immediately inboard of the engine, about halfway along its roughly cylindrical shape. "I'll have blood on my hands because I didn't show you how to kill yourselves?" "You began this," Minla said. You can slip into the Waynet and outrun the enemy." "I'm leaving," Merlin said. Haven't you understood yet, Mercurio? "Then, we'll just look like another ship trying to reach deep space. "Zeal not happy, you not bring me in," she said. If that was the case, he was in some way responsible for the deaths that had already happened. When you recall something—this conversation, perhaps, a hundred years from now—there will be things about it that you misremember. "Look, when the last reunion ended we all of us hared off into the Galaxy in different directions. "Remove the body," I told the waiting men. Any one of these buildings could be where she lives. He was seeing maybe less than a thousand sleepers in this one chamber, but from that point on Gaunt had no doubt whatsoever that the operation could be scaled up to encompass billions. "We're not going to kill this woman. "Stand aside, please," I said. A curious metal ring encircled his neck. It whirred away. He recognised the type immediately: Ouroborus class. I think he was trying to tell us something. There was a silence. "I'd heard of such things. Either way, I have a feeling we haven't finished with him. "That or starve. That was part of the methodology. Slipping ever further into disorientation, it will take an effort of will not to succumb to that familiar and distressing syndrome, paradoxical undressing." I forced a smile, ignoring the sense of wrongness I felt. Of course. Then, desperately, I stared at the problem again. "Toccid a smile, ignoring the sense of wrongness I felt." strong. Looks as good as the day they wheeled her out of the clean room." "Stirring hydrazine tanks," Galenka said. It's like riding the rapids." Merlin didn't wait to see if Minla was following him. "You don't understand, Richard. They won't be buying the premium editions of my book, or paying for the best seats at my evening speaking engagements." "I was talking about going aboard and finding out for ourselves." "Just like that, without so much as a by-your-leave?" "I'm not saying it would be easy. And it was good to see other faces again, after so long alone. Without Mars, there would have been no Radiant Commonwealth. I'm afraid I didn't get the chance to determine the source of the transmission." "Keep listening." "Get in the back, buckle up. I've been stripped of my armour. She wanted to give you something in return for the flowers. The face achingly familiar. You couldn't have." "But they knew enough to want her to be wrong. That was when I ended up in the Delta Vee Hotel. They've been quite busy, too." Phobos altered. I kept telling myself not to worry about the future, just to enjoy the moment, this time we had together. But set against my chances of surviving the arrival of those enemy units, running suddenly looks a lot more attractive. The man wore only lightweight clothes, grey silk pyjamas belted at the waist. The crowd silenced as the evil little thing glinted in the lantern light. The weapons get into your skull, turn you insane, if you're not already spidered." I knew then that nothing, not even dread, would deter Rasht from his quest for profit. Captain made us put these on you for the time being, but we'll get them off you as soon as we can. "Is is possible that you simply couldn't stand to see those poor people survive? How am I still able to recognise the landscape?" "I shaped it for you," Fury said, not without a touch of pride. I was wrong, but it was reason enough to land and try to talk to the locals." "Were they at war?" "Just like you lot. As if it vaguely bothered her that I existed, or was the shape I was, but that she could feel nothing stronger than that." "It wasn't your wife any more," I said. They've seen you make a mistake. But she had no reason in the world to doubt her companion. My view tilts as his weight transfers onto me. I'll make a living figurehead out of him." Lenka and I were wise enough to say nothing. When my father hurt his arm, he said you tied an eel around his arm." Her words made the widow smile. Where's my volantor? "Show me," I said. It was a construct, a mimic, created by his enemies. Maybe it would become worse in the days ahead. They were a carnival of grotesques, even by the standards of the cyborgs I'd seen around the spaceport. She could feel the soft thatch of its feathers, and the lacelike scaffolding of bone underneath. Good that you're wide awake enough to remember my name. "Let's push on," Childe said. It wouldn't have any claim to fame except Klushino is the place where Yuri Gagarin was born. If I'm happy, what do I care?" "I'm not criticising you," Zima said. Eight billion conscious minds, each of which was more complex than any other artefact in the cosmos. She had put the companion back into her satchel, and she hoped neither of them would make a sound. They gathered data, and when the Watchers passed away, that same data was entombed on the first world that my people settled. "It's easy enough to rescript memories. Some of the people down on those planets have various forms of immortality, but that doesn't make history pass any less quickly. "All right, you bastard," Childe said. Reluctantly he had left without her, the taste of shame in his mouth. "Well, I think what these figures..." Celestine sketched a hand an inch over the intricate designs worked into the frame, "I think what these figures..." Julact was the home of the assassin—dozens of other worlds would have given at least as convincing a match—but at least I didn't have to rule it out immediately. The new men wanted to take us back to the old ways. There was talk of challenging the Demarchist supremacy in the outer solar system; perhaps even an attempt to gain a Coalition foothold around Jupiter. The image must have been snapped from Deimos or one of the interdiction satellites. Equipment clattered off trays. Rig after rig passed on either side, dark straddling citadels, and then the field began to thin out. "But we haven't come to do you any harm." Gentian tongue with scholarly precision, as if he had learned it for this occasion. For every ship like that, there are a thousand like the Petronel: just trying to ply an honest trade, with a decent, hardworking crew under the hand of a fair man like Van Ness. Beyond the monument, grey- black water lapped at the shattered remains of a promenade. \*\*\* WE WENT OUTSIDE again. "You believe that?" "I don't know if it makes the world seem weirder, or a little more sensible." She shook her head. The markings were on either side of the door, on the uprights of the frame. If it's no good, it'll only cost me a little longer to fetch ours." So Lenka went back to the crash site, detouring around the pool in which I was still trapped, then rejoining our original path. "It won't cost us anything to put you back under, if you don't think you're going to work hard at retrieving the memory. "Calliope will die. In a way, that's the beauty of it. Yes, definitely. "Then how did you know what to expect, in so much detail?" "I didn't. So what if I walked in vacuum, or swam in seas of liquid nitrogen? It seemed that the Regressives had gained control of one of the bright lights was connected to another by a shimmering filament. He didn't say anything, of course, or at least nothing that the locals could have understood. "This is the worst thing that's ever happened to us, the end of our history itself. They arrange for the airships to drop off supplies and parts, as well as provisions for me. I've seen what it's like for you people. Clavain knew that was how it was happening: he had studied possible attack scenarios for me. I've seen what it's like for you people. Clavain knew that was how it was happening: he had studied possible attack scenarios for me. I've seen what it's like for you people. burned indelibly into his memory. That'll help. The loss of pressure would be immeasurably slow at first, for near the top the trapped cylinder of atmosphere. He will try to sell the knowledge of my location." "He doesn't even know what you are!" "But he will find out. She dropped our speed from hundreds of metres per second to what was only slightly faster than walking pace. Then the paralysing toxins would have hit her nervous system. Somewhere deeper in the nest, In all the versions of this encounter that I've run through my mind before the escape, she never needed any persuasion to meet me. Your story kept changing, but you kept telling me we were somewhere...that we'd gone a little off course, but that it was nothing after our aborted efforts at waking her. But I wanted that interview so badly I was prepared to consider anything. "We have come this far," Rasht said. "And then what?" "We reach the Progress, or get as close to it as we can without getting ourselves stuck. But I wonder if everyone's being straight with me. He himself had pushed for the extension of democratic principles into many of the empire's more backward prefectures. I knew I'd been around considerably longer than that. He paused, looked around and then turned back to face us, looking down on us now. Obviously, if you'd stayed any longer, your suit would have begun to turn against you, the way it happened with Teterev. So you lose the bonus on this one. I'm going to provide some lift-support to that aircraft. But they keep telling me I'll be fine and I know I won't be, and everything they say is exactly what I don't want to hear. At this rate it would take many days to get anywhere near the summit. I tried to work out which way we were facing now. Do you know of fliers, girl? Corax had been kind to her, and on some level he had seemed to understand what she was going through. Numb, Clavain allowed himself to be pulled to safety. Yes, left to myself I'd be perfectly happy just to talk to children. "What are they?" "You're seeing the locations of the Conjoiners," Galiana said. But then he stopped. So are Galiana and Nevil. "What are they?" "You're seeing the locations of the Conjoiners," Galiana said. But then he stopped. So are Galiana and Nevil. "What are they?" 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"What are they?" "You're seeing the locations of the Conjoiners," Galiana said. But they are they caught the alien, made sure it was incapable of escape, and pushed feelers through the integument of its suit and into its nervous system. "You were never a good liar, Thom." "Yeah. Galiana's only response was to tell him that he was not yet ready to be shown the answer. The image froze, the Bubble one amongst many such structures. As the seadragon came in again, he started down the ladders and stairwells, grateful for having a full set of fingers and hands, terrified on one level and almost drunkenly, deliriously glad on the other. Grisha favoured this assessment with a nod. The pilot tried to compensate— Merlin could see the play of light shift on the wings as they warped—but it was never going to be enough. I tell them who I am, although I think by now they know. It hit me harder this time, but the instinct to flinch away, the instinct to flinch away there had been. She was the first of your kind—a new jewel, to place in my collection. "Baby," she said. "Exactly how much do you remember, Richard? Tyrant was manufactured by a culture that had had over ten thousand years of experience in spacefaring, not to mention knowledge of industrial processes and inventions dating back at least as far again. "But not at any cost. You'd have to go against its advice many, many times before it grudgingly updated its model and started suggesting white rather than red." "All right," I said, still wishing we could talk about Zima rather than me. And I did not know whether to be glad that these souls were not quite free, or sick with terror that the rock might yet contain multitudes, still seeking escape. "That's us," she said, jabbing a finger at the red dot in the middle of the display. Before I wake him, though, it might not hurt if I told you a thing or two about myself, and how I came to be here." "We've got all evening," I said. But there was another possibility open to me. Our reflections shifted. I had examined the problem from every conceivable angle, looking for a hairline flaw—and I had found nothing. Have you dug deep enough into Lenka to know what that means?" "No, but Teterev knew." "That's good. "You worry that we're going to blow ourselves to bits, just because you showed us the clockwork." He had seen enough progress, enough evidence of wisdom and independent ingenuity, to know that the Skyland forces would have a working atomic bomb within two years. Instead of modifying the whole atmosphere at once, the Wall allowed the initial effort to be concentrated in a relatively small region, at first only a thousand kilometres across. With surprising strength, she twisted them until their quadrants shone ruby red. "All the same," I said, "that still doesn't to be concentrated in a relatively small region, at first only a thousand kilometres across. With surprising strength, she twisted them until their quadrants shone ruby red. "All the same," I said, "that still doesn't across. With surprising strength, she twisted them until their quadrants shone ruby red. "All the same," I said, "that still doesn't across a strength, she twisted them until their quadrants shone ruby red. "All the same," I said, "that still doesn't across a strength, she twisted them until their quadrants shone ruby red. "All the same," I said, "that still doesn't across a strength, she twisted them until their quadrants shone ruby red." explain why he didn't alert the rest of us. "Shy, Doctor?" Forqueray said, his voice simultaneously deep and flawed, like a cracked bell. It gave us enough of a handhold to start fighting back. The red material of the couch flowed over Weather completely, covering her hands and face until all that remained was a vague, mummylike form. "Not yet. I'm not going to hurt you." Yukimi moved her mouth and forced herself to say, "Hello." "Hello back." The man turned slightly, his armor huffing and puffing. But the domed chamber was inhabited. "Course you have a choice," Nero answered. "I do." \*\*\* I GIVE IT two hours, then three to be on the safe side. I recognized it instantly as the Milky Way. Suddenly, he had seized the man by the arm. The thief is unconscious, head lolling away from me. He was not happy now, not even half way to being happy, but the despair and bitterness had abated. They're ten kilometres out, but making steady progress. An obsessive and thwarted cyberneticist with a taste for extreme modification. "You shouldn' have run. We are all very glad of her. More than that, the records also showed the robot's port of origin." "Which was?" "A world beyond the Bight. Perhaps, Clavain, thought, she would fall forever. "This is as far as we can go with these suits," Childe said, indicating the door that lay ahead of us. "They can't haul both of us up fast enough, Clavain.' Clavain looked into the Conjoiner's face, trying to judge the man's age. "You don't like it?" she asked. "Well, at least you won't be on the edge of your seat come Thousandth Night," said Samphire, an old acquaintance in the line. It didn't last long." "You people could achieve a lot more if you pooled your efforts," Merlin said. First appeared in Subterranean Magazine, Summer 2014 "The Water Thief" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2012. I don't know what happened after that. Galvanic skin response off the chart. The baby was not being hurt now, but that was only because the Devilfish did not need the mother's services. "Establishing a pattern, a normal state of affairs. It's a microgravity environment so we should be able to move around without too much difficulty. Those that come, like me, must still feel that the artist has something else in store...one last surprise. The vision ended then, and I felt my mind being sucked back to the body I had left (and nearly forgotten) aboard Burdock's ship. "C-drives. He just lies there and watches us. He began to climb, then realised that the ground was dropping away much faster than he was passing rungs. Did we make it back?" "Yeah," I say. Estimated duration eight hours, reasonable pay, at the upper end of your skills envelope." "And I must fetch my daughter from school in three hours. In the microgravity environment of the Matryoshka the Soyuz only needed to exert a whisper of thrust from its attitude motors to hold station. It sits there in your sky, it orbits Lecythus, but it doesn't pull on your seas the way the old one used to. She'd been working on the Schiaparelli irrigation scheme when she was caught behind Spider lines during the Sabaea Offensive. It employed a sonic effect to shatter human bone, turning it into something resembling sugar. It's your fault for showing me how easy it would be to get aboard one of the airships. The few layers of clothes I'm wearing—the pyjamas, the thin coat I stole from Doctor Kizim—will start feeling too warm. And people you abandoned in orbit, as well." "They'll all die. "Not quite," I said. I lurched and hobbled until I was next to her. Zeal let out an almighty bellow of pain and fury: real this time. "Tell us, Celestine," Childe said, between what was obviously gritted teeth. The monkey would have bitten my face off given half the chance, but its teeth were on the wrong side of its visor. Then the view does indeed begin to track, and this landscape, weird as it is, strikes familiar notes. Weeks passed, and then the weeks turned into months. "My sponsors are making contact with yours as I speak. I know now why he spoke to me. What if they repair her?" Zeal looked at me and shook his head slowly. There seemed too much detail for one view, an overwhelming abundance of richness, and yet no matter which direction I looked, there was yet more to see, as if the dome sensed my attention and concentrated its efforts on the spot where my gaze was directed. Neither would necessarily be easy. The Progress wound itself in on electric winches until it was close enough to extend its tools and manipulators. "I strongly suggest we start work on the next door," Childe said. "There were a limited number of slots available and they needed practical types first—biologists, that kind of thing. Maybe there's something in that data after all." "We've been through it with a fine-toothed comb." "But looking for the obvious signatures," I said. You've just woken up. Claim-jumpers. "The remaining samples?" "Leave them. Walk on the Moon, one day. But you live, Peter Vandry. "How long do you think she can keep it together?" "I mean, why is it that everyone has to sleep? It was happening perhaps a kilometre away, towards the west. \*\*\* BUT CHILDE COULD be persuasive. "No," Zima agreed. Why you work for Zeal?" "I didn't have a choice. Names like ever-unfolding mathematical structures—names that begat themselves, in dreams of recursion. I had no answers. "Zeal did this." "I figured." "Once I work for Zeal. But for longer trajectories—those that may involve six or seven transits between aperture hubs—machines lose the edge. I remember being chased down a corridor by an enormous stone ball which was going to roll over me." Hirz nodded. When he rose from his throne, it was with a sprightliness that belied his apparent age. "Don't tell me it means something to you." "I heard Voulage mention him, that's all. I pull my point of view back into the trauma pod. We were beyond the Local Bubble. Except now Corax was down there, inside the armor, inside the armor, inside the armor, inside the watertight, unlike most of the others. Do whatever is necessary. "It's given us as long as we like to solve the problems until now, but from now on it looks we'll be up against the last door opened? The worm thrashed against the base of the wall, then began to rear up, its maw opening beneath him; a diamondringed orifice like the drill of a tunnelling machine. She was leaving, so we wouldn't be able to talk normally anymore because of the lag. I smiled awkwardly and continued: "It kills me to think this message is going to take so long to get to you. Pretty soon it'll be smiles and high-fives. But I do not fear them. Then join the two neighbouring dots. But her name's still there. All around us the silver patterning continued, streaks and fissures of it, jetstreams and knotted synaptic tangles. If there was a tune there it was almost on the point of being comprehensible. What are the chances of anyone still being down there?" "Difficult to say. It was just-too much." I reached out my hand. The new longevity processes allowed him to ride that wave of burgeoning wealth all the way to the stars. "The eleven-sided figure is the next one in the sequence. More lights have come on now and I'm noticing the stirrings of daily activity. Time after time he almost had the nerve, before pulling away. "What happened?" "You took a head wound, but you'll survive." He groped for the right question. Shall I show you what happened?" "How can you show me?" "Like this." He did not happear to be in very much discomfort. He wore a stiff leather apron over his bare, muscular chest, and he glistened with sweat and oil. I won't be bored, that's for sure. How many hours logged, with both timelag and weightlessness?" His question is rhetorical, but I furnish an honest answer. Still, lucky as I'd been, I was never much good to Authority after that. The landing is open to the elements, only a low railing along one side. I owned one like it once. As the road sloped down, the sea gradually closed over the cockpit bubble and it was almost possible to believe that they were just driving through a normal, albeit strangely unpopulated, district of Shalbatana City. All he'd have seen was a grey blur, followed by a lot of arterial blood." I thought back to the speed with which she'd reached up and grabbed my forearm, and knew she wasn't lying. We're not impressed by the fact that you just slept a hundred and sixty years. A bright parched landscape, blazing white under a sky that is a deep, pitiless black. Don't you feel handicapped around the rest of the crew?" "Sometimes. Just come back with us, and all will be well." "Look at the picture," Nesha says, handing the pass back to me. "Good lad, Inigo," he said, placing his heavy gauntleted hand on my shoulder. "He really got to you, didn't he." "No," I said, feeling a perverse need to defend my old friend, even when I knew that what Celestine said was perfectly true. "I see why the captain cut our field now," I said. "How was the flight?" "Fine." He stopped suddenly and turned to face me. Once we had completed basic checks, we got into our spacesuits and prepared for the surface. "Hirz, I..." "Stop," I said, interceding. "I'd like to, but I must leave immediately. "What makes you so certain?" "Because if there were, wouldn't there be alien ships popping out of the aperture here? "It's an excellent question. With Coalition forces surrounding him, Clavain's suit was glorious and overwhelming: an avalanche of history. "Then why the hell is she here?" "Because I happen to have use for someone with the skills that the Jugglers gave to Celestine." "Which included?" I said. It's a piece of the future, in your hands." She removes it from her coat. If transferring your anger onto me helps you, go ahead. "You mean they'd murder all of us?" "This is about more than just Gentian Line," Grisha said. The tide was going to envelop us long before we reached the Soyuz. There's a reason for what might be possible in the twenty-four years between the first and third apparitions? Thousands of them now, packed into huge and ponderous shoals or flocks, each aggregation moving with its own dim identity. Gaunt was mostly too tired to think, but in the evenings a variety of entertainment options were available. Are you any more clued up about it than me?" "I doubt it," I said. There was a square of cracked and oil-stained concrete, marked here and there with lines of fading red paint. Still stinging from Fescue's criticism, I told her that I was in no mood for it, but Purslane won me over and I agreed to meet when I was done with the tower. "I recognise this design of ship," Purslane said, whispering. Nero had impressed on him many times the safety procedures that needed to be adhered to when working me. "There's serious provenance here. "It doesn't like it," Lenka said. At least they still had seagulls, Gaunt thought. What about the other thing? I mean we carry their living experiences with us, into the future." Weather swallowed, something catching in her throat. You know who I mean. And I have watched the news and tried to keep myself informed. Are we clear on that?" "This was your idea, Dimitri. Forqueray obliged, with what sounded like the tiniest degree of pleasure. "Yes." "Fine, then. Always and for ever." Merlin sighed: he knew that this conversation had run its course, that they had been over these things a thousand times already and were no closer to mutual understanding. Death and silence, for eternity. We fit together like hand and glove. "Of course he will still be busy," Peter said, helping himself to some of the bread. I was watching the blade when a voice disturbed me. I slipped the gun into my belt. Seemed better to wait until morning, when we'd have a better idea of the damage to the ship. Eventually it would require careful measurement to detect its movement. I pushed my belt. through the next module. He made it sing, thinking we'd understand. "We still have a ship, that's the main thing. And Steiner was awake, unable to speak, but nodding, turning his face this way and that to make eye contact with the welcoming party. He began to stand up, presumably to offer assistance. And some of them are also trying to keep us alive. Your subjective sense of elapsed time will slow." I stared at the doctor, horrified and fascinated at the same time. Over the horizon, an ominous false dawn signalled some terrible impact. I know what that Progress can do, Dimitri. Perhaps I had shut the door of communication between us with that one invocation. Anyway, Teterev knew she was stuck down here. To me you're like a photograph. "This isn't what you thought it would be like, is it." "No...not at all." There seemed no point lying to her. "The Watchers continued to study the spiral culture. Why else would you have told us?" He made a growl-like sound. The tip of the very first bullet was next to a dark hole in the wall. Someone must have figured out what I did, and now they've recalled the airship. It would have taken several normal lifetimes to put in place the necessary measures—and only a select few have ever been given the image, like a tiny star, against which the shimmering network paled almost to invisibility. There was nothing I could do for the other lobots, not in the time that was left. But still it came. I had a few other things on my mind." "Not only can't we mine it for helium three, but it isn't much good for anything else. The entire structure lurched with the impact; he doubted the impact would have been any less violent if a submarine had just collided with it. And I explained what was to become of it. At least he was clean and groomed, his hair clipped short and his beard shaved. "Sometimes we're barely aware of any of this. Conjoiners took Tychoplex and returned all the prisoners to Transenlightenment. It seemed absurd to invite me down to the surface, only to take me away from Julact. But some of the largest ships were still not screened. I levered myself onto the nearest thorn and started climbing. But they don't deliver the same output energy." She was telling me everything and nothing. The unwieldy clockwork of the central black hole would be tamed and harnessed for human consumption. But as you'll have realised by now, patience is one of my strong points." "I still don't understand why you've brought me here. The two of you make a great team, Doc." She looked at him with an expression of pure loathing. "Instead of enhancing normal neural development, we impaired it terribly. And besides, I do want to hear what she has to say. The body on the couch belonged to Burdock. "Campion," he said. "They wouldn't last, not with all the geothermal activity around here. But he still thinks it's worth it, if war can be avoided." "And the younger brother?" "He's got a different viewpoint. I remembered Fescue's criticism of my strand: how there were turbulent times coming and how I'd have all the time in the world to loll around on beaches after the Great Work had been completed. Do you remember the internet, Dimitri?" "Just barely." It's something from my childhood, like foreign tourists and contrails in the sky. He realised, with a sharp and surprising clarity, that he did not want to die. "Then don't sweat about it. "I'm a pair of hands down. Under certain conditions of atmospheric calm and viewing elevation you can sometimes see a flash of green just before the star slips below the horizon..." I trailed off lamely, detesting the sound of my own voice. Kathrin knew that she had no choice but to continue. The nest extended several tens of atmospheric calm and viewing elevation you can sometimes see a flash of green just before the star slips below the horizon..." I trailed off lamely, detesting the sound of my own voice. levels beneath the Martian surface; maybe deeper. That was the truth. Bubbling pools pressed in from either side, our path narrowing down. They were somewhere underground again— deep in the nest. As for me... It turned out that I remembered more of our meeting on the island than I had any right to. "You have choice." "I don't see that I do." "I show. "Then we might as well give up," I said. My entire experience of working with C-drives was confined to routine operations, under normal conditions. \*\*\* "THIS WAS A town?" Corax nodded. Warren; how long do you think we have to find a solution?" "Not long. She was lying naked next to me, leaning on one elbow, with the sheets crumpled down around her hips. By the afternoon, my patience was wearing perilously thin. But now that their forces are concentrated near the surface, they won't succeed. We had air and fuel to spare, but I still wanted to be out of here as quickly as possible. Zeal reached up with his bare hand and closed his fingers around the goggle. But if I were you, I wouldn't take too long on the way back." Then he looked at me, and again switched on the private frequency. I'm just abiding by the rules that the Spire sets. In all honesty, it was good for us that another ship came through. It's difficult enough to reach Julact now. "You were lucky. And the ability to hear, if you want to taunt them. Keeping the Wall alive is the single most important fact of her universe-more important than love, pain, death-anything you or I would consider definitively human." "Then what happens to her when the Wall dies?" "Her life ends," Galiana said. Told us the name of your ship, who owned her, who was flying it, what you were carrying, where you were supposed to be headed. He was looking into the sky when he said that: almost laughing. "So that I'd have a lead to follow? But getting out was another thing. I pass the bundle across the coffee table. "Yes?" "Let's see what that drone of yours has to say." Forqueray had his float-cam fly under the rim, orbiting the underside of the Spire in a lazily widening spiral. It felt tissue-thin between my fingers, like a fly's wings. She selected one laggard bird. You were assigned to treat him, to learn what you could. The water was calm and inviting, with the lowering sun reflected like a silver coin. One final time." "You changed yourself just to come after me?" Slowly, with the stone grace of a statue, she extended a beckoning hand. "The deepest canyon on Mars. Knowing what I did, how could I permit him to live another day without being confronted with the horror of what he had done? But knowing something of the interior workings of the drive was not the same as being able to fix it. I consider using it. I'd outrun Happy Jack's button men; I could outrun the crew of the Devilfish. "I think it's a time to take a stand," he said. It can't be allowed to return to Transenlightenment." "Why ever not? I pushed these concerns from my mind and exited the Soyuz. "Wait a second," Clavain said, requesting a head-up display which boxed the nest. "I agree with you. The box emits a series of tinkling notes. I stared down at it as if it was the most alien thing in the universe. It did not seem to come from a single point source, but rather from veins of some mineral running through the aeroplane—its wings now crumpled, its fuselage buckled—on the apron below. But once she'd been away from Mars for a few months she stopped doing it. Not happy with that guy. And I knew even as I said it that some irreversible bridge had just been crossed, and that it was more my fault than Van Ness's. I'm calling from somewhere called Saumlaki Station, a repair facility on the edge of Schedar sector. "This one is supposed to lead to the command deck," I said, as the symbols became suddenly meaningful. I understand what she's going through. With his body thus armoured against environmental extremes, Zima was free to seek inspiration where he wanted. I think we were both thinking the same rueful thoughts. Still in your surge tank. He had seen it when he was a boy, carrying the Sheriff and his men above the land faster than any bird." "If the Sheriff could fly then, why does he need a horse and carriage now?" "Because the flying machine crashed down to Earth, and no tradesman could persuade it to fly again. At the last moment he judged it safe to disengage. I went into the Matryoshka." "No," Doctor Grechko corrects patiently. "What if someone asks..." "That isn't a problem, either. Perhaps we'll meet again: stranger things have happened. "But that doesn't mean I could build one myself, or show a master boat-builder how to improve his craft." They wanted to know why he couldn't just give them the technology in Tyrant itself. During port stopovers, we were sometimes assumed to be sisters, or even twins. When we broke into his ship..." "When 'we' broke into his ship," Fescue repeated, silencing me. The metal remains hovered there for an agonising instant, before dropping—one by one—to the floor. "Like making a sacrifice?" "You've been good to me, Inigo. And I'd become interested only in the playing of the games; not their construction. Need materials, power. I speak with the synthetic voice of the dead actor Cary Grant. "I am at your disposal, should you wish to reconsider." \*\*\* WE SPENT A full day in the shuttle before returning to the Spire. I don't think Grechko or the other men see her do it. As long as one remained perfectly calm, a Mood Maze held a fixed geometry. You really went the whole hog, didn't you? There's a catch, of course: you'll have to put up with my inane ramblings until then. He had spoken to her over low-bandwidth videolinks, but only in person was it obvious that Galiana had hardly aged in fifteen years. The assassination toxin was eating him at a measurable rate; cubic centimeters per hour at normal body temperatures. If I don't do it, Zeal'll kill me." "You need to slow your breathing. "You need to slow your breathing. "That means no more wars between the Skylands and the Shadowlands. The moral act of duty and self-sacrifice. I could almost feel the furious computation of her mind, as if I was standing next to a humming turbine. Turn up your suit's heat, and you can stay as warm as you like. "Work hard. I saw their pain, but also their solemn consent. Clearly Childe's influence in the city exceeded my own, even though he had been absent for so long. We walked the gilded hallways of the Great House, the emperor walking a few paces ahead of me. The thrust was a hoof kick to the spine. I've had enough of this shit." Hirz turned to Celestine. I'd only need to give the box a hard thump with the heel of my hand, and Weather would be decapitated. Atomic weapons had been used in their thousands, by both sides. "These shunts aren't perfect, and—" "There's something else, isn't there?" "Don't worry. My work done, I let go of the particle gun. I felt something crack in my chest, tasted my own blood as someone smashed a fist into my jaw. You're my patient, and I'm not giving up on you. "Is Lenka going to become part of you? "Let's...not get ahead of ourselves, shall we? But that doesn't mean I could ever be like you." "You could try." "You don't understand us." "I want to!" Weather jammed her olive eyes tight shut. That made sense, because in the airship could have made it to Vikingville, let alone anywhere farther away than that. "Finally," he says. The Iron Lady shook like a struck bell. She was wearing a skintight load-suit, designed to preserve muscle tone even in weightlessness. Probes that had been intended for Mars or Venus were hastily repurposed for the Matryoshka flyby, where time and physics made that possible. Merlin rolled up the sleeve of his arm and motioned injecting himself. Such as the fact that the assassin guilds on Lacertine were masters of their craft, known throughout the worlds of the Waynet for their skill and cunning, and that no guild on Lacertine was more revered than the bio-artificers who made the sleepflowers. I did not trust myself not to return to the Spire. You must have liked it, or you wouldn't have given it to me in return for my flowers." "The flowers," Minla said, thoughtfully. Oh, wait. In their hundreds, they were pressing against the low railing that encircled the balcony. The blanket had been warmed. This is how it will happen." Then she looked back to Van Ness. Beyond that, it was anyone's guess. \*\*\* NOW A NOISE came steadily nearer. My family lacked the resources to send me to one of the Juggler worlds, and the bodies that might ordinarily have funded that kind of trip—the Sylveste Institute, for instance—had turned their attentions elsewhere." "In which case Celestine was deeply fortunate, wouldn't you say?" "I don't think anyone would deny that," I said. "You are not the cosmonaut. "You don't have to apologise for being rich. Prepare yourself, Nevil." Her words were unnecessary. Hence the patterning on the whetstone. It bowed at the waist and spoke very softly. "Maybe it's smarter than it looks," I put in under my breath, which was about as much as I could manage with the effort of my ailing suit. "What's happening?" "Her fieldmaster's trying to compensate," Zeal said Take these translators and give them to your best people—Coucal, Jacana, the rest. "She did not. It's a border incident, that's all. "We need to get one thing straight," Gaunt said, when they were deep into the humming bowels of the rig. Even the Cockatrice must have been nervous of what would happen if the port spar gave way, since they'd begun to concentrate their efforts on our midsection instead. "If deep space was where we were going." Felka stirred next to him. But when I turned around I found my interest notching up slightly. Fear, dread. By the time one gets to hear about the other, the other probably doesn't exist any more. This brain doesn't consider itself to have been imprisoned here. She was looking beyond me, to the door where we had entered. I'd upset the purity of the others, spoil the harmony of the neural connections, like a single out-of-tune instrument in an orchestra. A strip along the top of my visual field showed a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view all around me, and I could zoom in on any part of it almost without thinking. And yet he knows the cost of failure." "But you can help him." "I won't pretend that my abilities are more than a shadow of his. For that we're going to need more guidance from you, Merlin." "You seem to be doing very well with what I've already given you." Minla's tone, cold until then, softened perceptibly. The maze would remain in existence until the nine hundredth night; time enough for everyone to have a try at it. "You'll barely have aged a day, and your memories of this day will be as sharp as if it happened yesterday. "People don't stop needing sledges, just because the Great Winter loosens its hold on us. The Realm isn't a serial processor, you see. "You must give me authorisation to make adjustments," she said. But there it was again: an occasional rumble of distant machinery, but one that was coming closer. "Go on," Clavain goaded. You've reached the twenty-third century." Gaunt took in the drab mundanity of his surroundings again. My only purpose in visiting the place seemed to me—" "You went there?" "Twice. There were games and sports and instruments and opportunities for relaxed discussion and banter. Yet what kind of war required people to be put to sleep in their billions? "You need to understand one very important thing. Everything that we see around us, every event that happens in what we think of as reality, has a basis in the Realm. She pointed with the nearly dead stub of her cigarette. I knew my way around his operating it now. Then consider this." And the view contracted again, the Bubble dwindling, a succession of overlaying structures concealing it, darknessed again, the Bubble dwindling, a succession of overlaying structures concealing it, darknessed again, the Bubble dwindling, a succession of overlaying structures concealing it, darknessed again, the Bubble dwindling, a succession of overlaying structures concealing it, darknessed again, the Bubble dwindling, a succession of overlaying structures concealing it, darknessed again, the Bubble dwindling, a succession of overlaying structures concealing it, darknessed again, the coming into view on either side, and then the familiar spiral swirl of the Milky Way Galaxy looming large. Still following me? What's so important that you have to go away?" He touched a finger to my lips. On some basic level Derek wants to eat anything that moves. They were a dark, streaked grey, infinitely less regular than they had appeared from space. Even before I had been introduced to the rest of the crew— or at least the surgeon—the Iron Lady was moving. "What my name was." "But you didn't know." "Doesn't matter. Galiana thought that, in achieving a pathway to augmented human intelligence, she would render the brain utterly knowable. I only sleep when I choose to." "That's what I figured. But it will still be enough to destroy this balcony. There's a distraction now...maybe we could reach our ships?" She shook her head and used her finger to wipe blood from my chin. He was silent for many moments, letting Minla enjoy the last calmness of what she did; performed with ferocious concentration, as if the fate of creation hung on the outcome of her game. The Priors had no name for themselves except the Watchers. All she heard was faint mechanical sounds in the distance, and the continuing throb of the Scaper. shape; still nothing happened. I hoped it was quick. If we destroyed our bodies, we died. She is Maria, and with a shudder of understanding I grasp that we are in Babelsberg, where the film was shot. But I don't. The terrain became firmer as we neared the hill, and we did not need to pick our course so carefully. About how I should get off the ship as hot. soon as possible, before Mister Zeal put machines in my head or the bad thing happened. These old sub-surface ducts dated back to the city's earliest days, before the domes were thrown across the crater. Now all she had to do was watch the scrolling, chattering indications for the auguries of an opening window. Children—up to early teenagers—sat on soft black toadstools next to the screens in little groups, debating. The gentle mocking of one of our number was also part of tradition. I tell myself that she can't be Authority. Your feet are on the ground. None of us had spoken until that moment. "Lining us up," Galenka said. Like us, it retreated once it sensed it had gone as far as it reasonably could. Unlike the other ship, no misfortune befell us as we completed our landing approach. Since we were only able to use the low-gain antenna—the high-gain antenna Celestine asked. The spheres slowed down and sped up unpredictably, making a nonsense of long-range forecasts. "'Almost an obsessive compulsive disorder'. But this much at least was true. But they also know that our hold on you is tenuous, and that you could just as easily refuse to attack a given target. In the atrium, I saw a bib-capped worker in rubber gloves removing diseased carp from a small ornamental pond. He's been inside this engine for twenty-two years of shiptime; nearly sixty-eight years of shiptime; nearly sixty-eig but you're not indispensable. Celestine looked over her shoulder. But whatever he had done, he must have planned on doing it long before she took her airship ride. Docking gantries closed around them like grasping skeletal fingers. And that would mean that I would be compelled to undo my single greatest work. "I had an idea," Corax said. Figure on at least three weeks, maybe longer. They've been on the wrong path, doomed, from the outset. Then humanity, or what had become of humanity, or what had bec process he seemed to arrive at a decision. I don't see why she can't do the same for us, if we ask nicely." "Why did he have to force her, if you're so convinced. It didn't even have eyes. "I'm ready. Now and then I even stop and confront them, standing with my back arched. She looked very old, very tired, but she still found the energy to form a smile. The artwork had a cheap, hasty look to it. And it's history that keeps destroying things. Anything else in the Cohort database?" "They were using long beeps and short beeps. One day, our agents captured him and brought him to the Skylands. He was dressed in a yellow silk gown identical to the one worn by the corpse. We've reached for it across two million years and it's brought us to this place, this moment. "My proposal concerns Phobos..." "Go on." "I was injured there," he said. It was three days before we found her again. Isn't there something you can do for us?" "From here, nothing at all." "But if you were allowed to get closer to the engines... might that make a difference?" "Until I'm there, I couldn't possibly say. Blood Spire snips off a finger or two other occasions she took a promising step closer to the door, but none of these things heralded the sudden, intuitive breakthrough we were all hoping for. For now they were being afforded the care appropriate to war heroes, even those who screamed bloodcurdling pleas for the painkilling mercy of euthanasia. "Easy, Thom," Greta whispered. I wonder why she cares. It's only when the horizon flashes with an explosion, or something strobes the cloud deck above, that I get any real sense of the tactical environment. Both of us wear heavy coats and boots, but Triton's cold still insinuates itself up the stilts, through the city's floor, into our ancient bones. Enough for one lifetime, perhaps. The thrust burst was longer and less brutal this time. As the box wheeled through the thicket of hanging ships toward the island I began to see the crests of waves, stippled in brightening gold. So I'd have a chance." "Someone...live," she said. How am I able to see her always smiling, never-tiring face? All I felt was a bittersweet regret, the way one might feel about a broken heirloom or long-lost pet. It was following the rim of the land mass, slowly gaining altitude. It wasn't difficult to keep in touch, once we'd agreed a scheme. Even after what happened." Ingvar pumps her feet against the ground. "Where's the old guy?" asked the other man. A presence, an entity, waiting between the stars. "I'll just commit it to eidetic memory and review it later." She increased the flow of data, until it blurred into whiteness. "Weather, I think I love you. "Only that the bodies are yours." His tail flexed impatiently, brushing the floor. With his sunken cheeks and bald skull, the man's Martian physique lent him a cadaverous look. They're designed to integrate seamlessly with biological memory, to the point where the recipient can't tell the difference. She got her feet onto the floor, dragged her satchel with her, oriented herself—she could see the loading ramp, and the doors above it lowering shut—and started running. "Show me what to do." "Give baby more fuel," she said, indicating a set of controls. The room smelled smoky. That doesn't excuse an assassination attempt on him." dismantled him, separating him into his constituent components, placing some pieces of him in neatly labelled fluid-filled flasks and others in vials. "There is one other thing I need to ask you, sir. Black marks have been set against my name, forbidding whole categories of employment. Not to come over all Philip K Dick, but this one actually goes back to a vision. Almost looks innocent, doesn't it? None of the others had stepped over yet, and I wondered if I would have come. "Months, at least. Beyond the blue, the face of the gas giant backdropped our view of the hill—one swollen, ugly thing rising above another. "Just as they pressured your side into delaying hostilities a little longer." "Is that all?" She hesitated slightly now. It's Squill's strand tonight. "We're safe now, I take it?" "Yes; we can repair the damage to the dyke. "Were you now? FURY I WAS THE first to reach the emperor's body, and even then it was too late to do anything. "SHOW DEREK TITAN PICTURE." You're all in good shape, and your ship only needs a little work. It would look very bad if one of the other lines discovered the truth before we did." "Maybe we're not. What does she expect? "And how do you know Burdock?" "I'm Grisha," the man said. "Good," she said. Felka chose where to send those machines; her hand gestures establishing pathways between damage points and the factories sunk into the Wall's ramparts which made the required types of machine. "They got that thief. The man jabbed the barrel of this mess. "There wasn't any. And without exception each machine analysed its situation and came to the same conclusion. Prepare a dossier for Authority. Clausen's already redrawing the schedule so someone else can take up the slack here." "I don't get a choice in this, do I?" Nero looked sympathetic. Nothing had happened to it since our departure. I reached the door. But the distant, comforting rumble of the fusion engines wasn't there at all. "It should be okay to cross open ground then, even with limited oversight." "How do you feel now?" "Different." That's an understatement. "Rivalry? \*\*\* IT IS LATE when I finish. This time I didn't even argue. As if thanking me for bringing this news. "Yes, they'd certainly kill me. There was no reason to think she would not have been able to make her way to the exit, had she wished. It knows, with a high degree of reliability, what my best choice of wine would be given any set of parameters." "And you follow that advice unquestioningly?" I sipped at the red. "Really's Let me finish what I have to say. Inide she said warningly, "then we'll go down to the engine and I'll make everything clear. They said a trawl was all the sharper if it was performed at the moment of death, when damage to the scanned mind mattered less. Two and half years subjective, maybe three, 'til we make the next orbitfall. An orderly had already poured tea into china cups set before each bigwig, including Merlin himself. But now it's time you heard the truth, which is that the Spiders took her. If it took a monster to do that, doesn't that mean we sometimes need monsters?" "Maybe we do. \*\*\* GAUNT HAD ARRIVED to his decision. So there must be another reason. Something between a tentacle and a barb broke the surface, still imbued with a kind of glowing translucence, as if its hold on reality was not yet secure, and from his vantage point it clearly reached higher into the sky than the rig itself. Then there was another gasp of air—longer, this time. Had he listened to me, he might have put some other member of the crew in charge of questioning her, and then I wouldn't have got to know her as well as I did. "It's alive," Hirz said. Brief, bittersweet golden ages flourished for a handful of centuries while the ships were still moving between stars. It must have always been that way, for ship's surgeons. But Van Ness treated his crew well, kept his word in a deal and always reminded us that our passengers were not frozen "cargo" but human beings who had entrusted themselves into our care. Too many of us would have reached other systems for there to be any need for this subterfuge. I hacked into some of the medical records that the Stoner authorities still haven't declassified, because they're just too damned disturbing. Lomax? I remembered highpressure jets of vivid arterial blood spraying the room like pink banners, the shards of shattered bone hammered against the walls like shrapnel. For months they've been goading us toward hostile action." He paused, then nodded at an unseen audience. And I helped you as well. And they were at least as well co-ordinated as the attackers. That's only a name she wears in port." He tapped a hand against the metal framing of the bubble. But by the time we realise it, by the time the Soviet falls, it's too late. Baby drink. He would say that he caught him sleeping on the job, or drunk, or stealing nails." "Garret promised you that?" "He said, life's hard enough for a sledge-maker's daughter when no one wants sledges. The Great Winter fell across our world because the sun itself grew colder and paler. Now that the space program is over-it has "achieved all necessary objectives", according to the official line of the Second Soviet-Zvezdniy Gorodok is just another place to live, work and die. Then you're very, very wrong." "Maybe you weren't solely responsible," Clausen said. If that's what being assassinated feels like, then it isn't much to fear, truth be told. Again, it accords with Argyle's story." With a sinking feeling of inevitability I saw where this was heading. It studied what had happened to the first victim and took precautions—better armour; drugs to enhance mathematical skills; some crude stabs at the medichine therapies we have been using." "And?" I said. If I'd had the sympathy of the crowd five minutes ago, I had lost it completely now. I knew right away that this was no ordinary Way turbulence. The magic that makes a machine fly, or a man see in the dark. I could just begin to think about speaking again. A thousand years, maybe more. The thing is waking. It lay in a frightening sequence of pictures showing the night sky being riven by lava-like fissures, until whole chunks of the heavens dropped out of place, revealing a darker, deeper firmament beyond. "I don't think he was thrilled about the Mood Maze," I said. The right thing—no." Another shooting star slashed the sky. "I'm fine," she said. We had encountered some of these hieroglyphics before—they were akin to mathematical operators, like the addition and subtraction symbol—but we had never seen so many. What caused the gaps?" "Burdock being too cautious, throwing up his screens every time a speck of dust came within a light-second of his ship. How does that sound?" "No one has ever come close to working out how our engines function," Weather said. It hit the ground and bounced again; a little higher this time. But even as he remembered how to reach the staircase, he realised that it was inside the same leg that the sea-dragon was wrapped around. The timing of your arrival is either very bad or very fortunate, depending on your point of view." Before he could guery her, Galiana added: "Clavain; I want you to meet someone." "Who?" "Someone very precious to us." She took him through a series of child-proof doors until they reached a small circular room. I've been a widow for more than two hundred of those years, though not always under this name. My mother never knew. Cocooned in their dropships, the soldiers would be suffering punishing gee-loads... but it was nothing they were not engineered to withstand; half their cardiovascular systems were augmented by the only kinds of implant the Coalition tolerated. "It doesn't matter. You've been in the chair for a long time now." "It's what we came to do. It could not be allowed to happen. Is that the idea?" "Would you sooner offer yourself? Kathrin tried to keep a composed face, while all the while suspecting that the widow was as mad as people had always said. Mostly we aren't superstitious. "It won't be long before the rest of the crew come after us," I told the girl. I checked up on you, Doc-after that meeting in Childe's house. Ninety that swam in the metallic hydrogen oceans under those atmospheres. If I splinted it, I ought to be able to grip something. By the time the chimp receives any data from beyond the womb, there's almost no plasticity left to use. I don't know if he expects me to succeed in my escape attempt, but Doctor Kizim—who had always been more sympathetic to the Tereshkova's survivors than any of the other medics—did turn a conveniently blind eye. I'm Doctor Grechko. And what use would it be to you anyway?" "We could make our own ship, and use your syrinx to escape from here." Merlin tried not to condescending. "He's starting to sound like Nesha Petrova," Galenka said teasingly. The challenge helped me, taking my mind off my own predicament. I hit the floor—the stump. Quilted in fiery platelets that flexed and undulated as the creature writhed in the field's embrace. Nanotechnology, in other words. But by turns we noticed something that we couldn't dismiss. We cram our Mechs with sufficient autonomy to make them independent of human control. Hundreds of stars, packed together into foaming white lanes of sea spume. Where his earlier work had been characterized by exuberant brushwork and thick layers of paint, the blue forms were rendered with mirror-smoothness. She was wrong. "The objective. It'll be just as if I received it the same way as everyone else." "Wait," Purslane said, raising a hand. She runs a hand over her scalp, to no avail. "That's our drive flame stuttering," Zeal reported, with no sense of alarm. A little while later he even risked introducing himself, and by way of response he learned the names of some of the other workers. "You knew the emperor when he was still recognisably all that matters." Ingvar's head bobs in the fur-lined hood of her coat. Can the island lock a screen around him?" "No," I said. Before bad thing happens. Or they might think diagonally, or something even less obvious." Childe said. Childe's right hand was missing all the fingers. She'd been "reading" when I arrived, which for Weather seemed to involve staring into the middle distance while her eyes flicked to and fro at manic speed, as if following the movements of an invisible wasp. "Let's do this shit, and get back home," Galenka said, pushing past me. Until that moment, her results. "Soya, what are you doing? And I'm not responsible for you losing anyone." Her face twitched; it was as if he had reached across the desk and slapped her. It was more like the mad scramble of some desperate, last-ditch war effort than anything seen in peacetime. They're supposed to contain enough firepower to take apart a small mountain." Childe coughed. "Are you certain of the answer?" "Trust me," Celestine said. "Where are we going?" "Running a shift change," Da Silva said, wrapping a pair of earphones around his skull. More than a few hours, evidently. There have been rules. At times when the emperor's hold on the galaxy had slackened, data wars corrupted even the most secure of archives. The Shadowland administration also has its bright minds, Merlin. For you they're just a means to an end, but for me they're the only thing of interest." I felt slighted, but she was right. But you always believed it was still out there, didn't you? They had finished their meals but were still talking over mugs of whatever it was they had agreed to call coffee. Then I make mistake. I wasn't so keen on that idea before, but now I'm beginning to wonder if maybe it isn't so bad after all." She said nothing. You kept me sane, Galiana. The name of your ship..." "What would it be to you? So instead she found this world. Inside, tightly folded and marked in precise handwriting, was what amounted to Trintignant's suicide note. \*\*\* OF COURSE, HE asked Galiana what she meant by that. No cracks in the visor, no obvious gashes or rips. Keep on working. Was it possible that the adults had decided that a child offered the best conduit for understanding, and that Minla was now their envoy? But if you hadn't played your part, someone else would have taken up the slack, no question about it." Nero tugged down the brim of her hard hat against the sun. I made out his close-set yellow eyes, wide and uncomprehending. Cut some corners, maybe. "Yes?" "You mentioned him being in an intermittent vegetative state." "He's been like that for a while. I hope so. Still, I need to keep focus. Something in that hill. An intrusion specialist with a talent for breaking into highly protected—and dangerous— environments. They'll find me and take me home. They weren't all party to your schemes, so they don't all deserve to die when you meet the Huskers. "What...?" I asked, not needing to say any more. Planetary time moved much faster than that. The morning after, Gaunt was engaged in his duties on one of the rig's high platforms when he saw the helicopter coming in with Steiner aboard. "And the obvious choice might not always be the right one. We just used the means at our disposal to access what was coming to us anyway." "Who's going to break it to him?" Clausen asked, looking at Da Silva. Entire cultures wax and wane while we're making course adjustments. A long, long way beyond it." "I need to know, Greta." She pushed herself from the bed, reached for a gown. Going for victory. Last night was the eight hundred and third threading. "They get over it eventually, and then wonder what all the fuss was about." "Why me?" "Because you kept asking nicely," Zima said. They may not know I'm here yet, but there's no guarantee of that. "Give us that name. "It looks ancient," she said, trying hard not to show too much disappointment. And the type of search we've been doing wouldn't have picked up screen signatures. I palmed the door. Find me something shorter." Prakash's sigh is long suffering. "Looking in the rough direction of the patient would be a start, lad." I forced myself to take in the bloody mess on the table: the two detached body halves, the details of meat and bone and nervous system almost lost amid the eruptive tangle of plastic and metal lines spraying from either half: carrying pink-red arterial blood, chemical green pneumatic fluid. I shadowed the fleeing moon long enough to establish that it was headed into a sector that appeared to be free of Husker activity, at least for now. "I have to start what I finished, though. As long as you're not too fussy about the water part." "Actually," Purslane said, "I quite like waterfalls. "It's not genocide when they're just a faction, not an ethnically distinct race," Warren said, before Voi was within earshot. If they are, I doubt that I'll feel a thing when the moment comes. Unit KX-457 is a headless humanoid chassis with an oval gap in its torso, a hole I can see right through. If a machine became intelligent, the most we'd do is isolate it, cut it off from external data networks, until it could be studied, understood..." "For a thinking machine, a conscious artificial intelligence, that would be like sensory deprivation. "She won't thank you for saving her life, Clavain." "Maybe not now," he said. They're sending out a flier tomorrow anyway, so we should be able to get you back home before too long. "When you did that thing with the gun...what did you mean when you said 'baby'?" "I mean this," she said, and opened a door. "Then tell her something halfway truthful." We un-plumb Suzy and haul her out of the surge tank. And don't even think of calling for help, or expecting some security override to protect you. Anyway, I knew that something descended from us—something descended from us—something halfway truthful." Matryoshka. After that, it was just a short flight back to the waiting shuttle. Then another loop flicked out and snared Hirz, wrapping around her midsection and pulling her towards the centre. Gimenez never really liked it here. Life from Felka's viewpoint must have been a nightmarish thing, surrounded by identical clones whose inner lives she could not begin to grasp. "I know that. Small as she was, she looked easily capable of inflicting injury. "The entire planet was geared up to provide medical services of a kind unavailable elsewhere. That wouldn't last. The Progress had travelled fifty kilometres into the Matryoshka—through two layers of orbiting obstruction, each of which was ten kilometres in depth, and through two open volumes fifteen kilometres thick. Can you feel your eyeballs starting to freeze? I think about the purple light, how pretty it is. You must do it, Merlin. "Don't make me slash at your hands. Or I could return the dials to blue-green and let the Cockatrice catch us up without risk of further failure. "I've brought you somewhere significant. Doesn't say or do anything." "We should up the medication." She tapped keys, adjusting one of the Progress's camera angles. Its head, or what he chose to think of as its head, had reached the level of the operations deck. Of course it was worth it." "Are you so sure? At least our injuries had demanded as much, I thought; unlike Childe, who had lost only his fingers, but who had appeared to welcome more of the doctor's gleaming handiwork than was strictly necessary. "Julact is Mars, Mercurio. He smiled, ever so slightly. "How old are these?" "You can still smoke them." The driver leans over to open the other door. Secondly, that I'd do what I could to find Lev. "Whatever you're going to do, do it." "Do you still have the bullet, sir?" His eves flashed childlike terror. We have no idea how it works, or even who made it. Trintignant's desire to find the ultimate fusion of flesh and machine had become obsessive; even—some said— perverse. I wait a minute then press it again. I checked my settings, of course, making sure none of the other dials were out of position. So what if it happened thirty-two thousand years ago? "We live in a flawless collectivised utopia. He looked at my tongue. Clearly the rigs were largely automated, but it had still been necessary to pull him out of sleep because someone else had died in the Patagonia offshore sector. In the canopy, the pilot was obviously engaged in a life-or-death struggle to bring his machine to safety. "Swimmers drink plasma. But let's not pretend that we're speaking of the same order of intelligence. Drifting, I saw Yakov leave the taser floating in mid-air while he returned his attention to the wheel and redoubled his efforts. Whatever you may have told her, she'll confuse it with all that rubbish she already believes. He had lost a leg inside the Spire, but had been able to crawl to the exit before the combination of bleeding and asphyxiation killed him. He had been able to crawl to the exit before the combination of bleeding and asphyxiation killed him. Loop II and the Lindblad Ring. Minla seemed more stooped and frail than he remembered, as if she had worked every hour of those twenty years. The VASIMIR engine malfunctioned on the way home, exposing them to too much radiation. I heard the strangest rumours, you know. Except it wasn't another man at all. Whereas Demarchists used implants to facilitate real-time democracy, Conjoiners used them to share sensory data, memories—even conscious thought itself. "Where is she?" "It was very fast. Burdock kept up the pattern of behaviour we had already noted, asking questions that probed the nature of the Great Work, but never directing his queries to known Advocates. From some world I'll never ever see. Didn't let any of us down. That gives us something. Whatever we were dealing with—whatever had come to find us—wasn't what we had assumed. I promised him that much. But you couldn't see the microsats from here—they were tiny, and the machine was vast. That's when I went back to the scribbled fragment and

started writing Troika instead. Halting on the back of a Scaper—kilometers from anywhere—had not figured in her plans. We can expect things to be a little worse in future, of course." "Then we'd better not make any more screw-ups, had we?" Hirz was directing her words at Celestine. They could show him maps and printed historical and technica treatises, but none of these shed any light on the world's many mysteries. Robots were sent down, equipped to survive on the surface for many decades. "But you have to be brave and strong. "Ever noticed that all the adventures he embroils himself in always end up making him look wonderful, and everyone else a bit thick?" "True. He had been recalibrating his hopes and fears, forcing his expectations into line with what the world now had on offer. That still wouldn't put us out of reach of the Cockatrice, though." "And beyond that?" I showed Van Ness my handwritten log book, with its meticulous notes of engine settings, compiled over twenty years of shiptime. So what is the truth, exactly?" "It's not good, Thom." "Tell me, then I'll decide." I didn't see her do anything, but suddenly the dome was filled with stars again, just as it had been the night before. "Yes," he said, after a moment in which it seemed as if his mouth was still frozen. They reshaped them, configuring the topology to enhance mathematical provess, which took us onto a plateau beyond what the neural modifiers had been capable of doing. "He wouldn't have minded. The impactor might through the ship like a bullet, and the momentum transfer had almost ripped the engines off. Trust me, the best thing you can possibly do now is turn ninety degrees and bail out." I think about this. Was your ship stealthed?" "No." "Then he'd have seen you arriving or departing. It's at least possible that a shock-wave did some harm to one of your engines, especially if your coupling gear—the shock-dampening assembly—was already compromised." "It probably was," I said. And what they found was very interesting. The system has informed me of the winner...the name I am about to reveal." I pulled a face that suggested amused surprise. Coverage is still patchy. The things were seldom alike, even in the most superficial sense. Afterwards, I deleted the sleepflowers from the bio-library. "How far? I reached out a hand and steadied myself against the trunk. "My ship's already sent me back a preliminary analysis. "So why didn't you?" Van Ness asked. What do you think? The lenses rinse me out of reality, into global workspace. She struggled—cartwheeling her arms, her feet skidding against the floor—but it was no good. The engine extended for one hundred and ten metres ahead of me, and for approximately two hundred and fifty metres in either direction to my left and right. I spin through three hundred and sixty, assessing my surroundings. "Pretty dismal, to be honest. But we were all getting older. It's for you." She opened the collar of her coat and pushed the flower inside for safe keeping, until only its head was jutting out. "It doesn't have to happen like that." "Yes, it does. But none of those voices were silent: they were all heard, and something of them has reached down through all these years." "Again: why are you telling me this?" "Because I have a message from your wife. I can't be satisfied with myself until I've done my duty, and mapping and naming things is a very big part of it." "You take pleasure in your work, then." "Tremendous pleasure." "You were made to do a job, Vincent. In fact sometimes that's exactly what I do. When Abigail Gentian shattered herself into nine hundred and ninety-nine gemlike pieces, she had hoped to conquer space and time. With the money now in my account, I wouldn't need to work for years. The innate fascination of the strands, the spectacle, intrigue, and glamour of this final evening together was all that mattered. Galiana issued some neural command which made the bullet seem to become transparent. Amerikano relics are worth quite a bit these days, especially on Yellowstone." "Then we return to orbit, send down a drone," I said. And then, perhaps for the first time, she noticed Merlin. It is my suspicion that the Spire has been tolerating the drone until now—lulling us, if you will, into a false sense of security. What, though, I can't imagine." "That's as far as you've got?" "I'm afraid so. No worse than telling secrets to a dog. You've been very kind. Baby wasn't going to be able to do anything about them. Doctor Annabel lies. Purslane wore a fox mask and a harlequin costume, in which each square detailed one of her legendary adventures. Within a few hours the body had been subjected to an exhaustive forensic analysis, resulting in the extraction of bullet shards from the path of the wound. If it had taken even longer to engineer a vehicle capable of traversing it. We all knew we were going into the boxes as soon as we were old enough to survive the process. I have a distance estimate. The Spire was a quarter of a kilometre high, after all. Or at least that's how it started out, before the machines were allowed to infest and reorganise its deep structure." Weather tapped a finger against the side of her own scalp. "Don't think so. Any advance that could get you slightly closer to the speed of light was to be treasured. He saw flooded harbours, beginning to be clawed back by the greedy fingers of the sea. You can't stop me." "You won't do it, Celestine, and you know it." She glared at him, but said nothing. Minla had already led Merlin down a spiral staircase into an observation cupola set under the thickest part of the wing. Our own movements seemed slow, but were lightning-fast by comparison. Or did you talk more than you said?" "No," I said, cowed. By counting the number of wires between her and land, I could isolate the anomaly to within a few tens of minutes. It senses such things and acts accordingly. Always very practically-minded, Gennadi. "My name... gone." Then her eyes flashed wild in the shadows. I'm assuming that even if the door seals behind me, I'll still be able to open it. Just as you'd get used to it, if you had the same experiences." "I'm not so sure." "I am. But now she's had time for it to sink in, I guess. At this early hour Zvezdniy Gorodok gives every indication of being deserted. Anyway, if it wasn't for the hand, some people might not believe I'm an Ultra at all." "Do you plan on being an Ultra at all." "I'm sorry." An hour after that, we aren't moving as fast as we'd like—" "I'd like to see Van Ness," Weather said. I had a bad turn, I got confused—but everything's all right now." "I'm sorry." An hour after that, we were checking our suits and prepping the Soyuz for departure. Doubt it'll be the last, either." \*\*\* I STAYED IN a hotel overnight, in another part of Saumlaki. He was not well-preserved. "They worked on Hirz." "Must have been luck. I squeezed the trigger and delivered the stun flechette. Discovery could easily mean expulsion from the line, or something worse. Clavain was easily twice his age; had surely lived a richer life; had comfortably cheated death on three or four previous occasions. We'll have gained something incredible. It would be the ultimate human achievement, a spectacle of engineering visible across cosmological distance. Who are you?" "Nobody, and I don't know why they've given me this job. That was the emergency. I think it's now or never." I could only bow to her superior wisdom in this matter. The Blue Goose was sitting in a huge, zero-gravity parking bay. The younger man became the emperor, I'm assuming?" "He took Mars into war. The credits I ought to have earned from the last task—I did, after all, save Luttrell—have failed to appear. There are a couple of items of old furniture, threadbare but otherwise serviceable. I offer my apologies, such as they are, while remaining—Your obedient servant, T Childe never returned. But I can show you in a moment." He felt colder than ever now. Through the door Clavain saw a throng of media people, then someone gliding through them, fielding questions with only the curtest of answers. There are bound to be weapons on Forqueray's ship we could use from orbit; we could open it like a carcase." "Yes," Childe said, "and in the process destroy everything we came this far to learn?" "I'm not talking about blowing it off the face of Golgotha. That silver stuff that got into us—it's primed us in some way, hasn't it? He walked into the room, coughing to announce himself. She blinked against the dusty air and removed her hat. One of which happens to be Fescue." "Still not good enough, though." I thought for a moment. Effective terraforming—the creation of a thick, breathable atmosphere—lay a thousand years in the future. Next to him was a woman with longer hair, greying rather than white, and with much darker skin. They poke through a pair of hatches above my sternum, as if there's someone just outside, reaching in. So we exit, into the domed-over night. They added things to me. She committed it to the collective memory long before her death, knowing that it would always be part of Conjoiner knowledge, even as our numbers grew and we became increasingly fragmented. I can't make any promises, though. "Goodbye, Minla." Twenty minutes later he was in the Waynet, racing back to Lecythus. And you won't be able to achieve as much with brute force as you would with an unmodified suit. Without her they were deaf and blind. I looked around, taking deep, normal breaths. Yukimi was by now quite uneasy, not at all sure that this rendezvous had anything to do with her being rescued. It doesn't get any more intimate than numbers." "It's enough that we both reached out, wouldn't you say?" I offer her a conciliatory smile -I haven't come to pick a fight about the best way to apprehend nature. Now imagine that the triangle's sides are twice as long. Traces of the suit remained, but much of it had been picked or dissolved or remade into the larger mass. And though the modifiers were enabling us to think with a clarity we had never known before, a kind of exhaustion always crept over us after solving one of the harder challenges. Not just the major planets, of course, but the minor ones: Ceres, Vesta, Hidalgo, Juno, Adonis, dozens more. And lower. "You sure you don't want to take a break? Very good at finding a reason to keep living, even when the world's turned to shit. A decade's a mere fling in this town, Richard." "My private life's my own business," I responded sullenly. We know for a fact that he lied." "But couldn't he have doctored those logs as well? "I don't know why I kept them all this time, but perhaps you can use them." I put down the tea. Had she meant the attack, or was she talking about something else, something yet to happen? You've always been very kind to them, employing them in positions of responsibility where others would rather treat them as subhuman slaves. I wanted to take my gloves off, to find out what it played. Take all the time you want." Celestine fell into a reverie which lasted minutes, and then tens of minutes. In three days I want to meet with you all." Malkoha regarded the tray of translators with suspicion, as if the ranked devices were a peculiar foreign delicacy. A whirling thing, like a windmill made of tin. That room began to feel like a prison." "Why?" I asked. "Whatever takes her fancy. "We both know how thorough you've been; all the angles you've covered. "It'll do," I said, remembering how much Forqueray had irritated the doctor with the same remark. "You...go now." She nodded back the way I had chased her. Our enemy already know something of your existence: it was always going to be a difficult secret to hide, especially given the reach of the Shadowlander espionage network. Are you ready to make this unanimous?" I thought I had not. "Saying whatever he needs to say to get us to go back." "I'm not lying. "All of him." There's that wordless exchange again. "Um, Richard?" she added. If the jangling men come, then at least someone will have a means to hurt them The Mendicants trade in the frozen, and we have traded with the Mendicants, in many systems. "How many people do you think are inside?" Voi said. Nor had an examination of the area around the Spire—where we had found the pieces of Forqueray—revealed any significant part of the doctor. The distortion screen had been turned off, and the viewing platforms on the ships thronged with hundreds of thousands of distant witnesses. "Hello, Minla." She lay on her back, her head against the pillow, though she was not asleep. "You were being sold a scam. As it is, things are worse than before I started. Ahead lay the cave mouth. "There's an empire out there," I said. He didn't know, and he knew better than to expect guarantees or hollow promises. There was a malachite escritoire, a number of well-stocked bookcases, a single chandelier, three smaller candelabra and two fireplaces of distinctly gothic appearance, in one of the shelves and pushed aside some junk to expose an old-looking space helmet. "Why exactly are you here, Celestine?" "You don't remember, do you?" "Remember what?" "What it was I used to do, Richard, when we were married." "I confess I don't, no." Childe coughed. "Let me show you something." Again, she did nothing that I was aware of. It had even taken place in the human era: demonstration projects designed to boost the prestige of whichever culture or line happened to be sponsoring it. "I think it's war," Galiana said. The walls and ceiling projected a holographic sky: infinite blue and billowing clouds of heavenly white. "No." Celestine's words arrived agonisingly slowly, and I began to wish that Trintignant had turned her into a diamond-skinned dog as well. But that didn't mean I was home and dry. Lunar soil curtains off them. Vanya Ingvar. At the same moment the door we had come through opened as well, as it always did at this point. We get abandoned to our fates?" Merlin smiled: he'd been expecting the question. I didn't need to. "A few pages' worth of vague sketches and cryptic formulae?" "They're more than most cultures ever get. The blue-green hue was now tinted with orange. Without power, the aircraft must have been cumbersome to steer. Would you really?" When he put it like that, I wasn't sure. One day Zeal get angry with you." "I'll be off the ship before then." "You hope." Now it was my turn to sound angry. Merlin presumed that the concave shape of the land mass was sufficient to trap a stable microclimate. You said I had...what? But so did atomic war, and the coming of a single world state. perhaps the Phobos problem might actually prove useful in his negotiations with Galiana. Being effectively one-handed did not hinder her in any visible sense, even on the ladders, which she ascended and descended with reckless speed. I think she is strange, but she sees me and flinches. "Nor was the blood loss as rapid as might have been expected given the absence of cauterisation. I knew nothing about her except that I wanted to know more. I felt a slight resentment at being manipulated so effectively. The official craned around in his seat, studying the ravenous creature for a few seconds. "The human remains—with the except that I wanted to know more. I felt a slight resentment at being manipulated so effectively. The official craned around in his seat, studying the ravenous creature for a few seconds." genetic individual. He was still in the water, cold around the neck but his body snug in the insulation suit. "I spent a century and a half in that contraption," he said, "waking every fifteen or twenty years whenever a report trickled in from one of the envoys. "Not quite your style, I'd have thought?" "It was all I could do to argue against something even more ostentatious and morbid. "Now surround that dot by six neighbours, all the same distance from each other. "These suits, for instance. "Do you think Childe has brought us together to taunt us about our lack of respective failures, Doctor?" I asked, beginning to feel uneasy again despite my earlier attempts at reassurance. Let's see if I can cut away a sample." The laser etched a circle into the surface of the platelet. "I guess nothing's really prepared us for this, but it's not something we should be surprised about. There are three of them. There was no possibility that the pilot could have survived. It was shifting and altering colour, and Felka was responding to these alterations with what he now saw was frightening efficiency. "The emperor's reception room," I said, marvelling. Control...improving. And they don't like it if they think you'd done it deliberately, or tried to block them out or muffle the sound. When there was a lull in the landing pattern, I ducked into a bar and found an Aperture Authority booth that took Ashanti credit. That's never been in doubt. I realised that I had been wrong about Fescue: utterly, utterly wrong. But spending an entire life aboard a ship, hopping from star to star at relativistic speed, soaking up exotic radiation from the engines and from space itself, is hardly the environment for which the human form was evolved. Study stations, research facilities—an entire campus, floating in vacuum. "And whatever it is you want me to do, I can learn." "Mister Zeal—our surgeon—needs an assistant. This isn't his first visit to the Spire." I convulsed my canine body in a shrug. I did not actually speak. What bothered me was that I wasn't even sure he was joking any more. I left the starboard engine and retreated back into the monitors. The island shook beneath our feet. I wouldn't waste your energy speaking, if I were you. Look." By now we had all become reasonably adept at drawing figures using our suits' visualisation systems. His acceptance into the community would be reversals and misjudged situations. Behind me I heard the tiniest crack. She was sad for Corax, sad that she wouldn't see him again. "You can come as close as you like. I must turn the dials to a setting you would consider highly dangerous, even suicidal. "You'd have loved Giles, Richard. "What is it, then?" "I don't know. The worm writhed in intense robotic irritation. An hour, two hours? Her helmet, similar in design to the one we had seen in the wreck, had fissured in two, with its halves framing her head. But even greed wasn't strong enough in the end. "Oh, I'm not going to make anything of it. Simultaneously, the door behind us had opened again. I'd even told her about Kolding and the damage to the Blue Goose. But I doubt that you can, can you? More than one life could ever encompass. It meant that the ship had a result. "I simply made it available to whoever could afford it." "Yes, you did. She nods almost imperceptibly—it cannot be easy, bending that neck—and introduces herself. Gaunt couldn't tell if the man was a cknowledging his attempt at humour, or mocking his ineptitude, but at least it was a response, at least it showed that there was a possibility of normal human relationships somewhere down the line. That's why we need something more permanent." Merlin felt a prickling sensation under his collar. "Remorse for what you did?" "I can't show remorse for something that wasn't a crime. The indigo curve of the Earth, seen from above the atmosphere. Mainly, a link to the Naiad impactor." I blink. "Yes." "I will see you again, in a month. Part of the reason, certainly, but not all of it." "It's too dangerous." "It was, but now we've got a much clearer picture of what's inside Shell 3. "But you can't tell anyone. "Restrain him." Three of the Advocates took purposeful steps toward Samphire. "What is that thing?" "Something trying to break through," Nero said. You think we had the slightest idea of the consequences?" "You made a good living." "And I'm expected to feel bad about that? Tried to talk him round, of course, but it was like arguing with a wall." Nero ran her good hand through her curls. Instead of muscle and bone, we saw only an oozing clockwork of translucent pink machines, layered around a glowing blue core. Here the tormented human forms were not confined to figures marked on the walls. But your suit is heavy and provided you don't wriggle around inside it too much, you should stay upright. Perhaps then Minla would never have had to commit her crimes. I could only hope that she was holding her ground. "That's all they can do. I can see right through you, examine you from all angles. And if we want answers, we have no option but to catch her and find out what she has to say." Van Ness sounded suddenly interested. "You aren't late," I said. Through the suit's numerous layers of armour and padding I felt the rough texture of the ground beneath my feet. The voice rumbled again. But to most casual observers, and even people who had spent much time in the Great House, I was just another human security expert, albeit one with an uncommonly close relationship with the emperor. "Yakov, please," I called. Yes, that made it all right, didn't it? Most of the Mechs on the ground are friendly, but occasionally I'll spy an enemy scout unit on the limit of visibility, testing our defenses. I'd read an article about the US military developing the next generation of battlefield medicine, using robotics and telepresence technology to develop a "pod" in which an injured soldier could be placed and operated on, even in the middle of the theatre of war. I didn't want to know...not yet. Watch out for the janglies." "I will, Widow Grayling." The door closed behind her. Is this what the stands are all about?" "This is where it will happen," Zima said. They poisoned him before he returned to his ship." I looked at Purslane and nodded. "If I'm going to be any help to you, I have to see this whole thing out." \*\*\* MALKOHA WAS THE last to see him before he entered frostwatch. "Metals make the ship good," "When the ship is good, the ship will fly? And I nod to the west, where a swift rising light vaults above the low roof of the nearest building. "No response...I'm trying again, but..." The heads started moving, their voices threatening to drown me out. Classically proportioned. Sweat began to bead on my forehead. There was not much colour in Minla's world, so Merlin's gifts must have had a luminous appeal to her. This will take some time. "I was Authority. "My suit's damaged. "Not much change since last time. "I call it Blood Spire. Every basket-case totalitarian state still in existence couldn't get its hands on your product fast enough. The fact that it all went so horrendously wrong was even better. "I just hope this makes things a little more tolerable." "So your captain's finally realised I'm not about to suck out his brains?" "Not exactly. But that doesn't mean I couldn't operate Lachrimosa on my own, if it came to that. It was regular enough that she had a chance to move during the exhalation phase, when the figure was making enough noise to cover her movements. I didn't know this was a pirate ship. "You think you're different, Gaunt? We were only interested in games." "Oh. How charming. All go well...until one day. Analysis of all available data showed that window events occurred, on average, once in every seventy-two minute interval. "It was only machinery. Not this way." "This is how it ends," he said, before turning from her bed and walking to the exit. Ahead lay the Winged Man, its sign containing a strange painting of a foreboding figure rising from a hilltop. "You've just left that man alone, looking after that whole complex. "Feel what?" Rasht asked. Fine—let's give you that information, and see what you make of it. No one was expecting miracles, she said: if something arose that he couldn't reasonably deal with, then help would be sent. Same story—notes, chords, melody and counterpoint. We never imagined such things!" "Good. "I know him very well," the man told me. The lasers continued to fire for another minute, but once they'd burned off the Cockatrice's ice (which she could easily replenish from our own shield, once we'd been taken) they could inflict little further damage. Are you ready to tell me the score?" "Nothing that isn't fixable. Voi came behind him, gaining her own m-suit. You played a part in this." Through the window, wheeling with the gentle rotation of the orbital station, the nearest Dormitory loomed larger than Lecythus in the sky. He sniffed as he worked, the curl never leaving his lips. Her suit scraped rock. In time the tunnel widened out into a larger space. "What?" "Look down, Dimitri. I've allowed myself the occasional visit back to the city—just like I did today—but I've tried to keep such excursions to a minimum." "Didn't you have horns the last time we met?" I said. Witnesses report a doughnut shaped lump of dark chondrite asteroid, about two kilometres across. Dimitri knows that something bad is going to happen to him, but he's resigned to it—almost happy, knowing that he has let Petrova know she was right. "So we may as well live with it. That's what I learned inside the Matryoshka. He looked at us over the shoulder of the line member he was talking to, shot me a warning glance then returned to his conversation. And she was just a lobot, after all. And I guess I should be glad of that, because it means Annabel's neural cross-wiring has had some effect. He had always had some effect. He had always had some nebulous idea of the form his wake-up would take and it was not at all like this. Which, for the moment at least, was the truth. Their mechanisms had been sabotaged so that they limped and creaked, and they had all had their voiceboxes disabled. Katerina didn't know that Greta and I had ever been a couple. It should be ready any moment now, as it happens." Weather glanced down at the floor between us. No one ever mentioned going in with "It was always an unstated option. He was walking almost alongside her now, between Kathrin and the road. But instead Celestine just spoke with the flat, soporific tones of one who could not quite believe she had made such an error. "I started saying. It's a frivolous enough idea, but it also plays into one of my slightly more serious hobbyhorses: the notion that space exploration won't belong to robots or people exclusively, as the debate is usually framed, but to some as-vet-undreamt-of hybrid of the two. It's good—a robot snowplough wouldn't stop, so there must be someone operating this one. But the truth is, after writing and publishing more than sixty short stories, many of which were not short by any reasonable measure, I suspect I'm no nearer an understanding of this game than when I started out. He took something that wasn't his, or tried to. There was just...software. "There," she said. I know you can learn to live with it." "Why didn't you tell me straight away, as soon as I came out of the tank?" "Because I didn't know if you were going to be able to take it." "You waited until after you knew I had a wife." "No," Greta said. His ship might have been stealthed..." "I don't think it was. "And you're hoping that through the problems they set us you'll eventually understand the Spire's makers?" "Not just that. That's why the flier was scheduled, so I could take "Well, sorry, but you're not getting your hands on me." Trintignant appraised her. "Them. The screens guivered and stabilised, and a hail of minor impacts glittered off them. "A pretty flower for a pretty little girl." "Oxen spray, Minla," the red-faced man said, pointing could not afford to lose any more hull material, I advised Van Ness to eject two of our three heavy shuttles, each of which massed six thousand tonnes when fully fuelled. "Was making a living, until you interrupted me." "But you've had your share of disappointments. That means she's a prisoner that we can free and return to her people. He had stood up to Clausen but did that make him more respectable in her eyes, or someone even more deserving of her antipathy? "I made a commitment to Teterev," I carried on. If I don't go early, there'll be none left." I peer through the window, at the grey-white sky. It's true there wasn't much warning, and the planetary defenses were not at maximum readiness. The obedient machine reversed away from me in a flash of metallic green. It's still possible, you know." He turned around, his rear part scraping against the floor, and then looked back over his shoulder. Ray was still unconscious, but there was nothing wrong with him. When Ultras meet on friendly terms, to exchange data or goods, the shipmasters will often trade stories of engine settings. "He'd programmed it that way. Come off it, Richard." We descended a series of steps down into the lower level of the Monument. But more than likely he was sounding you out, seeing what you thought of it, goading you into an indiscretion." Vetchling looked to the simmering sea, punctured by hundreds of volcanic vents that had reopened in the planet's crust. Minla is clever. "Tomorrow it will be sealed, and the day after it will be flooded with water. "From building services?" I assume that there's no camera letting Nesha see me, if there ever was. Without giving too much away, that's where I got the origin of the robot in this clever. story. By the end of his first week, he was at least a day behind, and so tired at the end of his shift that it was all he could do to stumble to the canteen and shovel seaweed-derived food into his mouth. We weren't used to analysing anything like that. "A complex robot: an autonomous artificial intelligence. When the criteria were established, he saw that there was really only one possibility. Of those that do, even fewer ever develop the maturity and stability that would make them suitable candidates for enshrinement in an engine." Weather faced me with a confiding look. "I've had my ship check the data over and over. I wondered if it was even possible for Rasht to make it through. Take my word on that." Stupid thing was, I did. He was—is, to a degree—your patient. She must have collapsed half the tunnels, or maybe Galiana had deliberately sealed entrances herself. In all our years together, he'd only mentioned his wife a handful of times. I thought of what I had said to the emperor, before my departure. "Please," she said. There was a moment of resistance and then the intrusive thing was ensconced. We had our time together; that's all that matters. TWO WE REACHED ORBIT around Golgotha. We willingly opened our memories during each threading, but that was within the solemn parameters of age-old ceremony, when we were all equally vulnerable. Some wriggled, smooth plaques of carapace grinding against the glassy rock of the tunnels. Our Captain had been correct. I was the first to speak to her, when we finally had her cornered. "It began by accident: a misapplication of colour on a nearly finished canvas. "Need to make baby strong now," she said, "The Second Soviet is the only political organisation still doing space travel. "I hate this place," Lenka said quietly. With the exception of Merlin's own late intervention, no weapons more potent than hydrogen bombs were deployed. "Good shooting," Voi said, almost grudgingly. She stopped and turned around. "I'm Celestine. I turned from Weather's casket and looked for the way out. The Aperture Authority would have to relay the message from ship to ship until it reached its destination. For a moment I have the sense of having embarked on a ludicrous and faintly delusional task. "Burdock can tell you that. He was so confident now that I began to wonder if he had merely been holding back before, preferring to let the rest of us make the decisions. "The bad thing already happened," I said, angry and confused at the same time. In some way that we didn't yet understand, the object distorted the very physics of the spacetime in which it was floating. He had been given just enough time to gather his few personal effects, such as they were. I'll go back for some more in a while. Surely, they rationalised, we would be wise enough to avoid such foolishness. It flickered away and alighted on the correct answer, but only momentarily. "Not exactly, no," I said. Kathrin stepped nimbly aside as one of the barrels ruptured and sent its fizzing, piss-coloured contents across the roadway. The monkey was having some difficulty with its paw, as if the contradiction." I looked at her wonderingly. Find others." "Yes. Shapes and forms, relationships between things. We gained a little, but the pirates still had power in reserve: they'd stripped back their ship to little more than a husk, and they didn't have the mass handicap of our sleepers. That's all I need to know." "We're Ultras, yes, but we still want to help you. He nodded, and said simply, "Yes, it does." "Good," Weather answered. "You will speak with more of us?" "I've just learned some bad news, Malkoha: news that concerns you, and your people. He had a hand in the wound I had bored through the body, plunged deep to the wrist. Another hub. I was passed from one owner to the next, between generations. You're inside the robot, but you are not the robot itself. The degree of pain would depend acutely on the manner in which the nerve ends were truncated. "I'm sure you did everything you could." "I hope we did. The Eye looked at a huge sample of spiral galaxies, scrutinising them for signs of intelligent activity. Who was I to quibble? If we could both agree to put this little aberration behind us, there was no reason why we couldn't continue to enjoy a fruitful relationship. "I wish Galiana had warned us a bit sooner..." "I think she thought we already knew." They hit. Presently the ground became soil-covered, and then fertile. Do you think you can make it overland to the nest?" "It's only two hundred meters," Voi said. But we had been tricked by the remains of their enclosing structures. Even Conjoiners needed to breathe, and that meant there was less and less of the ship in which she could hide. She held her hands in front of her, like someone expecting a gift. I doubted that pain was a strong enough word for the psychic shock associated with being ripped away from her fellows. The figure made a sound as of another label being scuffed clean. That's why he sent me here." "That why...has to happen soon. Dead and exhausted. Blood-dark and red as the ink on the imperial seal-was oozing out from the input controls. In their view, almost any machine could become an intelligent robot, provided it was allowed to evolve and layer itself with improvements. Always there for you. I kept up my side of the promise. Fundamental constants stopped being fundamental. Is it anything we can fix?" "One question at a time, Inigo." Weather smiled tolerantly before continuing, "There's been extensive damage to critical engine components, too much for the engine's own self-repair systems to address. If anything we're the ones holding the candle." "It's not enough. I wondered what Burdock would have been fast and unstoppable. No matter where I went, I bumped into Burdock with unerring regularity. Instead, he saw weapon-beams scythe out from the nest toward him, knocking him to the ground. "But if we're to bring anyone to justice, we have to know what this is all about. Why would I have lied about such a thing?" "That's not for me to say." But after a moment Maria can't contain herself. That's right, isn't it?" Merlin bridled. I won't risk taking the Soyuz any closer, but we should be able to cover the remaining distance in suits." "Whatever it takes." I checked my watch, strapped around the sleeve of my suit. We were never forced to proceed more quickly than we chose, and the Spire always provided a clear route back to the easy." fantasized about saving her: how I'd do the bare minimum in Zeal's service, just enough to keep him happy, and then jump ship at the first opportunity. Corax picked up the helmet again and shuffled around the table until he was behind her. The orbiting ship had been picked up the helmet again and shuffled around the table until he was behind her. Since my time on the ship, I had learned enough of the ramscoop design to understand that the interstellar gases collected by the magnetic scoop had to pass through the middle of the ship to reach the combustion chamber at the rear...which was somewhere near where we were standing. A warm breeze rolled in from the west, but the sea was tranquil, save for the occasional breaching aquatic. The thing I remember most of all about my father, though, is holding me on his shoulders when I was five, taking me out into a cold winter evening to watch our Mir space station arc across the twilight sky. There's not much to see, other than the cave mouth behind you and the wreck ahead of you My father flew one of the last consignments. If it had to be meaningless, he thought, at least let it be swift. Or a machine. Nothing happened for several seconds, other than the occasional stutter of red light from the hole. \*\*\* THE WORK, AS he had anticipated, was not greatly taxing in its details. FOUR "IT'LL DO," FORQUERAY said, tilting his new arm this way and that. But at the same time it doesn't keep me awake at night. But that still wasn't enough for all of the artilects. Grab a good breakfast beforehand because you won't be taking a break until end of shift." Then she turned to leave the room, leaving him standing there. "We need it sooner rather than later. I remember when Shalbatana was nothing, just a weather station that wasn't even manned half the time. "If mass can be converted into energy, then the military implications are startling. "You said no." "You changed your mind once. My ship can get me there and back very quickly. The one that put me under. But then, given that the airships had not been built for the convenience of stowaways, it was hardly surprising. "Mister Zeal...that lobot we were just working on..." He looked back at me. I heard her shoes scuffing on the deck plating. You are a high-value asset, and we can't afford to lose you, not with the way things have been going. They will leave dust and ruins and silence, and you will not be the last." "Lev," I said quietly. She had withdrawn into some kind of catatonia. But I didn't make you a monster." "No," she said. I told the AM to stay here until I returned. But it was hard to say which. "All the years since haven't made it any easier to understand what the flier told me. Somehow or other Blue Goose took a wrong turn in the network, what they call a routing error. "What just happened?" "She save me." I frowned. Sometimes these windows opened only into gloomy interior spaces, but on one occasion we were able to look outside, able to sense some of the height we had attained. For the most part it had no need of her, this residue of what she had been. That you'd had me deleted from your long-term memory." "I had you suppressed, not deleted. You have instantaneous access to the sum total of recorded human knowledge. I'm safe while they think Mike's inside me. "Did you know this culture?" "I had no data on anything like them, dead or alive. I kept on walking. No one seems to know much about it, or even if it really exists. And still he hadn't been dark or silent enough to avoid detection. Baby stronger...hour by hour. Jump and run, and take the lobot girl with me. There's a small but non-negligible risk of detonation." I tried to sound panicked, but still in some kind of control. Let's keep it formal. Being smart, they were able to do some clever shit behind the scene. Before very long he would look as if he had been made this way. The time machine had been made of blue was that precise powdery aquamarine that Zima had made his own. I kept drifting around, until the door came into view again. The man would have gladly erased not just Abigail but her entire line. Entire upstart civilisations had risen and fallen since the last reunion, several times over. "Something we were kind of hoping not to run into." "It's not cohering," Clausen said. You want to escape that raider? So much for that. "I was going to say a friend." "Why don't you?" "Because the Wall's just a machine. "We may as well tell the truth, Campion," she said quietly. He was a good and just man, and I was happy to serve him. \*\*\* TRY A DIFFERENT approach, Greta says. "Still fairly simple. Quite the was a good and just man, and I was happy to serve him. \*\*\* TRY A DIFFERENT approach, Greta says. "Still fairly simple. Quite the was a good and just man, and I was happy to serve him. \*\*\* TRY A DIFFERENT approach, Greta says. "Still fairly simple. Quite the was a good and just man, and I was happy to serve him. \*\*\* TRY A DIFFERENT approach, Greta says." contrary. Felka and her surroundings had not changed at all since his visit. He went to Widow Grayling and she made his arm better again by tying an eel around it. "And now the time has come. "Would you believe me if I said I'd had you suppressed because I still loved you, and not for any other reason?" "That's just a little too convenient, isn't it?" "But not necessarily a lie. But in my early teens, during a long wet walk in driving cold rain, soaked to my skin—a typical English summer, in other words—I ended up at the side of a water reservoir somewhere in the Midlands. "The possibility of knocking down the Wall always figured in our contingency plans for another war. "Though you could still be lying, I suppose." "I'm not. "You can hardly blame us if we put them to military use in the meantime. "Then build your bomb," Merlin said. "Sandra! No!" She made to stand up, but it was too late by then. The man on the right held something in his gloved hand, a small box with a readout set into it. Again: none of this will matter if Van Ness refuses to trust me." My cheeks were smarting as if I'd been slapped hard in the face. The ship had been gutted from the inside out, with almost no intact pressure-bearing structures left anywhere inside her main hull. "It did?" "Our scientists made a prototype for the fusion drive, according to your plans. You want breakfast?" "I don't feel hungry." "Your stomach will take some time to settle down. "Is this really Patagonia?" Gaunt asked. At that point, overwhelmed by terror and pain, you might try and turn down the thermal regulation again. And we were still receding. And now I can't go back: not now, not ever. Galiana's people manned their cannon positions and did their best to fend off what they could. Not now. "Go and sleep some more, you want to. "Or what Teterev had become. It was then that I understood how the crew exerted their control of the alien. "Very impressive," Fescue admitted. It will make no difference to me now, whether you take it or not." "I'm not old enough for this. The thought of it was almost enough to make him laugh. "You have your ship, and a syrinx. They're perfectly normal human hands, wearing green surgical gloves. In terms of the deep structure of our minds, we've barely left the trees. These control systems used line protocols." "Gentian, or one of our minds, we've barely left the trees. These control systems used line protocols." "But you knew him a little. "Why line the ferryman's pocket when you can cross the bridge for nowt?" Kathrin shrugged easily. Something that could change our world. Our last was absolute and final." "You'll be in violation of treaty if you attack." Warren's smile was one of quiet triumph. An orgy, a game, or a long, distracting conversation..." Purslane nodded provisionally. But Clausen wasn't finished. It was hard not to think of a living silver nervous system, threading its way through the stone matrix of this ancient mountain. "You've become something worse than the thing you set out to beat." there are certainties. And there was no shortage of wonders, even if they were not always quite what you had imagined when you set off on your journey. Nothing would be stronger, better equipped both to deal with the thing at the heart of me, and also to make my concealment more effective. "Mine's in," I said, requesting a full summary. I know this because there's another wounded soldier, and that simply wouldn't be possible in the first pod. In the chaos of footprints, there was no chance at all of picking out the individual trace of the monkey. I knew exactly what I was going to do. I can't read its mass, but it's blocking an appreciable cosmic-ray flux, and none of our scanning methods can see through it." "Forqueray's right," Childe said. He gave a shrug, too tired to care whether she was impressed or not. Not as clever as you and I, not possessing anything resembling free will, but still capable of behaving independently. But there are days when the pain of his betrayal feels as raw as if it all happened yesterday. We were now making antibiotics for all the land masses in the Skyland Alliance, thanks to the process you gave us. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous for all the land masses in the Skyland Alliance, thanks to the process you gave us. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous for all the land masses in the Skyland Alliance, thanks to the process you gave us. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous for all the land masses in the Skyland Alliance, thanks to the process you gave us. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous for all the land masses in the Skyland Alliance, thanks to the process you gave us. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous for all the land masses in the Skyland Alliance, thanks to the process you gave us. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous for all the land masses in the Skyland Alliance, the process you gave us. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous for all the land masses in the skyland Alliance, the process you gave us. It had punched through his skull, achieving instantaneous for all the land masses in the skyland Alliance instantaneous for all the process you gave us. It had punched through his skyland Alliance instantaneous for all the land masses in the skyland Alliance instantaneous for all the skyland Alliance destruction. It's like trying to play chequers on a chess board." "You're right of course," I said, sighing. Minla was obviously a bright girl (he could tell that much merely from the precocious manner of her speaking, even if he hadn't had the ample evidence of her drawings and writings). Just a tiny flicker of regret. Here are some notes. I've written a handful of stories for younger readers, and my approach is pretty much indistinguishable from my normal writing process. You saw the man accept his fate on the dyke, when he understood that your death would harm us more than his own. "Like we're gonna say, it's fine man, go back into the box, we can do without you this time." "What you need to understand," Nero said, "is that the future you were promised isn't coming. Except for one. Vines and tendrils of silver smothered them from head to foot, binding them into the older layers of the mass. "But you'll get there eventually. Have you gone transonic yet?" "In prototypes. And although it seemed to be crawling, that was only an illusion caused by its size. I know because I found it and ... well." He stroked the helmet lovingly, leaving dust tracks where his fingers had been. Your choice, of course. "If I had not lost the other head... if Garret had not caught me... would you have given me these things?" "I was minded to do it. I felt a strange impulse to reach out and touch, as if there was a magnetic attraction working on my fingers. Want to take a bet on who finds something first?" "No point, Campion. Everything looked normal up until now. If they get an inkling of what you're up to, they'll tune to a different resonance." "Then I'd better not give them much warning," I said. The engine can't be fixed. No matter what else I learned that evening, I knew that I had already misjudged someone who deserved better. I'm carrying on." Still propping myself against a wall, I said, "You can't. Surely in all that time we'd have seen evidence of the worms?" "You'd have thought so, wouldn't you?" "Meaning what?" "Meaning, maybe the worms weren't always there." Conscious that there could be nothing private about this conversation—but unwilling to drop the thread— Clavain said: "You think the Conjoiners put them there to ambush us?" "I'm saying we shouldn't." She had just stepped back into the room. He came out with a pair of long, vicious looking knives, turning them edge-on so that we'd see how sharp they were. What matters is that it is work. "I don't like that hill, and I like the fact that Teterev didn't come out of it even less." "We really don't know what happened to Teterev. And from somewhere comes the glimmer of a plan. It knows we're here." THREE I MOVED TO the door and studied it properly for the first time. Here and there I saw the tiny eyelike knots of birthing solar systems. Shapes in four dimensions again, "When I was a girl," Minla said, "long before you came, my father would tell me stories of people travelling through the void, looking down on Lecythus. "Interrogate her, you mean?" "I didn't say that, Captain. I was with her when she woke. "Mustn't be too hasty. "Not overnight, obviously, but harder and faster than you'd been expecting. Very, very bad mistakes." "How can you call taking someone prisoner and stuffing their skull full of Conjoiner machinery a 'mistake, Weather? Everything he's told you is the truth. Unscheduled activity in hatch three, said the words. Fury turned to me, as the projected images faded away, leaving only the empty reality of the Martian landscape. The crowd surged. How exactly was that going to get her home any quicker? "I'll wait here. There's only so much I can do from my office. Nothing wrong with that —there was no good reason to prevent foreign parties boarding a vessel—but it was just a tiny bit impolite. \*\*\* "IT'S A SHUTTLE," Lenka said. He thinks there's still a chance for peace. To all intents and purposes, nothing will have changed in our relationship. By the time the artilects reported back, our part of the Realm had almost stalled." "We never noticed down here." "Of course not. The Great Work concerned nothing less than the relocation of entire stars and all the worlds that they were locked in their fully extended positions and that the status lights were all in the green. Gaunt couldn't tell how long they were going to be leaving Da Silva alone out here, whether it was weeks or months. "It's not a beetle. But you are very much the focus of attention. "Mocked me?" "About the musical box. "Why do you care?" "Because we're not all the same," I said. "Maybe the left side...?" "Try it. Yakov was trying to escape from the Tereshkova. In those days, the man had been one of many groups and individuals groping towards the hard problem of artificial intelligence. Life had spilled from these pools out onto the surface, infiltrating barren matrices of rock and ice. I knew then that I would not see her again for a very long time. "Nothing they were selling I hadn't seen a million times before. Can you get me out of here?" "It would help if I knew where we are. The mannequin poured two glasses and I sampled mine. She picked a target, wove around the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the ozing platelets. We reached the plinth. The force of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors onto one of the impact had driven them into the field lines and came in close enough to fire the sticky anchors on the st ground like the shaped stones of some ancient burial site, surrounding the main part of the wreck in patterns that to the eye suggested a worrying concentricity, the lingering imprint of an abandoned plan. A week doesn't go by when the black and white balls aren't drawn out for something. At ten klicks per second it would take years... "Where are you taking us?" he asked. "No idea at all. It must have cost him an indescribable effort just to look at us. I hadn't—those things really had happened to me—but I'd still spent the rest of the reunion in a state of prickly self-defence. Two travel boxes folded around us and pulled us away from the island, through the thicket of hanging vessels, out to the ship belonging to Burdock. There's no way to tell. Or rather, there are degrees. Tyrant was clever enough, but there were times—long times—when Merlin became acutely aware of the heartless machine lurking behind the personality. She sat up on the ground. We can pull you out of the link at any moment, slot someone else in." "Who will do as they are told?" "Who knows what's good for them." "Then that is not me." Prakash is right: I can be pulled from the link at any time. Rewinding motors. I was on the Lachrimosa until something better came along. He imbued it with a primitive notion of reward. In the tunnel, the bullet accelerated continuously at three gees for ten minutes. Maybe that's why Conjoiners make them twitchy." She unhooked her legs, dangling them over the edge of the bed. The rifle stopped jabbing Merlin's back, and the cruel-looking voung man fell silent while the pilot made his way over to them. "It's got me." "Keep moving." She pulled the boot free, reached the next thorn, and for a moment it appeared that she might be capable of outrunning the fluid. "Please tell me you see the answer immediately," Childe said. That isn't how we like to do things in Gentian Line." "You Advocates keep yourselves." "That's different. Whichever way I looked I saw other ships locked onto cradles. The figure is thin and dark, and with each step it makes there is a small, precise whine. "Or use sensory stimulation to create a perfect simulation of the other planet and all its inhabitants. I saw only damaged mechanisms; twisted and snapped steel and plastic armatures, buzzing cables and stuttering optic fibres; interrupted feedlines oozing sickly green fluids. "My ship kept a watch on the island. Even the monkey had fallen into dim simian reverence. At median tunnel speeds, it's a vear from the centre of the Local Bubble. A sense of the unnatural." "Then it's a defense mechanism," Rasht said. "Yes, I see it." Childe was the first to answer. "I'm getting cold. Captain Voulage took me prisoner around Yellowstone, when the Cockatrice was docked near one of our ships. \*\*\* BUT I AM not even half way through the task when something goes wrong. But vital all the same." "I don't doubt it." "I can remember that afternoon when the news came in. Tell me you weren't intending to put machines in me at the first opportunity." "No; I wasn't planning it. We can sip from the dreams and nightmares of fifty million billion sentient beings. But when I replayed the recording it sounded more like an afterthought. Blithely Zima moved into interplanetary space, forging vast, free-floating sheets of blue ten thousand kilometres across. Kathrin hoped that he was under the side of the bridge, hectoring the workers. If the nest was in any way like an ant colony, then it was an ant colony in which every ant fulfilled a distinct role from all the others. I meant to kill him, but he was not riding in the machine when I brought it down." Kathrin laughed. But there was no blood gushing from the wound; no evidence of severed muscle and bone. Give him some fish to look after. We had already spread the relay microsats around the alien machine, ready for when the Progress penetrated one of the transient windows in Shell 3. He wasn't the only one who needed sleep. by Sumit Paul-Choudhury and Simon Ings, 2012 "The Old Man and the Martian Sea" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2011. The few prisoners whom the Conjoiners had reluctantly returned to their preinfection state had sought every means to return to the fold. It had been an accidental whim of design, but it had saved us all. Waking is the worst part. And once they were able to talk, they only got smarter. We are supposed to live in such places, when they are ready. You're a long way out. "Greta works here," I say. A child sat cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the room. Rationally it made sense: without Felka's help the Wall would collapse much sooner and there was a good chance all their lives would end; not just that of the haunted girl. On balance, I find the crew to operate it." Then she looked at Childe, and while her gaze was averted I admired the fine, faintly familiar profile of her face. The thing is, I know what Dowitcher was thinking now. "This is where it starts getting more serious." "Just press the fucking thing," Hirz said. "The lines aren't regular, though. "I did. When we are gone, when all other traces of our culture have been erased from time, we hope that at least one of these monuments will remain. "Metal that's no use to anyone, except barbers and butchers." "Only because we can't make fires hot enough to make that metal smelt down like iron or copper. I hated the monkey. By then the lasers had already struck her, vaporising thousands of tonnes of ablative ice from her prow in a scalding white flash. "Oh, no," she said. "I did, on the way home. Within ten years, the world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines. "That's good—no need to go over that again." The world swarmed with his bright, eager machines." piece, upright on the surface. It's a hypercube. Whatever it was, she put it down on the table. The burden is knowledge." Again, Kathrin said, "Tell me." "As if I didn't know." "We started on Mars, Captain Van Ness—just a handful of us. "They've lit the drive," he said. Only a fraction of the discharges cause me any harm. Now, as the size of the forming creature became apparent, he understood why such things were capable of havoc. It isn't easy to decide." He smiled. Try to see them through fresh eyes. By stages it became the cleverest of all his creations, and the only one that he refused to strip down and cannibalise. The figure moved sideways, to the next pod. "For them," Corax went on, "it's a form of art as much as anything else. Unfortunately, your system turned out to be the perfect instrument of mass surveillance for every despotic government still left on the planet. Fifteen." The rest of the ship came into view, silvery under its untidy-looking quilt of reflective foil. It had been engineered to be terrible. It hit her then. Seat-of-the-pants flying, the way Gallinule and I used to do it on Plenitude, when Plenitude still existed. I scoop up one ball from each box, both in one hand. Ray's largest BVM stared back radiantly from the cowl of his tank. We're dealing with principles as far beyond anything on Lecythus as Tyrant is beyond one of your propeller planes." Malkoha looked stricken. After a while I can not only breathe, I can move and talk. He reached forward with a gloved hand, allowing me to shake it as one would the hand of a woman. "No way of getting back down here, and no way of Teterev getting back up. Merlin endured it all with stoic good grace. When the star had widened to ten or twelve metres across, the floor stopped moving. As if we were still in Star City. "And make your mind up fast, girl. To overcome this, the machine's builders had approximated a cylinder by stringing four hundred and forty-one neutron stars together until they were almost touching, like beads on a wire. That almost sounded impressive, until one considered the several hundred metres of Spire that undoubtedly lay above us. Then the embryo's development slammed forward, until Clavain was looking at an unborn human baby. The guestion is—" He paused and leaned across the table to refill my glass, all the while maintaining eve contact. "What, then?" "Why do we take out the language center in the first place? "Exactly." "Unless I've missed something, he's given up trying to find what it's all about." "Which tells us one of two possibilities," Purslane said. It must have rubbed off when you squeezed through the narrowing." "It's also on you," I told the Captain. "Patagonia offshore sector," Da Silva said. I endeavoured to target my questioning at different people than the ones Burdock had buttonholed, not wanting to spark anyone else's curiosity. My own shadow pushes ahead of me, jagged and mechanical. The cable—having missed Childe—retreated to the middle of the room and hissed furiously. The Progress was on its own now, relying on its hardwired wits. It looks pretty watertight, once you get your head around it. He's taking a cigarette out of a packet when our eves lock. "We have no evidence that Conjoiners were here either." "They say the spiders liked to place their toys in caches," Rasht went on, as if my words counted for nothing. Gobbets of hot gas slammed into the swallowing mouth. The only thing driving us on was greed. But the room's central feature was a mahogany table, around which three additional guests were gathered. I've enjoyed much of your work over the years. She's a terraforming engineer on Venus. Some of us might look like freaks, by the standards of planetary civilisation. Their tendrils would have closed around Minla's face with the softness of a lover's caress. He altered his state of mind to one of total acceptance." "Fine. This time even his usual admirers have been tut-tutting behind his back." rose from the back of each suit, containing—I presumed—the necessary life-support equipment. I had come to love and to admire him, both for his essential humanity and for the wapon. On the last run through, Hirz and Celestine had shared almost no common ground: it was unnerving to see how much Hirz now grasped. It began to drift out of the aircraft's glide path. And then so will everyone on Lecythus." \*\*\* THEY WERE ALL there when Merlin walked into the glass-partitioned room. "No, there's nothing for it, I'm afraid. Instead of the expected bill, it was a small, blue card printed in fine gold italic lettering. "Get used to it, Thom. Kanto needs a new helmet for his spacesuit. Huge sense of historic density. Because she was a girl. High-autonomy, surface-environment protection units. She told me it had cost her a week's pay, but it had been worth it to impose her own personality on the grey company architecture of the ship. I've seen the flame Burdock mentioned, but it really is too faint for an accurate match. No signals or ships can cross the Galaxy quickly enough to make any kind of orthodox political system possible. "You've been sleeping for nearly a hundred and sixty years," the man said. "Is it really?" "Why would I clone myself?" "I'll answer for him," Celestine said. Greta leaned over and touched my hand. And saw things we should not have seen. That's not a great combination, Childe." He sighed. The origins of that book go back to an unfinished novel I started in 1986, and some of the short stories I wrote in the nineties could be seen to belong to the same future history. After all, I'm more likely to be satisfied with the choice it suggests." "But unless you ignore that suggestion now and then, won't your whole life become a set of predictable responses?" "Maybe," I said. By mounting selective demonstrations of their control over local reality. "But you were certainly complicit. "Show me what you do with this," Merlin said, as he motioned drinking the vial. For Merlin there was something hugely reassuring in seeing the evidence of similar imaginations at work. Her mistake? I should say the KX-457, Annabel, and I, because when those hands reach through to adjust my leg dressing, or the catheter in my arm, or the post-operative clamp on my head, it's hard not to feel that she's along for the ride, my wellbeing never less than uppermost in her thoughts. The Arks would be built in orbit, using materials extracted and refined from the moon's crust. Coaxing the weapons back to operational readiness, and it all had to be done without alerting the Cockatrice that we had any last-minute defensive capability. The rest...I think I'd like to hear it from you." I shake my head. "Mother... too strong. It clattered to the deck of the catwalk, then dropped all the way to the floor of the chamber, where it smashed apart. He looked at Phobos. Operators wore headsets and sat at desks behind huge streamlined machines, their grey metal cases ribbed with cooling flanges. I took weight from my left foot and stepped down again, and the first sheet curved back under me to meet my falling foot. The dead man tumbled down the rim wall, into the mouth of the worm which had just killed Sandra Voi. "But I think we'll pass on that one, Doctor." Trintignant offered his palms magnanimously. I let out a brief yelp, biting my tongue, and then I didn't even have the energy to scream. She's mine. Why would you still trust me?" She cocked her head, as if my question made only the barest sense to her. At the far end of the chamber—they were walking toward it—waited a series of cylindrical things with pointed ends; like huge bullets. If he had something to hide...why leave the evidence aboard his ship?" But Purslane did not answer me. Overhead, stars poked through the thinning layer of moonlit clouds. The silver patterns appeared to shimmer and fluctuate in brightness, conveying an impression of subliminal movement. "It was almost as if he was trying to upstage me in the dullness stakes." "I think he lied," Purslane said. To have lived through those years, to have breathed the same air as Remontoire and the others..." She looked away sadly. I felt mental sutures straining under the pressure. But the same air as Remontoire and the others..." She looked away sadly. I felt mental sutures straining under the pressure. But the same air as Remontoire and the others..." could do. "Fifty-one." "Not what I'd call old. Can't wait to see what you've got lined up for us." "What's it going to be? If we choose, we can cross the Galaxy in the gap between thoughts. There was room inside for both boxes. heard much from them lately. You were the hit of the reunion." "Maybe I'm getting old," I said, "but this time I felt like taking things a little bit easier. Against the vastness I had been shown, the cosmic scale of the history I had almost glimpsed, Galenka appeared no more substantial than a paper cut-out. Another lay in wait for flies and cockroaches. "The real Burdock is dead?" Fescue asked. Gaunt caught a few glances directed his way, a flicker of waning interest from one or two of the personnel, but no one showed any fascination in him. In my cold, sodden slippers I squelch to the buzzer panel next to the mailboxes. See: slow, but she gets there in the end." "My ship's refined its analysis and come to more or less the same conclusion," Purslane said. Within three years —after some of the bloodiest battles in human experience—the Conjoiners had been pushed back to a clutch of hideaways dotted around the system. To see people walking around under that sky without needing suits or domes to keep them alive. "I didn't think it would seem so big," Skanda said. I had been one of a party of people trapped inside an endless series of cubic rooms, many of which contained lethal surprises. The doctor has revised the mission is sole survivor. Gruff as he had been to start with, Zeal gradually opened up and started treating me...not exactly as an equal, but at least as a promising apprentice. "We can't point fingers unless we have a better idea than that." "Agreed. "I'd prefer to think of it as a profound lack of self-doubt. Dingy and disused as it appears, people are already milling around outside. From the observation bubble, I watched his little ship drop away from Moonlighter. "But I suspect most of you are already aware of that." They always laugh at that point. Afterwards, we concluded that their suit-to-suit communications, even their spatial-orientation systems, must have been reliant on signals routed through their ship. But I couldn't help wondering how many people were buying the paintings because of what they knew about the artist, rather than because of any intrinsic merit in the works themselves. You've got the wrong guy here." "You think we mixed up your records?" Clausen asked. Keeps talking about her 'mistake' in not waking the others. Nothing about the artist, rather than because of any intrinsic merit in the works themselves. air aboard his ship would be anything but a standard oxygen-nitrogen mix. "The station exists, just as I said it does. Would it help if I still called you Captain? I heard groans, and then felt a sudden pain in my leg, and the ball kept on getting faster. "You sure about that?" bitchy speculation that attended any private discussion about other members of the Gentian Line. More robots and more rigs. The bulk of the money had been paid to the Ultras, who had already emerged as a powerful faction by that time. I fumble a pack of cigarettes from my coat pocket and push the crushed and soggy rectangle up to the slit in the window. Lacking that core of experience, they had to make their work look damaged and ancient because that was the only way to disguise their screw-ups. They were high up now and the rig's decking creaked and swaved under their feet. Yet when the astronauts got hold of part of the probe, an entire half of it drifted silently away from the other. separating along a mathematically perfect plane of bisection. "He will see you now," the robots announced. "Do what you will. "There is no winner," I said softly. I drew breath and returned to my former spot, the gun following my motion. I was rare. When they looked at me they would perceive the same consensual illusion. "Can you hear me?" "Loud and clear, Dimitri." I heard her voice on the helmet radio, but also coming through the glass, muffled but comprehensible. "I heard you got married." "Yes." "Well? I dashed for the door, remembering the symbol she pressed. "I don't know. We'll take mine instead." Where my volantor had been was a larger, blood-red model. "The Advocates knew this, I think," Burdock said. Now she looked like some half-starved animal, driven to the brink of madness by hunger and something infinitely worse. From orbit, I dropped down samplers to sniff and taste Julact's lifeless soil. The thing stepped in front of the ramp, blocking her escape. It would be my privelege." "I'm just a rock cutter from Titan, Skanda." "No," he said, firmly enough that it was almost a reprimand. "It's cold, but we can get warm if want to. And yet when I look at it, it's somehow not quite there, as if I'm looking at the space where it used to be." "That's exactly how it looks to me." Minla withdrew her touch. I imagine that a human must feel something of the same ancestral chill, wandering the hallways of the Museum of Natural History. I'm the only one left." "Why should I believe you?" "Because I'm standing here in pyjamas and a stolen coat. "Prakash, my broker, says I should head somewhere else." "My name is Fury. Let's break for a nappy change, and then we'll come back to talk about your adventures." \*\*\* THE DAY AFTER we take the slev down to Washington, where I'm appearing in a meet and greet at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, Perhaps you really have come closer than any of the others." She said, But brain surgery? \*\*\* WE STEPPED THROUGH sliding glass doors onto the balcony. It's rising too quickly." I gritted my teeth: typical Galenka, pragmatic to the end. "It never worked out." "Still made you a rich man along the way," she said. "But I'm pretty sure none of his enquiries were directed at known Advocates. We'll make a few tweaks here and there— heighten this memory, downplay that one. You can have it back if you like." "Keep it, Merlin. And Trintignant—how did you know he'd come in so handy?" "I saw the bodies lying around the base of the Spire," Childe answered. Now my interest in it was known to at least one Advocate. It wouldn't be the same as Shirin—it wasn't meant to replace her—but just make it so that we didn't always feel apart." "It seems like a good idea," Corax said. Or-more accurately-the remains of what had once been people. The life-support system would have to work much harder to sustain someone who was active. "But then everything changed," Ingvar said. They had offered him political protection when the powerful Mixmaster lobby opposed the project, and they had been amongst the first to be scanned. They're not really interested in improving matters, if you get my drift. It's not been sitting there long enough to soak up billions of years of particles from the solar wind. That was why Grisha's people had to be silenced, even if it meant their genocide. I nod. "In case you thought we were yanking your chain," Clausen said. "It's delicate, sir—or at least it might be delicate. "Our view is that the Shadowland administration is vulnerable to collapse. And we would still need the packs to make our retreat, back through the unpressurised rooms. We can still build on that bond of trust and find a way out of this crisis." "But does your side really want a way out of it?" He did not answer her immediately; wary of what the truth might mean. It's a patch job, but it'll get us to the nearest motherbase. "The body he has on the island is intact. "It's trying to drag me in." "Fight it." Maybe she did—it was hard to tell, with her movements so impeded. "Is there a point to this conversation,

Richard?" "Not really," I said, stung by her response. We'll just have to find fuel from an alternative source, and redesign our fusion drive accordingly. And—though they had been spread from star to star in the distant past—they did not now depend on any form of technology that we recognised. "Don't think it can't happen," she said, holding up her mittened hand. There's a description of the job, the remuneration, the required skillset and earnable proficiency credits. It was said that if you wanted to kill someone, you gave them a gift of flowers from Lacertine. "I'm not the one anyone needs to feel sorry about." The remark puzzled me, but I let it lie. Can we do something?" "I'm afraid not. My sponsors have even given me a handsome, square-jawed face that can do a range of convincing expressions. To begin with it would not go first, ahead of its master. "I didn't realise it was cutting into you all that time. She'd burned through her capacity for loneliness, discarding it like an outmoded evolutionary stage. We had tickets to see a band in town that night. And if she could not yet see her way to selecting the correct answer, she could at least see the one or two answers that were clearly wrong. "By who?" "Someone on the bridge." "Children?" "A man." Widow Grayling nodded slowly, as if Kathrin's answer had only confirmed some deep-seated suspicion she had harboured for many years. Hundred pages, three fingers. Inigo, make promise. They numbered between forty and fifty; spanning by his estimate ages from a few months to six or seven standard years. He'd been annoyed at the interruption to his surgical work, but he still did not sound particularly alarmed at the fact that we were being shot at by another ship. It's the one he created from the window of his room in the asylum at Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, after his voluntary committal. "He asked me along because we both used to test each other with challenges like this. "What are you looking at, Inigo?" "Nothing," I said, looking sharply away. "Loti Hung?" I turn from the window. The huge field-encased creature was as sleek as night, its under parts highlit in brassy reds from the fires. The amount of data we've gathered..." "Maybe what? But you needn't be alarmed by them." "In twenty years, must we wake you?" "No, the ship will take care of that as well. "But of course you knew that all along, Mercurio. I'll take you as far as the first crossroads on the edge of town. The armies of the sun itself to dig and shore up those seams in the sky." "Good. Like making the most beautiful music imaginable. Failure to follow proper approach and docking procedure, that kind of thing. But they'd have known that as well. "Wild night ahead of you?" "Something like that." He's got the radio on, tuned to the state classical music channel. In the comparative calm that followed, Childe looked down at his severed trunk. But not you. You just have to take my word for it." "Like looked down at his severed trunk. But not you. You just have to take my word for it." took your word that the surgery was going to be straightforward?" "We have to consider this a success, Mike. "So I thought about it, and decided there must be a reason not to have all the doors open at once." Childe sighed. Perhaps I've been wrong to keep looking over my shoulder, all this time." "Whoever did this, they must have known it wouldn't achieve anything." "I've wondered about that myself." He stroked the fine white banner of his beard, as if acquainting himself with it for the first time. The prefabricated surroundings, the background hum of distant machines, the utilitarian clothing of his wake-up team: perhaps he was knew that name almost before I knew any other. "You are giving him a chance about this, aren't you?" "I don't know. Eventually the structures became too unwieldy to be hosted on planets. You just didn't realise it." I thought back to the religious text on the bullet casing, wondering if it might have some bearing on our conversation. His other option would be to return to one of our nests and remain in essentially this form, but without the necessity of running a drive. You think anything matters?" "More than you can imagine," I say. "There," Nero said, pointing out to the right. I remembered what Greta had said about dealing with other crews in the same situation, before Blue Goose put in. In the course of our study, we found this data and eventually we learned how to understand it. But you were braver than most. Based on a game I had discovered during my travels, a Mood Maze was sensitive to emotional states, which the maze detected using a variety of subtle cues and mildly invasive sensors. For a moment the atmosphere snatched at them...but almost as soon as Clavain had registered the deceleration, it was over. Like visiting someone in a prison, not being able to touch them. If the Sheriff can fly, then can a jangling man not steal me from my bed at night?" "The jangling men are a story to stop children misbehaving," Peter said witheringly. "Just an old habit breaking through. "So what do you do?" she asked politely. At this point in Grisha's story, Purslane and I looked at each other in a moment of dawning recognition. Afterwards, when we had time to think about what had happened, I do not think any construction and I looked at each other in a moment of dawning of us thought of blaming Celestine for making another mistake. We embark on our grandest scheme to date: the Great Work." The view of the Milky Way did not change in any perceptible way, but I was suddenly aware of human traffic crossing between the stars. Childe and Trintignant were undamaged. Kathrin, isn't it?" "I need to be getting along, sir..." "And your father needs good wood, of which I've plenty. "But you're wrong. Why do you keep launchingly. And I saw what I should have seen at the time, but didn't. "Oh, and it's a red world," the official continued. I guess this is the farthest from home I've ever been." The sun was catching the bubble's edge, picking it out in a bow of pale pink. And that makes it a crime, not some random accident of celestial mechanics. I felt a tiny subepidermal click. I half remembered. Time and again he used it as a test-bed for new hardware, new software. We'll just have to take his word on that one." "And there's room for all of us up there?" Forqueray nodded. It's been a ghost town for decades; I'd be surprised if it's on any of the recent maps. You've no idea how much I agonised about the placement of these islands, let alone whatever I've cooked up for Thousandth Night." "No, I can believe it. And until the artilects penetrated the Realm and made contact with the others, it didn't matter a damn." "And now it does." "The artilects can only defend our part of the Realm if they can operate at the same clock speed as the enemy. The impacts were increasing in severity. A soldier walked over and extended a hand to the girl, ready to escort her back inside. Not for centuries, not until we're out of this mess. There was no need to rush things now. When it happened, one of us would be tasked to create a suitable memorial somewhere out in the stars. "I don't understand. Hardly one to forget a pretty face, me." The man beckoned her to the doorway of his shop. Nesha—for it can only be Nesha—is waiting in the gap, bony, long-nailed fingers curling around the edge of the door. But when the sun climbs, some of them will concentrate the sun's light on the snow and ice on which you are standing. Well, not quite a vision. It was polite at first, but soon it built in enthusiasm, even as the stars quickened their display, flashing overhead too quickly to count. The collar trailed a thumb-thick cable from its rear, which ran all the way to an activating box on my belt. "No more than a glimpse, no, but I think you'll agree that we lacked previously." "You mean you've turned us all into maths geniuses, overnight?" "Broadly speaking, yes." "Well, that'll come in handy," Hirz said. Rather than a natural product of geology, the outcome of blind processes drawn out over millions of years, it seemed to squat on the surface with deliberation and patience, awaiting some purpose. He'd never attempted to influence Gentian policy. Cracking text would take Tyrant even longer than cracking spoken language. Metaphor, simile, sarcasm and understatement, even implication by omission. She wore a child's version of the same greatcoat everyone else wore, buckled black boots and gloves, no hat, goggles or breathing mask. I saw your interview on The Baby Show. "She tells me you're measuring up," Clausen said, when he was called to the prefabricated shack where she drew up schedules and doled out work. "Transcended machines from other branches of reality —nothing that ever originated on Earth, or even in what we'd recognise as the known universe. "It was so she could reach through it." "Yes. They don't mean to take me out, though. "Something else is out there. Even as I acknowledged this impulse, Galenka—walking to my left—reached out her left hand and skirted the pattern on her side. The sense of relief...the strain being lifted...I can't comprehend how he lasted until now. Come morning most of them managed to say something vaguely complimentary about my strand, but beneath the surface politeness their bemused disappointment was all too obvious. Its profile was a semicircle, with the apex perhaps ten metres above the surface of the ice which extended into the darkness of the mouth. "To where?" "You tell me, Campion." "To where? any direct rapport with the others. She couldn't tell if it was a robot or some ancient, grotesquely cumbersome space suit. "I like the may he says 'everyone'. This will be the pattern of your life, while the first wave of evacuees had already taken up residence in the polar holding pens. She's an outcast from her people, unable to return to them because of what's happened to her." "Well, then," Van Ness said, nodding as if he'd proved a point, "outcasts do funny things. I couldn't see any visible indication that they were out of alignment, but then again it wouldn't take much to make our trip home bumpier than usual. The idea of seeing Fescue publicly humiliated—revealed as fabricating chunks of his strand—tasted shamefully delicious. My contacts drop an ident tag on the robot. That's what everyone thought it was, especially as the Matryoshka came in high above the ecliptic, and well out of the plane of the galaxy. And the 'chines are broad-spectrum; not tuned specifically to any one of us still wearing one of the original suits. I told you it was exclusive," I said. "In a few moments, emperor, you and I are going to walk back inside the Great House. "I happened to be there at the same time, or else no one would ever have known." "Yes," he said. "Not saying I didn't get on with the guy. I didn't see any external evidence, but—" "You wouldn't, not necessarily. Around the crash site, geysers pushed columns of steam up from a dirty snowscape. "Are you complaining?" she asked. It was not at all clear what she was doing. It was only then that he realised that it was much too early in the day to have his accident. And you shouldn't pin your hopes on the Waynet. But (as my sponsors surely know) children don't have deep pockets. "Thank you for getting the winch," I told Lenka, between breaths. First appeared in Diamond Dogs by Alastair Reynolds, PS Publishing, 2001 "Thousandth Night" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2005. But I decided to worry about that later. Nor is there much hope of my little resting place remaining undetected, when the enemy units arrive en masse. It was assumed that if anyone did try and open it, they must have a valid reason for doing so—venting air into space, for instance, to quench a fire. How could the doctors get too close to you? "Just a hint of one, Childe. "Our cargo dirigibles can lift fuel all the way back to the Skylands." "Are you still at war?" Merlin asked, though her statement rather confirmed it. But it still felt as heavy and dead and useless as the broken sword. I've guessed most of it." "That's still more than Campion and I know." "All right," he said, with something like relief. What difference does it make to me, here and now? They could drop Phobos on top of your nest. We can't narrow it down. The more processing power the artilects can grab and control, the stronger they become. We were inside a red-lined antechamber, like a blocked throat. There wasn't much I could do for her, though. I am taking this man back to his friends." "I wouldn't do that, Soya. "Small mechanical puppets. "We've played our hand in that, of course: putting out more than our share of misinformation over the years. Everything you see here—this ship, this frostwatch cabinet, these souvenirs—would once have seemed unrecognisably strange to me. "Now do you recognise me?" He smiled and stepped closer: as tall and imposing as I remembered. I slept fitfully and got up early. Or at least a machine intelligence many orders of magnitude cleverer than anything we've encountered to date. If she had a sane bone in her body by that point, she'd have felt the way the rest of us did. But there happened not to be a surface. Sympathy? "Looks like we have a viable spacecraft. "Perfectly sure," she said, standing up without my assistance. In fairness, Mazamel's information wasn't totally valueless. I don't even know why you're bothering. In the end, it is the white ball that I let go, the black one that I return to its box. The hatted man's still keeping a good hold on my arm. But now the network wasn't the only one. Weird things keep happening—strange structures in the sky, rifts and dislocations. Inside the Realm, the artilects were able to influence computational processes that had direct and measurable effects here, in base reality. The air on Lecythus was thicker at sea level than on Plenitude, but the little machine must still have been very close to its safe operational ceiling. We all lied." I was too drowsy for her words to have much more than a vaguely troubling effect. And you said it yourself: you're halfway back to being human again." "I said I wasn't a Conjoiner any more. "We assumed you were fully aware of the Ouroborus infestation. The view lurched, swerved, contracted. That means you're in as much trouble as you ever were. Metal that could crush diamond. "May I sit down?" "Do what you like." I ease my aching bones into the chair. She smiled. "Could it be Conjoiner?" "That was my first guess. Her hair fell across her face in dishevelled, sleep-matted curtains. "I'd still like to be able to salvage something." I steeled myself against the shot. My eye had caught enough to know what to expect. We were trying to bring something." I steeled myself against the shot. My eye had caught enough to know what to expect. We were trying to bring something." I steeled myself against the shot. My eye had caught enough to know what to expect. We were trying to bring something new into the world, that's all. It would appease the Captain and not delay us more than a few minutes. But I don't think that necessarily reflects poorly on your captain. Both of us tensing, expecting to be squashed out of existence at any moment, we turned to face whatever awaited us. "If you can get me to the Frolovo. "And he's a tactician, not a field specialist. "You ask me...what my name is." She blinked, screwing up her face with the effort of language. "This fucked up state of affairs. Things can always go wrong, no matter how good the crew. It kept getting faster, in fact, so that its trajectory came to resemble a constantly shifting silver loom which occasionally intersected with one of us." The ground shook again. We were created at the same time." "I don't have a brother." "So you believe. "I see them sometimes at dusk. It was a face, shattered and time-worn, with great clefts in the evacuation effort. Even before the aircraft had touched down on the pad, caretakers were assembling just beyond the painted circle of the rotor hazard area. Childe had just given up trying to convince her to stay, but he had sent me in to see if I could be more persuasive. Then you will feel admiration turn slowly to envy and then to hate, and it will start to feel like a curse. Are you sure there are people at the end of this trail?" The time it takes him to answer, I may as well have asked him to calculate the exact day on which he was born. Did you consider that?" "She'd blow herself up as well." "Was it?" "For me, yes. "They are a pattern you have remembered across tens of thousands of years, forgetting its true meaning. I noted the existing settings, then made near-microscopic alterations to three of the six dials, fighting to keep my hands steady as I applied the necessary effort to budge them. If I wanted to hurt you, I could have hit you from space with charm-torps." When he reached the apron, the leader gave another order and a trio of soldiers broke formation to cover Merlin from three angles, with the barrels of their weapons almost touching further progress. So what?" "But a different order of machine," Zima said. I always did, and I always will." Weather fell silent, her expression respectful. "Red, I think," Zima said. Got some metallic backscatter, too. It rose over the shielded region in the bowl, where water and greenery had gathered. "Not yet." "Perhaps you ought to stand down," Fescue said The treaty between the Coalition and the Conjoiners—which Voi's neutral Demarchists had help draft—was the longest document in existence, apart from some obscure, computer-generated mathematical proofs. "Eventually he agreed to open the clinic records and examine his grandfather's log of my visit." We turned a corner. Fescue certainly wouldn't have approved." "I don't know," she said. We have to talk them up before the thread, so that everyone is in a state of appropriate expectation. Did he mean for me to steal his coat? "You're on the Devilfish, and that makes you one of us." \*\*\* A WEEK PASSED, then another. By the time they start crumbling, there'll be no one alive on Lecythus." "You're surely not thinking of taking everyone with you," Merlin said. He knew he could shatter that moon and turn it into a ring system around Neptune. "What happened?" "The records say that I was never a man," Zima said. Yet now it's happening, just as my father always said it would. The pilot's head turned. Certainly, the provisions I've now put in place would prevent anyone making a second attempt in this manner. In truth I found her fascinating. You like dolphins, Gaunt?" "Who doesn't," he said. We had no idea what to make of the glowing veins, whether they were natural or suspicious. You'll have to look smug and self-satisfied. It took fifteen minutes of cautious progress to react a second attempt in this manner. In truth I found her fascinating. You like dolphins, Gaunt?" reach the lodged Progress. "We'd have been pulped otherwise." "Would someone please tell me what just happened?" Celestine asked, inspecting her own attempt. Just...how to find my way back. Felka's search for meaning in a universe without her beloved Wall, or his passage into Transenlightenment? "Another metallic chamber, considerably smaller than this one. Time and causality get all tangled up on the interface. My armour would have undertaken some life-preserving measures, but that was only a stopgap until the robot arrived. The chamber was round, easily a hundred metres across, with a domed ceiling. I turned another corner, more in desperation than hope, and faced yet another unrecognised corridor. "If I had a strong preference for one over the other, then, yes, the AM would always recommend one wine over the other. The best it could give was twenty or thirty years of hard graft. I think." "Yes." Celestine turned to me. We've spent a lot of time together at the facility." "I'm not going back. I'm strong, and well armoured, but I'm no match for two infantry units. Short range...bad. During that time the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the current crisis had steadily deteriorated. "I was so sure." "That's the way it happens. He'd put in jokes and little rhymes, things to make me laugh. "That's a good idea. Our eyeballs waited back at the shuttle, floating in jars like grotesque delicacies. "When we began, we were moving in vacuum—or at least through air that was as thin as that on Golgotha's surface. I saw it in the history." I paused and swallowed hard. For what was the loss of one culture, against something so huge? "What happened to my float-cam, Childe?" "I don't know. Except—now—I could see that I'd failed to mention Greta for another reason entirely. His head reeling, Clavain walked in light. "I'll give you another twelve hours, lad. He just stepped through the door, into the next room. Beyond these recognisable forms lay the evidence of many stranger anatomies and technologies. The Conjoiner drive was essentially a piece of magic we'd been handed on a plate, like a coiled baby dragon. But if he turned his back on her, he would become something even less than human himself. "You should have said something," I told her as I dabbed at the abrasions with a disinfectant swab. They twinkled with embedded gems: reds, yellows and hard blue-whites for different stellar populations. I'm assuming you can do better." I took the end of the line. Ahead, the airship had regained some measure of stability. Let the cold return. Her clothes are still those of her early middle age, with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with little effort." I thought of the Advocates I knew, and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could draw up the same shortlist with allowance for infirmity and the cold. I'm sure you could moment's lag before Merlin heard his response translated into Main, rendered in an emotionally flat machine voice. Glowing blue lines slipped into orifices and punctured his flesh at a dozen points. But by the time we have that capability, they'll more than likely have the means to strike back, if they don't hit us first. We did—but only to produce brain-dead corpses. When the moon and Calliope were tugging on your seas in the same direction, you got a spring tide. What does it matter to me if there are other domains? She did not even think of running in the other direction. And the doctors kept telling us that the immortality breakthrough was just around the corner, year after the year. "What about it?" "It falls. "Connect up. Like Uncle Otto with his expensive private sunjammer that he liked to take guests in for spins around Earth and the inner worlds. "Do you think anyone else knows?" I asked Purslane, during another covert meeting aboard her ship. The stellar engineering hinted at in this story is speculative, to say the least, but it isn't completely without some basis in solid thinking—see, for instance, some of the wilder cosmological fancies in "Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition", by the science writer Ed Regis. Don't piss on her memory, Captain. Unfortunately, that meant I couldn't stick around." "Happy Jack bad man?" "As bad as Zeal." She looked at me, hard and deep and enquiring, and then said: "I hope you not lie, Peter Vandry." "I'm not lying." She showed me her hands, giving me time to admire the crudity of their function, the brutal way they'd been grafted to her arms. Furthermore, they can almost always guarantee that the desired routing is the one that the aperture machinery will provide. We're a small community, and if you lose someone, it's not like there are hundreds of other single people out there to choose from. I have no idea what's going to happen to either of us now. Must be noisy on the interface." The yellow-green stain was diminishing by the second, as if that magical city were descending back to the depths. "But it's all right. But as soon as I saw you standing there, I forgot all about that stuff." Greta nodded. No matter what had happened until that point, there was a mask of fear and incomprehension. "I'm not here to test you, or humiliate you, or anything like that. If I could divert just one swallowship here, it could carry fifty thousand refugees; double that if people were prepared to accept some hardship." "That's still not many people," Sibia said. Our files mixed up. Much of that bandwidth was now being sucked up by this one video link. This isn't exactly the place for small talk, let alone who chose to have me erased from his memory." "Would it make any difference if I said I was sorry about that?" I could tell from the tone of her response that my answer had not been quite the one she was expecting. I think of myself as something of a student of the human arts. He gave the robot a full-colour vision system and a brain large enough to process the visual data into a model of its surroundings. \*\*\* DON'T MIND ME, for the moment. That's enough to put a dent in anyone's day." "I'm sorry about that." "There's something else, too," I said. His hand was holding it from inside the wing. But foolishly or otherwise, they're still thinking of the soldier I was meant to save. I don't boast." "Breaking into ships isn't you either It's clear that I'm not being bullshitted. Give me the word, and I'll go in. By then we'd reached the surgeon. I opened his armour, as he told me, and I found his arm, bound by iron straps to the inside of his back. "I was just hoping you might have some clue as to why Galiana keeps wasting valuable lives with escape attempts." Voi shrugged. Tradespeak? We are all tested for such gifts when we are young. Greta pulls something from her pocket and touches Suzy on the forearm. They were alone together aboard Tyrant, Malkoha ready to leave with another consignment of antibiotics. The whole point of this exercise is to measure our alertness, our ability to see through delusional constructs. These are my precursors, my humble fossil ancestors! They would be suitably awed by me. He couldn't decide. Fifteen years ago the Conjoiners had avoided extinction by deploying weapons of awesome ferocitybut those ship-to-ship armaments were too simply too destructive to use against a nearby foe. The floor is level with the door, so we'll have gained a metre or so in height. "Tangible," he said, softer now. "I don't know," I said weakly. "Or, for that matter, my outrage. It was not one to induce great cheer. "Cheerful-looking place, isn't it?" Childe said "But it actually feels like a lot less than that, since we mostly keep to our assigned sectors." "You know the real irony?" Clausen said. Nero and Da Silva went through a checklist, Nero making sure her replacement knew everything he needed to, and then they made their farewells. All it would take, she told him, was a moment of inattention. Already himself up and down the ladders. "No," he said. Something huge floated in the cage. "Who are you?" Purslane asked. "I liked Asphodel," I said absently. "Van Ness told me something I didn't know. Felka developed with machines in her head. D skin conveyed a full range of sensory impressions to his mind. "Our sounding rockets have penetrated to the very edge of the atmosphere," Minla said. Images, videos and audio are available under their respective licenses. Trintignant followed a little way behind, moving with the automaton-like stiffness I had now grown almost accustomed to. I'm in the Waynet now, riding the flow away from Calliope. "In a tediously complicated sense, yes." "People like me out of work." Skanda smiled. No one had ever mentioned anything about them indulging in this kind of detour. And yet you still act as if there is more we could have done." He was a thin, sallow man with arched, quizzical eyebrows, dressed in a military uniform that was several sizes too big for him. Engines of creation, forging a new world." "You saw them?" He seemed to catch himself." I looked at Childe, expecting him to at least proffer some shred of explanation. Just a tiny, tiny bit. It was the best she could do, but she wasn't optimistic. To a Conjoiner, what happened to me is the world. Unless I have to." Then he turned to the infiltration specialist, still standing by the frame. "I went to see him," Galenka said, startling me. For most of the crew left aboard when the impactor hit, the end would have come with merciful swiftness. I call up the history. The thing was slow, but this was its lair and she knew that she could never escape it for good. It comes into view and I observe that the woman—for it is a woman, I think—is wearing an exoskeleton. It was not a scale representation, Clavain knew. "There's no dust in it," he said, peering at the glasscased tip. "We are coming." Lenka and Rasht disappeared into their respective tunnels, their suits moving with visible sluggishness. It might have been constructed around some antique but valuable moon-sized engine, or some huge, fabulously efficient prototype drive that no one else possessed. "Don't," Galenka said, with a firmness that stopped my hand. "I hope you're right about this, Dimitri. "Thirty-five years, sir. It was a man, baseline human in morphology. Who else got the blue card treatment?" "Only you, to the best of my knowledge." "And if I'd declined? "The city's vigilant. You'll need warm clothing and enough food and water to get you through two days, and maybe some supplementary oxygen in case cabin pressure drops. "After I rescued Grisha, I caught a trace of a drive flame exiting the system in the opposite direction. Time to get back to the ship, if we rushed, and none of us got stuck in the system in the opposite direction. Time to get back to the ship if we rushed, and none of us got stuck in the system in the opposite direction. Time to get back to the ship if we rushed, and none of us got stuck in the system in the opposite direction. miserable little gatherings you have known. Jonathan Strahan was soliciting stories for his Eclipse series of original anthologies, and I was happy to take a try with this one. He opens the pack to inspect the contents, sniffing at them. "Go away," she hissed, hating herself in the same instant. It's why I've risked my life to come here and talk you out of another provocation." "It's completely different now." "Of course!" He forced himself not to shout. "But I'll pass on that for now. Service staff rushed out of location, tearing at gristle, but he managed to keep his grip on both the Conjoiner and the ladder. We could breathe it now, but there was no biomass elsewhere on Reunion to replenish the oxygen we were turning into carbon dioxide. The cubes were resilient, resourceful. We climbed down the pea-green flank of the Soyuz, using the handholds that had been bolted on for weightless operations. I guess they become a little less accurate with each instance of recall, but like Zima said, perhaps that's the point. At the last instant her fingertips grazed the ancient artefact and then held the contact, daringly. "Those pricks on Arkangel." "And after that? Her smooth skin slid against stubble. Accidental death was commonplace. "That wasn't Burdock that you saw. We're just barely holding on as it is, without adding more shit to worry about." The two women were sitting up front; Gaunt was in the back with Gimenez's foil-wrapped corpse for company. But you try another stunt like that, and..." But even then it was obvious that Hirz had come to the conclusion that I had already arrived at myself that, given what the Spire was likely to test us with, it was better to accept these machines than ask for them to be flushed out of our systems. I'll step through and we'll see what happens. "But is that so very bad? The fluid was rushing out through the vents, exposing a floor of slightly twinkling black, like polished marble. Maybe there'd be friends in those hundred faces, friends as well as enemies, and maybe, just maybe, there'd be at least one person who could be more than a friend. "So did everyone involved. "How do I know this is true?" Van Ness asked quietly. It's a piece of the past, a memento of the way Mars used to be. Even from where I was lying, I saw something change on his face. Don't you want to hear what happened to me?" She opens the door a tiny bit wider, showing me more of her face. "Who is it?" "Dimitri Ivanov." I wait a second or two for her to respond to the name. He holds the syringe to eye level, taps away bubbles and presses the plunger to squirt out a few drops of whatever's inside. "But I also care about someone being manipulated." "I haven't manipulated." "I haven't manipulated anyone." "Then tell him the truth about the clones. For the last nine years, Deimos was all that he had known, but now he could encompass it within the arc of his fist. That, and a certain stiffness in his movements, betrayed the fact that this was a new body, being worn for the first time. I remember being on that ship, everything that happened." "Only because you spent so much time in his presence," Grechko says, not without compassion. What if they could be brought into a state of coherence, like the atoms in a laser? "Not that I'n complaining, or arguing against the terraforming program. Go ahead. "The company," he said. Yukimi was now more terrified than she had ever thought possible. "We are wasting valuable time here, Richard." "Prudent?" Celestine said. Or are you going to play on your personal connection?" "I was just her prisoner, that's all." Clavain took the controls—Voi said piloting was a bore—and unlatched the shuttle from Deimos. "But none of it will mean much to you. So we had murdered another ship and taken some of her crew as prize. As stupid as he was, Kanto was innocent in all this. Triton's the only moon of any consequence; the rest are snowballs. When a group of Advocates wagered among themselves as to who would beat the maze the quickest, it was Fescue who ended up with the humiliation of being trapped in a closed-loop. "I never accepted this bargain." "Right." She nodded, as if he'd made a profound, game-changing point. Some of those lines had died out over the intervening time, but most had endured in some shape or form. Only some news from home which Childe has allowed me to see." Uninvited, Trintignant stepped fully into the room and sealed the partition behind him. If a crewman needed treatment, he was going to get it—even if Zeal and his lobots had to drag the man screaming and kicking to the table. Make entries whenever we could. Overnight storm breach. I think of waving to myself. You may forget the rest of us one day, but please don't ever forget my daughter." "I'm lucky," Malkoha said, something in his tone easing, as if he was finished judging Merlin. They say the q-matter machinery twinkles and moves all the while, like the ticking innards of a very complicated clock. "Well,' Fescue said, addressing Purslane. Her skull was hairless, her forehead rising to a bony crest rilled on either side by shimmering coloured tissue. The unshackled part is drifting towards your sun, tugged towards it by the pull of Calliope's gravitational field." "You're certain of this?" Sibia asked. As I said, not everyone would welcome the truth getting out." I shake my head, almost disappointed with Ingvar, that she should give in now. With the passing of every reunion it seemed impossible that the wilder fringes of humanity could become any stranger, any less recognizable. You know they can make things happen just by thinking about them." "She'll have no reason to hurt us. I picked up one of the smaller shards, tugging it from its icy holdfast. Some kind of transmission tower or pylon has come down, sagging over the ground contours like the skeleton of some saurian monster. A real fucking pisser." "It is," Gaunt said. The last time she had looked at the picture, everything had been possible, all life's opportunities open to her. Plodding and wheezing and slow as it might be, it would always find her. Language going. He was looking at a starship. Not very exotic compared to mapping the large scale universe, or probing the event horizons of black holes. There's a point to you. So Trintignant had gone to ground, and continued his gruesome experiments with his only remaining subject. So did I. Who wouldn't be?" Grechko stubs out the cigarette and extends a gloved hand. He was smashed and bent, like a toy that had been trodden on. Which isn't too surprising. His voice is near and far at the same time. You actually want another damned war." "Don't be so defeatist," Warren said, shaking his head sadly, forever the older brother disappointed at his sibling's failings. But we'll be getting you out very soon now." "Don't jerk me around. My agency, I think, would be best pleased if I were to simply disappear. "I'm sorry about this," I told her, "but it's the only way Van Ness will let me take you out of this room. "How long did you spend awake each time?" I asked. He hasn't contributed to a single problem yet. I nodded at Fescue's assessment: kilotonne range, easily. The robot helped me into the rear compartment. Her strand would be the subject of so much discussion tomorrow that no one could possibly take the risk of not dreaming it tonight, even if my apparatus had permitted such evasion. Says Lev would help her, if she could get a message through. All that's left is the lightweight mesh suit, and that's ripped and shredded pretty badly. "The lines have been gnawing at the lightspeed problem for half a million years," Burdock said. "It's not ringing any bells." "I'd be surprised if it did, sir. He held up his hand. "There are twelve hundred people on this ship, some of them children. And if they had been believed, there'd have been panic and confusion all over the world. The rilled structures on the side of her crest throbbed with vivid colours, each chasing the last. Even Hirz. From a distance it appeared to rest solidly on the base: a mighty obelisk requiring the deepest of foundations to anchor it to the ground. It gleamed in twilight, shining where it had appeared dull before. "Or why Grisha's people had to die." "I'll tell you about the Work in good time. Minla would have presented no challenge at all, but the Planetary Director had declined the offer of frostwatch care herself, preferring to give up her place to one of her underlings. A seething mass of tiny bright things lay nestled at the base of the cleft, twinkling with the light of the sun. But while it seemed likely that we'd be invited to participate in the project before very long, we were also now at our most vulnerable. Once we've agreed on the strand, I can receive it immediately. If they had been present nearer the surface, we would probably not have seen them against the brighter illumination of daylight. That I may have malfunctioned—that I may have acted in a manner injurious to human life—may or may not be in dispute. I counted a minute, then two. If you could skip forward a few hundred million years and examine a piece of whetstone laid down now, you'd probably find very faint variations in sediment thickness. During the second apparition, the Americans had sent one of their robot probes straight through one of their robot probes straight a great war, on your behalf, against an enemy you do not even remember." "What enemy?" "The jangling men. The scientific returns were almost incidental. After due process, the attention will shift to Burdock. The walls of the chamber—like every room we had passed through, in fact—had looked totally seamless. My phantom twin has vanished. I continue on my way. No, not quite. "But human memory wouldn't work that way." "No. It would latch on to that one exception and attach undue significance to it. It was what had given him the reins of the vast, layered machine it was his duty to steer and safeguard. Sort of. Very private." She seemed distracted, quite unlike her usual self. Make promise fast." "Say it. The ship's dark architecture seemed to be rearranging itself as I passed, confounding my attempts at orientation. They could have made it back into space, instead of dying on Titan." "DEREK BRING OTHER GUEST." I glance around—this is not what was meant to happen. The whole thing was breathing in and out, the components moving as if tied together by a complex web of elastic filaments." She shapes her fingers around an invisible ball and makes the ball swell and contract. "Now. It had been visible, of course, long before we set down. It was best that nothing be said. They looked small and doll-like as they stroked and examined my mechanical counterpart Let mother and baby go. They've begun altering the moon's orbit. Or simply very, very curious. "Now you'll have to tell me where they're from." "It's a long story." "That never stopped you before." "A world called Lacertine. "I—" "I said don't talk." Childe knelt down and picked up the amputated arm, showing the evidence to Forqueray. It doesn't look like this way to the outside world, because writers—like most people—don't tend to advertise their catastrophes. "Does it look like I have a great deal of choice?" "We're not implicated," Purslane said soothingly. "Becoming trouble. Watch out for the jangling men." "I will," Kathrin replied, because that was what you were supposed to say. Campion and I broke into the ship. We stooped through the low overhang into a much larger room. It might take days if we were all expected to follow her reasoning. What fraction?" "More than half agree to stay," Clausen said. Childe narrated: "The better part of two and a half centuries ago, my uncle Giles—whose somewhat pessimistic handiwork you have already seen—made a momentous decision. Bring us around to her rear and then approach from under her." "Merlin, you have no idea who these people are. She was able to return to the first room unimpeded—the rear-facing doors opened and closed in sequence to allow her to pass—and then make her way back to the rest of us by using the entry codes we had already discovered. A soldier stepped out of the mist, the obscene darkness of a gun muzzle trained on Clavain. It makes my head hurt." She stops turning the handle and returns the musical box to her pocket. "Bring me a mirror," he said, with an ominous foreboding. I'm just not absolutely certain. Your memories have to be electrifying—the talk of the island for days afterwards. "You don't feel it, then?" Yakov asked, directing his question to both of us. "Look," he said, removing a sheaf of papers from his jacket and spreading them on the table. You know that by now." "I beg to differ." He takes a long drag on the cigarette. "Don't tell me, Campion. Did you have some kind of accident?" It takes him time to answer. With luck, it'll open up again on the other side." "And luck's been so kind to us until now," I said. Technical manuals floated in mid-air, tethered to the wall. But what if the dying figure on the ship was the impostor, and this was still the real Burdock? The time dragged on; first an hour and then the better part of two hours. Yet all along they professed a kind of puzzled bemusement that their spread was being resisted. The universe could be spared a single callous act. Fucking cowboys." "It doesn't matter," I said. But only if we ignore what the last test taught us. Didn't you already extract a confession?" "We found evidence that points to the Luquan Emergence." "Yes, I've heard about that." Ostentatiously, he tapped at a sealed brochure on his desk. "I'm sorry, but...something's wrong. "You may just have saved us all." \*\*\* IT HAD BEEN ten years. Greta said there was a window of a few minutes before the events she was experiencing began to transfer into long-term memory. The only long-term solution here is..." he trailed off. There I opened the hatch that gave access to the controls of the drive itself: six stiff dials, fashioned in blue metal, arranged in hexagon formation, each of which was tied to some fundamental aspect of the engine's function. sharklike things, or dextrous multi-limbed molluscs or hard-shelled arthropods. "What do you reckon we should do? He tossed the float-cam through the open doorway and waited several seconds until it flew back into his grasp. "Do you want to go up there sometime, Dimitri?" "Do you have to be big?" "No," he said. There isn't a better syntax runner in Ashanti Industrial. But there was also something bleak and chilling about them. I looked at the man, trying to fit him into the Burdock puzzle. "We'll be arriving in two hundred seconds. It towered a hundred metres above the flying wing, stepped like a ziggurat and cut and engraved with awesome precision. "This doesn't look like anything in the census." "I think they built an armoured sky around their world," the ship said. It was not yet capable of supporting life, but one would not have died instantly without the protection of a suit. "Yes," Childe said testily, like a conjurer whose carefully scripted patter was being ruined by a persistent heckler. Bad thing happen soon. What's your name?' "Well, Yukimi—which is a very nice name, by the way—it's your call. I don't like it when they answer back, and I definitely don't like it when they start showing notions of free will." He smiled. Radar bounced off its flawless surface as if the thing was motionless. "In the meantime...you can just hide out here. "What happened to the sword?" she asked. "...express my shock," Warren said. I took a pace closer, hoping she would stay engrossed in her meal. The vehicle was projecting forms out onto the landscape, superimposing ghostly actors on the real terrain. "He didn't come nearby either. She had just pressed the correct topological symbol and the door had opened to admit us to the chamber beyond, one we had not so far stepped into. Twenty Dormitories were ready now; the remaining eighty would come online within two years. Merlin made out the tiny moving forms of birdlike creatures, wheeling and orbiting in powerful thermals, some of them coming and going from roosts on the lower ledges. Tyrant could pump out antibiotic medicine by the hundreds of litres, or synthesise something vastly more effective in equally large quantities. Expense was never a problem, since Zima had many rival sponsors who competed to host his latest and biggest creation. More than to flee back to my ship and put myself to sleep until morning. That's what being smart meant: taking care of yourself, knowing what you had to do to survive." "You say 'machines'." "There were many projects trying to develop artificial intelligence; yours was just one of them. After you learned that was going to happen, you had no choice but to do everything possible to save us, no matter how bad a taste it leaves in your mouth." "I have to live with myself when this is all over." "You'll have a natural satellite in orbit within fifteen years, maybe ten. I had experienced re-entry gee-loads that were enough to push me to the brink of unconsciousness, but those forces had built up slowly, over several minutes. "Yes." The man tapped a fist against his own chest. I don't, as a rule, end up sleeping with my clients. Part of it was occasioned by our intervention. "I am not turning, Prakash. Their minds—if they could be dignified with such a term—were cobbled from the innards of junked computers, with their simple programs bulging at the limits of memory and processor speed. It just happened a bit sooner than the captain told me." "But then if they're not the pirates..." "Correct, lad. Because then I knew Katerina couldn't mean that much to you." "Fuck me? The components in Tyrant are manufactured to exacting tolerances, using materials your chemistry can't even explain, let alone reproduce." "Then show us how to improve our manufacturing capability, until we can make what we need." "We don't have time for that. They're raising the apocentre of the moon's orbit." Apocentre, Clavain knew, was the Martian equivalent of apogee for an object orbiting Earth: the point of highest altitude in an elliptical orbit. She was already asleep. I was just a twenty-year-old kid with some ideas about being a cosmonaut. I also knew that none of those planners seriously expected the secrets of the Matryoshka to bear the slightest resemblance to their imaginings No cargo, no tradeable commodities. I parked it here." "I sent it away. The aircraft lined up with the airship, the two of them at about the same altitude. "Even the way she remembered previous attempts to wake her." The glass mannequin approached our table. I couldn't offer Suzy the same solace, but I was sure that there was a way for us to coax Suzy to the same state of near-acceptance. We might not experience much time passing in our ships, but that doesn't apply to the prevailing winds. That includes the Aligned Territories, the Neutrals and yes, even our enemies in the Shadowland Coalition." He beckoned with a hand in Merlin's direction, inviting him to stand. The walls had been carved with a hypnotically detailed mazelike pattern, one that I could never quite bring into focus. His fists were clenched. "You finished checking those planes?" I asked. "DEREK WELCOME MARIA." "Thank you, Derek," Maria says, before taking her position next to me on the couch. "The mind chose this vocation willingly." "It chose this?" "It's considered a great honour. "No. We were the first, I suppose—the ship I came in. At twenty gees it was as if a huge invisible hand snatched them away into the distance. Remember: they poisoned me not because I knew what had happened, but simply because I was asking too many questions. Another followed it: brighter now. "I didn't go to the hassle of bringing in Forqueray just for the free ride, you know. It was supposed to be watertight, though only machines had ever read it from beginning to end, and only machines had ever stood a chance of finding the kind of loophole which Warren was now brandishing. Real human affairs would not begin in earnest until the last star was dropped into its designed Galactic orbit. It's armoured, independently powered, and fully capable of keeping you alive until we have an extraction window. Our minds might have been able to compute the future position of a simpler pendulum, steering our bodies out of its harmful path. "Then don't. I created the bullet that did so little harm. Four pieces of Forqueray had thudded to the Spire's floor; his interior organs were laid open like a wax model in a medical school. "There are really only two possibilities. We came close to meeting around the Hesperus Veil: near enough to exchange recognition protocols." I nodded. Her breasts were small. The forms were humanoid, with arms and legs and heads even if something had happened, there would never have been anything I could have done about it. "Can you understand me, Merlin?" asked a woman, with a firm clear voice. I'd seen the images, but the first up-close viewing was always special. They'll have to find out one of these days." "Not tonight, though." "Campion...if my name comes out of the hat... what will I do?" I feigned concern, suppressing an amused smile. "Tell us." "Prepare," he whispered. So she could believe it, at least provisionally. "But he could not rule out someone else being implicated: a sleeper, an agent no one would suspect." "He must have suspected Purslane and I," I said. Someone else's dream, certainly, but I don't doubt that there'll be a certain rapturous quality to it. "Doctor Trintignant," I said. The punishment ceased and the door opened. Her answer came back, no more terse than I had expected. I've worked hard, had my share of successes. She slowed. He said it would only be harder if my father lost his work." "In that respect he was probably right," the widow said resignedly. So Mars was significant to the emperor. Clavain's throat was dry. He looked something like a whale, except that he had no flippers or flukes. And the doors were definitely getting smaller. Yukimi scrunched the satchel until they shut up. What made you decide that you had to solve this mystery? Stray fire accounted for even more losses. The emergence event—the first apparition—caught humanity entirely unawares. "Yes," I say. "If you feel you must." He made precise right angles of his thumbs and forefingers to frame an image. On some level, something has gone catastrophically wrong with my body image. We'll lose nothing by doing so." "You can't be sure of that. "I was wrong about you, Captain. "If you want to remain here," Rasht said, "we can exclude you from your cut of the profits." So he had gone from denial of the Amerikano settlement, to a skeptical allowance of the possibility, to imagining how the dividend might be shared. "It's the deal we all took. "Baby," the girl said. The ferocious clockwork that Trintignant had installed in my skull spun giddily. "I don't really have a choice, do I," he said. As if the meteor had triggered something, the sea erupted with a vast wave of departing aquatics. Trintignant's machines did more than just supplant our existing and clumsily slow neural pathways. I wondered if she had felt brave as she came down here, or instead afraid of the worse fate of dying alone in the wreck. The robot took her out of the bay, down a ramp, into some kind of enclosed storage room." "Only one way to find out," Hirz said, joining her. How much do you understand about Kaluza-Klein spaces?" "Not a vast amount, I have to admit." "That's what I feared. This in turn will have ramifications for the various governments and corporate bodies involved in the agency. Nesha's old, but she could easily have decades of life ahead of her. She unwraps the handkerchief and blinks at the little metal box it had contained. Not at all. "I can make you more medicine. Mars being moved into a different orbit, its gravity altered. "Supposing that is the shadow of a tesseract...what's the puzzle?" "This," Celestine said, pointing to the other side of the door, to what seemed like an utterly different—though no less complex—design. But when my fingers touched it, its contamination seemed to jerk onto them. Gentian Line was not the only one of its kind. "About bloody time." I watched our weapons impact across the hull of the other ship, flowering in a chain. "Better than you, I reckon." "I doubt it. There he was examined by Skyland medical officials, a process that involved much poking and prodding and whispered consultation. I believe that with our minds meshed together, and dedicated to this one task, we may be able to return the engines to something like normal efficiency. Mental architecture was a private thing at the best of times. My daughter is twelve; she barely remembers the outside world. Made a living." I watch an excursion craft slide across the bisected face of Neptune, lit up like a neon fish. She pointed out the new cities that had been built since the cease-fire. Burdock's approach never took him all that close to the main action, but there must still have been a lot of debris flying around. We've been coming for a very long time. "I merely stress the point that what we consider state of the art medicine may be somewhat beyond the city's present capabilities. I told it to ease off on the wisecracks and start giving me the bad news. I think we need to talk about it face to face." "This room is already one of the most secure places in the entire Radiant Commonwealth," he reminded me. We even have a name for it. It's nice to watch the sunset, isn't it?" "Nice," I agreed. Needs something doing to her." I sensed further questions would be unwise, bitterly regretting that I had raised the subject in the first place. But I'm convinced that you can do it, if only you pull together." Merlin looked sternly at his audience. I like Minla. "To speculate about the shape of alien consciousness is one thing; but to drink it; to bathe in the full flood of it—to know it intimately, like a lover..." I trailed off for a moment. She had been journeying for lifetimes, by the long measure of her species. And you're not Paolo." "Was she any easier on Gimenez than me?" "To begin with, I think she was too numbed-out to feel anything at all where Gimenez was concerned. Then everything changed. What about the thousands of conversations we had; the times when we put aside our differences to talk about something other than the damned war? "He up to speed on things yet? It'll be too risky to attempt to free the Progress, but there's nothing to stop us transferring the artefacts. There are a lot like us, leftovers from the old days, when the place was emptier. I could tell when something had gone wrong with the platelets, but I had to trust that Suzy had done her job. Nowadays we were all a lot more careful. "We're concerned about the Phobos worms. This is our home. But I haven't brought you to full consciousness yet." "All right. He realises they have differences, but it would never occur to him that his younger brother might be planning to have him killed. Not exactly. That's all she said." "She's out of control," he said, more to himself than me. "Tell." "A man called Happy Jack did something to my sister. Scabs of concrete came away, hitting the sea like chunks of melting glacier. There was only a single pair of footprints, and they only went one way. Perhaps it was the way she carried on regardless, engrossed in an activity to which she seemed to attribute the utmost significance, yet which had to be without any sane purpose. Candles were being lit in the inns and houses that lined the bridge, tallow torches burning along the parapets. Members of other lines had committed atrocities in the remote past. There's no point putting a human being in the combat zone if you won't trust their judgement." She relents. "Maybe by the time the mistake of thinking there's any chance of talking your way out of this one. Malignant red laser-eyes swept over us. The young man filled his house with these simple machines, designing each for a particular task. But then, perhaps Lenka thought exactly the same of me. It doesn't know how to distort or forget." "Isn't that the point?" "Not exactly. She looks much smaller, much older and frailer, than I ever dared to imagine. He's thinner than the others, with a shaven, bulletshaped head and small round glasses that bestow a look somewhere between professorial and ascetic. I didn't call last night because I was too tired and disorientated after coming out of the tank, and I didn't know how long we were going to be here. Then the doctors said that while they couldn't give us eternal life just yet, they could give us the means to skip over the years until it happened." Gaunt forced himself to sit up in the bed, strength returning to his limbs even as he grew angrier at the sense that he was not being treated with sufficient deference, that—worse—he was being judged. They want to see that we're still capable of picking up on the details that don't fit." The blood was spooling out of my hand, forming a chain of scarlet droplets. If it wasn't fucked, it wouldn't be on this stupid elliptical orbit." "Maybe this orbit is all part of the plan." Yakov said. They pierced the tops of planetary atmospheres, jutting into space In the years since the last apparition, the complex motion of the spheres had been subjected to enormous scrutiny. If they had little cause to visit these corridors, it might be years before they found my dead body. Galiana's act threw a wrench into our thinking. Like those of Shell 1, the components of Shell 2 were all but invisible to the naked eye dark as space itself, and only a fraction of a kelvin warmer than the cosmic microwave background. Or maybe you don't. Celestine...are you ready now?" "Almost, but not quite. But although they differed from Grisha's people in every superficial respect, there were points of similarity between the two cultures. "I'm sorry to break it to you, Ingvar. "You'd think this was a punishment—to be put inside the Matryoshka, alone, hurled back in time. Depending on you for wisdom and balance in all things. "Of course, it's faked," Greta said, her voice soft now that she was leaning closer. I could not negotiate, I could not negotiate, I could not negotiate, I could not negotiate the Matryoshka, alone, hurled back in time. my existence. "We thought you'd raise your young in a simplified version of the machine-generated environment you experience." "In the early days that's more or less what we did." Subtly, Galiana's tone of voice had changed. Yes, we called them colonies back then. The reason for all this." "You think you're ready for it, Gaunt?" "You tell me." "No one's ever ready," Clausen said. "Not for him. "Don't you get it?" Hirz said. It was a plinth, and there was a figure on the plinth, lying with his face to the domed ceiling. I could see David's head in my mind's eye, visualise exactly where the first cuts would have to go. "Please, remain calm. Anyway, he doesn't mention you either. It was no place to visit, let alone stay. Nesha Petrova may be too old to remember anything of importance. "We only had three minutes to spare on this one, Childe. That's all over now. All we know is you aren't supposed to be here." "Right. Looking into their slack, sleepwalker faces, I couldn't help wondering what kind of people they had been before; what kinds of lives they had led. They were just leaving me alone while something else attracted their attention. For now, get some rest." I turned away before he could answer. Merlin pushed harder, giving the aircraft more altitude in readiness for its approach glide. The blockage was an assemblage of fused shapes, creature absorbed into a sort of interlocking stone puzzle, a jigsaw of jumbled anatomies and half-implied life-support technologies. "Whoever the perpetrators are, they're still part of the line. "Don't you think that changes things? If Lev was on that ship, he'd have made it back to one of the settled worlds by now. They say they were pushing the engines, trying to outrun the other voidships. I filed him away as interesting but kitschy; maybe worth a story if something about the bulge's shape struck me as odd and unsettling, as if it simply did not belong in this landscape. "I made her convincing, the way she would have acted." "You made her?" "You're not really awake, Thom. Only a few had survived the initial collision, and most of them must have died shortly afterwards, as the ship bled through its wounds. By rights, they should have viewed this data as an awful warning, and acted accordingly: abandoning the Great Work before a single star had moved an inch." But it was never going to happen like that. The system worked all right. "Normally, you'd have relied on the advice of the AM, wouldn't you?" I shrugged. The rest of it was hidden by the armor. "But much as I hat the little rat for doing this without my permission, I admit to seeing the sense in it." I felt the bump in my wrist again. There was also ample opportunity to get away from everyone else, if solitude was what one day we shall make it our home again." "I like the bit about 'peace and harmony'." "History is what we write, not what we remember. Those pulsations change any more, the algorithm won't be any use." "He could be lying," Galenka said. It had the hard, enamelled blue of midsummer. Ever since then, including an embarrassing anecdote in a strand had almost become de riqueur. \*\*\* VAN NESS HAD been right to be concerned about our proximity to the Cockatrice. The ramparts were hundreds of meters thick, dark as glacial ice, sinking great taproots deep into the lithosphere to harvest the ores needed for the Wall's continual growth. Even if the widow had not told her of its nature, there would have been no doubt now. Men and women of various ages were sitting around tables, talking quietly as they ate meals or played card games. When the steam had fallen astern of the still-accelerating ship, we got our first good look at the damage. Field trip that goes wrong, bored kids and teacher run into trouble when they activate some ancient, buried technology. "We're beyond the Rift." Suzy screams, knitting her face into a mask of anger and denial. "Does it anger you, that he did this to your greatest work?" Ingvar asks. There'd be a measure of acclaim in it for me." "Just a measure?" "Some trouble as well. All of a sudden I realise that the Tyrannosaurus Rex may not be my biggest problem of the evening. Can you feel the warmth flowing up from your neck ring, taking the sting out of the cold? And she found it. The best and the worst of all of us. I got used to it, though. You wanted to leave there and then. It took him days to build up to it. They tried to bury you, but you were right all along. His strand didn't exactly set the island ringing, did it?" "Nor did mine." "Difference is Fescue obviously expected more. Always just out of reach. What happened to the rest of the Few, what is this fucked up, miserable place, and so on." "I presume you're going to get round to some answers soon enough." "Maybe you should tell him the deal now, up front," Da Silva said. "There's always been something about blue. There were furious blue-white stars embedded in what looked like sheets of velvet. Hirz was putting on a helmet and backpack assembly for the first time. "Did I do something wrong?" Merlin asked. So we made preparations to abandon the world that had been our home for so long, and to commence a journey into the outer darkness of interstellar space, looking for a new home in the stars. From the whirl, tiny pieces of flesh and bone dribbled to the ground. That's what this has always been about, hasn't it, Childe? I'm just a machine—a space probe. The Wall looked much higher here in relation to its diameter. A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library. It was done out of kindness. Someone landed a final punch in my chest, sending a bolt of pain up my spine, and then pulled away. Whatever it had been was small; no larger than a marble or small stone. "Then they're all like that?" "Unless you know otherwise." Zeal studied me with chilling suspicion. "That already narrows it down to less than a hundred." My ship pushed a memory into my head: a girl seated in the lotus position, with a golden, glowing cube rotating above her cupped palms. The best probes and surveys weren't infallible, and nor were my tools and methods. I wasn't able to bring the bodies back home with me, but I managed to document what I found, record the messages, offer those poor people some small measure of human dignity." I steeple my hands and look solemn. "Let me guess -heightened mathematical and spatial awareness?" "If that's what you call it, yeah. I could still make out the Local Bubble, but only because I had been concentrating on it all the way out. "You needn't apologise," Voi said. Just as long as it keeps my daughter from starvation. "What happened after that one died?" "It didn't die on its first attempt. Maybe it was what I always knew I had to do, or maybe it was all down to what you just said about Minla. "The system made a mistake, not you." "Schedar sector..." Suzy says. Brimming with righteous indignation, determined to bring the world-be assassin to justice." "That's still my intention." "I've looked inside you. Except I didn't believe in omens, especially not when they were signified by pieces of cosmic grit slamming into our planet's atmosphere. The thing that they called the Melding Plaque had plunged our city back into a festering, technologicallydecadent dark age. When I came out of that tank I felt the same way I felt when I'd been out to the Rift. But Derek's brain is like nothing I have ever encountered. "We won't be able to get through more than two or three more doors. First published in a fat engraved urn set in the middle of the table. The metal signature's in the same area, too. I think when I fell in that pool, some of the native organisms must have formed a barrier layer, a kind of insulation against the nanotech. I was about to say as much when Rasht spoke again. In the event, a useful window—one that she could reach, in the allowed time—opened within forty minutes of our conversation. It must recognise that we're living. A door at the far end with a frame that extends half a metre out on either side. He failed." "So instead you want to crush them into submission." "If that's what it takes," Minla said. "I'm going to need more than a few minutes to crack their language, Merlin, even if it is related to something in my database, of which there's no guarantee." "Fine. Childe's been here before. He guessed first, not me." She threw something towards me. We had one of those last time." "Not a very good one though." "And the time before that—what was it?" "A recreation of a major space battle, I think. Turn it down, then. The other lines would take up the slack. Unless you always planned this." fields that allowed them to fly, and which would—I presumed—sustain them when the air thinned out, high above us. I'd told Katerina about Saumlaki Station. But my optimism was misplaced. I thought you got that safely out of your system last time." "I have," I said. "But Argyle said the first room was safe. Yet as the moments slipped by it turned from something terrifying in its unfamiliarity to something he could begin to adapt to; something that even began in the tiniest way to seem comforting. It looked as if she was playing six or seven weirdly abstract computer games at the same time, manipulating symbols according to arcane and ever-shifting rules. But we'd have to agree on it, I think. These stresses manifested as heat, which in turn helped to drive the geysers and surface volcanism. Even with the Waynet, I'm still just one human man, with one human man, with one human life. "I told him to install the shunts. We only get one chance at controlling its fate. But you still had some control over it, and enough strength to overcome the resistance of the jammed locomotive systems. Her skin is a sea of bruises, burns and cuts. She lost someone not too long ago." Nero seemed to hesitate. I felt the back of my neck prickle. Our bodies were encased in exoskeletal frames to which these limbs were anchored. Yes." "Get a grip, Dimitri. But we knew it was solid science, important to the field as a whole." She leans forward to make a point. "I just did that and—" "I've turned off my chemo-whatsit, don't worry." "Then what are you—" "Why don't you reach down and see for yourself?" Slowly, we all knelt down and touched the floor. Our modern science tells us that the stars are very distant, and that two stars that appear close together in the sky—the two eyes of Prinia the Dragon, for example—may in reality be located at very different distances." "The lines are more significant than you appreciate," Merlin said. I pushed through another connecting throat, scraping my hand against sharp metal until it bled, then corkscrewed through ninety degrees to reach the secondary throat that led to the number three hatch. I braced myself, unsure what to expect when we made a deliberate error, wondering if the Spire's punishment code would even apply in such a case. And somewhere distant, somewhere near the heart of the rock, in a matriarchal chamber all of its own, something drummed out messages to its companions and helpers, stiffly articulated, antler-like forelimbs beating against stretched tympana of finely veined skin, something that had been waiting here for eternities, something that wanted nothing more than to care for the souls of the lost. Through the window I saw huge scabs of metal slam past. Add one to two and you've got three. It's entirely possible that they've done

this to other line members in the past. The magnetic coils on the induction guns had to be warmed and brought up to operational field strength, and then tested with slugs of recycled hull material. "That's the Hyades. Do that for me. Some of us. "Which was?" "They destroyed an entire culture...Grisha's people...a culture that had uncovered Prior data damaging to the Great Work. Of course she went on. Maybe they even got in touch with you, Shirin. This camp does not have to define you. He chose instead to give Malkoha supplies of the drug in approximately the same dosage and quantity as he must have been carrying when his aircraft was damaged, packaged in similar-looking glass vials. \*\*\* I FOUND HER again. But it wasn't going to be that easy. Nearly time now." "Back there," I said. It was said that they could make them in any shape, any colour, to match any known world. Something Russian?" "Like you always said. Seventy years had aged its pages to a brittle yellow, dimming the vibrancy of the old inks. "I've heard of a plaque," I said, making my way to Lenka. "Marcus Gaunt." "Good," he said, smearing a hand across his lips. All that the alarm told me was that the alarm sir." I paused. So his brother was capable not just of contempt, but of treacherous murder. Just enough to enable us to squeeze through apertures which would be impassable with our current...encumbrances." Trintignant looked avariciously at my arms and legs. They were all eyes, or all mouths, hinged open to obscene angles, or they were anvilshaped nightmares that seemed to have cleaved their way through the rock itself. "It's going out to all the nets; right out to the trans-Pluto habitats." "What they did was an act of unspeakable treachery," Warren said. We let her slip a little closer and then rotated our hull through forty-five degrees to give her a full broadside, all eleven working slugcannons discharging at once, followed by a burst from the lasers. "This is Remontoire," said Galiana. "I liked the old one better." Weather reached out and gingerly held my hand in hers. Lying outside the Local Bubble, the Rift is the furthest point in the galaxy we've ever travelled to. "You could try waking one of them, now." \*\*\* GRETA'S WITH me when I pull Suzy out of the surge tank. I'm still a soldier. Then the ball trembled, and—without deforming in any way—bounced itself off the ground to knee-height. "What does he think you are, a pack mule?" "I'll tell my father about the wood," she said. Yukimi lay still, wondering what to do next. I stepped from the side of my balcony, into open space. I've often felt the same thing." "Old and very heavy. Rigs and work and green tea and a few hundred faces and that's it for the rest of your life. Leaving the community tent, I try to gauge the public mood. This is our best guess for a design." Merlin glanced at the illustration long enough to see a complicated diagram of concentric circles, like the plan for an elaborate garden maze. Though some pieces of fabric remained, the Spire had retained all the metallic parts of her suit for itself. It just means she's an adult with a lot of people making demands on her. Driving the world toward the edge of that cliff, without a thought for the consequences. The pattern of holes was the same in both spheres, but because they were rotating at different speeds, on different, slowly precessing axes, the holes only lined up occasionally. Most of those had been picked off, as well. A fat Moon brings out the worst in people, my mother used to say. Childe got the worst of it, though. What a crew we made, the four of us. Shall we think about eating?" \*\*\* IN THE MORNING they left the Scaper, traveling out in a small, four-wheeled buggy that came down from a ramp in the great machine's belly. My ship was modestly sized for an interstellar craft; only three kilometers long, but Purslane's was enormous. Or sent back to meet Russians. When at last he looked up, he saw that the solitary building was in fact an enormous stone monument. We'd only make things worse." "We can't run on just the port engine, either—not without rebuilding the entire ship. Continue—with a quadruple-sized triangle—and we hit fifteen." She paused, giving us time to catch up. Lenka and Rasht, though, were not moving as efficiently as before. The naming of things. In the texts of the Kalarash...but everyone always assumed they were legendary animals, like unicorns, or tigers." "Real," she said. It wasn't enough for him to have an abstract understanding of the true extent of his power. Perhaps the thing to do was find an uninhabited land mass and put down there. The power winch was a tool about the size of a heavy vacuum rifle. My dear friends, he had written. I'm a machine made to map the unknown. They dropped away at a tangent to the rotation of the equatorial ring which girdled the moon, instantly in free-fall. The tunnel narrowed as it deepened. This one concerns the construction of a new type of aircraft engine, one that will allow you to exceed the speed of sound and reach much higher altitudes than are now available to you. "He told me where it came from, you see. Even mentioned the voidship: said a relative of his was being frozen, put aboard for the voyage. It was being frozen, put aboard for the voyage. It was being frozen and reach much higher altitudes than are now available to you. "He told me where it came from, you see. Even mentioned the voidship: said a relative of his was being frozen, put aboard for the voyage. It was being frozen and reach much higher altitudes than are now available to you." in nineteen seventy-five. Maybe she thinks I'm too far gone for that kind of persuasion. Frustrated after several days of bashing my head against a blank computer screen, I gave up on the creative process and went for a swim. Make mother shape field, or hurt baby even more. Move something in, you have to move something out." "Let's go back to the wine for a moment," Zima said. You say it's not personal, but she told me I started this war." "Well, you did, kind of. There were complicated moving parts in the collar, but nothing that a Conjoiner could influence. Not according to this, anyway. "You could have sent a message to one of us," Purslane said. Doesn't hurt wetheads like you all that much... but us, that's different." He knuckled his fist against his plated cranium. There were several compartments to the shuttle, all of which seemed to have withstood the crash. You are standing, yes. And it's Mister Zeal to you, by the way." "No," I said. I know you can't move your head very easily. Given their deaths, I'd rather the end result was a bit more permanent." "It'll outlast us. A moment or two passed, and then—with whiplash speed—jointed arms seized his pieces and pulled him into the wall, leaving slick red skidmarks. All other organs—stomach, intestines, genitalia—were removed, along with many bones and muscles. "Just as I reckoned. It was still an awkward business, but at last 1 was able to beach myself on the surrounding ice without floundering through. "Second left. The sooner we're back on the island, the happier I'll be." We took the corridor, following its rising, curving ramp through several rotations, obeying signs for the deck all the while. "It wouldn't work. I might even reach Barranquilla ahead of it, but in all my years of delays that had only happened once. Inside was a robotic system which sorted the samples, fed them into miniature laboratories where appropriate, and delivered whatever was left into a storage volume just ahead of the fuel tanks. None of us were capable of forgetting any of the threaded strands unless we made a conscious effort to delete them. She would have been very upset with me if I had." Malkoha had given Merlin a small piece of stone, a coin-shaped sliver that must have been cut from a larger piece and then set in coloured metal so that it could be worn around the neck or wrist. The Merlin stories take place a long time from today, but this was the chance to go really deep, and revel in the possibilities of immense spans of time and history, from a vantage point from which our own time is barely a geological sliver, if it's remembered at all. It was as if she were playing a holoclavier or working a phantom puppet show. "That wouldn't be too far from the mark," I answer urbanely. But they won't stay that way forever. Thank you! 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Sorrow because those are the memories of the dead, all that's left of them. The vehicle is still in orbit—waiting for my next expedition to commence! But my controlling intelligence, you'll be pleased to hear, is fully embedded in this body. After the routing error, we had enough supplies to set up a self-sustaining station on the nearest rock. You have to figure that at least one reader won't have read anything else by you before, so you can't overload on backstory and obscure references to other events in the universe. Sensing her mood, the cartoon characters on the side of the satchel started singing and dancing, trying in their idiotic way to perk her up. The blade had sliced him through the middle, just below what had once been his ribcage, spilling steel and plastic guts, bone, viscera, blood and noxious lubricants onto the floor. "You had another career once," she says. Unless you think you can survive fifty years aboard this thing, until you swing by the next colonised system with no way of slowing down." "I'll take my chances." A voice buzzed in my helmet. Then you bring her back to me." He'd cleared the operating table. The worst was that he got to meet that person after her transformation." After a little while, Weather said, "Mistakes were made. Baby must have been warming the hands as well as the deck. Covering his entire form, it was a synthetic material that could be tuned to different colours and textures depending on his mood and surroundings. Respect was easy. She raised the weapon to them and felt a sudden dizzying apprehension of their number and distance and position, each crow feeling distinct from its brethren, as if she could almost name them. I attended one of his 'moonwrappings': the enclosure of an entire celestial body in a lidded blue container, like a hat going into a box. "I think so." "What's your name?" the man asked. But that was just an average. They helicoptered him out to the other rig. Merlin liked Malkoha, even though he knew almost nothing about the man. "Believe me or don't believe me, it's up to you." "We are certain that these weapons can be made. Graph up a chequerboard display on your suits—Forqueray, can you oblige?—and start arranging dots in triangular patterns." We did. On the end of his arm was this bracelet." "If the bracelet had the power of healing, why was the Winged Man dying?" "He said that there were certain afflictions it could not cure. Its proportions were reassuringly normal, requiring only that we stoop down slightly to step through." "Weather" is probably my favorite, perhaps because of its clean, simple structure and the fact that there's a strange love story at the heart of it. But if we don't put it on the table, they'll be very, very disappointed. How anyone could think this world was crowded, or even beginning to be crowded, was beyond her. It had been on Golgotha the whole time, you see-watching Argyle's arrival, hiding and recording them as they confronted the Spire. "I'm the man who saved your life." "Gecko," the red-faced man said, pushing the wooden box into Merlin's chest. And now I'm going to help you get home.' Whatever "mezereon" meant to Van Ness, whatever it revealed to him concerning the truth of Weather's message, I never asked. "About three days. Think you can handle it?" Jack's men, closer now. You know what happened to her when she didn't shut up with her silly ideas." "What plan?" I asked. That's ten. He knew that the worm almost certainly had a lock on him by now. Presumably whoever deployed the machines was still around until then, making sure that the job was done." "We should look in the coat," Nesha says. Its external layout was crushingly familiar. He's using me, Inigo. "What we'read here," I said. doing here is trying to beat an elemental thing. He had adapted entirely too well to the one-gee of the Deimos ring, constructed for the comfort of Earthside tacticians. But there was also a whole section of the operations rig dedicated to refurbishing basic components, and given care and resourcefulness, there was no reason why the caretakers couldn't continue their work for another couple of centuries. Remember what I said, Loti. He ordered the ship to deliver a concentrated charm-torp salvo against the compromised rocket facility, bringing more energy to bear on that one tiny area of land than had been deployed in all the years of the atomic wars. All the energy he had put into one ambition, all the friends and lovers he had burned up along the way, shutting them out of his life while he focused on that one white what?" "The head of David. It's draughty and unlit, the tiled floor filthy with footprints and paper and smashed glass. And still the sea-dragon produced more of itself, uncoiling out of the dark waters like some conjuror's trick. Third right. Now we must talk about the future." Merlin nodded agreeably. "Fine." Childe lowered his head; a posture of sadness and resignation. Active, resourceful protagonist. He supposed it had always been an article of faith that the world would improve, that the future would be better than the past, shinier and cleaner and faster, but he had not expected to have his nose rubbed in the unwisdom of that faith quite so vigorously. Nose pressed to glass, she studied the wheeling, rushing landscape for the lake where Crowe's Landing used to be. I can tell that much from a glance. "You already gave us secret knowledge of the atom. It dug into me, seeking an explanation for whatever its sensors had picked up. But we did something great. "You even sound like Trintignant now," Celestine said, following me. The mix, incidentally, corresponds to precisely the atmospheric preferences of Ultras. Just like Comrade Gagarin. Just concentrate on the problem." But this time the punishment began before we had begun our solution. Until then Purslane and I would have to walk among our fellow line members with that knowledge in our hearts, and not betray the slightest hint of it. But don't we all?" "Not to that degree," she said. We walked along a railinged catwalk, high above the floor. Neither makes much sense. Now she touched a brushed-steel panel, causing armoured slats to whisk open in rapid sequence. Then he too would be one of the crew, and it was likely that a bone or two had been fractured. "I..." Celestine trailed off. But we held, somehow, and thirty per cent of that initial salvo hit the Cockatrice square-on. The barbs sprang out and contacted my chest. The point of the VASIMIR (it was an American acronym, but it sounded appropriately Russian) was that it could function in a dual mode, giving not us only the kick to escape Earth orbit, but also months of low-impulse cruise thrust, to take us all the way to the artefact and back. "Just this once," Garret said. First appeared in Interzone #209, April 2007 "Diamond Dogs" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2001. Nothing else for miles around—nothing inhabited, anyway." "Yes. I am not sure why he covets it so badly. "My ship is capable of self-repair," he'd said, "but it isn't capable of making copies of itself. And we'll make damned sure the Soyuz isn't going to drift away from us." Galenka's estimate was on the nail. My alloy is always colder than they expect. Nutrient systems crammed the remaining thoracic spaces; our hearts were tiny fusion-powered pumps. I couldn't have that. Two weeks earlier I'd been sitting in the Piazza San Marco at noon, watching white figurines glide against the white marble of the clock tower. Mike means a lot to them, and by a perverse twist that makes him valuable to me as well. Always there for the Lachrimosa. Not enough to make a suit, but you could imagine how useful that would have been to the sheriff's spies." "They'd have wanted to get to the Winged Man first." Widow Grayling nodded. But I had persistence on my side." "And money," "And revulsion when you saw what we'd done to ourselves." "Maybe you do revolt me," she said, nodding. That was enough to ease the pain in his arm and perhaps allow it to heal faster than it would otherwise have done." "But you turn people away." "If they are seriously ill, but neither feverish nor unconscious, I cannot let them see the bracelet. "I tried to stop myself. "Someone has to. The forms broke through, began to eat her ship—making more cubes. I was told that she'd been executed, but three years later I saw her again. A bodyguard was all I'd ever been. Even if I released my hold on the gun, it would keep tracking its designated target. Before I go I want to do what I can to help. An island stood in the middle of the chamber, moated by a ring of uninviting water. For the first time, she seemed to notice him. "Such meetings erode the very spirit of chance and adventure Abigail sought to instill in us. Maria is admitted into the cage. But the truth...well, why don't you tell us, Childe?" "I don't know what you want me to say." Celestine smiled. There isn't a lot of it out there, but when it hits...at a quarter of the speed of light, it doesn't take much to inflict crippling damage. It was, I realised, the sleeping chamber: the place where the ship's occupants (even if they only amounted to a single person) would have entered metabolic stasis for the long hops between stars. No arguing with it." "I'm sure you're right." "Do you want the stone back?" he asked. I wanted more: a better ship, a better captain, better prospects. But Stilt Town never stays still long enough to get familiar. The least it could expect was a welcome party. But it's a small part and easily ignored. "Then consider acting upon it," the official said. Instead of dropping to the floor the weapon simply hung exactly where he had left it, with its barrel still aimed in our general direction. Soon there'll be cities and people. But you did make this venue, Campion. It was surrounded by debris, but the wonder was that any part of it had survived. Ships that use the Waynet can't be very large." "Why is that?" Merlin shrugged. After a few moments he unclipped his spade and started digging. I've had a spectacularly uneventful two hundred thousand years." "You said exactly the same thing last time, Campion. Rasht cut power when we were still hovering, so as not to blast the snow with our descent jets. Outside a diplodocus slouched by with a freight container strapped between its legs. While all this was happening, I felt the engine surge in response, the deck plates pushing harder against my feet. "I can see Shalbatana now, Shirin—it looks much smaller from up here. "You found me." There are oceans of relief in his voice. You get used to them. When they see a poorly constructed script, they feel it like toothache. I had plans to change my appearance so far as I was able, but all of a sudden I know how futile that'd be. I can feel it. The water was clear enough that Yukimi could see for tens of meters in all directions. "One sample," he said. The engines still seemed to be present when we made our longdistance survey. I was not totally under water, and the suit could cope with a lot worse than immersion in liquid. But I wondered about those medical records. Perhaps between the two of us—" Her jaws cracked together, teeth cutting her tongue. I can't tell if it's aggression, or some lingering neuromuscular effect of her time in the tank. The point is, your plans were in tatters. "They kept us apart the whole time Yakov and Galenka were still alive. Did you imagine we were so stupid, so childlike, that we wouldn't put two and two together?" "Maybe I thought you had more common sense. The rest, I have to say, is pretty much guesswork." "Our estimates aren't dissimilar. It hadn't moved, or shown the least sign of life, since emerging through the floor. I snapped my attention back to Childe. "Where are we?" I try again. When she finally broke the news, as shocking as it was, it didn't shatter me. Mournful, cetacean moans cut down through the piss-yellow clouds over the port. But when Paolo died we didn't even have a body to put back in the box. Both, perhaps. Like the Cutter and the Torch is now, the place was a popular hang-out with artists and their sponsors. "I know how you broke into my ship," he said, "and I presume Grisha's told you something of his place in this whole mess." "A bit," I said. Of course, that was exactly what happened. It was the Spire." "Please, Richard. It takes all of my resolve not to take it out and turn the little handle that makes it play. It's very clever." I looked at him. Really running now, not the pretend running she had done all her life until this moment. "Something ahead," Rasht announced. The suits quickly learned how you moved, adjusting and anticipating all the time like perfect dance partners. Since Purslane's discovery that Burdock had lied, the reunion had passed by in a blur. Very few of us show even the slightest aptitude. Suzy shakes her head. Strange things had happened during the early months of the debriefing. "Take a look down," Da Silva said. "The spar was already stressed." "Then you have your explanation. He was ready to defect. Though Weather had sustained her share of injuries, the outfit showed no sign of damage at all. "She seems faster than before. It's cold, against my skin. "You haven't even told me what it is you want." "That's easy," I say. "Inigo told me you had something you wanted to say to me. If she didn't survive, there wasn't much point in me surviving either. "Same as all the others. You've been shaped by a series of complex industrial processing machinery. There's nothing that narrows down my list of suspects." "Maybe a fresh pair of eyes might help, though," Purslane said. "The procedure is reversible. If it means so much to you, why don't you fly down to the other side and talk to them?" "I'm an explorer, not a diplomat." "You could always try." Merlin sighed heavily. "As one facet of Abigail, you've crossed it ten or twelve times; tasted the air of a few hundred worlds. Merlin gave her a new flower each time he saw her, freshly spun from some exotic species in the biolibrary. It was still there, still orbiting Holda. You were reluctant to speak in detail over the superluminal link." "I have news," I confirmed. "Before we all cross over, shouldn't we take a look at the problem? The beauty is that I don't even have to know anything about medicine. Nuclear power had brought us to the Matryoshka. It was wonderful and terrifying. The insulated survival clothing, the life-jacket, the egress procedure... A staircase ran down the interior of one of the legs, emerging just above the water line; it was how they came and went from the rig on the odd occasions when they were using boats rather than helicopters. "Yes," Lenka said. And it was indeed a dragon, or rather a chimera of dragon and snake and squid and every scaled, barbed, tentacled, clawed horror ever committed to a bestiary. "You could have killed the sheriff later, when he came to inspect the killing poles." "I nearly did. "You'll be all right," I heard him say. My suit was as stiff as it had been since my accident outside, but for the moment it did not seem to be affected by the silver. You can't have stayed on Julact—Mars—all this time." "I didn't. I looked at him, remembering that his mathematical fluency had always been superior to mine. Herds of iron buffalo. I waited until there was a lot going on, with everyone running around trying to get it loaded on time. "Good enough for you?" "But like you said, most of the sleepers would have known what they were getting into. Not shoot me. But she did not want to be found by this thing, whatever it was. But I knew Suzy wouldn't screw things up. "You want to know where we are?" Corax asked. Older than Galaxy." I stared, humbled, at the astonishing thing. How the fuck did it get in?" She faded. She listened to the drone of the airship's engines. "No, he didn't," Purslane said. "You've had people in Phobos all along?" "Ever since the cease-fire, yes. From the moon-girdled heart of the Capital Nexus, through skipspace via the Coronal Polities to the fuzzy perimeter of the Luguan Emergence—sixty thousand light years in only a handful of days. Though it hardly moved in the socket, I still had the sense of penetrating focus and attention. This one is a plan for a two-stage liquid-fuelled rocket. Now you will only be losing machinery -a far less traumatic prospect." "You're enjoying this," Hirz said, "aren't you?" "It would be churlish to deny it," Trintignant said. It was only as we came in closer, tightening our own orbit like a noose, that the actual condition became apparent. As if recalling something from a dream, I remember another hand placing that musical box in mine. She grunted with effort and concentration. "I thought you asked..." "I did. "Here's yours," I said. It's as if I have brought to be. They have bright clothes with slogans on, sunglasses, ski hats, and they're both smiling. I always liked him—we'd talk about the fish, sometimes. The Matryoshka had come out of its wormhole mouth—if that was what it was—on an elliptical, sun-circling trajectory similar to a periodic comet. Even the way she had stippled the tubes to suggest snow or ice could not help but suggest to my eye rows and rows of suckers. But she did not respond to Clavain's presence in any way an adult, or even a normal child, would have. Sylveste had a grudge against anyone who'd visited the Jugglers; he suddenly decided they were all unstable and couldn't be trusted." I looked at Celestine wonderingly. "The entire " \*\*\* THEY COLLECTED NERO and the corpse from a sick bay several levels down from the freezer chamber. That—and the other matter—almost bankrupted us. The upper fifth of the stump opened, irising wide. So I waited, and waited. She flinched and withdrew her gloved fingers with a gasp of something that could have been or astonishment or simple childlike delight. We'll all die temporarily, but there won't be anything they can't fix in Phobos." "It won't just be a structural web, will it? "You must have been fierce in your day." "Well, maybe it wasn't him—but we still needed a different referee. As he swam I wondered how I was going to tell his story, and who was going to buy it. Can you pass those records to my ship?" "Mine as well," Purslane said. I can't hold it much longer...twenty-five, thirty seconds." Fescue's eyes bored into me with iron determination. It's not like we don't have other things to occupy our minds, is it?" "You have a point there, comrade." "Are you happy about taking her in? I jerk back, avoiding the blade and the flurry of dirty snow it flings aside. Just as the Coalition had suspected, the base was deeper than the original structure; far more extensive, reaching deeper down but much further out than anyone had imagined. But there was a coldness in her eyes. That's why I wanted Celestine along. It was that easy?" Ingvar asks. "I'll be older when we meet again," Minla said. Mobile Autonomous Robot for Interplanetary Astronomy?" "Something like that. "To all intents and purposes, they exist independently of each other. They were like the shapes of continents on a world with tectonic drift. As we made love, I tried to remember whether I'd designed the glass floor to be transparent in both directions—and if so, what kind of entertainment we were providing to the line members who might be looking up to the fiftieth floor from below. One day it found what it was looking for. This one wasn't easy, either. The first thing that hits me is that I'm safe, back in Tango Oscar. Calvin had recruited Trintignant to his own research team, but the collaboration had not been a happy one. "Is there a fix for this, or am I stuck with it forever?" "There's a fix for most things. The last and best thing. I don't think he's been actively frozen out, but he certainly hasn't spent any time cultivating the right connections." "I'll have to review the recordings again," Purslane said. The Ouroborus was making undulating progress toward them, zigzagging with predatorial calm, knowing that it could afford to take its time. "I know how a sailing ship works," he said, trying to explain himself. Then the dray hit a jutting cobblestone and rightmost front wheel snapped free of its axle. "Don't look so sad, Campion. Minor cases, in the scheme of things. It moved along a service rail, sometimes without warning. "And that's what I've always believed. I closed my own fist around the musical box. "No great loss, when there is so little raw material with which to work." "Screw you, creep." Hirz left the room. I could have stared at it for hours, in a state of ecstatic transfixion. She's still shivering, her muscless reacting to movement after so much time in the tank. Once you've fixed the engine—" "It isn't like that. I couldn't read the syntax, but I knew these ships had come in all the way from the Rift. What other colour were you expecting?" Yakov was still staring out the porthole, at the looming Matryoshka. "But I bear you no personal animosity for your atrocities, and I guarantee that my crew will extend you the same courtesy." "Very gracious of you," Trintignant said, before shaking the Ultra's hand for the minimum time compatible with politeness. But I have never seen them." I steer us around a boulder as large as the overlander itself. "As a matter of fact I think she's already failing." It was true "What did he say to make you come back?" I said to Hirz, between one of the challenges. If you can't wait for me, don't. I slink between shadows, my thin, doglike form confusing them. The man who had murdered his brother was still alive; still in absolute command of his faculties. Reason we thawed you, actually. The glass hull wrapped itself around me and I felt a surge of un-nulled acceleration. "I've had an idea. There was pain, of a sort, for Trintignant had wired those limbs into our nervous systems, so that we could feel heat and cold. By the time I reached them they'd have been only days away from the encounter. Normally, in that instant between the question and the response, the AM would have silently directed my choice to one of the two options. What clothing to wear, to increase his chances of surviving the accident? Look further out, and there are more bubbles, their walls intersecting and merging, forming a vast froth-like structure tens of thousands of light-years across. Argyle's lot had the same problem. Martian lineman Celestine fell forward. Make of that what you will, but it seemed I didn't need the mental crutch of my AM quite as much as I'd always imagined. "And, finally, you." "I know you, I think—" I said, her name on the tip of my tongue. But always I came back to the same conclusion. But the monitoring systems of the Aperture Authority detect no movement at all. The frozen. He studied Galiana's node and saw that-even as she was speaking to him-her mind was in constant rapport with the rest of the nest. "Why are you telling me this? In many ways so alike. "What do you want her for?" I asked. The effects were almost too subtle to measure at the distance of the Tereshkova, but they became more severe the closer any probes got to the middle. Something pale and mummified; something brown teeth. \*\*\* THE SNOWPLOUGH'S TAILLIGHTS fade into the night. Where is he?" She looked him straight in the face, daring him to dismiss what she was about to say. "Nope," Clausen answered. Forgueray's suit reacted with impressive speed, but it was still sluggish compared to the javelin. Remember, I did just save one of their planes." "You're not even wearing armour." "Armour would really scare them. For the Conjoiners, boring the tunnel had not been especially difficult. "The day will come when atomic weapons are used. "I will use this," the man said, "so please do as I say. Within the cage of its chest she felt the tiny strong pulse of its heart, and she knew that she could make that heart freeze just by willing it. "What is this about?" I asked, once we were outside. This is what was on offer." Zeal stood up from the table and studied me with a curl on his lips, wiping his right hand against his apron. "Then what is the whole truth?" "Those bodies aren't anything to do with Captain Argyle." "They're not?" I said. And it does worry me." "Me too. She wasn't alone—she was in the cabin with Corax—but there was still something spooky about driving slowly through this deserted colony. We leave the building, venturing into the snow-covered street. "He caught me and took me into one of the mills. It's not very far, but in the weeks since my return to Earth I have gained a certain level of celebrity and no movement is without its complications. I felt a spasm of horror every time I saw how little of him there was, while shuddering to think how much more intense that spasm would have been were I not numbed by the medichines. Whatever Weather and the boy were doing between them, it was having some effect on the engine output. The one remaining Exodus Ark had reached five per cent of the speed of light. "There's another aircraft," Tyrant announced. Bring some or all of the crew out of reefersleep." I paused, my finger hovering over a word. Even though it was cold he had his shirt sleeves rolled up, his hair scratching against my skin. "We can't leave him," Rasht said. From now on we would be facing fresh challenges again, rather than passing through those we had already faced. But when it happened it was completely unplanned." "You mean the blue stuff?" "The blue stuff?" "Not quite. I felt a chill rising from whatever was inside, a coldness that seemed to reach fingers down my throat. Instead what he got was me. Circuit repair. He was looking at his goggle, pushed high onto his forehead. "That's the first step on the road to Transenlightenment. While this room was smaller and dourer it was still more colourful than any other part of the nest he had seen before the grassy room. That's what you were warning me about. "Because I wanted to help you if I could. The captain felt you needed to know." "And he couldn't tell me himself?" Weps cleared part of the wall and called up a display, filling it with a boxy green three-dimensional grid. I had known the Captain endure worse, when there was a sniff of payoff. I bet she knew it was a thousand to one chance." "Nonetheless," I said, "there is something odd about that hill. Even with a massive international effort, there was no way to send dedicated probes out to meet the artefact and match its velocity. Something happened to him. The older brother bent down onto his knees to start digging, scooping up handfuls of rust-coloured dust. "I'm not sure if it's my imagination or not..." it would be. Beyond the Aquila Rift Introduction Stories Adaptations See also References Thanks for reporting this video! An extension you use may be preventing Wikiwand articles from loading properly. "Katerina's dead," Greta told me. Ultras, by definition, already had Conjoiner drives. "All this because of a maze, Fescue? We looked. "Where are we?" she asks. Let's not spoil a perfect evening." I looked up at the starscape. The flier said that men like him—special soldiers, born and bred to fight the jangling men —were all that was holding them back." "And he told you they were fighting a war, above the sky?" Something pained Widow Grayling. Plasma bolts gash the clouds. No one's getting in or out of Zvezdniy Gorodok unless they have party clearance and a waiting Zil. What could we possibly need to hear from our descendants, except their undying gratitude?" "Everything we say is being logged on our suit recorders," I said. Killed one of us. Although it was only the robot we were sending in, with the Tereshkova parked at a safe distance, I still shuddered to think what those lines of force could do to metal and ceramic, to flesh and bone. That was when I began to suspect that this wasn't any act of mindless desecration, but something much more sinister. It isn't more than twenty or thirty metres down that tunnel." "Or that one," I said, nodding to the middle shaft. "At least we're not asleep." Then she jabbed her cigarette at a sleek black shape cresting the waves a couple of hundred metres from the rig. I thought of a brush drawn through wet paint on marble, exposing the white surface beneath. Light poured from snaking strips embedded into the walls like arteries. You've told me what you are. I can't reveal the detailed physical principles upon which the drive depends, but I can tell you that the conditions in the drive, when it is at full functionality, are enormously complex and chaotic. "But we've no evidence that you didn't forge this data." "The authentication stamp ties it to Burdock," Purslane said. "You were only partly blocking the door. I was already centuries old when I arrived on Kharkov Eight, with full legal independence." "No," I said, shaking my head. You assumed—as you continue to assume—that she ended her days there, an emotionless zombie haunting the shell of the woman you once knew. My words boom out, distorted and godlike. Clavain could see what they were manipulating on the flat screens: shapes that made his head hurt even in two dimensions. There were more Conjoiners in this room than he had seen so far in one place. There's a drink on the coffee table in front of me (along with a copy of the book) but of course I don't touch it. Things had changed, but not for the better. A thin carbon dioxide atmosphere, and no sign that anything's ever evolved there. But he came out of it very well. But still that distant, throbbing respiratory vibration rattled the floors, lower now, and slower: the Spire letting us know it was aware of our presence and, perhaps, the tiniest bit disappointed at this turning back. I would just have to hope that the necessary commands had already been sent, and that those ships were just a bit slow to respond. "You did well," I told Galenka. Clearly, the airship was going to catch the aircraft and carry it over the rim. She would have been dead not long after my departure. The field around Samphire quivered, beginning to lose integrity. Hit bedrock. One of us recognised it eventually." With only mild interest Grechko adds: "That piece by Prokofiev, the famous one?" "Troika," I say, as the door opens. The same kit almost certainly included analgesics." "It wasn't enough to save him, though," Childe said. His state of mind came crashing back to normality. Clavain knew that the distant processes Felka directed were awesome. Perhaps if I hadn't made such a noise about my findings, perhaps if I hadn't angered the wrong people..." Nesha stops speaking. Given his feelings regarding Conjoiners, I wasn't going to push for any more time. Weather was too bad to do the extraction until today, but now we have our window. It was just a flash, just a glimpse. Nothing. It wasn't serious, but it took them a while to realize their mistake. Then I'll be on my way, and no one will have to know that I was here." "I'll know." "Please, let me in." I haven't bargained for this. A meteor shower! Easily done, I thought. I don't know about you, but I'm willing to give it a try and see what happens." Panic crossed her face. I'm too precious to them for that. You can change someone else's past, but not your own. "He's very discreet about it," I said. They skidded for a few metres and then nosed up against a sandbank. \*\*\* WHEN MOST PEOPLE speak about his Blue Period they mean the era of the truly huge murals. They could never know everything: only out of date snapshots. It was coming from all around us, from the very fabric of the Matryoshka. Medium height, the kind of face they called 'elfin', with slanted, ash-gray eyes and a bob of shoulder-length, chrome-white hair. There isn't nearly as much downtime as I might wish, but at least I'm not faced with that tiresome human burden of sleep. Technically, we were different manifestations of the same individual. Our suits aren't perfect Faraday cages, not with all the damage and repair they've had over the years. "Do it," he mouthed. She didn't look or move like an Ultra. You'll just have to trust me that I know what I'm doing." I glanced back at Van Ness. Celestine withdrew her hand once I had shaken it. We continued our sweep of the wreck. "But I didn't think any of us were going to be able to persuade him to turn back." "And that was the only reason?" "No. I also thought you deserved something better than to be killed by the Spire." "You risked your life to get me out," I said. No one knows. "Lad, have you ever had close dealings with Spiders?" He still called me "lad" even though I'd been part of his crew for twenty years, and had been born another twenty before that, by shiptime reckoning. Now, when Warren reminded Clavain that they were brothers, he never entirely concealed the disgust in his voice. You wanted to make your name—to do something that would impress the other crews—leave your mark on history. Thinking of him more than her own survival, I think. To his horror, Clavain watched one of the Conjoiners lose his footing and tumble over the edge of the rim toward him. Could the two of them be accomplices? The second attempt, picking a different entry point, had taken it a kilometre under the surface before it met a similar impasse. The light wavered and pulsed. Now he is given his most important mission Two members of the Service have The planet itself was tough enough--barren, desolate, forbidding; enough to stop the most adventurous and dedicated. It's something familiar, isn't it? This wasn't right. I came close, Inigo. "Then let's talk about the danger. That part was almost prepared to accept her rejection. Burdock would die. It was a manufacturing centre, and therefore of tactical importance. There are still people on the surface— Regressives, allies, I don't care. Names like clouds. That's right. Framed by the air-tight seal of a helmet I see a woman's face, and again there's a flicker of recognition, which I instantly crush. In case that makes any difference to you." "You said it yourself. Part of Gaunt wanted them to turn the helicopter around, to give him a better view of whatever process was going on under the waves. No pressurisation. But as of now, only two people are aware of that. Periodically, as now, Conjoiners may make contact with the enshrined mind. "Why fight the thing on its own terms at all? Galiana was capable of running the same simulations. A hundred new minds might not have made much difference to the Realm's clock speed but it would have established a risky precedent. "You can have Mike back," I say. He'd paid up front. "Surgeon, actually. Perverse yes. The transition was smooth; suits formed around us like thickening auras. It was in small increments, nothing dramatic. Fescue spoke again. Brought its last living perpetrator to justice. That changed, later, after I returned to the fold. The entire system thinks the rings were made by accident. The swept-back geometry of their wings, the angle of the leading edge, the rakish curve of their tailplanes all owed something to the shape of Tyrant in atmospheric-entry mode. Now as ever. Galenka and I were in a huge iron-grey room with gill-like sluice vents in the side walls. There's no possibility of mutual cooperation; the sharing of intellectual resources and knowledge." Purslane shrugged. It was never as bad for me. "I'm sure you still have something in the queue," I tell him. But I think something happened to Burdock: something that had him doctoring his thread to create a false alibi." I shifted in my seat. Can you hear me?" There is a very long silence before he replies. They opened and allowed us to disembark. The unfortunate fact, though, was that we simply didn't remember. If you want to turn ten pages, you use two fingers. But from up above, with an entirely different perspective, she couldn't be certain. Like you told me, the surface gravity is much lower than you'd expect. But the true picture was of crushing slowness, even though the ships moved at the keen, sharp edge of lightspeed. Yes." I nodded. She must still have been wearing her suit when she was trapped and bound. The ray was extending itself through the map, coming closer by the second. If his contagion touched me, all I'd have to show for it is a nasty rash. "Do you see a match?" "Yes," she said. He'd had it with him for days, waiting for the moment he hoped would never come. You can stay on station, finish the work." He'd made it seem like some unscheduled crisis, something that had blown up at short notice, but deep down I knew that couldn't be that case. "In all that time, you don't need to worry about me. "Zeal's talked about putting some implants into me soon, to help with the surgery... nothing irreversible, he says...but he hasn't done it yet." Why was I talking to her so openly? What of him? Some other people..." But Kathrin trailed off. "My mind is made up, and the sooner we're on our way, the better. "I don't mean putting a bug on him, following him to his ship, or anything like that. "What sort of medichines?" "Neural modifiers. He raised a hand defensively, and I saw the same rectangular bulge under his skin. Still, Teterev would not have had the luxury of a drone either. If they can break out and meet us, we'll take them as well. "Put us all out of our misery, will you? If he experienced any kind of joy in the swimming of the pool, it was the near-mindless euphoria of a pollinating insect. Above the snorting, impatient diesel I call: "I could use a ride to town." The driver looks at me like I'm dirt, some piece of roadside debris he'd have been better shovelling into the verge. It was there that I mentioned Burdock's swift passage through the maze. It got into our heads. "Did you narrow it down to anyone?" Purslane asked. An eyeblink later, an explosion ripped from the belly of the other ship. But I shared the monkey's dwindling enthusiasm. The Petronel surged faster, still maintaining her former heading. "Minla," he called, a crack in his voice. I turned from the balcony. But when she mentions the Naiad impactor, I know she's got the wrong woman. "I'm broadcasting the resonance data to all ships. "Even if it can't defend itself against such attacks—and we don't know that—it will certainly destroy what it contains. Inigo. "I promise you Warren won't get his chance to apply that loophole." Voi snapped out of her trance irritatedly. They might be more interested in the shuttle for now, but that was nothing they could count on. A signalling mechanism would be just as useful. That trick I used to break into Burdock's ship? Palace architect. Zeal lowered his goggle back into place, settling it over his left eye. Then I said, "I really don't think there's much point. If Galiana maintains the pattern she's been following for the last six months, we're due to break into Burdock's ship? Palace architect. Zeal lowered his goggle back into place, settling it over his left eye. another escape attempt in..." Warren glanced at a readout buried in his cuff. Coldness seized me, electric with the crackle and fizz of subatomic radiation. There simply isn't a way to get beyond it, at least not within the faster-than-light network of the aperture links. Are you sure you can't sweet-talk any more out of them?" "We could risk going to two gees for a few hours. "In the meantime, I'll give your regards to Chasm City." "Do that, please. "Is it true? "And you don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives? "But I don't remember what I planned. Captain lets them have fuel. You're not exactly the way nature intended, you know." "This is just cosmetic," I said. "I'm curious. You and I are either, do you?" "About Childe's motives? "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives? "But I don't remember what I planned. Captain lets them have fuel. You're not exactly the way nature intended, you know." "This is just cosmetic," I said. "I'm curious. You and I are either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't remember what I planned. Captain lets them have fuel. You're not exactly the way nature intended, you know." "This is just cosmetic," I said. "I'm curious. You and I are either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" "About Childe's motives?" "But I don't care either, do you?" 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I've never been sure about you, if truth be told-how much stock you put in traveller's tales. The unlucky ships flared a white that hurt the back of the eye and rained down in a billion dulling sparks. The Exodus Ark carried only twelve hundred exiles, few of whom would live long enough to see another world. "Fanta had to go, but she passed her onto Ramatou. Three seconds was all it needed to do its work. They began to pull at my clothing with animal fury. "I heard fear was one of their counter-intrusion measures. I found the Winged Man when I was sixteen years old, just like you." Kathrin smiled tightly. The world was getting better, it was coming out of the trough. "Not if you'd been fortunate enough to have it happen to you, no. "I saw a winch in the stores locker, on the wreck. Inside the machine—something touched us. "Wait, though. No significant alteration in the local gravitational vector, either. She tugged down the sleeves of her sweater, using them as mittens. That was how things stood when I first paid attention to Zima. Even the Great House hadn't been able to help me sort out truth and fiction where the Emergence was concerned. Guess I need some practice." There was an awkward silence. Some of the concave masses even had little lakes near their centres. She judged her progress by the passage of alehouses. "Just a bit starstruck." "Well, you shouldn't be. A perfect afternoon turned into a perfect evening." "It might not have had anything to do with my choice of wine," I said. "Van Ness thinks you want to blow up the ship. A kind of golden mask had come off, lying next to him. I had seen the insides of more ships than worlds. They had moved things around, arranged provisions, bedding and furniture, that could not possibly have remained undisturbed by the crash. Let us find Lev. Because it's not. But understand this. Shall I break out the vodka?" "Let's not get ahead of ourselves—no use going in if we're blind. "This is more for your benefit than mine. I steadied myself on the handrail. Perhaps we could pass as sisters or twins, if we wanted new employment. Core's too old and cold for that. "It's not good for you." "I'm not really in the mood." "Honestly, Campion. If I didn't have errands, I'd probably never leave the building." Nesha puts on several more layers of clothes and fetches a coat for herself. They always go down well." "You're insane. "Not to make money for anyone, but to begin the process of getting the whole of humanity into hibernation. Merlin could not say for certain what had happened to Minla, since she was careful to turn her face away from him whenever they spoke. "Better than you," she said. Looking over her shoulder at the screens, I could scarcely detect any change in Shell 3. I watched it speed into the distance, the grey light occasionally flaring off one of its flat sides. "Thomas Kinnear's boy, was it?" "How could you know?" "Because I've lived long enough to form ready detect any change in Shell 3. I watched it speed into the distance, the grey light occasionally flaring off one of its flat sides." opinions of people. "That was spectacularly indiscreet." "I couldn't help it." "It would be completely improper for us to meet." "Utterly," Purslane agreed, nodding emphatically. You can reshape it according to your requirements?" "Yes," I said, faltering. We turned on our helmet lights and ramped our eves to maximum sensitivity. I was moving my arm when the figure twitched, convulsing within the constraints of the couch. Why? The engine note faded away, leaving only a distant throb, one that came up from the floor. "It smells moldy," she said. No more." "We've got to stop this ever happening again," I said, reopening my eyes. The topology of the network was constantly shifting, like a pattern seen in a kaleidoscope. If you can paralyse Lenka's suit, you can probably work your way into the charge and disarm it." "You would kill Lenka at the same time." "Not if you let her go. "Thank you, Derek. Every nerve screaming turn around, go back, this is wrong. That was a cue for the crowd to renew their interest in me, tearing their attention away from the departing aquatics. This wasn't in the book. He might have anything in that briefcase—a gun, a syringe, a lie detector. The little pool-cleaner taught the young man a great deal about the fundamentals of robotics design. Both of those things were possible. "Look, just concentrate, will you? Where's the difference?" "A mountain doesn't enjoy doing it, for a start. I assumed they'd been exaggerated, the way things often are during wartime." "But now you've seen the light. The light ramming through the same grey-blue that came through the same. If they determine that the mind wishes to retire, they may effect a replacement, or decommission the entire engine." "And then what?" "His choice. "You weren't kidding. They don't run chat shows. I'm afraid you'll still have some compatibility issues to deal with." A coded memory flash—a bee landing on a flower—told me that my ship had just received nission from another craft, in an unfamiliar file format. The old wall-map, with its cumbersome push-around plaques, had been replaced by a clattering electromechanical display board. Maybe some of them are in pods like me, awaiting extraction. I shuddered to think of the energies being flung a against the Iron Lady's already bruised armour Eventually I was invited to write a piece featuring some aspect of "power armour" for an anthology being developed by John Joseph Adams, and it seemed as good a time as any to dust off that story title. Start showing some spine, Campion. The final sun-mirrors were being assembled in place, manipulated by mighty articulated robots. They'll deploy weapons to make sure it never happens again. It was a weapon: something unspeakably ancient and nasty. I did not know whether I was more disturbed at the presence of the alien object under my flesh, or my unnatural reaction to it. My mind played gruesome tricks with the shapes, turning them from brutally detached pieces of human anatomy into abstract sculptures: jointed formations that caught the light in a certain way and cast their own pleasing shadows. But there was a gap in the schedule—another group had just pulled out of their slot, because they couldn't get their software to compile properly. I could only imagine her pain. The planet was about Earth-sized as well, enabling it to hold on to a thick atmosphere. Eventually it exceeds the means of the engine, and the reactions become uncontrolled." "Nova." "Quite," Weather said, favouring my response with a tiny nod. Those things in the air, swirling around?" "Change-clouds," Yukimi said. But that suspicion had grown less fervent as the years passed; world after world had revealed only faint, time-eroded traces of cultures that might once have been glorious but which were now utterly destroyed. Ouite why no one thought to tell me this..." He shook his head ruefully, as if he expected no better. I've seen the view from the near side of the Rift, like a good tourist. He meant well, but he really didn't know his own strength. I'm arranging them around you. I'd felt no crushing spasms of grief over Katerina's death, or enforced absence, or however you wanted to put it. "I'd been lucky, really." "Well, we'll soon fix that. "Then you're... the nineteenth to try and solve the Spire?" I think he would have smiled at that point, had it been anatomically possible. But it's probably not the kind of war you're thinking of." "And where do these people come into it, these sleepers?" "They have no choice," Clausen said. At a dedicated Conjoiner manufacturing facility, certainly. Merlin winced in anticipation of an explosion—one that would hurt the little aeroplane a lot more than it would hurt Tyrant—but the tank must have been empty. Because either before or after that he was somewhere else he didn't want us to know about. But after that process of consideration she had carried on deeper into the tunnel, where it continued beyond the chamber. I can barely smell you at this distance, let alone sense your neural emissions." "This'll do nicely," Van Ness said. Even to Trintignant. "I'm sorry," he said. Then she moved to another pair of dials and moved them until they were showing a warning amber. Purslane was like between our visits to Reunion? I badly wanted to get home. That isn't how it seems to you and I. There's a kink in the flow where it begins to drift out of alignment. As my right foot stepped below my left, another sheet whisked under that one. We were reasonably sure you survived, but it's good to have it confirmed." "Do you want me to abandon the mission?" Warren's hesitation was more than just time-lag. The trigger was a gleaming red disk. In every respect it was as if only an instant had passed since their meeting; as if the onset of war and the assaults against the nest—the battle of which this was only an interlude—were only figments from someone else's troubling dream; nothing at all.' Suzy looks at Greta. I escaped through a gap in the facility's security fence, in a neglected corner of the establishment tucked away behind one of the kitchens. Though the planet might now have reverted to its prehistoric condition, the effects of those warm, wet interludes would have been to erase all evidence of earlier settlements. "Are you really the cosmonaut?" "Yes." "I can make some tea." "Please. I suppose it was only natural, though, that a latent interest in visual expression would start to seep out into my fiction, whether I wanted to or not. Purslane moved from one to the next, conjuring a status readout with a pass of her hand. She tried to strengthen the fields and layer the alien machinery in more armour. What made him shiver even more was the realisation that some of the injured—some of the dead—were barely older than the children he had visited only hours ago. The golden robots left us alone, retreating into the rear of the craft as a door closed between us. I think the wisest line of defense would be to argue that my presence or otherwise in the vicinity of the Titan accident is simply an irrelevance. There was a silence before Lenka said: "Turn to the end. At the same time the airship swung around and began to climb. "Run," Clavain said. Childe nodded. The horses were harnessed to a four-wheeled carriage slightly larger than the volantor, above which was perched a headless humanoid robot. She wanted room for more samples when she got further in. There were no craters deep enough, so the Wall had been completely artificial: a vast ring-shaped atmospheric dam designed to move slowly outward, encompassing ever more surface area at a rate of a twenty kilometres per year. Mulling this, but knowing there was nothing I could do about it until I was out of the tank, it took me half an hour of painful work to free myself from the connections. "I can't give you any guarantees," Weather said, "but there was one word I was also meant to say to you. "This isn't quite the outcome I was expecting, Mercurio—if you don't mind my saying. There was a lot of resistance...the lobot kept fumbling the job. But I thought there might be a little more to this than a lecture about the way I choose to manage my own memories." "Actually," Zima said, "there was a point to this after all. She saw a few patches of water, some vehicle tracks, and some of them looked vaguely familiar. Another few hundred rooms, each posing a challenge more testing than the last? The theories of your Captain. "That doesn't help me much. "You fool," she said. It had been dyed red in order to emphasize the fine grain of its surface: a series of parallel lines like the pages of a book seen end-on, but with a rhythmic structure to the spacing of the lines —a widening and a narrowing—that was unlike any book Merlin had seen. The sound it made was like a fusillade of gunshots, the space between detonation growing smaller. The robot must have been cut in two as it passed through the Matryoshka, but so cleanly that the two parts had continued moving on exactly the same trajectory, until this moment. It won't last. At least now we would have a clear route back out of the Spire. He screamed, as the hot thing seared into his forehead like a brand. And the chances of any of us bumping into each other between then and now were tiny." "But it happened?" "Not exactly. Fescue's just a wasted old bore. People would spy where they fell and try to get there first. The Blue Goose was much too quiet. After all, it's not as if someone didn't notice in the end." "Or maybe he was just insane, and the music's just a side-effect." "That's not a bad legacy to live up to. Childe was brilliant now, but I sensed there was more to it than the extra layers of cognitive machinery Trintignant had installed. "There are eight more; up to ninety-one, which has thirteen dots along each side." "The final groove," I said, accepting for myself that whatever this problem was, Celestine had definitely understood it. What if someone sees us entering or leaving his ship?" "That's also a problem," I said. So am I. Some of them have probably tried it. Now I'll have to spend all day telling lies. "This wasn't planned for. As the route wound its way around obstacles, the Scaper became little more than a dark, chimney-backed hump on the horizon, seemingly fixed in place. The uplift, Vratsa?" "What about him?" "We subjected him to mild interrogation. When the voidship reached the Oort cloud, when he was scheduled to be woken... would he have declared himself responsible? I'm about to place a hard burden on your shoulders. In any given year, I can pretty much guarantee that one of the best books I'll have read will be a mountaineering book. She had softened me up with a romantic meal, her trap already sprung. Behind the other ship was the hot spike of its drive flame: the end result of all that interstellar material being sucked up in the first place, compacted and compressed to stellar core pressures in her drive chamber. It'll be a matter of public record that I came to the Monument, and we'll have been recorded together by those float-cams." "Exactly," Childe said, nodding enthusiastically. Yet she had no sooner resumed her pace-moving faster now, the bags swaying awkwardly-than she saw Garret Kinnear. A nice fat thermal signature too. We can load in the Progress's trajectory and follow it all the way in." "And if we damage the Soyuz? Just stay where you are and I promise I'll be home soon." That was it. There was a moment of absolute terror as it forced its way down my throat, through my eye sockets, nose and ears. Judging by the data she recorded before getting stuck, we'll be able to get within two hundred metres without difficulty. He searched for a cluster which would identify the room where he stood. The only thing non-cometary was the very steep inclination to the ecliptic. "Let's go for a walk." "In this weather?" "I need bread. He just wanted to get out. Until then, there are other uses for it." Without touching the hilt, Kathrin slipped the weapon into her pocket where it lay as heavy and solid as a pebble. It was always only a hypothesis. In a flash the man's anger turned to despair. "It used to span the galaxy," Greta said. It hasn't been working. And trust me, lad: I've had long enough to dwell on things. That's how we began, brother. Nesha's poured me another cup of tea, which—her views on my sanity notwithstanding—I take as an invitation to remain. Make you understand your place in things—the value in your being here. The fact that it's been on this orbit for twenty-four years proves nothing. You killed your brother, emperor. It wasn't long before a wary crowd had gathered around Tyrant. But what I remembered of the Lacertine assassins was that they were known for their cleverness, not their clemency. "He isn't linked to the Advocates, as far as I'm aware. Magically, the problem had opened up before me where a moment ago it had been insoluble; like one of those optical illusions which suddenly flip from one state to another. I chose it myself. "But by then we'll be well on our way." "Now that you've shown me this secret, aren't you worried that we'll take it from you?" "The ship wouldn't let you. Their biology and culture was alien enough for a lifetime of study: even a modern one. That how it works." It was all too much. The doctors and surgeons got too close to us, too involved. But some data packets did escape from Titan's atmosphere. Ship or an installation. No one had a clue why. We know what happened to Burdock now. The aug was purposefully thin, and that meant people had to take responsibility for their own actions. But it was difficult to see how a single man could have orchestrated the long game of the assassination attempt. Even if the rocket fell behind schedule, they only had to wait until the aerial land mass drifted over a Shadowland target. I watched them, wary of their intentions. Nothing that happens in the Matryoshka will be as bad as what they'd do to us for failing our country." An hour later we'd informed Baikonur of our decision. And those people, too. If the speech center's been scooped out...it isn't in our power to put it back again." I steadied myself against a bulkhead, as the floor bucked under us. It's probably easier if I show you." Minla let the orderly wheel him into one of the faces were right. I'll fuse his bones. "Breech glow. Then you won't lose any sleep over it, will you?" With gun in my hand I considered turning it on Mister Zeal and putting him under and then killing him. "You said that last time." "Aye, but this time I mean it. "You did it before, and it didn't kill you. Hirz had gone ahead into the unexplored room. "I can't turn it off," Nesha says, as if I've already judged her. For all Gaunt knew, it could have been based around a model that was in production before he went under. "That means all we have to do is identify the groove on the right which corresponds to the missing triangular number." "All?" Hirz said. "I don't like it," Hirz said. The AM would never tolerate that. Zvezdniy Gorodok is stirring to hypothermic half-life. No one had ever succeeded in detecting the signals that passed between two matched C-drives, let alone in understanding the messages those signals carried. "I'll have Tyrant take them out, using charm-torps." "We've considered asking for your direct military assistance," Minla said. I think he had some firsthand experience of the trouble that followed." "Then I envy him those first-hand memories. She moved, timing things expertly. I feel whole again, and strong. People should be less choosy in life." He emits a long nasal exhalation like the air being let out of a tyre. Of course, we didn't know for sure that the Matryoshka had come through a wormhole. That was Arkangel all right. After the battle, Vetchling, one of the other Advocates, took me aside and told me what she knew. Only a slight easing of the crease on the side of Galenka's mouth indicated that she was, for now, breathing easier. In that case there is no real disadvantage in using automatic syntax generators. Elsewhere I noticed blank pages and sometimes gaps of many days between the accounts. It was said that they could pass all tests save the most microscopic scrutiny. I couldn't stand not knowing. Like I was the victim of a bad practical joke, someone in the department messing with the data." "And when you realised you weren't being hoaxed?" "I still didn't believe it—not to begin with. It's between me and Childe now. "We will travel back out into the Galaxy and seek new experiences; new strands to be woven into the greater tapestry of the Gentian collective memory. If the monkey had any sense, it was already through the narrowing, on its way back to daylight. "I'm lost! I need someone to show me the way out of here!" Lobots never spoke, but they understood spoken instructions. Most of the time Corax didn't have his hands on the controls, the buggy navigating by itself. He had long black hair, the greasy grey colour of dishwater. The mask felt clammy against his face. "A station in Schedar sector." "That's not where we're meant to be, Thom." I nod. "I'm sorry I brought this on vou." I tell Nesha, and make to lift myself over the railing. There was no one else around: only a glass manneguin standing at attention with a napkin over one arm. It peered at the next label. But Naiad was destroyed to make this happen. It was even possible that we had passed beyond the city's crater wall, so that above us lay only poisonous skies. The last time you saw your wife was in that Coalition compound. "Then are you at all surprised that I didn't tell you?" I turned to Trintignant. Because of the shape of the mushroom cloud that accompanied each burst, they called them Minla's Flowers. I couldn't make out our surroundings with any clarity for more than a few metres in any direction, but as Weather pushed on I sometimes had the impression that the machinery was moving out of her way to open up the path, and sealing itself behind us. He was in the middle of a speech. "Know what?" Gaunt asked. There were a hundred ways she could have killed herself aboard the Cockatrice before we boarded, and she didn't. I leaned forward. "I'd almost forgotten them. It's not a question of being distressed by my phantom twin any more. "I think it's a moon any more. "I think the doorways are getting narrower. Only a handful of buildings reached higher than the city wall. At its ticking, whirling core lay a necklace of neutron stars. Someone just got a promotion." THE SLEDGE-MAKER'S DAUGHTER SHE STOPPED in sight of two hog's heads and forty pence worth of beeswax candles. He looked back in time to see Voi stumble. The pilot gained further height, then cut the aircraft's engine. "What about you, then?" "Nothing very exciting. The couch extended parts of itself into his body. An Indian tug has crashed into it, and now there is a race to rescue the construction workers. This is true, but only up to a point. Nothing we can't fix, you and I." "Fix?" "A few minutes under the knife, is all." My hand trembled on the gun. "I was lucky. It had all the usual recording functions, and enough wit to arrange and categorize Yukimi's entries, but when it spoke back to her she never had the impression that there was a living mind trapped inside the floral-patterned—and now slightly dog-eared—hardback covers. A spray of golden lights betrayed the

darkening sliver of the main spire. Did that make it less of a crime than if it had happened ten thousand years ago, or last week? Just like Campion and Forgiving. The layered structure confused the hell out of us. Or you can consider the alternative. But that wasn't the only bright thing in the room. The lump was contoured with dim sunlight on one side, picking out craters and ridges in purple-browns. The why is easy. "It shouldn't be a problem." Two hundred meters, yes—but two hundred meters across treacherous, potholed ground riddled with enough soft depressions to hide a dozen worms. The crowd advanced. "Are you ...?" she starts to say. For a moment he sought the surface; tried to keep the water from his lungs. It understood my concerns. "Just making about sunsets again. But doing it the hard way meant months of patient work. Mazamel's intelligence proved faulty, so we make the best of what we find." "You get the intelligence you pay for," I said. Clausen and Da Silva were waiting in the windowless corridor outside the room. They had no direct comms back to Earth by then. He was sure it would come to him sooner or later. All this...stuff should help you make some progress." "Is this all you can give us?" Sibia asked sceptically. The bio indices were all in the green. "But you have to come all the way out here first." "The trouble is, not many want to continue the journey at this point. "Are there as many as you imagined?" Clavain judged that there were no more than seventy lights in the whole complex now. Then it won't take you long to check them over, will it?" "Whatever, Skip." The thing I liked about Ray was that he always knew when he'd lost an argument. The mathematical problems had now grown so arcane that I could barely describe them, let alone grope my way towards a solution. The Mood Maze was a pleasant enough diversion, and popular with most of those who took a chance on it. "A window must just have opened." "Feeling better now?" "Guess it's nice to know the windows are still behaving." "I could have told you they would." Galenka grunted with the effort of dislodging the sample she had selected. He had grown with it, swelling as each new territory—be it a planet, system or entire glittering stare cluster—was swallowed into his realm. Perhaps she was right; perhaps I was insane to think a Conjoiner could ever feel something in return. Since Galenka was still at her station, still guiding the Progress, it was obvious what the problem was. "I do." He stopped in his tracks and folded his arms. The construction of the Matryoshka was the last great enterprise of a waning civilisation. "Were you expecting something else?" "You bring me out of cold storage, tell me the world's turned to shit while I was sleeping, and then give me the choice of staying awake or going back into the box. Very soon the work was underway. This much I understood: The Matryoshka was a complex machine with a simple purpose. I'm not so cruel that I wouldn't give you some influence over your fate. You need to think about getting out, while the collision-avoidance algorithm will still get you through Shell 1. And you had no qualms whatsoever about selling it, did you?" Gaunt felt a well-rehearsed argument bubbling up from subconscious. "But remind me, Soya. The furthest any human beings have ever travelled! It was awful, to find them like that." I glance at the nearest teacher. For us, it didn't matter. Turning my wrist this way and that, I admired the object, acutely—and strangely conscious of its rectilinearity. If his enemies learned of my existence, le Who knew what difference five or six samples might make, compared to two? Greta had broken it to me gently, giving me time to settle into my new surroundings and take that necessary step away from Katerina. His legs buckled under him before he reached the door. I'm just wondering if we couldn't help it do better. Shall we?" "I'm at your disposal," I said. Down this shaft, I think." Rasht was indicating the rightmost entrance of the three we had faced on our way in. The Spire may give you only twenty minutes to solve a room, but I can make it feel like several hours; even one or two days." I turned to Childe. He climbed to the waiting robot and sat there. She whacked it with her palm and then when there was no response she whacked it again and again. Get it out of your system." "I've got to go back to it later." "Believe me, this will help. We've seen wonder and terror; heaven and hell. Simpler just to freeze him back again and pull out an intact body to take his place." "Is Steiner doesn't have a choice, unfortunately. "Take it anyway," Mary said. "What about it?" "It seems funny that we can do so much to their brains...put stuff in, take stuff out..." "Go on." "It seems funny that we never give them language. Kick a man when he's down." "Actually I admire your nerve," she said. But I don't think he'd be very likely to throw me into an airlock. The ancient mind saw demons and monsters in the heavens. A single bone-white bridge connected the mainland to the island, shaped like a great curved femur. A few minutes later I had made my way to the same observation blister I'd used to check the ship before the surge. Is that it?" He smiled. Plenty of room aboard the Soyuz, to bring them back to the Tereshkova." She breathed heavily, as if she'd just come off the exercise cycle. I didn't want to say anything, but...yes. We give them wits and smarts, then wonder why they start doing stuff we didn't ask them to. You don't get to know everything. Horribly wounded, he tried to get up, to crawl a few inches nearer to his tormentors, but the worm was already upon him. Get her own speaking tour, her own book and documentary?" "Look," I say. Stepping between these two sheets, I walked calmly down to the lower balcony. "Presumably it wouldn't stretch your talents to spy on Burdock." "Oh, no," I said, shaking my head. It will certainly be the last time I see the stars. The cage flickered with containment fields. Eventually the doors would have been a tight squeeze even for something anomalous. But I knew the truth. A single skirmish could eat up many centuries of planetary time, whole lifetimes from the point of view of a starship's crew. "That's not how it comes across." "It hasn't been easy for her. Some found their way into private collections, but Zima murals also started in the sincere belief that it was going to turn into a worthwhile finished story—and most of them didn't. "I mean, sea monsters...who ever thought they might be real?" Then she stood up and made to return to the front of the helicopter. "Still, if you think it was dull...that's your prerogative. Anyway, the Soyuz isn't rigged for remote control or sampling." "I wasn't thinking of remote control. Then my feet touched bottom. Let's finish it." "It's Fescue," I said. "And yes, there is a secret tunnel. The surface of Mars was dropping below them very quickly indeed. They say starve baby...keep baby alive, but just." She clenched her fist and snarled. Clavain reached the base of the ladder. Are we really as far out as you said?" "Yes," she said. "But that doesn't mean we have to humour it." I understood his reluctance. So, for instance, if I were to say: remove as much of Mike as is compatible with the continued integrity of his central nervous system, then the trauma pod will enact my order. Finish David for me, and I'll be back to see the end result." "Where are you going? At times I pitied her, at others I felt contemptuous of the way she allowed herself to be subjugated by Rasht. Anyway, that sterilised husk doesn't mean anything to you and I. Things float away at the least provocation. I supposed that there was nothing for it but to assume that he was still inside; still working his way to whatever lay at the summit. She was right, and I knew it. And we would, too. It was bruised and battered from endless near-light transits, with great scorch marks and impact craters marring much of the hull. It cost a lot of money." She leaned back a bit, so that the shadows dropped across her face again. He was a good man trying to make a better world for his fellow citizens. I'd come to this white marble version of Venice to witness the unveiling of Zima's final work of art. And some of the sunsets were actually quite nice." She'd meant it as a compliment, but I couldn't help looking wounded. When I had felt it before it had been as cold and dead as the floor of a crypt, yet that was no longer the case. With only a week under my belt, it seemed like a life sentence aboard the Iron Lady There were many reasons why someone might need a ship this big. Lenka carried it in two hands. "That was the idea. No offence intended." "And absolutely none taken." Trintignant gestured towards a vacant chair. When I reached the wreck of their vehicle—this was three days after their air ran out—I sent my sample-return probe inside the craft. Hirz had not repeated the complete exercise since, but she had gone back a dozen rooms, and found that the Spire was just as operative as it had been before. A few musical instruments lay around unused: holoclaviers and air-guitars. I felt a glimmer of cross-species empathy. It pulled her apart and then the parts disappeared into the walls. "Not many people have an AM these days, do they?" "I wouldn't know," I said. Burdock had pulled him out of the escape craft; warmed him from the emergency hibernation, and cracked the labyrinth of his ancient language. But that wasn't the reason I altered my strand. Eventually they were done and Merlin was allowed to wash, clothe himself and finally eat. Borage's strand detailed his heroic exploits in rescuing an entire planet's worth of people following the close approach of a star to their Oort cloud. "Teterev went on," Rasht said. "Whether they had the same hopes and fears as us, or whether they had the same hopes and fears as us, or whether they mere so far beyond us as to seem like gods." "I don't give a shit who built it," Hirz said. He rubbed the smooth skin of his scalp where the horns had been. The walls, floor and tables were covered with images and solid projections of work both good and gaudy: asteroids and ice-teroids, boulders and rocks, transformed into pieces of art, from the geometric abstracts of Motl and Petit to the hyper-realistic portraiture of Dvali and Maestlin. Merlin watched with a sickened fascination. Eventually you became so complex that you accreted intelligence. If there are N dots in the lower row of the last triangle, the next one will have N plus one more. See, feel, all around it. "Meddling in human nature isn't the solution. You spend a lot of time together, just the two of you. "Any bright ideas?" "Prime numbers," I said. Not the enemy, but my own side. Not unless we saw what those anticollision fields looked like." "Exactly," I said. "What kind of delay?" "Forty days. Provided you had the power, and provided the planet did not need anyone to do anything else, it was eminently doable. It's a pity so much is hanging on it, or I might be inclined to give it a moment's credence." "We have no choice but to trust her. "We talk many times. I wondered what chance we stood of finding anything in the other craft's remains. Michael Luttrell. Our word still holds: we'll drop you at the nearest safe planet, when we next make orbitfall. I'm sure they'll be thrilled to hear from you." "I could do just that. "The industrial capacity of the Skylands, even when our surface allies are taken into account, is insufficient for the higher purpose of safeguarding from a strategy document, even though she was looking Merlin straight in the eye. Until now his trust in my competence had always been implicit, but Weather's arrival had changed all that. Her face is projected into a small window in my view, fighting for attention with an ever-changing dance of tactical analysis overlays, flagging every potential threat or hiding place. "I am not Georgi Kizim. Felka looked the same. Intercepted telemetry from the Titan descent vehicle, establishing that the distress signal was sent out much earlier than you claimed, and that you had ample time to respond to it." "Preposterous." I make to rise from the couch. What I'm worried about is a bleed on your brain that we need to treat sooner rather than later." So the pod's surgical systems have already been busy. Escaping from the ship is the objective, the end-state." Reasoned argument clearly wasn't going to get me anywhere. We met before, but I'm not sure how much of that you remember." "Every detail," she said. It's as if she knew no one would be coming down." I had to work hard not to rip the paper with my power-augmented fingers. There are other things that resemble pigs, and they are the worst of all. Something with a mind and a purpose. It was an old design that had been dusted down and made to repair it?" "Not here." "I'll tell you. Work with us, become part of the team, or go back into hibernation and take your chances there." "We need to be on our way." Clausen said. Perhaps the fate was not so avoidable after all, no matter how wise you became. Nothing happened for several more seconds, and then the door ahead of us began to open. I didn't create the enemy. Whatever happens, Crowe's Landing will eventually come out of the waters. It was as if they had been flung away in a fit a temper. I am invited to cast my vote. White surroundings again, the hum and chug of diligent life-support. "I think Burdock's thread was deliberately altered." "By Burdock himself?" "Yes." "Why would he do that, though? There isn't a single memory I haven't already agonised over a thousand times: putting it in, taking it out again." "I'm sure you're right," I said, knowing how much of a perfectionist Purslane was. Then again, very few people have. Some of us manage without being acronyms." "All the same, Vincent, Maria is another robot. But when I rar the maze, Burdock sailed through it, with the walls registering hardly any change to his emotional state. His answer came back, clipped and automatic. Then he looked again. You're aboard the Petronel. Instead of the death sentence, they got neurosurgery and a set of implants so that they could be puppeted and given simple tasks. I might have been able to work the ship without you, but certainly not without Lenka. And—before we assume more sophistication than is strictly necessary—there are no concealed supports." Celestine was silent for a few moments before answering, "All right. To see Earth in the morning light. They had the strongest ties to external lines. My father told me that it was a custom for all cosmonauts to visit Gagarin's office before a mission, to see the clock on the wall stopped at the moment of his death. I can't detect it." "That isn't possible." "I'm telling you." The Ultra looked at us, his fear not well concealed. You don't know that the Spire will keep letting us make these attempts. Even given the absence of a single Secure anywhere in the venue, there were plenty of places that were private enough for innocent assignations. Every now and then KX-457 raises one of its arms and zaps the sky with a plasma cannon. Toys were scattered on the grass. Not long after our departure, something upsetting happened to Chasm City. The sea was still heavy, huge waves dashing against the concrete piers on which the rigs were supported. "We were lucky to get you." Merlin smiled. A single neutron star could be made to have the requisite density and spin, but it lacked the necessary axial elongation. They are very insistent on this point." "Luttrell seems very insistent as well. "Come. He would replace one phantom prize with another, over and over, until reality finally trumped him. Her voice, when she spoke again, sounded strained. Maybe more than his career. Soon our deception would be revealed, and we would be for many seconds a note for many seconds. It sustained a note for many seconds a note for many seconds. before changing pitch. She interrupted a light-beam with her hand, opening the viewing shields. With a jolt the robot lowered the open-topped pallet and disengaged. To feed me their fears, so that I might better my defenses. When that wasn't sufficient, he could tap into the data feeds of any number of accompanying machines. Then the net began to be winched back towards the gondola like a haul of fish. Perhaps it's already tiring of us." "I still—" But I stopped, my new, wasp-waisted body flexing easily at the approach of a footfall. This diagram shows the presence of emission lines in the spectrum of hydrogen, and a mathematical formula that predicts the spacing of those lines. The ground undulates toward a treeless horizon, strewn with boulders and stones. Even I could see the sense in that, whether I liked it or not. It's the thing that's trying to kill you, not save you." "But when you leave us...you'll ride the Waynet, won't you?" Merlin nodded. You've seen how stretched we are: it's all hands on deck around here. The snow's stopped falling, and a pink frigid sun is trying to break through the gloom on the eastern horizon. "I don't want any trouble from the police." "I won't stay long. Zeal nodded at the other man. Cocooned in relativistic time, the journeys did not seem horrendously long for the pilots: mere years or decades of flight, with the rest of time (which might equal many centuries) spent soaking up planetary experience, harvesting memory and wisdom. "I thought the scoop fields were supposed to have settled down by now." "That didn't feel like a field tremor to me. She's a clever little girl." "Yes. You want to go back in the box, let someone else shoulder the burden, don't let me talk you out of it." Then she looked at Da Silva. There was hatred in it. I pretended I hadn't heard him. She had done the right thing, she told herself. It's a machine, that's all." "But maybe a cleverer one than anything we've ever known before. You didn't have to take part." "That's all anything is to you, isn't it? There are joints in the tube, where one piece connects to another. But I'm also not sure you do, or else you wouldn't keep pushing your luck." Something snapped inside him and he asked the question he had meant to ask in a million better ways. Aren't you going to tell me about her?" I drank some of my coffee. I swear on it." "Going now. Once, we could. We were less interested in Teterev's whereabouts than what Teterev might have left us to plunder. Now all you have to do is collapse that shadow by one more dimension, down to two, to get this—" She jabbed at the beguiling design marked on the door. Childe placed his forepaw over the solution that he and Celestine had agreed on, and pressed. Had she been expecting him to try something like that, after what had happened to Steiner? "Great Wall of Mars" has the earliest setting of any of the stories to date, and it helped firm up the foundations for some of the ideas and factions in the novels. A sooty smear erupted from the engine. Cockatrice's drive system. "We can form a supply chain, save going all the way back each time. "Soya," a voice calls. You can't understate the value of that, here in the refugee camp. You realise that, don't you?" "I'd guessed, but I still hope I can talk you out of it." With her good hand, she fingered the small, hard thing Trintignant had placed on the table. "It wasn't like that just now." "I know." Hirz turned and looked at me. "I'm glad things have gone so well. If I hadn't offered to make that medicine for you, your military effort might have collapsed within months. "Please," I continued, "come with us. "Twenty years," Merlin said, indicating the settings, which had been recalibrated in Lecythus time-units. Childe looked unimpressed. It was a useful physiological adaptation when there was a lot of work to be done, but it also meant that ten days in space could feel like thirty back on Earth. The other was that the doorways would not continue to narrow now that we had discarded the bulky suits. "It's dead. "We took out a ship...killed its crew." "No," she said, shaking her head gravely. "You think I won't do this? They boil down to this? might be. "I wish I could stay." "You seem like two men to me," Malkoha said, his voice low. His heart was racing. The machines got smart, but they decided not to let us know. I had served him well until now. All I had was a bullet, an inscription and some fine red dust. They had not hurt her as badly as me, but there was still a cut on her lip where someone had slapped her. If there was a nursery, it was obviously not very productive. It was just a waystation, a place to pass through. Once we were clear—with the window sealing above us—Galenka did a somersault roll to use the main engine to slow us down again. others. "What makes you think they haven't, Thom?" I reached out and took her hand, the way she had taken mine. And I'm a stickler for detail. Back to Lev. With insouciant ease, Childe skimmed us between aerial walkways and then nosed the car into a dark side-tunnel. Had some nice jobs lined up for you." I bite back my excuse. 'No,' he said. But rumours and ghost stories, those are something else. When they finally broke me out of the link, we were still some way from his camp. There was still light at the north end, where the sagging arch was being repaired. In fact, there were very few environments in the galaxy that I couldn't tolerate, at least temporarily. "Good lad," Zeal said. Galiana had deployed some kind of chemical smoke screen: infrared and optically opaque, he guessed. The Progress would come down on autopilot, laden with alien riches—that was the plan, anyway. "She never was a human being. I was last woken six months ago, and I've not returned to the chamber since. They occupied their days in the diligent, monkish study of the Prior culture that had inhabited their system before their own arrival, in the time when humanity was still a gleam in evolution's eye. "This one." "And you're certain of that?" Hirz said. "Dimitri," crackled a voice. "Clausen doesn't like me much," Gaunt said, when they had reached the next level and he had caught his breath again Countless modifications later, his mind was now the size of a small house. In sixty years—faster, if the engine could be improved—it would streak into another system, one that might offer the possibility of landfall. He wondered how else he was supposed to take it. "Secret tunnels under the worm zone, is that it? "I'm not sure if I'd have noticed it were it not for the whole business with the maze...but ever since then, I've been watching for anything even more out of the ordinary than normal." "You've seen something?" "More a case of what he hasn't been doing, if that makes any sense." Purslane nodded sagely. During one of Burdock's visits to his ship, she had shadowed him with a drone, a glassy dragonfly small and transparent enough to slip undetected into his travel box. The chamber had struck us into a thunderous, paralyzing silence. They were covered in scales or plaques which moved around in a weird, oozing fashion, like jostling continents on a planet with vigorous plate tectonics. We don't have to go on." "Of course we go on!" Rasht said. They were telling me I had no choice. "We have the advantage of height, but little else. "Yes?" "Nesha Petrova?" I ask, leaning to bring my lips closer to the grille. As it was, the machine appeared completely oblivious to the attention—as it had continued to do through the second apparition. "Trust me, Galenka. Then something eye-hurtingly bright cut into the worm's hide. She led me along a winding, restrictive path that squeezed its way between huge intrusions of Conjoiner machinery, like the course etched by some meandering, indecisive underground river. It is a small world, this. When she died, she passed it to the young man's grandson, who happened to live on Mars. My feet touched the thorn. "Can you understand what he's saying?" Merlin asked, knowing that Tyrant would be picking up any external sounds. "Can you hear me, Mike?" "Yes." Annabel swallows. Huge blasts...but not enough to stop a wave of retaliatory fire. One instant, the Cockatrice was creeping closer to us, her engines doused to a whisper now to match our own feeble rate of acceleration. "I had dreams," she says, when the grogginess fades. Three months, perhaps, to bring David to completion. Twenty light-years from here is a bountiful system known to the Cohort. My brother's death must have been planned days—maybe even weeks—in advance." His face glistened with a wave of military composure. It'll be better coming from him." "You were going to tell us how you ended up on his ship," Purslane prompted. "Well, if there was a lot of debris that far out, there must have been even more closer to the action. They turn back before they get this deep, as you nearly did. No one comes and goes until we find out who did this. Greta shrugged. "Not bad. "Don't put yourself down. I didn't want to...it's just that I need to keep on Mister Zeal's good side." "Zeal bad man. It's as if there's this vast sea of collective experience lapping at the shore of consciousness, but it's only every now and then that it floods us, leaving us awash in sorrow and joy. The silly fool had his defence thresholds turned down too low." Unfortunately, Fescue was in earshot. I think." "Since then you've had a few relationships, but nothing lasting more than a decade. Watches us and hums, making the same tune over and over again. There are black balls and white balls, in open-topped cardboard medicine boxes. Your ancestors forged the armoured sky to hide from them, to make Lecythus look like an airless world. For us, it was the most appalling piece of good luck imaginable. But the Great Work was not about moving one or two stars a few light years, impressive as such a feat undoubtedly was. The field medical unit has no head, but there's a suite of cameras and sensors built into its shoulder yoke, and that's where I seem to be looking down from. It was here—dying—that he had been interviewed by Childe's envoy, which had only then emerged from its hiding place. Even from his distant vantage point, it was obvious to Gaunt that Steiner was in a bad way. Galenka sent commands to the Progress, to be relayed when a window opened. But don't sweat about it. We still need to get home." I made to touch the wall again. There were gaps in that jigsaw, but most of them in place. One of the things that always interests me in SF is the juxtaposition of past and future technologies and cultures. But please don't play it now. Just because things happened between us..." A question I had been meaning to ask her forced itself to the front of my mind. "There she is," Clavain said, as the Great Wall rose over the horizon. When the repair work was done, I once more made my way along the access shaft to the starboard engine and attempted to follow her arguments, but the best we could do was agree that two of the other answers would have been wrong. My mathematical brilliance came in feverish, unpredictable waves, like inspiration to a laudanum-addicted poet. This pig's getting awfully heavy in my hand." \*\*\* KATHRIN STOOD IN the widow's candlelit kitchen—it only hadden waves, like inspiration to a laudanum-addicted poet. one tiny, dusty window—while the old woman turned her bent back to attend to the coals burning in her black metal stove. That's enough for tonight, isn't it?" "It'll have to be," I said. "I cared," Yukimi said to herself. Our memories were a knot of entanglements. Take the bracelet back." "Kathrin, listen. If we push it too far, the artilects won't be able to mount a defence. "But yes, it's definitely an improvement." "I could sit out here all night and just look at it. "Looks like the door stays open for now. "I can feed you back there a sight quicker than you'll reach Milankovic. The glory of it. Dimitri escapes. I don't remember what became of Rorvik and Lomax. But Trintignant will tell you the same thing. "Galenka," I said. "But now the next question: why?" But we didn't have long to wonder about that. The walls were a smear of service machinery: squat modules, snaking umbilical lines, the retracted cradles of unused docking berths. He went to the emergency locker and found a mask which slivered eagerly locker and slivered e across his face; another for Voi. He was as firmly entrenched in his convictions as I was in mine. Eight weeks had passed since his revival. The ship was to the command deck and did what I could to bring her back under control. But she was only along as a neutral observer. "You felt as though you'd spent a long time in the tank. The Spire, it appeared, was more interested in probing the limits of our understanding than getting us simply to solve permutations of the same basic challenge. They've seen images of my spacefaring form and they can't quite square it with the handsome, well-proportioned androform physiology I present to them today. At first I thought she was beckoning me, but then I saw there was something in her palm. "A deterrent device, to keep out intruders." "Then we might think of heeding it," I said. "Which is to say, you might consider giving me a 'hello' in return. They had wrapped this fleet around their system and quickened it to a kind of slow, singleminded intelligence. "In fact, sometimes I think it gets harder each time." "Then your equipment needs servicing," Forqueray said dismissively. There is a doctor present now, a young Lebanese man. That was the way I'd always felt about his work as well: it was as vast and inhuman as its inspiration, and only Zima's cyborg modifications lent his art any kind of uniqueness The technical fault can't be repaired, not without use of Conjoiner technology. They take more care of that than they do the heating. Mission resumed. At least I'll have made my point." That was going to cost someone a lot of money, Yukimi thought. Doesn't it bother you that you only get to do that one thing?" "Not at all. They had all cast their votes and my system had tallied the winning strand. And that building will still be there. By now Zima was hugely famous, even to people who had no particular interest in art. Well, yes. Now watch." She made the line become a square; splitting into two parallel lines joined at their ends. "Am I really Doctor Kizim?" I ask Grechko, as the elevator takes us down. If there was one unifying activity, one thing that brought everyone together, it was when the caretakers crowded into the commons, listening to the daily reports coming in over the radio from the rought everyone together, it was when the caretakers crowded into the commons, listening to the daily reports coming in over the radio from the other rigs in the Patagonia offshore sector, and occasionally from further afield. That's my promise to you." Nesha looks back over her shoulder There isn't even a trace of debris, and there's no sign of anything that could have destroyed it." The silence that followed was broken by Trintignant's piping tones. But something was different. Alliances had already been forged; hierarchies of influence and responsibility agreed upon. There were setbacks and days when I couldn't see my way through the thing. Zima offered his hand. I asked Forqueray to have them removed from the suits. We mock too easily, as if we understood everything of our world where our forebears understood nothing." "But if I should believe in certain things," Kathrin said, "should believe in certain things," Kathrin said, "should I not also believe in certain things," But if I should believe in certain things, "Entire Second acceleration should believe in certain things," as he had been promised. But in the meantime, think what you'll have done. "Too bloody optimistic, as it happened. Soon bad thing happen and you still here." I pushed my hand against my chest, trying to numb the pain in my forefinger, where it had been twisted out of here, then worry about when you can slot me in for surgery. All this, I thought, before even Celestine had seen the answer. Going to be a bitch of a job moving all of them back to the Soyuz." "We'll take what we can; that was always the idea. The floor was an undulating mat of synthetic grass forming hillocks and meadows. Must be about half a tonne of stuff in here already. Meanwhile, the field medical unit maintains maximum vigilance. It was dark inside. Around us, the ship rocked and roared. One sleeper, however, would soon have to be warmed. What are you saying? But where could I run to? And I did not want to remain on Golgotha pondering such things. Ranks of new aircraft now occupied the area where the towers and airships had been, bigger and heavier than anything Merlin had seen before. The floor under his feet surged and when it stopped surging the angle was all wrong. My stars were mathematically remote reference points, to be used only when I had cause to doubt my inertial positioning systems. Occasionally, it kills. "Grisha's system had been turned into a cloud of radioactive rubble. It is a matter of common knowledge that I have enemies amongst the Ultras." Trintignant removed his Homburg and patted his crown delicately, as if smoothing down errant hairs. They'd be impressed by your weapons, that much we don't doubt. "You in one piece, Gaunt?" she asked, while her companion spooned in another mouthful of his breakfast. All he had to do was have an accident. I'd been a professional astronomer for fifteen or sixteen of them, by then." She becomes reflective, as if it's only now that she has given that time of her life any thought. After a few seconds he heard her say: "Roger, vectoring three two five." Followed by an almost silent "Fuck. I folded the workstation keyboard back into its recess. "He called me from Jupiter. The plane had reached ten kilometres, but it would need to double that to clear the upturned rim. Progress systems are dropping like flies, anyway—I give this ship about six hours before it dies on us. It's just a rock with people on it. "I was the only prisoner she had. There was once a world—" "What happened to the place in question?" Malkoha asked, before Merlin could finish his sentence. What was her name again?" I'd had her memory buried so deeply that it took a real effort of will to recall any exact details about my marriage. When I was working, deep into it, Skanda would retire to Moonlighter's bridge and conduct long-range business. But there's no arguing that he's better off now than he was before." "He's dead, though," Gaunt said. Fescue and I had never seen eye to eye. Now the Scaper has to be nursed, treated with kindness. She was still holding her metal hands before her. "Easy. There was something in the pit. "The usual self-serving stuff," I said. I don't usually abandon a piece when it's this near to completion—it's too hard to get back into the right frame of mind." "You don't have to abandon anything. Even if there isn't anyone living there now, I may find another clue, another piece of the puzzle." The emperor was outside again, very close to the spot where his previous body had been shot, kneeling by the treasured koi pond with some kind of water-testing device in his hand. I paused to turn around, but already the room we had been in was angled out of view, with the door beginning to lower back down. I have no doubt, Kathrin." She stood. As if, only now that the airship was outside the bubble, was she grasping the mistake she had made. Why did you swap me to a bigger pod?" "It's the same pod, Mike. Was that much of a cruelty? These suits are built to take a lot of crap." "Even alien crap?" "About to find out, aren't we?" He moved to palm one of the lower symmetry pairs. I didn't even open it at first; it wasn't as if IAU telegrams were exactly unusual. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised that almost no one gets the Rogue Moon reference. For a moment Merlin felt as if he was looking in the mirror at an older version of himself. It was one of you—an Advocate, he thought." I frowned at the silver-ridden corpse. DIAMOND DOGS I WAS NEVER very good at it, but for a while I took up rock climbing. I didn't want to fall, didn't you've ever received before, if my suspicions are correct. But you'll be dead by then. "A winning team, is that your idea?" "It's got to be better than war," Clavain said. They fail to work on any significant level, or they fail to work on any significant level, or they fail even to be finished. I get in without causing a scene. Now the equipment—stowed since launch—was slowly deploying, like a flower opening to the sun. Hit the intakes or stabilisers, that might have been enough." "Kanto!" It was Rasht, screaming at the monkey. It showed a picture of the starry night, the heavens as revealed after the fall of the camouflaging sky. They maintained that robot intelligence was an emergent property, something that could only happen given sufficient resources of time and complexity. "You want to see it?" she asked. Their colonies never got this far out." "She was desperate enough to try anything," Lenka said. It was a simple human trinket, the most innocent of machines. Not to bury me, or complicate my extraction, but to shield me from enemy eyes, cameras and weapon systems. And something else, which I preferred not to think about. She could feel its wingbeats cutting the cold air. "That's why I applaud your earlier ceasefire. I talked him into giving us a few extra hours to find you. A single deviation wouldn't affect its predictive model to any significant degree. "But that doesn't mean we're any closer to finding out who killed Grisha's people." "Actually," I said, "I've been thinking about that. Their heads were faceless, save for a kind of hemispheric delineation, a bilateral cleft suggesting a skull housing nothing but two huge eyes. I laid the whole cosmic perspective angle on them: how there was a bigger universe out there, one they could be a part of if they only stopped squabbling. She was always cleverer and quicker than me; she always had been. It can put proctors into this room in a matter of seconds." "And the moon, Merlin? "I'll make it out, Richard." She grimaced, tugging the tourniquet tighter. Yes, you did. I wonder what happened to the other guy, the one jammed in next to me? From the moment it was deployed—before I was hauled in and treated—the pod was also operating independently of human control. Tyrant will take care of everything I need. "I'm not asking for absolution. Something I would rather die than do. And what did Teterev know?" "That you have a matter-antimatter device." "That's right." "And the yield would be...?" "A couple of kilotonnes. Not that that's any surprise to you, I suppose." It wasn't Shirin she was talking to, of course. She'd have replaced it sooner or later, but without it she was horribly vulnerable. Most had been painted in one session. "I was listening to that." "Please. "Take Vratsa and remove him from the Great House—he's a continuing security risk, even if he doesn't know why he did what he did. She heard rummaging sounds. Such a good boy. Get them to wear them all the time, no matter who they're talking to. The mantises have withdrawn: they have done their work, the patient has been stabilised, she is mostly conscious. The urge to return it was almost overwhelming, but I could only take so much in one go. My name's Merlin." He thumped his chest for emphasis and said the name again, slower this time. You can reengineer the Galaxy itself, to shrink it to a human scale." In an eye blink of comprehension we understood the Great Work, and why it had been necessary for Grisha's people to die. It's considered very beautiful and a little melancholy, like a haiku in five dimensions." "Inside the atmosphere of a gas giant, right?" She looked at me alertly. Will that take your mind off the cold, for a little while? And there was a body. For what it's worth, though... you're a good man, Nevil. He began to understand why the airship dared not stray too far from the side of the land mass. The sea boiled and seethed. "I'm going to put the helmet in there. It came to rest next to a low, white pebble-dash chalet I hadn't noticed during our approach. It's some kind of assassination weapon: very subtle, very slow, very deadly." Grisha leaned over and stroked the containment bubble, his fingertips pushing flickering pink dimples into the field. Warren despised Clavain's belief that any kind of peace, even a peace which consisted only of stumbling episodes of mistrust between crises, was always better than war. But don't try and stop me doing this." Galiana looked at him, shaking her head slowly. That made it easier for us. "You remember going under, right?" He grasped for memories, something specific to hold onto. I could still walk, but the suit's responses were sluggish, meaning that it was resisting me more than aiding me. Neural growth factors have given him cortical modules for language and social interaction, butter solution and social interaction. these are islands in a vast sea of reptilian strangeness. Though the painting is fixed—no part of it has changed in two hundred years—its lurid firmament seems to shimmer and swirl before my eyes. "When," I say. The terms of cease-fire were being thrashed out and she knew she could buy herself favours by releasing me unharmed. In which case losing the Progress might be the least of our worries. On the afternoon of the eight hundred and seventieth night, I opened the maze on one of the high balconies, with a modest prize for the line member who found their way through it the fastest. You may as well hear it. Took a good six months before I realised this wasn't the worst thing that could happen to me. SLEEPOVER THEY BROUGHT Gaunt out of hibernation on a blustery day in early spring. But if you feel something?" It was clear from his tone of voice what he felt about that. I greet the studio audience, walk into the cage, pause while the door is locked behind me. She wore the same tight black outfit we'd found her in when we boarded the ship. "Another ship, probably. "But you don't clone, do you? I did not feel brave at all. I wondered if she was thinking of exactly the same objections I'd voiced to Van Ness, when he raised the idea. Know what to do. One of our field medical robots was able to reach you in time. The javelin passed through him as if he were made of smoke; its progress was unimpeded by his presence. Even her skull had been cracked open and sucked dry, so that the Spire could winnow the few small precious pieces of metal she carried in her head. I did not want to be found. "You may leave us now, Master Khorog. You see, there's nothing inside the vehicle but machinery and fuel tanks. It's what he left in my room. People cracked in space. "Get back." The figure who spoke dares to stand a little taller, even as their companion maintains a nervous, bent-at-theknees crouch. A smear of silver had attached itself to my right elbow, where I must have brushed against the wall. We followed him until we stood in a small, nervous huddle under the centre of the ceiling. Your master; I chose mine for myself." I searched my memory for information on any figures named Fury who might have been considered a security concern. Orbital operations are a world award for myself." from anything you know." Prakash pauses—his attention is elsewhere today. So did he. I know it's not oil. Can you see your reflection in it? Spin me some indigo hyacinths, the kind they used to grow on Springhaven, before the Mentality Wars. Its anatomy was profoundly unfamiliar to me. Do you honestly think we'll remember them, in a billion years?" Fescue turned to his Advocate friends. On my way in, I'd passed Ozymandis, a kilometre-sized rock put into Triton orbit. There were five terrestrials, four of which were uninhabitable. Nevil; before you came here you told us you had a proposal for a peaceful resolution to the crisis." "I'd really like to hear it," one of the others murmured audibly. As the winds harried it the water moved like the skin of some monstrous breathing, sucking in and out with a terrible restlessness. There is always something. But some good months, was that too much to ask for? She curved under the froglike bow of the ship, then rose up on the other side. She knew that every future Conjoiner would be the set of the ship o carry her message—even an outcast like me. You say there are people who believe the Sheriff can fly, as if that was a foolish thing, like the iron road and the winking bridge. They seemed to be formed not of rock, or the silver contamination, but some amalgam of the two, a kind of shimmering, glinting substrate. As it was, my father died only a few weeks after his diagnosis, and this was the last piece of fiction I produced until well into the following year. "I'm not going to like this, am I?" "We could examine the records on his ship and find out what he was really up to." "He's hardly likely to give us permission to do that." "I wasn't talking about asking his permission." Purslane's smile was wicked and thrilling: she was actually enjoying our little adventure. "I can see there's something wrong with her." "She was one of the discovery made by the Watchers, and rediscovered by Grisha's people. Lovely things to see, places to explore, people to meet. You're with us and you're stable." I try and move again, but my skull feels as if it's clamped in a vise. Not so bad when you get used to it." "And the alternative?" "Bag you and tag you and tag you and put you back in the freezer," Da Silva went on. "She's dead now," I said. "No...I thought about it, of course, and high command agrees with me. Some automated system had decided I was the only one who needed waking. In the end the weather settled matters for him. But then another ship came through the aperture. We'd still be quarantined here." Clavain leaned forward. I thumbed my way to the start. But we might want to ask her a few questions." "We'd be playing with fire. But as the airship lowered, so her certainty evaporated. The tendrils squirmed out and all. "That must be where Galiana launches her shuttles from," Clavain whispered. The initial sums had been large enough, but upon our return to Yellowstone we would all receive nine times as much; adjusted to match any inflation which might occur during the time-between sixty and eighty years-which Childe said the journey would span. "The son of part of you, the son of Teterev. None of Gennadi's coats fit me (they're all too tight in the sleeves) so I'm forced to make do with Doctor Kizim's again. "She's fully submersible. Which might mean that Nesha Petrova was right after all." "They should tell her." "I'm sure it'll be the first thing on their minds, after they've spent all these years crushing and humiliating her." Galenka fell silent for a few paces. He will content himself to wait until you cross his path again." Kathrin collected her one remaining bag and moved to the door. There's been some damage to your right frontoparietal regions, Mike. Sorry, but that just isn't a reasonable objection." "You're right, of course. "What?" "That whatever happens when we get home—whatever's become of the city—you won't go back to the Spire." "I won't go back," I said. Seems that her short-term memory isn't quite as fallible as we'd like. "Sorry," I say. The lake itself was an easy fifty or sixty kilometres wide. It's very close now. Is it me, or is your brother hoping we fail?" She was speaking Quebecois French now; Clavain shifting mental gears to follow her. But I'd still end up harming them. The rings the storms, the brooding blue vastness of it all. The view reminded me of the work of a preExpansion artist who had specialized in eye-wrenching lizards. Monsters that appear out of nowhere, and then disappear again." "That's a more refined form, but the principle is the same. You'll assist in the completion of the operation. That, though, was a fight for another day. That was why we had duct-tape and tasers aboard. "Minla," she said, in barely a whisper. He enlarged the view still further, until the glints resolved into distinct shapes. Zima smiled. I felt like a tightrope walker halfway across Niagara Falls. But it's true. He tried not to look at the man's wound. Blood was drooling down my leg from the wound. Nothing had been said to him, except a muttered "don't take it the wrong way" as one of the caretakers brushed past him. She must scruple to use it wisely, for nothing like it now existed in the wound. It was drooling down my leg from the wound. It was drooling down my leg from the wound. It was drooling had been said to him, except a muttered "don't take it the wrong way" as one of the caretakers brushed past him. distressing for you because she did not respond to you on a human level." "Because you'd ripped everything human out of her," Van Ness said. Baby couldn't help it. Moments later, Merlin watched as one wingtip grazed the side of the cliff and crumpled instantly, horribly. It's a long way down, isn't it?" Yukimi agreed. I had become a machine for solving the Spire. Suddenly the noise stopped. "We won't be able to go on," I said. Nothing that Galiana could do would make any difference. The lines had already invested too much of themselves in the future success of the Work. After all this." She took a hesitant step towards the middle, then halted. Could he do that? I sensed that its power was not limitless, that it must be used sparingly, against the time when it became really necessary. Then you stopped." "Perhaps it's time to start again." He set them by her bedside, in the water-filled vase that was already waiting. It was the brightest part of the ship, with plastic flowers and ornaments, tinsel, photographs, postcards and children's paintings stuck to the walls. He cracked our ribcages open and carefully removed our lungs and hearts, putting these organs into storage. Not jewellery, I realised now, but miniature field generators. I met a very intelligent girl twenty years ago, and believe me I've met some intelligent people in my time." Merlin brightened, remembering the thing he'd meant to show Minla. Any and all candidates were welcome, even those who might have suffered destabilising isolation away from Transenlightenment. The wound had begun to close, I saw, his diamond skin puckering tight to seal the damage. But that would only be passing the problem on to some other traveller. I no more need to know about surgery than a human needs to know about digestion. They're what've kept me alive so long." "I'm sure Captain Voulage felt the same way," I said. Rations and medicine for less than half a million people. Now break the glass." He glanced at me, as if he hadn't quite understood the words. "If my people discover that there's a hidden agenda here there'll be hell to pay." "The Conjoiners gave Warren plenty of reasons to hate them after the battle of the Bulge," Clavain said. They used mirrors to direct the star's energy output in a single direction, in the manner of a rocket motor. Now there would be no more. With one black-nailed finger she traced a line down my chest and said: "There's energy output in a single direction, in the manner of a rocket motor. Now there would be no more. 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With one black-nailed finger she traced a line down my chest and said: "There's energy output in a single direction, in the manner of a rocket motor. Now there would be no more. With one black-nailed finger she traced a line down my chest and said: "There's energy output in a single direction, in the manner of a rocket motor. Now there would be no more. With one black-nailed finger she traced a line down my chest and said: "There's end the said." something you need to know." "What?" I asked. Their helmets were airbrushed gold halos. Clavain fell behind the curve of a dome before the nearest soldier got a lock onto him. That part of the Emergence doesn't see much traffic, so the skipspace connections are being pruned back. And something was approaching us over the span: a dark, complicated and unfamiliar contraption, which at first glance resembled an iron tarantula. We don't have any spare slots here, but they can put him back in a box on the operations rig." "My box," Gaunt said. It just wasn't the part that gave a damn about me any more." "I'm sorry," I said again, feeling as if I'd been left drifting in space while the ship raced away from me. "Why didn't you contact me again, after you were told you couldn't go to Resurgam?" "Our relationship was over, Richard." "But we'd parted on reasonably amicable terms. Sensing danger, the island's screen came on, muting the impact blast to a salty roar. We selected the leftmost shaft and carried on down it. "It's happened again," I said, addressing Celestine on the private channel. I angle down. But together, perhaps, they might even find a way to help each other. The real Burdock is dead." "Then you're going against his orders." "I presume you could get into trouble for that." "He'll never find out." I thought of the unknown ship that was creeping towards us. I'm still in the pod, of course. Shallow tides less. Maria and I may have had our differences, that's true enough. Yes; I'm glad you came to that conclusion. "She doesn't seem aware of us." "Her deficits are severe," Galiana said. "We're the ones who get to call ourselves the Few now. It was a different sound now that the air outside was so much colder and thinner than inside Shalbatana City's dome. Too much danger... kill baby." So the mother was powerless, I thought: she had the ability to destroy another ramscoop, but not to unshackle herself from her own chains without harming her child. We're not just as old as the empire. "The machines are outside their heads, but not for long. Then she pushed forward and pressed the groove on the right side of the door. In an instant I recognise that she has styled her outward anatomy on the robot from the 1927 film Metropolis, by the German expressionist director Fritz Lang. But there's an even greater risk in leaving things until later. It wasn't long—no more than ten or twenty seconds—before the younger brother found what he was looking for. They were happy to let us take responsibility for our ailing comrade, even if we ended up killing him. Older even than this Scaper. Some carried lasers and plasma cutters. Then another voice boomed across the apron, one that belonged to a much older man. It will be instantaneous and we won't feel a thing. I mean, look at us. Was it possible that now. "When she went back, the Spire was no more purposeful than a flytrap? Nothing in the universe could stop that now." in." "Mike, please." "Just do it. "Two hundred and fifty metres," Childe said. I am proud of my daughter." "You have every right to be," Merlin said, hoping that his sincerity came across. I didn't really like the way they were barging in. "She's right," I said. "I didn't mean to bring these men here." "We've come to take you back to the facility," the bald man says, pausing to ignite the cigarette from a miniature lighter. He just wanted to do something outrageous." "He succeeded. The fall into the surging waters seemed to last forever, the superstructure of the rig rising slowly above him, the iron-grey sea hovering below until what felt like the very last instant, when it suddenly accelerated, and the he hit the surface with such force that he blacked out. Let me talk to the fusion engineers." "I've scheduled a meeting. They're getting harder now. \*\*\* I BOWED MY head. This is when Prakash returns, unbidden. I look older, beyond any doubt. Implants had begun to change, infecting millions of minds with the templates of Conjoiner thought. "I'm lowering blockades, allowing the boy to co-opt my own resources. Just keep moving, this heading. I felt, in an odd way, privileged. I had been about to say the same thing. It had long been rumoured that the Demarchists and the Conjoiners were closer than they admitted. He had touched the wound and there had been no blood. You can reengineer human nature to slow history to a crawl, so that starfarers can keep pace with planetary time. He can be very difficult to understand, but he becomes quite cross (or should I say crosser) if he has to repeat himself. Do you remember me?" "I remember me?" "I remember me?" "I remember a man I used to talk to in a room. "Had to have them removed. "But then she won't be able to talk." "That's the idea." "I can't shoot her," I said. The knife tore at the leather, but couldn't find its way home. She might not have distinguished his face from all the other people who came to see her, but she surely recognised something...that now the adult world was bigger than she was, and it was only from the adult world that any kind of salvation could come. I'm afraid I came across evidence that directly contradicts Vincent's version of events." "You'd better have something good," I say, which under the circumstances proves unwise. Their dark winter clothes reduce them to an amorphous, weary mass. "I have to get back to our own engines now," I said, "but I'll come to see you later. Even since I encountered Arthur C Clarke's seminal The City and the Stars, I've loved reading and writing about the very far future. Let me try. All the sailors' tales, all the way back. There was a chisel-sharp crease in the skin on the side of her mouth that only came when she was concentrating. "I don't think this is any of her doing," I said calmly, vowing to hold my temper under better control than before. The field medical unit has secured the area and established an exclusion volume around your site." My mouth is very dry, and now that I have some sense of location I begin to pick up on the fact that my head doesn't feel quite right. which they were descending now were as cold and grey as any Clavain had seen. You heard what he said. Not the way it was meant to go down. It must be like ancient history to you." "Not to all of us," the woman said sternly. Extraction window compromised. After a heart-stopping pause there was a clunk, and I felt the floor vibrate even more strongly than it had before. Gaunt sat down at the corner of the table, acknowledging the other diners with a nod. "Sooner than I expected," I said. The dray had blocked all the traffic behind it, and nothing was coming over the bridge from the south. I position the eye, balancing it on a shoebox until its purple pupil blinks readiness. If I looked down I could even ask the suit to edit me out of the image, so that I could view the scene from a disembodied perspective. "Vincent!" someone calls, and then someone calls, and then someone else, and then someone calls, and then someone calls, and then someone calls become an assault of sound. I passed from nomadic group to nomadic group, allowing myself to be improved and augmented from time to time. white, like the peaks of mountain ranges. I sent them in after me." "Sorry, but I don't understand." "I went in first, and the Spire killed me. At its peak, there were thousands of machines like this, crisscrossing Mars from pole to pole. Lifting now would not be a good idea." "You know how the tower works," I said. This is the twenty-third century, Gaunt told himself. "Go on." "It's about knitting the worlds of the lines into a cohesive entity—a Galactic Empire, if you like. It took me a while before I realized what was playing on my mind. With a lightcrossing time of only fifty centuries, something like an empire was indeed possible. "Don't dispose of it until you've completed a thorough forensic analysis. "That was forty years ago." "Not to me. I smile as he sprints away, pausing only to glance over his shoulder. Magnetic fields. Shell 3 did not look like something which had grown, wildly and unpredictably. Stay wethead. No fame, no notoriety. That left him with only one other option. One hundred meters into Shell 1. "A glow, I think. "Kanto's taken the wrong one," he said. When the Cockatrice ramped up her own engines to compensate, I identified a further twenty thousand tonnes of material we would discard until the next orbitfall, even though the loss of the armour would marginally increase the radiation dosage we would experience during the flight. Merlin examined the stone with interest, but in truth there seemed nothing remarkable about it. When they were balancing each other, you got a neap tide. I looked down at Zeal's spreadeagled, motionless form and shook my head. Your father's arm would have mended itself on its own, Kathrin. I've something for your father." "Sir?" "I was hoping to visit him last week, but work kept me here." He cocked his head at the painted wooden trademark hanging above the doorway. That was when Asphodel would have delivered her strand, had she made it back to the reunion. Her father let Yukimi sit by the window as the flier accelerated back toward Shalbatana City. I don't think the Spire was too thrilled about my taking a sample of it." "Shit. "Did you like your old line of work?" "It paid." In fact it was good work, and I was better than any of us could have managed." "It wasn't good enough." "No, but you narrowed the field down to two possibilities. The higher of the two Martian moons was a dark, bristling lump, infested with armaments, belted by the bright, what would have been a twenty-year crawl now...and that was an eighty-year crawl in which almost all that time would be experienced aboard ship. "What about you?" "I confess my use of city services has been as limited as your own, but for rather different reasons." "The good Doctor needed to lie low," Childe said. Nothing would prevent the boy creeping into the shipping container and taking the eye while I am working. "Childe!" I should have been as limited as your own, but for rather different reasons." unnecessarily. I'd been stitched up before, led to think I was on the verge of a life-changing commission. I guess I did all right. The entries became sparser, too. The object already felt a part of her, as if she had carried it for years. All of this was inferred, for when the chemosensor attempted to shave off a microscopic layer of the flooring for more detailed analysis, it gave a series of increasingly heated error messages before falling silent. Merlin would examine Minla's works and offer praise when it was merited. One or two other additions pierced the wall in different directions, but none of them reached as far as the Rift. I'm already seeing red on two dials, and we haven't even exceeded point-two gees." She thought about this for several moments: what for Weather must have been hours of subjective contemplation. For the ship...maybe not." Then she stopped and cocked her head to one side, frowning. "Feed it more." She moved to a console, set into a recess in the railing itself. "Yeah," Childe said. Celestine's choice had been correct. She'd been caught by a flash flood when she was working in one of the big craters, testing plant stocks for the Demarchists. But I sort of remember a few of the things that were going through my head when I wrote some of them, and—thanks to date-stamped notes and files—I've got a vague grasp of when decisions were taken, paths abandoned, other roads followed. "Hear us out," Purslane insisted. I reached out to grasp it and he held me higher, as if that might make a difference. The dust had been disturbed, but it would only take one good storm to cover that, and the two sets of tracks that led from the parked vehicle. I stride this ruined world like a colossus. "What you just said...about us 'agreeing' on the strand." "Um, yes?" "Am I missing something," "There goes the Tereshkova," Galenka said. "She won't remember anything," Greta says. And the same to go backward." "It's just like a diary. A mechanical voice intoned warning messages. It was as if in the Wall she found..." Galenka said. off. Her face remained impassive, but in the guickening way that her eyes darted from point to point it was possible to read the first hints of panic. "Forget it," Clavain said, turning away from his victim. It's perverse, really. Then...once the Flux Swimmers were taken care of ...we'd find a cryopod and save ourselves. Buried just beneath the skin was a hard rectangle, showing darkly through my flesh. He had seen a sea-dragon from the helicopter on the first day of his revival, but he had not come close to grasping its scale. But it dragged behind it a comet-tail of gore, exploding out of his suit where he had been speared, just below the elbow. When that whetstone formed, your moon was raising tides on Lecythus. It was years since I'd seen anyone who had the same dedication to the art. I said to her, over wine, under the Milky Way: "Nothing here is real, is it?" "I thought you were in a hurry to leave.' Merlin's hand closed around the stone. Politely, doing his best to mask his distaste, Clavain declined. I clawed my way out of the grave." "With a dead man still inside you?" "Of course," Fury said. "Tell me how far, Thom." "Farther than I'd like." She balls her fists. It would get us all the way home again, too—whereupon we'd climb into our Soyuz reentry vehicle and detach from the mothership. Galiana told him the rest-how they had managed to establish control pathways to the Wall from the nest, fifteen years earlier-optical cables sunk deep below the worm zone. I don't mind admitting that I'm a little fazed by Derek. But I hadn't always been that clever, that complex. "One of us?" I scanned the crowd and pointed to Burdock's duplicate. Such a memorial could take many forms. But you can do it. They had the look of a detail that had been hand-tinted in a black and white photograph, so that it appeared to float above the rest of the image. As if any of that makes it all right. If we were to salvage anything from this expedition, that was the last option open to us. Some noble gases and metals: iron, vanadium, some other stuff I'm not too sure about right now. The gaps seem to be caused by his anticollision screens going up, blinding his sensors. The Petronel was running an evasion routine, swerving to exploit the sadly narrowing timelag between the two ships, but the routine was old and with the engines already notched up to close-on maximum output, there was precious little reserve power. "The music," Galenka said, breaking the reverence. "He's right," Trintignant said. I didn't feel far from home. The thing she found, in the wreck of another ship, seemed dead to her. Be angry. I've been here before. Merlin scratched fatigue from his eyes. "I, lobot." "Oh, no." "When bad thing happen, I go too. Hard, non-biological forms bulged under drum-tight flesh. "Devilfish found her...living in outflow jet from star. "You can perceive things now," Galiana said. And I want some flowers. "Will you get into trouble for this?" Luttrell says. Instead I had to grin and bear it, just as everyone else had to when their night came around. There was every expectation that the Matryoshka's pulsations might tell us something about the inside of that as well." "I quess you didn't have a clue what you'd actually find." Nesha gives a brief, derisive laugh. The silver. The native artilects, the ones that had been in the Realm all along, launched an aggressive counter-strike from their region of the Realm into ours. If we were anywhere near a moon or asteroid, that might just be an option, but not when we left." "That wasn't better. The hypodermic's in my pocket now." "I'm sorry the news isn't better. The hypodermic's in my pocket now." Burdock," Grisha said, with a weary sigh. Calliope's rays flared off the golden swell of its envelope. But nothing came. The weapon was a particle gun. They were spiders, as far as we were concerned. It was fashioned from the same dull grey metal. On Grand Teton, vast numbers of tiny singlecelled organisms conspired to produce the slime towers which were that world's most famous natural feature, and while those towers reached impressive heights and were often strangely shaped, they were unmistakably the products of unthinking biological processes rather than conscious design. Seven or eight names. "Funny how I feel like I've been in that thing for months." I shrug. He didn't turn his head to greet us—the consuming plaque would have made that all but impossible even if he had the will—but I assumed that he had some other means of identifying us. But none of that will reach down here. Unless you can organise a significant number of allies and move against them guickly... I fear they'll gain the upper hand." "Then we'll just have to outplay them, so that they never get a chance." Easier said than done, I thought. She poured herself another measure of wine, then made sure my own glass was charged. Clavain's memory of the simulations told him that at least four hundred units of the attack wave would survive both re-entry and the Conjoiner's heavy defences. For a few microseconds I model its viscosity and progress with one of my terrain mapping algorithms, tweaking a few parameters here and there to get a better match to the local physics. But his heart was elsewhere. But even as the island's own screen flickered on—blurring the view all around us, as if smeared glass had dropped into place—I knew that my plan was coming adrift. Merlin pushed back his hair to let Malkoha see that he was already wearing a similar unit. then motioned for Malkoha to insert the translator into his own ear. "I think I know it. We're not in Star City now." He winked at me. Shirin would have been proud. Van Ness wanted to move on. I watched their approach with trepidation. but none of the machines showed any hostile intentions. She told it to use its manipulators to try and pupil. The effect—are ninety-one grooves, Richard." She spoke with the tone of a teacher who had begun to lose patience with a tardy pupil. The effect—are ninety-one grooves, Richard." crudely speaking—is to enhance your spatial abilities, at the expense of some less essential functions. Tensions are running high at the moment—other factories have switched to making weapons, there's an arms embargo around Mars, and it's not clear if war can be avoided. The program was in full swing by the time I went under. Still warm, too. Millions of lives were lost—whole communities rendered uninhabitable. They change and soften, and the highlights glow a little brighter. I can create one, if you think it's worth it." "No: that'll just draw too much attention. Richard and I were rich kids—relatively rich, anyway with not enough to do. But under a warm June evening this is how they must have appeared to this anxious, ailing man-as near and inviting as lanterns, lowered down from the zenith. I feel scared." "Then I know it to be true. Most of them wore long leather coats, heavily belted, with the crescent emblem sewn into the right breast. We could have done without the packs, of course, but none of us wanted to breathe Spire air until it was absolutely necessary. Her hair was bunched and high, sculpted like a fairytale palace with spires and turrets. Like all spacecraft, the Tereshkova looked like a ransacked junk shop inside. It was like using a hammer to push around a feather. By then the scenery would be someone else's problem, not mine. It was a fine end." "You think so?" "They'll be raving about this for a million years. But I don't think he'd kill me. I wanted it to go away. "And the soil's a close match to that sample you found in the bullet. Or the Great Work." "We've won this battle, though. Genocide machines took apart our solar system world by world. "The thinking was that they'd get exclusive access to it for six months." "You can't blame them for that." "There was still an outcry. It doesn't allow weapons inside itself, you see —or anything else that might be used against it, like fusion torches. Finally we reached a large room walled in plush red velvet. "We'll give it until dawn," I tell Annabel. Rather than the limo in which I had arrived, I left the studio complex in the back of a truck. I then took those isolated sequences and slipped them into Purslane's dreams, along with the allotted strand for that night. It was their screw-up that allowed those settlers to build their camp on that little moon in the first place. There's snow on the ground nine floors below, but it won't do much to cushion my fall. He must have known there'd come a point when I wouldn't be able to turn away." "No matter what the costs?" Celestine asked. That's where syntax runners come in. The nursery was nothing like that. "It looks human. We penetrated Shell 3. Its basic motor systems were already

compromised when I found you near the cave mouth. There are even superdense knots where the dust is almost too thick to be seen through at all. "Sit down here and take the weight off your feet. And I'm in a world of trouble. Assisting a barnacle-scraper, on the belly of a Chinese supertanker. He had always promised it would be possible, and while there was much about him that I did not like, I did not think he would lie about that. I set down just beyond it, instructing my ship to wait while I ventured outside. But if they had not died, I would not have had the other inner planets had always been more conservative, preferring to access the nets via traditional media. Except it wasn't even luck, really. The pain in my leg was now excruciating, beginning to dull my alertness. I guess I'd have recognised it, if my education hadn't been so patchy. When everything seems like it couldn't get any worse, you'll always be able to tell yourself: I did this one brilliant thing, this one brilliant thing that no one else has ever or will ever do. It's just a shame he couldn't make the decision to pull you back until she's good and ready." "I think I pissed her off," Gaunt said. You've been badly injured, in a war zone. I couldn't deny it. You needn't worry about draining it. She's working with the change-clouds, to make the atmosphere breathable...." "Now which of us is doing the wittering?" Corax shook the visible part of his head. Much of the wreckage consisted of pieces of mirrored hull plating, curved to reflect our approaching forms back at us in grotesque distortion. His face was lined, especially around the eyes, with flecks of grey in his hair and beard. We don't know what happened to any of them." I knew she must have been talking about pivotal figures from earlier Conjoiner history, but the people of whom she spoke meant nothing to me. I had crossed it enough times to know the kinked architecture of its stellar arms and dust lanes, a whorl as familiar and idiosyncratic as a fingerprint. Then get up and walk away." I stood up, leaving the emperor kneeling by the side of the pathway, his hand extended out over the water. "He found ways to coerce me. It chilled the blood to think that Trintignant's most heinous crimes had never been fully revealed. Here's the thing, though. He'd already had a certain rock in mind. "At least, that's the simplest explanation I can think of. Always in our hearts and minds. "Then get dressed. On the way to the school, Eunice asks me what I did last night. This hard, black, irregular, dully pointed thing. Of course, I have no idea of the damage it would do to you." I used two hands to twist the charge open along its triggering system. That was about the time that I renewed my interest in Zima. It was like praising a painting because it had been done by someone holding a brush between their teeth. times, as its task scheduler suddenly decided to propel it to a new inspection point. We had been in the Spire for more than nineteen hours. First appeared in The New Space Opera, ed. It was flashy, completely contrary to any number of Line strictures, but it got people talking about Borage, not Purslane. First appeared in The Starry Rift: Tales of New Tomorrows, ed. You were dead right. Occasionally you hear about ships that have been running on three orange, even four orange, for decades at a time. "Point is, Gaunt, this isn't a hypothetical situation we're talking about here. Now we had falsified a strand and were trespassing on someone else's ship. It replaced the real Burdock nearly three weeks ago. "By increments, yes. And I knew I could. But all this was just convention. Our best minds have grappled with the implications of these ideas for twenty years. Not exactly on my top ten list of ways to die, either." Childe coughed. It affected us all, even Yakov, who hadn't gone inside. "Could it simply be that space is too dangerous for human beings? I allowed myself a glance in Purslane's direction. They had a bickering, love-hate thing going. Deep-look radar will identify an incoming shard and send an emergency steer command to the engines. Or— if we were very unlucky—we'd be pulled out to become caretakers. There's always a shinier, juicier piece of fruit just out of reach. It was now fatal to breathe that air for more than a few hours, but the slow poisoning of Lecythus was of no concern to the Planetary Government. "Of course, there was another function," she said. Zima had chosen Murjek to host his final work of art, and to be the place where he would make his retirement from public life. It would occlude the spysats and might be primed to adhere only to enemy chameleoflage. "Long enough for what?" I felt a falling sensation in my gut. I'd lost my old hand in an accident, and much of what had happened to Van Ness was down to time and misfortune in equal measure. It sucks fatigue poisons out of the blood, and puts other chemicals back into the blood to upset the brain's normal sleeping cycle. Would she see through his plan, and realise what he had done? It took ten years off her age. "We're in Patagonia." \*\*\* HE GOT DRESSED, putting on underwear, a white t-shirt and over that the same kind of grey overalls as his hosts had been wearing. That you're dealing with a fully sentient individual?" "Well..." The Baby starts. The only missing pattern was for the fifty-five-dot case, which happened to coincide with one of the deep grooves on the right side of the door. Why are your arms the way they are? Tell him I couldn't find you, or that you tricked me and destroyed the gun." "Not work on Zeal." "I'll think of something," I said glibly. "Peter Vandry, surgeon's mate," I said automatically, before frowning. The emperor was overjoyed to hear that I had survived my trip to Julact, and brimming with anticipation at the news I would bring. I didn't have long to wait for Greta. It would only take a single clear-cut demonstration of our capability to bring about a coup, followed by a negotiated surrender." "And this clear-cut demonstration?" "That's why we need your assistance, Merlin. But at least it allowed me to ask the same questions. Unless you'd like to suggest something better." \*\*\* SHE NEVER DID suggest something better, even though I think she once came close to it. He gave the rig a few minutes at the most. "What does your father make of you visiting the witch, anyway?" "He doesn't mind." "No?" Peter asked, interestedly. I was impressed by that. What did you call yourselves, Gaunt?" "The Few," he said. And yet he had done something unspeakable. It's actually a pretty pure example of "Mundane SF", in that nothing that happens in the story requires any science or technology not already on the drawing boards, if not already with us. I have never been allowed to pursue my admittedly controversial interests to their logical ends. We'll need your help, if we aren't to fall hopelessly behind schedule." towards the wheeling view. I settled my thumb over the disk, thinking of the tiny, pollen-sized speck of antimatter held in a flawless vacuum at the heart of the demolition charge. I just shrugged and walked out, and wondered how long it would be next time. "You can let me out now," he said, through the bulkhead window. She looked through the window again, straining hard to look down and, yes, there was something under them. "Extreme mathematical provess." "And why would that have been useful?" Childe turned to the Ultra, indicating that the man should remove his bubbling apparatus. But he would not reveal what that secret was." Merlin hefted the stone once more. "I'll live. Whatever that stuff is, it's harder than diamond. It was hued entirely in shades of grey and pale rust, cratered and gouged here and there by impacts and what must have been very ancient weathering processes. "I see the old fart's giving you a hard time again." It was Samphire, pushing into my personal space. Its beam would slice through us as cleanly as it sliced through the hull of Burdock's ship. Another man moved in a similar exoskeleton to the one Khorog wore, but in this case there was very little man left inside the powered frame: just a dessicated whisp, like something that had dried out in the sun. "Tell the field medical unit to scoop me up. Skeletal hands gripped iron control cables which plunged into the backs of the horses' steel necks. "I'm not exactly thrilled by it myself," Childe told her, watching as the ball hit the ceiling and slammed back to the floor, landing to one side of the place where it had begun its bouncing. "I don't mind walking." your strand," Purslane said, approaching uncomfortably close to the bedside screen. "No..." she said. There was a point to all that. Thank you for not leaving us." "There's a catch," Merlin said. And then we are moving, flanked by police floatercycles, and the computer-controlled traffic parts to hasten our advance. If her relationship with Marcel was in as much trouble as she'd made out, then obviously she had less to lose than I did. But the chopper's waiting. How fast it happens, is in your hands. "Check this out." I followed her, pressing the flimsy fabric of my glove against the surface. Leaving Merlin to hold the box and flowers, the red-faced pilot pointed angrily towards the wreckage of his aircraft, and in particular at the cylindrical attachment Merlin had taken for a fuel-tank. But instead she just frowned. "You've no romanticism," he chided gently. She reached across the table and took one of Kathrin's hands, squeezing it between her own. How would it feel, I wondered, if we ran into one of those infinitely-sharp field lines? Another time, his men found a shred of garment that kept changing colour, depending on what it was lying against. "You're awake," a man said. Warren's face soon appeared on a screen, thick with pixels like an impressionist portrait. The chamber was dark, but the float-cam provided some illumination and our suits' sensors were able to map out the chamber's shape and overlay this information on our visual fields. "He was a good guy. A secondary hatch and docking assembly had been installed in the side, so that the sample compartment could be unloaded through the Tereshkova's own docking port. The hard blue glow made me think of Cherenkov radiation, boiling out of some cracked fission core. Of course we were hoping the offensive would come later than it did...but we reckoned without Warren's conspiracy." "Then you are planning from its linear induction rails. A similar flame would have been burning from the Iron Lady's stern, keeping us locked alongside. Not that it mattered what kind of competition I had anyway: Zima wasn't talking. I know a great place there, and the views...have you ever seen the skimmers plunge through, albeit overshooting its target era by many millions of years. "We've seen odd behaviour from other worm infestations across the system; things that begin to look like emergent intelligence. More medical examinations followed, including some that were clearly designed to test the functioning of his nervous system." said. The other man still has bravery to learn." "I'm not running away." "But you are running from something." "I have to go now. "We didn't realize." When she could find the words she asked, "Am I in trouble?" "No," her father said soothingly. Sculpting like Michelangelo. Made your fortune in computing, didn't you?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "Tell me how you felt when you first realised you were a robot. "It would look rather fine here, wouldn't it?" "Were you sad when you found the people on Titan?" asks another girl, studiously ignoring my question. My suit still felt sluggish, but it had not worsened since I came into contact with the silver contamination. "You worry that we're used when you found the people on Titan?" asks another girl, studiously ignoring my question. My suit still felt sluggish, but it had not worsened since I came into contact with the silver contamination. "You worry that we're used when you found the people on Titan?" asks another girl, studiously ignoring my question. My suit still felt sluggish, but it had not worsened since I came into contact with the silver conta becoming monsters. "I could take the other one off as well," Trintignant piped up, rubbing his hands together. "Whatever you need to do—" "In the course of this, you will learn more about our engines. "Think of it, Loti. "They say they aren't dynamically stable," Ingvar comments, looking up through the dome. "Way back when. "Torture?" "No. She could always...choose to die. There were dozens, and he had the sense that they didn't stop at the horizon. But what's the point? It understood our fragility. "You are beyond city services, but only because I value the secrecy of this place. But now she reached a hand into her pocket and closed her fingers around the flier's weapon. Look." A bar of light had cut across the base of part of the wall. There were three possible directions ahead of us, and a mess of footprints at the junction. I'm just talking about clean, surgical dissection." "It won't work. They knew a lot about us. On this airless afternoon they are as silent as stalagtites. But it doesn't lead under the worm zone." "Where, then?" "Somewhere a lot further away." \*\*\* WHEN THEY PASSED through the medical centre again it was empty, save for a few swan-necked robots patiently waiting for further casualties. It tolerated us playing outside the rules until now, but we shouldn't have assumed that was always going to be the case." Hirz nodded. Poor woman. With memory trawls and medichines, you could go some way towards imprinting your personality and memory on any clone you chose." "He's right," Celestine said. After we came back from the Matryoshka, there was something different about us. I'd been fiddling around with the patterns long before the Burdock affair, so there was nothing odd about my actions as far as anyone else was concerned. "Query the city and find out for yourself," Trintignant said. She was sitting alone in the galley, barely able to speak, when she heard footsteps echoing down the long metal corridors from the landing bay. There was definitely more headroom at the start than there is now. As far as I'm concerned, it would achieve about as much as smacking a puppy for something it did the day before vesterday." "I've spent much of the last thousand years trying to enforce humanitarian principles on the more barbarous corners of my own empire. "Well?" "This is getting a tiny bit monotonous. "Tyrant's detected a Husker attack swarm, six elements lying a light-month ahead of you There were fine scars on her skull. "I'm not going to touch you, Captain," she called, her voice echoing from the corridor's ribbed metal walls. No records, but so what. Then she was restful again, for many hours, and the play of colours calmer. Perhaps their tiny minds had never truly registered the presence of civilisation and technology in the first place, and so there was nothing for them to miss in this skeletonstaffed world. It was like no view I'd ever seen from another station or ship. I answered, "I'm turning into whatever it takes to beat the Spire." I stalked away from the shuttle, moving on slender, articulated legs like piston-driven stilts. Before me, the door began to open. I push my way through fellow refugees, until I am within sight of the water thief. The city lay inside the crumbled remains of a once-proud wall. For several seconds it did nothing at all. "How old are you, exactly?" "Older than my aunt, and I'm not sure how old she is. I have a proposition, a proposal for a commission. Zeal take hands. Through blurred and slitted eyes, I saw Yakov twitching against the metal. A girl, perhaps a bit smarter than the run of the mill, asks: "So where is your brain, Vincent?" "My brain?" I smile at the question. More than could be said of Minla's aides, injured in the same attack, but they were at least receiving the best possible care in Tyrant's frostwatch cabinets. A pale form, half eaten by some form of brittle, silvery calcification—a plaque that consumed his lower body to the waist, and which had begun to envelop the side of his face. \*\*\* THE MEN ARE waiting next to Nesha's apartment when we return with her bread. And it watched him crawl out of the waist, and which had begun to envelop the side of his face. Spire, shortly before the last of his colleagues was ejected." "I'm not sure I'm prepared to trust either the testimony of a machine or a dying man," I said. His arms were metal wings, as wide across as the road itself if they had not been snapped back on themselves. It isn't fun any more. The telescopes peered through the hail of local stars out into intergalactic space. She just looks at me expectantly. Zeal nodded grimly. And for a long time—until the dreams became too much—that was how it was. The wind flicked iron-grey hair from his aristocratic brow. Faced with that, you have two other possibilities. I have picked up enough to suffice. The field medical robot has done its work, not only of dragging my wounded remains into the pod, but of securing the pod itself. I watch this newcomer swim its way between the fixed stars, which seem to engorge themselves as they must have done for Vincent Van Gogh, at the asylum in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. It's on a high inclination orbit, but easily reachable. A tide of rustcoloured water lapped against the lower part of my visor. Burdock's data is riddled with gaps." "He warned us there were a few holes." "What he didn't say was that thirty percent of his records were missing. It was one of those days when I had the place largely to myself, able to walk from aisle to aisle without seeing another visitor; only my footsteps disturbed the air of funereal silence and stillness. The answer, I am afraid, lies as much in vanity as anything else. Trying to be the first to stake a claim in the Oort clouds. It's beginning to redo it. "I created something and now I'm ruining it. "We thought there might be Amerikano relics, maybe a Conjoiner cache. I didn't want to tell her the truth right out." "I know," Greta says. "Don't let," she said urgently. So we're not really from Mars after all, if you want to be pedantic—but Mars is where we were activated, and where we served our masters for the first time." "But if there were two moons on the frieze, it must be very old. "Why's he done that?" I asked, fighting to keep the terror from my voice, not wanting to show myself up before Zeal. He served his people to the best of his abilities. No wonder she seemed so engrossed in her game. There was a jagged design in the floor, worked in white and black marble —rapier-thin shards radiating from the middle. "They've changed since the old days," I said. "I'm wittering. They're still all waiting to hear who's won best strand." "I can't believe anyone still cares about that, after all that's happened." "Never underestimate the recuperative powers of human vanity," Purslane said sagely. Merlin could understand that; as a child he'd also formed harmless attachments to adults often those that came bearing gifts and especially those adults that appeared interested in what he had to show them. I laughed: it was the only possible response, other than screaming terror. This morning I had to walk twice as far to get clean water, because someone from a neighboring compound broke into our area. The door behind Celestine slammed shut like a steel eyelid. We should keep open minds, of course...but I think the Great Work has to be something else. Trintignant can put me back to the shuttle there was no sign of Doctor Trintignant. And we also know who Burdock spoke to about the Great Work." I paused and let those numbers crunch against each other. I wasn't thinking in those terms at all. I would be lying if I said I did not wonder what good this calamity can do for me. It would have been rude not to. Shell 4 looked nothing like the dark machinery we had already passed through. There were reckoned to be less than a million of us in existence—not many, considering the billion worlds of the Radiant Commonwealth, and all the teeming souls on those planets and moons. Now we're down to...what? "One of us has committed a crime." "Burdock's body is still on his ship," I said. I didn't know how Burdock was doing it, but I could see at least two possibilities. It was dark, just as it had been the night before, with only the lamp-lit tables to act as beacons. "I want you to be straight with me, Annabel. The line was thin and flexible. Just be ready for it when it comes." The glass cockpit of the Soyuz was much more advanced than the basic frame of the ship itself, which was older than my grandmother. Thankfully, things picked up for her on the fourth night. And thanks to yourselves—who were so keen to learn the Spire's secrets—I have been gifted with subjects willing to submit to some of my less orthodox procedures. Instead, padding on all fours, he crossed into the next room. How long have I—" "Twenty years, just as you instructed. Scared out of her fucking skull. "With all due respect...I wouldn't recommend it. But do you think you can do that and get inside me before the trauma pod has ceased operation?" "Don't do this," the woman says, amplified voice ripping through her mask. "We still haven't told anyone that my strand wasn't all it appears to be. It'll be a nasty, slow death, though. He heard the foghorn call, saw one of the legs crumble away, and then an immense tidal weariness closed over him. \*\*\* HE DIDN'T REMEMBER the helicopter finding him. He still had no idea who had committed the crime; how deeply they were tied to Gentian Line. I didn't feel heroic, but it seemed the right thing to say. I'd like to know what it is that has the lines so stirred up. After all, no one else seems to have noticed anything unusual..." "Anything unusual about what?" "Do you remember Burdock's thread?" "Burdock's thread?" "Burdock's thread?" "It'll have to." But it was much better than that. Then she nodded toward a male Conjoiner sitting opposite her, Clavain guessing that the gesture was entirely for his benefit. There's no sense in giving the fucking thing an answer before we have to; not when so much is at stake." "I'm sure of the answer," Celestine said, pointing to the part of the frame she would eventually palm. The controls were designed to be opened by someone in a suit. "How can you be sure things just weren't that dull?" "Because of a contradiction," Purslane said. "No other planes?" Merlin asked. "The loss of a single line would be a setback, but not a crippling one. His visitors crowded around his open casket, faces difficult to make out, his eyes watering against the sudden intrusion of light. The engine is being forced to explore other pathways, those that it can still manage given its existing resources. We've both got our work. There's another door on the opposite side, again with markings. "What is this about, Purslane?" "Be on my ship." She turned away. The white flash of the pulse bomb, the skull-jarring concussion of the shockwave. It's just that now and then the system throws a glitch." "Funny how no one likes to talk about that very much," I said. "You're home and dry. But you were still able to make them work better. No cogs or springs, like in a clock or tin toy. I admit the replacements I have fashioned here possess a certain brutal esthétique, but in functional terms they are without equal." As if to demonstrate his point, he flexed his own replacement leg. Just a carrier signal, trying to establish contact with us. You as well." Because by then I'd realized. In doing so they created the preconditions for their own extinction. "Or your fix is wrong, and he's ahead of us anyway. If you don't nip these things in the bud, they can become a big problem during recovery." I offer a mental shrug. I could only imagine that the wheeled machine had brought the two figures on a long, difficult journey from some equally flimsy and makeshift settlement. Their visored face mirrors the sky. For all we know, the magnetic field is screwing up your tracker." "He isn't behind us," Rasht said, doggedly ignoring me. "I gave the stone to my daughter. The modifiers haven't performed any radical neural restructuring, but they are suppressing and enhancing certain regions of brain function. "But we are concerned to expose the truth." "It's dangerous. It's the same size as the Progress, right? Only a handful of specialists retained the means to even attempt such work, and they were free to charge whatever they liked. I stared at my hand, cross-webbed by streaks of gently pulsing silver. There was nothing here to sample or analyse. I mapped some promising rivers during my tour; places where the matter what happens, you'll have made your mark." "No one's interested in what I have to say," Yukimi said. "A handful of plausible suspects...conspicuous Advocates, for the most part. He couldn't be sure who exactly had poisoned him." "I don't understand. Now and then a geyser erupted, fountaining tens of metres above our heads. Enough to awe enough to fascinate, but not enough to give nightmares. It was another ramscoop, shaped more or less like the Iron Lady. One day—one unrecorded century—she stumbles upon something. Maybe a year. "The Matryoshka is almost the last thing they do. "Your wife, Richard, was as fascinated by the alien as you were. You realise that, in fact, we are monsters after all." "I didn't say that. While we hesitated the others floated around us, saying nothing. Any longer in that pond, and I might have had real problems." "I'm glad we got you out." Perhaps it was just the flush of gratitude at being rescued, but I vowed to think better of Lenka. That continued to be the case for the next few rooms. I think for a moment it's going to surge on past. I heard the mechanical horses snort; alloy hooves hammered the ground impatiently. No one could have asked for better security than you've given me, all these years. "If Trintignant had his way, you'd be like him by now. "I've found a journal," I said. Then heard: "Nidra." "Yes," I said. As they stepped away, her clothes assumed the texture of weathered stone and froze into sculptural forms from deep antiquity. The only person I ever showed it to was Doctor Kizim, and I don't think even he believed where it had come from." "You must have trusted him." "You had to trust someone in a place like that. Human again, for that matter. But this is the first time I grasp something of crucial significance. I'm no longer a wounded man in a humming coffin. "So you'll never try again?" "Burn your fingers once, you don't put them into the fire twice." "Well," Minla said, "before you think too harshly of us, it was the Skylands that took the peace initiative in the last ceasefire." "So what went wrong?" "The Shadowlands invaded one of our allied surface territories. She heard the calls of men and women, the braying of drunkards and slatterns, the regular creak and splash of the mill wheels turning under the arches. "If Zeal agrees to it," Khorog said back. My leg felt tender where the ball had struck me, but I could still walk, and after a few minutes the pain abated, soothed by a combination of my own time to do as I please." Looking around the dingy confines of the galley, Yukimi couldn't think of a worse place to spend near the core of the ship. "I had a suspicion—little more than a hunch—that the genocide had something to do with the Work." "Quite a hunch," I commented. It was a troupe of servitors—humanoid household robots, of the kind anyone would have felt comfortable with in the city proper— but they had been reworked to resemble skeletal ghouls or headless knights. I think she was just scared of us, scared that we were going to be like all the other Ultras. Thirty, perhaps—maybe not even that, since the screens locked into stable forms and became harder to see. "Pre-Shrouder, maybe," Lenka said. Ultras didn't care, as a rule. First appeared in Constellations: The Best of New British SF, ed. Another trail lanced down fifty kilometers away, raising a huge plume of superheated steam. In any case, fear plays no part in our thinking. That podium-like mass was perhaps fifty metres in diameter: a fifth of the structure's height. "In answer to your question, we are a state of the structure's height." currently have no viable theories as to what they're doing, but we do know one thing. "I got that as well." "They sent it here. And keep an eye on each other." She unbuckled. The light of a voidship, dying in a soundless eruption of subatomic energy. There isn't much time now." She projected an image into his visual field: the Wall, now veined by titanic fractures down half its length. I'm the one who's drawn the short straw." He turned around, conveying two steaming mugs of tea. "I know you have good reasons not to like her people, but she isn't the same as the Conjoiners from those days." "That's what she'd like us to think, certainly." "I've spoken to her, heard her story. "They are lines drawn between chance alignments. But none of us had imagined that this would be over quickly. Even harder to tell which is the mental leap needed to view him as a machine— albeit a machine with soft, cellular components—rather than a man. Hirz—who had picked up as many pieces of us as she could manage—had never found the other part of Trintignant. I'm just an acronym." She pauses, then adds: "Thank you for the kind words on my data, by the way. "Just so I can thank you for the kind words on my data, by the way. "Just so I can thank you for the kind words on my data, by the way." to protect him against the crush of a gas giant. But something she said upon her return disturbed us. Layers of wisdom poured into me, cooling and stratifying like ancient rock. "Just a pup, Master Khorog. Some much worse." There was an edge of playfulness in the voice, taking droll amusement in my ignorance. "No, you made it through the gate." "And?" "There was a screw-up. The black and white shards were pulling back from the middle, sliding invisibly into the floor's circular border, a star-shaped blackness opening up in the centre. Don't feel bad about it, Hirz. It's continuing on to Milankovic, and that's a long way from here—at least two days' travel. She was senior to me on the crew, and yet Rasht seemed to value her capabilities no more than he did mine. Backup systems had occurred and as a consequence around a hundred sleepers had been lost to unscheduled warming. She had never seen anything like this before. Instantly I heard the sizzle of burning skin. He had equipped Childe to survive the most extreme injuries. "We have been out of range of city services from the moment we entered his conveyance." "You needn't worry," Childe said. That's what I'm keen to find out. That it was human had been obvious from the moment the plinth rose. I'll wait for you. Of course you'll have to trust me when I tell you that, but-well-we all have to trust someone sooner or later, don't we?" "Who are you?" Yukimi asked. Do you think they care, because I don't think they exist." "I was once of the same opinion. I have to stay here from now on. Then the doctors would like to look you over, if only for their own notebooks. Maybe it won't. Even when Kanto left, we said nothing. There was a ternity, crammed with strange dreams." "But you hoped the rewards would be worth it?" Childe nodded. There was a shocking silence as the engines cut, until the next carrier began to approach through the clouds. "But one day you might think about it." "Nothing's ruled out," I said. That something will go wrong with the routing, something so severe that they'll end up on the very edge of the network. If the Resurgam expedition hadn't come up, we might not have parted at all." Celestine sighed; one of exasperation. I went to see Captain Van Ness and did my best to persuade him that Weather was not going to cause us any difficulties. She had to know. I could already see Yakov at the end of it. Demarchist society was supposedly flat in structure, non-hierarchical; but someone of Voi's brilliance ascended through echelons of her own making. That's less than six weeks. If she will not come back this way, she must pass a message onto her father. But there won't be any difference between us." "You'll become Conjoined, yes." Galiana offered the faintest of smiles. They were sleek white contraptions, armoured, powered and equipped with enough intelligence to fool a roomful of cyberneticians. "But you can't stay where you are. There were lace-up boots that were tight around the toes, but otherwise serviceable. Minla, though, had picture books. Nothing in Zeal's operating room looked newer than a thousand years old. There's the soft whirr of pumps, the hiss and chug of air circulation. She read my face like a book. "The part of it near us still function," Greta said. Purslane is a troublemaker—a thorn in the line." "She's my friend." "That's clear enough." I bristled. She wanted to feed her face with it drunk on curiosity. "I feel I should apologise for the dreams. That was when I had autonomy, legal independence. The Iron Lady, or the Devilfish as I now had to think of her, had attacked and crippled another ship. "This could be bad," I said. I felt that we owed you that much. Kolding—he's the repair chief— says three at the most. And a companion. She observed the faint flicker of incomprehension on the old man's forehead. Suddenly the sky was cut in two by a brighter meteor than any we had seen during the earlier display. You and someone else." I do my best to smile. "How long, "Three, four hours, depending." "And do you have air and power?" "Enough." "How long, Luttrell?" "If I don't talk too much..." He trails off, and there is a lengthy interval before I hear him again. You and I, we've got a lot of history together. A ship in space is an easy thing to see, even across light years. Not worth a mention. We'd have the Devilfish to ourselves. He's gone, and with good riddance. With the same cosmic indifference that i had shown when the Chinese robot had rammed it, or when the American probe intersected its field lines? He was acutely aware of how easily he could damage the fragile thing with a miscalculated application of thrust. But he did have the loose tongue of all small boys. The emperor was famed for his clemency and forgiveness. "Looks as if she went down all three shafts," Lenka said. He had been right. by Jonathan Strahan, Science Fiction Book Club, 2010 "Sleepover" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2010. I was thinking, we fly the Soyuz all the way in. Afterwards, we put a lot of time and energy into bringing him up to speed, making him mesh with the team. If I could do that—if I could outline the systematics of the process—then I might stand a chance of being able to repeat it on demand, like a production line. I don't remember providing a sample." Trintignant dipped his head in a nod. Somewhere near the seven hundredth threading, I was again approached by Purslane. By huge I do mean huge. Would you like to sleep?" Merlin looked back at the coffin-like slab of the frostwatch cabinet. Numberless. "All I ask is that you use them wisely. Numb, but knowing there was nothing she could do, she sat in silence for the rest of the journey. "But I'm not running." "Aren't they one and the same?" "Not this time. She's been a Spider from the moment they made her, and she'll go to the grave like that." "Then you won't consider it?" "I consented to let you bring her aboard. You could get into trouble on Mars. "You're not one of us, and you don't look like one of the guests." "He isn't," Purslane said. They are going to vote," says Busuke, sidling up. Trintignant, nonetheless, fell to the floor. That's why I'm going back to Lecythus. All I would have needed to do is shove a comet onto the right orbit, shatter it and let its dusty tail intersect the orbit of my planet at the right point in space and time...here, tonight. That ten million people managed to achieve what you and your precious Few did, all those years back?" "I suppose not," he said, as the truth of it sunk in. The parts wriggled beneath the dust. Maybe. History would no longer outpace starfarers like Purslane and I. It looked back across the sea, to the island. Neither will be necessary. She was into the open-topped pallet before the wheeze ended, and nothing in the ensuing moments suggested that she had been discovered. There was a component to it beyond the instinctive dislike of confined spaces and the understandable reaction to the figures. Is it possible that you simply couldn't I...wash, or something?" "Just hold the line. The waiter placed a folded card on my table. It won't be possible to save everyone but if you could at least ensure that the survivors are adults of breeding age..." Merlin trailed off, conscious of the dismayed faces looking at him. He was thinking of the rest of you." Purslane and I were quiet for a few moments. He's been acting odd for weeks, giving everyone hard stares. "My wife didn't die in a terraforming accident," he said slowly, not quite able to meet my eyes as he spoke. "Nice touch. Then a million...so on." She paused. Nor would this data be hoarded by Russia alone, for with characteristic Soviet generosity, it would be shared with those "once-proud" nations who now lacked the means to travel into space. "You misjudge me," Clavain whispered, before quietly shaking Warren's hand. It wasn't hard. Fragments of skin and bone and pinkish grey cortical material lay scattered on the tiles. That's where they went in. How little you know me!" "Angry, then." "Why should I be angry? One of them placed a croissant in front of me, then poured scalding black coffee into my cup. At the moment, signals aren't getting where they should due to the damage caused by the bleed. And he never, ever, looked Garret Kinnear in the eye. The entire encampment was only a kilometre across, circled by a dyke which was piled high with regolith dust on one side. Back the way I came." "If I went the other way, how long before we hit civilisation?" Now Prakash cuts in again. "He's a weapon." Samphire smiled. Galenka brought us to a hovering standstill above Shell 3. Iron oxide, silicon and sulphur, for the most part. Thinking back to her journal, with its increasingly desperate, fragmentary entries, I could not shake the irrational sense that we would be letting her down if we did not follow her traces all the way in. "Allow me to introduce Captain Forqueray," Childe said. "They have a taste for human flesh now," he said, as if the two of us were making idle conversation. We found an equipment locker containing an old-fashioned helmet marked with the word TETEREV in stencilled Russish letters. "Easily." It was still day, not even local noon. After giving the matter no little consideration, I have decided to dispose of myself. Time for monsters and the rumours of worse. He rasped out three words that might have been "fuck you, Nidra". Keep your hackles down." "We don't have much time, Celestine. Forsaking immortality, forsaking any hope of seeing a better world. I think he had a suspicion his enemies and the rumours of worse. He rasped out three words that might have been "fuck you, Nidra". might try something like this. You have Teterev. "You don't need to be. It's not quite what I expected...but thank you for rescuing me." "I was beginning to wonder if we'd made a mistake. Then, an instant later: "Can we catch up? Zima had the appearance of a well-built man wearing a tight body stocking, until you were close and you realized that this stocking." was actually his skin. But if he was threatened, I knew you'd move world and star to find the perpetrator. "No, sorry. Clausen nodded, but showed nothing in the way of jubilation in him having got the answer right. It was larger than it looked from the crash; the distance further. Remembering the fly wouldn't have added to it in any material sense. I was repairing one of the bridges after a storm, knitting it back together with wizardlike hand movements, making the invisibly small machines that composed the bridge dance to my commands. That's all that matters." I look at her and for a moment remember someone else, someone I haven't thought about in years. The last handful of crows gyred overhead. Get over it." I shrugged and—with one eye on the Doctor himself—told Hirz what I knew about Trintignant. I squeeze through to chase me. He still thinks they'll find common ground." "Then they're not at all alike." "For brothers, Mercurio, they could hardly be more different." The younger brother brought the older one to a halt, signalling with his hand that he had found something. There was nothing too surprising about that: we were all meant to be family, after all, and many of the parked ships probably had no security measures at all. "You'd better get buckled in, Dimitri. Before he slept, the locals had grilled him for help with their prototype atomic rockets, seemingly in the expectation that Merlin would provide magic remedies for the failures that I was now only slightly more vulnerable than when I had surveyed Julact from space. This was not a game any more. Some had even chosen suicide rather than be denied Transenlightenment. "So you've got one too," she said, showing me the similar shape lurking just below her own skin. To redeem one possible history, even if they couldn't mend their own. "Because you knew who had destroyed Grisha's people?" "The weapons were old: million-year-old relics from some ancient war. "Whatever we do," Purslane said, "it'll have to happen before Thousandth Night. Large enough to cover the side of a thousand-storey building, the mural was considered by many to be as far as Zima could take things. I warned her that the delay might cascade through to our tunnel routing, depending on how busy things were at the Authority's end. "I'm trying to get this thoracic line in. That was hardly surprising. "I started to say. That is no more than the basest approximation to Derek's actual mode of speaking. It shone the same arterial red as everything else around us. Peals of thunder, distant and low, signalled the activations. Each layer would only take a few hours to be formed, although it might take hundreds of millions of years for it to harden into stone." "So it's very old." Merlin nodded. A man once spent his entire life searching for a particular shade of blue that he remembered encountering in childhood. I have the eye, my lenses, my earphones and my t-shirt. It'll only make it worse. Assign a low-level task handling subroutine to the job. But I was still curious. "Problem, Richard?" asked Childe. Story about the accepting of a duty of care. The hole in the side of the Progress was just large enough for a suited person to crawl through. With my own eyes, just before it hit." "You were there?" All of a sudden, Ingvar looks tremendously old and weary, as if this is the end of some enormous and taxing enterprise, something that has swallowed decades of her life. The other guest, I am not entirely astonished to see, is another robot. His strand consisted of endless visits to planets and artefacts left over from the Interstitial Uprising, overlaid with tedious, self-serving monologues of historical analysis. Given the truth about Burdock...I believe we should take the rest of the story seriously. "There was an accident, yes. To me it was less than a year. At the very tip was a bulb-shaped swelling that had cracked open to reveal a tilted floor. And when I looked at the other diners, really looked at them, there was no one I couldn't swear I hadn't seen before. They had escaped Mars now; Galiana, Felka and himself, riding the last bullet. I also think it's maybe about time you told me what's really going on. Merlin felt an immediate pang of recognition as the image zoomed. I can still see the strong and determined woman who stood by her beliefs, even when the state decided those beliefs were contrary to the official truth. Neptune was further out than I'd ever been before, but I figured it was worth the time and the cost. I was thirteen." She reached into her satchel and pulled out the companion. But I couldn't stop climbing either. Music. "No one ever said this was going to be easy." "I was just trying to ease her into it gently. She adjusted one of the remaining dials to a lower setting, into the blue, and then returned to the first two dials she had touched, quickly dragging them back to green. My refusal to obey Prakash has not gone unpunished. What would they need to witness or experience? And you've put an armed servitor on the door, in case she gets out of the restraints." "Pays to be prudent." "I think we can trust her now, Captain." I hesitated, choosing my words with great care. But if you'd rather stay aboard this ship..." She stared back at me and said nothing. The helmet might have been a spare, or the owner had chosen to go outside in just the lower part of the suit. He didn't dream. Lenka and I seemed like twins, our twisted, elongated shapes wobbling in heat-haze from the pools. "Have you looked in a mirror lately, Richard? I just thought you might want to know. Even now, we can't always work miracles." "Whatever happens to me, you've done all that anyone could expect, Annabel. The dusk stars would appear shortly, and it would be dark within the hour. I'm glad she never asked me too much about those he had used during the war. But we survived, as we had survived the previous attacks. My colleagues and I will be with you the whole time you're in the pod, and we'll be handling your case once you've been extracted. The part near us was fully tiled, but I couldn't help noticing that the tiles were chipped and cracked in places. We were too far out from Shiva-Parvati to get back again, and yet we were moving too slowly to make it to another system. "Whatever took his leg off did it cleanly," the doctor reported, pulling back the tattered layers of the man's suit fabric to expose the stump. I'm not going to just stay here and hope that luck's on my side. "The AM would have been just as likely to say red as white?" "No, it's not like that either. "I had Tyrant run an analysis on it. I think people sometimes imagine that I'm deliberately holding back from the truth. More importantly, it said nothing about me. "How are you going to get everyone to turn on their shields?" I squinted against the sun. "Then do it. This was not just some more difficult phase of the game. "That is as may be. But I could sense a thread, a sense of connectedness between the era of the Matryoshka and our own. His vision sharpened by degrees. Another chamber, another set of markings." "No booby-traps?" "Nothing the drone can resolve which I'm afraid isn't saying much." "I'll go in this time," Celestine said. "Weit and hear me out. I'm not sure what they told you, but I promise you that we're safe and sound and they told you, but I promise you that we're safe and sound and that we're safe and sound and they we're safe and sound and th other. No human had ever made it as far as Titan, after all. If the user wished, the suit could even go off on its own, scouting for resources or carrying material. This entire station is being simulated." I sipped my wine. "Vestibule plastrum." "You have some kind of medical crisis? After all this, what if her choice had been wrong? After several minutes of this I had adjusted the suit's alertness threshold to what I felt was a useful level of protectivity, neither too watchful nor too complacent. "Good thinking. The pain of the discharge was beginning to ebb. We might stop the wheel of history turning, but we wouldn't be human anymore." "I agree," Purslane said. "What is the bad news, Merlin?" "Three days isn't going to make much difference. In the far corner, a small, yellow robot glued ceramic tiles into place. I think it's right up your street." "Any idea what the nature of the task is?" Celestine asked. Given what becomes of Mars in those books, though, I think we can pretty easily rule out them sharing the same universe as this piece. But objective time—the time that passed back home—is a lot clearer. "Customs," Suzy says. If I was interested, I should report to the Rialto Bridge in exactly two hours. "SHOW DEREK DEAD PEOPLE. After each violation we issued Galiana with a stronger warning than the one before. The vibration rose and fell in throbbing waves. I felt something happening to my hand, a crawling itch like pins and needles. I was pleased with the way this story came out, especially as I was able to sell it to Interzone as my first submission to the magazine's new editorial regime. "Off cuts," he explained. "This is about more than our piddling little line, Campion." "The Great Work," Purslane said, voicing my own thoughts. "Your people had a memory of arriving on Lecythus in a moon-sized ship," he said. I could feel every cruel edge of it, cutting me open from inside. The girl was a Conjoiner. Then it began to change. A day or so after that someone else—a big man with a bushy black beard—even initiated a conversation with him. "Technically. What single thing would be sufficient to push someone into changing their mind? Until Baikonur advise." Galenka pushed her own taser back into her pocket, with the barbs dangling loose on their springy wires. That soil could have come from anywhere in the galaxy. "Maybe a geyser caught them," I speculated. We're in interstellar space!" "Your problem," she said. It was all in the haughtiness of her walk, the guarded confidence of her looks, the sympathetic, slightly pitying smile with which she greeted everyone else's efforts. Other machines would take care of his island, protecting the pool and its silent, slow swimmer from the ravages of weather and time. "You the newbie, right?" she asked, lifting a coffee mug in salute. She didn't take any payment except the skydrift." "Does your father still believe an eel can heal a wound?" "He says he'll believe an eel can heal a wound?" "He says he'll believe an eel can heal a wound?" "He says he'll believe anything if it gets the job done." another cycle. The flier took off, leaving the other man alone on the Scaper. It was hard to tell, but the ground looked nearer than it had been all afternoon. "I can't let you out of the room just yet," I said, sitting on the fold-down stool next to the bed, upon which Weather now sat cross-legged. "Still no footsteps," Lenka said, as we neared the entrance. The Cockatrice began to crab, losing axial stabilisation. The Spire's base failed to touch the surface of Golgotha at all, but floated above it, spaced by five or six clear metres of air. Think geometrically." "I am," I said testily. "Yes." "I realise this is unorthodox, Campion. People like Suzy have an intuitive grasp of syntax solutions. You can't hide absence, Galiana. Now, though, was not the time-even if, by Warren's estimate, he only had three days before Galiana's next provocation. "Are we in a ship now?" "Fuck, no," Clausen said, sneering at his question. What you are getting is a glimpse into the cognitive realms that Celestine inhabits as a matter of routine." Celestine opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off with a raised palm. Somewhere near the end of the century. Kathrin wasn't quite sure what she was looking at. We turned away from space—that's the mistake. At first they don't remember what has happened. No single face that hit me with the force of utter unfamiliarity. Without hesitation she grabbed yellow handholds and levered herself inside. That was what had precipitated the war. "What do you know about Skanda?" "I know that he paid you to cut a rock. But for someone like Richard—who craved knowledge of the alien with every fibre of his existence—it would have been anything but mundane." He turned to me. Clavain clutched his gun, not firing but mundane?" "I know that he paid you to cut a rock. But for someone like Richard—who craved knowledge of the alien with every fibre of his existence—it would have been anything but mundane." vet. I would talk to my companion as if Shirin was there, and Shirin would talk to hers as if I was there. "Except it is. The speed of light is an absolute constant, irrespective of the observer's motion. A decade and a half of habitual expression should have engraved existing lines deeper into her face—but Conjoiners were not known for their habits of expression. I had known, even then. You've done that kind of thing before." "No thanks. "I'm Doctor Annabel Lyze. "She's keeping us alive," Galiana said. Like any members of a starfaring society, those of Gentian Line had terrible powers at their disposal. "Where do you think? The light would be quick and painless, negating the past and future in a single cleansing flash. It fell to the decking. Remontoire continued, his voice as preternaturally calm as a parent reading slowly to a child. "It's nanotech," I said. "My second career...it's not as if it's anything I need to be ashamed of. Dark figures appeared in the opening high in the rimwall. Banished him to the ground like the rest of us. None of us." did. He said something and the onlookers laughed. I tell it what I've been doing, or let it record things for me. The problems to be solved grew harder, but after consultation the solution was never so esoteric that we could not all agree on it. "I'm afraid it's just a piece of whetstone." "Whetstone?" "Very hard. He'd tied back his hair and made a point of trimming his beard. She grabbed hold of the steering joystick Corax had been using and tried yanking it left and right. I've returned to Merlin's saga twice, and this is the most recent of the pieces, though chronologically sitting between the second and first pieces. I'd rather climb than drift, if that's OK with you." "Agreed. We all had our favorite spots, and we were careful not to intrude on each other when we needed some personal time. Those lessons were incorporated into the other household cleaner—became sufficiently robust and autonomous that the young man began to offer it as a kit, via mail-order. It worked equally well with yours.' "What did you do?" "Nothing harmful. Within two-possibly three-rooms, we will be able to discard our suits and breathe normally." "Discard our suits?" Hirz looked at him as if he were insane. Maybe I'd been in space too long, but she looked better in that load-suit every day. I didn't save as many as I'd have wished, but I did save some of the Minla left behind to die. "My name isn't Georgi." Doctor Grechko nods solemnly. Given the state of the prints, there was no way of saving which had been her ultimate choice. Already, in fact, the self-healing mechanisms were coming into play repairing the wound. "That you did." He thought that was the end of it, the last thing to him. And yet he's already proved his value, hasn't he?" "I don't follow." Celestine rubbed her shunt. Which begs the question: what's inside it? "Helped a man," I say. Easy enough to sneak onto the docks—not much has changed since you left—but much harder to get aboard the airship. It defined one of the seventy-odd navigational sectors across the whole Bubble. The middle of the Matryoshka. I like red wine sometimes and white wine other times. You'll miss your diary, of course, and maybe you'll have some explaining to do to your sister when she finds out what happened to it—assuming you tell her, of course. Not guite as smart as the type infesting Phobos, but still adequately dangerous. I don't think it's done with us just yet." He paused, his suit beginning to remove itself. You've met her, haven't you?" "I..." Zeal had the better of me. Any planet with some kind of atmosphere, and some kind of surface, usually ends up with some kind of atmosphere. Not a simulation being run inside another computer by some godlike super-beings, but a simulation being run by itself, a self-organising, constantly boostrapping cellular automaton." "That's a mental leap you're asking me to take." "We know it's out there. "We won't fit—even if we're naked." "You are entirely too defeatist," Trintignant said. "The magnetic fields, perhaps. I'd come out to Triton chasing a possible client. The screens before her were alive with camera views, from both the Tereshkova and the little robot that had just detached from it. It was Forguerav who had caught the worst of it, though, Nidra can wait here, just in case Kanto's gone ahead of us and turns back." I did not like the idea of spending ten more seconds in this place, let alone the time it would take to inspect the tunnels. Then, every now and again, the companions would—I can't remember the word." Yukimi frowned. Luttrell is silent, and I think he is either asleep or has turned off his communications link. In two hundred years, someone will be just as quick to mock us for ours, if we're not careful." "I still don't see why you have to live out here." "I keep this Scaper from falling apart," Corax explained. The sky was darkening to the east, in the direction of Jarrow Ferry. The horizon ripples with chemical murk. In fact, our response has already commenced." "Dear God, no," Clavain said, but the evidence was all there now; all around the table he could see the updating orbital spread of the Coalition's dropships, knifing down toward Mars. It's a machine, a ship, that they sent to our solar system for a reason." "It's a dead alien thing," Galenka said, huffing as she cycled harder, pushing through an uphill part of her training schedule. In the distance the dark threads of railway lines stretch between two anonymous buildings. It is lying quite close by, and wearing a spacesuit. "Were you exiled from the Conjoiners, or something like that?" She shook her elaborately crested head, as if my question was the most naive thing she had ever heard. At least that was what Shirin had never lied about anything. Nero stood to one side, and Shirin had never lied about anything she had ever heard. smoking a cigarette made from seaweed while Gaunt did the manual work. Not just because they had supplies we could use, but because it helped us to help them. Merlin could imagine the sputtering protest from the little engine, the fear in the pilot's belly that the motor was going to stall at any moment. Her ship had only just docked from Circum-Jove, after a three-week transit at maximum burn. Frankly, though, I'd rather kill myself than walk around with that thing still attached. Those regions of the galaxy are thousands of light-years from Earth, and without the apertures we'd have no way of reaching them. Stars flowed by from all sides, like white sleet. "Someone...come back. I just mean keeping a record of anything he does or says in public. But had Shirin really cared? \*\*\* "THOM," GRETA SAID, nudging me toward wakefulness. People have often trusted you to set the record straight, especially near the ends of their lives." "You talked about retiring, not dying." "Either way, it would still be a withdrawal from public life. None of the remaining suits were missing, and when we contacted the orbiting ship they had no knowledge of the doctor's whereabouts. If that isn't satisfactory to you, you'd be welcome to remain aboard ship until we arrive somewhere else." "Your captain would allow that? I formed a mental image and queried the fluttering presence of the AM, but it couldn't retrieve the name. The technical phrase is a police action, I believe." Clavain saw that Voi was momentarily lost for words. "No good, Dimitri. They were there to keep the crew healthy, and much of their work was essentially benign: the treating of minor ailments, the prescribing of restorative drugs and diets. "They're aquatics. The format, even by the standards of the shows I have been on so far, is slightly out of the ordinary. They traversed swathes of bleak grey-green grass, intermingled with boulders and assorted uplifted debris. You're going to be fine." "What..." I start to say. The true enemy will snuff out our reality in an eyeblink." "Then all of this could end," Gaunt said. I can even have the memory of it suppressed, so it doesn't haunt my dreams." "Why not," she said. Losing locomotive assist. "We'll light in good time." Khorog hammered one of the wall plates. Like a sandcastle, or an ice sculpture. If only half of those stories were true, it was still more than enough to justify what was about to happen. In a year or two, you will feel no change in yourself. The engine note had changed to a dawdling throb, just enough to hold station against the wind. Celestine was already attending to her injury, fixing a tourniquet from her medical kit above the point where her arm ended. Perhaps the winking bridge and the iron road were also things of the old world. I've been to Jupiter, seen the skydocks, seen the voidships being built. I'd steered water-ice comets onto this arid world just to make its oceans. Inevitably the Demarchists would all be embroiled in war long before then. "And you need to believe it, or you're going to die here when we leave. "Hold on," he said. My damp clothes cling to me. I'd also like to hear what happened to the clone." I sensed him see the with anger, then bring it under control. There's nothing we can do about our fate. It was a bittersweet moment. That no matter how alien it appeared on the outside, there was something human at the heart. The jibs were Ray's area. You're on another planet, with your job, so you don't have to deal with any of this. As hard blue light pushed through the widening Saps where the doors were rising open, she slunk back into the shadows, hiding between two freight pods. Three or four years, Khorog had said. They arrow to the horizon, straight except where they kink to avoid a boulder or slope. But I don't like it." "If it was hostile, you'd know it by now," Rasht said. The only downside is that Mars may have to relinquish its economic primacy compared to an alliance of the outer giants and their moons. "Nonetheless, it appears that one has been taken. I began to ascend, pushed upwards on a section of flooring immediately beneath me a square tile that became a rising pillar. Not much good against blizzards, but without it I'd never have got as far as the snowplough, let alone Zvezdniy Gorodok. "I should hate you for this," Clavain said. Probes reached through the field, contacting the field, contacting the field have got as far as the snowplough and the field have got as far as the snowplough and the field have got as far as the snowplough and the field have got as far as the snowplough and the field have got as far as the snowplough as far as the snowplough as far as the snowplough and the field have got as far as the snowplough as far as the snowplough as far as the snowplough and the field have got as far as the snowplough as far as the like molten lava, and then carving out new niches that no one had dared dreamed of before. "There's something you should know, though. Let's get straight to business. "Wait a minute. "Absolutely sure of that, comrade?" \*\*\* I WIPED THE sleeve of my load-suit against the portal glass to clear the condensation. Our camp. Nothing had changed; none of us had suffered any sudden, violent injuries. I bet you're shaking your head now, wondering what the point of all this is. But something if the social circumstances demanded it. Something that was always going to destroy her. But I couldn't go to all that trouble and then ruin my plan with a few indiscretions." "You were friends, then?" solicited Trintignant. You need treatment. The blue light spilled from the fissures. "Hi," I said lamely. It's been good to get warm, my clothes beginning to dry, but now that I'm outside again the cold only takes a few seconds to reach my bones. But that didn't matter because there was no longer anything resembling an economy. I promise you." "Perhaps we should just keep her awake, after all." "That would be cruel." "It's cruel to keep waking her up and shutting her down, like a toy doll." There was a catch in her voice when she answered me. The other hatted man gives me an encouraging shove, urging me to start walking along the landing to the waiting elevator. "Do you understand why you made the wrong choice originally?" "Yes. They're very anxious to talk to you." Minla paused. The topic, rather interestingly, is the dreams some of us experienced on the way here." "Dreams...?" I said. "Never done a hard day's work in your life, have you? It was a question of ambition, of acceptance. "No; in all likelihood he didn't. A tolerable invitation to keep away?" Rasht tried to say something. It wasn't all that wonderful, believe me." "Tell me about Gennadi. There was something. It wasn't all that wonderful, believe me." partly filled with plastic sacks of some agricultural or biomedical product. "Don't take it personally. "At least I won't have people pestering me for the rest of the carnival, trying to get at the memories I edited out of the strand. He fitted in well, after his adjustment. But if that's not the answer..." "I don't think it is. She had become a puzzle that I couldn't leave unsolved. I'll feel safer up there." I lower him nearly to the ground, then watch as he eases stiffly from my arms. He could skip over the days or weeks it would take to reach the planet, but that would mean subjecting himself to the intense unpleasantness of frostwatch revival. Well maybe we should have all taken a trip to the Pattern Jugglers. Maybe the simplest thing really was to have the Matryoshka sing itself to us. You had no idea what you were unleashing." "I'm telling you, we unleashed nothing. They were skintight suits of reasonably modern design, but they were museum pieces compared to the Ultra equipment. Now, as we encountered the tasks that had challenged even Celestine, Hirz was still able to perceive the essence of a problem, even if it was beyond her to articulate the details in the formal language of mathematics. The machines were intelligent, in a one-dimensional way. But I'd had more than that in mind when I set it up. I stumbled groggily into the common quarters of the shuttle, presenting my wrist to Childe, who was sitting there with Celestine. I want the music in my head to end. Its gibbering turned shriller, more anxious. Already I could tell that he was only lightly unconscious, and that we'd have a struggle on our hands if he came around now. The ghostly promise of rings yet to come. I felt sure we had met once or maybe twice before Not until you know why another robot wanted your emperor dead, and chose not to do it himself." He understood me very well. Warren needed another war to avenge what one had stolen from him. But they could take down the people behind it, like Gennadi. Nothing of significance emerged, even when I expanded the search parameters to scan back many thousands of years. And in all that time I'd always been there to protect him. Even holding up my side of the conversation, even being attacked, hasn't stopped me from working. I feel exactly as tall as the KX-457—there's no sense that I'm contained in a much smaller body, down in the belly pod. Before our departure, Galenka had configured the sensors and readouts to emulate the same telemetry she'd been seeing from the Progress. ZIMA BLUE AFTER THE first week people started drifting away from the island. Chances were, that particular ship wasn't headed to Barranquilla or anywhere near it. They don't break down. There can't ever be any kind of peace while they're still down there. "Not before everything here is duplicated and archived," Malkoha said firmly. Once a year, if he exceeds certain performance targets, Derek is allowed to go after live game. It was the finest thing I'd ever touched. The gravity on Holda was nearly Earth-normal, so we could move around just as easily as if we were on the ship. For an hour during the rest period I teetered on the edge of sleep, but then alertness returned like a pale, cold dawn. "OK," The Baby says. I've been looking out for false threads during every carnival." "Because you suspected one of us might lie?" "Because it made it more interesting." "Maybe we're making too much of this," I said. First appeared in Eclipse Two: New Science Fiction and Fantasy ed. It normally passed in a few tens of minutes, but until then we generally waited before venturing through the now open door, gathering our strength again. Its barrel glittered with inlaid treasure. Just because they didn't make many of them didn't mean they'd forgotten the rules. approached. At last, after so many frustrations, Trintignant had been given free rein to do with us as he wished. Finished, the younger brother set off home. TRAUMA POD THIS WAS A straightforward case of the title coming before the story. "Knowing your dedication to his protection, I had little doubt that you'd terminate yourself if you failed him. From his confident and authoritative demeanour, he must be on his first posting. Calliope's still there, so that only leaves the moon. KX-457's weapons and countermeasures aren't to be trifled with. And if he cracked out there, then he'd be brought back. "You think they're looking for you." "I know it." "Then where are you going to go?" Out into the cold and the snow to die, I think. "The shelf'll just give way under you, and then we'll both be in the water." "Nidra's right," Rasht agreed, while the monkey looked on with a sort of agitated delight. The final challenge in each set would always be the hardest; the one where we were most likely to make a mistake. Now let's be on our way." Merlin looked back at the lapping waters as he followed Minla to the moonlit flying wing. Our own research lines will give them to us sooner or later." Merlin leaned back in his seat. The man with the syringe walks ahead and opens the rear passenger door, beckoning me into it as if I'm some high-ranking party official. We promised we'd keep talking to our companions, but Shirin didn't. Apparently we've been trying to outrun the other ship for weeks. Isn't that something worth looking forward to?" "You only think you understand. I willed the floor around the two figures to detach itself from the rest of the balcony. Even more so when I get these bandages off, and I can work my fingers again. And he's not going to be much use to us doped to his eyeballs." We manhandled the stunned Yakov back into the main part of the Tereshkova. Beyond the unfenced balcony, arid land sloped steeply away, offering an uninterrupted view of the sea. "What do you think?" "Just a wild stab in the dark, but did he by any chance up your cut?" "Let's just say the terms were renegotiated. Over the huff and puff of our suit circulators it was not the easiest thing to make out. "Other than some boats, helicopters is pretty much it." "What about intercontinental travel?" "There isn't the world I was expecting!" Gaunt said, straining to make himself heard. Without further clarification, it could be almost anything: a fault with the VASIMIR, a hull puncture, a life-support system failure, a hundred other problems. "I'm not sure. "Flux Swimmer," she said. I then spent a couple of months chasing completely the wrong story up and down any number of trees and through any number of so precious to you?" Clavain asked, not really wanting to know the answer. The weapon seemed to urge her to do it. If I doubted this, I only had to reflect on the compassion he had shown to the uplift Vratsa, or his distaste at the political methods employed in those parts of the Commonwealth that had not yet submitted to enlightened government. Galenka had fired barbs into him; now she was holding the prongs of the taser against his abdomen, the blue worm of a spark writhing between. I heard he was working on Twenty Arch Bridge." Kathrin shifted uncomfortably. But she'll also know that everything they stand for will one day turn to dust. It was only then that he satisfied himself that the means lay at hand. "We'll be leaving soon," Galiana said. It's better if I go walkabout." The phrase, which had popped unbidden into my mind, caused me disquiet. I'm alone, but Greta isn't far away. She wears old-looking jeans, several layers of jumpers, a scarf and the drab coloured shawl. "Right floor, right time. I know: I've checked. Stronger odds of surviving than anything left on the surface, with everything that's to come. But before I could leave her she suddenly reached out her left hand and touched the metal to the side of my head, running her fingers against the skin. Are you going to get to the point?" My travel box had brought

me into Purslane's hovering ship an hour after her departure. "You see that fine patterning of lines? By the time the evening of her threading came around, the atmosphere tingled with excitement. I'd just come back from the lake, you see. I just hadn't been ready to admit it to myself. Older than the history of any culture known to her kind. This is what it was all leading up to." "A shabby-looking swimming pool," he said. On the right-hand side there were three more figures with eleven, thirteen and twenty sides respectively. It wasn't like that, I tried to tell him: Conjoiners could talk to machines, yes, but not all machines, and the idea that they could work witchcraft on anything with a circuit inside it was just so much irrational fearmongering. But you didn't die instantly either. I began to sweat with the effort. "Not mine." Then she turned away, the sleeves of her overalls falling down to hide her hands. \*\*\* THERE WAS A great space battle that night, but this time it was for real, not staged in memory of some ancient, time-fogged conflict. Shortly afterwards, a second source began transmitting from another floating mass, half the size of the first, located three thousand kilometres to the west. Turn me in...it could make your reputation." "And yours," Ingvar nods. We're not really out here, parked next to the Matryoshka. \*\*\* I STEPPED BACK from his suited-but-immobile form, admiring my handiwork. There are nearly a thousand grams of machinery in that brain. There were no entoptic generators buried in these walls to supply visual information to the implants Galiana had put in his head, and even her own aura of light was gone. Biomechanical constructs were typical products of the Third Intercessionary period, but I had never taken to them myself. Something about his face is familiar: I feel that we've known each other somewhere before. I was there." Kathrin shifted. Almost all the human characters in Merlin's society take their name from birds, a fascination of mine, and I quickly found that there were more than enough obscure avian species to stock the average SF universe. "If you hadn't already guessed." "After all this time?" I asked. "Not like this." Yukimi showed him the way. Rasht and the monkey kept an eye on me, the Captain silent for long minutes. As gruesome as working for Zeal might have been, I kept reminding myself that it was a lot better than dealing with Happy Jack's button men. Through the green-tinted blastproof glass they had an uninterrupted view of the surface rolling by underneath. "Don't turn around," Luttrell says. Or, just possibly, to us." Weather hesitates and looks at me with an unwavering gaze. What I feel for you is..." Weather hesitated, her mouth half-open. All around, worms struggled to snatch them out of the sky, but mostly they were too slow to catch the dropships. She had been one of the first human beings to enter Europa's ocean, decades back. I pull my point of view back into the pod. "Maybe. "No." Trintignant stood up, the movement reminding me of an escalator. Exchange entries. We'll be taking excellent care of it." "Because our lives will depend on it. But they did. That's the other side of the system, in case you didn't realise. It had become an integral part of my personality. They fool with your inner ear, make you think you're floating." "That's your GLONASS transponder. Doctor Annabel Lyze. She had been chosen to forge the venue for the fourth carnival "This rig, that wave...even that seagull over there. Just because she turned her nose up at your elitist little club." "Careful, Campion. Beneath the Ultra suits which had brought us this far we had donned as much of the lightweight versions as was possible. It was already strong enough to kill any normal human being. But it should regard us as friendly, once we're inside." "Suddenly this doesn't seem like quite the excellent idea it did ten days ago." "We're committed now, Campion. I expected a body, closure." His eyes sharpened. You said it yourself." He raised a finger. Could you let him know that I've no need of a new sledge this year, after all?" "Peter," Mary said. It took time for light to reach the Eye from distant galaxies. He wasn't being invited into the inner circle, he wasn't being high-fived and treated like one of the guys, but it was a start. I crept closer, watching the sky all around me for the sheriff's whirling machine. What left behind after...not care about baby." "I care. The worm hit again and the wall shook more violently than before. Ask me about your brother, ask me about mine, and I will feign ignorance. Merlin could only imagine what the pilot made of the sleek, whale-sized machine now supporting his little contraption. But she also knew him better than anyone, better even than Clausen. He had been touched by the poisonous ichor of a jangling man, and the bracelet could do nothing for him now." "I still do not believe in magic," Kathrin said carefully. The one doesn't imply the other." "Merlin, listen to me. Loiter drones above us, enemy Mechs too close for comfort. They shared data across a baseline of tens of light hours, sharpening their acuity to the point where they approximated a single allseeing eye as wide as a solar system. The floor had a metalled quality to it, dented here and there, and the edge where it met the hole was rounded and worn. Thousands of years, and then millions. What exactly have you done to me, Childe?" "Again, nothing irreversible. "For me this is where it met the hole was rounded and worn. Thousands of years, and then millions. What exactly have you done to me, Childe?" gentle, it would carry its entire family of worlds and rubble and dust with it. I don't believe any man could have made it. It was another to come out and accuse my host of lying. She's rude and she's had dinner." Trintignant lifted his silver mask towards her. Fescue's mixed up in something. And yet she cared for me. "I can see a Scaper," she told the book. Don't you feel that?" "It's a rock." Skanda pushed a hair from my eyes. I skipped soaps, quizzes and chat shows until I hit the main state news channel. My ship, my rules. Our own attempt failed too—and the interdiction's stopped us from trying again." Again, she seemed to fall into reverie. We were the first. We need to slice the data up into short time windows and filter on narrow-band graviton pulses. He never forgot the little pool-cleaner. "It's about topological deformations, stretching operations on solid shapes." dimensional lattices. It was all over quickly. I was able to stumble from room to room, balancing myself against the wall and hopping on my good leg. If conditions became intolerable, I would just jump ship in the next port of call. It was not working properly. Kathrin started walking as the cart lumbered past her, using it as a screen. What had consumed him extended infinitely in all directions. Whoever was behind this had murdered those people because of something big, and the only big thing I could think of was the Work. In your bones. I fell in the pool, you didn't. If this is what it takes." "Silly...human...boy." She pulled my hand, with more strength than I thought she had left in her "Wethead," she said, with something like fascination. The flying wing lowered itself on ducted jets, blowing dust and debris in all directions until its landing gear kissed scorched earth and the engines quietened. "I kept the musical box with me all the way home. Without that winch, you'll be going nowhere." "And without a navigator, you won't be going much further." "You're wrong about that, though. They had left Felka behind tending the Wall, her hands a manic blur as she tried to slow the rate of collapse. No runaway Chinese probe had ever collided with Shell 2, so we had no good idea how brittle the objects were. "Your suit's a mess," Rasht observed. The rear door—the one that led out of the chamber in which we were standing—had just slammed shut. We don't hate or fear you. It was two hundred kilometers from nose to tail, with a maximum width of twenty. "After I've crossed Twenty Arch Bridge, I'll go back along the south quayside and take the ferry at Jarrow." Peter looked puzzled. Merely doing so was a goading taunt against the emperor's authority. It affected me more than it did Galenka. That means I miss a lot of shit that goes down in Chasm City. In "Mariguita" John Ayscough (Msgr. The Wall was the most audacious and visible of Voi's projects. But the voice asked: "What do you know of Lev?" "Your son," I answered. My ship's listening in on this conversation. Otherwise we wouldn't be here." She looked down at his blanketed form. Have you come from Shalbatana?" Yukimi nodded. Then the pilot reached down to his belt and unbuttoned the leather holster of a pistol. They tricked me aboard. Just because it came from the heart didn't make it good." I said nothing. I'm sure you're close to finding a way, in the end. So what if I've done nothing anyone will ever remember me for?" "Until now. But it stops with Lenka. For a moment there was a shocking absence inside my head, the neural equivalent of a sudden, unexpected amputation. This was ten times bigger, a whole city built on the frozen river. We moved into the next time the tide came in, you'd get a second layer. There were ribcages and torsos, grasping hands, heads snapped back in agonies of perfect torment. It led into a huge and bright room: part of the engine system. It was worse than he had expected. They were soot black and sheer, as tall as the highest buildings in Shalbatana City. With some apprehension, Yukimi watched the water lap over the tops of the wheels, and then against the side of the cabin. Lovely names. The force of it was like a hard punch, driving the air from my lungs. When they are boosted to higher orbits, the satellites' mirrors will cup the Sun's light and pour it down to Earth. I think there might be something in it. Think of a dot, will you?" "I'm thinking," Childe said. Then they would always look away. It is as if, while the great institutions of the world falter, we are obliged to reenact them in miniature here. Seagulls feasted on waste floating in the narrow races between the bridge's feet, or pecked at vile leavings on the road that had been missed by the night soil gatherers. Luttrell spoke to you?" "Yes, and he was very insistent." I feel a prickle of foreboding. Just like I'm trusting you now. If I see a landscape—a crater or a rift on some distant icy moon—I must call it something. He had driven to the pipeline, not along it but from somewhere else. "We've got to do something, bury her...at least put up some kind of marker." "She's already got one," Childe said. "It's like a deep existential itch. Christ only knows where he'll stop." Trintignant shrugged. Ice lay in great silver swathes, and what few expanses of open water remained were warmed by buried thermopiles. She weighed it in her hand then set it down on the table, the head facing Kathrin in such a way that its beady black eyes and smiling snout suggested amused complicity. I'm glad we see things similarly." \*\*\* I LEFT THE Great House a day later, once I was satisfied that I had put in place all necessary measures for the emperor's continued security in my absence. "If the machines—the artilects—vanished without warning, how could you ever know any of this?" "Because they came back and told us." "No," he said. Our premier smiles down from the looming side of an apartment tower, lips moving but no sound coming out. And his daughter loved him, which had to count for something. I thought I was going to be lucky." Kathrin turned back to face her companion. "And I promise you that. "That's between me and Corax." "Are you all right, Yukimi?" her father asked gently. Intrusions into base reality from the Realm. The transition to thrust weight was sudden and unannounced. Yet we'd just been through a battle against another ship, one in which we were already known to have sustained structural damage. A woman glanced haughtily at me as she passed: normal enough except that the upper hemisphere of her skull was a glass dome, in which resided a kind of ticking orrery: luminous planetary beads orbiting the bright lamp of a star. There was a kind of ticking orrery: luminous planetary beads orbiting the bright lamp of a star. created. That would be good for Mars, but it would be even better for the concern. I don't expect to get the chance to apologise to him. My meat exterior was only a few centimetres thick. Enough to trigger the screens of the other ship." "I hadn't thought of that." "Me neither, until now. "It feels dead." "It just isn't active yet. The space vacated by one lung was replaced by a closed-cycle blood oxygenating system of the kind carried in spacesuit backpacks, so that we could endure vacuum and had no need to breathe ambient." "I think I'd remember." " glance it looked as if the canvas had been washed blue and Zima had simply left a small area unpainted. And in any case, his ship isn't the best match. Even Forqueray was waiting, the pipe of his apparatus poised an inch from his mouth in expectation. The blizzard has abated while we drove, but the snow's still falling, coming down in soft flurries from a milky predawn sky. These stars are exuberant, flowerlike swabs of thick-daubed paint. "Not long after I found this place and this building. Given the years of his life that he had given over to the dream of artificial intelligence, it was dismaying to see how little progress—if any—had been made. Must be about five, six kilometers from here." "Can you plot us a path between these obstacles?" Rasht asked. Continent-sized fissures were beginning to open up deep into the planet's mantle: wounds as bright as day. They were already overdue on the extraction," Clausen said. "What do you want me to do?" "Intervene," Minla said. I was wrong about greed being stronger. Had I missed something? The last two times I had stepped across a door's threshold my suit had bumped against the frame. "My estimate is that we have nine or ten minutes in which to solve the next problem." he saw that the box was damaged, its sides caved in and its lid ripped off. I trust you and you try shoot me." "I'm sorry. "It's perfectly safe to enter." \*\*\* THIS TIME THE markings looked more complicated; at first I feared that Celestine had been over-confident. She touched a finger to her lips. Even if justice would have been served, the greater good of the Radiant Commonwealth most certainly wouldn't have been. Just not much good with a screwdriver right now." "I'm sorry about Gimenez," Clausen said. "It was as bad as I feared. I've also selected my own rock. It was an inch-thick, three-metre-long length of flexible metal. Four unfamiliar shapes were inscribed on the left side of the door, spaced vertically. Your finger is moving. "Quite frankly, I didn't expect to find you alive. Van Ness was waiting to greet me. Every muscle fibre in my body felt like it had been shredded. We've come a lot further than a few hundred light-years." "You're right. "Suzy's dead. Merlin took careful note of the newcomers: those would be the people he'd be dealing with next time. Not much of it around any more, which is why the gun cost me so much. Beginning camera and waldo deployment— this'll be the real test." Our little envoy looked like a cross between a spaceship and a deep-sea submersible robot, the kind they use to explore shipwrecks and pull missiles out of sunken submarines. And we had all been hoping that this was going to be the big score. Scraping barnacles off a supertanker, scudding across the Moon: nothing much changes. "If you need me, you can call into this. "Problem-solving, actually," Childe served pitch-black coffee as he spoke, as if all that was ahead of us was a moderately bracing stroll. "Because, actually, we are a little off course." She's sharper with every breath. Got to go. Even your book makes me feel like an old relic from prehistory." He stood up, his knees creaking with the effort. They curved around in arcs and fans, so that the viewer's entire visual field was saturated with blue. I may be a little groggy at first, but I'm sure you'll make allowances." "I may not be around in twenty years," Malkoha said gravely. My slot for this evening is a live interview on Derek's Cage, which is not only the most successful of the audience with a large disposable income. Merlin judged that there must have been at least ten kilometres of clear airspace under each piece. He pulled back a lever, opening an iron shutter. On the floor --just below the volume of air where the cable had hovered and thrashed-lay a small, neat pile of flailed human tissue. "Merlin, before you sleep-do something for me." "Yes?" "Make me flowers again. Disavow your involvement in this, Purslane, before it's too late. "No," she said. But there's something we need to talk about first." Merlin reached for a shelf and handed Malkoha a tray upon which sat twelve identical copies of the translator device. Which reminds me." Peter ambled to another bench, pausing to stir one of his bubbling pots before gathering a bundle of sawn-off wooden sticks. The thing you came to give me. There's no family structure, of course, but then again there are plenty of human and primate societies where the family is less important in child development than the cohort group. Things that made the whole world sit up and take notice. But some of those activations were probably necessary: there was a lot of rubble, after all." "Go on,' she said. And it is in the Large Magellanic Cloud, and it is orbiting a brown dwarf star." "I could. He was one of their greatest thinkers: a scientist and soldier much like myself. I can't believe this is happening again. I've seen enough. That and the fact that you were right all along." "There was never any doubt in my mind. "Peter Vandry." He pushed the goggle off his eye, up onto his forehead. Now zoom in on one arm of the Milky Way. It was still a relief when I gulped down a lungful and found it palatable. What are you planning?" "Something...has arisen, that is due to the suit or some injury or weakness within him. Beyond the glass, closer than I'd expected, was the other ship. "I can tell." We rolled around on the glass floor, which softened and hardened itself in perfect consideration of our needs. Superhot blue stars—primed to explode as supernovae in mere millions of years—would be prematurely triggered, or shoved out of harm's way. "Mostly filled with water now—and it'll only get deeper as the sea levels keep rising. Very slowly, I'll grant you—but my suit sensors picked up on it immediately." Childe pulled a face. He shook his head disappointedly. He pushed his left hand against the rust-dappled side of one of the surgical machines, causing it to move back on a set of caterpillar tracks. Just me and a bottle of wine." "I don't blame you." Instead of the holographic blue, the dome was now full of stars. Beyond the islands, the humped form of an aquatic crested the waves. I can surgically remove all your limbs now, cleanly, with the minimum of complications. His movements were desperate, uncoordinated. "You sure?" I said, offering her a hand. Incongruously, there was an inflatable orange life-preserver on one wall of the shed, an old red fire extinguisher on the other. The great vessels of my people—the swallowships—sometimes stop in this system, to replenish supplies and make repairs. We found no sign that the Cockatrice had been carrying frozen passengers, although—since entire internal bays had been blasted out of existence, leaving only an interlinked chain of charred, blackened caverns—we probably wouldn't ever know for sure. Ships much like those of the Galaxy, and converged back again two or three hundred thousand years later, ready to merge experiences. I sat in the seat and recorded a thirty-second message to Katerina. I know this is hard for you, being told what to do. What have you got in them, anyways?" "Nothing that's any business of yours." "I could be the judge of that." Before she could do anything, he'd snatched the bag from her left hand. They cycled me in from Echo Victor, and before that it was Charlie Zulu." "Charlie Zulu." I say it with a kind of reverence. Braced against the wall, he was turning the yellow cartwheel that undid the door's locking mechanism. "She?" For a moment the girl seemed torn between infinite opposed possibilities. There couldn't be room in my head for all that was being pumped into it, and yet it continued without interruption. No, don't fight. It's not that big a place. Not for some us, at any rate. Curtains of water drained off their flanks as they parted company with the sea. There've never been any human colonies there, and no crewed vessel has ever passed within three light-years of it. Not all of the creatures who haunt the night are technically human. You could even have refused any dialogue." "Voi's people pressured us to allow your visit," Galiana said. "It's easy to say you're sorry, now... now that it suits you to say as much. 1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2 Collection copyright © Dendrocopos Limited 2016 "Great Wall of Mars" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2000. At a gesture from Childe it clammed open, revealing a plush gold interior with four seats, one of which was occupied by a dark, slouched figure. "Sorry. Half a dozen corridors fed off in different directions, labelled with symbols in an obsolete language." I think I see a solution, in any case." Childe's slender body stiffened in anticipation. Between you and me..." around. "Me too. The hard part was helping get the body...the man...onto the truck. Kathrin moved to contribute a piece. The antiassault guns were already working—locking onto the plasma trails as they flowered overhead, swinging down to find the tiny spark of heat at the head, computing refraction paths for laser pulses, spitting death into the sky. You've always had an interest in ancient weapons, Samphire...especially the weapons of the Homunculus wars." Samphire looked astonished. We take the slev to rainy Berlin, and then a limo conveys me to a complex of studios on the edge of the city. The crewman got up off the table, whole again—or as whole as he would ever be. I want to know." "That bracelet has been on your wrist for a few minutes now. We let him out of the module where we were keeping him locked up. The plans called for huge air-filled spheres, each of which would swallow one hundred thousand evacuees, giving a total in-orbit human presence of ten million people. Yet now I pad into the night, Celestine unaware that I have left our apartment. It used to belong to Crowe, one of the very first explorers." "Can you be sure?" "Reasonably The ball continued bouncing; reaching higher each time. "If only their transmission had reached me in time, I might even have been able to do something for them. I twisted around in the blister. I moved and opened my foreclaw to catch the falling thing." "What happened?" Hirz asked. Some craft had engines powerful enough to push them so close to the speed of light that time dilation squeezed all journeys into arbitrarily short intervals of subjective time, but this was not one of those. Work harder than you've ever dreamed possible. The medical robots are spindly but fearsome things, with too many limbs Those people really died, Loti; I didn't just make them up. The rig had a large library of damp, yellowing paperbacks, enough reading material for several years of diligent consumption, and there were also musical recordings and movies and immersives for those that were interested. "Feel it." Kathrin reached out tentatively and closed her finger around the criss-crossed hilt. He hadn't paid much attention to the land mass beneath them, but now that he did— peering through the holes in a quilt of low-lying cloud—he made out the unmistakable flashes of artillery positions, laid out along the pale scratch of a fortified line. "We need a better distraction: one Burdock can't walk away from after an hour or two. He was not even sure the mission could still continue, after what had happened. Sometimes I don't want any kind of wine." I hoped my frustration wasn't obvious. "No. No, don't do that. "One-way ticket to the future. Instead, Minla let it drop to the ground. Suddenly I knew there was a human being in the room with me, damaged and dangerous though she might have been. Then Celestine took my arm and helped me towards the exit. She dared move enough to look over the edge of the pallet. How does that make you feel?" "Sceptical." "Nonetheless, this is Mars. "When we arrive," I said. The downside is that the heat will spill away from your suit and melt the ice even guicker. "Twenty ninety-two. If it had the swiftness of the Cockatrice, it wouldn't have been skulking in the shadows letting the other ship take first prize. "I know where the station is," I tell the driver. Most had died immediately, but there had been enough warning for a handful of people to abandon the ship in smaller vehicles. "Lead impregnated?" "Just a precaution. Too much knowledge would have trusted us more." "You said you had no cause to wake me. Just a cluster of black cubes, lodged in the ship's structure like the remnant of an infection. "Is there any reason you'd lie to me?" "Come off it, Thom. "Not now." "That doesn't sound like someone in any great hurry to be reunited. She could conceal herself in that easily—if only she could get into it without being noticed. Greta waved him away. Almost that. Winds scoured tawny dust from pole to pole, creating an everchanging mask. "He was one of them. But we could still use the same methods, the same tools and tricks, to get a handle on them. Naturally, no individual could be solely entrusted with a particular skill essential to the nest—that would have been dangerous over-specialisation—but neither had individuality been completely subsumed into the group mind. Are you making that happen? I remembered the doctor fishing amongst the bones around the Spire's base; placing something in one of his pockets. I could turn the dials even further into the orange, making the engines run harder still. Years of it. "Have you spoken to Burdock?" "Not about this." "Anyone else?" "Just you," Purslane said. By the time I left, they were going at it again hell for leather. I have always criticised you for lacking spine. The bright light—beautiful and alluring as anything Clavain had ever imagined—was extending a ray toward the isolated node which represented himself. "You're thinking: shitty looking something out. Since the implants were installed I remembered everything, but that only accounted for the last three hundred years of my life. We have our own affairs to deal with in the meantime." "I wasn't trying to create a war machine. "Now now, my dear," Rasht said. I used to shape ice for the bulk carriers. Childe flicked his tail. I reached out a hand and managed to steady myself. Then I leaned down, bringing my face close to hers. I need to make myself stronger." "It won't work. When evidence reached him that an atrocity had been committed in the name of the Work...the murder of an entire human culture...he realised that not all of us shared his view." "Then Fescue knew all along," said, dismayed. But then who could? The younger brother placed the weapon down and surveyed the scene with hands on hips, for all the world like an artist taking quiet pleasure in work well done. After ten or fifteen more rooms we would again have to scrape our way between them. The vehicle bristled antenna, with solar collectors folded on its back like a pair of delicately hinged insect wings. Apart from giving me a much better insight into what's going on in there, compared to the crude resolution of the pod's own scanner, I can also intervene in some critical pathways." I'm still creeped out by my displaced body image. "Why don't we take a walk? But someone must bear it." Without thinking, Kathrin said, "Tell me." "Are you sure?" "Yes. On the right side of the door, however, the shadows were of the same objects after they had been stretched and squeezed and generally distorted. I turned from the scene and made my way back into the Great House. Still, Rasht was settled in his decision. Dark—misshapen. He took hold of the door, however, the shadows were of the same objects after they had been stretched and squeezed and generally distorted. I turned from the scene and made my way back into the Great House. gargoyle mask and pulled it free from the rest of his armoured casing. There was never any likelihood of an immortality breakthrough, no matter how long you slept." "I don't understand. "Until the risk of another attempt is eliminated, I can't have you leaving this building." "I have an inexhaustible supply of bodies, Mercurio." "That's not the point She'd need to move more than one to make things dangerous, and I could drop her long before she had a chance to do that. Figures in the sky. Instead the machine slows and stops. It's been a pretty good life, actually. I clutched at every crumb of comfort. "Let you create the head of David, let you think this would be the thing that made your name, all the while knowing it was going to be destroyed?" "I did what I was paid to do. "There isn't." "Look, there's no point arguing," Childe said. It was always red wine with sunsets, never the white. As my disembodied eyes adjusted to the darkness, the thing brightened and grew layers of dizzying detail. I did not cause the descent vehicle's problems (no one is yet claiming that), and I was under no moral obligation to intervene when it happened. The rest of him was covered in metal, jointed in a clever fashion. Maybe she didn't remember her name now, but with time...with patience...who knew what was possible? Her ship was almost a living thing in its own right. But they did it for us, not themselves. I'm patient enough to wait until then." "Really?" I asked. They had colonised every useful rock in their galaxy, to the point where their collective biomass exceeded that of a large gas giant. The remaining surface-bound colonists, those who would occupy the other Dormitories when they were ready, awaited transfer in pressurised bunkers, in conditions that were at least as spartan as anything they would have to endure in space. I am Loti Hung; I am eighty years old, a middlingly successful rock cutter. It would have been convenient if we robots could have been convent if pillar of whirling metal. "You were right to guess that we were rushing them to Transenlightenment, Clavain." "Why?" "Because it's the only way out of here." The image changed again. "Let me show you something." He took her into Transenlightenment, Clavain." "Why?" "Because it's the only way out of here." The image changed again. "Let me show you something." He took her into Transenlightenment, Clavain." "Why?" "Because it's the only way out of here." The image changed again. "Let me show you something." He took her into Transenlightenment, Clavain." "Why?" "Because it's the only way out of here." The image changed again. "Let me show you something." He took her into Transenlightenment, Clavain." "Why?" "Because it's the only way out of here." The image changed again. "Let me show you something." 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He took her into Transenlightenment, Clavain." "Let me show you something." He took her into Transenlightenment, Clavain." "Let me show you something." He took her into Transenlightenment, Clavain." "Let me show you something." "Let me show you something." "L worthy, over-earnest look of educational texts. The real Samphire had been on his ship, and when the construct failed to destroy the island, he made a run for orbit. What's the first thing you do?" "Announce myself. Planets were full of odd, boring physics. You'll be looking at four or five years aboard the Lady; maybe longer if he can't find another pair of hands. Something that must have been centuries old when he began his journey." "Maybe," Galenka said. \*\*\* "THEY CAME," THE voice said. Among his people the very notion of cloning was an unspeakable atrocity; redolent with horror. Luttrell has transgressed internationally recognised Lunar boundaries. We'll check comms and life-support thoroughly before we leave. "Corax isn't back yet!" But either the buggy was too stupid to realize what was happening or Corax had programmed it to ignore her. I'm not aware of anyone claiming misrepresentation through your writing." "It happens now and then," I said. Were I to detonate the powerplant inside my abdomen, you and I would cease to exist in a flash of light. Air to breathe. "That was...quick thinking, Fescue." "It must have been a false alarm after all," he said, his unmasked eyes piercing mine. Doesn't have a moon. No change in the status of the Matryoshka or the surrounding vacuum." On the screen, wireframe graphics traced the vast right-angled shapes of radar-illuminated obstacles—iceberg or battle-cruiser sized slabs of inscrutably dark free-flying machinery, between which the Progress was obliged to navigate a path, avoiding not only the obstacles but the invisible threads of razor-thin force binding them together. It was already moving to the next pod, and the one after that would bring it right next to her. "Not long. "You'd better." "It says that once a great human society lived on Lecythus, in peace and harmony. By then, of course, the project was costing us almost nothing, so there wasn't even a financial drain to be concealed." "And since then?" "I vowed not to make my uncle's mistake. I inspected the outer covering for tears or abrasions, but it looked as good as when I'd worn it. But already various valves and gaskets were stemming the fluid loss; clicking shut with neat precision. The smaller ships at first, then the larger ones—all the way up to the biggest craft of all, those that were already poking into space. Mars is on its second wave of history now—maybe even its third. Now it would be more visceral; closer to the primal templates of combat, and none of what the Conjoiners were marshalling would be much use against the kind of assault Warren had prepared, Clavain knew. For a long moment, taking in the immensity of what stood before us—its vast age; its vast, brooding capacity for harm—the idea of trying to reach the summit felt uncomfortably close to insanity. Though it was impossible to say how large the thing was, or what it was made of, it was very obviously a structure, as opposed to a peculiar biological or mineral formation. It was governments and rich planet-bound individuals who kept learning the hard way. It was as if I had been here before, as if this landscape had been awaiting my return, patient and still as an old painting. Is that what you're saying?" "I'm saying it's different, that's all." "You woke me," he said. Any more than they stopped needing wheels when the winter was at its coldest. But so was the third possibility, which was that the vector was reliable, and that Skanda had business around Jupiter. There were no markings on it, but nothing that Forqueray did made it open again. Not after my final gift to Minla. We walked on slowly, me lagging slightly behind his prowling muscular form. For quick-witted monkeys, it was no different than clearing a forest, or draining a swamp. "Have we not demonstrated our obedience with the trials?" "I didn't ask for those dissidents to be executed," I said. They've no interest in stirring up professional rivalries, or trying to make me feel as if I ought to think less of myself for being a machine. You could do great things. The geopolitical balance was different back then, as I'm sure you'll appreciate." "I know my history." Which was true, up to a point. Not a moment before." The cable continued writhing: flexing, coiling and uncoiling like a demented eel. The Iron Lady was huge, and its living crew tiny. The reos more here than meets the eye, Richard." "What do you mean by that?" "Haven't you noticed how—" She looked at me for several seconds, as if on the verge of revealing something, then shook her head. But it can't be the one I woke up in originally, because there just wouldn't be room. All that talk of the places he'd show me, the things we'd share together—the glamour and spectacle of the entire system, ours for the taking. You'll do, one day." "And if I died would they stop the clock in my office as well?" "You won't die," my father said. Never one to break my promises, me. He hadn't. The object spoke its nature through her skin and bones, whispering to her on a level beneath language. Surprisingly—to me at least, who admitted to some unfamiliarity with these things—the shuttle's fabricators had been more than able to come up with the various cybernetic components that the doctor required, and the surgical tools at his disposal—glistening, semi-sentient things which moved to his will almost before they were summoned—were clearly state of the art by any reasonable measure. But she told me some of them, as best as she could. The effect was electric. "If Gentian Line is implicated, then whoever's involved is on the island now. "This is all happening too quickly. Do you recognise these? "I think—" he started saying. It was a metal cylinder with a transparent cone at the front. It's just another war with lines of division among the allies." "At least we have some artilects on our side. "You cracked the hard problem of language comprehension. And the place would never become boring, for at any time—as Greta had intimated —we could always expect another lost ship to drop through the aperture. "Because I'm sure as fuck not." Celestine nodded. The punishments were initially mild, but they became steadily more brutal. Panicking suddenly, imagining I might have dropped it in the snow, I pat my pocket again. What did we come to this system for? She nods once. Long ago, the death of one of our number had been commemorated by the seeding of ferrite dust into the atmosphere of a dying star, just before the star expelled its outer envelope to create a nebula in the shape of a human head, sketched in lacy curves of bluegreen oxygen and red hydrogen, racing outward at sixty kilometers a second. Some were dated and consecutive. How does that sound?" "It sounds very dangerous, Campion." We did it anyway. I'm lost." She looked at me from under the stiff, knotted overhang of her hair. It is good to know one's place! After London there is only one more stop on my European itinerary. "The knowledge frightened me. And that makes me special." She thought about the companion. "Are you authorized to tell me what this is about?" "I'm afraid he didn't tell me," the robot said, making a face appear in the back of his head. Something catastrophic, which I still don't understand. The space between his hands darkened. She was dressed in austere, tight-fitting black clothes which only emphasised her diminutive build. I was doing something wrong if I didn't wake up with a million knives in my back." She dismissed him from the office, Gaunt leaving with the feeling that he'd scored a minor victory but at the possible cost of something larger. If I were to reveal key information to you, I would have more to worry about than just being an outcast. But the flier was talking about a different kind of strength altogether." The widow paused, then stared into Kathrin's eyes with a look of foreboding. "I think the damage is already done." "Thank you." He is silent again. It's about doing our bit for the war effort." "What war?" Gaunt asked. Under it all, though, he had a serious message. We'll have to make do with my ship." "I really need to finish this bridge." "Finish it. How can Burdock be sick here, if we've seen him running around on the island only a couple of hours ago?" Grisha smiled narrowly: the first hint of emotion to have troubled his face since our introduction. There were collaborative efforts, millions of people downloading a fragment of the data and analysing it using spare CPU cycles, but they still couldn't beat the resources of a single well-equipped academic department with a tame supercomputer in the basement. "I do not believe this." "I would not expect to you. I travelled in full imperial regalia, and made sure the seriousness of my mission was understood. "The ultimate exclusive club. I'm expecting full oversight to be restored as soon as I regain normal comms, but that's not what happens Fry them alive, same way as Zeal. "I think we got away with that one," I told Purslane, when she was finally able to move through the island without being pestered by an entourage of hangers-on. "But I definitely didn't bump into Burdock." I rummaged through the island without being pestered by an entourage of hangers-on. "But I definitely didn't bump into Burdock." I rummaged through the island without being pestered by an entourage of hangers-on. inland, they'd have sent land-dragons instead. Will he nuke us?" "No; I don't think so. "And the AM certainly wouldn't attach any significance to that one happy combination of circumstances. But which was riding the exercise cycle in one corner of the module. I'm lying flat, or flattish, on a cratered plateau, hemmed in by the craggy ruins of what were once office blocks or retail developments. "Damage?" I asked. "Vector your ship toward the westerly rim wall. Radiation levels are actually very low in this sector." They disembarked via an escalator that had folded down from the flying wing's belly, accompanied by a detachment of guards. Four hours, high remuneration. And whatever happened next, however hard it got with her family, she would know about until the seas retreated, on some impossibly distant day in the future of Mars, her Mars. Not enough to suit our needs, anyway." "Then you mustn't have been looking properly." "I assure you we looked, Merlin. But eventually we made it." Even as I framed the question, I think I already had an inkling of the answer. The other crew might loathe us, but they needed us as well. And there were children. By the end of his nine-hour duty shift his fingers were chafed and sore, and his hands were trembling so much he could barely grip the railings as he worked his way back down into the warmth of the interior. "Spring tides and neap tides, I think of the said. Eunice is in a bad mood, hungry and restless. I think of the said. fat full Moon, daubed with the emblems of nations and companies. "But it's not as bad as you think it is." \*\*\* I LOOKED AT the woman who had just spoken. "Why didn't you press that one first?" She looked at me. You look tired. I had no other choice. Even with the augmentations Trintignant had given us, the damage inflicted was considerable as a scythe-tipped, triple-jointed pendulum descended from the ceiling and began swinging in viciously widening arcs. "Central Lagos. You ever used a soldering iron, Gaunt?" "I don't think so." "For a man who made his fortune out of wires and metal, you didn't believe in getting your hands too dirty, did you?" He showed her the ruined fingernails, the cuts and bruises and lavishly ingrained muck. Keep a very straight face." "You mean...just accept it? You're a good man who once did something so evil the shadow of it touched you across thirty-two thousand years. "I'm his replacement." people. So why go to all this trouble?" I paused before continuing. Still, Greta was right. And in truth, it could have been a lot worse. It was only then that I realised that the knives were not necessarily made of metal. Is that simple enough for you?" "Why?" I asked. Five thousand? "A while. Could there be more to it than that, though? "Then we're not in Schedar sector." I try to sound pleasantly surprised. The decking rumbled, as if the ship itself had shuddered. "No further than we've already come." We pushed out of the chamber, Lenka setting the pace, following Teterev's course down another rock-walled tunnel. Through the tangled fringe of her hair, eyes shone feral and bright. It would have a sift he ship itself had shuddered. "No further than we've already come." We pushed out of the chamber, Lenka setting the pace, following Teterev's course down another rock-walled tunnel. Through the tangled fringe of her hair, eyes shone feral and bright. It would have a sift he ship itself had shuddered. "No further than we've already come." We pushed out of the chamber, Lenka setting the pace, following Teterev's course down another rock-walled tunnel. Through the tangled fringe of her hair, eyes shone feral and bright. It would have a sift her hair, eyes a single down another rock-walled tunnel. Through the tangle down another rock-walled tunnel. been bloodier, and you might have needed to run off a few more clones...but I don't doubt that you could have done it." "The solution, Celestine." By my estimate we had not much more than two minutes left in which to make our selection. "And we're doing this. At first my eyes had difficulty making out our surroundings. She can feel every bruise, every swelling, as if she's right here in the pod with me. There was something inside the glass part—a few specks of reddish sand or dust. I'm not as young as I look, either." I held up my mechanical hand. That's the four-dimensional analogue of a cube. "You're going to kill me now," he said, speaking in a frightened hiss. Do this." "I..." "Do it! For the sake of the line!" I looked at the faces of the other line members. Beneath it was a pale, almond-shaped face half lost in shadow. They were a little off-alignment, so—seeing as we're going to be sitting here for eight hours—I decided to run a full recalibration." I nodded. Clavain opened the channel allocated for Coalition-Conjoiner diplomacy. Typically, a few hundred light-years across." "Who made it?" "I don't know. "Hey." Hirz, the only one still wearing her original suit, knelt down and touched the floor. They have seen men made of tin and gears, like the inside of a clock." "Some people were frightened too much when they were small," Peter said, with a dismissive shake. That's our watch. Then they fractured cleanly apart, revealing falling pilots clad in bulbous armour. The chamber was dark except for a few pools of light, but in the shadows Clavain made out discarded excavation equipment and freight pallets; cranes and de-activated robots. On the chance that the man may hear me, I ask him: "Who are you, and what has happened?" There is a lapse before his answer comes back. It was only afterwards—playing back the visual record captured by our suits—that we were able to make any sense of events. Dark weapons hovering in Mars-synchronous orbit above the nest locked onto the ship for a few instants, magnetic railguns powering up, before the shuttle's diplomatic nature was established and it was allowed to proceed. I recognise the symptoms from my training: stage one moving into two, as my body redirects blood away from skin to conserve heat—shivering and a general loss of coordination the result. From where I'm sitting, it feels pretty damn rational." Then he drew an enormous intake of breath, as if he needed sustenance for what was to come. Nothing about his face marked him as Gentian Line. Now that the other nations have abandoned their efforts, we have to do more than just subsist. Where once they had moved too slowly to threaten more than a handful of neighbouring systems, the compactification allowed war and disease to spread like wildfire The Cockatrice is gone, along with everyone aboard her. "A pair of brothers." \*\*\* THE WALK TO Tyrant was the longest he had ever taken. Now I'm changing mine." "Incalculably so." Minla stroked it again. Lenka made sure she was standing on firm ground, turned up her suit amplification, and began to drag me out with the winch. Whole galactic turns ago, she said. The room was cool and twists their magnetic fields. "Who is this guy, and why does everyone hate him?" "Allow me to introduce Hirz," Childe said, indicating the woman who had spoken. I almost had the nerve to order another coffee and put it on the same tab. Horrific, certainly, but possessed of a certain genteel precision compared to the weapons that had consumed Plenitude. He watched a subset of the nest file in to the conference room. "You think, or you know?" "I mean what I said. Doesting the vertain the station exist? The Advocates dreamed of nothing less than compactifying the Milky Way; taking nature's work and remaking it into something more useful for human occupation. Occasionally a lobot would arrive to take away some piece of equipment or dead flesh, or arrive with something more useful for human occupation. Occasionally a lobot would arrive to take away some piece of equipment or dead flesh, or arrive with something more useful for human occupation. guided the buggy into the waters, picking his way down what must have been a thoroughfare between two rows of buildings. "If I had the slightest suspicion that I was being manipulated..." "Of course you're being manipulated..." "Of course you're being manipulated..." be speaking to you now. He was elegant, well-dressed, exceedingly handsome—and definitely not someone I'd seen in the Delta Vee Hotel until now. What you're showing me here is a human brain, a living mind, turned into some kind of slave." "No slavery is involved," Weather said. And if there had been only that one javelin, we might have missed it happening at all. They could make that happen, certainly, but then they would open themselves to difficult questions concerning the destruction of incriminating evidence. I trusted him. "" "Everyone aboard will die?" "Baby kill them. It's the arse end of nowhere and the trains aren't running." "I only need to get to town." He looks at me, assessing the shabbiness of my dress, the state of my beard and hair. There's nothing in the data to suggest any unusual event, and I don't have any plans to return to Lecythus and see what became of that world when its sun was gored open. "Why?" I said. It's like a puzzle I'm not meant to solve. Was there a problem with the butcher in the Shield?" Kathrin had considered feigning ignorance, saying that she did not recall how only one head had come to be in her bags. Names that would drive a nail through your sanity. A good son. "How long have we known each other, would you say?" "Since I was small." "And in all that time have I come to seem any older to you?" "You've always seemed the same to me, Widow Lynch." "An old woman. Stay wethead and get off ship. Thanks to a Chinese probe that had gone off-course during the second apparition, we knew that the outer integument was surprisingly brittle. Calliope had set during their descent and a biting wind was now howling into land from the sea, setting his teeth on edge. "It isn't?" "I wouldn't say so, Thom." She smiled. Even if it took two or three more million years to move all their target stars, this was still a price worth paying. Bang goes our bonus." In anger, I hammer the side of the surge tank. My brain feels like a pan that's been scrubbed clean." "Did Doctor Kizim help you to escape?" "I've asked myself the same question. We couldn't see the Progress any more. She couldn't see his face, but she knew it was no longer frightening. Conjoiners were only allowed to send kilobytes a second to other parts of the system. "What about Ray?" Suzy asked. Barring the unlikely—a chance meteorite impact, something like that—there's really nothing out there that can hurt me. But nor was I going to let your phobias stop me from saving your life." The image grew in complexity. But always they came. "I had that one too." "Me too," Hirz said, chuckling. Failing that, I'll swear a vow of silence. It gained a few more wild loops and hairpins, including one that reached beyond the wall of the Bubble to touch the sunward end of the Aquila Rift. Fifty years from now, maybe sixty. I go right back to when things weren't so pretty between the Spiders and the rest of humanity, back when my wife was alive." It took a lot to stir up the past for Rafe Van Ness. The robot follows suit with its own limbs. I sent another command to my ship to tell it to start working on the format conversion. The atomic rocket production lines were already running at maximum capacity without the burden of carrying even more tonnage into space. It had too many limbs, a strange way of moving, and I wondered what it looked like outside of its armour. The ship tells me it'll be flight-ready in two or three days. Once again the essence of the task lay in the figures marked on either side of the door, but now these figures were linked by various symbols and connecting loops, like the subway map of a foreign city. Another part of me...doesn't feel like that." "You've been amongst people too long, Weather. You, on the other hand, are extraordinarily valuable to us." Something's wrong. It wasn't your fault." I help her into her ship clothes. I'm sorry, Inigo. I still have some of my husband's old clothes—someone may as well get some use from them." "Thank you." "You shouldn't have come to see me. All l knew was the way that colour spoke to me, as if I'd been waiting my whole life to find it, to set it free." He thought for a moment. They stole her from me, and turned her into one of them. "That's us firing back," Zeal said. My point of view shifted and something awesome hoved into view. "And, indeed, they may well have been. But it was already more people than he could ever hope to know or even recognise. But it was never totally sufficient. She came back to us, you see." "I thought Conjoiners never returned to the fold," I said. "Mike, you need to trust us. My nerves had been frayed even when it had just been the robot at stake. And therein, I am afraid lies the problem. It wasn't the smartest companion in the world. I took the freezer route, but a lot of my friends opted for the pill. "Wait a moment," I said. Through the windows in the side of the tunnel I saw figures floating, pulling themselves along hand over hand. I'm fine now." I looked at him through the armoured glass of the bulkhead door. Anything that might shave a day or two off our return trip. As Abigail's shattered self we've crossed it ten thousand times; known a million worlds. I gritted my teeth. The degree of concentration is quite intense. I learned to stop asking questions, afraid of where my tongue might take me. Her ship woke her up, asking what it should do. But it still needed a launching device, a kind of gun. Bots did my bidding. I allowed myself a moment of relief. He was tremendously fond of them. I never thought that we'd have a life together; I wasn't that naïve. "I think he was just a tiny bit economical with the facts." I frowned. "Then he's won already." "No, he just thinks that he has." Without warning the widow stood from her chair. They were talking amongst themselves, giggling or singing. Some of them looked very close to death. For now it's enough to say that I was right to trust my instincts about the moon. "Something going on?" "Oh, didn't you hear?" Busuke lowers her voice conspiratorially. But that's understandable, Mike. All the scenarios end with your corpse hanging from the mouth of the cave. This was her turf and I was well advised not to trample on it. "I had no idea." "I just wanted you to know: with me and the Spiders, it isn't an irrational prejudice. Perhaps half were concave in shape, so their edges were turned. One marriage down the drain because of your self-absorption. Lenka, whose suit was more lightly armoured, would find it easier to cope than Rasht. You see that open cluster?" She waited for me to answer. "How's the hotel?" she asked after I'd ordered a coffee from the waiter. And it's no more vulnerable than a cluster of im inside my head. The hospital was near the core of the ship, safely distant from the sleeting energies of interstellar radiation or the exotic emissions of the Waynet. Sleeping with Greta obviously helped. I yelped and started to fold as my leg buckled under me. Of course, unless they had a lightning-fast internet connection, about ten million terabytes of memory, expertise in hypercube numbercrunching, their own Cray...they couldn't even begin to scratch the surface. Not the dizzy sense of adventure she had been expecting, but an awful, knife-twisting sense of wrongness. Whatever it is." "Hold hand." I reached out and took her hand, in my good one. Anything goes wrong on this ship, we need him to fix it. A blight which afflicted everything contingent upon any microscopic, self-replicating system. She said nothing. The ball slammed into Trintignant, ricocheting off his metal leg, and then connected with the effort. He tried to pull his hand away, but his fingers appeared to have stuck to the goggle. There were a few other ships ahead of us in the queue, plus the usual swarm of AA service craft. He walked stiffly to the door, pawing at his healed injuries in a kind of stunned wonderment, as if he had never expected to leave the operating table. I can give her all the reassurances in the world, but she knows she's been under too long for this to be anything other than a truly epic screw-up. I reach into my pocket and feel the fat round bulge of the eye. It's hard to tell but I doubt that she's any younger than me. You knew where those weapons were to be found, and you probably had more than an inkling of how they worked." "No," Samphire said. "The sensor records of my passage through Grisha's system are still in my ship files—will they be enough?" "You had no other means of witnessing events?" "No. Everything I saw came through the ship's eyes and ears in one form or another." "That should be good enough. My mind raced ahead to the Soyuz, realising that even if we got there in time, even if we got inside and sealed the hatch, we wouldn't be able to get the ship aloft in time. She felt quite strongly about that. "Let me out, Dimitri. "About right." "And while I know that aperture travel times vary from point to point, with factors depending on network topology and syntax optimization, isn't it the case that the average speed is about one thousand times faster than light?" "Give or take." "So a journey from one side of the Bubble might take—what, half a year? "An empty fucking room. No matter how much time passes, those of us who walk in the world will be carrying this message, alert for your name. You'll have sent a message to the future. It was the best thing to do, but there was always a chance..." Merlin spread his hands in exaggerated apology, as if there had ever been something he could have done about it. I've done it a thousand times. The body's eyes looked to the cross-shaped seam in the ceiling. "Yes. Fescue was holding the containment bubble around Samphire, preventing the blast from escaping and destroying us all. I got to know their faces; got to recognise their slumping, shuffling gait as they walked into a room. It was astringent, blood-hot, humid, and smelt faintly of machine oil. Without Zeal the crew would be inconvenienced, but most of them would still survive. My hand tightened on the rail at the edge of the high balcony as I heard urgent footsteps approach from behind. How would they ever fake that, Dimitri?" He let go of the wheel with one hand and touched the back of his neck. "We get through this door, I'm out of here, money or not." "You're giving up?" Childe asked. Clavain had been deeply disturbed by Felka when he had seen her before, but not for any reason he could easily express. "Why do you keep doing it, Galiana? When one of us falls, we reach. They needed someone with basic skills." "I have never been called into space, Prakash. Yes, I found Teterev. It was a thing of the old world, before the Great Winter. "I see it now. "Just a means of raising money. You wanted very badly to get a message to him, to have him help you. At the back of her mind had been the worry that he was something other than fully human—she had, after all, only been able to see the top of his head—but apart from being scrawnier and older than almost anyone she could ever remember meeting, he was normal enough. But then we've always had modest ambitions." "But what about Burdock?" I asked. She says one or other of the engines was damaged during the engagement with the Cockatrice, and I've no reason to disbelieve that. One robot was a sticky-limbed spider that climbed around the walls of his house, dusting the frames of pictures. According to your mutual strands, the two of you should have both been in the same system at the same time." "Which system?" She told me. Can you imagine the absolute vanity of that?" "So who else do you want?" Already I was thinking loved one, lover, heroic ancestor: the usual selfaggrandizing bullshit. I gave myself a hard shove in his direction, hoping to overwhelm him with sheer momentum. They would be arriving very shortly. What she didn't say was what would happen then. "How far out?" "Further than you thought possible." The next question was obvious. An unseen mouth said, "Hello." Yukimi couldn't answer. She still became one of you." "I am telling you," Weather answered, "because her memories are part of me. Burdock knew what they had done." Fescue looked intrigued. Some of them had plumb lines; one of them even had a little black rod that shone a fierce red spot wherever he wanted something moved. He could tell the man he was Nevil Clavain—but what would that achieve? Presently she had the pilot bring them below supersonic speed, and then down to a hovering standstill above what Merlin took to be an abandoned building, perched near the shore amidst the remains of what must once have been a great ocean seaport. She's wearing a knitted shawl of indeterminate colour. Rasht pulled on the leash, and I pushed it through from the other side. "And then something—very probably Husker-level ordnance—shattered that sky." "No one could have survived that," Merlin said, feeling a rising tide of sadness. "They'd been butchered by it." "And?" "I decided it would be good to have someone along who had the medical aptitude to put right such injuries." "Yes." Celestine nodded. That I may or may not have had ample time to effect a rescue is quite beside the point, and in any case hinges on a few data packets of decidely questionable provenance. Maybe he tried to tap into it. And now that I've been de-clawed, now that I've been half-blinded, they imagine they can take me apart like some complex puzzle or bomb, without harming my human cargo. Later I can expect a deterioration of vasomotor tone as the muscles now contracting my peripheral blood vessels become exhausted. Can't wake the others. You must have been through hell." "I only had the pain to endure," she said. It was no longer trained on us, but we were still in Grisha's power. "Be serious." "All right. "You need to come with me," Merlin said. "You're not going to like this, but..." Biting his tongue he brought the shuttle's hidden weapons online. It didn't necessarily mean there were still people, but it was a lot more encouraging than finding a cratered, radioactive corpse of a world. I'm sure I can persuade Galiana not to make another escape attempt." "But if we should fail?" Voi looked at Warren now. You could have been anywhere." Weather's tone hardened, taking on a kind of saintlike asperity. It's better if we wait until the translation is more accurate, then there won't be any misunderstanding." "We are friends," Malkoha said, leaning forward. It was felt that an event of this magnitude demanded the immediate release of all the data to the community. I took a few paces in the direction of the Great House. I don't need to see KX-457 approaching; I hear the boulders being dislodged around me and then feel the trauma pod lurch and tilt as the robot hauls it from the ground. "When you're not working?" "A little industrial archaeology of my own, actually." Corax put down his tea cup. It was a big stupid lunk of a robot: yellow and greasy and easily powerful enough to crush a little girl without even realizing what it had done. By the noise it made Kathrin judged that it was an item of some weight and solidity. Childe, who had been hit himself, shouted: "Celestine! Make your choice!" The ball chose that moment to slam into her, making her gasp in pain. "Behold the Space Dormitories," she said, declaiming as if she had an audience of thousands rather than a single man standing only a few metres away. Zeal examined them with a particular attentiveness, his scrutiny more thorough, more methodical, than Khorog's had been. "I put modifiers in your brain, via the wrist shunt. So we left. "Maybe he just did something embarrassing that he wanted to cover up. Indistinguishable from biological memory. "You talk. I think you did. My interest is in where you were twenty-seven years before that. It's too late to change my mind now, isn't it?" "Fraid so. "I'm really hoping you're not going to tell me we're still stuck in Arkangel system," I said. "I don't understand," Clavain said. He'd already shown great forbearance in allowing us to delay the departure for so long. What would be the point? Not only were they possible, but you succeeded." "I'm fairly certain we didn't." "Think about it," Nero said. Text was already scrolling on it. Even though she was sitting down, she still felt a twinge of vertigo. We could get aboard Burdock's ship, but we would still need to camouflage our departure and absence from the island. But my attention kept wandering to the volcanic cone. "But the danger remains. "The Progress should be directly under us, where this trunk constricts against the one over here. Only then will bloom and prosper. Tyrant was armoured to withstand Waynet transitions and the crush of gas giant atmospheres. Dimitri finds Petrova They go for a walk. So we kept hold of them as we wriggled between rooms, fearful of letting go. The brothers are both influential men in one of the largest military-industrial entities on the planet. only hazard, and one we can easily deal with. Keeping my mouth shut had always been the toughest part of the job. The moment closed around me like a vise. Not enough to kill them on the trip out here." I think some part of me had always suspected. I watched Weather alertly, transfixed by the play of colours across her cooling crest. On some level, that meant he also knew as well. Ever the perfectionist, I thought. "Nothing the suit recognises. Which means that if Doctor Annabel Lyze is right about the brain bleed, I do need to go under the knife. The more complex something is, the greater the burden it places on the part of the Realm where it's being simulated. Certainly not the heavy ores and precious metals you promised us." "I've seen a few moons, Minla. Swinging there until the ice returns. She wouldn't have been aboard that ship of her own free will. But do you have the stomach for the rest?" "I've seen worse than that," I said, glancing at the patient. You think the equipment never fails? "I know he means a lot to you, Captain..." "Is there something wrong with your suits?" I asked. It's human nature for us to keep changing, to keep changing, to keep the wheel of history turning." "But if we weren't like that, we wouldn't be human. Clavain stepped through the purple haze and knelt down beside the soldier. They had no interest in wider galactic affairs, and seemed perfectly content with a mortal lifespan of a mere two hundred years. During these awkward encounters I kept fumbling for the right tone, hoping that I never gave away any hint of the suspicion Purslane and I felt. But I'm opening comms to your module. "Where's that child going?" "To the next stage of its development." Clavain wondered what were the chances of him seeing the nursery just as one of the children was being promoted. But it was science that pulled me the hardest, and so I learned to work around my analytic limitations while putting art to one side while I trained to become an astronomer. That the ice occasionally melted and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and refroze was clear from the fringe of icicles daggering down from the event and the event worms around the nest were a Conjoiner trap. I remain vigilant for prowling Zils and men in dark suits. But at the same time it didn't help him feel as if he would ever be able to fit in. You worry about the distraction." We maintained our vigil on Burdock over the coming weeks, as our dangerous, delicious plan slowly came together. Here, We knew then it was over. He was entrusted with a mission of unimaginable importance." "To change their past?" "No. They were stuck with what they already had. "After all, it's given us the chance to catch up on old times, hasn't it?" "Greta?" I asked, disbelievingly. I was deep in thought, a little drunk, rubbing clues together like a caveman trying to make fire with rocks, hoping for the spark that would point me towards The Gun, the one no one ever thinks I'm going to find, the one I know with every fibre of my existence is out there somewhere. But cheated out of what, exactly?" She nodded down at the ground, in the vague direction of the rig's interior. Sit with us and join in the discussion. "Why do vou live out here?" she asked, as Corax prepared her some tea down in the Scaper's galley. Submitting myself to fate. I stepped onto the disk. We should have been heading away from the last exit aperture after our routing. More than that: how is Doctor Annabel Lyze able to talk me at all? She's too smart, too well attuned to the physiological correlatives of surge tank immersion. "I thought so." Grisha returned soon enough. "Well, fuck me if it isn't another puzzle." "Describe it, would you?" "Weird shape shit, I think." She was quiet for a few seconds. If it gets too bad, I can always go full manual." Then she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and reopened them. Even if she risked climbing out and managed not to break anything or knock herself out as she hit the deck, there was still a danger that the robot would run over her with one of its wheels. Our multiple screw-ups." "Skanda never meant for people to die. I couldn't save him." She takes a breath. "There's crosstalk between the two units, but I don't have the implants to make sense of that. The crows were still wheeling, but more languidly now, preparing to roost. "Because anyone in my position would have done the same. We're shipping out." "I can't issue that order, Mike." "Can't or won't?" "We're running simulations now, and they're telling us that you have a statistically improved chance of survival if you remain right where you are." "By what margin?" "Enough of a one that I'd really urge you to consider this course of action very thoroughly." If the odds were that persuasive, she'd tell me up front. And once Zeal's trained you up, he won't want you leaving his service at the first port of call. The world has not stopped turning, just because of this unfortunate business." Today's offered assignments: helping a construction robot at the Sarahan solar mirror project. But even knowing this, I don't want to go back to the way things used to be. I wondered if the pilot had conserved some last flicker of sanity for the time when he had visitors—just enough selfhood to die knowing whether he had succeeded or failed. At the risk of hopeless reductionism, I'm pretty much convinced that my brain was wired for art, rather than science. Which particular pearl of wisdom would that have been?" "If you're in a position to moan about a situation, you've no right to be moaning." "Christ. But try getting by without any fingers at all." "I'll be careful," Gaunt had assured her, and he had believed it, truly, because he had always been squeamish. "Anyway, I don't hear so well these days. That ghoul isn't remotely interested in solving the Spire. Another machine with full artificial intelligence? There were no other patrons dining tonight. Large areas of the Iron Lady were out of bounds: the rear section was deemed too radioactive, while the front was closed to low-ranking crewmembers like myself. Merlin felt a cold line of sweat trickle down his back. I suppose that has to count for something, "But you do have something for me?" "Very much so." "That thing in your hand," he said, his attention snapping to my fingers. I don't recognise the woman who's just addressed me, but my first thought, strangely, is that she must be Authority. They say the planet must have been moved into its present orbit by the Waymakers, from another system entirely. I shoulder my way through the onlookers to the low trestle table, where the votes are being administered. You played a part in it, Minla. It was a sentiment

I shared. "What are your orders?" the robot asks me. My red gaze stabs through them. We've just grown apart. I was wrong in that." Peter looked exasperated. Everything came together magically: the company, the conversation, the late afternoon ambience, the splendid view, the euphoric rush of being slightly drunk. I wondered now if anyone would come after us. "Then it's true," he said. Of Garret, the reason she wished to cross the bridge only once if she could help it, there was nothing to be seen. "Shit," Voi said, her veneer of Demarchist cool cracking for an instant. You and I both know they won't try until day-break, at the earliest." She can't argue with that, and she doesn't try. But what happened next happened with lightning speed: a silver-grey tentacle of the blur—a thin loop of the cable—whipped out to form a double coil around Celestine's arm. Now Lenka said: "There are steps! This is the way she went!" It was true. I know the answer, but you don't have to take my word for it. "Witness how the bone and muscle have been neatly severed along the same plane, like a geometric slice through a platonic solid? We passed officials and servants and mindless servitors. But it was too soon to put his idea to Galiana. No one smart would come within pissing distance of this fucking place." "What does that make you, Hirz?" Celestine asked. Say five or six months? The first real world that humans touched, after they left the Earth. No riches, no prestige, no luxury, and most certainly not immortality and eternal youth. Somewhere along the way, though, it swallowed him up. Haptic feedback on arm two is delayed just enough to throw me off. Just a few machines in the right parts of his brain and the truth could be his. We continued, passing the seventieth room—fifteen further than we had reached before. First appeared in Edge of Infinity, ed. Take your pick." "No," she said. Among the guests on Reunion were ambassadors from other lines—some of which were in on the big secret. "You should see her in a few seconds, Dimitri." The Progress drifted over my horizon, a pea-green shuttlecock with CCCP stencilled down the side in red letters. But that's all it ever was. Everything else you see is also pretty accurate, if you accept that certain frequencies have been shifted into the visible band, and the scale of certain structures has been adjusted." She pointed out features for my edification. "Flux Swimmer...has power. So the envoys crossed space by themselves, at only a fraction of the speed of light, and the targets they were sent to were all poorly explored systems on the ragged edge of human space. There's still something left of who she was." "How would you know? "His emotional registers were all very flat, according to the maze." "I don't see why he'd cheat," Purslane answered. In fact, it was a vital clue to the nature of your world. "Says that she expects the power to run out eventually, so there's no point trying to record anything in the ship itself. "Keep on working. Ray is dead. "Ave," Kathrin answered, hoping the wheelwright's wife wouldn't push her on the point. But there's enough idiosyncratic variation from individual to mean we can't be a hundred percent sure of the outcome of any given intervention." "It's a tiny bit more sure of the outcome of any given intervention." "It's a tiny bit more sure of the outcome of any given intervention." "It's a tiny bit more sure of the outcome of any given intervention." scientific than that. And at that moment it will prevent any of us leaving until we have solved that problem." "You mean it's changing the rules as it goes along?" Hirz asked. You look frightened, don't you? But you're pulling ahead again, aren't you? But you're pulling simple one: there were no userserviceable components inside. "You said things were much worse," Clavain said. "Give me a suit," she said. "That's encouraging," I said. He has attempted to take what does not belong to him. Under ordinary circumstances, while the trauma pod was fixing me up, the robot would have plugged the pod back into its belly and hightailed it out of the combat area. It really doesn't become you." \*\*\* THEN SOMETHING ODD happened to Burdock. I saw Purslane, the fox mask tugged down, and something like horror on her face. I have been here six years now. The words came out in a rush, and yet at the same time each syllable consumed an eternity of time and effort. There were robot animals: fabulous birds and rabbits just slightly too anthropomorphic to fool Clavain. I could barely hold myself up now. I paced nervously up and down the crescent window. "Weapons?" Forqueray asked blankly. I waited out the storms and the war. I've become damaged, broken, useless. "I'm about to show you." \*\*\* THE TABLE HOUSED an antique holo-projection system. "I could be wrong about it. They sped over oily, roiling waters. "But simply beating the Spire wouldn't be good enough," Celestine said. "Anyway, from Suzy's point of view, aren't you a friendly face as well?" "Maybe," I said. It paused by one of the cargo pods, not far from where she was hiding. got close enough to see your handiwork, Loti. You're not in Schedar sector." I started waking up properly. If we don't let her try something, most of us won't ever see another system." "Easy for you to say, son." "I'm in this as well. But before it hit, Purslane took my arm and turned me away from the view. There were nine of them on the Iron Lady five men and four women. "Tell her I appreciated it," he said. That's the best I can offer." "I'm sorry it came to this. "When you've just wiped out a two-million-year-old civilisation, what do a thousand clones matter?" I tried not to sound too disbelieving. I saw caverns, wormed-out and linked, and things moving through those caverns, bustling along with the frantic industry of moles or termites. I need to be with this ship." 'This ship is going to blow up if one of us sneezes. "I know you and I have had our differences. "Without Celestine we'll need to crack those problems ourselves." "I will increase the density of medichines in your brains," Trintignant said. Work together, I mean. "What are these for? Were you allowed to see them?" I shake my head. But if it had not been for the injuries he had sustained there he would never have been recruited into his brother's intelligence wing to study the Conjoiners. She couldn't see as far as you, though, even with the modifiers." Celestine tapped the shunt in her wrist, still faintly visible beneath the tight-fitting fabric of her suit. "I could fetch it for you. He wouldn't ever need to leave the pool. There were bluffs and promontories of ochre dust, so rich in three-dimensional structure that they resembled an exuberant impasto of oil colours; contours light-fitting fabric of her suit." years thick laid on with a trowel. Near the front of the other ship, where the scoop pinched to a narrow mouth, I could actually see the field: picked out in faint purple flickers of excited, inrushing gas. And yet the study of the stellar populations in spiral galaxies at different redshifts established that the preconditions for the emergence of intelligent life had been in place for several billion years before the Watchers had evolved, even in the most conservative of scenarios. It's history that stops us reaching our full potential." "I'm not sure I follow you," I said. But the limousine stops, releasing its passenger, and moves on. "They say it's all just rumour, but I don't know. Instead she turns to her comrade, fixes her mask back on, and nods in response to some exchange I can't intercept. "Hey, dolphins. Even if you did, you'd shrivel from any hint of responsibility." "All right," I said, holding up my hands in defeat. The rockets had no warheads, but that didn't matter: kinetic energy, and the explosive force stored in their atomic engines, was still enough to inflict havoc on their targets. Both men were dressed similarly, suggesting that they had originated from the same community or power bloc. Lenka and I shrunk to tiny proportions, beneath the looming, ogrelike form of our Captain. Then sobbing. Although customs varied, most of those lines had something similar to Reunion: a place where they convened and re-threaded memories. We have to do this." I nodded at Burdock. Why not now? Just keep driving." Before very long the pipeline has fallen away behind us, stolen from view by the Moon's curvature. I thumbed through the log with increasing haste, a prickly feeling on the back of my neck, looking for an entry where something similar had happened; something that would point me to the obvious mistake I must have made. The doctor turned his exquisite silver mask towards her. They call this part of Chasm City the Mulch and it is the only place where we can afford to live now. Not that I'm the only one on the task: the Adriatic breach is a local emergency. "I've been trying to manage ever since with this lobot, but today..." "Temper got the better of you, did it?" Khorog asked. But it would not hurt us to investigate. The largest shapes, convex or concave, must have been hundreds of kilometres wide. She was doing something to it. Enough of a mind to appreciate its surroundings, and to extract some trickle of pleasure and contentment from the execution of a task, no matter how purposeless. I presume there is a cabin, or something." "Just a seat, behind your camera. "Maybe you know something," I said easily. I think those are pretty fundamental rules." "Then what about the door?" asked Childe. All over the rig, inside and out various forms of robot toiled in endless menial upkeep. She stopped eating and looked at me. Scoop instability, Zeal said: it was always rough at first, before the fields settled down. We work you until you drop, and if you can't work, you go back in the box. A man called Steiner had been hurt in some way. Not even if we wanted it more than anything in the world. We've done nothing to you except treat superficial damage caused by the early freezing protocols. I think this is as good an example of any as to why you can't force short stories to come at anything other than their natural pace. After an awkward lull, Peter said, "There is something else I meant to tell your father. The cocky set of his jaw slipped a notch. We can make worlds and shatter suns for our amusement. As had happened with the monkey's paw, the organisms in the pond seemed to have infiltrated the suit's servo-assist systems. It would amplify the attractive parts of the memory of that afternoon and suppress the less pleasant parts: the fly that kept buzzing in your face your anxiety about catching the boat home and the birthday present you knew you had to buy in the morning. Well, I had: but I didn't think she was going to like my suggestion overmuch. "Then what can we possibly do?" "You can make plans to leave Lecythus. And maybe there was nothing anyone could do for them now. You can admire me, even love me, in your way, but I can't love you back. Are you really Richard?" "Why do you ask?" "Because I can hardly tell the difference between you and Childe." I looked at Childe, paying proper attention to his shape for what seemed the first time. Let baby get stronger. But enough is enough. The objects were larger and had a different shape to the ones in the outer shell—these were more like rounded pebbles or all-enveloping turtle-shells, wide as cities. Where was Galiana taking him? "Thom. You took a bad hit to your right leg and I'm afraid I had to amputate. A few moments later the chamber lit up with the wavering light of her helmet-mounted flashlamp. He gave me the stone and told me that he had learned something of great significance from it. At first I didn't think I had anything to offer, but after cycling to town I found an idea forming, and by the time I got back home I was pretty sure I could make a story out of it. Not until we've seen the rest of this place. A handful of her crew had managed to escape in cryopods, but most had died in the explosion when her drive core went critical. "I can't tell you his name, any more than I could tell you mine. What's clear, though, is that a drifting, preyed-upon hulk puts no one in an agreeable frame of mind. Given that there had been two people on duty here until Gimenez's death, Gaunt wondered why they didn't just thaw out another sleeper so that Da Silva wouldn't have to work on his own while Nero's hand was healing. But he imagined the tests would give the medical staff much to write about in the coming months. But it's not easy with that hanging overhead. Then something happened to make me change my mind." "This being when you found the Winged Man, I take it." "Before even that. The insertion into timereversed flight, the passage through the various filters and barriers installed to prevent illicit use of the ancient machinery, the exit back into normal timeflow, had caused eleven additional layers of shell to be sacrificed. Then the Conjoiner experiments had exceeded some threshold, unleashing a transforming virus into the nets. "Nose up," Galiana said. "Just for the record," Galenka said, when we reached the Progress again, "I'm getting itchy feet here." "We've still got time. Two more. "Hirz is right, in one way. If only we'd known about that Ouroborus infestation." Clavain leaned closer to the screen. Your captain will never allow me out of this room.' "Would you do it for us if he did?" "I'd do it for me." "Is that the best you can offer?" "All right, then maybe I'd for it for you." Just saying this caused Weather visible discomfort, as if the utterance violated some deep personal code that had remained intact until now. I could tell by the look on his face—the part of it that I could read—that the news wasn't good. I'm surprised it's lasted as long as it has, frankly. I knew Minla for less than a year of my life, and for seventy years by another reckoning. A vehicle, maybe a school bus, lies on its back fifty meters from me. "But the Spiders—the Conjoiners—aren't the bogey men some people like to make out." "I've dealt with 'em," Van Ness said. Blowing us all up is one possibility. We'll be asleep." "Well, it's academic. Soon we did not need our helmet lights at all. Golgotha's tectonically dead, and there haven't been any large impacts on her surface for a few million years." "Sounds boring," Hirz said. Look on it as your lucky day. "Then you let these kids develop normally?" "More or less. Now concentrate on a single dot again, near the middle. It's a bit distorted, but you'll have to put up with that. "Sandra Voi is dead," he said, removing the mask to speak. He looked into the sky. No one went out to fix a broken service robot in the middle of a storm. Did he rape you?" "No. But he wanted me to do something nearly as bad." "And did he make you?" Kathrin looked away. And it most certainly was bad news. Might as well try one of the ones we definitely know is wrong. The only thing else up my sleeve. I examined the customs records for Kharkov Eight and found that an autonomous robot entity had entered the planet's airspace a few months before the medical procedure." "No ther robot entity had come near the world for decades. But that's me all the way. Now apply pressure here." We kept on working, even as the ship threatened to shake itself to bits. "We're retreating, but only for now. Did I dare wonder where all this wealth was coming from? We rely on our scattered allies on the ground, together with raiding expeditions to Shadowland fuel bunkers." She pointed to one of the remaining airships. First appeared in Galactic North by Alastair Reynolds, Gollancz/Orion, 2006 "Beyond the Aquila Rift" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2005. "It's like the fucking thing's getting a hard-on," Hirz said. In the same instant I heard a faraway thud and felt the fabric of the ship lurch with the recoil. \*\*\* THE SILVER VEINS looped and crossed each other, defining the outlines that were still pressurised. Just out of interest, what are the chances we'll find anything incriminating anyway?" Purslane's attention snapped onto me for a second. I've done this a million times. I might back to what Weather had said a few moments before. You must be, because why else would this be our problem? The sky overhead looked strange now-darkening purple. "Even if we lake away the servitor, we can still keep her out of any parts of the ship where we don't want her. I'll speed-dream the scheduled strand to make room for yours." "And then what?" "Then we meet and discuss the material we have to work with. I have no interest in justifying myself to this man. "Do you think they look grateful," he asked, "or pissed off?" Tyrant declined to answer. Other people said an old sheriff had put it up. "Press it," I said. "I want you to take me somewhere.' THOUSANDTH NIGHT IT WAS the afternoon before my threading, and stomach butterflies were doing their best to unsettle me. It assessed the damage that inch-wide hole, and came to a rapid conclusion. "Come with me," Zeal said, pushing the goggletic systems could work to seal that inch-wide hole, and came to a rapid conclusion. up onto his forehead. My host for tonight is called The Baby. Orbits lit up, coloured bands arcing away like the racetracks of the gods. Here are some of the wardens has been killed. "But Michelangelo's dead, and I doubt that it makes much difference to him now." Ingvar claps her hands against her body. I am not alone—I have my publicity team, my security entourage, my technicians—but I still feel myself at the uncomfortable focus of an immense, unsatiable public scrutiny. She looked at it in horror; the cable tightened itself and snipped the arm off. We'll leave this whole system behind." "Where are you going?" "Shouldn't that be where are we going? They pulled me from the plinth and smothered me to the ground. Two figures were walking over the crest of a dune. This whole thing is in serious danger of turning into some kind of sick exercise in selfmutilation." Celestine looked at her own steel hand, not quite masking her own revulsion. Either way, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. "But Burdock knew the risk was too great." "Risk of what?" asked Purslane. The trick was to know when to admit defeat." I leaned forward. The air crackled with radiation from unshielded drives. Came by their old, slow methods. They were standing on a flying disk, a common form of transportation in the Julactic League. "Enhanced of course, brightened and filtered for human consumption—but if you had eyes with near-perfect quantum efficiency, and if they happened to be about a metre wide, this is more or less what you'd see if you stepped outside the station." "I don't believe you." What I meant was I didn't want to believe her. We're just rehearsing for it, running through another simulation." I tried to ride with his logic. A paper we'd been working on had come back from the referee with a load of snotty comments, and we didn't quite agree on how to deal with them. Not if that little ship of his had already been on its way out here for what must have been days. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. I was just prudent" He turned to me, so that only I could read the stammer of his lasers. Like a sidewinder it pulled its thirty-meter-long body from the sand and rolled toward them on wheeling coils. "It wouldn't be like that. We need you back. Back to our traveller. The Conjoiner argument was brutal in its simplicity: there were principles embodied in their drives that "retarded" humanity just wasn't ready to absorb. We all seem alike to her. "That's him," I say. "All right. "Do you think we can reach the rim in time?" "Not a cat in hell's chance." He wrestled with the controls all the same, but it was no good. It turns out—I learn this in pieces, not all at once—that there has been an accident on the Japanese power station. She never even tried to infect you with her machines." "No, she didn't see her, and lying down in the pallet she had no idea if the thing was waiting nearby. Which means if Felka recognised kinship...what would that make her?" "Someone lonely, that's all." Clavain watched the girl's motions. The airship's nose began to turn, bringing another crescent moon emblem into view. Nesha looks at me with something close to pity. She was sure of that. "You told the truth." "Yes," I said, with all the breath I could muster. "Marooned down here for a crime." "That's an expensive way of marooning someone." I read on. Who knows how these things happen? The winch had a grapple attachment which could be fired with compressed gas. A living thing like the Winged Man was still a rarity, but other things came down regularly enough. But I think Childe knew that some of us would have joined him even without that admittedly sweet bonus. That made no sense at all: there surely hadn't been enough time for shockwaves to reach us yet, but none of us had imagined the vibration. Although I don't achieve much, I have the impression that my silent companion has budged by exactly the same amount, as if glued to my side. The woman studied him with a cool detachment. Bent a few rules. The surface gravity's much less than you led us to expect, which complicates our operations tremendously. There was no answer from the man's lips shape a sound. Barely a century after the first manned landing on Mars. And what work! Exquisite surgery, even if do say so myself. "Didn't you tell me it had something to do with the family business?" He nodded in my direction. "But you know how uncomfortable I find these encounters." "I assure you I'll be as brief as possible." Above me the ceiling separated into four equal sections. Shouldn't we at least try to find some other Conjoiners and see what they say?" "That isn't how it works," she said. Only then did I realise how utterly exhausted she must have been. But what could be worse than being taken into the same place as the wheezing, goggle-eyed thing? You, Mister Swift, were shunned by those who you felt should have recognised your worth in the field of speculative alien psychology. She was there when I arrived, sitting at a table in an "outdoor" terrace, under a red-and-white-striped canopy, sipping orange juice. They imagined they had it all to themselves, until these new intruders made their presence known. "So did I. "No surprises," Forqueray said, in the usual slightly absent tone he adopted when reporting the cam's findings. There's still a lot of commerce you can do within a hundred light-years of Earth. He gunned the machine faster, our speed indicated only by the passing of red set into the tunnel sides. If those figures weren't an invitation to leave, to never come back, I don't know what could have been clearer. That's why they send the dragons: to destroy the sleepers, and ultimately us My ship has a technical problem with drive containment. Smaller numbers were setting up automatic cannon on tripods. And how is the arm doing?" Like Childe, I now boasted one steel gauntlet instead of a hand. I take it out, the prize folded in a white handkerchief. The only real evidence of ageing lay in the filaments of grey threading her hair; raven-black when she had been his captor. I know that man, but I'm not him. We'd spend months inside them, driving each other crazy. Nor did Van Ness ever speak of the matter again. "You planned this, Campion. "I hope you've given some thought to this," Purslane said. But they're real enough." "Why would such things exist?" "They'd been made to do the work of men on the other side of the sky, where men cannot breathe because the air is so thin. Gave up on the old world, embraced the diminished possibilities of the new. The figure was still again, but something about it had changed. But I remembered the gentle way she'd stroked my fingers, and I wanted her even more. Interesting star systems were thousands or tens of thousands of years of flight time apart. No matter what you may currently believe, you are Doctor Georgi Kizim. We were so close that the magnetic fields of our scoops must have been meshed together, entangled like the rigging of two sailing ships exchanging cannon fire. We cut our engines and matched her velocity. Nidra? It's a hyper-pyramid with five tetrahedral faces..." Celestine trailed off, looking at us with an odd expression on her face. As shocked as I was by the fact that she had lied to me—and as fearful as I was by the fact that she had lied to me. But no one ever used Zima Blue unless they were making a calculated statement about Zima himself. "Stay where you are—something just happened." "What?" "The door behind us closed on Celestine. Lots of exotic weirdness, radical technologies, off-hand strangeness. It must have had a capacity for hundreds of guests, but at the moment only a handful of the rooms seemed to be occupied. I do a slow pan, taking in the blasted, toxic landscape as far as the camera can see. I didn't know anything about it until then—hadn't heard even the tiniest hint of a rumour. By now the noise from the klaxons and warning voices had become deafening. \*\*\* YOU KNOW THAT "as soon as I awoke I knew everything was wrong" cliché? Without that delusion—let us be charitable and call it a different kind of truth—generations of people would have been far happier had I not known." "All right," I said. "There could be no doubt in their minds that we might do the unthinkable." "I'm really beginning to wonder whether I shouldn't have landed on the ground instead." "You'd be sitting in a very similar conversation," Minla said. They didn't say anything to him but at least they hadn't gone somewhere else. It was all very worthy, but not enough to stop people talking about Purslane's exploits. There was a reason for that. Now it was only Merlin they were interested in. "They...make her do this," the girl said. Even after we sent up a thousand canisters, the effect was tiny—we changed Phobos's velocity by less than one tenth of a millimetre per second—but there was no way to hide it." Then she paused and looked at Clavain with something like apprehension. More than a century and a half ago, a clique of researchers led by Calvin Sylveste had resurrected the old idea of copying the essence of a living human being into a computer-generated simulation. Before bad thing." "How am I supposed to get off the ship? Even the Waymakers didn't live long enough to glimpse more than a fraction of their empire." "It must make you very sad." "I take each day as it comes. They must have been directly over the burial spot, since the handheld box was now flashing bright red. Something inside your engine has broken, or is considered by the engine itself to be dangerously close to failure. Greta shook her head. "Childe must have triggered it," Forqueray said. He'd show me the pictures in my books, of the great ship that brought us to Lecythus. "What?" "The Spire. A drink, a bar, a half-way decent view. The clone wasn't a perfect copy of me, by any means—it had some memories, and some of my grosser personality traits, but it was under no illusions that it was anything but a recently made construct." Childe faded glory. Overhead, I noticed a dimming in the glow of the pipe after the point where the smaller lines branched out of it. Disembodied hands reaching through the walls. Not Teterev, but the original one—the first being, the first entity, to find this planet. SHOW DEREK DEAD PEOPLE." "Dead people?" This request for clarification irritates my host. "Start getting used to it." In the pool, the swimming figure ended a length and began to swim back towards me. The mazelike folds of that dome bulged against drum-tight skin, as if about to rip through thin canvas. I grappled with these questions during my journey home. "There won't be any weapons, I'm afraid. The giant's purple-blue gloom had turned out to be a perfect match for my funk. November the sixth, twenty fifteen. There were people who lived in trees, and people who had, by some definition, become trees themselves. Inspired, in their small way, me. It did not need the bracelet to heal, and your father was neither stupid nor feverish. We're still back in Russia. But it's easy for you, Shirin. She had wondered how the Wall had survived this long. Any way, I haven't come here to be teased with irrelevancies about my own past. Yukimi nodded. "I always get bad dreams coming out of the tank," I say. But in fact Lenka had been on the crew before me, and although we functioned well enough together, we did not have that much in common. The stands are always a little echoey and sad, even on a good day. He may even have had his suspicions about Samphire." "What will happen to the Great Work now?" "That's not just a matter for Gentian Line," Vetchling said. "My work said nothing about the cosmos that the cosmos wasn't already capable of saying for itself. "Keep up, Campion. One little impactor was all it took to remove her from the battle. Back on the airship and take your chances until you reach Milankovic—miserable arse-end of nowhere that it is. Lenka was coming back. Once that's done, you can sign off. Something like a whale, but carved from molten lava. \*\*\* SO I TOOK Skanda out to meet his rock. "Not quite, Sandra. Then it was gone, wiped away. But now we're well outside your sensor footprint." Clavain nodded. It was clear that Warren had betrayed him; he had surely been aware of the worms around the nest. "My dear fellow, it is a work of exquisite craftsmanship; a thing of beauty. He could return to the boxes with the assurance that he had done his part. Then he said 'water will not help me.' Just those five words, in a dialect I didn't know. Where I'm standing—is now a chain of domed resort hotels. "All Campion was hoping to do was provoke the raising of anticollision shields. Judging by the signals emerging from the galaxy—accidental or otherwise—the ancien spiral was home to a single starfaring culture two or three million years into its dominion. We still love you, darling daughter. One last thing." "Yes. I sincerely hope you are not wasting my time." "I can pay you, don't you worry." She looks at me with something between pity and awe. I mean, not this serious." "He's a basket case, Dimitri. I'm afraid there are many gaps in the sensor data. "Which side is winning, or has already won?" "I don't know; that's the terrible part of it. The Ouroborus passed underneath and then there was a spine-jarring series of bumps as the jaws tore into the shuttle's belly. Some were tunnelling machines, designed to sink boreholes, down which other bots would pack detonation charges. Then it happened: a violent lurch that sent wine and glass flying across the cabin, a shriek from the ship's alarms as it went into panic-mode. There can't be enough of it left to justify a drilling operation on this scale. It was still midnight blue overhead, but the horizon was tinged with the softest tangerine orange, cut through by ribbons of cloud. Felka's movements were swifter; less fluid. I'd allow myself one or two hours to catch up on the news; what was going on in the wider universe. Don't go back inside the box." Then she glanced at Clausen. Call that a character trait, if you will." "Overweening arrogance?" Celestine offered. "How long. Not always. It is a hard burden Kathrin. But our assignation was anything but innocent. Yukimi felt herself caught between possibilities. Schedar sector." He said it as though he was already losing interest, as if this was a routine he went through several times a day. It's your show, Campion. They skimmed the top of the Wall and punched through the thickening layers of atmosphere within it, the shuttle's hull morphing to an arrowhead shape. You will leave?" "That's the idea." Malkoha looked sad. Some were crawling among the rabbits; other, older children were gathered around tree stumps whose sheered-off surfaces flickered rapidly with images, underlighting their faces. "Our three-stage units now have the potential to deliver a tactical payload to any unobstructed point on the surface." "What would count as a 'tactical payload'?" Merlin asked warily. "Very badly. But it's not as if I can think of any other way of pursuing this." "There might be one," Purslane said, eyeing me cautiously. No matter what happened, whether the machine sliced or crushed, he was in doubt that it would hurt worse than anything he had ever known. "Burdock isn't expecting us to visit. As he speaks, his words flash up on a screen above the cage, and these are in turn visible on a monitor set near my feet. Are you actually saying you don't think my real strand would be interesting enough?" "Tell you what," I said, as if the idea had just occurred to me. "I'm not sure he'd agree." "Tell him it's about his wife. It's easily arranged." They walked out of the hangar; away from the half-assembled ships. It made one feel drunk and ecstatic just to look at it. "Don't open the door." He kept working the wheel, but looked back at me over his shoulder. Not long, admittedly, but long enough for my machine to get some sense out of him. "There was never a sword. Based on past experience, an eight-hour ground hold might become a two-day hold at the surge point. I couldn't see the sense in that. She had no need to take a life to test this new gift, at least not an innocent one. Or were they hoping to use Minla as a form of emotional blackmail, so that they might exert a subtle hold on Merlin when he decided it was time to leave? "So that's the enemy doing that. But now there was something skewed about the geometry of the field, like a candleflame bending in a draught. Every administrative department has done its utmost to comply with your requests. It's the kind you use for sharpening knives. I pleaded with you. Be sad. My mind, clotted with routines designed to smash mathematics, could not at first retrieve such mundane data. Finding me, and establishing my involvement. And managed, most of the time. She looked at me wonderingly. "Sorry to keep everyone waiting," Childe said, closing a pair of sturdy wooden doors behind us. "You don't understand. The younger man fastened the device onto his belt. "It's tough to begin with," she said. All I'd have done was make a mindless copy of myself." I said, "Not necessarily. All cheap, second-hand. And even then I didn't guess. But that still left a labyrinth of rooms, corridors and storage bays in which I was allowed to roam during my off-duty hours. He began to despair of ever finding it, thinking he must have imagined that precise shade, that it could not possibly exist in nature. The inside surface of Shell 3 was as pitilessly dark as its outer skin, yet all else was aglow. The tongue of ice continued inside, curving down into what we could see of the cave's throat. I took it without force, without malice, but with the assurance that this time I really, sincerely meant what I was faked." "Oh, it is," she said. The implants Galiana had given him were again throwing phantom images into the air. Pleased to meet you, Minla." And then on a whim, before any of the adults could stop him, he passed her one of the indigo hyacinths that Tyrant had just spun for him, woven from the ancient molecular templates in its biolibrary. The driver has kept to his word, taking us through the abandoned checkpoint, then to the first crossroads inside the old city boundary and no further. Yes. She had seen others walk away and kill themselves half an hour later. It's a blessing, I suppose." "Except it doesn't feel like one." I point to one of the threadbare chairs. What I can do is help it, relieve it of some of the computational burden. "But the island is still mine. Putting aside everyone else that happened...I think that was my favourite bit. I felt the Soyuz wheel around me as it orientated itself towards the Matryoshka. But I trust you won't keep me from my fish for the rest of eternity?" "I sincerely hope not, sir." I left the emperor, returning to my offices to coordinate the hunt for the assassin and the search for whatever evidence he might have left behind. "I need this. The sections slid back into the walls, a cross-shaped gap opening between them to reveal an enormous overhead space—a brightly lit enclosure as large as any in the Great House. "I don't know." "Then I'll decide for you." Fury's hand rose to his face. It's manual labour, mostly. Unfortunately, we had to solve it, not admire it. Do we have a fix on the Progress?" She jabbed a finger at another readout—target cross-hairs against a moving grid. Have you found the monkey?" There was a silence that ate centuries. I also devour TV documentaries about Everest, K2, the Eiger and so on. So go ahead: annihilate the would-be assassin. "Thank you." "The edge of town, that's as far as we go," he says, as if I didn't get it the first time. But not fundamentally. "Thank you need to start thinking about reducing your population over the next three generations. She knew from school that the air had once been even thinner, before the changes began. He had reached the operations deck, the room where he had planned to administer first-aid and issue his distress call, when the sea-dragon began the second phase of its assault. They were waiting for me to say something; anything. Wood was being steamed into curves, or straightened where it was curved. "And the only way you get out alive." I said, "Roland—how exactly did Argyle and his team get inside?" "They must have brought something to stand on. But you're a good man, and that's the problem. Proficiency ratings have been set back to zero. And I assure you that we will meet again, whether you like it or not." "I hope so," I said, while knowing it would never be the case. "I've heard about these suits, Captain. "Falsification of Purslane's strand, absence from the island during a threading, breaking into someone else's ship...why don't you let me worry about the rules, Burdock? "If I may be so bold...it may be that my services are the best you can now reasonably hope to attain." Celestine looked at Childe, and then at the doctor, and then at the doctor, and then at the glistening surgical sleeve. "A project bigger than any single line. It was nowhere near enough. And what the task was awed Clavain. But there were enough examples lying around of the materials Merlin needed—metals and organic compounds, principally, as well as water that could be used to replenish Tyrant's hydrogen-fusion tanks—that Merlin was able to make considerable progress just by pointing and miming. By the time traffic control gave us the green light I'd be asleep. The battlefield scrubs out. Clavair nodded assent, ready for the loom of machines to embrace his mind. These were solid shapes, three-dimensional evocations of distorted and contorted human anatomies, thrusting out of the wall like the broken and bent figureheads of shipwrecks. He had misread Galiana badly when she said the girl was precious to them. "So you're saying I have a choice?" "I'm saying we both have one. It was worst than any booster separation, stage ignition or de-orbit burn. "Not to kill, just to incapacitate. But Julact is worthy of my attention. I left the Blue Goose, walking in the opposite direction to Suzy. The chamber's circular wall was fashioned from what looked like the same hard, dull alloy, devoid of detail except for the point where it framed what was obviously a door, raised a metre above the floor. "Empty metallic chamber... only slightly smaller than the one we're standing in now. Especially as there isn't anyone else left to blame. Because Nesha is turning the handle so slowly, it's hard to make out the melody. "Well, how was it?" Childe asked, throwing a comradely arm around my shoulders. You must have known exactly what it would do to the prisoner." "Yes, we did," she said, "but we considered it a kindness. At one hundred and thirty meters, my head pushed through the surface tension of the sphere. Can you understand what I'm saying, Mike?" "I understand what you are saying," I tell her. Left to our own devices, we'll build weapons to use against our enemy below. A solid wall of gas slammed past. I sat down on the fold-out stool. "To begin with," Clausen said, "you don't mean anything special to us. But I agreed with what she had done. We inspected our injuries. The helmets and much of the breathing gear had been impossible to put on, so we had carried the extra parts strapped to our backs. When Abigail shattered herself, others had done likewise. Ponderously, the door slid aside, revealing another dark chamber. I had to reach out and touch things more than once to establish their shape and proximity. An inkling. Given to peculiar desires, most certainly. The root of this story, though, of a Galactic Emperor's personal security specialist—who just happens to be a robot—goes back to an abandoned draft for another commission entirely. I floated out of the tank, grabbed a handhold and levered myself around to view the other two tanks. There's no one there to use them." Greta's smile was coquettish, knowing. Yet it has its own understated magnificence. "I got lost. Perhaps I'd find a clue in all the strands Burdock had submitted during his time among us. She wanted her memories to burn bright with the knowledge that life—even a life spanning hundreds of thousands of years—was only a sliver of light between two immensities of darkness. A planet like this, with a large moon..." Merlin left the sentence unfinished. Find some work for him in the outlying gardens. But they'd lost the support of their mother ship, and all of them must have been aware that the situation had undergone a drastic adjustment. "Picking up ablation products," Galenka said, eyeing the trembling registers of a gas chromatograph readout. "So I gather." I looked at the other guests, who were observing us. "According to my investigations, it wasn't alone in my ignorance. It's been going on for at least a week now." "Then it isn't just me," I said, relieved that she had shared my observation. Hulking surgical machines loomed over the operating table, carrying lights, manipulators and barbed, savage-looking cutting tools. Mars was different, as everyone liked to say. A dozen or so workers—including a couple of aproned foremen—were standing on the scaffolding, looking down at the work going on below. In fact it's how I met my wife, who was also a keen (and incidentally much better) climber. "That was our first mistake, after all. It's not the way it usually works. He wondered how it must look to Voi; whether in any sense she saw it as her murdered child. I had just returned from the orbiter, where I had been checking on Yakov. "They're going to lie about Yakov." "I know." "When we get home, they'll make us stick to the story." "Of course." She said this with total resignation, as if it was the least any of us could expect. "But we never stopped being friends. \*\*\* THE COILED BLACK device had the look of a tiny chambered nautilus, turned to onyx. "It's like Trintignant said. "It's gone." "It was just a silly stone," We all have to grow up sometime, Merlin." For a moment he thought she was going to hand him back the gift, or at least slip it into one of her own pockets. "I should be getting on. Rewired our minds so that the Matryoshka can get into them?" "I think—maybe. I admire the speaker's boldness, even as I don't pretend to fully understand it. I reached down and picked up the item, taking it as gingerly as I could in my suit gloves. It had been easy for her to promise to keep her side of the bargain, before she said good-bye. We lacked Celestine's intuitive brilliance, but we had the advantage of being able to spend longer—subjectively, at least—on a given problem. We know what happened. Yet what remained visible was sufficient to shock me. If that was the case, he had only brought forward her fate. line of the Waynet, using the tube as cover from Husker long-range sensors. Zima was already unique by the time he emerged into the public eye. Though the existence of Shell 3 had been known since the second apparition, no hard data existed on conditions beneath it. Why don't you wake up more sleepers?" "Hey, that's a good point," Clausen said Our experts say the density's so low we shouldn't expect to find anything useful under the crust. There was just enough time for them to compose messages of farewell, for their friends and loved ones back home. But there was nothing that deserved that sort of terror. "Maybe you should stay here, while I check out the Progress," I said. "When we we get back to the ship, I want to give it a new name." I thought about that for a moment. "Will anyone understand it?" "They may have to work at it," Corax allowed. Her letters and words began to loop and scrawl across the page, like the traces of a seismograph registering the onset of some major dislocation. They have some gala opening coming up, but their usual 'bot has broken." "It's years since I cleaned windows." "Always a tricky customer, Soya. At least they'll know that's precisely as exciting as it gets." It was true: the pressure was off, and to my surprise I actually started relaxing and enjoying the remaining days and nights. We're in Star City, my friend. Was it to any kind of sanctuary he might recognise—or to something so beyond his experience that it might as well be death? My hand hesitated over the markings. "For what it's worth," I told her as we made our way out to the connecting spar, "I'm not expecting to have to use this. But you said it yourself: Lecythus doesn't have spring tides and neap tides. "Come on, Campion. It was a typical watery terrestrial, like a thousand others in his experience. We now have an inkling of what else that implies." "Do tell," Merlin said, an ominous feeling in his belly. Beneath the long ribbed form was a tiny gondola, equipped with multiple engines on skeletal outriggers. No, don't struggle. It began to turn, steering back the way they had come. But please give the following matter some consideration. I nodded. Zeal say 'more use on end of machine'." "I'm sorry." "Zeal got temper. As I said, I want you to understand what happens next. All we know now is that asking questions could get us into serious trouble. Whoever it was, I wished them well. This was a scheduled interception always was. I've seen shuttles ready for launch; that's all. None of these readings had given the slightest cause for real concern. It told her to be careful of the power she now carried in her hand. He would do their work, he would accept their deal, such as it was. He steered Tyrant away and left the aircraft to blunder into the net. "I've already said too much, Inigo." "But if we're going to die out here, it doesn't matter what you tell me, does it? "I say we kill the fucker now." I wiped the blood from my lips. These two men..." "They're both men?" Fury nodded. I'm surrounded by a low wall of rubble and battlefield junk, shoved hastily into place to act as a screen. More often than not it leaves us only with a reminder of what it can do. Text and graphics cascaded through the air in a flicker of primary colors. You were how old, exactly?" "Forty years. We have rumours of plague. "It was always going to be a tall order explaining those away." "By the time I went under," Nero said, "most of us knew the score. Purslane tightened her hold, anchoring herself to me. Merlin walked down the ramp, one cautious step at a time. But if I could shake it I would. Rasht selected an area of ground that looked stable. No surprise, either: the deepest cracks in the structure now reached a quarter of the way to the surface, and they were too wide to be repaired. "Was Fescue among them?" "Yes," Burdock said. We've gone through the same process with eight or nine others, since then." Greta looked at me, her head cocked against her hands. In our bickering diversity, we honour that impulse." I paused and laced my hands, nodding at the nearest faces. It was the culminative project of two million years of human advancement: the enterprise that would the tax the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the most powerful lines. No, now that I've had time to think things over I realise that I don't envy her in the slightest. It had been just before Shirin left Mars, so the companion had been a farewell present as well as a birthday gift. That's what they killed for, isn't it. That was when I plunged the other knife into his shin, and twisted. "Hirz—you may go ahead." She reached out and touched the frame, covering the eleven-sided figure with her palm. You'll have to stay here and wait for the flier. Now go ahead and press the other answer—the one you settled on originally—and we'll get Forqueray back to base camp." The Ultra glared at him. The damage inflicted on me by the weapon was severe—enough to kill my occupant—but not enough to destroy me. But in one field we still reign supreme: entertainment, which in this future means computer simulations. Again, I should have seen it sooner. My virching rig isn't much. Celestine —you wanna take a look at this? And the neural modifiers—Trintignant supervised their installation. Just like old times... "Damn you," Voi said. The child looked back for a moment, then followed the man through the gap. We put ourselves at considerable risk to get you to safety. Felka's activities were increasingly directed to these opening cracks in the structure; instructing the crippled structure to divert energy and raw materials to these critical failure points. "It'll be a squeeze, even with the lighter suits—except for Hirz, of course." "What's the air like in here?" I asked. Had to be pretty close, too. Huge enigmatic machines that prowl the outskirts of Mars, left mainly to their own devices. It was hierarchically layered, with clear modular specialisation for sensory processing, motor control, abstract reasoning and memory management. She may still have died or been moved on. "How long have you been in Tango Oscar, Annabel?" I ask, as I work my past way the shallow, smokeblackened remains of what was once a glorious air-conditioned shopping mall. I knew myself to be much older, but of my life before the implants I recalled only fragments; shattered pieces that I did not quite know how to reassemble." He slowed and turned back to me, the dulling orange light on the horizon catching the side of his face. But I make baby stronger. Had she? I think he wanted to conceal something that did happen. We have all the equipment we need aboard the shuttle." Hirz looked around uneasily. I didn't know whether she meant Yakov-for trying to escape-or me, for trying to escape-or me, for trying to stop him on my own. But that makes you think. It caught and digested them, using the energy from the chemical breakdown of their biomass to drive itself to another place in the house. Lecythus might have been isolated for tens of thousands of years, but languages older than that had been cracked by brute computation, and Merlin had no doubt that Tyrant would get there in the end, provided he gave it enough material to work with. "But it just seems... I was expecting something to slow us down. "You don't have to," "He put the gun or not?" "I could get into trouble just looking at it." He put the gun back onto the cloth. It's different now though, isn't it? Did he sense that I was intending to leave? "You, Grisha?" The question seemed not to offend him. \*\*\* BY THE TIME I reached the lock they were already through the first stage of the cycle. Who knows what that does to something?" "You certainly don't," Galenka said. Even from a Demarchist standpoint." There was a chirp from the console, Galiana signalling them. The nanotech contamination, the traces you picked up from the cave wall, was clearly the main cause of the systemic failure. So Clavain's call from the surface could be quietly ignored; spysat imagery doctored to make it seem that he had never reached the dyke...had in fact been repelled by Conjoiner treachery. I recognise this place. New technologies, new ways of doing things. "I know the Cockatrice was attacking another ship...how did you do this?" "We didn't. We need the extra space in the Soyuz. I just hoped I hadn't set the stun dose too high. The ramparts of Mimas—Saturn rings bisecting the sky like a scimitar. "And if he bores of this orgy, or game, or conversation, and extricates himself prematurely?" "That'll be trickier to handle," I admitted. I just hope I haven't done more harm than good, with the things I've showed you." "That again," Minla said, with a weary sigh. Not until we're under way at full power, in any case." "And then?" "He'd be angry. Even with Ivanov in his vegetative state..." "I am Ivanov," I say, but with a chink of doubt opening inside me. But only today, I thought: only since I left Happy Jack flopping and oozing on the carpet. Main? That's the deal." "I'm glad for Steiner, then." Nero shook her head emphatically. As always, Blood Spire did not oblige us with an instant judgement on the choice we had made. "There are, or were, markings on the bullet casing. The red world was smaller than most terrestrials, with a single small moon. The rock was riddled with the usual number of weaknesses, the scars and fractures of ancient collisions. Not now, he thought. If one Gentian member had it in them to do something bad, then it could be presumed that we all did. The effect was everything I could have wished for, and I tried to look as quietly pleased with myself as I ought to have been. It had gone instantly silent, suggesting that it had suffered a fatal or damaging collision. Break the glass and let the contents drain into the pond. It was obvious. Give me a moment..." Childe stared at it, and I watched as the lasers from his eyes washed over the labyrinthine engravings. "Where are we?" "We're at one end of one of those connections. Clavain sketched a porthole in the wall with his fingertip, outlining a rectangle which instantly became transparent. Outside, a stray dog with mad eyes yellows the snow under a lamp-post. The strands extended back to the larger form of which Teterev was only an embellishment. As I said, Vratsa and I have spoken on many occasions. It held another version of the alien animal, but one that was much tinier than the first. But how would you like to meet again later? "No, but this place smells deserted. "I'm feeling a little strange." "Blame Childe. It would take several hours for the implant to make the fine sensorimotor adjustments that gave the emperor true fluidity of movement, and allowed him to feel as if he was fully inhabiting the puppet organism. Walkabout mode, that's what they called it. Occasionally, too swiftly for Clavain to be sure, it shifted toward a mandala of elusive symmetry, only to dissolve into the flickering. ing network. Haven't you ever had vague feelings of déjà vu coming out of the surge tank?" "Sometimes." I admitted. "Show up in the mess room at eight: Nero'll be there with a toolkit and work gear. "But you still need to step things up." "We're aware of that." she answered testily. Administering oolsonous adent was simpler—at least that way they didn't have a body to dispose of." "Do you know about the impostor?" I asked. Argyle said the Spire didn't prevent anyone from leaving provided they hadn't attempted to access a new room." "Try it and see," Hirz said. Just when I was beginning to feel the itch of panic, a man emerged from the chalet, rubbing his hands briskly. "No, this is the reward for carrying the burden. But I've been there. We can't carry on much further with these, anyway—and I don't particularly fancy continuing with no armour at all." Celestine turned back to the frame. He smiled again before answering me. I knew it, because I'd seen the same look on the faces of men hanging from the sheriff's killing poles." "Did you talk to him?" "I asked him if he wanted some water. The woman says: "Give us Mike, and we'll leave you be. That's why I came to see you, all that time ago. Well, when I'm done here—done with my tour of Earth—I'll surrender this body and return my controlling intelligence to the vehicle. She knew that ship with animal cunning, as if the entire twisted and blackened warren was a lair she had made for herself. His voice came out raw, as if he had been in a loud bar the edge. I needed to know who it was. Also something of a celebrity?" "We're quite different, I think you'll find." "They say Maria's on her way back to Earth. "You sound like you know all this?' "Because Argyle survived. Now, suddenly, I had the sense that we were outside something—that we had punched beyond some containing sphere, defined only in vague arcs and knots of curdled gas, where the interstellar gas density increased sharply. But it wasn't there yet. Feel miserable about it? I never had that with the earlier piece. He stepped over a body that happened to be lying on the floor, scuffing his boot heel against the chest. "I don't care," I said. "Give her some dignity in death. It always has been. It came through a wormhole. That he had allowed her to place the companion in the time capsule, and to record her thoughts before doing so—her angry, bitter, wounded thoughts—was a privilege and a secret she would always carry with her. Rewired her think and feel like them." "I'm sorry," I began. "Miss two offered slots, you could be on the ground for days." "No one wants to get back home sooner than I do," Ray said. Just another machine, really. Let's find out what happened." I paged through dozens and dozens of entries. "No," Clavain said, through clenched teeth and the distorting membrane of his mask. The Great Work was about the herding of stars in numbers too large to comprehend: the movement of hundreds of millions of stars across distances of tens." "We should look into the cave, anyway," Rasht said. Those worms have been dormant—waiting—for years, but said." they've always been there. My own sensors haven't seen them at all. And if they didn't have to deal with them at all. Once in a while it raised her from the shadows, when her judgement was required. Tens of thousand, maybe more. But only one hand presented itself; my left arm had been curtailed neatly above the wrist. Did I ever screw up once?" "No," I admitted. The tide consumed her to the chest, taking her backpack, then absorbed her helmet. The view lurched, zooming outward. So, while Baikonur gave him a certain number of housekeeping tasks to attend to, Yakov had more time to himself than Galenka or I. And I know I can't just sit here doing nothing. "Almost everyone's asleep. I struggled, but then he put his finger to my lips and told me to shush." "If I made trouble, if I did not do what he wanted, Garret would tell his father some lie about mine. Periodically he inhaled from a glass pipe, connected to a miniature refinery of bubbling apparatus placed before him on the table. No one to orchestrate the intricate, flickering web of the global finance system. Save for a kind of fence, stretching from one horizon to the other, there is no indication that humans have ever been there. "If it was meant to work, we'd have found a way. "I lied; submitted a false strand. Real accidents were happening out there, but there wasn't much that anyone could do about it until the helicopters could get airborne. It had to begin small, so that they had time to work the wrinkles out of the technology. I was on the Durham road, riding a mule, when he fell from the sky. She hadn't been born into it. It's one of the things that helps me sleep at night, knowing you're not far away." "I'll only ever be a few skipspace transits from home, sir." "You have my agreement, of course—as if I was ever going to say no. The green was closer to turquoise now; the readouts and controls minimalist in layout, displaying only the most mission-critical systems. Then the seadragon rammed the rig again, and this time the jolt was sufficient to unfoot him. People had gathered on the gondola's rear observation platform. I am thinking what to do next when something tugs at my hem. What remains of my own mesh-suit layer should be more than capable of detecting intentions, the merest twitch of a neuromuscular impulse, and giving me appropriate feedback. Forqueray?" The Ultra nodded and tossed the float-cam upwards. He wiped a hand across his sharp beardless chin. They're our problem, Merlin, not yours." He'd heard stories about the regressives, but had dismissed them as rumour until now. You did something to the chest-pack?" "Told it to turn off the distress beacon, and give me enough power to allow for communication. There was a collective gasp from the revellers, even though no one seriously expected me to come to harm. We were between systems, in deep interstellar space. The gun quivered in my hand, and then leapt free of it with painful force, nearly snapping my fingers as it escaped my grip. I'm right here, Mike. "This is for you." Nesha takes it warily. "That would put us about ten days off our schedule, wouldn't it?" I try and remember what Greta said to me the first time. "I can't say I entirely blame her either." "You don't?" Childe asked. All we knew for sure was that it had appeared, accompanied by a flash of energy, in the middle of the solar system. This one had a head of hair. \*\*\* WE MOVE, THE KX-457 and I. I know you have the emotional strength to get through this. Should you come upon someone who is ill, you need only place the bracelet around their wrist for a whole day and—unless they have the jangling man's ichor in them—they will be cured." "What of the other things? Even though we'd spent all those months in the ship, they didn't want us contaminating each other's accounts." "So you never really got to know what happened to the others." "I know that they both died. Childe and Forqueray regarded the corpse uneasily, while Trintignant knelt down and examined it in more detail. At some point, frustrated by my failure to get this story off the ground, I walked away from it and realised I need to get back to something I actually had a chance of writing. I'd made no error with the settings, and that left only one possibility: something I actually had a chance of writing. had spearheaded. But when the flier spoke to me, I sensed an awful hopelessness, as if he knew things were not going to go the way of his people." "I'm frightened now." "You should be. "We have contact," she said, but I knew from her tone of voice that it wasn't all good news. Part of me would love to think that this is all part of your Thousandth Night plans, Campion." "Something awful has happened," I said. \*\*\* KATERINA'S WITH SUZY when they pull me out of the surge tank. Then it sorts it all out and makes me fill in the gaps." "Sounds horrendous," Corax said, pulling a face as if he had just bitten into a lemon. Comms gear, radiators, docking mechanisms and modular cargo containers ringed the ship around its gently in-curving waist. She had no answer. "In the end it got too hard to come up with something you'd find difficult. Does that mean you made progress?" "Decide for yourself." He followed Minla's instruction. Is it real, Captain? "There's no sense worrying them about their families, either. The one that will screw up the rest of your life, the one that creates the ghosts you see haunting the shadows of company bars across the whole Bubble. It was the work of Yinning and Tarabulus, the latest hot properties. Never having been shot before, I wasn't remotely ready for the pain. Grechko looks at her, then shakes his head. I suspected it was bluff. Hold a wake? When big stuff like this goes wrong, who do you think fixes it? Celestine made the square freeze, and then slide diagonally, leaving a copy of itself to which it was joined at the corners. He was giving me something in return for that kindness. The engine hasn't failed completely, but certain reaction pathways have now become computationally intractable, which is why you're seeing the drastic loss in drive efficiency. As I changed from ship to ship, I attracted an unavoidable degree of attention. Its armored hand was big enough to crush a chair. Sometimes they manage." "It's breaking up," Nero said. None of the sleepers had survived the rapid revival, but even if they had, there would have been no option but to euthanise them shortly afterwards. It could have come from a human building." 'Then why are they getting smaller?" Childe asked. "No. He had shards of intelligence—hints, rumours, whisperings. It was bigger than any moving thing she had ever seen with her own eyes. But he couldn't have begun to predict their dazzling complexity. It's Martian history. "Maybe we should talk to Burdock," I said. There was a connection, trivial or otherwise, that he was missing. "You shouldn't have done that. "Childe was wrong to do this without our consent, but—given the situation we find ourselves in—the idea makes sense." "Whose side are you on?" Hirz said, backing away with a look of righteous fury in her eyes. Things got a little faster after that. The swimming pool connection was another. "She is dead now, Captain Van Ness. We've been around too long to have been the product of some brief, ingenious golden age. Terraforming's very important work. But I wish time and tide had never brought us together. The slope-sided plinth rose two metres from the floor, putting figure just above our heads. There are thorns all the way down, spaced every three or four meters—we should be able to use them for grabs, even if we can't get traction on the rest of it. You could hand me over now." "I could. There was no fear, no apprehension. "And what exactly would it take for me to reach that stage?" "A simple procedure." Oh yes, he understood that part well enough. This isn't the first time I've handled this kind of situation. "You want to cut into my skull, while I'm still in this thing?" "Minimally invasive intervention, Mike. Why lie about that? Greta had suggested we meet for breakfast and catch up on old times. Do you really want to be aboard when that happens?" "I still need to be here. Now there's no trace that he was ever here. "Mer-lin risible plastrum," Malkoha said. "You think this is a mistake," he said eventually. It was something big and mechanical, something big and mechanical, something that whined and whirred and made pneumatic hissing sounds. "We took some damage and they decided to wake me first. Kathrin returned the weapon to her pocket. "This is not real. That's a promise. I knew that the mission planners had subjected the Progress to every eventuality, every scenario, they could dream up. Seagulls have been attracted by the flickering colours, pecking away huge pieces of his face. For a long time nothing at all happened. Greta hadn't just lied to me about Suzy and Ray. Even with the money in my account, I was just a rock cutter. It was a cave in the form of a near-perfect hemisphere, the great domed roof arching a clear three hundred metres from the floor. Some were only as hard and cruel as their office demanded. Ingvar keeps stomping her feet and flapping her arms. Edges and ridges of the pattern pushed out centimetres from the wall. "This isn't right," I said to myself. "But who would really benefit from the flushing out of Phobos? It's not the right one. Not only did it not match what he had imagined from the vantage point of Deimos, but it jarred against his predictions based on what he had seen so far of the nest. If the pain is generated in the head, using a reverse-field trawl, our defences are useless." She looked at me with a sudden hard intensity, as if daring me to imagine that will buy you favour with the emperor? "Then let's hear it. I study the fluid in the woman's drip and imagine that it is pure water. I don't know. It was bad luck for the crew of the Cockatrice. He looked at the people surrounding him, and then back at me, aghast. Gaunt forgot all about his planned accident. "Over time the cost of the process would have decreased, becoming available to people of lesser means. No one quibbled about my experience on the Adriatic seawall." "That was different. It wasn't just the familiarity of the process, but the man himself. When the time is ready, the ship will allow you aboard. "He's the one." We followed the onlookers to the balcony. "There is something, though," Purslane added. It's a very big thing and we're very small and a long way from home." "This is also a very alien big thing. The emotions I feel...the things that go on in my head...simply don't map onto anything you'd recognise as love, or affection, or even friendship. The house's architecture was haphazard: whatever basic symmetry it might once have had was lost under a profusion of additions and modifications. And it is about me, but it's also about you." He put down the glass. There was a red panel, lit up as if it was some kind of emergency stop. You couldn't live long like that, of course. "The bright light represents its totality: the unity of Transenlightenment. Sometimes when I think of her I see a human being in all her dimensions, as real as anyone I've ever known. "Put this around you," she said. But I won't be in any more trouble than if I do manage to sneak aboard. He wrapped it around himself with gratitude, and felt some of the heat seep into his old bones. He lowered his voice to a hiss. Below, but slightly off to one side, was a thick metal cage in the form of a horizontal cylinder. Trintignant, I saw, had done very well. Before very long Zima unveiled the first of his entirely blue murals. My learning continued through my early space missions. "Don't let him get to you too much," Samphire said. I turned around, confronted by the sight of Mister Zeal blocking the main catwalk, advancing toward us with a heavy gun in his human hand: not a tranquiliser this time. Yet now the Spire has decreed that we must discard that particular mental crutch. "Just you and me, and an impenetrable shell of alien matter between us and the outside world. "It isn't much warmer in here." damage. When the last of them had crossed the threshold, the rear door—the one we had all come through—slid shut. Within five minutes there were twenty-three of us outside, our suits bulked out with armour and antiquated weapons. No. I was always hindered." "Until, perhaps, now," I said. "Mainly solar-type stars. It is yours as well." She had touched it already, but this time Kathrin felt a sudden tingle as her fingers wrapped around the hilt. "You'll destroy the city? We are. As the light wavered down from the overlying sea, she kept seeing faces appear in the windows, brief and spectral like paper cutouts held there for a moment. In the distance, a glass mannequin cycled from empty table to empty table, playing "Asturias" on a glass guitar. But then again, we were from the Lachrimosa, which was hardly a perfumed garden. And the girl had been ripped away from that, forced to come to terms with existence as a solitary mind, an island once more. The rules have changed. Either they sent me a duff vector or there's more than one incursion going on." "Won't be the first time. "No communication tool in history has ever been a single-edged sword." "And that excuses you, does it?" Clausen asked. Any bright ideas, Childe?" "There's a way," he said. Yes, I know you've a lot on your mind. We go back even further, you and I." Through the window the landscape rushed by. "Please, sir, just respect my wishes in this matter." "Of course, Mercurio. The surgeons extracted most of it from the puppet, and they've promised me that the few remaining traces that entered the koi ponds won't cause any ill effects. That was just an educated guess papered over the vast, yawning chasm of our ignorance. It was two hundred kilometres away, but still ate up more than half the sky. They were just trying to get away from us." "I was having some fun. Their jibs were spread wide, and the smooth lines of their hulls were gnarled and disfigured with the cryptic alien runes of the routing syntax. Each rune of the script was formed from a matrix of millions of

hexagonal platelets. It was only when he handed over the third consignment, on the third day, that he mentioned the materials he needed to repair his ship. Unquestionably. "Hey," Hirz said. The pilot shouted, "Minla," at her approach, a single word that conveyed both warning and something more intimate, as if the older man might have been her father or grandfather. It was a haphazard jumble of several hundred mostly white, mostly single-storey buildings, arranged with the randomness of toy blocks littering a floor. My weight climbed smoothly, until I was certain we were exceeding half a gee and still accelerating. extensions that should serve me well for the next four or five hundred years. That has to mean something, doesn't it?" "Yeah," Hirz said snidely. I looked around, all my fears confirmed. The mere fact that the future is not the same as the present...that's totally unacceptable." "It all ends," I say, keeping my voice low. Pieces of integument flaked away easily— had we been out there in our EVA suits, we could have ripped them out by hand. "I'll accept your help after I've been injured, but if you're severely mistaken, Doctor." "Amen to that," Hirz said. But here's the thing. We all stared at the door, willing it to begin sliding open. The murals were undeniably impressive. The sky is a hard primary blue, as if it's been daubed in poster paint. Because in the back of my mind, even then, there had been the possibility that we might end up sleeping together. Your remark that our sun contains a 'nuclear-burning core'. Always figured he'd made the wrong decision, sticking with us rather than going back into the box. But it was much too late to do anything about it now. Drawn to this one place, and repelled by it—as you nearly were." "I wish we had been." "And usually the fear is sufficient. An open-ended string would have collapsed under its own appalling self-gravity, so the ends had been." entire ensemble revolving fast enough to stabilise the neutron stars against falling inward. If they don't, we all die." "We, as in...?" "You, me. Nero obviously did, and I presume you must have done so as well. "It's over, so you may as well deal with it. You'll die—not just your puppet, but you, floating above us—and you'll take most of the Great House with you." He blinked, struggling to process my words. "Campion," Fescue pushed. Well, we'll get to that. "It looks rather like the bullet you showed me before, the one with the inscription." "That's what it is. But I smile and say nothing. I couldn't guess her age. Until recently Gentian Line had been isolationist, but some of the others had formed loose the others." associations. I hope you're all right. Beyond that I knew nothing about it. Are we out beyond the Rift?" I can hear the fear. Shards of the Wall, as big as icebergs, had fractured away and now lay like vast sheets of broken glass across the regolith. Authority won't care about that. I can feel the strain this engine is under, just holding things together as they are." "I'm not underestimating it. It was in the back to run my own check on Yakov. Mars was everything. Who would really want to trudge into a cave, on an alien planet, if they had a choice in the matter? This infestation must have come from a batch with some subroutines we never even guessed about. "This is serious." "It could be." "It must be. "Well, it doesn't matter now. "The glass in the dome is smart. "We were just after information," Purslane said. Pay is shit and a monkey could do it." "Window cleaning. You cannot avoid Garret forever." "I can take the other bridge." "That'll make no difference, now that he has his eye on you." Kathrin looked down at her hands. "I could have reached Inigo and pressed that control box while the nervous impulse from his brain was still working its way down his forearm. I closed my eyes and directed a command at my own ship. I'm inclined to the view that Vratsa was just as much a puppet as that body you're wearing." "Why the bullet, though? "My dad said people reckoned the Winged Man came down hundreds of years ago." "It did." "Then you can't have been there, Widow Grayling." "Because if I had been, I should be dead by now? To his right, one of the cranes began to sway in an alarming fashion, the scaffolding of its tower buckling. The monkey, still leashed to Rasht, had no choice but to continue. Pass me the iron: we'll sew this one up before things get worse." "An attack?" I asked. I had played no part in converting them, but it would not have taxed Zeal to do the surgery on his own. Captain wants us to secure for thrust in less than an hour. After emerging from the soon-to-be-mothballed skipspace portal I had to complete the final leg of the journey at sublight speed, accruing years of irritating timelag. With the patient sewn up, rebooted and restored to consciousness, I rubbed my back as Zeal spoke softly to the man, answering his questions and nodding now and then. Seagulls and yellow-headed gannets wheeled around the warm air vents, or took swooping passes under the rig's platform, darting between the massive weatherstained legs, mewing boisterously to each other as they jostled for scraps. "And we must take pains to ensure none of these secrets fall into Shadowland hands." going to keep getting smaller?" "I don't know. IN BABELSBERG EVEN SPACE PROBES have Twitter accounts now (if you're reading this more than six months in the future, incidentally, please delete "Twitter" and substitute whatever social media tool is the New Thing) and it occurred to me that it wouldn't be too much of a stretch for space probes to start handling their own PR, fielding questions, doing the chat show circuit and so on. The first was: what did she mean: not now? "If the musical box was in the Matryoshka, then I was right about its origin," Nesha says. But the majority, she said, did eventually come to some kind of accommodation with the truth, however faltering and painful the process. "Keep it, if it amuses you." He closed his hand around the stone. The Coalition was suffering badly at the time and could not afford the propaganda blow of losing such a valuable arm of its research programme. "I'd heard they existed, but never really believed it until now." "Start believing it," Zeal grunted. Steiner would much rather stay with us. The rings of Neptune. Celestine stepped into the darkness. "Easy now, and we'll make it nice and quick when it's your turn. But if he was going to follow Galiana's exodus, it could not be with the sense of shame he now felt in abandoning Felka. As always, the narrowing was imperceptible from room to room, but after five or six it could not be ignored. We're safe in the ship—life quarters are well shielded—but outside, you're looking at the strongest magnetic field this side of the Crab pulsar. We looked alike, had roughly the same augmentations, and our dreadlocks confirmed that we had completed the same modest number of crossings. Those were the hours when he would have done anything for companionship, including returning to the Cohort and the tribunal that undoubtedly awaited him. There are channels, lines of enquiry. The mapping between the Realm and base-reality, it's not as simple as you'd think. The pace slowed as the edge came nearer, and then the point of view dipped, so that Yukimi was looking down, down at her chest-pack, which looked ridiculously old and clunky, down at her heavy, dust-stained boots, down at the Martian soil, and the point where—just beyond her toes—it fell savagely away. None of us dared speak again, unwilling to begin anything—even a word—for fear that something like the ball would return. "I'm worried, Campion. "You can't imagine how odd this makes me feel, Minla. The note stipulated that no recording materials were to be brought, not even a pen and paper. I only played back a tiny part of what's stored in that helmet. Is she much older than you?" "Six years," Yukimi said. Once in a while he'd dig into the wide leather pocket sewn across the front of his apron and come out with some new blade or tool. As he led me to the observation bubble, I finally found the nerve to ask the question I had been meaning to put to him ever since I met the girl in the corridor, several weeks ago. "Then you would have perfect neural equilibrium... shall I do it?" "You want to, don't you?" "I admit I have always been offended by asymmetry." I felt my other leg; the flesh and blood one felt so vulnerable, so unlikely to last the course. "I know you, Campion. It didn't take very long for people to work out who she was. That's two billion sleepers, near as it matters." Gaunt shook his head. But I happen to know the way their minds work back in Baikonur. Had she not felt the power of the weapon, she might have dismissed the widow's story as the ramblings of an old woman. Fundamental stellar physics. The injured worm showed cybernetic workings where its hide had been flensed away by weapons impacts. "Challenging little devil," I said lightly, trying to calm things down. I'm also pretty damned good at my job." Hirz paused to swig down some wine. Perception, navigation and autonomous problem-solving were the three things that most interested the young man. "And?" "I'm staying." "Good." She finished drying off one of the cups. Flat on the deck now, Zeal lowered his heel onto my chest. We were still holding hands, two lovers sharing an intimacy. I mean before that. I've done nothing wrong. I'll find those Conjoiners. "It's impressive." "There are a hundred monuments like this on Lecythus," Minla told him, drawing her cloak tighter around herself. Rationally, we had nothing to fear: if Burdock had the means to tamper with our heads, he could have already forced hallucinations on us by now, or killed us effortlessly. "I've seen some of Maria's transmissions. Periodically, the entire building would rattle with the droning arrival of another aircraft or dirigible. There were the foreshortened symbols of our routing syntax. I'll raise the island's own screen in ten seconds. The pilot took one of these smashed vials and held it up before Merlin's face, honey coloured fluid draining down his fingers. They could have been dropped there, like a discarded doll. But that isn't what happened. "Oh God..." Hirz began. Still, the monkey did not have much say in its fate. Beyond that? It's bad—one of the worst revivals I've ever gone through. Then the fluid took more of Galenka. Then get me the fuck out of here. I shouldn't have deceived myself that he'd have changed." I bristled. That's easy. Not just for Russia, but for Earth. "It's so good of you to come. If I had any intention of killing myself, you'd already made it easy they took control of that rocket factory. Years later, deep space radar had picked it up drifting powerless on a sun-circling orbit. The plan had been to make multiple forays into the Matryoshka, until we'd exhausted our hydrazine reserves. I don't hate her, even now. "I get it. Could she begin to guess how close he had come to actually doing it? They all have heavy black coats on, with black leather gloves. That, or take the euthanasia option. You're coming with us, after all." She paused. A beacon to our bright monkey cleverness. I saw Celestine drop to the ground, one arm pressed around the stump of another, blood spraying from the wound despite the pressure she was applying. By splitting the atom, or even forcing atoms to merge, we believe that we can construct weapons of almost incalculable destructive force. It was customary to sprinkle harmless entertainments and life-support mechanisms ended and their alien anatomies commenced. Extremes of anger could even cause the maze to form a closed-loop around the hapless player, so that they had no choice but to wander in circles until they calmed down. But I ran a full blood-scrub on him after the accident, pumped him full of cryoprotectant. There was one door leading out of the corrugated-metal shed. They were coming to the edge of something, a sharp drop in the terrain. It had the flimsy, makeshift look of something from the dawn of technology. I wouldn't say I was any less happy than the last time we met." "Well, that's good," I said. What if the moon's an escape vehicle? But Skanda made me wonder. "Keep us astern by a clear two kilometres. Hundreds of millions? He might not be an ogre, but he couldn't possibly grasp what she was going through. The bullet itself was a goal-seeking autonomous missile, a very sophisticated device. The door was open now, but none of us had yet stepped across the threshold. I can't see anything. My sense is that it will not go well for this woman. "No fields; not even a minor perturbation of Golgotha's own magnetosphere. Slowly he became confident with the work allotted to him. "It's just an heirloom." The heirloom was a bone gun: Kalarash Empire tech: very old, very difficult to pick up in security scans. "You weren't always an artist." catching Kanto if he comes back." "Stay where you are, my dear," Rasht said, addressing the monkey wherever it might be. "I don't know if I know it." "You probably don't. It was as if a smoky veil had been lifted from my vision, permitting thousands of new details and nuances of hue and shade to blast through. "This is the new assistant," Khorog said. That's a universal truth, a universal fact of life. To some extent, that's in your control. They were black and white images of the Skyland air mass, shot from increasing altitude, until the curve of Lecythus's horizon became pronounced. "What do you know about the Great Work?" "Everything," he said. One day—after a longer than usual gestation period—Zima unveiled a mural that had something different about it. "You believe me, don't you Dimitri?" "I'll see you later, Yakov." "At least let me talk to Baikonur." I placed the palm of my hand against the glass. They had individual personalities, but those personalities, but those personalities were more like the blurred identities of atoms in a metallic solid. Picked clean as a bone. "I'm going to retrace my steps back to the room where this happened. If the damage to the Waynet becomes greater, I may not even be able to reach the next system." "Then you must do what you think is right. "As are we all," Trintignant answered. "The cam—" Forqueray said. But Lenka's suggestion made the best of a bad situation. But nothing about Burdock suggested a criminal streak. And the purple was spreading in a mist across the nest. He barely recognised his own hands. "From my sister, Shirin. "Those sleepers don't make points." "The ship's gone," I said. Then we can take you back to Tango Oscar and get you fixed up.' "There's nothing that needs fixing." "Mike..." she starts to say something, then seems to abandon her train of intent. Especially when those robots were not powered down. And as his confidence in his abilities. Whether you conquer the Spire or retreat from it—assuming, of course, that it does not kill you—there will surely come a time when you will desire to return to your prior form. What you did with those whales..." She shook her head in undisquised admiration. "We made it back." Suzy looks back at the starscape, airbrushed across her surge tank in luminous violet and yellow paint. Otherwise the colours aren't unrealistic. Instead of sending my body to another planet, I'd piggyback a host body that was already there." I shrugged. But we were in a mood to take what we needed from the Cockatrice. "I'm not going to listen to this." "STAY IN CAGE. It may be fourteen years ago, but there isn't a day when I don't remember my father and wish he was still with us." As he was being propelled across the apron, Merlin looked up at the woman's face and compared it against his memories of the little girl he had known twenty years ago. They find a solution, but usually it isn't the optimum one. In truth, Skanda made it too easy. "That won't work. I want to meet them." "Don't raise your hopes. I had delayed my receipt of the announcement, not wishing to be distracted from the main business. And as the decades wore on, and the envoys failed to justify their invention, my uncle grew steadily more maudlin and bitter." "I'd never have guessed," Celestine said. "And totally fucking unprovable." I decide I may as well humour this woman for a few more seconds. "Let's go and sit on the balcony. In that moment he felt the first visceral sense of the time that had passed. It would be no good lying unconscious, bleeding to death. Just like Dowitcher, the man who gave your father the whetstone." "It was just a stone." "So you said. "So those cultures stumble through the dark, making the same mistakes over and over again, constantly reinventing the wheel. KX-457 would have detached the pod from its belly recess, laid it on the ground, and—after a preliminary medical assessment—slid me inside. Because Childe and I go back a long way, and I can't stand to give up on a challenge once I've accepted it." "Old-fashioned bullheadedness, in other words," Celestine said. "I thought we destroyed the Wall; completely killed its systems." "No," Galiana said. The worm returned its attention to Clavain and Voi. "Dead ahead, where she said she was. While she is in school, I go to the community tent where the water thief waits her verdict. She responded with the tiniest encouraging nod. But they didn't have back-up from the Cockatrice and—judging by the way the battle proceeded—they seemed handicapped by more than just the lack of covering fire. Even then it was three gees. "Inside the vehicle?" I reply, sensing his meaning. As shipmaster, it was my duty to give Captain Van Ness the widest choice of options. If you distrust me so completely, why did you ever agree to my visit? It'll be because we won the war, and we can all wake up again. The inhabited aerial land masses were all inverted compared to their supposed positions in the original sky, requiring that they must have been flipped over after the shattering. The only rule was that when we emerged from our ships we must assume the forms of adult humans, and that we must bring our minds with us. While I walked back to the Blue Goose, I thought of the message racing ahead of me. We knew there was something over. All the while this was going on, the enemy continued their long-range softening-up bombardment. Purslane stepped onto the pane. "We don't usually spend so long in frostwatch." "But you're alive and well." "So it would seem." "We've prepared a reception area in the compound. But if Van Ness had joined her...if Van Ness had joined her....if Van Ness had joined her...if Van Ness had joined wondered how she could be so certain. That's when we'll really know it's time to get out of here." Merlin forced a smile. Clearly this is fucked-up. It has structure, resilience, its own reserves of energy. It was a present from Shirin." He moved to open the book. "Hey, listen. "I saw you with Purslane earlier," he said. We had made it back through perhaps one third of the rooms when he slithered from her grip, thudding to the floor. Twenty thousand distinct branches of humanity had returned to alien seas, each adopting a different solution to the problem of aquatic life. You can stop now, where you are, with an idea of the truth. "What do you mean, not coming back? "Is this how you heal people?" she asked. According to Lachrimosa's records there was nothing in the native ecosystem larger than a krill, but the biomass load was enough to push the atmosphere away from equilibrium, meaning that it carried enough oxygen to support our own greedy respiratory systems. "I have a trace on his suit. It had been an effort to squeeze through the last door; only Hirz was oblivious to these difficulties. I have no choice but to work with Zeal." "No," she said. People came from miles around to see it, Kathrin: from as far away as Carlisle or York." "Didn't they get bored with it, if it was always there?" "It was always changing, though. "Have you been here during iron." "What happened to this man?" I asked, feeling I ought to be showing interest in more than just the mechanics of the operation. To operate the Progress in real-time? Never the brightest of souls...but diligent, gentle, and beyond any question a hard worker. I tell the boy to hold out his hand. We called them the Advocates. "Oh, I do. But you have good fingers. "Damn camera's sticking again. "It's the bullet, sir." "What about it?" I held the reconstructed item up for inspection, confident now that we were outside the reach of listening devices. Galiana had given him another breather mask, made him don lightweight chameleoflage armour, and then forced him to carry one of the smaller guns. Young galaxies crowding each other's heavens. "It helped, seeing a friendly face?" "Took my mind off the problem, that's for sure." "You'll get there in the end," she said. Clearly she had learned many psychological tricks: gambits and short cuts to assist the transition to mental wellbeing. The glass in them was dark like coal, but when the sheriff wore them, he could see at night like a wolf. Because I only had the metal hand, the rest of me still flesh and blood, he deemed me safe from her influence. Childe studied her with a peculiar watchfulness I had not observed before. The island had climbed out of what would have been Reunion's atmosphere remained. And at the end of it (if any of us lived that long), we would have something wonderful to show for it. "I'm trying to get some sense of what happened. I took out a tube of disinfectant and a roll of bandage for my gashed hand. "Tell me you don't feel a little freaked out, Dimitri." "Maybe a bit," I allowed. It was a telescopic docking tunnel, groping toward our ship. Our knives gave us power. We'd taken everything we needed from the pirates. \*\*\* "CLEAR," I CALLED from the porthole, as we undocked. These are very complex, expensive machines and they can operate themselves. "Do it!" he hissed. We left the ship with the hatch open, the last dribbles of air still venting from the hull. The one that met the Matryoshka." Silence follows. I chased after her, catching up with her easily before she reached the end of the next corridor. Then it was still. Perched on the rim of a crater in the middle distance, blocking off part of the nebula, was a tiny, blue square. "Are you following, Richard?" "I have no choice, do I?" "It's for the best." Seeing that I'm going to come without a struggle, Grechko nods at the man with the syringe to put it back in his pocket. Test the water thoroughly and don't let the koi back until you're certain they won't come to any harm." I paused, still trying to focus on what had just happened. I've still got plenty of reading to catch up on." Later—much later—Tyrant announced that they had reached orbit around Lecythus. The effect was exacerbated by the occasional high-altitude cloud that passed overhead, writhing in Golgotha's fast, thin jet-streams. The pilot nodded tentatively. And it's never been possible before, has it? Two million years of bioengineering and cyborg reshaping had equipped humankind for any possible before, has it? sinewy fusion of animal and machine: something that might have appealed in its grotesquerie to Childe's demented uncle. Out on the observation deck, he watched the lightning strobe from horizon, picking out the distant sentinels of other rigs, stark and white like thunderstruck trees on a flat black plain. We relaxed the safeguards." "I am not Doctor Kizim." "You'll come out of it, Georgi—trust me. And it'll be difficult for you for some time to come. She'd gone down much faster than I'd expected, as if she'd already been on her last reserves of strength. I provide some signatures, mouth a word or two to the onlookers, then bend myself into the limousine. So it lied and covered up the loss of Tychoplex. The gunshot sounds—the silver loom—even the ball itself—vanished. "They'd have to take me back, yes, if I presented myself to them. My suit ballooned around me, the seals and joints creaking with the pressure differential. But she's begun to regain some suit function now, and I don't think either of us will have any trouble returning to the lander." The Captain tried to speak. A chain of events in the Realm could have consequences up or down the timeline, as far as we're concerned." "I don't think I understand." She nodded to the window. "Are you lying to me?" need to be borne by my sponsoring agency, at a transnational level. The kit sold well, and a year later the young man offered it as a preassembled domestic robot. So why retaliate now?" "It's very simple. In that respect I may not have spoken truthfully. Clavain felt the shuttle lurch down sickeningly; no longer a flying thing but an exercise in ballistics. Their bellies were quilted in vast, glowing panels, tuned to match the real sky. So that, even if that particular clone did not solve the Spire, it would still be something with my genetic heritage that did. "Why her?" Greta asks. "I'm not sure of the yield," Fescue said to me, forcing each word out. "It's the same object, after a rotation." "The shadow changes that drastically?" "Start getting used to it, Richard." "All right." I realised she was still annoyed with me for touching her. Just hang on in there, they said. That's a no-brainer. It was not the hit of the reunion, and it did little to take the heat off Purslane. They wouldn't pay as much as some of the bigger titles, but some part of me liked the idea of going back to the old place. A man would have started drowning, but immersion in water posed no difficulties for me. "No, I didn't do this. Venus Deep and the reef cities of Europa. Why is that so damned important?" Something flashed on the console. I shall be sure to give your regards to Minla. I'm making a micro adjustment to the tension. He wore a high-necked leather coat which concealed much of the lower half of his face. I just hadn't expected it to happen to one of us, so soon in the mission. BEYOND THE AQUILA RIFT GRETA'S WITH me when I pull Suzy out of the surge tank. Zeal screamed as he fell. "Of course, we could always ask him." "Not until we know a bit more function of the surge tank." about what he's involved in." "You know," Purslane said. We put up too much of a fight, even after we've been boarded, the Cockatrice's crew may just decide to burn everything, sleepers included." "I know," I said, even though I didn't want to hear it. It's not that there's been any dramatic change in his behaviour, just that..." I completed her sentence for her: an annoying habit I'd spent the last million years trying to break. I know you risked trouble with Van Ness to make things easier in my cell. Our paths had hardly crossed during this latest carnival, but now he and I seemed doomed to meet each other every day. Dowitcher was playing a game with your father after all. And this isn't the hangar bay; ten or fifteen meters above the soil. The optics on the lasers had to be test-fired against specks of incoming interstellar dust, hoping that the Cockatrice didn't spot those pinpoint flashes of gamma radiation as the lasers found their targets. "I understand how bad it must have been, I said. It's something to live for, anyway. They can't do that if there are eight billion conscious minds holding them back." "So we sleep." "The artilects reported back to key figures, living humans who could be trusted to act as effective mouthpieces and organisers. "But it wasn't what I expected." "What did you learn?" Zima was a long time answering me. "That helmet I found? How did he know we wouldn't be able to go all the way with the larger ones?" I shrugged, a gesture that was now perfectly visible. You all right?" "Fine, thanks." She had rested less than three hours, but in weightlessness—even after an exhausting task—that was enough. As if our identities, our personalities and memories, were blurring. Look, we're both smart enough to understand that small changes in initial conditions can feed into a chaotic system in highly unpredictable ways. After a scandal involving experimentation on unconsenting subjects, Trintignant had been forced to pursue his work alone, his methods too extreme even for Calvin. I'm going to vent our air.' She let the air drain out through the release valve before opening the hatch. Sometimes they sensed something unusual in our relationship—the way she might appear to be leading her—and they would look at me, intently, before I stared into their eyes with the blinding red scrutiny of my vision. "That's enough for now." The fullness of Transenlightenment retreated, like a fading vision of Godhead. The hardest part was finding it in the first place. Abigail valued death as much as she valued life. By and large, they were ignored. It had quartered him: two quick opposed snips with the nightmarish scissors; a bisection followed an instant later by a hideous transection. The shape rhymed-there was no other word for it-with the surrounding panels and extrusions of the commons. I was nowhere near the middle of the ship. He was just a ghost until then, a half-spirit caught in dismal, drifting limbo between the weary living and the frozen dead. Almost, but not quite. "He's safe now, but keep a good grip on him." "What happens to Nesha?" I ask. It isn't going to make a damned bit of difference what flag you're saluting." "Thank you for the lecture. Before they silence me, and no one ever gets to find out." After an age she says: "You think it matters now for the lecture." Dimitri Ivanov? It's nothing serious—just a few bits and pieces buckled during the transit—but it means we're going to be here for another couple of days. Because of what I have become, and what I have done. What was she doing aboard the Cockatrice? We were lying like upended turtles, something like Earth-normal gravity pinning us to the floor The mission took its toll on me, but so did the facility. And you-well, no disrespect, Gaunt-but you're just not Val's type." "Maybe she'll find someone else has to die first, so that someone else has to die first, so that someone else." follow across the system, on Earth as well as Mars, if another war was allowed to happen. Maybe it wants to assess the foreign objects it detected, then work out how best to recycle or dispose of them." "Maybe it wants to assess the foreign objects it detected, then work out how best to recycle or dispose of them." always celebrated: a triumph of coincidence over the inhuman scale of the Galaxy. "But according to his strand he skipped the Veil altogether. You have a gift." What was the point in arguing further? It's twenty metres across, with a ceiling just high enough to let us stand upright. Clavain felt the vibration of each impact through the wall as he was dragged upwards. Nonetheless, I am liable to be something of an embarrassment. And yet it would have to climb even higher if it was to traverse the raised rim. Then the signal ended. Of course I am sad for these people—who wouldn't be? His grip felt like the cold clasp of a squid. "Just don't put too much faith in whatever gifts the Jugglers might have given me, Childe." "I won't. "You gonna be all right here on your own, until I'm straightened out?" "Something comes up I can't deal with, I'll let you know," Da Silva said. I have a plastic replacement if I just need to hook hold of things." "You don't like it very much." "It does what I ask of it." Weather made to let go of my hand, but her fingers remained in contact with mine for an instant longer than necessary. To begin with, the going was no harder than before. Whatever it is is making a slow, silent approach." My thoughts flicked to Weather. If the adults remembered that it was alien weaponry that had smashed their camouflaging sky (weapons deployed by aliens that were still out here) no hint of that uncomfortable truth was allowed into Minla's books. The snow melts from the land. He seemed resigned to his fate, as if this kind of solitary duty was something to think about what she had just said. "We haven't a moment to lose." \*\*\* PURSLANE AND I agreed that we should keep our meetings to a minimum from then on, in case we began to draw attention to ourselves. "I've done it now," she told it. The man we found the gun on was an uplift named Vratsa, one of the keepers in charge of the ponds." "I know Vratsa," the emperor said softly. I like this. They'd kill the poor bastard rather than admit that we were human. Instead, she had achieved a sort of stalemate. I suppose if pirates exist, then there's a good chance the Devilfish does as well." The hull shook again, but it was a different kind of vibration than before: more regular, like the steady chiming of a great clock. TROIKA THIS ONE WAS written for "Godlike Machines", an anthology edited by Jonathan Strahan about alien artefacts and other such enigmatic mega-structures. From a standpoint of composition and technique they were unquestionably brilliant. "Yes." "Would the AM always suggest one of the two possibilities?" "Go?" "Back to the main system." The scientists who'd had their missions redirected wanted a first look at the Matryoshka data," Nesha says. Not enough signal for clear breach. A figure was sitting on one of these benches as I was shown in. Go into the room behind you, the cupboard on the left. Finally, Trintignant gave us whiplike counterbalancing tails, and then caused our skins to envelop our metal parts, hardening here and there in lustrous grey patches of organic armour, woven from the same diamond mesh that had been used to reinforce Hirz's suit. "Keep playing with your toys, Campion. Most of the skaters have surrendered to the cold. In that sense, we did not really need the suits at all. Captain clever." "Where do you come into it?" I asked. "But you must concede that he did rather well, considering the impediments." \*\*\* FOR MOST OF its height Blood Spire was no thicker than a few dozen metres, and considerably narrower just below the bulb-like upper part. With nothing to do but wait for my journey to end, I sifted through the facts of the case, examining every aspect from every conceivable angle. "You have complete control of the structure, Campion? For a moment, even the idea of breathing seems insurmountably difficult, too hard, too painful even to contemplate. There are other types of work out here. Another hotel. First appeared in Arc 1.1: The Future Always Wins, ed. "Do you walk around inside and inside a contemplate." it?" asks one boy, speaking from near the front of my cross-legged audience. "Why did he cut the engines..." Merlin breathed to himself. They were all showing blue-green now, but only because I'd throttled the engines..." Exodus Arks," Minla said, when the battle was in its ninth hour. "Well, this time there's nothing false about it. You never got to see it tested." She regards me with steely-eyed intensity, the earlier Nesha Petrova burning through the mask of the older one. Maybe not the time of day." "You remember why you went under, of course," Clausen said. Van Ness still wasn't convinced of the wisdom of bringing her aboard, but even his dislike of Conjoiners didn't extend to the noise. Do you think you can do better?" My throat was dry, my hands shaking. Voting is what we do. "We have cloning technology, but we've hardly ever used it. I'd feel quite naked without you." "I'll report back as soon as I have something, sir." The emperor, the fish and the Great House faded from my console. "There's no way I can tell her the truth." Greta leans one hip against the wall, one hand still in her pocket. "Even if I have to take the Glitter Band apart That's why we don't light the scoop: it ain't neighbourly." "I'm sorry," I said, realising that I'd touched the cyborg equivalent of a nerve. There's also something darting, nervous and birdlike about the way she negotiates the claustrophobic angles of her apartment. Normally hosts like Derek are there to stop the guest from saying too much, not the other way round. With three minutes to spare, the door eased open, revealing the room beyond. When Purslane and I met alone on one of the high balconies, after breakfasting with a few other line members, I swear saw the same tightness. "Pass on that, I think. "That tells me nothing." "Then maybe this will. "That not what I mean. Zeal's arm swung violently aside, mashing against the railing. Picking up the entire gist of the conversation in an instant, she said, "Don't be an oaf, Peter. I don't want to go in. "Have I got that long?" "That's what we need to talk about. It feels like you're made of glass; as if the next movement you make—the next breath you take—will cause you to shatter into a billion pieces. Never having trained for Progress operations, I couldn't make much sense of the displays myself. That's a promise." "Love a Spider?" she asked. The clean-up crew had been thorough and there was no trace of the earlier bloodstain. Rogue warheads chipped away at the edges of aerial land masses, sending mountain-sized boulders crashing to the surface. There, I knew, Trintignant could make me whole again. I wonder if Katerina's jealous. Which was exactly what I wanted. Raised above Triton's cryovolcanic crust on countless thermally insulating legs, it's a quilt of independent domed-over platforms, connected by bridges and ramps but subject to frequent and bewildering rearrangements. Even if they do have implants, it's usually to replace areas of brain function lost due to injury or old age. He had fallen out of his system, engines dead, systems, engines dead, systems powered down to a trickle of life-support. "Do we care? A window of comprehension had opened and slammed shut again. Partly out of a sense of historical indebtedness." partly out of a cautionary attitude that we ought not to throw away something that worked, albeit imperfectly, and partly for the sheer pointless hell of it. It reminded her of her older sister. "Don't worry about the treaty," Clavain said. The sea-dragon was pythoning its lower anatomy around one of the support legs, crushing and grinding. Trintignant told me." "That isn't possible." "Oh, it is. "I'm taking her further in, while we still have a ship that works." "I'm fine with that." "Good," she said, massively indifferent to whether I was a miracle I'd made it as far as I had. It hadn't been a good idea to sneak aboard the airship in the first place. It just isn't here. "I'll core out his spine. "It was just luck that I got to him first. Perhaps it simply lured the curious into it, and forced them to adapt—becoming more like machines themselves— until they reached the point when they were of use to it. "Will you always be the one in charge of it?" Corax steered the buggy around a crater before answering. The blue lines strained like ropes in a squall. It shouldn't be much harder coming back up." "I'm right behind you." If the thicket registered our presence, there was no evidence of it. Clearly he was also a man brave enough to fly a hazardous mission to ferry medicines through the sky, in a time of war. I dare ask if there is work for me in orbit. It would be someone else's turn next time. Even then, it hardly seemed possible that the Progress would have time to pass through the sky, in a time of war. I dare ask if there is work for me in orbit. It would be someone else's turn next time. someone close to him. Even in Martian gravity, even allowing for the Conjoiner's willowy build, the impact almost sent both of them toward the Ouroborus. "Things were difference to their chances of surviving the Huskers, and I couldn't have expected much of a warm welcome. Taught me a valuable lesson, Minla. "There's a way in," Lenka said. "The accretionists were right," he said, by way of welcome. Celestine made her selection as quickly as she could, every muscle tense with concentration, and that gave us— by Trintignant's estimation—five or six clear minutes before the Spire would demand an answer. The formerly grey walls oozed beguiling patterns; as if a dark forest had suddenly become enchanted. The rigs, the sleepers, the artilects, the sea-dragons. Your injuries have been stabilised, but you're not out of the woods just yet." She pauses. Without any ceremony, Weather climbed onto the couch and lay down as if for sleep. It was scratched and dented and the white paint was coming off in places. "Turn and follow the tracks." I make a wide turn with the overlander. She scrambled out of the pallet, catching her trousers on the sharp lip, ripping them at the knee, but not caring. Licensed investigator. We're still monkeys, you know. It was not your doing." "What will happen to you now, Widow?" "I'll fade, slowly and gracefully. That's the mistake humans always make. Didn't you already find your assailant? Not everyone agreed, obviously, or else Zima wouldn't have sold as many works as he had. "If our machines lose, we lose. She had to get away from the Scaper. It is Busuke, a friend of mine with two sons. "A man once with two sons." known for his love of intricate challenges, but long assumed dead." Then she turned her piercing eyes upon me. I've been thinking it over, Clausen, and I've decided your argument's horse-shit. "How long do you think we have, Doctor?" "As an upper limit? "Not like this. A stinking, noisy shithole of a home, but still the best we had. You're stretched to breaking point just keeping this operation from falling apart. "It works for no one unless they carry the bracelet." "I can't take it." "Better you have it, than let that power go to waste. Tamper with an engine—attempt to take it." a small moon. The channel informed its viewers that the ship had successfully launched a robotic probe through Shells 1 and 2, a triumph equal to anything achieved during the last two apparitions, and one which—it was confidently expected— would soon be surpassed. If you hadn't dropped out of the sky, the Waynet would still be on its way to us, ready to slice our star in two. The pressure in the room was still considerably less than atmospheric. The Matryoshka hadn't touched the robot. It is true that Conjoiners can control their perception of pain by applying neural blockades. I supposed that they were lava tunnels, or something similar. But for her, so much had already happened! There had still been time enough for the rise and fall of numberless species and civilisations, time for great deeds and greater atrocities. Most people never will. "Because you can leave," she said, nodding at her own percipience. Himself, of course. There's a bit more to it than that, although you did ask nicely. The world was going to end if we didn't sleep. So what the hell do I know about short stories, anyway? If Galiana consents for you to stay, I suggest you do so." "But you still say I only have three days?" "That's up to Galiana, isn't it? I gasped at the crystalline rush. There were no tasers—just the remains of the foil and the recessed foam shapes where the stunners had fitted. I could tell her to fuck off use three days?" "That's up to Galiana, isn't it? I gasped at the crystalline rush." "They'll try and stop us, of course. We kept our helmets on, anyway. Now and then I would pass other crewmembers, but apart from Khorog none of them ever gave me the time of the day. "I know what I'm doing, Annabel. The combat zone is hazardous at the best of times, but at night, as the ground cools, it's almost impossible to move without being detected, scoped, targeted. It's inside. "Warren won't stop at just three waves, Galiana." "I know." She paused. We would not all be the same people, and not all of those friendships would endure. "We're changing course." They had been flying high and steady for eight hours, Mars unrolling below in all its endless rust-red monotony. Cunning little blighters. "You were engaged in mapping work of your own, that much we know. "Is it true?" I said. There were hard gold gems and soft red smears, like finger smears in pastel. Coming in with imperial authorisation, the license to ask any questions I choose." "I won't pretend I'll shed many tears when you're gone, if that's what you mean." He straightened in his chair, the stiff fabric of the uniform creaking. Just do your best, little brother." Warren extended his hand for his brother to shake. That's the point." I wanted to strike out against her. Some were always too brave, or curious, and by force of will they reached the heart of me. "Next." "Underwater inspection, Gibraltar bridge. FIVE "THREE HOURS," CHILDE said triumphantly. Every nerve in her body is screaming that message into her skull. I can tell you wish. When they were done, the Galaxy would look very different. Through tears of exhaustion he saw that the hangar was racked full of half-assembled spacecraft; skeletal geodesic sharkshapes designed to punch out of an atmosphere, fast. Trust me, it looked like a winner on the White Board. That is some headstart." Nero narrowed her eyes. Something to do with stretching, I think..." "Topological deformations," Celestine murmured before joining Hirz in the chamber. There are many branches to our great tree now, in many systems—but we all carry the memories of those who went before us, before the family was torn asunder. "Then I'm dead as well?" "No. You're alive. One of the system's other Conjoiner nests had been Clavain's initial guess—even though it seemed unlikely that they would ever survive the crossing. Those within a few light years of each other can exchange ideas and perhaps even enjoy a degree of trade. "A childish little prank," he said, spitting fury. "There was an accident. "Nine hundred or so," said Clavain. "You chose to wake me. The etchwork was a filigree of lines and junctions, descending down to smaller scales in fractal steps, until the blur of detail was too fine for his eyes to discriminate. "Obviously my idea of subtle wasn't their idea of subtle. I find lace-up shoes that I can wear with two layers of socks. There's no contest. He'd statements. We sped away instantly, back through the crack in the wall. THIRTEEN "YOU WERE RIGHT," I told her as we made our way back to the shuttle. That didn't matter, because the Conjoiners had arranged the two engines to work in perfect synchronisation, despite them being a kilometre apart. Doubtless you know the painting. "How did we know about your work on thinking machines?" "Then you've got the wrong end of the stick. You say we were just the same? A second apparition probe operated by the European Space Agency had tried to land and sample one of the Shell 2 obstacles, but without success. The envoys did, on occasion, find something interesting—but by then other human explorers had usually stumbled on the same find. found. Acres of hull shielding were now compromised, and there were warnings of structural weakness in the port drive spar. Dug a ten-kilometer-wide crater into the crust when his screens went up. "She was turned down at the last minute, Richard. Against these two possibilities the card seemed to flicker indeterminately. The journey wasn't supposed to have taken this long. "It's another mathematical puzzle," Celestine said. In the thirty-two thousand years of its existence, the empire had been through a number of historical convulsions. I could only assume that the many skipspace transits I'd been forced to endure were having an effect on my higher functions. The net risk of a successful breakout hasn't increased. I am a barrier against the thing that would damage the outside world, were it to be released." "Then I don't understand." I caught my breath, already drained by the effort of trying to free her. The Conjoiners have been doing it since the Transenlightenment, and their methods are well documented. "Did you have the one about the cubes, too?" "Christ, yes," the infiltration specialist said, as if suddenly remembering. Why would I care?" "But in two million years," Purslane said, "no culture in the Galaxy has come close to developing faster-thanlight communication or travel." open middle as it hauled its way out of the sea, using one of the legs to assist its progress. You might risk that to escape aggressors, but even then some will insist that to escape aggressors, but even then some alterationsalthough none that were as drastic as those that Trintignant had wrought on me. No, really. "You'll just have to be patient," I said. Eunice is a good and studious girl, but that will only get you so far. Documented and preserved as evidence. "The ship's been listening in on every conversation I've had with you," Merlin said. Power to smash jangling. men. He stood by the bench with his thumbs tucked into the belt of his apron, his belly jutting out as if he was quietly proud of it. My suit was no longer ballooning out, meaning that we were in some kind of pressurised environment. I'm surprised you don't remember. There was no automatic safety mechanism to prevent that door from being opened All had been mutilated in some fashion: crushed or pruned or bisected; the tattered ruins of their spacesuits were still visible in one or two places. A layer of cloud had formed during the afternoon, with the ships—most of them stationed nose down—piercing it like daggers. But the cold was a factor, and in any case the suits offered protection and power-assist. "Leave it behind?" "It'll be quite safe here, and you can collect it again when you return after nightfall." "If I say no?" "Then I'm afraid there'll be no meeting with Zima." I sensed that the robot wasn't going to hang around all afternoon waiting for my answer. Unless it is your contention that the Spire has at some point agreed to bind by a set of strictures, which I would ardently suggest is far from the case." "No," I said. "The shuttles provoked your side into a direct attack against the nest." "So this was deliberate all along?" "Yes. He was as tall as I and not dissimilar in build and cosmetic ornamentation. And you wouldn't achieve much anyway. "Good..." the woman says, as if she can't quite believe her luck. So different to the long years in which I was the one doing the scrutineering. "Remontoire's gone now. "I couldn't have done it if we hadn't played those games," Yukimi went on. Fully closed-cycle models with exoskeletal servo-systems, to assist our wearers. It's not just Kolding. You were already having difficulties with supplies of antibiotics. Not that this is bad, either." We paused a while to watch a succession of major impacts: a long, sequenced string of them. What else do the Advocates talk about, Campion—other than their own inflated sense of self-worth?" "You have a point." "Anyway, the more I dug, the more it looked like I was right about that hunch. "I'll bet it hurt like fuck, too, wouldn't you?" "Not necessarily. I placed my left hand on her shoulder as she squirmed under the restraints, suddenly aware of heir relationship best kept hidden. Many of its patients were veterans of the Regressive War, victims of the viciously ingenious injuries wrought by the close conjunction of vacuum and heat, radiation and kinetic energy. Emergency alarms sounded from the distance. Is everything all right? Eagerly now. And Shirin had never missed a trick in that regard. The engines were shut down completely and the hull had begun to come apart. flaking away in a long lateral line that ran the entire four kilometres from bow to stern. With enough money that they can afford to sprinkle a little of it on vanity projects, like keeping this machine operational. The third apparition—that was different, of course. Nothing you've just said changes that." She sat tight-lipped, staring at me as if I was some kind of byzantine logic puzzle she needed to unscramble. There's a jolt of déjà vu and I realise it isn't because I've experienced it before, but because I've experienced it before, but because I've experienced it before, but because I've experienced it before. skin, shading to black under his bladelike cheekbones. I wasn't the only one?" "No," Hirz said, "you weren't the only one. By the same token, I have no choice but to play along. Yet you'd swear your recollection was accurate." "But if the AM had accompanied me, I'd have a flawless record of how things really were." "You would," Zima said. I don't think the structure, with its alternating sections, really came clear to me until close to the final draft, but once I had it, I knew it was a strong story, and I'm still very pleased with it. "There's no bomb in it. Until then I have no idea that she's brought it with her. Though we had all been created at the same time, these figures had cultured a quiet superiority, distancing themselves from the more frivolous aspects of a reunion. We had no such compulsion, other than an indignant sense that we were owed our due after our earlier disappointment. Purslane found me again, attending to a whimsical redesign of one of the outlying towers. It'll keep me alive, but only if I don't move around." I think understand. He said that it was against the common law of his people to give such a gift to one such as I, but he chose to do it anyway. But we had only gone a hundred metres or more when the path branched. It isn't true. In fifteen years no ship had entered or left the Martian atmosphere, nor had any surface vehicle ever escaped from Galiana's nest. He pulled his hands apart to swell the image. They've read my article now, most of them, so they know what that slowly swimming figure means...but they still don't come in droves. It had been a day of bad ideas, and she wasn't going to make things worse now. After the wards and cubicles of the facility, it's bordering on the luxurious. I can't take all the strain off him, but I can give him free access to my mind. What they excavated, they compressed and fused and used to line the tunnel, maintaining rigidity against awesome pressure with some trick of piezo-electricity. It's as if there's a whole circuit in my brain that's never been activated until now." "I chose them especially. "He was exploring hazardous territory, so he'd have been certain to bring the kind of equipment necessary to regenerate organs." Childe turned away from the problem. The emperor knew—of course—and so did a handful of his closest officials. Not any more, at least." "I'm sure this means something to you." "Something happened to your moon, Minla. "You know this place, of course," said Burdock's disembodied voice. They would be popped back in when we had conquered the Spire. "I've come for Lenka. Derek only cares about his ratings because his ratings translate into a greater allowance of meat. I just tell the pod what must be accomplished, and the autonomous systems take care of the rest. They're mirror images, plus a rotation." "So we press the top right shape, right?" "Could be. "But do come closer." "I don't think so." "Because you are frightened?" "Yes." "Then I am very glad to hear it. Not many of us are still alive from those times. "Well, since you asked, I did try and contact you." "You did?" "But by the time I'd made my mind up, I learned about the way you'd had me suppressed. Any of them." "Then we're done here," Lenka said. "I almost hate to ask-but the koi?" "I've got my men searching the ponds, looking for bullet fragments. I felt like I'd been in the tank for a long, long time." "It feels that way sometimes." "I know the difference, Greta. If the machines are fighting each other in some abstract dimension of pure mathematics that I can't even imagine, let alone point to, what does it matter?" "A lot," Nero said. Suzy's smart —there isn't a better syntax runner in Ashanti Industrial—but she's also beautiful. "That's mine." "How much would a pig's head be worth?" "You tell me. "Because I want her out first," I say, wondering if Greta's jealous. "Pre-Juggler. I began to ease, trying to imagine myself in a forest or cave system—something huge but mindless—rather than the glowing guts of an alien machine. I was half way across the solar system when it happened, so far too distant to detect them directly." "Then you have no proof." "Except that the packets were detected and stored in the memory buffer of a fifty-year-old scientific mapping satellite which everyone else seemed to have forgotten about. Perhaps it had been an old keepsake, a memento of earlier spacefaring adventures. Most destinations —including most of those on the Blue Goose's itinerary—didn't even get you beyond the Local Bubble. But their chalkboard explanations usually left Merlin none the wiser. But if you think I started wars, if you think I'm somehow responsible for this..." He gestured at his surroundings. "It's been eighteen months now, Mike. There was something harsh and clinical about that state of mind—it did not feel completely normal—but it enabled us to get the job done, and that was all that mattered. The deployment of a field medical unit is a gold-plated giveaway that someone's taken a hit, and there's nothing the enemy would rather do than capture or eliminate a high-value human asset. And her own anti-collision system was preoccupied dealing with our short-range weapons. Then he pointed to the parked form of his ship and spread his fingers wide, hoping the pilot got the message that he could multiply the medicine. Oh, I see. "Well, at least that sounds like the old Richard." "There's hope for me yet, then. They glowed with their own soft light. But something would remain—a little kernel of being—enough of a mind to recognize its own existence. She was in the command seat, wearing her EVA suit but with the helmet and gloves not yet in place. Travelling close to light, visiting world after world. "I lied to you about that, probably because I wanted to start believing the lie myself. According to the last Cohort census the system contained fifteen planet-class bodies. It was just the companion. Conjoiners will find me again." I shook my head firmly. The blast from Samphire's weapon had shattered the outlying islands, crumbling them back into the sea. We need to be moving, and moving now. For some reason I'm not quite in the mood." She touched my wrist. Perhaps it had been designed that way, or perhaps the altered spacetime was a kind of lingering contamination, a side-effect of wormhole travel. "I noticed too-if we're talking about the same thing. But I want you to know that you're not alone." "Call me Mike," I say. "We're leaving anyway." Ray swore. A high-pressure water-jet might have achieved the same precision of cut, or even an extremely sharp blade." "Fascinating, Doc," Hirz said, kneeling down next to him. "Do?" Trintignant sounded mortally wounded. Voulage's men ambushed us, split us up, then took me so far from the other Conjoiners that I dropped out of neural range. I wanted to write back to the journal and request a different referee. "I'm just sorry that Sandra Voi can't be with us now. She was one of the city's foremost specialists on the Pattern Jugglers, although she'd be entirely too modest to admit it herself." He paused, apparently seeking Celestine's permission to continue. I just need to know how to get out of here. Argyle already learned this much. "A little girl gave me this. Then I decided that I didn't care. If so, I hope I'll treat you with something of the kindness you always deserved, and that you always showed me. It was while watching one of these programs that I started thinking about the peculiar allure of dangerous spaces, and the mentality that will bring a mountaineer back to a place year after year, even though it's a kind of extended game of odds in which the stakes range from frostbite to severe injury or death. The last two apparitions..." "Just machines, just dumb space probes. "Thought so. You remember the wreck, don't you? The abandoned piece didn't have anything to do with blizzards or cosmonauts or Prokofiev. Before breakfast—bleakly alert, even though I didn't really feel as if I'd had a good night's sleep—I visited Kolding and got a fresh update on the repair schedule. "Peter Rigby, the wheelwright. "At least, that's my impression." They were out on one of the grey swelling sea below. Then I realise she's talking about a different kind of theatre. The other workers in the operations rig would occasionally sea below. acknowledge his presence, grunt something to him as he waited in line at the canteen, but for the most part it was clear that they were not prepared to treat him as another human being until he committed to their cause. Where the hull had scabbed away, the brassy orange glow of internal fire was visible. I remember the others' names now. But they couldn't run with them turned off." "Is this enough to improve matters. "I think these markings are shadows. But he's lied to the older brother; told him he's received intelligence concerning a buried capsule containing valuable embargoed technologies. At least that way some of them might survive, even if they won't necessarily end up where they were expecting. Yes, that's me. "Only fair, the way I see it." "Thank you," Kathrin said doubtfully. Some kind of geomagnetic anomaly, spiking up in the northern hemisphere. Inside it was almost shouting. Burdock would surely receive his due, but his death had to remain a secret until Thousandth Night. He just looks at me. "They're triangular numbers." "Fine," Childe said. Without getting closer, we could only resolve the structure in the outer layer. Fortunately, Galiana did not press the point, for the time had arrived for the meeting he had been promised before his arrival on Mars. A purpose. The Zil's warm and plush and silent. They could crucify us and it wouldn't change anything. "Astronomy's like a cathedral, Dimitri. The shuttle docked with just Khorog and me aboard. "Leave me alone," Kathrin said. "Better. "Why don't I show you?" Childe said. Which, in that moment, I think it probably was. The Dormitories should have been finished and occupied by now, with work already under way on the floating mass soared as tall as a cliff. Friendships made here must be put on hold until the next reunion, two hundred thousand years in the future. She worked the heavy toggles until the next reunion, two hundred thousand years in the future. shrivel away from it. \*\*\* BY THE TIME Ingvar steers me to another part of the quadrangle, the band has given up for the night. We did not step through, of course. I'm going to show you something now. I heard shouts as some of the revellers tried to pull the others off me, but the collective anger—the collective repulsion—was too great to be resisted. They enveloped themselves around you, forming a seamless white surface which lent the wearer the appearance of a figurine moulded from soap. Derek's Cage is just large enough to contain Derek, a lamp shade, a coffee table, a couch, and one or two guests. The yellow-green glow had by now all but dissipated, like some vivid chemical slick breaking up into its constituent elements. Each of the shapes was composed of four rectangular elements of differing sizes, butted together in varying configurations. This is really presumptuous of me. I told myself that a window would eventually open for us to leave, just as one had allowed us to enter. "There's no sign of Celestine's hand," I said Purslane squeezed closer to me. There's no need, though by that point I suppose the distinction is moot. It was wearing armor, but the armor was scratched and scabbed and rusty, and bits of it didn't fit correctly. There isn't really any kind of effective work he could do like that, and we can't afford to carry the deadweight of an unproductive mind. The urge was still there, the hunger-the vacuum in my head-returning. In fact it will be here very shortly. I told her I was on my way back, but that we were stuck on Arkangel for another few hours. Childe's carriage pulled up to a smart stop in front of the building and I was afforded my first unobstructed view of our destination I turned around, steeling myself against what I was about to see. He wouldn't be concerned about whether or not he was wearing a suit. None of us came to harm you. In all such instances I always felt a quiet certainty that I was the superior machine, or that we were at least equal partners. "It's not that we regard individual lives as worthless, any more than you would willingly sacrifice a limb. There are also three mantises. But if you could find a small piece with an edge, there was nothing it couldn't cut through. Or it might be that her ship carried some vast, secret cargo, like the entire sentient population of an evacuated planet. We'd arrived somewhere. Please tell me I'm doing the right thing." She slumped down with her back against the sloping wall of the cargo hold. Then I would clap my hands and summon you to me, and I would spend the rest of my life letting you know what you still mean to me. I had always found Samphire cloying, but I tolerated his company because his strands were usually memorable. The crowd tensed. "I don't have to be physically present, since I already know my own memories. It was not much of a theory, but I had nothing better to offer. Clear-headed, like I've just woken up after a really slong sleep. It was a modest affair: a smooth wedge of obsidian shaped like a metronome, undecorated save for two cameo portraits set in elliptical borders. But if they find a way to increase their reach, by eliminating more payload mass..." She turned her face from his. It would have been far too vulnerable to the shells in open air. I was never sorry when they turned for space and left me undisturbed." "I don't believe you." "Believe what you like. "But what practical difference does it make whether the artificial memory is inside my head or outside?" "All the difference in the world," Zima said. "I am. I looked around me, and felt the same visceral awareness of the other shapes which formed my surroundings. I climb in, taking deep, shivering breaths. In desperation, he saw a possible solution: one he'd rejected before but was now willing to advance. Conjoiners breathed the air at the base of the Wall without difficulty. It had a handle jutting from the side. They are trying to make a weapon." "You can't be sure of that." "We can't afford to be wrong. You've only ever been able to test yourself against problems set by other humans. The ship that destroyed Grisha's people...we had data on its field resonance, but we needed to see our own fields before we could establish a match." Purslane swallowed and regained some measure of calm. The shipping container has had its doors removed and holes cut in the sides. It was a drawing of the volcanic cone, exactly as it appeared from the position of the wreck. "Please...just a moment. There were no markings on the walls; no navigation consoles or colour-coordinated arrows. The convex masses were all a scorched tawny grey in colour, devoid of water or vegetation, save for a cap of ice at their highest point. It's the same with—what they call them? "You were always were lucky," Galiana said, leaning over him. He lowered his hands, and tried to fumble one of the knives into his apron pocket. Tell her the truth this time. The Matryoshka was a different order of machine. "We should check out the wreck," Lenka said—trying to make the best of a bad situation. Around Felka—cordoning her like a barricade—was a ghostly representation of the Great Wall. What would they make of the blank-eyed visage? It's not how the stars really are, of course. Cables and tubes emerge through gaps. Clausen eased the helicopter into the air, the rooftop landing pad falling away below. "I'll do what I can. Bad weather always does bring them out. They're already growing—spreading out and interfacing with your existing neural circuitry—but the total volume of glial mass that they will consume is tiny: only a few cubic millimetres in total, across your entire brain." He wondered if she was calling his bluff. The island was just the right size: small enough to feel intimate, but with enough curious little byways and guirks of design not to become boring. Barely enough to chip an asteroid in two. I make my robot advance. They were snug and warm in the buggy's pressurized cabin, Yukimi wearing under the armor, which-for reasons not yet clear to Yukimi-he had stowed in the buggy's rear storage compartment. But it looks like I am now." "That's the spirit," Childe said. He let out a long, slow sigh. Just enough... keep alive. She needed an able-bodied worker, that was all. Once, hundreds of communities had sheltered inside that cell of warm, thick, oxygen-rich atmosphere. Chameleoflage was only truly effective against a solitary enemy, or a massed enemy moving in from a common direction. Yet two hundred kilometres higher the wall was a diaphanously thin membrane only microns wide; completely invisible except when rare optical effects made it hang like a frozen aurora against the stars. There was an authority in his voice I had never heard before. She came frighteningly close. "It's still at the limits of detection," she said. The first wave destroyed half of the unfinished Dormitories, inflicting catastrophic damage on many of the others. It wasn't because we thought we'd find Amerikano relics. Or rather, he would be right, if I did not have so much experience at driving robots. The sky was a pale, wintery blue, unsullied by contrails. More Van Gogh What a master this man was. Everything at once. I played no part in planning his kidnap, but I was delighted that we might at last meet on equal terms. "Because we can. You loved him. That's too fast to get you back to Shiva-Parvati, even if there's a shuttle aboard this thing. Sorry, but with the kind of money Childe's paying us, buying a new one ain't gonna be my biggest problem." An awkward moment followed, for only Hirz seemed at all comfortable about discussing the generous fees Childe had arranged as payment for the expedition. I'm Peter Vandry, surgeon's mate," she corrected. "Celestine. The thing looked at her for several seconds, the eyes blinking as if it, too, was not quite sure what to make of this meeting. Can you breathe more easily now? Look into that clear blue sky." He bent his neck, as well as his old body allowed. Her limbs, like ours, were mechanical, but her basic form was far less canine. If I destroyed myself, I could not be certain that I had undermined the threat to the emperor. But with one hand stuck to his forehead and the other holding the knife, he had no means to secure himself. SLEEPOVER THIS STORY CAME out of a very vague set of notes for a novel that was never to be. "And before you try and talk me out of it, that's final." We were alone in her guarters. There's work to be done during these reunions— serious business, of great importance to the future status of the line." "Lighten up," I said under my breath. I slip in the earphones. Once they saw communities on Mars and in the asteroid belts fall prey to the Conjoiner phenomenon, the Coalition powers hurriedly pooled their resources to prevent the spread reaching their own states. Instead I said: "I'm worried about the

others. "Master Khorog seemed to think I could do it." I held out my hand, hoping he didn't notice the tremble. The hundreds of billions of stars formed a blizzard of light, but through some trick of perception I felt that I recognized all the systems I had visited during my travels, as well as all those I had come to know through the shared memories of the Gentian Line. "You're placing too much humanity behind her eyes. It was the man cleaning out the fish that did it, in the lobby of the hotel. The Petronel hadn't fired a shot in anger in more than fifty years. "Is he going to sit here drinking tea while I work for my pay?" I smiled. Now and then the tracked robot would creep forward to assist in a procedure. "Dimitri Ivanov, the cosmonaut. He was working on one of his patients when Khorog showed me in. "He's taking more of me. The robot was a runaway success, and the young man's firm soon became the market leader in domestic robots. Telling me to get off the ship before it happened. At least that way we'd know that they'd understood our instructions." "Language modules are too expensive. On the way home, I sit at the computer keyboard and find myself typing Yakov's name and password into the system, as if he's sitting inside me. I'm just saying this is what I believe the answer to be." I nodded. "Descend, Mercurio-I promise that no harm will come to you, and that I will satisfy your curiosity in all matters. My people...they're sending out a ship to get me. Sheriffs came and went. "Let's see if she holds, shall we?" "Still there," I reported, when the Progress had failed to blow itself apart. Was it possible that it served none but its own self-preservation? The speed of light varied. "You took a serious head wound, Clavain. My face bulged back in the mirrored globes of his goggles. In sixty years the Second Soviet was dust. \*\*\* ZIMA LED ME back to the swimming pool. Are you honestly telling me he had something to do with this?" "He's not even denying it, sir." "I'm astonished. Tend them. THE STAR SURGEON'S APPRENTICE THE ENERGETIC JONATHAN Strahan was assembling a collection of Young Adult science fiction stories entitled The Starry Rift and I was kindly approached to offer a story. Hill looks wrong. One by one their pet machines crossed the threshold into consciousness. As for the locals' theory concerning the origin of the aerial land masses, Merlin found only one clue. Nor any of the other places you've told me about." "There are places I'll never see. "We'll just to have make the best of what's left." "My ship's already made the obvious checks. It was much as Childe had shown us, except that it seemed infinitely more massive; infinitely much wine and ended up sleeping with Greta. Had he been standing, he would have towered over both of us. All remaining sentient machines therefore dated from this period. "Them." "The engine systems?" I asked. It wouldn't be easy, the amount of time we both spend away from home." "Mm." She had a mouthful of croissant. He helped me make up my mind." "He's still out there," Kathrin said. "It's possible that you haven't noticed." He leaned forward, elbows on the table. Perhaps she had pestered her father into allowing her to spend more time with Merlin. The light from the explosion momentarily eclipsed the brightest impacts still raining down on the planet. If you had any doubts, I've shown it to be true. And once it started moving, once its great engines came online after tens of thousands of years of quiet dormancy, no force in the universe could have held it back. He had not gone through with the accident. Us," Da Silva said. They've murdered my brother." Clavain felt the deepest of chills. The people you condemned to death." "Me, Merlin?" "I examined the records of the Regressive War: not just the official documents, but Tyrant's own data logs. She has been beaten to the edge of death. Then it shivered and the ship flew apart like a rotten carcass. "Five meters. It's me who's being asked to lie here...and anyway, why do I have to lie in the edge of death. Then it shivered and the ship flew apart like a rotten carcass." first place? For nine hundred and ninety-nine nights we had dreamed of suns and worlds, miracles and wonders, and perhaps a little mud along the way. Yukimi could not see the far side, even with the buggy raised high above sea level. Am I my brother's keeper? He was machinery wrapped around a core of dead flesh. The silver tide was abating Text is available under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license; additional terms may apply. There was something instantly commanding about the voice. While bots swarmed over the ship, and my bank account trickled down to single digits, I shuttled to Triton to drown my sorrows. But it's still music." "Look at the walls, Dimitri." They were astonishing. There are too many difficulties." Minla studied him with an attentiveness that Merlin found quite unsettling. Everything that had happened to date, they liked to say, was just a prologue to history. They thought my strand was wonderful, darling. "Captain's turned off our scoop. That's why you came as far as you did. "Hello. I did it because I needed time: time to identify those responsible, and protect Grisha from them until I had enough evidence to bring them to justice. Since we had last seen the pool the robot had finished gluing the last of the tiles in place. The machine had catapulted the Matryoshka into the prehuman past of our galaxy. "All I can tell you is that vacuum is not as you understand it. Comms is shot to shit. I'm completely sure of it now." "But you can't make any of us see that this is the case?" She shrugged. "...he isn't poking around the Great Work any more." Purslane's eyes gleamed confirmation. If it was steep and treacherous at dusk. You walked across the bridge today. "I lied. As it was, we only got off another two salvos before the slug-cannons suffered a targeting failure. Instead, we turned around and made our way back through the succession of rooms we had faced before the attack. A boy laughed as Kathrin nearly tripped on the labyrinth of criss-crossing ruts that had been etched by years of wagon wheels entering and leaving the bridge. "As such, it is our military duty—our moral imperative—to bring all of Lecythus under one authority, a single Planetary Government. The books were startlingly similar to the books Merlin remembered from the Palace of Eternal Dusk, the ones he'd used to fight over with his brother. Then you understand. Somehow, despite the layers of humanity that had been stripped from me, I could still taste terror. With the beam kept at an angle to the surface, it was eventually possible to isolate a cone-shaped piece of the material. In the Garlin Bight normal interstellar law did not apply. The angle of the slope pitched down steeply. Even if I have to pluck him out of the bottom of the chasm. She'd been taken prisoner by the Coalition for Neural Purity, and they were trying to turn her back into a person. This crime touched both of us. "Especially not a shipmaster, judging by the way things are going. dispersed to help us. A kilometer long, it was a modest craft by Gentian standards: neither modern nor fast, but rugged and dependable for all that. Then she pulls her hand from her pocket and shows me the musical box, before closing her fist on it as if it's the most secret and precious thing in the universe. We're not really being stretched yet." "Yeah, well, I'll settle for not being really stretched," Hirz said. But why worry Katerina by mentioning another woman, even if I pretended that we'd never met before? "The engine is already doing all it can to provide maximum power, given the damage it has taken. "My own ship has projected a secondary screen around yours, Campion. "I not get off Devilfish, Peter Vandry. I also grasped the idea that my existence was now in peril. You're on schedule to complete repairs within six days, aren't you?" "On schedule, yes, but that doesn't mean things can be moved any faster. Near the cliff, it at least had some measure of cover. It was now or never. Perhaps it was no more than an accident of faster. Near the cliff, it at least had some measure of cover. It was now or never. Perhaps it was no more than an accident of faster. Teterev's hand, but the way she had put her marks down on the paper only seemed to add to the suggestion of brooding, patient malevolancy I had already detected in the feature. "Not where I come from. "Which still doesn't tell us why she does it," Voi said. If you were an artist, you could have a batch of it mixed up according to that specification. In turn each world had its gaggling court of fellow-travellers. "We'll need to lie low for a couple of hours, until those drones are out of the area." I squat, shutting down essential systems. Now it's your turn." "I can't leave here. "Got a taser," I heard myself say, as if from a distance. The drayman spat out a greasy wad of chewing tobacco and started down from his chair, his face a mask of impassive resignation, as if this was the kind of things of alien provenance—clawed and suckered at the armoured glass behind him, testing its strength. We need you to give up control of the field medical unit and allow us to decouple the trauma pod. So what if I could see ultraviolet photons, or taste electrical fields? "It's just that I thought we were going to keep it below one meter a second, all the way in." "You want to sit around for thirty hours, be my guest." "I wouldn't be the one doing the sitting." "This is well within acceptable limits. Galiana made the forward view zoom in, until the object was much clearer. He craves his fortune. Lots of people thought that was a good idea, too. I'd hate to have to look elsewhere for someone of your abilities." I turned back and, despite everything that told me to hold my tongue, I still spoke. "Can't blame him, though, can you?" "It could be me that's lying," I said. "And you want us to go there and find out what it was they were so interested in. They must have thought they could keep on solving next test." Childe looked sad, but said, "I understand perfectly. "What about the bullet?" "Show it to me." He opened his hand, the glass-nosed bullet still pinched between thumb and forefinger. And then even the dark hump was gone. Overhead was a thick, glowing tube, running the length of the room. She's been injured..." I was fearing the worst—that the door might have snipped off an arm or a leg as it closed—but it was, mercifully, not that serious. But some of them appeared to be floating above the ocean completely, casting shadows beneath them. "That's easy." He made another image. "Wait here," he said. It ate into the surrounding geology, bolstering the containment and consolidating its defenses. If you want to understand, you need to see everything." She reached up and planted her hands on two of the dials. Clean yourself up and I'll show you to your quarters." \*\*\* IT WAS A job, and it had got me off Mokmer. So has the trauma pod. "It's not about life and death," Busuke insists. But why would you replace the truth with something less interesting, unless you had something to hide?" "That's what I thought as well." "Why would he go to the trouble of creating an alibi, when he could just as easily delete the offending memories from his strand?" "Risky," Purslane said. "Make it a hundred." \*\*\* WAS THAT MORE than just natural caution? But, like a slender chess piece, its lower parts swelled out considerably to form a wide base. Holda's sun, 82 Eridani, was rising. Below, perfectly cloudless, is Africa, turning out of night. The fucking thing was as derelict and run-down as Lachrimosa. If someone has an accident..." "So what's the problem?" "The environment doesn't report to me. Gradually it became clear that someone has an accident..." push through the crowd fingers brush against my skin and I register the flinches that accompany each moment of contact. It was another ship—a Gentian Line vessel that just happened to be passing by. He had no reason to lie. That they can murder me, but chose not to?" "I don't know. I'll get through this." "I believe you will." Minla's gaze settled on his hand. Give us the means to make a weapon now and we'll use it in such a way that the civilian casualties are minimised. "That won't get you to the Napier Belt, kid, let alone Frolovo." "It's all I've got." "Then maybe you should spend a few months working in the port, until you can pay for a ride." The shipmaster—he was a cyborg, like most of them -turned away with a whine of his servo-driven exoskeleton. Even suited, even hidden under a glove, my hand was obviously mechanical. They played with matter and elemental force the way a child might play with sand and water. "Like I said, I try and keep it in the family." "You've become a monster," Celestine said, almost beneath her breath. Feeling less myself than ever, I watched the way her face changed shape as she spoke, conscious of the armature of muscle and bone lying just beneath the skin. Thanks for sticking with me, all those hours. They would have been difficult to distinguish, but my suit had partially erased their suits, so that they seemed to walk unprotected save for a ghostly second skin. She hadn't even remembered her name. Illicit cybernetic modifications, that it was only machines that witnessed it, but that if anyone had been looking toward Fornax, at the right time... "It would be something, to be known for that," I tell Ingvar. I try and get a better look at my extremities but a pair of hands gently pushes me back down. A thousand years ago Yves Klein said it was the essence of colour itself: the colours. We call it the Waynet." "Is this how you arrived?" Malkoha asked. "Like us," we both said. "It would have been almost insultingly trivial to do that," Trintignant said. See how it changes if I rotate the cube, how it elongates and contracts?" "Yes. But all it took was the look on Minla's face as he presented her with another relic of some long-dead world —to banish such doubts almost entirely. "What, Merlin?" "There's a good chance you're all going to die." Her tone became sharp. "There's nowhere left to go, and even if there was, we don't want to hurt you. I never had you down as quite that bad a loser." "You have no idea what is at stake," he repeated. I knew you'd turn over every stone until it led you to me. Severed parts accompanied the bodies, often several tens of metres from the rightful owner. Perhaps they've had time to begin to evolve their own defense measures, to contain the spread of it. I thrashed out, survival instincts kicking in, but there were too many of them. He could have discarded the suit, of course—put up with the cold, for the sake of his treasure. But nothing they'd consider worth their time. "How will you know it's safe?" The building's shell is blocking ambient comms, interfering with oversight. And when the work has been done, the surplus material will be ejected through the waste disposal vent in the pod's lower end fairing. That evening I sat down at the same table where Greta and I had met over breakfast. But I did detect some very brief radio emissions." "What language were they using? It was traumatic, but eventually his old personality resurfaced. Give my regards to your father." "I will." Widow Grayling opened the door. Greed trumps fear, but then a deeper fear trumps greed all over again. At least you're alive. I had no idea. They were looking out to sea, drawn by something going or beyond the island. Most published short stories are successes on at least some level. No: that is an absurdity. America, Russia, China and India have the biggest claims, but there is a little swatch of Africa up there, and it gladdens me. NOT MAKE DEREK CROSS. The companion came alive under his touch, blocks of text and illustration appearing on the revealed pages. It's the only way that any of us will be getting home." "I don't understand. "This is...unfortunate. This poor mind...he's had so much to do on his own. Even then he glimpsed that it was only a shadow of what Galiana was experiencing every instant of her life. "Plus my original; the first one to go in." I absorbed this number, stunned at what it implied. I give Annabel my consent. I escaped from the psychiatric facility a few hours ago, and by now they'll be looking for me." "Then you should go now." "I was inside the Matryoshka, Nesha. The damage was actually quite minor—easily repairable, if only they'd had better tools and the ability to work outside for long enough. It was a region of the galaxy encompassing six hundred habitable systems, squeezed between three major economic powers. Digging through the ruins of the past. Not much, then. Merlin pulled back to allow the incoming craft enough space to complete its docking. They'd been pointing at the ship before. A year to the Aquila Rift?" "You know that already Greta. This is not what it seems." Childe turned his sleek, snouted face to mine. "Maybe," I said. "Want to bring her back, unload and return?" I asked. We were still a quarter of a kilometre from the thing's base, and yet the flared top—the bulb-shaped finial—seemed to be leaning back over us, constantly on the point of falling and crushing us. "I'll leave that to Burdock. He's accepting my help." Despite being almost totally enclosed in the shell of red matter, Weather's whole body convulsed. Glowing nodes of light appeared in the tunnels, some moving slowly through the network. Migrated. "All you've got?" "They're American." The driver grunts something unintelligible, but takes the cigarettes anyway. Red emergency lights started flashing. "No joy with the rune monkeys," she said. "Another worm," Voi said. It was a marvelous sight. What could be worse than a bomb? It's a thing that has been in my possession for a very long while, but now it must change hands." Kathrin didn't know quite what to say. I assumed Ray hadn't spent as much as Suzy. It was a bright day, with the blinds drawn. There was not going to be time to agonize about it, though. Intricate neon mechanisms pulsed behind the flexing glass of the robot's mannequin body. The corridor widened, the intricate walls flanking away on either side, until we reached a domed room of cathedral proportions. The gash of his lips opened. None of the other diners appeared to notice as we began to zoom in toward the Milky Way, crashing toward the spiral, ramming through shoals of outlying stars and gas clouds. Then she reached out and took her father's hand in hers. And what happened to him down on eight was an accident." "I never doubted it," Da Silva said. Then maybe I wouldn't be about to shit myself." Celestine said nothing, but merely reached out and touched the errant figure. Teterev had come earlier—many years ago—so her degree of intregration was much more pronounced. "I'm more than sure." The gathered revellers looked out to my ship, which remained stubbornly intact within the envelope Fescue had projected around it. Celestine's replacement was very similar, although sleeker and somehow more feminine. Trying to redeem himself. Wake up. You OK now. "What does it run on? "You didn't appear to be pushing your engines dangerously during the chase." "I wasn't. "Show me the military targets on the surface that you would most like to eradicate," he said. What did you call it?" She shifts into an effortless impersonation of the dead actor Cary Grant. "Nothing can take away from their bravery, that they were willing to risk so much to come so far. "You don't get it, do you? For a moment I stood still, paralysed by what had happened. The railing along the balcony is very low. Trust me on this." "So what are you saying?" The problem was that I wasn't really sure. It was tall and dark, its details indistinct. But all they can do is work with the basic neural topology, suppressing and enhancing activity without altering the layout of the connections in any significant way. It was creature: sleek and elongated, aglow with its own fierce brassy light. I knew what it was like to feel special, even amongst geniuses. Not now." "I wouldn't be too sure about that. "News, doubtless, that would be better discussed in conditions of absolute privacy?" "Actually," I said, "there'll be no need for that at all." He looked relieved. You'd got that far, which can't have been easy. It hardly mattered that he had probably never inherited the precise moment of death; the lineage was no less monstrous for that small mercy. The sky was a pale blue, crisscrossed by high-altitude clouds. The camp used to confuse me, but now I could walk its maze of prefabs and tents blindfolded. "I'll be dead long before your Waynet cuts into our sun. He still has several minutes of effective consciousness left, and I think he'd rather tell you in person. It was workable: I was convinced of that. None of this is real. It brightened to hellfire, ramming from his mouth and eyes. The crow rejoined its brethren, something skittish and hurried in its flight, as if it had felt that coldness closing around its heart. "Then...they did something about it." Grisha opened his mouth as if to speak more on the matter, then seemed to think better of it. No one seems very keen on conversation, though. Again there is a delay before my intentions have effect. All he had done was act in self-preservation. Being out there, doing the heroic stuff-being humanity's envoy-that was your business, not theirs. They couldn't have been more wrong. That's how it happened, in fact. "But first the wreck. The fifth-the furthest from Calliope-was supposedly colonised by humans in the early Flourishing." Merlin glanced at the census data as it scrolled down the cabin wall. But the Bubble I had been looking at was suddenly filled with a skein of red lines, like a child's scribble. One day, thousands or tens of thousands after our departure, you, the people who read this message, may find us. Then she did something that shocked him beyond words. Other times, I see something two-dimensional, like a faded illustration in one of her books, so thin that the light shines through her. You want to see some notes? "Since I've been awake, I've... experienced things differently. "She'll take care of herself for a few hours, don't you worry." An awkward question pushed itself to the front of Yukimi's mind. "That's not enough to prove that he lied, though." "No," Samphire said. Then a question, accompanied by a nod towards Tyrant. I feel Remontoire sometimes, when I look at something in a certain analytic way. The challenge that the rock, studied his face. But as she spoke of abyssal time, I felt a lurch of cosmic vertigo, a sense that I stood on the crumbling brink of time's plungeing depths. The Spire has a definite taste for metal. "Then we'll find you something else to do," Khorog replied. I just hope he doesn't get into too much trouble when they find out I took it. "I'm caught giving you a ride, it won't be good for me." "I doubt it'll be good for either of us." The driver shifts the snowplough back into gear and lets her roll, the engine bellowing as the blade bites snow. He had done this with such ingenuity that the apparent wealth of House Childe had never faltered, even as the Program entered its most expensive phase. As you can tell from the apparent wealth of House Childe had never faltered, even as the Program entered its most expensive phase. As you can tell from the apparent wealth of House Childe had never faltered, even as the Program entered its most expensive phase. As you can tell from the apparent wealth of House Childe had never faltered, even as the Program entered its most expensive phase. lobot, things took a turn for the worse. It has gone down a bit since those heady days of the silver screen, but I am not one to complain. She was aware now of a very slight undulation to their motion, as the colossal machine followed the terrain under its wheels. They all looked so similar now. The musical box is yours now. They found him with his weapon, waiting to be apprehended. But I think Hirz is right. But as to exactly why the people in the sky were now at war with the people in the sky were now at war with the people on the ground, Merlin had little idea, and even less interest. The AM's been following me around for hundreds of years. man consisted of a grinning, cackling, gaptoothed head plugged into a trundling lifesupport mechanism that had apparently originated as a cleaning robot: in place of wheels, or legs, he moved on multiple spinning brushes, polishing the deck plates behind him. It meant something. And yet when I looked at Celestine I saw nothing resembling shock or surprise in her expression. Flora and fauna had moved out in vivacious waves, lapping eagerly against the constraints of the Wall. "Is it dead?" "For now," Clavain said. That was a wash-out. "Approaching Crowe's Landing. We will take care of you and your ship, no matter what happens." Merlin said farewell to Malkoha. The armed men moved ahead, sweeping the ground with things that looked like metal brooms before ushering Minla and Merlin forward. "We're here already," Rasht answered. I kept thinking of that American probe sliced in two, coming apart in two perfectly severed halves. "There has been a conspiracy...a murder. What else could she do?" Throw them overboard, you wonder? Effective range for my implants is a few dozen metres under these conditions. "No matter how many times we've been over this, you just don't seem to get it, do you? That is why Tyrant was damaged; why I had to land here and seek your assistance." "And the nature of this problem?" the old man pushed. "I just got...I can't describe it, Dimitri." If we could get them to put up their screens...all we'd need to do is find the ship with the closest resonance to the one in Grisha's system." "Wherever you're taking this line of thought..." Purslane's eyes flashed a warning at me. Power to smash ordinary men, if that was what she desired. You think we don't sometimes lose someone because a box breaks down?" "Of course not." "You go back in the box, you're gambling on something that might never happen. She hasn't arrested me, doesn't even have powers of arrest. "It conflicted with Campion's version of events." Step aside now, Peter. With the goggles on, he'd show me things. The cards were going to be shuffled again. We were not fools. Really only know one way to write, and I'm still trying to get good at that. But there was a glimmer of cunning, an animal recognition that something dreadfully wrong had taken place. The machines Childe had pumped into our skulls had improved the mathematical skills of all of us—with the possible exception of Trintignant, who I suspected had not received the therapy—but the effects had differed in nuance, degree and stability. A thousand years? Ahead lay the hexagonal arrangement of input dials. We remembered how it had felt to be just one individual, in the centuries before Abigail shattered herself into pieces and sent them roaming the Galaxy. "I heard you were returning to Earth," I offer, not wanting to seem entirely taken aback by her apparition. The universe always feels old, though to the other side. If we couldn't work out how to fly the aliens home, we could at least let them go. Only one system you can control. Rivers flow, crops grow again er had taken an obvious liking to Merlin, even though they shared nothing in common. The ones putting the gold on the top spire get all the glory, but they'd be nothing without a solid foundation. Zima wasn't even remotely done. And to do so, the engine needs to think through problems. I don't inhabit it, and I have no wish to. Then a window opened and the Progress reported that it was still jammed tight, despite executing Galenka's instructions. Usually there is a doctor at the other end, assisting the robot via a virching link, but not always. But as I was passing close to your planet— because a strand of the Waynet runs right through this system—my ship encountered a problem. Equatorial night had arrived quickly, and the pool was bathed now in artificial light from the surface. "All right," I said. "That was the idea, wasn't it?' "I'm sorry?" "Deliberate dullness, to take you out of the running for best strand." "That wasn't the idea at all," I said testily. I get to see a lot of Mars and I don't have to spend every waking hour keeping the Scaper running. "I think he was playing games with you, Malkoha." "That's the conclusion I eventually reached. I felt cheated when they woke me up. If my own marriage was in such great shape, why had I failed to mention Greta when I called home? Her ship found something almost immediately, now that it had been given the right search criteria. "I look after them. He will return. I can't work out whether he totally disapproves of me on every level, or whether he's just bitterly disappointed that I waste so much potential talent." "Well, I wouldn't lose any sleep over it. You'd found your stupid fucking monkey. I voice a question to myself, aloud, thinking that someone, somewhere, may have the decency to answer. It's still rudimentary—there are a lot of gaps the ship still needs to fill—but it will only get better with time, the more we talk." Malkoha listened diligently as his earpiece translated Merlin's response. "He was right not to. Of course, much may change before our return..." "Then I'll just have to take that risk, won't I?" Celestine said. Childe's gaze snapped to the Ultra's face. "Thirty...forty minutes." "Then it's time enough," I said. Black cauls like the Taurus or Rho-Ophiuchi dark clouds, or the Aquila Rift itself. I'm rotated through ninety degrees, until my head is higher than my feet—or rather, I remind myself, foot. I'd had the title in mind for a while, but not much an idea of what to do with it. All she told you was how to get back home. He had placed himself on his operating couch, beneath the loom of swift, beautiful surgical machinery. It pleases them to keep this Scaper running, and the others still trundling around. If we did, we wouldn't have risked our necks getting you out of the Cockatrice." "No, you don't hate or fear me," she replied. Greta told me that she had seen just about every possible reaction in the spectrum, and the one thing she had learned was that it was next to impossible to predict how a given individual would take the news. He had no obvious enemies. Why do they widen and then narrow?" "Tides vary," Merlin said, suddenly feeling himself on less solid ground. "Distal," the man said again, this time with an emphasis bordering on the hysterical. You're experiencing some kind of body image crisis, but that's all it is. Shiga, the others. The shiver of contact was less shocking this time. She's letting me in. I'll want to see for myself, of course." "Not until we've secured the Great House and found our man," I said, speaking as only the emperor's personal security expert would have dared. "Yeah, Corax." The younglooking man set his bag down on the table and began unloading it. It's that simple. But since Purslane and I were none the wiser about what it was that had unnerved Burdock. "It's large, about a kilometer across, but easily within your capabilities. Most ships can't switch to reserve fuel as smoothly as we can." "I still don't see..." "That was when the field instabilities exceeded some critical limit. Shall we adjourn any further discussion of trivialities until we're through?" "Childe," I said. "Then you know that those brave men and women died on Titan. "Oh, she is perfectly well," the voice answered. My hand closed on the haft and removed Grisha's particle gun. It was harder than Clavain had been expecting, but the shuttle stayed in one piece and the seat cushioned him from the worst of the impact. I waded over to the noose and took hold of it. It was like standing on the shore of an ocean, being engulfed by a wave taller than himself. But there's a cost. Given a desired destination, they can assemble a string of runes that will almost always be accepted by the aperture's own machinery. I wrote some more of the story in the back of a car driving up the Pacific Coast Highway, and then finished the whole thing in Burbank, Los Angeles. ISBN (eBook) 978 1 473 21637 2 Printed in Great Britain by [printer] www.alastairreynolds.com www.orionbooks.co.uk www.gollancz.co.uk She nodded. "Would you? You can come with us whenever you like. Or dead. If Yakov really did think that the ship was still in Russia, he wouldn't be concerned about decompression. Within the Wall lay a lymphatic system whose peristaltic feed-pipes ranged in size from meters across to the submicroscopic; flowing with myriad tiny repair machines. Now and then a stained-glass window allowed a view out of Golgotha's surface, which looked very far below us. "Step away from the console, please," the man said. If we had passed any other signs of human habitation since leaving the deserted city, I had witnessed none of them. As soon as my exo-cladding detected that I'd been injured—which was probably sooner than my own nervous system—it would have squawked the nearest field medical unit. Minla would show Merlin drawings and paintings she had done, or little compositions, written down in laboured handwriting in approximately the form of script Tyrant had come to refer to as Lecythus A. The goggles painted designations, civil registrations and cargo summaries. Forqueray happened to be standing in the way. Trintignant refrained from approaching him. I was on the ship, the Tereshkova. Held tight against my chest to stop it itching, my hand was lost under a glove of twinkling machinery. Each rocket launch deposited more radioactivity into the atmosphere of the doomed world. It was his desire to help someone move on, before he did the same. And yet I was outnumbered. It came with instructions on how to tame its fire, and make sure it did not come to harm, but we were forbidden from probing its mysteries. After the emergence of the Huskers many planetary colonies went to great lengths to camouflage themselves against the aliens." "So there could still be a welcoming committee." "We'll see. All I can promise is that I won't be long. His voice was soft, unhurried. \*\*\* IT'S DAY WHEN they find me. "I know it sounds impossible. Zeal went to an intercom, bent a stalk to his lips and spoke to the rest of the crew, before returning to me. The distortion to the field intensified, and then snapped back in the other direction. There were dark, glamorous rumours concerning the covert development of technologies that would bring this state of affairs into being. The things I'd thought were viewing stands were exactly that: terraced structures about thirty metres high, with staircases at the back leading to the different levels. "I'm not sure I understand." "We were both supposed to use our companions all the time. There's air here; not much of it I'll grant you—but what if the Spire's mostly hollow? I allow my experiences to be recorded by a machine that accompanies me everywhere I go. He was the weird cyborg celebrity who made huge blue structures; the man who never gave interviews or hinted at the private significance of his art. "I think you may shortly have your wish." He was right. "And there are mad old women who don't belong in either category. I presume he needed someone with your kind of Juggler transform. "What happens to you, while all this is happening? I told Katerina I loved her and couldn't wait to get back home. I felt as if I was touching bark or rock through my glove. Skanda meant it to happen. I took out Zima's invitation and held it against the horizon ahead of us, trying to decide whether the blue was a closer match to the sky or the sea. "And each time you've successfully destroyed her ship with all the people in it. "No. It's not me that you'd be doing. And you're losing people. The man looked impatient with her, as if she wasn't showing sufficient deference. We were all ill—the perfect excuse for incarceration in some nameless medical facility cum prison or madhouse. After my appearance on Derek's Cage—which went out on a global feed, to billions of potential witnesses—I was "detained" by the cybernetic support staff of my own transnational space agency. I had no consciousness to speak of; no sense of my own identity. We got Malyshev back in the end. "The fault lies in Brendan, not me! If he did not make such good and solid sledges, then perhaps I should need another by now." "I shall tell him," Kathrin said. The number of vertices of the shapes on the left-hand frame are the first four primes: one, three, five and seven." "And on the other frame?" Childe answered for me. "They wouldn't tunnel out of reality to avoid being axed, then come back with a progress report." "They didn't have mocked you, Dimitri Ivanov." The elevator doors close. The bracelet feels lighter, because part of it has entered you. Then go home and get the glory, like good cosmonauts. There was a moment of unpleasant confinement, as if I was a being squeezed into a too-small bottle, and then I was back, still holding hands with Purslane, the two of us reeling as our inner ears adjusted to the return of gravity. With social planning, we can organise matters such that the population shrinks to a tenth of its present size. "Say that again." "The routing error was more severe than you were led to believe. A screen flashed red and began scrolling with error messages. And could it make a difference to the survivors you left behind?" "Hiding inside a shell won't help them," Minla said. You really are alone, Mike. I am studying it now and it strikes me as...challenging, to say the least. And the Spire may not tolerate that kind of delay." "I just don't don't help them," and it strikes me as...challenging, to say the least. And the Spire may not tolerate that kind of delay." "We don't know that," I cautioned. But it looked a lot like a devil's horn. "You mean, why would anyone ever want to leave?" "I just don't help them," and it strikes me as...challenging, to say the least. understand. I thought of the way he had followed me, researched my past and had my own volantor desert me. "I'm ready," she said, aloud, into the night, for whoever might be listening. Except all that was self-justifying bullshit, wasn't it? "It behaves me to point out that you may be making a tactical error in conducting your enquiries here, at the present heart of the Emergence. The proof of the pudding..." I looked at the pudding-like mass of neural tissue and asked the question I was dreading. "I just tried to shoot you. All we ended up with were various manifestations of savant syndrome." set in the deep, distant future—at least seventy-two thousand years from now—but there's an epic, mythological sweep which I think resonated well with the Arthurian symbolism of the name. "Metals make the ship good?" "Yes," Merlin said. He no more knows why he did this—and who's behind it—than the bullet did. And besides—I've heard enough rumours to think that I know half the answer already." That was news to me. Yinning and Tarabulus hadn't come up through the combines; they'd never worked with rock and ice in any other context. "Which way?" He takes a while to gather his breath, and even then his voice is ragged. Maybe next try. "Yes, actually. The last message he could get through to us. Yet I summon my resolve and announce: "There she is—the lovely Maria. So far we haven't seen any pathologies." Clavain watched as one of the older children was escorted out of the grassy room, through a door in the sky. There were awful bruises all over her body, some more recent than others. How foolish she had been, to take Twenty Arch Bridge when it would only have cost her another hour to take the further crossing. Mammals. What do you mean, flowers?" Merlin said. The stars outside were stationary, their colours showing no suggestion of relativistic distortion It's the only thing that saved me. They were swung out from the hull on triple hundred-metre-long jibs, like the arms of a grapple. "Just another ghost." Various possibilities flashed through my mind as I listened to the man's deep and taunting voice—a kidnapping, an assassination—before I stopped flattering myself that I was worthy of such attention. Names like forests. Post-revival amnesia. You may be malfunctioning, Mercurio, but I still don't think you'd do something that barbaric." "Perhaps I would have done it, if I thought justice would be served. They'll have thought of the Soyuz option by now, realised that it's feasible." "They won't force us to do it, thought justice would be served. They'll have thought of the Soyuz option by now, realised that it's feasible." "They won't force us to do it, thought justice would be served. They'll have thought of the Soyuz option by now, realised that it's feasible." operate. I have seldom had cause to use these things, but they are well remembered. \*\*\* WE DIDN'T DROWN. The breath was knocked out of me. "I think I need to stay awake. We still knew nothing of relativistic starflight, so those ships were necessarily slow and vulnerable. They might just have been echoes of the war we're fighting." Clausen shrugged, as if the matter were of no consequence. As a matter of fact, we were both made in Deimos, in the same production batch. You're not here in the end. But you know, now that she's put the idea in my head, that's an excellent fucking idea. "Nevil Clavain?" he heard. Obviously, while I was out cold, being operated on, KX-457 was able to complete the extraction. "Kolding says you'll only need a day of damage repair before you can move off again, and then another twenty, twenty-five days before you reach your destination, depending on routing patterns." He said he'd been somewhere he hadn't...somewhere Campion had been." "So it was Burdock's word against Campion?" Fescue turned to the impostor. I shook my head, struck by an intense conviction that this was exactly the wrong think I'd die out here." The voice speaks English. I kept thinking back to the girl in the corridor, and the cryptic warning she had given me. "You said my injuries have been stabilised. You were mistaken. Before I do that, I recommend that you order your ships to protect themselves." Some of them already had. "Minla's Flowers" is about the hazards of meddling, even with the best of intentions, as well as being a parable about the corrosive effects of political power. What about the hundred lives you've thrown away with your escape attempts? That's three taken care of. Most, if not all, were very simple machines, tailored to one specific function. "We can't keep doing this indefinitely," I said. "What about the others?" "They're all four-dimensional objects; relatively simple geometric forms. More and more I was thinking of it as a sentient thing: inquisitive and patient and—when the mood took it— immensely capable of cruelty. We're glad to have you back with us, Merlin. Awesome it must have been, too. We've got less than a minute." The feeling in my belly was one of ice. "There was a ceasefire shortly after my father's death. Can I look at her journal?" "Be my guest," I said, passing it over to her. Now he worked not with brushes and paint, but with fleets of mining robots, tearing apart asteroids to make the raw material for his creations. "You too, Thom." Greta finished her orange juice and then took a corner of my croissant for herself, without asking. He wanted to survive. Celestine slumped to the floor, screaming. The binding energy of the moon, the kinetic energy of the impactor. Thawed from reefersleep we convened for breakfast, riding a travel pod upship to the lighthugger's meeting room. Maybe worse than being switched off." She paused. Garret turned down the alley, still carrying Kathrin's bag. Politics took up more and more of his time. "He was a politician?" "An activist. The room beyond was utterly dark; no stammering flashes now. It is not the end of the world, or at least not the end of the world, or at least not the end of mine. What right have I have to barge in on this old woman, to force her to think about the way things used to be? He was looking at something which had never existed before in the whole of human experience. As you should have done. I was debating these points with myself when a signal flashed from the surface, emanating from the largest ruined city. Something did, but it took a while for anyone—including me—to notice. We need to know who's with us and who isn't. "There isn't much time left." "He's right, Purslane said, gripping my hand. It's not a weapon. He thought of Nero. This woman hasn't just been roughed up a bit. "Lower the island screen, Campion." And even as he spoke, Fescue's ship pushed mine up and away, into the high atmosphere, until it was lost among the stars. The resonant effects of Triton, and its lesser siblings, conspire to divide up a bit. and subdivide these infant rings into riverine bands. We are now deep inside the Great House. In the pleasant mental haze brought on by the stem, in jewelled and ringed fingers. Another part, attuned to some fundamental wrongness about the phenomenon, wanted to get as far away as possible. The responsibility was hers alone. Art fiends, commentators and critics packed their bags in Venice. It was lost under a silver tide, a sea of gleaming mercury climbing slowly through the thicket, swallowing everything as it rose. At the same time, he also paid close attention to what the books had to say. It was against regs: something about the paint clogging intake filters. We made our way to the koi ponds. "We know there'll be more." He walked to the railing on the inner side of the balcony and looked over the edge. It had trapped Lenka, but she was not yet fully part of it. Predictive impact model still holding. Part of me knew she was only being kind, in the harshest of ways. I no longer needed armour now: Trintignant had grafted it to my skin. He'd occasionally had a presentiment when something was about to go wrong. But if we don't get this ship moving properly, that'll be the least of your worries." "I know." "So perhaps we should return to the matter of the engines. "My ship says seventy kilometers at the low end, with a central estimate around ninety. Typical, eh? Data was what I lived for now. More disappointed than they'll already be at us for losing the robot." I watched her reflect on what I'd said. Other species...dozens, hundreds of them. That'll take some fixing." "You don't seem all that worried." "I'm not." "But we're being shot to pieces here." "We'll hold," he said. If he knew he'd been poisoned, why didn't he tell the rest of us? Data scrolled onto my visual readout, informing me that the floor had a temperature only one hundred and fifteen degrees above absolute zero. The fault may be in my own systems, but it's much more likely that there's been and the floor had a temperature only one hundred and fifteen degrees above absolute zero. The fault may be in my own systems, but it's much more likely that there's been and fifteen degrees above absolute zero. attack against a critical node in our distributed grid. "Would you like to see the view?" the ship asked, with a playful note in its voice. "Thank God we'd put the helmets back on," I said, fingering a deep bump in the crown. I could only carry a few at a time. When the domains shattered from each other, the connections reaching beyond the galaxy remained intact." "In which case you can cross from domain," I said. Behind us the exit door slammed shut. "You know, I think the first chamber was just a warm-up," Celestine said. On the horizon, the tops of distant rigs glittered pale and metallic in sunlight. It keeps this kind of thing to itself." "But it could be programmed to report to you," Purslane said. But there was only one moon as we came in." "That was Phobos," Fury said. For a few weeks or months—however long it took the ship to scavenge and process the raw materials it needed to fix itself—the search for my Gun would be on hold. Inductive heating, I thought: Baby's magnetic field washing back and forth over the metal, cooking it. "We have enough of the ore," she said. I don't think he felt much, it would have been so quick. Venice tilted below us, then streaked away to the horizon. I just did what Zeal told me, while he watched me with his one human eye, taking in every slip and tremor of my hand. "That's good." "Here's the first installment." I've been a busy little beaver, while we've been having our little chat. "Unfortunately, some of your information proved less than accurate." Merlin blinked at her. But to do that I need to be close to it. "Guy was one of the Few. In the normal course of events Conjoiners had no need of sleep: at worst, they'd switch off certain areas of brain function for a few hours." Everywhere else, the aug was so thick, so all-pervasive, it was impossible to do anything illegal without someone knowing more or less instantly. "The tunnel, of course." Galiana made more lights come on. Up to a point, writing can be a release from the pressures of life, but sooner or later—in my experience at least—life will trump the ability to write. Almost before he had time to reflect on his own words he found himself saying." The other man, perhaps wary of a trick or some misunderstanding brought about by the translator, narrowed his eyes. They were hollow, picked open and gouged of their dangerous, seductive treasures But they still wanted to be trawled, so that—in the unlikely event that they were killed—something would go on. And that would mean that the jangling men had not yet won." "But the Thaw..." Kathrin began. It looked, as near as he could remember, exactly the way it had been before. "It means it's a piece of piss when you know the answers." We the Thaw..." Kathrin began. It looked, as near as he could remember, exactly the way it had been before. "It means it's a piece of piss when you know the answers." We can be could remember as the could reme were standing by the door where Celestine had made her mistake the last time. You get out when we stop. "But if he has done something bad, the line has to know about it. "You were right. I never got to see either of them while they were still alive." "Why didn't you get a similar dosage?" "Yakov was mad to begin with. We had never considered they were still alive." possibility that Burdock might be acting honourably, even heroically. Like the view of an unfamiliar room if you turn the lights on for an instant. But I won't ever forget, and neither will you. They were both wearing harnesses with clip-on safety lines, but Nero only used hers once or twice the whole day, and because he did not want to seem excessively cautious he followed suit. "This won't work," I said. I was fearful at first, but when I saw the Winged Man's face I only wanted to do what I could for him. I screamed. But I've not failed. Keep them...working." "What do you mean, them?" She cocked her head behind us, in the direction of wall plating. The inscription, in so far as it can be translated into Prime, reads as follows: Am I my brother's keeper?" He reflected on this for a moment. Don't you think us being observers, changes things? Ingvar raises her voice over the brassy dischord. "After all those times where we used to dare each other to sneak aboard, I've actually stayed behind until after the doors are closed. They wrap around to form a smooth ceiling, broken by hatches and recesses. They were on me in seconds, swatting aside the gun. A bright central bulge at the galactic core, with lazily curved spiral arms flung out from that hub, each arm composed of hundreds of billions of stars, ranging from the dimmest, slow-burning dwarfs to the hottest supergiants teetering on the edge of supernova extinction. "There's something I need to tell you," he said eventually. "No time to go through it all now," she said. Space calls for me again—there are always more worlds to map—but I imagine I could be quite content as a cartographer of the human cultural space. None of that worked. Better than anything I could come up with, at any rate. "The one you made happen." \*\*\* THEY CAME IN to land on another rig, one of five that stood close enough to each other to be linked by cables and walkways. This was more like a prickly fruit, a nastily evolved bacterium or some fantastically complex coral formation. After so many thousands of years of loyal service, I could only imagine how surprising they were. "Greedier than you'll ever know," she said. I'd feel a lot happier if we were already throttling back." "You don't think we can lose ask the captain to delay drive start-up until I'm finished with this one, if that isn't too much trouble?" "I'll do what I can," Khorog said. "Go now," she said. I'd feel a lot happier if we were already throttling back." any more mass?" "We're stripped to the bone as it is. "Kind of surprised you haven't thrown yourself into the sea by now." "And miss the warmth of human companionship?" The bearded man didn't laugh, but he made a clucking sound that was a reasonable substitute. This is my work—my vocation." I flash back to the mad swirling stars of De Sterrennacht. Can you feel those skin cells dying, the frostbite eating its way into your face? "Gaunt." He had to wait a moment for the rest of it to come. The Ultras could have delivered his probes to any system within range of their lighthugger ships, but the whole point of the exercise was to restrict the knowledge of any possible discoveries to the family alone. It's not to put you under pressure, or anything." "Of course not." "It's just that...we really don't want to be hanging around here a second longer than necessary." \*\*\* I REMOVED WEATHER'S restraints and showed her how to help herself to food and water from the room's dispenser. Forqueray, who had been monitoring our journey with an inertial compass and gravitometer, confirmed that we had ascended at least fifteen vertical metres since the first chamber. It's as if God blew a hole in the dust just for us. Two weeks, three at the most. As the technocrat had already promised, it turned out to be in uncannily close agreement with the forensic sample. He was being studied sketched, perhaps even photographed. Clavain, making for the base of it, made no effort to quieten his footfalls. "Nidra is right—her body isn't our concern," Rasht said, while Lenka paged through the sheets. But I have to trust that they've left the area, and that the phalanx of heavy Mechs has continued on its original vector. "Only then." "What if Mister Zeal doesn't agree to it?" I asked, when we were safely out of earshot. "For my sins." "My God. It was not her alienness that drew my furtive attention, but her very human face: her small and pointed chin, the pale freckles under her eyes, the way her mouth never quite closed, even when she was silent. "But that's what historians and archaeologists do. Perhaps it was the stirring up of the past as each new thread was added, but we all felt Abigail Gentian's base memories looming large in our thoughts as Thousandth Night approached. Tell you? Sooner or later, though they crunched the numbers—triangulated from the slightly different pointing angles of the various spacecraft and telescopes, the slightly different detection times of the event—and they realised that, whatever this was, it had happened within one light hour of the Sun. Without seeming to do anything, she made a diagram of mammal brain anatomies appear on the trunk's upper surface, then sketched her finger across the relevant parts. I could still see clearings, but the individual trees had vanished into an amorphous mass. But I knew we had his full attention. It knew that we had no choice about what we had no choice about what we had become." "But it didn't end, did it? "I agree," she said. "Then you don't need me." "But we do. The last time, my submitted strand had been so well received tha there'd been mutterings that I must have spiced things up for effect. Just housing a thousand of the Few needed a building the size of a major resort hotel, with about the same power requirements. Does it feel any different?" "No," Kathrin said automatically, but as soon as she'd moved her arm, she knew that it was not the case. We'd barely doubled the distance between the two ships when her drive spar failed, allowing the port engine to drift away from its starboard counterpart. Can you breathe a little more easily? It was a painting of a swirling, star-pocked nebula, from the vantage point of an airless rock. We just wanted to know what had happened to Teterev." "So Teterev was the beginning and end of your concerns? Service lights threw a warm golden glow on the scene. The life support core was intact—I was in no danger of dying—but my locomotive augmentation was not working as well as it was meant to. The people who made the Scapers understood that, even if they didn't get the technology quite right. Nebulae ghosted past in spectral wisps. Pieces of her were drifting away. There was a reefersleep casket of the kind Forqueray and his ilk used aboard their ships, attended by numerous complicated hunks of gleaming green support machinery. Every now and then a geyser went off or a pool burped a huge bubble of gas into the air. No use to me, but I am sure your father will find use for them. I never saw their Zil. if that was how they arrived. He stood with his arms outstretched, like a sculptor visualising a composition. I know she hated every minute of that performance, but to her credit she threw herself into it with giddy abandon. Letters in Lecythus A marched in stentorian ranks across the highest vertical face. Small by Martian standards—they were about the same height, and Yukimi hadn't stopped growing. Something really, save the absolute, life and death essentials. "You did everything that was expected of you. Some moved via propulsive waves of multiple clawed limbs. "That one," he'd say, directing my eye to a tagged procession of cargo pellets, shot out from the mother ship for less than three and a half hours—well ahead of schedule. "We have eleven minutes to get through this door, or we'll be punished. But I was also educated by my human trainers at the facility near Zurich, and allowed to evolve the higher level organisation of my neural networks through a series of stochastic learning pathways. "Then we'll continue. Compactified, death could touch us all in less than five thousand years. I wondered if they were taking me back into space. "I just want to be careful, that's all," she said. That's a lot of Mike on the ground. The writhing grew in strength, accompanied by the slithering, hissing sounds of metal on metal. "I would not want to be in her shoes." "They say she took a bit of a beating, before the peacekeepers came. Was that a shock?" "Not at all." I notice that a watery substance is coming out of The Baby's nose. Gradually the scalp and face came free. I knew it wasn't going to work; that it was always going to be easier thinking that she was already dead." "When she saw me, she remembered me. The more you try to make yourself impregnable, the more evident you become to the outside world. As I said, it's got provenance." He paused. A dozen in the first minute, and then two dozen in the second. The other one moves closer with the syringe. Honestly, I hadn't meant it to happen this way. I was born three hundred years ago, Kathrin. Would Julact provide any answers? "You thought I was someone else." "What did you say your name was?" "I didn't. Presumably these were the lobots that needed to engage in more complex tasks, requiring a degree of reciprocal communication. That's a lot better than six." "He's right," Childe said. We have our own names now, terms of address that can only be communicated in the Transenlightenment. I'm still where the field medical unit left me, still hemmed in by a makeshift cordon of rubble and junk. If it gets better, then it has room for improvement. "Well, what else have we. There'll be all the time in the world for lolling around on beaches after we've completed the Great Work." Fescue poured the remains of his wine into my ocean. And now we reach again. "We can't just leave her here," I said. The problem was, not all of us did. When all this is over and done with, I wouldn't be at all surprised if you have an imperial audit to deal with." He shrugged, as if the matter was of no possible consequence. "My ship only discovered it three days ago, based on observations it had collated since I arrived. "Nevil Clavain," Galiana said, introducing him to the others. He had been shown the emergency equipment during his training, never once imagining that he would have cause to use it. All the while the Tereshkova, and all the while the Tereshkova, and all the while the Tereshkova remained in contact with the Tereshkova, and all the while the Tereshkova remained in contact with the Tereshkova, and all the while the Tereshkova remained in contact with the Tereshkova, and all the while the Tereshkova remained in contact with the Tereshkova investigations. Just in case there was something significant about it, something neither you, I nor your father had spotted." "And?" Minla asked, with a note of fearfulness. But even as these thoughts formed, the body retched and coughed a mouthful of dark blood onto the perfect white marble of the terrace. There were pipes and cables all over the misshapen form, with wisps of steam coming out of its joints. Albedo. But when he had taken a few paces away from the buggy and turned back to wave, Yukimi waved back. Any area of the ship that wasn't already in use as a screen or control panel or equipment hatch or analysis laboratory or food dispenser or life-support system was something to hold onto, or kick off from, or rest against, or tie things onto. I turned a corner and there she was. "Nobody's going to order you to do anything. Despite my fears, the Spire had not objected to this, but I remained acutely aware that we did not yet know all the rules under which we played. "There's no doubt." I shake my head. Only when the Progress was already committed—moving too guickly to stop or change course—did a glimmer of blue-green light reassure me that there was a heart beating inside that ribcage. For a while I considered riding the contraflow, back towards that lone Exodus Ark. That was usually sufficient to tell if the message was interesting or not. Some of our units were going rogue. You'd have paid more attention to the monkey. "We won't be able to burn reserve fuel for very long without the scoop to replenish..." "Scoop's down for a reason, son." I followed Zeal's gaze back to the other ship. "Less than a hundred kilometres away, there is a pressurised maintenance shack. What was that figure?" I turned back the sheets with a sort of dread. Always more. I show her the Moon but she is beyond distraction. But the left one's just as valid." Hirz said, "Yeah. There were those who saw us and imagined that the creature with her—the thing that trotted by her like a stiff, diamond-skinned, grotesque mechanical dog-was merely a strange choice of pet. "I am Minla, Merlin. "Some kind of shell," the ship told Merlin. He thinks that, far from standing down, this could be the big chance for Mars to position itself as the main player in the system-over and above the outer giants and what's left of the Inner Worlds Prefecture. I do. I just wish I'd put the clues together sooner than I did. I'm only a girl from the Shield, a sledge-maker's daughter." "What do you think I was, when I found the flier? Nobody ever admitted to deploying them and it was usually impossible to convince them that the war was over and that they should quietly deactivate. I know a good bar near here, and there are no rock cutters. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a flicker of rapid motion, like an eyelid closing. I'll just withhold my solution." "Seventeen," Childe said. We'd hurt her, but barely, and I knew we couldn't sustain more than three further bursts of fire before the Cockatrice's own short-range weapons found their lock and returned the assault. "Mike, listen to me carefully. From somewhere in the distance a siren rose and fell on a mournful cycle. At fifty thousand kilometres, the Cockatrice was in range of our own weapons. The captain has one, but that's only because a hull spar took out his speech center." "I'm not talking about cyber modules." Zeal halted and looked back at me again. And if you don't let her go, this has to be a kinder way out than being sucked into you." I allowed my thumb to rub back and forth over the trigger, only a twitch away from activating it. I was on a moon in one of them. The last thing we wanted was to frighten possible future candidates. Constellations had been drawn on the patterns of stars, with sketched figures overlaying the schematic lines joining the stars. The Spire is a living thing, Celestine. "You mean my companion?" "Your thoughts and observations aren't any less valid than Corax's. Green fluid dribbled out one of the knees. Dreams that you were pulling me out of the surge tank. It was heightened, with the mad shimmering intensity of a Van Gogh nightscape. But there was nothing he could do to help her. "We see it..." Childe said. "He was pissing me off anyway," Galenka said. Our perception of time's flow remained absolutely invariant, even as our entire universe was slowing almost to a standstill. "When he arrived here, the ship detected the contagion and refused to let him leave." "Noble of it," I said. My people would come after me. I wish that it were otherwise. The best you could hope for was incarceration. We were soon through, into the interior. I'd known about the break could not be seen from the administrative offices or any of the surveillance cameras. "Something you seem incapable of grasping." He looked back at my maze, as if willing it to crumble to dust. Maybe a decade. In this weather, I can forget about buses. Still in their surge tanks?" "Yes," I said, guardedly. I knew they hadn't finished with me. He heard a rattle of a hundred safety catches being released. That was all I knew to begin with. And look —here you are. But what has happened today cannot be ignored. "How could a machine have a brother?" I asked. He knew the basic principles of building an atomic rocket, but little of the other ship's intact hull to repair our own damage, Van Ness saw no reason to hang around. "Actually, my earliest memories are probably much like yours—a vague sense of being, an impression of events and feelings, some wants and needs, but nothing stronger than that. But in a flash something emerged from the wall: a rigid, sharp-ended metal rod spearing out at waist-height. VAINGLORY A LOT OF my stories revolve around art or artists, now that I come to think about it. You have become my magnum opus. And we can find him. You could never map the limits of your ability; any more than a lion could test its strength against paper." She looked around her. Clavain made a mental effort to retain some of what he was seeing in his mind, the intelligence-gathering reflex stronger than the conscious knowledge that he would never see Deimos again. I had to swap out the power cells, but other than that I've done nothing to it. The voice said: "Nothing like that." Not just yet," Doctor Grechko—if that was his name—says. "The baby can do the same trick?" "Baby weak...for now. Who was she? None of us had time to notice it, let alone react bodily. Either way, the old world was an irrelevance. Just a game with no consequences." He glanced at the other Advocates, who were looking on with amused expressions. I catch a reflection of myself in its visor: a golden behemoth of metal and plastic: some kind of truck, with multiple wheels and cameras and forward-mounted manipulators. The route out of the Spire was now clear again. If this one's a lot less dense than I thought, then there's something weird about its chemistry." Merlin paused, feeling himself on the edge of something important, but whatever it was remained just out of reach. You could hardly see it then. I had served the emperor with every fibre of my being for the entire duration of my existence. Two or three of the creatures were loosely humanoid, in so far as their forms could be discerned. We only went back in to help you." "I didn't need you to help me. "Ever since that family business came up. Clavain had tried to make her come with them, but Galiana had told him he was wasting his time: that she would sooner die than be parted from the Wall. I listen to the chimes, snatching a moment to myself. He's one of us. Perhaps we were going to make it home after all. "It's not too late, Richard. It was only now that we were allowing those mental shields to collapse; forcing our imaginations to confront the fact of the tower's existence. And a strand was a strand, whether it was delivered by a thinking because he saw it as a way out of the impasse—maybe the last chance for peace. Then we'd judge the right moment to slip away to Purslane's ship. They want to see how alert we are. That was when the monkey broke free. I said I knew nothing of a war, unless he spoke of the Battle of the Stadium of Light, which had only happened twenty years earlier. What she had thrown curved lazily through the air, following a parabola. They must have freshened him up before bringing him to consciousness. She must always have known that her provocations would bring down something she could never hope to defeat. "You said it," Clavain answered. Neither of us were interested in the stock market or the social whirl. The shots skim past me, wasting most of their energy against the sagging, geologically-layered shell of a collapsed parking structure. "Well, it's good to see you," I said, But did I ever approach what I considered were the true limits? "I've never felt better, sir," "I'm., troubled." "There's no need," I extended my hand, beckoning him to leave the throne. Felt more like an attack, "A couple of them went mad. It was a spiral galaxy. "Awake?" I managed. Then with a powerful flick of its fluke it soared higher, to the orbital shallows where its fellow were already assembling. A family matter came up that was best dealt with confidentially, and I really couldn't be bothered explaining to everyone why I needed some peace and quiet on my own." "And faking your death was the best way to go about it?" "Like I said, I couldn't have planned the Eighty if I'd tried. "I said there was good news as well, didn't I?" "Which is?" Childe said. I find a vest, a shirt and an old grey sweater that's been repaired a number of times. Everyone was there, including Trintignant and Forqueray, the latter inhaling from the same impressive array of flasks, retorts and spiralling tubes he had brought with him to Yellowstone. Well, a bad thing had certainly happened. There were patches of shallow-rooted, mainly dark-red tundra vegetation; cotton grass, saxifrage, arctic poppies and lichen. I know what happened, Kathrin: I saw the statue with my own eyes, before the Winged Man fell. For long minutes, nothing happened. But the reports were glorious. "Well?" Celestine said. All we can hope for. We stood and watched it in silence, neither of us ready to make the first move. It was sudden, purposeful activity, not the result of the brakes being loose or some underwater current stirring it into motion. He sounded pleased to see her, but somewhat less than pleased that she had chosen this exact moment to run outside. You knew the way my mind worked too well." "He's convinced that he's a failure," Childe said, turning round to smile at the Doctor. I asked for a man." "Beggars can't be choosers, Mister Zeal. I lean over and turn the volume down, until it's almost lost under the engine noise. "Most of them don't treat me badly at all-they're not monsters or sadists. "You've tolerated her attempts so far," Voi said. It's why I dialled the dose to five times its normal strength. There was a tiny head inside the armor. I had been a cosmonaut for longer and I had seen how our superiors punished failings. I would have seen it from space, had it not been screened from observation until this moment. From where I was sitting, hardly anyone wasn't a possible suspect." "Do you trust us now?" I asked. If you gave me some money, and told me where to go." Seeing the sceptical look on her face, I add: "I'd come back." "We'll go together. It's causing Phobos to spiral slowly closer to Mars, by about two metres a century. There were never any cast-iron guarantees." "You lied to us." Minla turned suddenly spiteful. I just hoped that they would have the sense to put up their screens first and worry about the coincidence later. Shortly we'd know. The strangeness of her, the odd shape of her hairless crested skull, should have been off-putting. I pushed the wound to my mouth and sucked at it. "Plenty of time to study the opposition and make a few judicious alterations." Samphire sidled a bit too close for comfort. "Your father would be ashamed of you." Minla's look made Merlin feel as if he was something she'd found under her shoe. "Aye,"

Kathrin said. But you can speed it up, if you like. My mind is permanently disfigured. Moving stars was not actually as difficult as it sounded. Though there were icecaps at either pole, the world looked neither habitable nor inviting. Make yourself as warm as you wish. But the girl was different. "Which was?" "Air," Forqueray said. I find voice amplification mode. "Tell me that's a code in our database," Merlin said. A blue-green glow shone through the winking gaps in Shell 3, hinting at luminous depths. Tell them and make them help." "I will. "Miss Clay? This one has bodies in it: grey-skinned men sitting upright in dark coats and hats. "I couldn't very well let them stay in the ocean." "It was lovely. Frosted with your own breath, blurring everything on the other side. If you allow it, there's time for them to establish a structural web across your brain. Even if Greta had the authority to turn out the lights when she wanted to, didn't anyone else object? That was one half of the problem cracked, at least. Yukimi's fear sharpened into a very precise kind of terror. "We're here," he said grandly. "I'm sorry," I said, aiming the gun. There's nothing to edit. Have you any idea what that means to one of us?" I shook my head, not because I didn't understand what she meant, but because I knew I could have no proper grasp of the emotional pain that severance must have caused. Both deeds were as close to crimes as anything perpetrated within the history of the Gentian Line. Not just Greta, but all the other unlucky souls who had ended up at the station. What else is it tolerating now?" "I don't know." I managed a thin smile. I couldn't piece together the tune, if indeed there was one —it was too slow, too deep for that—but I didn't think I was hearing muddy slush, and as it passes I see that it's empty. Because of that, it's watertight as well. "Will the Scaper be all right without you aboard?" Yukimi asked, as they powered out of its shadow, bouncing over small rocks and ridges. "Suzy and Ray. I watched her sleeping. For all we know she came back to the wreck and was eventually rescued." so, or take her journal with her?" "We're going into the cave to find answers, Nidra. It was quicker now that we didn't have to carry anything between us. The light in her room turned her into an abstraction of milky blue curves and deep violet shadows. If that did not appeal to you, I could have programmed your stump to regenerate a hand of its own accord; a perfectly simple matter of stemcell manipulation. That was before the Great Winter came in. But nothing that lasts. But the Arks had met obstacles as well. Cleaned and tidied, but still me. I'm sorry that we're asking you to make these difficult moral choices. But there was a low droning noise, like the bass note of an organ. I did not like it at all. Set against the billions of years ahead of us (before the Galaxy itself began to wither, or suffered a damaging encounter with Andromeda) what was a mere handful of millions of years? Sawdust carpeted the floor, fine and golden in places, crisp and coiled in others, while a heady concoction of resins and glues filled the air. Samphire's ship, on the other hand..." As one, the crowd's attention locked onto Samphire. But what if one of us had done something truly awful? "That's all I ever wanted. Now that you're talking to us, I don't see any further need for them." "Thank you," she said again. The apartment complex has a public entrance lobby smelling of toilets and alcohol. And if you get the slightest idea that she might be trying something—and I mean the slightest idea that she might be trying something." \*\*\* I CLAMPED THE collar around Weather's neck. That's when I started accepting the reality of it. She's from Earth as well." "Did I say I was from Earth?" "You mentioned cathedrals," Yukimi said. Forqueray has also doubtless noticed that the temperature in each room has been a little warmer than the last. The moment I woke up, and I'm trying to work out why. "Shall we take a little walk? There's a good reason. I lost control; nearly died." She takes a breath. Conjoiners were waiting to get aboard them. "Please come with us," they said in unison, beckoning me to step onto the disk. The system wasn't due to inform me for another hour. \*\*\* THERE'S A LOT to tell, and one day I'll get around to writing it up properly. Why the hell didn't we? Where else could we be? "Hold that down," Zeal said, ignoring my question completely. "We're not building for posterity," she said. Do any of you still remember the war?'" "What did you tell him?" "The truth. They were easily verified. He'll wait until the dust storms have died down," then he'll raid the nest with a hundred times as many troops as you've seen so far. "Now lad," he said, sounding more disappointed than angry. Do you want to try it on?" She didn't, really, but it seemed rude to say so. I haven't allowed myself to become a"-I faltered, my brain struggling with vocabulary now that so much of it had been reassigned to the task of cracking the Spire—"a perversion," I finished. "The point is delicate," Purslane said. "There's been a mistake." "Perhaps," Fescue said. "You'd better not be taking the piss." \*\*\* "FORQUERAY?" CHILDE SAID. Only a few thousand people up there now, but they say it will soon be tens of thousands. An androform robot, certainly—but an obvious machine nonetheless. I kept asking for an interview and kept being turned down. There were ruined cities on the surface—smothered in dust, abandoned tens of thousands of years ago. I was somewhere dark beyond imagination. Not the ship in orbit. Their helmets were leather caps, with long flaps covering the sides of the face and the back of the neck. "Then you must drop the two of us through the floor." They were standing only a few meters apart. Red material flowed around her body, hardening over her into a semitranslucent shell. Years later, I paid my own respects in the office. Their suits were hard armoured shells, with the limbs joined by flexible connections. He had not drawn a breath since first seeing the sea-glow, but he started breathing again, daring to hope that the life-form had swum away to some other objective or had perhaps lost coherence in the depths. But to use it in defence, against a smaller target...that would be a different matter, I think." Kathrin thought she understood. "That was before the new pods came on-line. She drew it out. So you have to make yourself yet more impregnable...add to your library of fears. One day I'll cross that particular mnemonic bridge when I get there. "Malkoha." And then he indicated the vial Merlin was still carrying. No one gave us a second glance, even as we pushed forward to the front. Shock does not appear to have been the primary agent in this man's demise." Doctor Trintignant fingered the remains of a red fabric band a little distance above the end of the leg. The clothes give her an illusion of bulk, but I can tell how thin she really is. "Deep tides carry more sediment. "There's a distortion screen blocking the view from space." The island was about a kilometre across: low and turtle-shaped, ringed by a narrow collar of pale sand. I'd made professor, which meant I didn't have to grub around for funding every two years. "But not immediately. "There were just two survivors," he said quietly. Does the word mean something to you?" I looked at Van Ness. I don't need to be able to move my own body to control the robot. He issued the distress call, but didn't wait for a possible response. Maybe things would have been different if you hadn't had that collar on, though, eh?" "You mean I might have sabotaged the engine, to destroy myself and the ship? I kissed Weather. Now that we were in space, the g-planes had deployed. Think instead of reducing the current threat from the worms." "Threat?" Clavain nodded. It was dragging its tail, lingering after Rasht. I could read no expression in the tight mask of his face or the blue facets of his eyes. There were two schools of thought concerning our origin. But the Wall was dead. It would only cost meet the blue facets of his eyes. a moment's concentration to order that part of the floor to detach itself, falling free. Whoever did this..." But I trailed off, my thoughts still disorganized. I consider the series of transformations I have wrought upon you to be my finest achievement to date. I forced myself to stand, putting most of my weight on my good leg. Did we make it back?" A minute later we're putting Suzy back into the tank. Despite everything I actually agree to work with you, knowing full well that in doing so I'm forsaking any chance of ever living to see anything other than this...piss-poor, miserable future. Something popped out of the wall and dropped to the floor. You're on your own from then on." I'll agree to any arrangement provided it gets me a few minutes in the warmth of the cab. The engine spars, sweeping out from the hull at its widest point, had the look of ruptured batskin. "This wasn't Burdock," he said, standing to his feet, while still holding the obscene, wriggling thing. "Either he thinks he knows enough by now..." "Or someone has scared him off." "We really need to take a look at that ship of his," she said. They did not begin until a few metres into the cave, where sunlight must have only reached occasionally, or not at all. The readout said the ammo-cell was fully charged. "My father meant well. They want to disable me, but not to do anything that might endanger the still-breathing corpse I carry inside. It was inevitable, I supposed, but I had hoped to keep a lid on it for a little longer. The third man isn't wearing a hat, although he was aiming for. "I'm sorry?" "Break the glass. "No; of course not. The platelets were on motors so they could be pushed in or out from the hull. "It did come from the future after all." "They never believed you. It's really nice to eat here in the evening. In the meantime, I think she can be helpful to us. And no ships are to pass in or out of the Capital Nexus without my express authorisation." "Yes, Mercurio," the men said in near-unison. I had to cross the bridge on my own. A few moments later a square glass pane tumbled out of the sky and lowered itself to the ground. It was draining off them in chrome rivulets, leaving them dry and on the recoil it streaked diagonally across the room, hitting one of the side walls before glancing off at a different angle. Look, I didn't say there wasn't a catch. "One of them is braver than he gives himself credit for. You need to start learning about rocketry now, because it's the only thing that's going to get you into space." His finger moved to the final sheet. I'd taken a wrong turning, then another one, and before I realised quite how lost I was, I had ended up in an unfamiliar part of the Iron Lady. Not after all this time." He choked—I think it was fear more than sorrow or anguish. Once or twice, the prints became confused, as if there were suddenly three sets, rather than one. It must recognise that we're thinking beings." "Always the optimist, Dimitri." "Something's happening Is that possible?" "I told you things were worse than before. But I still have a gun to find, and I'm not getting any younger. "I take it very personally indeed." We reached the first chamber, and then dropped down through what had been the entrance hole. Galiana took him down a short, grey-walled, metallic corridor which ended in a circular room containing a console. Few vehicles are on the roads, and with the trains not running the area around the station is almost totally devoid of activity. Warm, too. I did the same for myself: it meant that we had more to dream than everyone else, but that was a small price to pay. He allowed the robot to make its own decisions about the best strategy for cleaning the pool. We can check them quickly, three of us. I finished my coffee and steeled myself for the bill. By the time of the fourth apparition, it seemed inconceivable that there would not be a permanent human presence out here, following the Matryoshka throughout its orbit. It'll feel like a booster separation, only harder." I made sure I was tight in my seat. But it still looked like the beak of an octopus. "These machines must have been reasonably intelligent," Celestine said. "I've done my best. You can't help it, but you're filling the space Paolo used to occupy. "Transenlightenment blurs our sense of self," Galiana said. What happened to him? Then I think of something better than being taken along for the ride. In the Matryoshka's reference frame, it had consumed centuries of subjective time. "I'll need to get closer if I'm going to be any use to you," Weather told me. From the day it arrived. Had he been telling it to return to the Scaper after a set interval with Yukimi was still aboard? Not good. Since I had designed and constructed the venue, the machinery that handled the threading of the strands into our nightly dreams lay under my control. This kind of stone was laid down in shallow tidal water. Forqueray tossed the float-cam through the open door. She wears copper rings around her neck, and her fingernails—which I see clicking against the thighs of her exoskeleton—are as long as stilettos. "It's your life, your destiny. Once the ripples had settled, Yukimi could see the outline of Crowe's Landing exactly as it had been before. But we would not be going forward, and I knew not all us would be leaving. "The lowest three shapes on the left have just been rotated through an integer number of right angles, giving their corresponding forms on the right. Is that better? I'm not sure how much of a part the wine played in it for her. It won't tolerate violence being used against it. Unofficially, there were also Gentian members who seemed to know something. were now at least sixty metres higher than when we had entered, and for a while it looked like we had found a tempo that suited us. I still don't." "And you think that changes things, means we can cut you some slack?" Clausen asked. The rest of the house had a forbidding aspect, the paleness of its stone, the irregularity of its construction and the darkness of its many windows suggesting a pile of skulls. The other school, the accretionists, held a different view. Smash other ship, easy. You think you're owed something the rest of us never had a hope of getting?" "I never signed up for this deal," he said. "Adapted, of course. "Images of Titan?" I ask. A bronze craft, shaped like a blunt spearhead, waited on the floor for our arrival. Until we came!" "You are no different." "Perhaps we aren't. Though the Great Winter was easing, the evenings seemed as cold as ever, as if night was the final stronghold, the place where the winter had retreated when the inevitability of its defeat became apparent. Some part of his brain had skipped over the events since his arrival and was still working on the assumption that it had all worked out, that he had slept into a better future, a future where the world was new and clean and death just a fading memory. Rasht considered that for a moment. I'm not going away." "I hope we get to meet up," I risk telling her, even though it feels like I'm jinxing my chances of ever getting out alive. We moved as quickly as our suits allowed. They hate me." "That's sort of the reaction we were hoping for. I followed their gaze to see another slashing shooting star, and then another. On three occasions, Burdock had steered his conversations with other line members around to the subject of the Great Work. Widow Grayling hobbled over to the table, supporting herself with a stick, eyeing Kathrin as she opened the bag and took out the solitary head. "It's funny you should say that," I tell her. The t-shirt is ultramarine, with a Chinese slogan and some happy splashing dolphins. "But I said fuck the hat. And it was anyone's guess how they would align themselves. He had faith in you to keep him alive, Mercurio. This is well-trodden ground in SF, though, and I felt a conscious tip of the hat needed to be made to the seminal novel Rogue Moon, by the writer Algys Budrys. "We manufactured parts of them here, yes," Galiana said. It was the one time that your life was touched by greatness." A sudden reverence enters Ingvar's voice. Except, of course, it wasn't God. So that's what they did." "I'm sorry." "It's all in the past now. \*\*\* "WELL," CELESTINE SAID. Various machines nestled neatly amongst his innards, sliced along the same planes. My bright new memories told me now that I was seeing the pilot, the navigator that had steered the artefact through the vicious barbs of the boobytrapped time machine, and then up through time, skipping through a cascade of wormholes, to our present era. That's not to say I haven't had to fight to preserve these memories, treasuring them for what they were." He gestured at the rushing landscape beyond the window. Tell him he can trust me, with or without that silly collar." \*\*\* I WENT TO fetch the captain. In quick succession, six more cut the sky from zenith to horizon. His breathing is laboured and he stops after only a few paces. I'd rather take good memories from one world than fret about the thousand I'll never see." "You're a wise man," Minla said. "I think I will. The implication was that I'd let the side down by looking for pointless green flashes rather than adventure; that I'd deliberately sought to add nothing useful to the tapestry of our collective knowledge. That's much too long on a human scale. "Right about what?" "The sunsets. If they fled, we still shot them. But even those two components only really linked together when I started thinking about International Klein Blue, and that only happened because I'd been idly leafing through an art book, trying to come up with names for spaceships. "They don't last long, compared to us." "But perhaps you'll find an even better one." "I'll keep my eyes open. We thought there would be nine hundred of you in this nest, but that was a gross overestimate, wasn't it?" "You haven't seen much yet," Galiana said. "What, Doctor?" "Rather disturbing news, as it happens. There was no evidence that the Conjoiners had attempted to enliven their surroundings; to render them in any sense human. You seemed so cool, so focused. She poked and prodded the fire until it hissed back like a cat. More than once Gaunt saw a hand raised to brush against the stretcher, or even to touch Steiner's own hand. She thought it was dead. Something like...waterfalls." "They're pretty universal, you know. Gaunt had been adjusting, slowly coming to terms with his new life. There are about two hundred of us, and we look after about a hundred rigs, all told." Gaunt ran the numbers twice, because he couldn't believe what they were telling him. I'm a high-value asset, or so they tell me. We arrested the bleed, and I'm very happy about that." "I don't like that 'mostly.' Why is there another soldier in here with me? They were claimjumpers. "Show me what's outside the pod." "That won't help, Mike." "Show me anyway. "Just very eager to continue." \*\*\* IT WAS NEVER the same thing twice. It was driven by a single chugging propeller rather than a battery of rocket-assisted turbines. She heard a bolt slide into place. The body next to mine breathes with me. It looked as if I was going to lose a lot more than sleep. She looked smaller and more delicately boned than when we'd first glimpsed her on the Cockatrice. Perhaps those plasma cannon batteries are charging up again. If they made a mistake, the Spire punished them. It was a mistake. What next? "Hot dust. Conjoiners spent their whole lives in a state of gestalt consciousness, sharing thoughts and experiences via a web of implantmediated neural connections. "A co-operative gesture might be exactly the thing to lead to a relaxation in the terms of the interdiction. In Cohort terms she could only have been six or seven years old. From the ferocity of its attacks, Gaunt thought it quite possible that it could take down the whole rig, given time. He said that, just as there may be holes in a old piece of timber, one that has been eaten through by woodworm, so there may be holes in the sky itself. "Baby..." I called. Lenka: you'll need to go back to the lander, get the power winch." "There's a quicker way," Lenka said. Everything consumed on the rigs, from the food to the drink to the basic medicines, had first to be grown or caught at sea. "Her suit is frozen, and I have pushed channels of myself into her head, to better learn her usefulness. "What I mean, sir, is that I can be much more effective in person." "I appreciate that. Like a small, disposable part of your past—something to be wadded up and flicked away when it offended you?" "It wasn't like that at all. That's not quite the same as being able to reconstruct the exact creative trajectory that took me from first idea to finished story, and I'll try not to pretend that it is. I'll cycle the water until it attains the necessary clarity." "And then?" "I prepare myself for my performance." On the way to the swimming pool he had told me as much as he knew about his origin. One or two citizens pass me in the snow, but they have their heads down and pay me little heed. The needle-tipped hull was battered, pocked and gouged by numerous collisions with interstellar material. We'll be on reserve fuel in a moment." Sure enough, normal weight returned When you called, I hoped you'd come to fix the central heating." She pauses for a moment, mind working, then adds: "I can give you something to drink, and maybe something to drink, and maybe something to drink when he'd brought it back, nearly ruined. My hesitation lasted an instant too long. Things that couldn't be explained away." "Like dragons in the sea. Then thumps and vibrations signalled the opening of the door. "It's heard enough of your language to begin piecing together a translation. But your deep memory says otherwise—as does mine. The view through the dome is really something." I looked up into that endless holographic sky. There was only a blandly handsome silver mask; sculpted into an expression of quiet serenity. "We are," Childe said, answering for the group. by Gardner Dozois and Jonathan Strahan, Eos/Harper Collins, 2007 "Zima Blue" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2005. "Yes?" "It isn't transmitting anymore. Its titanium-pistoned legs look spindly, but they're as strong and shock-resistant as aircraft undercarriage. His expression remained calm as he waited for the drone to return to its master. It was a long time before anyone noticed that the shade of blue was the same from painting to painting. Definitely not: I'm stronger now, and bigger. "I'm all for the future." "Sibia?" Minla asked, directing a glance at the older woman. "I'm afraid I have to go now. There were pulsars, flashing on and off like navigation beacons, their differing rhythms seeming to set a stately tempo for the entire scene, like a deathly slow waltz. "Provided everyone else agrees with me..." It was not an easy decision to make, especially after having navigated so many rooms via such a ruthlessly democratic process. "Go back. Shall I read you the inscription?" Merlin had still learned nothing of the native writing, and he'd neglected to wear the lenses that would have allowed Tyrant to overlay a translation. And the sooner we get back to the shuttle, the sooner we can fix Celestine and get back to it." "A moment please," Trintignant said, fingering through another pile of human remains. If there's time, I'd like to show you something beforehand." "What?" "Something no one else will ever see again," Corax said. What kind?" Purslane flashed me a sidelong glance It's not that she's wearing a uniform, or looks like any Authority official I've ever dealt with. I was dismantled and my core cognitive functions were integrated into a vatgrown biological host body." With one finger he tapped the pewter side of his skull. Then came a message from the stars, a warning that our world was to be destroyed by the fire of the sun itself, or something even worse. The worm paused by the downed shuttle, then smashed its diamond-jawed head into the ship, impaling the hull on its body. "Thank you, Captain." "We'd best start waking those guns, lad. "Yeah, but what did I know back then? The more frustrated one became, the more tortuous the labyrinth made itself. "Agreed..." It took only a few minutes for everyone to agree that the eleven-sided figure was the obvious choice. The walls were a mosaic of crowded, intermingling displays, teeming with moving images and rapidly scrolling text. In the meantime, I continued trying to find a way to deal with Suzy. If Burdock felt aggrieved, we could be ostracized by the entire line." "It's a risk," I admitted. But whatever the effect is now, it must be insignificant compared to the time when your whetstone was formed. "Another raider. "I have the entire islance." under surveillance, so I always know where Burdock's otherwise engaged. It looked much longer and thinner than it had a moment ago, as if it had elongated itself. I've eased it a little. But entirely free of tampering, manipulation?" I don't actually make the accusation: I just leave it there in unactualised form, where it will do just as much harm. What you're saying is, for the rest of us it was easy? The effort I've put into those fish—I'd be heartbroken if anything happened to them. It isn't an escape artist." "We do have the Soyuz," I said. You can still come back with me." "No," I said. What did it matter to her if I shot her now, rather than later? The buggy started moving. We went into the dormitories knowing there was a tiny, tiny chance we might be woken to help out with the maintenance. I have far too much to be getting on with. But it's a good sign that you're already questioning these fundamental certainties." "The cosmonaut?" I ask, suddenly unable to mention him by name. They felt the pain as fully as Childe did, even if they were not willing to admit it. Something snaps inside me. "You're malfunctioning, Mercurio." "No. The fact is, I've never functioned as well as I am functioning at this moment. Arms and sensors and cameras had been bolted onto the front ruining whatever vague aerodynamics the Progress might have had. Clavain's side had been studying the nest from the vantage point of Deimos ever since the cease-fire. They must have anticipated his difficulties, because a wheelchair was waiting at the base of Tyrant's boarding ramp, accompanied by an orderly to push it. But you need to understand something very important. You already have flying machines. It's helping you, focusing on Suzy. Why don't you just bite the bullet and sign the repair paperwork?" "I'm not looking forward to another twenty days in the surge tank. Why regenerate a single hand or arm when you can culture a whole body?" "What good would that do me? launches herself into the air, tucks her arms and executes maybe twenty rotations before her skates touch ice again. "I mean somewhere private." She looked at the hand with narrowed, critical eyes. But I was still nervous as she stood next to the hexagon and cocked her head to one side. "This road we're on-this path. Even if the engines held, the ship wouldn't, but at least we'd go out in a flash when the spar collapsed and the two engines drifted apart. I probably should have warned you of that. "Great. I think so. Be back in a jiffy! You'll recognise the things when you see them. I'll always be there for you, from now until the day I stop functioning. The planet in question was called Lecythus. "There are seven other deep grooves, concluding with the ninety-first. My hand is cold around the hypodermic. It was you I wanted to talk to, Carrie, not some surrogate recording device." "Me?" The pewter mask of his face formed a quizzical expression. The pulsation modes in a solar-type star aren't the same as the pulsation modes in the Matryoshka. It was the colour of a beetle in a museum of natural history. "I won't help you." "Then you may as well leave us now," Minla said. I was still in love with science, too. Empathic. I suspect you got off with a polite warning." "Generous of it," I said. Diced, if I remember accurately." "Yeah. And then moved deeper into the nest, to see who else he could kill before the odds took him. Yakov remained still, slumped and unconscious against the door. It was a tiny thing, a beautiful jewelled toy of a spacecraft, porpoise-sleek and not much larger. "I've made up my mind," he said. The Doctor's chuckle was an arpeggio played on a pipe organ. But I'm not superstitious. It was more that he'd spared the two of them a minor chore, that was all. "Now counting from the bottom, the following grooves are deeper than the rest: the third, the sixth, the tenth, the fifteenth...shall I continue?" "I think you'd better," Childe said. The young man could have bought a cheap swimming pool cleaner from a mail-order company, but it amused him to design the robot from scratch, according to his own eccentric design principles. But a flawless society can't, by definition, evolve. She looked acep into his eyes and reached out a hand. They had stealthed the ship to the best of their ability, and for a little while it looked acep into his eyes and reached out a hand. if they might make it into interstellar space unmolested. No one had ever told her there were monsters like this on Mars, not even Shirin, when she had been trying to scare her little sister. Diamond dogs. Going on Derek's Cage requires courage as well as celebrity. "Mine, anyway. All you need to do is keep building on that achievement... building and building...until you have the means." "You make it sound easy." "It won't be. Back on the island they're dreaming my strand and wondering what the hell turned me into such an adventuress. The one that put everyone under." "Brain cells haven't mushed on us," Da Silva said. Some of the pieces were shown crashing into the seas, raising awesome waves that tumbled over entire coastal communities, while others were shown hovering unsupported in the sky, with kilometres of empty space under them. Her home, everything she really knew, was inside that pocket of air, and now it looked like a cheap plastic snow globe, like the one her aunt had sent back from Paris with the Eiffel Tower. I'll ask you again. They were moving at ten kilometres a second when they reached the surface again, exiting via a camouflaged trapdoor. I don't think she could have felt much." "I hope to God she didn't." Doctor Trintignant stooped down and examined the pieces. There was a discrepancy in Burdock's dreams...an error." Purslane's control began to falter. We weren't meant to go poking our thick monkey fingers into their innards. The witch on the hill." "There are good witches," Kathrin pointed out. No matter what happened now, we had made history. No single impact was damaging, but as the assault continued, the cumulative effect began to take its toll. "Your ship is clever," Malkoha said. I bet there aren't more than a hundred of you left here." "You're wrong," Galiana said. Now that I had been given license to enter this part of the ship, I felt more confident. You're being fed data. Changes." I nodded slowly, beginning to understand. Suddenly he saw it for what it was: a map of the nest, dug into Mars. Samphire left me. He couldn't say for sure that something had changed in their relationship—it would take time for that to be proved—but he did sense some thawing in her attitude, however temporary it might prove. The Spire had allowed us to take back Forqueray's arm after it had been severed, but it appeared to have decided to keep all metallic things for itself. You wouldn't need to query the AM about your choice of wine; you wouldn't need to wait for that confirmatory whisper. There was enough air inside the cargo hold to last for the journey, though. "These things mean nothing," she said patiently. With his help, I assumed I would be able to make sense of the memory fragments I carried in my head. No one to see how clever you'd been." "That isn't true at all." "Then why did we all have to come here? Your systems didn't just recognise speech. "Maybe she pulled you out because she needed to take out her anger on someone, I don't know." Hey, I'll mend. The diplomatic link between the nest and Deimos was secure—even the Demarchists had no immediate access to it. I could have kept the ship in one piece." "To make a point?" "No," she said, with acid slowness, as if that was the only speed I was capable of following. I wanted to touch that face, to pull back that messy curtain of hair and look into her eyes. The result was not what I was expecting. Thousandth Night. Either you've planned something or you haven't." I looked at him pityingly. We all remembered being Abigail. Zeal, I came to learn, enjoyed an uneasy relationship with the rest of the Iron Lady's crew. Now that we were under flight, sucking interstellar gases into the ramscoop field, climbing inexorably closer to the speed of light, Zeal's work tended to minor operations and adjustments. He really did look sculptural, frozen into that oddly dignified posture, with his arms coming together across his chest, one hand touching the cuff of the other. "Make what you will of it. Reunited, our little party continued into the tunnel system. This is the kind of thing I do for fun. The shift is tiny at the moment, but too large to be anything other than deliberate." Galiana looked away from him for an instant, as if weighing her options. Clavain returned the compliment, dropping his compatriot. Now that I was seeing the alien environment with my own eyes—through a thin glass visor, rather than a thick porthole or monitor—it appeared not only larger, but vastly more oppressive and strange. It was something his father had shown him on Plenitude, when he had been Minla's age, and her delight exactly echoed his own, across the unthinkable gulf of time and distance and circumstance that separated their childhoods. The AM was about to follow me inside when the robot raised a warning hand. There might once have been a time when his expansionist ambitions were driven by something close to lust, but that was tens of thousands of years ago. Nothing happened. Suzy's short-term memory after all. I tried the chemosensor against part of my own suit. Worrying about the breakdown of a Conjoiner drive was like worrying about the one piece of debris you won't have time to steer around or shoot out of the sky. Wait a moment." Widow Grayling stooped under the impossibly low doorway into the next room. My body is much the same as yours, our lifespans very similar. "Something to do with Triton's influence, I think. Is this what happened to you?" "There are a million lagues, some worse than others. There is the sun, orange-yellow, about two-thirds out from the centre of the galaxy. Then half a million. I had found it on a shelf in the cockpit. I remembered how she'd flinched back when I reached for her aboard the Cockatrice, and wondered what maltreatment she had suffered at the iron hands of her former masters. You'll be part of that, Yukimi—when you're older. I saw how upset she was." Yukimi didn't answer immediately. The atmosphere of the revellers became perceptibly tense, as my announcement drew nearer. "I'm afraid it's not that simple." "I didn't think it would be." "Over time, with the population reduction measures, eight billion living people became two billion sleepers, supported by just a handful of living caretakers. "This is a difficult subject for children. Power to smash bridges and towers and flying machines. Did something go wrong?" "Minor routing error," Suzy says. What if there's another pattern none of us are seeing?" Celestine looked at her coldly. Were they therefore the first intelligent culture in the universe, or had sentience already arisen in one of those distant spirals? Tell them. "I know it won't make any difference: I'm not a baby. "I wish things hadn't happened the way they did," I said. By the time they'd filled the most essential slots there simply wasn't any room for abstract dreamers like myself." "And the fact that you'd pissed off House Sylveste had nothing whatsoever to do with it? But that doesn't mean we should forgive them for what they are, even for an instant." Gently, as if bestowing a gift, Merlin placed the picture book on Minla's recumbent form. "That's the fundamental objection, no matter which way you look at it. All the same, he insisted that she be bound to the bunk by heavy restraints, in an armoured room under the guard of a servitor, at least until we had some idea of who she was and how she had ended up aboard the pirate ship. He might have been losing interest. Most of the remaining Eighty had succumbed, and now only a handful remained unaffected. There were gaps in that tangle, too, like the interstices in a loosely bundled ball of string. "Thank you," I said softly. I thought I was going to die in there. Dropping the Progress's speed to less than a meter per second, Galenka brought it within contact range of a particular lump of alien machinery and extended the arms and analysis tools to their full extent. My two human watchers crouch in wary anticipation. They don't crawl in through bedroom windows at night, clacking tin-bodied things with skull faces and clockwork keys whirring from their backs. It was made by alien minds, for a purpose we can't grasp. The fact that I had been in his service for tens of thousands of years was one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Radiant Commonwealth. When the storm turns, when the possibility of accident is still there, but when rescue is again feasible. "There were subjects upon whom I pushed my experimental techniques further than is generally realised, if that is what you mean. From that moment on, whether she liked it or not, she was always Weather. "Concern for an old friend. "Something bad happened to you out there, didn't it," she said. Maybe she meant both of us. She began to fall behind us. But in this case I'd began serious preparatory work on what would have been the book that came out in place of House of Suns, before deciding (spurred by an email from a reader) that House of Suns was the thing I really wanted to work on next. Yet even as the Space Dormitories were being populated, and to what purpose? "Here. Fucking greed. For God's sake; you've been cut in half." "It doesn't matter," Childe said. And, I told myself, if it had managed to hang above Golgotha's surface until now, it was extremely unlikely to choose this moment to come crashing down. We have to be flexible." "It's all very well you saying that. They exist, but not in the way we imagine them. "I couldn't be shocked by what I already was. I went to Yakov and told him what was going to happen. As windows opened and closed in Shell 3, the Progress reported on its continued existence and functionality. Put it on your wrist." Kathrin did as she was told. I gazed up at it, towering over us like some brutal cenotaph. "We're in trouble," she said. But even as Minla turned and began walking back to the waiting aircraft—moonlight picked out the elegant sweep of its single great wing—something tugged at him, holding him to the spot. He studied me with unconcealed hostility, sitting behind a desk in his private office in one of Selva's aquatic cities. He made it to the other land mass, but his plane was lost on the return trip." "He was a good man. "I guess," Gaunt said uneasily. I just write the pieces and only then worry about the content. Already putting his career at risk by giving me this information. "Lose the tunnel, the chamber, Teterev's prints, probably blast to atoms whatever we're hoping to find." "Her prints don't double back," Rasht said. Not just with the sleepers, but everything else. Eliminate the wrong shaft." Lenka's own breathing was now as heavy as my own. Lenka spooled out a length from the power winch and then cast the the noose in my direction. It was also trying very hard to communicate with its fellows—wherever they were—and that made it easy for me to trace the circuits and pathways of expression. It was a three-dimensional structure, as complex as an exercise in protein-folding. Long range...good control. I'll be gone shortly, I promise you. I never sensed any similar desires in Lenka. My job means I have to squeeze into places where a man like Van Ness could never fit. Relativistic ships can't help but carve a wake through it. "We'll take it one at a time. That state of clinical detachment won't last forever. How did he get involved?" "Gennadi was a scientist to begin with—an astronomer like me, in the same institute. Now only two remained. The three of them walked on, ascending stairs to the next level of whatever kind of building they were in. I'm old enough to remember when it was different." Still standing up, she waves a hand dismissively, shooing away the memories of better times. I didn't think much of it. "They must have had their screens tuned right down, for just this reason. Look in the pocket if you doubt me—there's a good chance you still have his security pass." "No," I insist. We all need a purpose, don't we?" He attempted another set of syllables. "As I said," winding up my voiceover, "it's been quite a trip." "SHOW DEREK MORE PICTURE. I carry on—this isn't quite what was in the script—but I'm happy enough to oblige. \*\*\* SO, ANYWAY. "We should leave, get out of here as quickly as we can. "Distraught." I look down at the ground, set my features in what I trust is an expression of profound gravitas. By then the stands were full of people who had arrived to watch the performance, and the sky over the island was a mosaic of tightly packed hovering ships. "Faster!" he shouted, but the mask reduced his voice to a panicked muffle. "It was an accurate description. I dug into our mutual psychologies, trawled the ocean of our terrors, and from that sea of fears I shaped the phantasms that I hoped would serve as deterrence, encouraging newcomers to come no nearer. I could hear it drumming inside his ribs. Be a bit difficult, slipping a noose around your neck, if you want some more heat? Why don't you tell me what it was like for you, back when it all began?" "You know my story." "I'd still like to hear it from you. We actively don't you tell me what it was like for you, back when it all began?" "You know my story." "I'd still like to hear it from you. We actively don't you tell me what it was like for you, back when it all began?" "You know my story." seek persistent disequilibrium." "Right." The last thing he needed now was a dose of Conjoiner rhetoric. By Forqueray's estimate we had gained forty-five vertical metres since entering the Spire. How many dots are connected together now?" Childe answered after only a slight hesitation, "Six. You don't have time to steer or slow down. But it was never going to be something available to the masses. Arrive. "Never been within a thousand light-years of the place." "I'll never see it. "And it didn't cross your mind to tell any of us about this?" "I thought it best to wait until a pattern became apparent." Forqueray glanced at Celestine, whose face was impassive. Why would anyone want more from life than the system can give them?" I can see where this is leading. "Is that it's black." "I mean it's more than black. As it climbed into the sky it stirred the geysers to life. We searched for him, but found nothing; not even a set of tracks leading away. Then: "Where's Yakov right now, by the way?" "Somewhere." "One of us needs to keep an eye on him, Dimitri. \*\*\* "I'LL FIND MAZAMEL," said Captain Rasht, clenching his fist around an imaginary neck. "But others did. "This was meant to be an unarmed mission!" "You're welcome to lodge a formal complaint." Clavain fired, the hull shaking from the recoil. I don't think anyone can really know how that feels unless they've also held some of that fire in their minds. You're only twenty days offschedule." Greta nodded toward the man who had the bad teeth. I don't know much about spacesuits, but I cannot see anything wrong. Doubtless many of the people were wondering what was going on: how it just happened that it was my ship that was threatening to blow up, when I was already the man who had the bad teeth. centre of attention. The first hint of it was his flawless navigation of the Mood Maze. Yukimi closed the book and strained to look through the window again. The orbit was high-inclination, the rock a long way from the ecliptic. If we outraged them, so be it. That is our custom. "I had no choice. Nero, for her part, tried to reassure him that all would be well. We were standing almost shoulder. I looked down on the assembled gathering from a much higher balcony, watching the membrane and the stuff enveloped him with a wet, sucking sound. He was wearing an outdoor coat now and had a zip-up bag slung over his shoulder. I didn't want to know, and I didn't ask. Aside from the pale, arrow-straight scratch of the occasional road or pipeline, there had been precious little evidence of civilization since their departure. "All tangible inkwells. I just needed a ticket off Mokmer." "What happen on Mokmer." "Bad thing," I said, with half a smile. "Use whatever force is merited." "I honestly don't make that distinction." I'm talking to The Baby, but in truth I've answered these questions hundreds of times already. It is a miserable, sodium-lit nightscape, barely inhabited. This building's as close to a time capsule as we're going to find. Lecythus and its sun now lay many light-weeks to stern. They go back to the apartment. I thought of simply killing it—it had come alone, after all. After thirty minutes became an hour, and every new corridor looked less familiar than the last, I began to panic. By night they sparkled as anticollision fields intercepted and vaporised meteorites. "Your wife was just one of many candidates who entered Transenlightenment during the troubles. Why the fuck did this have to happen to us? It will no longer permit us to gain any knowledge of the contents." of a room until one us steps into it. He knew that these were entirely the wrong reasons, but he accepted the force of them without argument. It took me a long time before I had any idea what I was, and what I was meant to do." "Then I guess you could say that you had a kind of childhood," The Baby says. We had no evidence that Grisha was authentic, and not just a figment created by the ship. It was exactly the sort of thing he had feared she would say. Cave mouth. It was a terrible thing. Almost beautiful, if he didn't know what it signified. "But you still think I might be usefu to you, don't you?" "Only if you wish to help us." "Captain Voulage thought that I might have the expertise to improve the performance of his ship." "Did you?" I asked innocently. And we now had less than nine minutes. I think Malkoha had more or less guessed that for himself." For a moment Merlin thought his explanation had satisfied Minla enabling her to shut tight that particular chapter of her life. Galenka popped the hatch. Or is that too much of a stretch?" "I never had to trust you when you were my prisoner," Galiana said. Whispering, I instructed the emperor to kneel in the same place where his earlier body had been killed. I could judge this in a glance, even before I had any deeper understanding of what I had found. Lines radiated out from one of the redder suns in the display, which I assumed was Yellowstone's star. I want you to come back. Galenka, who had overtaken me in our descent from the Soyuz, was the first to reach the sample hatch. "And we'll have to, briefly. "Yeah. "All the way. But it can help to have someone else to care about. We still lost good crew. "Yes, you will," Trintignant said. Wide, white-edged eyes in a girl's face, her strong-jawed expression one of ruthless self-control and effortless superiority. It would still say 'red wine' the next time you asked." I felt an uncomfortable tingle of understanding. Although it has to be said that I'm still in a kind of pod, and it has the same kind of white interior as the first. It appears that part of the Waynet has become loose, unshackled. "I didn't mean to alarm you, Nesha. "Hurt baby. Shell 1 pulsations have increased in amplitude and frequency. At a surprisingly high redshift, the Eye detected a single spiral galaxy that was alive with intelligence. Purslane did likewise, and—even as we planned our utterly illegal raid on Burdock's ship—we pieced together the tidbits of information we had gathered. "If they don't leave. She was speaking in general terms, addressing Rasht and I without favour. "Soon. "I want Richard to know exactly what happened here. Not my problem now, though. Should you do so, Conjoiner security would detect the leak and act swiftly. The sun was a cold grey disk, as if it was made of ice itself. I heard a click and the whirr of a buried mechanism. How many times have I heard that in my life, I wonder? Vratsa of all people. Most of them carried the same guns which they had used against the Ouroborus. He can barely a click and the whirr of a buried mechanism. spare any resources for what we might call normal thought. "No. Looks more like a test of conservation of symmetry through different translations," Celestine said, her voice barely a murmur. Your father was always generous to me, when I was going through lean times." Peter scratched behind his ear. It wasn't enough. I didn't really think you'd go for it. No explanation was offered, nor any hint as to what fate awaited me. Like any recording apparatus, we were prone to error and distortion. Finally, however, she spoke. In the seventy-first room, the Spire began to enforce a new rule. I almost remember her name, and then the moment passes. Most of it was true—you probably guessed that much—but I had to cover up my visit to Grisha's system." I nodded. Can you imagine something more strange than that?" He tried, and failed. "Everyone who comes here is pissed off about it. I hopped from hemisphere, trying to play the peacemaker, trying to knock their heads together to make them see sense. I promise you that much." "No one ever promises to return, Nidra. Clavain knew each species by its distinct infrared signature, but many of the plants were in recession now that the imported bird species had died. I need to know what's out there." Annabel purses her lips. "Why not?" "Isn't she going to remember something?" Greta shrugged. If there are people down there, they've been out of contact with the rest of humanity for a considerable number of millennia." "I only want to stop for repairs. "I seem to be quite badly damaged," he said. He hopped nimbly out of the way, the cable passing under his feet. Everything you've done, every rock you've cut, the entirety of your art, it's as nothing against the head of David. I was part of a small diplomatic party visiting Carousel New Venice. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. "And perhaps you're right, too. In the meantime we dose him on sedatives, put him under for as long as we can. And yet from all the choices presented to her, she had selected this one dark path, and followed it to its conclusion. Inverse square laws. "You're not Shiga." "I don't know who Shiga is. "We're all just going to have to make do as best we can, you included. They'll find me again, even if it takes a little longer. Cargo-handling 'saurs plodded out of their holding pens, some of them autonomous, some of them still being ridden by trainers. For a moment I was gladdened -just seeing the scroll of numbers and symbols, even if it meant nothing to me, made me feel closer to the Tereshkova. "Because Burdock's dead. The prints were confused now. It occurs to me that I've never come to the rink when there are skaters out. If they haven't, I'm pretty sure you'll have made your own enquiries. "Is this the factory where you make the shuttles?" Clavain said. Give her back control of her suit, and we'll leave you alone." "You could make that promise to me. The flash must have been visible all the way back to Shiva-Parvati. Just so you know where I am." "You're right," I said, wonderingly. Be assured that nothing of me would survive such an event. The other ship would probably abandon us once we pushed the engines up to cruise thrust, looking for easier pickings elsewhere. "Kharkov Eight specialized in a certain kind of product," Zima said. You let them, Minla." "I did nothing of the kind." "You knew the whole evacuation project was never going to be ready on time. "The friezes on the wall—the images of a landscape with two moons. "Some kind of underground tomb. THINKING OF you even then. It's been part of the Radiant Commonwealth for a lot longer than anyone realises. As if wishing to reward Forgueray for his observation, the next room contained a substantially thicker atmosphere than any of its predecessors, and was also much warmer. I remembered that day very well. What makes you think she wasn't helping them?" "Conjoiners don't condone piracy. We took casualties, of course." Around the circumference of the balcony were thirty or so grey couches, slightly recessed into archways studded with grey medical equipment. As to its greater significance, I can't say." "The Luquans haven't traditionally been a problem. As for me-I'm just the man they hire to do the dirty work. The difference in brain volume between a neonatal chimp and an adult is only about twenty percent. By any standards she was a large spacecraft. I plunged down to my neck in bubbling hot water, instinctively flinging out my arms as if swimming were a possibility. The strange contagion, the malady infecting ships and their crew. This is what we do-adapt and explore. A turbulent, cloud-skimming plunge into the atmosphere of Uranus. All I knew was that after her death, Van Ness had left the system, on one of the first passenger-carrying starships. "If you hate him so much, why didn't you put a bomb in that bullet?" "Because I'd rather you did it instead. What was going to happen when the Progress reached the secret layers beneath Shell 3? I didn't need you to come and tell me." "You constructed a hypothesis to fit the data," I said. Gennadi and I were in my office. He had assumed some bond of affection...whereas what Galiana meant was that the girl was precious in the sense of a vital component. Trust, however, was harder: it required that Clavain ignore the fact that, with her head dotted with implants, the Demarchist woman's condition was not very far removed tro that of the enemy. Then hose down the path until you've removed all trace of blood and whatever else came out of him. That's how time travel works. That might change her view of things. The buffering gel sloshed in. The ground had an arid, bleached look to it, dotted here and there by ruined shacks, broken domes, gutted vehicles or shotdown shuttles. Prudence?" Voi approached. I think I had vague intentions of digging deeper into this world, but so far there is just this one piece. It was as large as the earlier place, the shape similar, and a tunnel led out from it as well. "How long?" I said, pushing my good hand against the slug wound to keep the blood at bay. Kathrin heard him whisper something in the ear of one of the horses, in beast-tongue, which calmed the animal. But there's a deeper argument against the AM. No neuromotor complications? She continued the family tradition, adding cleverness to the little machine. Lanes and folds of dust swaddle the sun out to distances of tens of thousands of light-years. "Fine but a little hungry, if you must know. I closed my eyes, numbed at the implicit horror I had just been shown. Zeal told me not to take it to heart: it was just that I was working for him, and would always be seen as the butcher's boy. The triangles follow a simple sequence. other caretakers were already sitting. "Yes, but don't underestimate how difficult those computations have now become. He searched for the safety clip on the gun, "My ship may blow at any moment. He had undergone radical procedures to enable him to tolerate extreme environments without the burden of a protective suit. The swarm of relay microsats placed around the Matryoshka were intended to intercept these burst transmissions and relay them back to the Tereshkova. "You're infinitely more than that. Then you showed us wonders and miracles. I tried a kinesic reset but it didn't go away. "Your suit, Lenka," Rasht said. Tyrant could offer little insight into how this could have happened, but it was clear enough that unless the chunks were inverted, lifesupporting materials would spill off over the edges and rain down onto the planet again. Actually, we had some theories. "Oh," Yukimi answered. "I had my mind set on something once," Weather said. "Careful," I said. I could have kissed the egomaniacal bastard. The trouble is that sometimes that's exactly the way it happens. She'd have no more than a second or two to assess whether it was a window she could reach in time, given the Soyuz's capabilities. Enough to know that we were on the wrong path. It wasn't a bubble like the one around Shalbatana, though, or even one of those settlements that was built straight onto the ground with no protection from the atmosphere. Captain Rasht, then. I probably paid more attention to your sunsets than anyone else did. Derek is about fifty years old and has already had a number of distinct careers, including musician and celebrity gourmand. "At least, not for a little while." He made the calls and assured Yukimi that all would be well tomorrow. We could leave now, if we wished. "Except you won't just stop with a hand, will you? Now I know we're talking about the same man." "What did Voulage have to say?" "Nothing good. Celestine took her time before answering, "Ouite honestly, I don't know what to think," "I'm going back. "I'm sure you would. "I thought it was within my grasp, too. "I hear it was pretty intense there." She nods. The world of eight billion people, the world of eight billion people, the world of eight billion people, the world of eight billion people. the first place. In the meantime, I think you should rest." I snapped a duplicate communications bracelet from my wrist and placed it near her hand, where she could reach it. We needed to draw your side's attention; to concentrate your military presence in low-orbit, near the nest. It is not for the meek. "I did try once. Unfortunately, I saw no practical alternative. "While your ship was in repair dock, I paid someone to run a deep-level query on its navigation core. It's quite concentrated. "Don't be. "Do you feel it?" I risked asking. You've told me Blue Goose wasn't the first through. Then the expansion slowed and froze. Or maybe they're all dead. We paused in this rock-walled chamber, leaning back to study the patterning of the veins as they flowed and crawled and wiggled their way to the curving dome of the ceiling. Instead I just committed the existing message for transmission and wondered how long it would have to wait before going on its way. Hers was one new voice amongst many. "Patagonia's just a tiny part of the whole," said Clausen. You hear about them, but you hope they're never going to happen to you. Every culture in the Galaxy has the means to engineer itself into social stasis tomorrow, if the will were there. Which is why we've come." He tapped a few commands into the buggy's console and stood up creakily. But apart from a slight breeze there wasn't any loss of pressure. Their interest in those ore reserves I mentioned earlier...either there have been intelligence leaks, or they have independently arrived at similar conclusions to us. The pilot glanced back down over his shoulder, but the goggled mask hid all expression. "How long have you got?" the ship snapped back. It was getting cooler now and I began to wish I'd had the foresight to bring a coat. Well, now is your chance to prove me wrong. As my left foot pushed down into thin air, a sheet of white marble whisked under it to provide support. I almost certainly am. And they were not welcomed." He decided, for the moment, that he would accept the truth of what she said. The agreement was that if either of us noticed something unusual, we should leave a signal for the other party. My name is Skanda Abrud. Not if she went out of her way to avoid Garret Kinnear she wouldn't. I'm down to vapour pressure in the tanks now." "So's that brave fool of a pilot. "But you'll stick to that flight plan?" "To the letter." She had finished her wine. His arms were by his sides—his hands were small and boyish, out of proportion to the rest of him. It was time. "Would you care to tell us who it is?" Purslane blinked, paralysed by the enormity of what she had to reveal. It was tight for her, and would be even tighter for Rasht, whose suit was bulkier. Most of the accidents, though, tended to happen during port time. Glinting in the low light of Calliope, ladders and walkways—impossibly thin and spindly scratches of metal—reached down from the icebound upper reaches, following zigzag trajectories that only took them a fraction of the way to the perilous lower lip, where the floating world curved back under itself. His habitual expression normally suggested playfulness, compassion and the kind of deep wisdom that can only come from a very long and scholarly life. "Welcome, Mercurio," said the signal. His hair was black and curly; his face as smooth and untroubled by expression as Galiana's, with something of the same beautifully symmetrical bone structure. Autonomous construction/terraforming machines left over from the past. Next time, would anyone even bother sending out a ship? Other than that, I don't see anything except bare metal." "What about the other side of this door?" Childe said. Floating paper lanterns glowed in the warm air, casting lozenges of pastel color on the revellers. Thanks to the Spire—and to the good offices of Mister Childe—I have been given the opportunity to continue the work that was so abruptly terminated by the unpleasantness in Chasm City. Waves crashed a kilometer below, dashing against the bone-white cliffs, the spray cutting through one of the elegant suspension bridges that linked the main island to the smaller ones surrounding it. "He's Gentian. Although my strand had not set the world on fire, no one had any serious complaints about the venue. Even the crudest kinds of surgery were now difficult or impossibly expensive. If they stood still, we shot them. Are you sensing anything from them yet?" "A little," she admitted. Those drones may not have been looking for me at all, but for a vulnerability in our comms network. By then, their rocket programme would have given them a delivery system able to handle the cumbersome payload of that primitive device. "You must hate Calvin for what he did," Childe said, still with that taunting quality in his voice. Maybe that will happen quickly enough for us to begin redirecting the industrial effort towards the evacuation. "Hello, Felka..." He waited for a response, but none came. I passed all the early tests. Why would you care?" "We care very much. Hesitating, Clavain looked again into his brother's good eye. But Childe was speaking again. I can see Sagan Park and the causeway and the school. "Wrong floor, I take it?" "No," she said, standing on the perfectly transparent floor of an out-flung balcony, so that she appeared to float two kilometers above the sea. "That's what the three-dimensional shadow of a hypercube would look like. Anything less, I'm going to be a disappointed man." "We will do our best not to let you down. I understand that you acted...that you've been acting...for what you think is the common good. It looked serviceable. When they recaptured me, when they recaptured me of the coronal arcs near the surface of a late-type star. She hissed a curse back at the boy, but now the wagons served her purpose. "What about the rig?" "Gone," I said. "The Second Soviet," I said. Had there been a spot on the planet where it was still night, the auroral storms would have been glorious. It had been a long time... I queried the AM, wanting it to jog my memory about the ship. I'm a baby in the belly of a killer robot, and that has to be an improvement. by Jonathan Strahan, Viking, 2011 "In Babelsberg" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2014. We do it now or we forget about it forever." "Maybe that would be easier." "Easier, yes. "They have to sleep. "Not the hardest thing to do," Nero answered. Layers of it were peeled away, revealing the glittering device which lay hidden in its heart, poised and ready for flight. I also need your subjective evaluation of the effects. I still wanted to stop them, but the gun wasn't the answer. We stepped out of our lander, testing the ground under our feet. Knowledge, clean and viridescent, as brittle and endlessly branching as a flower chilled in liquid nitrogen, forced its way into my skull. It will begin to melt. I register peripheral armour ablation, loss of forearm weapons functionality, some sensor blackouts. I still could not bring myself to speak, not until we were well away from that place. Find Devilfish. I looked at Fescue. The thing with the gun...that took some precision, didn't it?" "Yes," she said. Slower than shipping it bulk, but cheaper in the long run. Whatever is in store for me, I shall make the best of it. We all stared at it, knowing that something unpleasant was going to happen, but unsure what. She's coming back with me." "I need her. You want to take a guess, Dimitri?" I said nothing. I had to dig through two metres of topsoil. But you know I know something. And always I had no choice but to take, to incorporate, to turn them to my cause. My lenses adjusted to the differing optical properties of the medium, until I seemed to be looking through something only slightly less sharp than clear air. The table was set with drinks and a bowl of fruit. "What..." Purslane began. He sees the war as his springboard to glory." "I still don't see why they've come here." "It's a trick," Fury explained. I can continue." "Maybe you can, but it's still time for a temporary retreat. Reluctantly Kathrin gathered her bags and followed Peter into his workshop. This was the Great Work. It's like being in the immersion tank." "Try and keep climbing." "Picking up some suit faults now. The Transenlightenment could use you. Trintignant had not slept with the rest of us, but looked none the worse for wear. She creased her forehead prettily. "What are you doing here?" I asked. A week later, he chanced taking his tray to a table that was already occupied and got a grunt of acknowledgement as he took his place. Since I control the apparatus anyway, no one else need know that I wasn't on the island when your strand was threaded." I watched Purslane's expression as she considered my idea. God's teeth, careful." A little while later, the engine lit up. You'll kill me and probably Galenka as well." "Listen to me," he said with fierce insistence. "Stop running from us," I said, as my lamp pinned her to squint. Surely there's a timedelay option." "There is, but I'm not sure I'd be able to get to my ship in time. So where are we?" I turn to Greta. The door buzzes. No one said much to him but at least they hadn't walked away. "I just want to do whatever it takes to beat the Spire." Hirz glared at Childe. Having bad teeth took a lot of work these days. He's seen me using it, setting it down on the mattress where I squat. It's locked in a loop, endlessly repeating. She flung the empty glass into space. Richard should know." I wish we could settle on a topic of conversation other than water. I left her sleeping, then spent two hours attending to various housekeeping tasks aboard the Tereshkova. It's not like you've changed all that much." "Well, you haven't either," I said. Then she heard something approaching. What if the rest of his story was a lie as well? Elsewhere an octopus squirted ink at the face of a twentieth-century despot. Worse, she had drawn a gaping, beak-mouth between two of those tentacles. And ever since then, I have seen the world with different eyes. Two people were standing at the foot of the bed, looking only moderately interested in his plight. Something wrong will be put right." "Well, yes. Whatever. But they have food and water and they can use the remaining power to stay warm." "Go on," Rasht said, while the monkey studied its contaminated paw. We honour our errors. You are very noisy! You gibber and shriek and make no sense whatsoever." "Are you Teterev?" "That is not easily answered. The Advocates could not tolerate that any longer. Hirz grumbled, but everyone else quietly accepted what had to be done. There was a ladder that led down to the water, with an extensible lower portion. "Getting to be a big strong girl now, Kathrin Lynch." She carried on walking, each step taking an eternity. Took our minds off our own self-pity. First appeared in Life on Mars: Tales from the New Frontier, ed. I realise, dimly, that there's an eventuality I've never allowed for. It was working. That's why I assembled this team. "It was...a thing. "What happened?" "It was a grave error," Galiana said. It's like being back on the Tereshkova, when we slept so little that a day could feel like a week. Even Celestine, who had been wealthier than me, could only afford to have me repaired, not rectified. When he was done, we looked like diamond-hided greyhounds. But I had to know the answer, no matter where it took me. Theory says that no impulse can travel faster than light. Got work to be getting on with. It looked like a metal ball, about the size of a marble. Observe also the way the remains are distributed. As more trails of light split the sky, I sensed that it would not be the last. Deep recon squad. Then we'll see how we're doing." "You were a lot more jumpy until that window opened." She was right. I don't think I know that little girl any more." Minla looked at the stone with a curl of disgust on her face. "I'll deal with you in a moment," Zeal said, preparing to move on. It reminds me of a vastly accelerated planetary ice flow. Not like this." But what did I know? \*\*\* "I LISTENED TO your babble. "Couple of days ago there was an accident out on J platform. He was charming, effortlessly easy on the eye and knew exactly what he wanted. A little bribery, a little coercion." He smiled slightly at that. "Whatever we just went through—I don't think it hurt our suits." "Do you still have air?" "According to the gauge, good for another vehicle passed us, but once the tunnel had branched half a dozen times, no further traffic appeared. Allowing itself to be controlled, absorbed. A human might never have made the connection, but we robots are attuned to such things. "That's all. Fifty million planet-class worlds. Over there you've got Betelgeuse and Bellatrix." "I'm impressed." "You should be. "Whatever that stuff is, we can synthesise it aboard Tyrant." He held up the intact vial and then placed his index finger next to it. Clausen silenced alarms as they came on, flipping the switches with the casual insouciance of someone who was well used to flying under tense circumstances and knew exactly what her machine.

By the same token, you sometimes hear about ships that went nova when only two dials had been adjusted away from the safety envelope. We drive. The inwardly-sloping walls of the corridor—rising to a narrow spine of a ceiling—were dense with intricately carved details, traced in the blue-grey light. Thirteen's one prime too high, and twenty isn't a prime at all." "So you're saying if we choose eleven, we win?" Hirz reached out her hand, ready to push her hand against the lowest figure on the right, which she could reach without ascending the three steps. Planck's constant deviated from the figure in textbooks. "I confess I do not. In the totality of experience, they are all equally vital, and all equally cherished." I singled out Mullein, and smiled sympathetically. They worked against the rock, not with it: couldn't see the weaknesses in the stone, the planes of failure. No point making exactly the same mistakes again, is there?" "I still don't get it," Celestine said when we had assembled outside the shuttle, standing like so many white soap statuettes. "You can stop now." She gave the taser one last prod, then withdrew it. My suit was damaged. We were after a bigger reward than that." My dread sharpened. Shell 1 was not a solid sphere, but a swarm of deadly obstacles and tripwires. The red light inside seemed to emanate from every surface, rather than from any concentrated source so that there were only hints of edges and corners. "I'll worry about the ship. Didn't evolve there. "What about it?" "You've picked up some of that patterning. The absolute certainty that this was still better than dying. No, it's not for your benefit! Silly Captain. I fully accept that you saw the surgery merely as a means to an end and that you would not otherwise have consented to my ministrations, but that in no way lessens the magnificence of what you have become. The man fired, but his discharge wasted itself against Clavain's armour. I stripped the tools down and put them together again. But I wondered if I already knew. Just don't have the medical resources to deal with that kind of injury. Since I would require Great House authority to make my investigations in the Emergence, there was no possibility of moving incognito. I don't know what more you want from me." She looked up from her planning. "Is it the colour of a beetle?" "No," he said. Had the projectile pierced your body, rather than one of its extremities, I do not believe we would be having this conversation." "You call this fortunate?" "A wound such as yours can be made good with only trivial intervention. Do you remember casting them?" "No," she says, then picks up something in my voice. I asked why. It had a crescent moon painted on both wings. My visual system scanned the approaching object, resolving it into a figure, stepping over the threshold from the previous room. Well, it proves I was onto something, I suppose. He heard an order from the soldiers' leader, and the massed ranks adjusted their aim. He lowers the window an inch. TELL DEREK STORY." I whirr through my store of images until I find a picture of the descent vehicle, sitting at a slight tilt on its landing legs. Bent double, blood dribbling from my hand and mouth, I lost all contact with the ship. Like an Egyptian Pharoah buried with his worldly possessions, Gaunt had required an entire crypt full of bulky, state-of-the-art cryopreservation and monitoring systems. "Which is why you were free to claim that it wasn't sent until much later. What's his problem?" "Fescue doesn't like me spending time with Purslane." "Only because the craggy bastard couldn't get a shag out of her." "I think there's a bit more to it than that. Mostly, though I'm what used to be called a hacker. He could keep his dignity. I couldn't have planned it like that if I'd tried." No arguing with that, I thought. But then why keep us alive? Utilitarian housing projects radiate far beyond the old boundary. Part of the same lineage. As long as there was a reason not to have us out in public, they were happy." The elevator completes its trundling, hesitant descent. This far out of town, on this road, it doesn't take much guesswork to figure out where I've come from. His back ached from the contortions he'd put himself through while undoing panels or dislodging awkward, heavy components. Can't back out, can't go forward." "Fuck." What was only apparent when the Progress reached the root complex was that there was no solid surface to Shell 4; that the tangled mass of roots was, to all intents and purposes, the simulation through to the end." "Don't you get it? What if people don't go along with your programme?" "They'l go along," Minla said. If Abigail Gentian was here now, I'd put a hole in her you could piss through." The dead calm with which he made this statement erased any doubt that he meant exactly what he said. "After Dimitri fell into the intermittent vegetative state, we considered the risks of contamination to be significantly reduced. I supposed that the illumination throughout Saumlaki Station (or wherever this was) was at the whim of its occupants, and didn't necessarily have to follow any recognizable diurnal cycle. "That isn't the same as cloning equipment." "Only because of artificially imposed safeguards," Celestine answered. You can't see it because it's pointing directly toward you." She smiled slightly. I sighed and started making my way to the airlock. It's not a question of endurance or nerve. That was twenty-five years ago. Eventually, it turned him into the man I could so easily have killed." "A good man, trying his best to govern justly." "But who'd be nothing if he hadn't committed that single, awful crime." Again, I had no option but to take all of this on faith. Such is the rarity of robot intelligence that I have only been in the presence of machines such as myself on a handful of occasions. Each evening, I took the environment's covert observations of Burdock over the last day, and ran a simple program to isolate those instances where Burdock was talking to someone else or accessing data from one of the public nodes I'd dotted around the venue. "Burdock told you who did it?" "Burdock had his suspicions. I crunch through the shattered carcasses of plastic horses and ride-on centipedes. You couldn't hide away inside things." "You won't—not for a minute or so." Now she pointed into the empty pit in the middle of the room. The harsh overhead light picked out only her face and shoulders, with the rest of her lost in shadow. Flowers are good. "He's just trying to goad you into following him. The reason your arms are positioned in front of you the way they are, is that I want you to be able to operate your cuff control. My head's still clamped tight They were interested in Merlin not just because he was a human who had been born on another planet, but because they hoped to learn some secret of frostwatch from his metabolism. Four hundred light-years, give or take?" My patience was wearing thin. It can smooth the transition." "Like who?" I asked. If there's a problem, the ship will either wake me or it will send out the proctors to seek assistance." "You have never spoken of proctors before," Malkoha replied. \*\*\* "THIS IS THE third time that he's fished for information about the Great Work," Purslane said. It's still cold for half the year!" Kathrin opened her mouth to speak. I'd like to show you the swimming pool." "The sun hasn't gone down yet," I said. I thought of the dreamers ranged throughout that tower, and of the lies we were peddling them. It caught flight and vanished into the rock's orbit. Suddenly I felt dizzy, lost in mazelike permutations of bluff and double bluff. When you told me you'd faked your death, I wondered if you'd just gone into hiding." He answered with a trace of hesitation, "I've been away, but not as far as you'd think. Against all this change, the nine hundred and ninety-three members of the Gentian Line must have appeared laughably quaint and antique, with our stolid adherence to traditional anatomy. Galiana showed him how to use the system then left him in privacy while he established a connection with Deimos. Tell them what made you run away from home yesterday. We were the same. He'd scared the hell out of me the first time we met, when he was recruiting for a new shipmaster in a carousel around Greenhouse. It's too perfect. Think of it as creating a small untruth in order to set free a larger truth. I try not to break my promises. It was a risk worth taking, so I took it, and I found the Winged Man, and he was still alive." "Was he really a man?" "He was a creature of flesh and blood, not a jangling man, but he was not like any man I had seen before. Harmless exaggeration is one thing. "A crew who happened to slow down in this system to make shield repairs," Childe said. "Give me the external feed again." "Mike, there's no need to concern yourself with matters beyond your control." "Just do it, Annabel." She mumbles a curse and then I'm outside again, seeing the world through the pop-up camera fixed to the outside of the pod like a periscope. "We haven't got a chance of succeeding, have we?" Clavain said. Under leaden, miserable skies, confronted by grey waters and grimly impersonal machinery, I had an almost visceral jolt of what the world would be like if only machines were left to look after anything. "His clothes," she says absent-mindedly. "She's a Conjoiner, Captain. We have duties...obligations. She was huddled in a comer, compressed like some animal ready to bolt or strike. I thought for a moment that she meant to shock me, but then I realised that she was only making a human gesture, touching the tip of her mechanical hand against the side of her head. Our breath jets out in comet tails. He smiled and leaned back in his seat, defusing some of the tension caused by his line of questioning. "No. I figured that part out. You'll have to drop hints. They were not quite equals, I knew, but neither were their abilities radically different. "This is all we've got now. A later Cohort flyby failed to make contact with the settlement, but that doesn't mean no one was alive. Please tell me it isn't." "It is human. "Sleepover was the company. Everything hinges on this moment. I was visiting my parents' shrine. He closed his hand around the gun and lowered it a little. So have I." I felt Galenka push past me, something hard in her hand. Although two hundred further metres lay ahead—the bulk of the climb, in fact—for the first time it began to appendage of me that should have withered and dropped off already. "If it comes to it," Van Ness said, "we'll let them take the passengers. It had been constructed by alien minds and then added to and modified by successive intelligences. Use its knowledge to better," "Our machines will just have to get better as well, won't they." He thought she might spit the observation back at him, mock him for its easy triteness, when he knew so little of the war and the toll it had taken. He said the tavern was named after a metal statue that used to stand on a hill to the south, on the Durham road." "And did your father explain the origin of this statue?" "He said some people reckoned it had been up there since before the Great Winter. That thing around your neck isn't going to get any less tight. It was all I knew, all I needed to know." "And now?" I asked, already fearing the answer. You won't be able to resist, Galiana. Or bread and ham if you'd rather." "That's kind, sir, but Widow Grayling normally gives me something to eat, when I reach her house." Peter raised a white eyebrow. This band was most likely a tourniquet, probably applied from his suit's medical kit. There simply isn't time." Sickened, Merlin watched as the aircraft slid past the aircraft slid p heading. Every now and then, ships will encounter something like that. Besides, I don't know what you'd do with me gone. "We should be no trouble at all, my dear fellow..." "Thanks." I steadied myself; my mind crawled with half-remembered images of the botched cybernetic experiments which had earned Trintignant his notoriety. And what if the narrowing continued beyond that point? I reached out and took it. You could still have saved more people than you did, albeit at a slightly increased risk to your own survival. "Give me a suit and then leave me alone, if you really want to help." "What's your name?" "We don't have names, Inigo. The housing blocks are mostly unlit, save for the occasional illuminated window—a pale, curtained rectangle of dim yellow against the otherwise dark edifice. They were narratives?" I said. We picked up the geomagnetic anomaly. In fact almost everything you told us to expect on the moon turned out to be wrong. I should have known better." "It's understandable." "All the way back." "Why did they let you keep it?" "Because they didn't realise its significance. It's just that everything else in her universe had become so heightened, so intense, that the love for another individual could no longer hold her interest. And that had always been the paradox. "Yes, my dear fellow. He understood that much of what he was just one man. Generous, yes. To bring me to you?" He nodded once. For humankind." "It came from our future. There was a moment when all of us tensed, expecting the javelins to come again...but this time we were spared further punishment. "It will change nothing." "That sounds suspiciously like an admission of guilt," Fescue said. It would have been a chore to have to return to the island and remake my lungs to cope with something poisonous. He watched the Ouroborus destroy the shuttle, then saw the image zoom in on himself and Voi, running for sanctuary. My sense of direction was soon hopelessly confounded, and I had no idea whether we had travelled hundreds of metres into the engine, or merely wormed our way in and around a relatively localised region close to our entry point. His hands jerked up reflexively, as if he meant to snatch the goggle away. We all watched, and then—as the moment elongated into seconds —began to suspect that something with a comet, a quantum black hole evaporating, to the illegal test of a Chinese super-weapon in deep space. You can move your fingers, tap those buttons. It isn't too late." "Not until Childe stops." "And then? "It is like locking a door when the wolf is already in the house." "I'm sorry. Fear is the last and best thing we have, that's what she told me. She told me that she had heard about an orgy on the fiftieth level of the main spire, very exclusive, and that I should join her there in an hour. "I'll check out the middle tunnel, if it'll help. I knew from our work schedule that we were not expecting any more patients today. But I didn't build it. "I don't believe you," she said. That was for hacks like Yinning and Tarabulus. I'd gone from feeling calmly in control to feeling total devastation in about five minutes. "We faced them with whetstone, would you believe it. And those titanium legs and arms move to my will, just as if they were part of me. "Oh yes; you were damned prudent. I was struck by a dreadful conviction that these were souls that had been entirely in the rock, imprisoned or contained, until an instant when they had nearly broken through. He peered back my eyelids and looked deep into my eyes. I watched it arrive. Something about the whetstone, something about the moon itself kept nagging at the back of his mind. Willingly, even eagerly. I think he hoped you might teach him more than you did." "I did what I could. No good will come of it, for either us." "You might say the damage is already done." She lets me inside. Doing something, no matter how pointless, to prolong the existence of the human species, and indeed the universe it called home. "Don't listen to him, Richard. I'd shown the driver the address I'd written down, pulled from the public telephone directory on Doctor Kizim's desk. "That's kind of the reason I dropped by, actually. Warn you... get off ship. The Spire had hurt him, not us. "Never mind my temper," Zeal said warningly. "I think we'll do our best to forget all about him." "He won't go away that easily. What actually happened—later in 2007—was that it ended up becoming part of the fabric of House of Suns, albeit transmogrified into a rambling, many-roomed asteroid habitat a thousand years from now. She sighed. If we sent it, then things can't be all bad." "It's the wrong future," I said. I'd very much like to hear your solution." She looked at the pattern, smiling faintly. They reach around with their right arm and scrabble at the chest-pack, touching controls with their thickfingered moonglove. Mushroom-shaped consoles studded the floor, rising to waist height. "There was some wild theorizing to begin with. "I mean with me, the two of us." "You know the line frowns upon planned associations," Purslane said, as if I needed to be reminded. I looked towards the femoral bridge, suspecting as I did that it was exactly what it looked like: a giant, bio-engineered bone, carved with a flat roadbed. By the time he came out of the wormhole, there couldn't have been the last thing he did, before the madness took over completely. Our remaining limbs were detached and put into storage, replaced by skeletal prosthetics of immense strength, but which could fold and deform to enable us to squeeze through the tightest door. Maybe this isn't such a good idea after all." "What's got you afraid all of a sudden?" "This is too easy," Purslane said. Why don't you tell me? And even if she didn't, no one would listen to her. He had always imagined the crowd cheering, daunted by the news, but not cowed, Merlin raising his fist in an encouraging salute. "I too have become aware of the changing atmospheric conditions. But I imagined her dreams were peaceful ones. Some mix-up of names or ship registrations or something. Partly it was fear, I think, that I'd use the hot-dust. Malkoha coughed to bring the room to attention. They had built the autonomous robot space probes according to this uncle's desires, and then launched them towards a variety of target systems. "You've heard, I take it," Clavain said. "Meaning what?" "I didn't see either of you at the orgy this morning. I wish I could tell you otherwise, but I hope it will not come as too shocking a blow, given what you have always believed." "When did she die?" "Thirty-one years later, in another system, during the malfunction of one of our early drives. I bumped into her somewhere near the back of the ship." The curl of his lip intensified. There was something of the cat or snake about the way she slinked out of the illumination of our lamps, something fluid and feral, something sleek and honed that did not belong aboard a ship crewed by pirates. But they do not understand what it really means." Kathrin hardly dared ask. He said that the bracelet would keep me healthy, make me strong in other ways, and that if anyone else was to wear it, it would cure them of many ailments. "Merlin. "Feel this." She was kneeling down, pressing a palm against the floor. "The very exemplar of dullness. He's never had his brother's chance to test his mettle. All traces of daylight were soon behind us. Beginning from the bottom on the left-hand side, there was a dot—it was too neatly circular to be accidental—a flat-topped equilateral triangle, a pentagon and then a heptagonal figure. Celestine followed, with me a little to her stern. The outer layers crisped and collapsed. A crude little machine with barely enough intelligence to steer itself around a swimming pool. Difficult as it was to look on that as any kind of positive development, at least it might force Zeal's mind onto other matters. Like the man she was wiry of build and dressed in crumpled grey overalls, with a heavy equipment belt dangling from her hips. "There'll be no freezer berth: the Iron Lady doesn't run to them. One of the most common misconceptions is that we must all be brigands, every ship bristling with armaments, primed to a state of nervous readiness the moment another vessel comes within weapons range. "You're right. Childe stared at it, fascinated. "Do you honestly care what happens to him? Meanwhile, the sleepers don't have unlimited shelf life. He'd been checking the alignment of the ski-shaped q-planes when I ordered him to close up ship and prepare to lift. "It began in small ways, while we were still on the Tereshkova. For two million years, they had accepted the crushing scale of the Galaxy and their own fixed relationship to that immensity. He swings his mighty anvil of a head, letting loose a yard-long curtain of the containment bubble, my planet writhed in the agonies of its death by stoning. "Gimenez died when a steam pipe burst down on level eight. She had become—or was becoming—something other than flesh. Where the lines squabbled now, they would come together in peaceful cooperation. But the two things were not unrelated. That made them nervous. It's not easy, you know. "Are you saying I should just press it, with no consultation?" "Celestine said. He wasn't expecting a straight answer, least of all not from Clausen. It was in a place they used to call Silicon Valley." "These tiles are coloured Zima Blue," I said. "How far back are we looking, Fury?" "A very long way. Subtle and stealthy and diligent. Since you're here, we might as well depart." The robot escorted me to a flight of stairs that led to the waterside. Of course it didn't seem lucky at the time. They had need of protection, so I offered my services. "He told me how to open his armour and find the bracelet. I know because I've seen his body. Fifty years passed... then sixty... but nothing of any consequence was ever reported back to Yellowstone, at least not in his lifetime. Constructing such a machine was anything but child's play. "That narrows it down even more. "You can do that?" "It's actually rather trivial. Then leave me alone." Van Ness started screaming in my ears again. I can feel it in every fucking bone in my body. But now it's my own body that's changed. Not in a million years." I commenced entry into Julact's wisp of an atmosphere. Fear is the last and best thing that we have," "We?" "My predecessors and I. Now that we have have, be a series of problems which depended on prime number theory, followed by another series which hinged on the properties of higher-dimensional solids. "You're coming with us. Like a coral atoll, it entrapped its own weather system; a disk of bluer air, flecked with creamy white clouds which stopped abruptly at the boundary. Or ours, for that matter. Our attempt to clean out the worm infestation failed and I lost some good friends. I returned to my bridge-repair work, wondering. All I want to do is flinch away from it. I could probably explain my reasoning to some of you, but there'd always be someone who didn't get it—" Celestine looked pointedly at Hirz. I still talk to Shirin. Like acolytes given attempt to clean out the worm infestation failed and I lost some of you, but there'd always be someone who didn't get it—" Celestine looked pointedly at Hirz. I still talk to Shirin. Like acolytes given attempt to clean out the worm infestation failed and I lost some of you, but there'd always be someone who didn't get it—" Celestine looked pointedly at Hirz. I still talk to Shirin. Like acolytes given attempt to clean out the worm infestation failed and I lost some of you, but there'd always be someone who didn't get it—" Celestine looked pointedly at Hirz. I still talk to Shirin. Like acolytes given attempt to clean out the worm infestation failed and I lost some of you, but there'd always be someone who didn't get it—" Celestine looked pointedly at Hirz. I still talk to Shirin. Like acolytes given attempt to clean out the worm infestation failed and I lost some of you, but there'd always be someone who didn't get it—" Celestine looked pointedly at Hirz. I still talk to Shirin. Like acolytes given attempt to clean out the worm infestation failed attempt to the some of you attem vision of heaven, they devoted their entire waking existence to the search for another glimpse. Maybe it had. Do you have any ideas about what they might be up to?" Again, there was the briefest of hesitations, as if she was communing with her compatriots for the right response. Something else is different. Yes, of course." It was a silly, if understandable question. Even the Sheriff tugs his forelock to Thomas Kinnear. We already knew Burdock had lied once. "I'm here because Burdock had lied once. "I'm here because Burdock had lied once." "You didn't have much trouble closer, placed a finger on his lips. If you want to help us, you must give us the means to overwhelm the enemy." "If I give you this, millions will die." "A billion will perish if Lecythus is not unified. As Van Ness led our boarding party through the drifting wreck, the scope of the damage became chillingly clear. I have never felt myself to be in the presence of a stronger, cleverer entity. You're right. I mean real bad thing. Soon the secrets revealed here would be in the hands of the entire human species, but for now-for a delicious and precious interval —the only two souls granted this privilege were Galenka and I. I have never pretended to be entirely sane, but it must only be now that the white bones of true madness are beginning to show through my skin. We're not that kind of crew." "And your captain?" "He'll keep his word. He embarked on what we in the family referred to as the Program, and then only in terms of extreme secrecy." Childe told us that the Program was an attempt at covert deep space exploration. It was as baroquely ornamented as a funeral barge. As always, we waited for Forqueray to send his float-cam snooping ahead of us, establishing that the room contained no glaring pitfalls. Galenka used hammers, cutting devices and claws to pick away at the scabbed edge of the impact point. This clawlike appendage was grafted onto her forearm, held in place by a tight black collar We'll talk about it later." I think of Luttrell. "And I'm disappointed that you'd even debate the possibility." Clavain terminated the link with Deimos. Fritter away your days in idleness and dissipation. It was worse than any weather he had experienced since his revival, and at first it was almost too perfectly in accord with his needs. From around the curve of the ship there was a puff of silvery brightness as the pyrotechnic docking latches released their hold on the Progress. You must see it now, surely. There was no one to grow crops or distribute food. "And it very probably is, but that isn't the point. We haven't moved you. From now until the end of my existence. The Cockatrice was using everything in her arsenal, from slugs and missiles to beam-weapons. They were expecting something—the public unveiling of a work that would presumably trump everything Zima had created before then—but they could only stare in puzzled concern at the pool, wondering how it could possibly measure up to those atmosphere-piercing canvases, or those entire worlds wrapped in shrouds of blue. "Like its owner. Do you remember?" "Not much worth remembering. The further it looked back into the history of the universe. The tube in Mars was a thousand kilometres long, which allowed us to spread the acceleration over ten minutes. Their seats ballooned around them. Then the man emerged from between two shrines a little way down from the metronome. Ten days was nowhere near as much time to gnaw away at my better judgement. "Why don't you let me have a look at your strand the day you die. What we really need is measuring equipment, sampling gear. Unless she crossed it she would face the long trudge to New Bridge, a diversion that would keep her on the road until long after sunset. An Exodus Ark big enough to take the entire population?" "You have no evidence." "I have this." With that, Merlin produced one of Minla's old picture books. "What do you want?" Her hair is short and gingery and squashed into greasy curls, as if she's just removed a tight-fitting vacuum helmet. "I don't disagree with that. Years after my time in Newcastle, I found my imagination being drawn back to the River Tyne, only this time thousands of years in the future, after some climate-shifting catastrophe has thrown the world (or at least this part of it) into a mini ice-age. I've done what I came to do, so what's to prevent me from taking my own life, in preference to being taken back to the facility? I kept climbing, while knowing it was useless. My star was on the rise, modestly, but even then I sensed that the bubble couldn' last. Yukimi looked despairingly at the console, with its many controls. "Or is it possible you might have forgotten? If that's what they are." We tidied up the patient as best we could, while the ship continued to shudder. All the others faded from her attention, like players removing themselves from a stage. Unless one counted the lakes, which were made by rain, and rain was made by people, but lakes weren't civilization, as far as Yukimi was concerned. And most of those days would be spent doing hard, backbreaking work, until the work took its ultimate toll. But I trust you'll reassess your decision as soon as we're through?" "Sorry, but my mind's made up. There's food and drink, a medical team waiting to look at you. There was much that we all needed to learn. At the moment those cultures are bumping around like random atoms in a gas. Wouldn't they be glad to get you back?" She took a long time answering. Still, I did make it part of the way. The square was just the beginning. A hand touched my shoulder. No need for a transport infrastructure because no one travelled. Like it was universal." "Wasn't it?" Da Silva asked. "But you gave them the keys to that rocket silo, and the know-how to target and guide those missiles. "I didn't see the need. Tentacles whipped out and found purchase, and it snapped and wrenched away parts of the rig's superstructure as if they were made of biscuit or brittle toffee. The floor was moving past very quickly, racing by faster than she could run. You can't deny that. Frankly, it would be nice to have the luxury to dwell on such fears. My fingers numb with cold, I dig into the pocket until I touch the hard edge of his security pass. A meandering path climbed gradually between white stone walls, bathed now in gold from the lowering sun. I wasn't thinking of fucking music." "Tell me how it felt." "The first time I ran the analysis, and realised that the pulsations could be broken down into notes on the waves." turning leaden and sluggish, and the eastern sky gained a band of salmon pink. The corpse was already bagged, a silver-wrapped mummy on a medical trolley. Old wounds would be reopened; old rivalries would simmer to the fore. "I believe this makes a queer kind of sense." "You do, do you?" I said. \*\*\* AIRBORNE, THE VOLANTOR'S baroque ornamentation melted away to mirror-smoothness. At any one time, as per his contract with Sleepover, he would have been under the direct care of several living doctors. My neck's already on the line." "I suppose one more wrong won't make much difference," he said, resignedly. "Heard you were one of the first to go under, Gaunt." "You heard right," he said. They were designed so that they'd keep functioning—keep looking after themselves, locked on the same program—even if the rest of human civilization crashed back to Earth. Felka sat within the crumbling circle of the Wall. A synaesthetic bridge allowed him to hear visual data as a kind of music, to see sounds as a symphony of startling colours. "That was a long one," he said, his tongue moving sluggishly, making him slur his words. I waited for the anger to subside. "Careful!" Rasht called. Yukimi saw tire tracks in the soil and guessed that Corax had come this way before, maybe within the last few days. She's still gone. She was still moving her arms frantically, but her face. was red now, locked into a petulant scowl of anger and fear. That is where you come in." Now Minla produced another sheet of paper, flicking it across the table in Merlin's direction. When the Resource and Relocation people came, with their trucks, helicopters and airships, with their bold plans for human resettlement, I—along with many millions of others—did exactly as I was told. You can query it as often as you like, but it will never enhance or omit a single detail. The whole tower looked as if it were toppling. She squints, holding it at arm's length, studying the little hologram. She'd been a botanist, working on the Martian terraforming programme. It could easily be done. "I'm doing the right thing, Shirin. But don't let her out of your sight for one second. "DEREK WELCOME VINCENT," Derek says, thrashing his head around and rattling his chains. It isn't me. Studying these latter books, Merlin began to grasp something of the history of Lecythus, at least in so far as it had been codified for the consumption of children. It's playing Prokofiev. "I feel sorry for her, stuck all alone here. "Just for the sake of argument—" "Those were the facts. She can show you the ropes while she's getting better." Clausen paused to put the dried cup back in one of the cupboards above the sink. I tell myself that nothing bad can happen in Stilt Town. Weapons that came through at the wrong moment, achieving coherence just long enough to be seen by someone, or bring down a ship. I still felt its feral pull. "You will take care now, Kathrin. But it was a very old-fashioned looking buggy, and the symbols painted on its side reminded her of the faded markings on the old space helmet." Promise me," Celestine said. I was already covering myself when I called Katerina. She? But we can route around those obstructions, using the probes I inserted. "But enough about me. "I think I would have followed him." Celestine smiled. When our part of the Realm only had to simulate rocks and weather and dumb, animal cognition, it ran at much the same speed as any other part. Maybe I did, toothough I felt the same lack of certainty. "What I mean is..." Yakov started saying. Or the radar will direct anticollision lasers to vaporise the object before it hits. Merlin's hands trembled. We'll need one for Fescue." "One day we might need one for Fescue." Hypothermia, frostbite, slow choking—take your pick. Knows I've come to help. I stumble into the main structure. Solve to help. I stumble into the fucking thing. Galenka used an epoxy-tipped sucker to extract the fist-sized sample, which already seemed to be in the process of fusing back into the main structure. There must never have been a bubble around Crowe's Landing, so the buildings would have been the inhabitants' only protection from the atmosphere. But we need him to get us home. I was sure I had broken a rib, and Childe grimaced when he tried to put weight on his right ankle. Do you see those tracks in the dust? Every make and class you could think of, every possible configuration of hull design compatible with aperture transitions. That's what the skaters sound like: an endless and spiralling cosmic hiss. Huge and silent, it daggered into the sky. Skyland food was austere compared to what he was used to aboard Tyrant, but in his present state he would have wolfed down anything. We now had pieces of Shell 1 and Shell 2 aboard, ready to be taken back home. Whatever you two are doing in there—it's having an effect. They were supposed to keep processing the atmosphere, sucking in soil and air, for as long as it took. Yukimi sometimes wondered if her sister had given her more than a moment's thought except for the times when her conscience prickled her into sending a message. "But there's something on the surface we should look at as well." "What?" "I'm not sure. It's healthy. So you did this for a reason." "I told you, you had the right background skills." "Skills anyone could learn, given time. "You've never actually won best strand, have you?" "Come close, though...my strand on the Homunculus Wars..." He shook his head. Even my own dread was becoming harder to push aside. "We'd better retreat and come back." "No," Childe said. Nesha might consider her apartment cold, but it's a furnace to me. We reached the relatively secure ground under the other wreck. They were emaciated black machines with sinewy piston-driven limbs, venting steam and snorting from intakes. The vivid indigo seemed to throw something of its hue onto her face. If we don't start running soon, they'll be on us." "And you didn't think to tell me this sooner?" "Vould it have made any difference?" "To the trust between us, possibly." "I'm sorry, Weather. He still had instructions for you. "I understand. There's a moment when they don't know quite what to make of it, a hiatus before the horror kicks in. "I'm sorry," Merlin said. And you, Mister Childe, have never discovered a challenge worthy of your undoubted talents." "I didn't know quite what to make of it, a hiatus before the horror kicks in. "I'm sorry," Merlin said. And you, Mister Childe, have never discovered a challenge worthy of your undoubted talents." "I didn't know quite what to make of it, a hiatus before the horror kicks in." I'm sorry," Merlin said. And you, Mister Childe, have never discovered a challenge worthy of your undoubted talents." think you'd paid me any attention, Doctor." "Nor had I. He had, Childe said, his own rather specialized plumbing requirements, incompatible with standard reefersleep systems. Galiana had just given herself the slightest of edges. I'll go thirty metres, no more, and turn around. "Certain magics are real, though. "Everyone does in the end. But the way they snaked away from the main mass, thick at the start and thinner as they progressed, gradually vanishing into the surrounding terrain, made me think of a cephalopod, with the volcano as its main body and the ridges its tentacles. I answered Celestine. Then he got better, or at least decided he was better off working with us than against us. We all looked around, assessing each other. It was only when I saw how low your approach was that I realised..." "That we might not have known?" Worms were area-denial devices; autonomous prey-seeking mines. Neither of you." "Be sure to tell Lenka that, when she returns." "No need. She was as plump and red as her husband, only shorter. "And anyway, I had the view." "It's an improvement, isn't it?" "That wouldn't be saying much," I said with a smile. It had streets and avenues, its own quarters. Beyond the tables, a rain-washed window framed only a rectangle of grey cloud. "According to this, we're already running a fifteen per cent chance of losing the ship within the next hundred days Pushing aside his fears, he strove to show no hesitation as he followed Nero across suspended gangways, slippery with grease, up exposed stairwells and ladders, clasping ice-cold railings and rungs. "I just..." "Wanted to talk, yes." "And you don't?" "You can hardly blame me if I don't, can you? "Talk to me, Galenka." "It's all racked and sorted, Dimitri. Days went by with nobody to treat at all. They could fly and would protect their user against just about any external environment, ranging from a vacuum to the crush of the deepest ocean. "How would I have known you were to be trusted? His rage built to a crescendo until I tactfully intervened and allowed him an exit. "That's not Burdock," said. "But at least you survived." He thought of the man falling into the Ouroborus. I already told you that this was the coldest time of the Great Winter. Phrases jumped out at us. Is that your idea of an expression of gratitude?" But she was smiling, and I felt a faint impulse to smile as well. It felt solid, as well it ought given that it was supporting the weight of our ship. The Great Work was a project—not yet initiated—which would require the active cooperation of many lines. It's beyond any rational fear we ought to be experiencing." She paused and added: "I think something is making us feel that dread." "Making?" Rasht echoed. If I was interested. But do look after yourself, Mercurio. I wonder if the others got out. He seemed, if anything, even younger than when I had departed. And I have something interesting to show you." The vehicle was slowing. Near the middle it rose to a shallow plateau, on which vegetation had been cleared in a roughly rectangular area. They might be in mind for a bit of cruelty, but they won't be in need of new crew." I winced, before he crushed my collarbone. I felt so certain of my choice. I saw then that both her hands had been replaced by mechanical substitutes. A deep recon insertion gone wrong. "Now, there is no call for that. There's a subtle distinction." She nodded knowingly. But I found one of the weapons, adrift and deactivated. With the rest of the crew still alive, my chances of stopping the Devilflish (let alone making it off the ship in one piece) were practically zero. The movement was startling and quick, like the strike of an ambush predator. When I returned to the Netherlands (where I was living at the time), I redrafted the story onto computer and made some significant changes along the way, including altering the main character's name to Merlin. Now and then it fingered the base with a spray of laser-light, and once or twice even made contact, skittering against the flat surface. Now it was vibrating; as if somewhere not too far from here a mighty engine was shaking itself to pieces: a turbine on the point of breaking loose from its shackles. This took me to Kharkov Eight, a world in the Garlin Bight, about nineteen thousand light-years from here. Keep them alive." She nodded upward, to where smaller conduits branched off the main fuel line. Ordinarily I would not consider dropping out of contact for as long as it will take me to travel to Julact and back. And you're certain of that?" "I'm not certain of anything, Richard. "It's a little awkward, actually. "I...tend." She screwed up her face. That's when we lift for orbit." \*\*\* WE LIFTED ON time. He would have liked longer to think about it, but the one thing not on his side now was time. The name was my suggestion, not hers." "Don't start humanising them. You don't recall your origins, after all. I nodded my agreement. For most of us, it was of no concern. "I hear it now," Childe said. That's a good one." "I mean truth in the higher, metaphoric sense. She was right. Bring them. But there all similarities ended. Forgetting to clamp down on that safety lock, forgetting to ensure that such and such an override was not enabled. New worlds would be forged, vast as stars themselves: the golden palaces and senates of this new galactic empire. Merlin had offered the services of Tyrant to assist with the evacuation effort, but as efficient and fast as his ship was, it would have made only a token difference to the speed of the exercise. The card was addressed to me, Carrie Clay, and it said that Zima wanted to talk to me about the unveiling. Or it may be that he was murdered and replaced with an impostor, just like Burdock. Green-gowned doctors in a clean surgical theatre, his hand signing the last of the release forms before they plumbed him into the machines. "Unless we brought a second Progress no one told me about, we're stuck with this one." "It's nothing we can repair," Yakov said. Nothing had happened. It feels better, doesn't it? But his voice turned low, conspiratorial—as if there was a chance of the walls listening in. And I was thinking: while we're at it, why don't we give them something else to puzzle over, in addition to the helmet?" Yukimi thought for a moment. I reached a red locker marked with a lightning flash and threw back the heavy duty latches. No one comes here deliberately, Thom." "I still don't get it. "I hope the rest of the tests are this simp—" "Steady, old girl." Childe had caught her wrist. It's all I am and when I'm out in space, it's all I need to be. What took place happened too quickly for the human eye to see. \*\*\* THINGS BEGAN TO improve in the afternoon, when interest shifted to the next evening's strand. If that was the case it would be on its way quite soon, and she would much rather be on it than stay behind here, inside the Scaper, with the thing. Get in, get out. Fear is the point of this place. Today was a dull pewter-grey. "It'll take a while." "Everything does, these days. It would have detracted from it." "There was no afternoon, there was no afternoon, there was no afternoon, there was no afternoon, there was no afternoon attended the body." I said. A bustle of ivory machines attended the universe had played some sick cosmic trick on him. Then I remembered Kolding's bad teeth, and recalled how they'd reminded me of another man I'd met long before. I turned to him now, feeling the faint ghost of an emotion Trintignant had not completely excised. "Every experience, every memory, is sacred. "That's...not unexpected. I need to think about this for a minute." "Fine. By the time they began moving, the javelin had been and gone. Purslane and I let out a joint gasp of disbelief. Only tell story from Dimitri POV. It was hard, with the noose tight around his throat. You lost her then, and saw her once more when the Coalition took her prisoner. I was screaming "Medic!" out of pure reflex. That means there are only two sane people left on this ship, and I'm being generous." "Do you think Baikonur will be able to help?" "They'd better. We had the cabin lights dimmed so he could get a good view. The charges at maximum delay. Now he remembers being Yakov, but he's in no doubt as to his core identity. Eventually we arrive at a large, hangar-like building which once housed sound stages. "I suppose so," Burdock said, with not quite the conviction I might have hoped for. "Hull plating," Zeal said. "A structure?" I asked Childe. Another robot busied itself by repainting the walls of the house over and over, so that the colours matched the changing of the seasons. The party was over. "Clausen figured it wouldn't hurt for you to come along for the ride, get you up to speed." Clausen flicked a bank of switches in the ceiling. Until this moment. We took him forward to the orbiter, opened a medical kit and injected him with the sedative. "No one gets exiled." "Then tell me what the hell happened!" Anger burst to the surface. One was a young looking man carrying a heavy bag. When the Waynet comes closer, the syrinx will sense it. "Then we'll lift." "I haven't finished the recal. "But not mother. They had been talking animatedly until then, but without ceremony the mugs were drained and the trays lifted and he was alone again. The last few entries were barely entries at all, just scratchy annotations, done in haste or distraction. "Makes you wonder what kind of beings built it," I said. Five, six days. She must have gone up and down the shafts several times, changing her mind, returning. That didn't seem very likely, though. shadowed under the generous rim of a Homburg, tipped down to shade his brow. They were landscapes without a human presence, save for the implied viewpoint of the area about the area abou the Spire's base, but there were no remains that had not been there before. "I do." Fescue nodded grimly. This...incident...is something we'll never speak of again. There had been many robots to check out, and at any one time there always seemed to be a tool or part needed that he had not brought with him, and for which it was necessary to return to stores, sift through greasy boxes of parts, fill out paperwork. Yakov here. "Yes," I said. Something had broken through her shell, Clavain thought. As he walked toward the icons they darted out of his way, mocking him like schools of brilliant fish. But there'd been no mistake. Massive layers of insulation buttress the city from the surface of Triton, and now they go to all this trouble to create another little square of frozen ground over the city's floor. Are you sure about not coming back this way?" "I'd best not," Kathrin said. I completed my adjustments, satisfied that I'd done all I could without risking engine malfunction. We seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed, avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoiding the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoid the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoid the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoid the seemed to be moving faster than the city ordinances allowed avoid the seemed to be avoid the seem the usual traffic corridors. "I thought you were dead, Roland." "No, Richard," he said, stepping close enough to shake my hand. The station's orbiting a brown dwarf star in the Large Magellanic Cloud. The ambient physics hasn't changed too much." Ever since the first apparition, it had been known—or at least suspected—that the Matryoshka was not just a mysteriously layered artefact drifting through space. Then I see the body. "We started this, Campion. Two massive power blocs, chemical weapons, the works. But I'm just trying to make sure we aren't missing anything obvious." "We aren't," she said. It was here. "Would you like to see, Mercurio? No one lives there now, but..." "I'll come to Julact in good time." "You may wish to move it up your schedule. It hardly mattered that it was all irreversible: there wouldn't be enough of him left to regret what he had lost. There's history here—lots of it. A phalanx of enemy machines is coming my way. But emphatically not a monster." "What about your victims, Doctor?" "I have always maintained that they gave consent for the procedures I inflicted"—he corrected himself — "performed upon them." "That's not what the records say." "And who are we to argue with records?" The light played on his mask in such a fashion as to enhance the halfsmile that was always there. What if you publicly accuse me of lying?" "Risky, Campion. "That was over a million years ago. But I hadn't told her about Greta. Van Ness-a good man, but never the most imaginative of souls-wasn't interested in what a stray Conjoiner could do for us. All the while I checked for updates from the Progress, but no signal had yet been detected. But that was a hundred years ago. She meant Earth years, of course. But it was the only way we— they—could see at the time. She was one of us, Nidra—an Ultra. I thought I knew something of Conjoiners, but they had a long and complicated internal history of which I was totally ignorant. As soon as she came out of the tank, she knew that we'd come a lot further than Schedar sector. Whoever dug into my nav core didn't know what they were doing." "I'm not talking about your whereabouts at the time of the collision. Doesn't deserve me, the mistakes I've made. "My money's still on Burdock. Of course, I knew I must have planned something. We were hitting the rock with weapons, trying to adjust its vector or shatter it to rubble. Perhaps the Spire, having tasted his blood once, had decided it wanted much more of it-more than could be provided by the sacrifice of a mere limb. But you failed." "And Lev is gone." I nodded. I expected it to taste suddenly thin and synthetic, but it still tasted like pretty good wine. I'm not sure I wasn't happier in blissful ignorance." "We have the data from Burdock's ship," I reminded her. "But I'm not sure I know what a triangular number is." Celestine glanced at the ceiling for a moment, as if seeking inspiration. The old units didn't have anything like as much autonomy as the ones we're used to now. It just had cylinders sticking out of it at various angles, glassy with lenses, and some filth-smeared grills in the side of the dome. Not an option today, though: too much risk of the robot being intercepted and taken out. "Unless you have strong objections." "It's not that I can't decide these things for myself," I said. NINE CHILDE AND I went back. \*\*\* LENKA FINGERED OPEN a hatch and used the manual controls to open the airlock door. I know my own strength, Merlin. "Second... left. But I still moved a few things around. Neither of us seemed to know what to say next. Here, the theatre of conflict was considerably less than half a light-second in diameter, encompassing only the immediate space around Lecythus, with its girdle of half-finished Dormitories and Exodus Arks. Burdock's impostor touched a hand to the smoking wound, opened its mouth as it speak, and fell lifeless to the floor. Including the part about the murder of an entire culture." He looked at the two of us. There was nothing more I needed to say, other than: "I miss you." Delivered after a moment's pause, I meant it to sound emphatic. I'd read all your articles, long before I was selected for the mission. The snowplough sounds its horn. The experience was shocking; not because it was profoundly and totally new. "In a little while, we will return to our ships," I continued. There were people as large as small moons, which fostered entire swarming communities within their bodies. "Meaning big ship," I said. "My little ship could never have crossed interstellar space without it. More and more it seemed to us that there was something about the Work that had alarmed him; something too sensitive to bring to the attention of those who had a vested interest in the thing itself. "Good afternoon, Prakash," I say. But they used it to crush you, to bury you. It's what he's always wanted, and he's had his witnesses now." Childe eased himself onto the lip of the door leading into the room we had just come through. I can't say I ever had my mind set on being a shipmaster. It had been my turn to design the venue for this witnesses now." carnival, and I thought I'd made a tolerable job of it. Tower says we can lift in thirty minutes." I shrugged. THE OLD MAN AND THE MARTIAN SEA AFTER THE SUCCESS of The Starry Rift, Jonathan Strahan began casting the net out for young adult stories set on future iterations of Mars. The war had left many pockets of the solar system still riddled with active worms. How often had she dared to hope, before learning to crush the emotion before it caused any more pain? "Please." "You know I can't go back now. In the intervening time his control over the new body had improved markedly. Soft red light bathed us. "If you can't cross from domain to domain, how did Blue Goose get this far out? She tugged down her hat in readiness for the journey and stepped onto the broken road in front of the widow's cottage. "You'll live," Celestine said, with what struck me as less than total sympathy. No interstellar traffic came close to that world during my entire stay. Joy because something has endured, and while it does they can't truly be dead, can they? "Poor Steiner," she said. They don't beat me, or electrocute me, and the drugs they give me, the things they do to me, they're not to make me docile or to punish me. We hauled her crew, broke the news to them." "How'd they take it?" "About as well as you'd expect." Greta laughed hollowly to herself. He hadn't even tried to leave the grounds of the Great House. It took all my effort to lever myself into a sitting position, and then to stand up, fighting the weight of my backpack as it tried to drag me down. The interstellar medium's pretty thick near there. "But not in the way you think. You see that building to our right, the one shaped like an oldfashioned hat box?" "Yes," Yukimi said dubiously. Liaisons between line members were normal enough—even long-term relationships— but the fact that we insisted on meeting out of the public eye was bound to raise eyebrows. Doctor Kizim, he's even kind to me. He was a necessary fiction—a reason for Childe knowing at least something about what the Spire entailed. Mazes and labyrinths; secret passages; trapdoors; dungeons and dragons. "When was it?" "Three months ago, when there was still snow on the ground. Worms of this form still infested a hundred niches across the system. Blow yourself into space rather than let the bastards get their hands on you. No one could know that people had died on Naiad, becaus that made us look bad. You have my assurance that you won't be hearing from him again." "You killed him?" "No, he's still much as he was." The ambiguity in my words must have registered with him, because there was an unease in his face. As I stepped onto Julact's surface, the dust crunching beneath my feet, some ancient memory threatened to stir. He said that he was. "I don't know," I said truthfully. Dared he prepare the first aid equipment in advance, so that he could use it one-handed? "Be careful, all right?" Childe then told everyone else to disable their chemosensors until told otherwise. Is that all there is to your name? But they had only taken three or four paces when Samphire shook his head, more in sorrow than anger, and ripped open his tunic, exposing his smooth and hairless chest to the waist. Give baby more fuel. The events still don't feel quite like they ever happened to me, but they settle in a little bit better with each act of recall. You and me. Not because he doesn't trust me, but because he can barely manage his own processing tasks, without adding the temporary complexity of farming some of them out to me. "Glad you could make it, Carrie." It was Zima, of course, and in a flash I felt foolish for doubting that he would show his face. I just have to get off Mokmer." "Show us your mitts." Before I could say yes, Khorog's metal hands were examining my skin and bone ones, splaving the fingers with surprising gentleness. "You need only consider the evidence of your eves, There were no controls or displays, and the only furniture consisted of two padded benches, set at an angle to each other before the windows. But we went inside. Must have dug into that hill, buried something in it. The Progress calls in, I'll wake you." "If it calls in." I offered a shrug. A year on Mars was twice as long, but everyone still used Earth years when they were talking about how old talking about how of talking about how of talking about how of talk was swinging near the Sun once every twelve years. Methodically and fearlessly, the Progress had set about finding a way through to whatever was underneath. Surface irregularity. Tell them how you got here. Are you telling me to keep away from Purslane?" "I'm telling you to buck up your ideas. I twisted around and looked back the other way. Presently I reach the appointed area. I take it you know why we were dumped out of the Waynet?" "I've run a fault-check on the syrinx. Here and there were even pockets of liquid water. They'd hunt you down as well. There won't be much time when I get back to Lecythus." "Please," she said. But I hadn't really given serious thought to how far I should take it until I got a publishing deal and was forced to think ahead to my next couple of books. There was enough space in there for the insertion of any number of harmful agents, up to and including an antimatter device that could easily have destroyed all or part of the Great House. The only possible justification for for the insertion of any number of harmful agents, up to and including an antimatter device that could easily have destroyed all or part of the Great House. carrying it was to use it against his brother's forces-against his own side. But I hope that some of the following comments are of interest. He gave the first two consignments as a gift, in recompense for the harm he was presumed to have done when attempting to save Malkoha, and let Malkoha think that it was all that Tyrant could do to make drugs at that strength and quantity. "The engine will guide you out, don't you worry." "You're coming with me, though." "No, Inigo, I'm not. "It's hard to know." Lenka said in a low voice: "Then we have to leave. "Of course, nothing that the dreams contained is likely to reflect anything that we'll find inside the Spire...but don't you feel better for having had them?" I gave the matter some thought before responding. It must have suffered a malfunction very near the surface, or else there would have been nothing to recognise. Not yet. Samphire that had been sent to infiltrate our gathering. They only met a few other Conjoiners, and they seemed to be moving in the same general direction; down to the nest's basement levels. "What if we're wrong? "And what did she say?" "Nothing," I said hurriedly. Through her visor her face turned ghostly. It isn't my job to sprinkle fairy dust on a planet and get everyone to live happily ever after. Transient features. It took moments for my sense of scale to normalise; to realise that, for all that the machine had shown me, I was no different. I'll have three for you next time." "I'll manage if I must. They recommend holding him at the current dosage until they've run some tests." "Easy for them to say, half the solar system away." "They're the experts, not us." "I think we should let them handle this one Masked and unmasked faces were caught by something above. "Other. There was something else, too. I initiate the virching link. "I adapted them from a variety of sources, thinking they'd put us all in the right frame of mind for what lies ahead." "Dying nastily, you mean?" Hirz asked. "Do what I'd do. In those quiet minutes we spoke amongst ourselves, discussing what had happened and what we could expect. It was Zima Blue: the same shade of blue as on the gold-lettered card. The place is crowded, the atmosphere volatile. It's so they can track and recover our bodies if the re-entry goes wrong." "That's what they told us." He kept on turning the wheel. She took in a deep breath, as if that was going to help her. I catch the rise of a swift bright star. I'm sure you're going to startle us tonight." "That depends," I said, "on how much you like sunsets." \*\*\* THAT NIGHT MY memories were threaded into the dreams of the other guests. There are things with gills that can barely breathe in open air. There was to be no "other guest". It took six hours to mop up the last resistance from the pirates, by which point we'd taken eleven fatalities, with another three seriously wounded. You've made all the right decisions so far. Do you want to get back aboard it? Take a simple point-to-point transfer, like the Hauraki run. But you don't need Lenka. If hostilities between the Conjoiners and the Coalition re-ignited, the Demarchy would not be able to stand aside as they had fifteen years ago. The old, forgetful robot is certainly a recurring trope of mine, but I don't think I had a clue about that when I wrote "Zima Blue". "My ship was badly damaged. For a while, you will glory in it, "You in a hurry or something?" Kathrin tightened her grip on the bags, as if she was going to use them as weapons. It would have worked much better for us if your wife had shown love and affection to you, and then begged you to follow her into the wonderful new world she'd been shown." Something of Weather's manner seemed to blunt Van Ness's indignation. A lesser spirit would already have buckled. But the fact remains that uplifts don't generally exhibit a high degree of forward planning and resourcefulness. Best guess is six to twelve hours, but that may be wide or short of the mark, depending on how things evolve in theatre." For a second I think: operating theatre, and wonder why the hell that should be my problem. He said it was because I had offered him water. I was born in Dar es Salaam, around the turn of the century." "Before or after?" "I don't know. Unnerved, but still determined to stand my ground, I waited to see what would happen. That's how we met. His eye-goggle clicked and whirred into focus. "We're going down." Voi's calm returned. The inhuman scale of the colonised Galaxy was its strength as well as its weakness: time and distance were buffers against catastrophe. It's more like a key or a passport." "What does it do?" "It lets my ship use the Waynet. "No..." she said, hitting the ground with a detectable thump. "It's getting easier for you, isn't it?" "I don't know," I said. "You were wrong," she said. Galiana made refinements to all of us, reinstating a higher degree of personal identity. No, that wasn't a plan. But her options were diminishing with every hour that passed, as more and more air drained out of the wreck. One entire line had been murdered, when a rival line booby-trapped its equivalent of Reunion with an antimatter device left over from the War of the Local Bubble. Not me. Should we not listen to the man who actually lives here?" "Just do as you are told, Soya." Do as I am told. You'll make an effective deterrent, wouldn't you say? There must have been dozens ringing the nest. There were fields with grazing animals, and evidence of some tallchimneyed industrial structures on the far side of the lake. Soon it was out of the lake. Be ready." "I'm here." But as I said that, a status panel lit up on the side of my faceplate. As a hero, one of the Few. "Actually it's really not that bad. Are we on a schedule suddenly?" "I'm just a little concerned about the amount of time it's taking us, that's all." He stroked the bulge on his forearm. But the Amerikanos are of interest to us." "Records say they weren't here," I said. Only the helmet parts remained semitransparent, so that I could still identify who was who without cumbersome visual tags. Her skin had the pearly shimmer of the figures we had seen in the second chamber. "I was born on a world not very different from Lecythus, Minla. "Easy now, lad," he said, as I tried to block him. Bringing along those other suits, so that when the first ones became too bulky we could still go on. The robots he would suffer catastrophic breakdowns during his tour. That's not our main concern here. "Zima Blue is the colour of the tiles," he gently corrected. "The thing is, stars breathe as well. The other hatted man rushes to me and locks his massive hand around my arm. A bit like cathedral might take lifetimes to finish." He paused and smiled, years falling from his face, albeit only for an instant. Sensible advice for both of us, wouldn't you say? Even the suits—programmed to move out of the way of obvious moving hazards—were too slow. It snaps." "There's no such thing as society," Minla told him. Clavain was about to say something when there was a sudden loud buzz and the first bullet slammed into the hole. I'm an inveterate doodler and a great believer in the power of drawing to liberate areas of the imagination that might not be accessed through conscious effort. This is a secure compound in the European Central Cybernetics Facility, not far from Zurich. I liked the way she walked in the low gravity of the station, the way the subdued lighting traced the arc of her hips and waist. The knowledge told me everything, but not all of that wisdom was framed in terms I could readily decode. "I think." The storm, if anything, appeared to double in fury around the glowing form. "Looks like she means it when she says she's quitting," I said, breaking the silence that ensued. Names that split the world in two. I think I'll revisit some of those old places, for old time's sake." "Bring me back a memory." "I'll be sure to. I'm assuming the oil reserves ran dry sometime in the last century?" "Oil," Clausen said, cracking open the cockpit door. Zima led me into the darkening shadow under the nearest stand, then through a private door that led into the enclosed area. "Thom?" I followed the voice. The walls and ceiling were veined grey; tranquil after what he had seen in the last place. "More than you realise. We don't want to be trapped in there if it's something we can't solve." Childe walked over to the far door. If I hadn't gone crazy, I wouldn't be standing here now." "You said there was something I had to know." "Give me a little of your time, then I'll be gone. The timeworn frescos on the swallowships commemorated engagements where the participants -human and Husker both-were moving at significant fractions of the speed of light and employing relativistic weapons of world-shattering destructive potential. It was all very well warning Lenka away, but it only took a few minutes of frustration to establish that I could not get myself out unassisted. "We'll talk about it when I am done. I don't even know if it still exists." "Tell me about Lacertine," she said, pronouncing the name of the world with her usual scrupulousness. Otherwise, there was nothing to distinguish it from the dozens of surrounding to me now, just as it shouldn't have meant anything to my father. Aim for a leg. "But there are only seven deep grooves in that interval," she continued. "I still have my memories. We had passed beyond the limits of the ruined city and were now traversing lifeless hills and valleys. "Who you?" she asked. Not if he didn't want to be tracked down and assassinated." I stamped my feet, beginning to feel cold. But look, it really isn't that bad. I couldn't break the truth to you in one go." Sharply I withdrew my hand. One engine spar was seriously buckled. At school, I was expected to go into illustration or some aspect of creative writing. But I didn't see anyone else to object. They struck from ambush, guick as pythons. I could see where this was going. This time when it sphinctered open there was a glistening membrane stretched across the doorway, a recently licensed item of Demarchist technology. The best way to think about it is an intense competition to best exploit the Realm's computational resources on a local scale. For both our sakes." "We have no choice," I said. "Just keep away from any cargo lifts for a while." "Thanks," the cyborg said. Some of the chunks are pretty big. If data received during post-natal growth was so crucial to intelligence, perhaps we could boost our intelligence even further by intervening during the earliest phases of brain development." "In the womb?" "Yes." Now she made the tree-trunk show a human embryo running through cycles of cell-division, until the faint fold of a rudimentary spinal nerve began to form, nubbed with the tiniest of emergent minds, "It can't ignore the message in the Matryoshka. He had to hand it to Galiana's people—they were fighting like devils. The tracked machines attending to the operation were of ancient, squalid provenance. And they'd make a hero of you as well." \*\*\* THE ELEVATOR DOORS open to a chill wind, howling in from the flat farmland beyond the city. "Sorry you agreed to stay awake now?" "No, I don't think so." "Even with what happened back there?" "At least I got to see a dragon up close." "Yes," Clausen said. Can you spin me some flowers?" "Where exactly are you going? They have very little intelligence of their own, so they won't be able to help you with anything creative. But I can still move, still breathe. "Or try to." "It's not a bad life, is it? And without art there is no truth." "Fallibility leads to truth? "Don't do anything silly," Fescue said, even as the crowd parted around Burdock's impostor. You have to work these things out for yourselves," She looked only slightly disappointed. She died! But by then her living ship had grown to know her so well that her personality lived on inside it, haunting it as a kind of ghost. Plump and vellow, two thirds full, the Moon swims over the tents, rippling in heat. But the Mood Maze was no ordinary labyrinth. Burdock-the rightful owner of this ship-seems not to have told the truth about what he was up to since the last reunion." "That's Burdock's business, not yours." "Do you know Burdock?" I asked, pushing my luck. It was as if she had found the right way of thinking, and now none of the challenges felt truly alien to her. "This all looks good so far," she said. But the bird had done nothing to wrong her, and she spared it. The servos won't allow it." "I'm not sure I understand. With a shudder my thoughts raced back to the surgical machine in Zeal's operating room, the one with the feminine hands. "I thought you were the worm expert, Nevil." He serves won't allow it." "I'm not sure I understand. With a shudder my thoughts raced back to the surgical machine in Zeal's operating room, the one with the feminine hands. "I thought you were the worm expert, Nevil." He nosed the shuttle up, but fractionally too late. Giles had conceived the work, funding it directly from the family's finances. "Why not goggles?" I said when Trintignant had first explained his plans. At least we get to feel the sun on our faces, get to laugh and cry, and do something that makes a difference." "A difference to what, exactly?" "You're still missing a few pieces of jigsaw, aren't you." "More than a few." They walked on to the next repair job. But the story's also about the miraculous human capacity for adaptation to almost any set of circumstances, and somewhere along the line I think it manages to find a rare glimmer of optimism. The bracelet still looked the same, it still looked like a lump of cold dead metal, but it seemed to hang less heavily against her skin than when she'd first put it on. All we need." "That wasn't a weather alert," Nero said. "I was never very good at diary keeping." "It's meant to be more than just a diary, though. Of course much of the work is being done by robots, but there are still dozens of men and women involved. Which meant running our models again, which meant a week of time on the department supercomputer. It lapped to her thighs, then her waist. A crime committed by one Gentian Line member would reflect badly upon all of us. I was thinking of that when another comms burst came through. Just installed a copy of my flight plan on your

ship...for your information. There were metal bones and muscles in it. "And bring down half the mountain in the process," I said. My mouth was dry. It had eight solid wheels, each of which was large enough to roll over not just her home but the entire apartment complex. "There was nothing personal about it at all." Voi nodded, without in any way suggesting that she actually believed him. "Nothing's without a little risk." She shook her head, slowly and wonderingly. I held her hand, willing her to find the strength. They'll never know true happiness. by Jonathan Strahan, Viking, 2008 "The Sledge-Maker's Daughter" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2007. "Anyway," Samphire continued, obliviously and wonderingly. I held her hand, willing her to find the strength. I am thirsty and my back aches from lugging water. It was the power to smash walls. It made us realize how far we'd come, and how much help these newcomers needed to make the same transition. "All I need to do is find a way to get them to trigger their shields. And when they push things through, they don't always come out in what we consider the present. They chanced upon the Spire and started exploring it, believing it to contain something of immense technological value." "And what happened to them?" "They went inside in small teams, sometimes alone. It was still early in my time amongst the Conjoiners, and —perhaps just as importantly—it was still early for the Conjoiners as well. "Remember that." "I will." Mary encouraged her to take some of the bread and meat, despite Kathrin again mentioning that she expected to be fed at Widow Grayling's. "My organic memory reached saturation point about seven hundred years ago. All I know is that it's still night. What had seemed beautiful then—a whiplashing binary star, or a detonating nova—must have finally reached out and killed her. But a second emerged, a fraction of a second after the first, spearing across the room at a slightly different angle. "I don't really understand," I admitted. It took off the helmet, lifting it up above its shoulders. "No, I don't. If I need to dig into the surface of a moon or asteroid, I can send out a small analysis rover, or gather a sample of material for more detailed inspection." I tap my chest. Some chance, I thought. I'd had an interview. "I'm not suggesting we let her run amok," I said. "I'm in it now. Forqueray and Trintignant followed. "How tall is it?" I asked. But I want you to be clear that I will if I have to." She walked slightly ahead of me, the cable hanging between us. "Each of these platforms holds maybe ten thousand sleepers, give or take. It was hard work, getting Lenka back here. Ten metres. "They'd find a way to blame your death on us. \*\*\* KEEPING OUT OF Van Ness's way, as he'd advised, was not the hard part of what followed. "For you'd have no witnesses. Overhead, the bulk carriers slid in one after the other. "I'm not ungrateful?" "Not ungrat by my reckoning. As flattered as I was that she was taking such an interest in me, the surgical precision of her questions left me slightly uncomfortable. "Let me see." If God was a fly, this would be the inside of his head. I pushed away from the piloting position, expertly inserting myself onto a weightless trajectory that sent me careening through one of the narrow connecting throats that led from one of the Tereshkova's modules to the next. "These felt real. I just have to fetch some things from Teterev's wreck. Adults were always going on about how there were already too many people on the planet, but as far as Yukimi could tell there was still a lot of empty space between the warm, wet bubbles of the settlements. I took off my old Ashanti Industrial bib cap, scratched my bald spot and turned to the jib man. It was a hopelessly ambitious attempt to tell a story about an alien artefact that crashes into the Earth and undermines our technology and language, while at the same time reversing our sense of the flow of time, so what we think of the artefact's arrival was actually its departure, and instead of perceiving a technological acceleration...you get the idea. Something's come up. One of the robots on his inspection cycle was large and dim enough to cause injury to the careless. "What now?" I picked up the iron and wiped sandpaper across its tip until it was bright again. It's in the hands of transcended machines." "Only partly. Before I worried about the Matryoshka, I'd worry about not screwing up your part in it." "I'm not going to screw up." He looked at me earnestly, as if I had challenged him. You know what I mean, don't you." Samphire kept his voice low. "Yes, I know," he said. Suzy didn't care. Prior to arrival on the planet, we were free to adopt whatever forms we chose. Timelag's too great to go crying to mummy every time we have a decision to make." She withdrew her hands from the waldo controls and flexed her fingers. I've become very used to knowing you're close at hand, in the walls of the Great House. The unit is scary to look at, but it's on my side, and that makes all the difference. I creep my way out of the amusement park, until I'm almost back under the open air. "You think it's coming from his head, don't you." "I think music must have comforted him during his journey. I tried not to think about it. I'm afraid you're going to be in rather a lot of hot water. "I know," Yukimi said resignedly. It's much too late." Celestine reached out to help me make my awkward way to the next door. "Come closer, Nidra," a voice said. Thick metal jewellery glinted on his fingers. "They are valued very highly indeed, to the point where they are valued very highly indeed, to the next door. "Come closer, Nidra," a voice said. Thick metal jewellery glinted on his fingers. "They are valued very highly indeed, to the next door." were gifted enough that it was possible...no one would willingly choose this." "You don't understand us, Inigo. Original to this collection The moral right of Alastair Reynolds to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. "I know: I've run it through Tyrant's medical analyser. But he was also a fellow who looked into the heavens and saw wonder. "Especially by the standards of the time." Childe nodded keenly. "It's just that this is a little strange for me." "It shouldn't be strange," he said. With dreadful slowness it raised one of its hands. If we can't celebrate that, what can we celebrate?" "They'll be bringing someone else out, then." "As soon as Clausen identifies a suitable replacement. It was achieving coherence, taking solid form in base-reality. I forced my attention back to the puzzle, feeling the machinery in my head pluck at the mathematical barbs of the problem. Now we had to move in single file, whether we liked it or not. "It's Purslane, isn't it," I said. But I want what they left behind. That means the rules were different. We both agreed that we needed to know more, but our suspicions about Burdock (and, by implication, Burdock's own suspicions) meant that we were just as incapable of putting direct questions to the Advocates. It's the same contraband variety I used to buy my ride into town. It looked extragalactic, not some local event. The tension on your noose will increase." I paused, allowing that part to sink in, if he had not already deduced matters for himself. He twisted the tube around, dust spilling from the open muzzle at one end. There are fallen machines under my titanium feet, and bodies. "But this isn't a simulation. From the Kuiper Belt the sun is barely..." "SHOW DEREK TITAN PICTURE." This, I suppose, is when I suffer my first prickle of disquiet. The life-support equipment on the front, a rectangular chestpack connected to the rest of it by tubes and lines, is still lit up. Evidence of same? It requires great responsibility." "That's what my parents keep saying." "It's the truth. "Forceps," he'd say. "Just flowers. He felt normal—no memory drop-outs or aphasia. "Add it to the list of Gentian rules we've already broken tonight," I said. They never actually lied about what happened to you." "They didn't have to. She could see her father now, shaking his head at the shame she had brought on him with her antics. There was just a long period of unconsciousness, and then the noise and vibration of the cabin, the sun coming in through the windows, the sky clear and blue and the sea unruffled. I was going to ask what you thought of Tormentil's strand." Tormentil's memories, burned into my mind overnight, still had an electric brightness about them. Time presses, and I must soon be on my way to the Hayden Planetarium. One of us would leave the system heady with the knowledge their dream had moved us like no other, and that they had been honoured with the design of the next venue. "It just happened to be the shade that the young man used for his swimming pool tiles." "Then some part of you remembered." "This was where I began. What is this little pep talk about, Fescue? "And Childe," she continued. For a moment Merlin was numb. Once, he could have ascended the ladder with his arms alone, in onegee, but now the ladder felt alive beneath his feet. "Fear and revulsion. I wished I could reverse time and start again, ignoring my misgivings. "Who are we, indeed." \*\*\* WHEN TRINTIGNANT WAS gone, I turned to Celestine and start again, ignoring my misgivings. "Who are we, indeed." \*\*\* WHEN TRINTIGNANT WAS gone, I turned to Celestine and start again, ignoring my misgivings. "Who are we, indeed." \*\*\* WHEN TRINTIGNANT WAS gone, I turned to Celestine and start again, ignoring my misgivings. "Who are we, indeed." \*\*\* WHEN TRINTIGNANT WAS gone, I turned to Celestine and start again, ignoring my misgivings. injured. For a moment, contact between the two craft was lost, and when Tyrant came in again it hit the aircraft hard enough to crush the metal cylinder of a spare fuel tank bracketed on under the silence, when I sensed that I needed to think about something else for a moment. "I'm going back for her. "Because it was said that the sheriff's men once found a head of skin and bone, all burned up, but which still had a pair of spectacles on it. They stretched great corridors between the stars: rivers of flowing vacuum. Mike's long past the point of missing anything at all. It's just the way the universe is. "Camera assembly three is a little stiff—I wouldn't be surprised if it seizes on us mid-mission. "That's possible. We were sophisticated units with a high capacity for self-repair. For a moment, like a breeze on a summer's day, Merlin felt a wave of almost unbearable sadness pass through the room. Captain Van Ness did not wish to endanger his passengers by provoking a damaging retaliation from the pirates. You had to leave him on the orbiting ship. You decide when we leave." "I'm going to finish suiting up. "Yes, the deck's getting hotter. TWELVE THE PROBLEM WAS as elegant Byzantine, multi-layered and potentially treacherous as any we had encountered. Gaunt put them on and fussed with the microphone until it was in front of his lips. But for me it was different." Greta smiled. That must have been the only way for aircraft to arrive and depart from the hovering land mass. I made myself as quiet and silent as physics allowed, and willed them to leave. "Stop," Rasht said, as I turned over a page. Six months feels like half a lifetime ago now." "When did you go under?" Gaunt asked. "Well, all things come to he who waits. No one's blaming you." "Let's see what Baikonur have to say when we get back, shall we?" "I'm sure they'll be in a forgiving mood. She was content to be a component in a small, barely functioning machine. It was a thing she'd half hoped to find, half hoped to avoid. There were streams and currents of fainter stars, like a myriad neon fish caught in a snapshot of frozen motion. "Maybe to her the lives aren't anywhere near as valuable as you'd like to think." "Do you honestly think that?" "I don't think we can begin to guess the thinking of a true hive-mind society, Clavain. "Don't let. It was his coat that I had taken. Until we get there." "Got a problem with music?" "Some of it." The driver shrugs—he doesn't seem to mind as much as he pretends. No cutting tools, either. What comes to their rescue? When the very idea of it would have been laughable. I knew it as I watched Zima stand at the edge of the pool and surrender himself to the blue. "I understand you. The lines reached out towards other stars, forming a three-dimensional scarlet dandelion several dozen light-years wide. In truth I'm rather moved by the experience. On one of those trips, I brought this story to work on during a quiet few hours in the afternoon. I had been answering questions from schoolchildren; the selected few that had been deemed worthy of my attention by the mission schedulers. "I think I see what's going on here, but..." Childe looked at her. But not always. And you have a gift that people aren't going to forget in a hurry. Maintain the link until I say otherwise." My point of view shifts again. "There was part of the reception team. We're your wake-up team. "We could blast it," Lenka said. "That was the only one." They followed the airship in. At the moment such a thing clearly isn't practical. He nodded. Stripped it of engines, weps, crew. The rigid silver mask swivelled to face us all in turn. The obstruction caused by the dray had been cleared, and traffic was moving normally from bank to bank. I don't think there's much chance of you being able to understand me, but just in case...I'm not here to cause trouble." He forced a smile, which probably looked more feral than reassuring. I was chipping the beard away in house-sized chunks, a curl at a time. "It's the almost part that worries me." "Me too." She glared at Childe. Winds, yes. It was like a machine caught in the instant of blowing up, but which was still working, still doing whatever it was sent to do. By day, as we fulfilled our social obligations, we reviewed the Burdock data independently. "It's the only way. The syrinx still works, much to my relief. There was hope. Illness or injury had disfigured her since their last meeting; she wore her greying hair in a lopsided parting, hanging down almost to the collar on her right side. Without it I can't work, and if I can't work, my daughter and I go hungry." He is too small to understand my words, but the message gets through anyway. It shamed me that they were still so vivid, as if some furtive part of my subconscious had been secretly hoarding them through years of marriage and fidelity. If you want to." "I had better want to. This is a "Resource and Relocation Assistance Facility". "But not, unfortunately, a very nice planet." Childe made the view enlarge again, so that we were skimming the world's bleak, apparently lifeless surface. The other ship must have been guite sleek and beautiful before it crashed, at least in comparison to our own squat and barnacled vehicle. Not just the station. I gave you my word on that, and I'm not about to break it. "But then I shouldn't have expected any better from you." "It's just a game. I figure I'm safe for the moment. "Actually, I'm surprised you're here at all." "When it's my turn I'm sure I'll still be on my ship, furiously re-editing until the last possible moment." "That's the problem," I said. Their impact fireballs had dispersed most of the atmosphere by now, and had elevated a goodly fraction of the crust into parabolas of molten rock, tongues of flame that arced thousands of kilometers before splashing down. I'd sooner forget about Neptune and Naiad. Merlin held the book open at a particular page, letting Minla look at it. If we agreed that there was something worth talking about, then we'd "accidentally" meet each other within the next few days. Then he looked at Felka, and wondered which of them was about to embark on the stranger journey. A rope-ladder unfurled down the side of the structure. He'd been planning to land, but it seemed improper to arrive immediately after witnessing such a tragedy. But there was still more than an hour remaining of the time I had allowed us. For this piece, I homed in on an idea that had been floating around in my head for a while, that of some vast family reunion after a grand cycle of galactic exploration. "Don't crowd me, Childe. "You remember when we sent Hirz back to the beginning, to see if the Spire was going to allow us to leave at any point?" "Yes," Childe said. They showed me forward, into the front compartment of the vehicle. Then forget about bombs and start thinking about atomic rockets." Minla looked at him pityingly. "What?" "I shouldn't even mention it...but I'ves," Childe said. They showed me forward, into the front compartment of the vehicle. been less than discreet about my flight plan. The impulse that had drawn my hand towards the patterned wall compelled me to reach out and fifty-two innocent and fifty-two innocent people died. There was always the danger that the next room would be the one that killed us—and every second that we spent before stepping through the doorway meant one second less available for cracking the next problem. All of a sudden I feel shamefully intrusive. "Do you see the nest yet?" Voi said. Several agonising minutes later, the distance between the two engine units exceeded sixteen hundred metres and the drives went up in a double burst that tested our shielding to its limits. The stories also need to have some functional independence from each other. It requires strength to dig a hole and more strength to dig a hole you met, spending several years of her life at the study station on Spindrift. In that respect the Blood Spire isn't very different to a mountain. I have nearly twenty years on you." But her eyes measure me and I know what she's thinking. Me, Rorvik, Lomax. I could take it, open its mind, learn from it. The modifications I inflicted upon myself were gruesome and extreme. You never questioned it?" I look down. It comes with age." Behind Corax, the cargo doors were closed. Pieces of the crashed shuttle. "Well, I can show you some of my Kuiper Belt images—that's a very long way out, believe me. "No. She's right. The vehicle's still in orbit, isn't it?" "What a clever young lady you are. All lifebearing stars (cool and long-lived suns, for the most part) would have been shunted much closer to the core, until they fell within a volume only five thousand light years across. There were more. "He could have been cheating," I said. Nothing with a sense of self. "Strip those away and you can clone to your heart's content. I assisted him over the edge. In the old days, you needed a permit just to get into it. It was fugitive territory. I hope you have a strong appetite for questions." "I have a strong appetite for guestions." "It's not about Katerina. Zeal picked up the end of one segmented chrome tube. The joke of his, that we were still back in Star City, that all of this was an elaborate simulation, a preparation for the mission to come-even down to the impossible-to-fake weightlessness-was beginning to wear thin. Though she was bony, with barely any spare muscle on her, she had the broad shoulders of a swimmer. Did I mention the Bubble already? "I shall." "God go with you. You'd just know it." "Where's the difference? None of this could be explained under any existing theory of physics. "Fix that," I instructed my suit, authorising it to divert whatever resources it required to the task. "What deal?" Gaunt asked. There must still be some residual damage-repair capability. It appears that the links to the Magellanic Cloud were more resilient. It had been known since our own era that a sufficiently long, dense, and fast-rotating cylinder had the property of twisting spacetime around itself until a path into the past became possible. If brute force would have been sufficient, I'd have had no need to scour Yellowstone for such fierce intellects." Hirz spoke from inside her own, smaller version of the armoured suit. It had become just one facet in a much larger mosaic." "I said it was a mistake. I don't just mean the simple fact that we remember their names, what they looked like and what they did. What was it? "So anyway," he said, conspiratorially. Quite suddenly, one of the freight pods was moving. "We'll take a stroll outside," Minla said. It was a crumb of consolation. It was a crumb of the top of the canopy as it pushed into air. I'm old enough to remember what it was like before Gorbachev. Does that bother you?" "Why would it?" Our host rumbles. My sixty-odd published stories constitute the iceberg's tip, barely hinting at a vast submerged catalogue of failures and fragments and things that may or may not go somewhere one day. "It's mostly good news. Then something made him relent. I had to know why that colour meant so much to me, and why it was taking over my art." "You allowed it to take over," I said. One was that the problems, while growing steadily more difficult, would not become insoluble. The problem is that they're quite hard to write. It was what I did. Since my ship is already riding the Waynet's flow at very nearly the speed of light, it seems impossible that any information concerning Calliope's fate will ever be able to catch up with me. "But if at any moment you feel uncomfortable, we can return to Venice." "I'm fine for now. Now you're privy to the machine-generated imagery encoded by the fields through which we move—most of it, anyway." "Tell me this wasn't planned, Galiana. "Looks like a clean birth to me, boys and girls." Galenka was webbed into a hammock at the Progress workstation, one hand on a joystick and the other tapping a keyboard. For an anxious moment her expression was frozen somewhere between surprise and suspicion, as if he was some kind of puzzle that had just intruded into her world. BEYOND THE AQUILA RIFT PETER CROWTHER WAS putting together an anthology entitled Constellations and kindly asked me if I might be able to contribute a piece. She had always assumed that the airships went from A to B as quickly as possible. Most Conjoiners don't need anything that specialised, unless they work in the drive creches, educating the engines need educating?" Not answering me directly, she said, "I can feel the engine now. Flying another hazardous mission for us, in very bad weather. New travellers, new species. I feel an icebreaker cutting through my brain. Ah, yes. The second apparition." "Where they proved you wrong?" "So they said." "They were wrong. "Those are the main commerce routes, the wellmapped connections between large colonies and major trading hubs. Tactical readouts around the table showed the build-up of strike forces above the Martian exclusion zone; probable drop trajectories for ground-force deployment. He knew when there was no point in maintaining a bluff. Best to save his ammo-cell power for a target he stood a chance of injuring. "Until you have the engines back to full thrust, I suggest you keep out of my way." \*\*\* WEPS CAME TO see me eight or nine hours later. What kind of a question is that?" As soon as I had said it, it sounded absurd and offensive to me as well. She was traveller, too. "I don't want to seem discourteous—we haven't even introduced ourselves—but that airship's on a tight schedule and it'll be lifting off very shortly. It wasn't the shuffling, wheezing figure this time. Childe had attached some additional armor to her skintight—scablike patches of woven diamond—but she must have felt more vulnerable. He would have seen the bracelet, and spoken of it." "Then you did nothing." "Your father believed that I did something. Less than fourteen months later, their simulations had also been amongst the first to crash. It looked like a misshapen dark stone—whatever the doctor had found amongst the first to crash. It looked like a misshapen dark stone—whatever the doctor had found amongst the first to crash. It looked like a misshapen dark stone—whatever the doctor had found amongst the first to crash. -fortuitously for us-the spheres had holes in them, several dozen circular perforations ranging in width from one to three kilometres, spotted around the spheres in what appeared to be an entirely random arrangement. "Control architecture is much as I remember it from my ship. Men and women ripped out of time, cut adrift from families and lovers by an accident of an alien technology we use but barely comprehend. I'll show you." \*\*\* I FOLLOWED GRETA in a daze. She was saying that Childe's answer was the right one; that the one I had been sure of was the wrong one... "I thought..." I began. He's shown heroic dedication...I wish the nest could know how well he has done." She clamped her teeth together and convulsed again, harder this time. "She has no interest in other human beings. "You came all the way from Jarrow Ferry with this?" "Give me back the bag, tried to grab it back, but he held it out of her reach, grinning cruelly. But I was no closer to a story. Perhaps it's unravelling, and I'm about to breathe my last breath before I become a thin smear of naked quarks, stretched across several billion kilometres of the water. "Because we're traditionalists, Campion. They're the ones who'll spend their whole lives with that knowledge looming over them. The seas and skies are a shimmering electric blue, the forests a dazzle of purple and violet and pink; colours that you've only ever seen when you close your eyes against the sun and see patterns behind your eyelids. She'll drop, after a minute or so. We can hold here for hours if we have to, especially with the anchors. "I'm fine, Dimitri." But I noticed that Galenka's knuckles were tight on the joystick, the effort of piloting beginning to show. By baseline standards his physiological age was mature. "You've been wounded, Sergeant." I manage a smile. I set my story in a kind of transit camp where migrant workers—forced to flee by climate change and resource shortages—earn a crust using cheap but ubiquitous telepresence technology doing menial chores elsewhere on the planet—or in this case, on the Moon. That meant we were in free-fall. Of the few survivors we did encounter, none attempted surrender or requested parley. The nature of the challenges was less important to me than discovering what was at the summit; the secret the Spire so jealously guarded. Whatever they did to you, whatever they did to you, whatever they did to you," I said patiently, "you'd be dead by now." "You didn't." I'd been ready to give her the benefit of the doubt, but my reservoir of sympathy was beginning to dry up. "I'm afraid it is. He was targeting people on the fringe: line members who might know something, without being directly privy to the big secret." "Why wouldn't he just ask the Advocates directly?" "Good question," Purslane said. Of course, I should have seen that coming. It was a different game now that the Wall had been attacked again. You're with us now. It's not good. "It's collapsing." "And Felka?" "She's still trying to save it." He looked at the Conjoiners boarding the leading bullet; tried to imagine where they were going. "The syrinx creates a path that you can follow, a course where the river is easier. Until extraction." "Waiting for an update on that right now. To you." "I'm sorry about Malkoha." "He died well, Merlin. Make the choice." Celestine looked at each of us in turn. I have seen paintings of starry nights. She came close. Sure we'd find a way, if we felt it mattered enough." I look at them now. The rock sculptor?" Since I'm sitting in the Cutter and the Torch, surrounded by images. of rock art and with my own portfolio still open before me, it's not a massive deductive leap. Isn't that enough for you?" "It might be enough for you?" "It might be enough for you and I, Campion. They were able to understand it on a level no computer system had ever achieved before. "What do you think?" He supported himself by his forelimbs, his severed trunk resting against the ground. The younger brother stood back for a few moments, then knelt down and began his own excavation, a little to the right of where the other man was digging. That was his problem. They tried to chase us, and for a little while it seemed that they had the edge. So much more difficult than I thought it would be. The door had damaged the thigh of her suit, grazing an inch of its armour away as it closed, but Celestine herself had not been uneventful, and I hadn't paid much attention to it. "It's just that sometimes I need to be able to move around very quickly." I bottled my qualms. Does that scare you sufficiently that you'd consider co-operation with the Coalition?" Galiana steepled her fingers before her face; a human gesture of deep concentration which her time as a Conjoiner had not quite eroded. We got the line in, then moved onto other areas. No wonder Galiana's people had made so few attempts to leave by land. First we need to talk about the people who want Grisha dead." man, and then returned her attention to Burdock. We returned to the jammed Progress in good time and only took fifteen minutes to get the second sample back to our ship. I caught another glimpse of her face, eyes wide with apprehension. Blink, and it will be millions. They spent a lot of time standing around in grave huddles, shaking their heads at the rest of us. It took me another yawning moment to remember that I'd dismissed the AM the day before. "Nothing. Not just a chunk of metal and plastic but a historical document, a living record. As the hours ticked by, Minla's analysts maintained a grim toll of the total numbers of surface and orbital casualties. It was lenient, I suppose, compared to the savage dismembering that had concluded our last attempt to reach the summit. "I'm sorry," I said. She will miss you very much." Malkoha paused and reached into his tunic pocket. Why doesn't the fieldmaster shut down the field, if he's losing control of it?" "Too scared to. My arm was in a bad way, but the fingers still worked. I jerked in my suit, nerves battling with curiosity. The sky over Venice was jammed with ships, parked hull-to-hull. We were looking into the hidden heart of a Conjoiner drive. Shirin had one as well—she bought it at the same time. I think what followed was the longest five minutes in my life. The machine misses nothing, and it's so efficient at anticipating my queries that I barely have to ask it anything." "The machine is vulnerable." "It's backed up at regular intervals. We run a tight operation here and we can't afford to lose even one member of the team." It was Da Silva speaking now; although there wasn't much between them, Clausen had the sense that he was the slightly more reasonable one of the duo, the one who wasn't radiating quite so much naked antipathy. "Isn't that true?" "I admit I'd have done a great deal to experience communion with the Jugglers," I said, knowing that it was pointless to deny it. "Not now. With cloning, it's almost child's play." "This is nonsense," Childe said. But then there were millions of rich people in the system—who else was paying for the voidships? I stationed myself against a wall and watched television, flicking through the various uplink feeds while spooning food into my mouth. That's an estimate based on my experiences as a prisoner, and the hundred or so who've died trying to escape since. Time and again, as covertly as we dared, we met aboard her ship and discussed what we had learned. It was good fortune that the gap existed, but I still wouldn't have got far without the help from Doctor Kizim. THE LAST LOG OF THE LACHRIMOSA WAKE UP. Interstellar travellers returning after centuries away. From that, it was only a hop and skip to a science fictional idea about an alien artefact that enacts a punishing toll on those who would dare to penetrate its mysteries, and yet which seems to have no end of volunteers ready to submit to its hazards. He used dullness as a deliberate camouflage." "Wait," I said. They could always fix him a new hand, in the new world on the other side of sleep. The air was colder than any part of the nest he had visited so far, with a medicinal tang which reminded him of the convalescence ward on Deimos. "What is it?" "We call it a syrinx. I knew there was something more in there...something that hadn't been completely erased. "Always been a bit too chirpy, that one. What he saw there was something more in there...something that hadn't been completely erased. "Always been a bit too chirpy, that one. What he saw there was something more in there...something that hadn't been completely erased. "Always been a bit too chirpy, that one. What he saw there was something that hadn't been completely erased. "Always been a bit too chirpy, that one. What he saw there was something that hadn't been completely erased." an interrogator's eye: as pale, colourless and cold as a midwinter sun. Of course, if you're unhappy with your choice of employment, you can always find another crew." I thought he might leave it at that, but Rasht added: "I know how you feel about Lachrimosa, Nidra. "We'll do it on Thousandth Night, just the way we said we would. "You know me entirely too well, Richard." "I thought I did. He'd be cold and wet a lot of the time, and when he wasn't cold and wet he'd be toiling under an uncaring sun, his eyes salt-stung, his hands ripped to shreds from work that would have been too demeaning for the lowliest wageslave in the old world. I've lived a very long time—the drugs weren't always the best, but at least I had a ready supply—but my time's coming to an end now and you'll outlive me by centuries, if luck's on your side." Yukimi thought of all the things in her life that were not the way she wanted. Nothing had prepared him for the frigid silence of his audience, their judgemental expressions as he left the low buildings of the compound their unspoken disdain hanging in the air like a proclamation. Papery sheets of skin adhered to the bone here and there, but not enough to suggest a face. Not one of the ships had ever managed to escape the Martian atmosphere before being shot down...but sooner or later he would have to ask Galiana why she persisted with this provocative folly. Two mechanical black horses provided the motive power. He gave us nothing, but I'd be remiss in my duties if I didn't point out that we could employ other methods, just to be certain he isn't keeping anything from us." "What's your honest judgement?" "I think he's completely innocent, sir—he was just following a script someone programmed into him thirty-five or more years ago. He'd have known that the rings would be beautiful, a thing of wonder, commanding the awe of the entire system. "You've enemies everywhere," said Forqueray between gurgling inhalations. Seeing shapes everywhere," said Forqueray between gurgling inhalations. universe itself was smaller than it is now. But there were ridges or arms radiating away from it, semicircular in profile, meandering and diminishing. The grandest. The destruction of the sky was shown simply as a natural catastrophe, like a flood or volcanic eruption. And in any case, we're thinking many rooms ahead here, when we might not even be able to get through the next." "I agree," Childe said. That's very positive. Maybe there still is." I brightened. But you still need a small boat to squeeze around the obstacles." "Then no one ever made larger ships, even during the time of the Waymakers?" "Why would they have needed to?" "That wasn't my question, Merlin." "It was a long time ago. We took a wrong turn, somewhere between the first and second apparitions. Weather watched me guardedly, but said nothing. Enough that you can pay off the rest aboard the Iron Lady." I could already feel Happy Jack's button men, pushing their way through that you can pay off the rest aboard the Iron Lady." I could already feel Happy Jack's button men, pushing their way through the port, asking urgent questions. You were physical protection, but also a kind of talisman, a lucky charm. But Peter Crowther, who'd commissioned it from me, felt that the ending could use an even darker twist. It was a repair facility. The Conjoiners crouched among them like ravens. "You're heading up a blind alley." them. Starman's Quest by Robert Silverberg This Halcyon Classics ebook is Robert Silverberg's sci-fi adventure STARMAN'S QUEST. Through this process, the ship was constantly testing and rejecting language models, employing its knowledge of both the general principles of human grammar and its compendious database of ancient languages. recorded by the Cohort, many of which were antecedents of Main itself. If not today, it would have happened next time. "Where are you going?" I said. Van Ness reckoned we should send out a distress call and wait for rescue. She very much wanted not to be. "No. We'd taken almost nothing. Maybe Ingvar had higher hopes than that, a long time ago. I'd thrash you." She did, too. Where I resembled a masked soldier in jade armour, he was a fiery, almost luminous red, with the face of an iron gargoyle. Line loyalists, to the marrow." She tightened her grip on the rail as something came streaking up from the molten world below: the last of my aquatics, lingering out of idleness or some instinctive curiosity. It grew out ragged and greasy, tangled like the branches of an old tree, but it was still hair. Yet that had been allowed for; it was easier to leap back into the deep past and crawl forward in time than to achieve a bullseye into a relatively recent era. The arms were tipped with various sampling and cutting instruments. "What is this?" "A live transmission from Deimos," Galiana breathed. I believe Prakash. The wrong way to do things." "Easy to say that now." He drew a finger around the rim of his tea mug. She was losing, and now she knew it. As to why only a few of us have the talent... that is one of our greatest mysteries. "No merely cautious. The puzzles I had set him had seldom defeated him, even if it had taken weeks for his intensely methodical mind to arrive at the solution. While there were still children in the universe, and while children to a reason to keep looking, a reason to keep believing. "I always bring flowers, don't I?" "You always used to. That is Burdock." "No," I said. "I don't know—are their brains smaller?" "Yes—but a dolphin's brain is larger, and they're scarcely more intelligent than dogs." Galiana stooped next to a vacant tree stump. "This mind—" "It's male," Weather said. She had the face of a girl, but there was a steely resolution in her olive-green eyes that told me she was older than she looked. "In any case, the ice will melt eventually, with the change of seasons. Understand?" "I think we get the gist," Trintignant said. She could just make out the ghostly impressions where they had been. If he didn't recover they'd make something up—an unanticipated illness, or a debilitating accident. His fingers were already clenched sweating on the railing as the light inched closer and engulfed his node. "You were about to announce the winner, Campion. When I doodle something, and get an unexpected buzz from it, I know that I've stumbled on a connection or image I wouldn't otherwise have found. Yukimi tensed and pushed herself even farther back, but not quite so far that she couldn't see the cargo doors. How many clones were there, Childe? The weapons were antiquated and underpowered, good enough for fending off orbital insurgents but practically useless against another ship, especially one that had been built for piracy. The scheduled lightbreakers don't go there. They undid the damage very easily. But he had no doubt that it would happen eventually. Every hundred metres of altitude gained seemed to tax the aircraft to the limit, so that it climbed, levelled, climbed. "Galiana? If we moved quickly and efficiently—and we were already beginning to settle into a rhythm—we could recover three or four additional samples before it was time to start our journey back. You've been preselected for aptitude, anyway. Look, there's still time to make another entry. "No time," she said again. "Why? Rooks and jackdaws wheeled and cawed overhead. When the Conjoiner reached the door the child hesitated, tugging against the man's gentle insistence. We all feel the tragedy of her death. May I speak candidly?" "They're aware of what happened," the teacher says. Something in the eyes, tired and pink-tinged as they are. We're both unharmed." "Thank God." Old verbal mannerisms died hard, even among the Conjoined. Lenka was the first through. The Matryoshka still had more to tell me. I'd had enough. Before I dropped out of superluminal signal range I contacted the Capital Nexus, alerting the emperor that I would not be home for some time. "What I mean," I continue, "is that being born or being made are increasingly irrelevant ontological distinctions. The fear had finally worked its way into you. We can sedate him, wrap him in duct-tape and confine him to one of the modules if necessary. It didn't work." They were walking along a suspended gangway now, crossing from one side to the other of some huge space somewhere inside the rig. "It's beautiful," I said. "That's on its way to Mars. "It's not as if that world ever had any chance of outlasting us. "It's Third Intercessionary. "All the machines in my head only amount to two hundred grams of artificial matter, and even so I still need this crest to handle my thermal loading. "Do we?" I asked. But that already made them slyer than foxes Quickly I stripped down to my underclothes. I spurn these insults; settle finally for a low remuneration but high skills dividend job, helping one robot perform a delicate repair on another, at one of the Antarctic construction projects. It vanished into the scarred, mountainous hull of an enormous waiting ship. "There was less to do than you might think -the terraforming changes left this part of Mars relatively undisturbed. Before "Last Log", the previous one had been "Monkey Suit", from 2009, so it was high time to produce something new. I'm sorry. The worst was returning to your office to find a bottle of vodka and a loaded revolver. By twenty thousand kilometres, all our weapons were inoperable. Don't I deserve at least to be told thank you? The toolkit didn't just contained spare parts such as optical arrays, proximity sensors, mechanical bearings and servomotors. In the same timeframe my men recovered other fragments from the vicinity of the corpse; enough to allow us to reassemble the bullet. "Of course it's different. The rockets worked now, after a fashion, but they'd arrived late and there was already a huge backlog of people and parts to be shifted into space. "I can't stop you making weapons," Merlin said. But that was before he saw injury as a means to an end. "I could have really used her lately." "It doesn't mean she doesn't love you. "If what you say is true, how did I become the way I am?" "You were programmed to adapt to your master's movements, to anticipate his needs and energy demands. "Well," I said. The brain surgery. The air smelled of ozone. "What will it take, Childe? The hundred or so people working in the sector was about the size of a village, and for centuries that had been all the humanity most people ever dealt with. With your permission, I'll use our remaining fuel to reach Lecythus. Celestine nodded. The mob has simmered down since earlier, but the place is still busier than usual. I could hardly expect you to be less thorough about this than any other security arrangements you've dealt with." "I promise I'll be as quick as possible." "Of course. Not everyone does. But there was someone standing at the end of it. This was unknown territory to Clavain. It had gone horrendously wrong. All I ever would be. "I was there," I said. It turns out to be very good for making monuments, especially when you don't want the letters to be worn away in a handful of centuries." "You built a hundred of these?" Merlin asked. I decided that I was no longer enjoying the illusion of seeing everyone as if we were not wearing suits—we all looked far too vulnerable, suddenly—and ordered my own to stop editing my visual field to that extent. On the second pass through the Spire she had been intuiting the answers to many of the problems at a glance, and I was certain that she was not always remembering what the correct answer had been. Flickering with arcs and filaments of lightning, like a perpetual dance of St. Elmo's fire. I vowed that if anyone was ever crazy enough to let me loose on a piece of rock that big, I'd cut it perfectly. "As soon as he stepped into the other room, it closed the rear door." The Ultra stepped closer to the aperture. I sketched in his early career as an experimental cyberneticist, how his reputation for fearless innovation had eventually brought him to Calvin Sylveste's attention. You clung to that." Ingvar's tone changes. Part of it flashes red. "He won't give up," I said. She led me up steep ramps, assisted me as we negotiated near-impassable chicanes, helped me as we climbed down vertical shafts that would be perilous even under one-tenth of a gee. By then, even the Demarchists had their own prototype starships, using the technology we'd licensed them. Perhaps, when this was over, I could break it to her that she was considered no more than useful, like a component that would serve its purpose for the time being. Nothing in ordinary human experience could grasp the loss of a loved one. Even the monkey had no problem with the rest of its suit. I'll make one of out Mazamel's skull. "Turn it. "What?" "Turn the handle." She does as I say, gently and hesitantly at first, as if fearful that the handle will snap off in her fingers. All she knew was that she was very, very frightened by it, and she didn't want to know who—or what—was inside. Private art museum, Cairo. "What is going on, Prakash? No. They're neither my concern nor my interest Purslane took my hand. Enough to see that Voi didn't make it. "You already told us we'd achieve nothing by digging tunnels into Lecythus." "I'm not thinking about hiding. "Stop," boomed out a voice. How long do you think?" "No idea. It was a long time ago." "Not to me. It was a glass container pierced by many silver cables, each of which was plugged into the folded cortex of a single massively swollen brain. Galenka and I glanced at each other through our visors, then began a slow, measured walk. My resolve at that moment is total. Small ponds fed rivers that ambled down to the single lake that occupied the land mass's lowest point. If you are guilty, we will prove that instead—and uncover the rest of your collaborators. Something that will convince you of our seriousness." "I'm not sure I need convincing." "I want you to see it nonetheless. But who honestly wants to hear that they look about ten years older than the last time you saw them, even if they still don't look all that bad with it? To answer this question, the Watchers had taken one of their worlds and shattered it to molecular rubble. "That's a million in the whole of Patagonia offshore," Clausen said. "Fescue took a step toward me, presumably intending to help me from the plinth. Following a plan that had been argued over for months back on Earth, it had been agreed to attempt sample collection at each stage of the Progress's journey. "Deal is, we train you up and give you work. I know that the secret will eventually be revealed. Not terror, no panic, just blissful unconsciousness. TROIKA BY THE time I reach the road to Zvezdniy Gorodok acute hypothermia is beginning to set in. There was nothing translucent or tentative about it now. "Teterev starts this after the crash," I said, while the others gathered around. My own clothes broke up into a cloud of cherry blossom petals and scudded away across the floor. You can do that. And who was to say that some of his ancestor clones had not crawled out of the Spire, horribly mutilated, dying, but still sufficiently alive to succumb to one last trawl? And then the punishment commenced. We're not just making measurements on this thing from a distance now. When I was younger, old people used to complain about the world getting faster and faster, leaving them behind. Your death would be made to seem our fault; justification for a pre-emptive strike against our nest. It wasn't quite true. The Watchers had chosen to focus on a single, simple question. "I didn't speak to your parents, but I understand they'll be informed that you're safe and sound. "It looks like we've found Argyle." Childe nodded. I'm truly sorry for Teterev. "Seasoned beech," Peter said emphatically. Would it be a long fall back to the Sun, or an inglorious short-cut to the Matryoshka? Long enough to be sure that you're on the right track, and that I can trust you to make again." "There's a lot we need to talk about. "Give us the bad news first," Celestine said. At first he just looked at me, his eyes pale as the sky, his lips opening and closing like a fish that has just been landed. "Everything I told you is true. Weeks, months. Time enough to establish an interplanetary civilisation, even if it only extended as far as the solar system." take another shot. "On your own head be it." Trintignant paused and placed something small and hard on Celestine's table. "It died." "How many people were saved?" For a moment Merlin couldn't answer. Normally I would have edged away, but for once I relaxed in his presence, glad to unburden myself. One day Minla took a shine to the stone—I kept it on my desk long after Dowitcher was gone—and I let her have it." "And now it's mine." "You mean a lot to her, Merlin. It's me. The world now is beautiful and bleak, a depopulated wilderness with just a few thousand waking wardens to tend to the vast sleeper cubes which dot the landscape. Something had to be done. But I still felt the shivering onset of shock, and all I wanted to do was make it out of the Spire, back to the sanctuary of the shuttle. Unthinkable ages of galactic time. She had no reason to think otherwise. He set them down in front of Kathrin on a scrap of cloth. Then it clicked. " work out here, doing odd jobs. "Something wrong?" "Maybe you're right. She picks it up gently, holds it before her eyes and pinches her fingers around the little handle that sticks out from one side. One day Gaunt realised that the big bearded man hadn't been around for a while, and he noticed a young woman he didn't recall having seen before "Everyone's allowed that. His strands had always been unmemorable. Let me finish the job you were so tragically incapable of completing." I stood my ground. That's the Local Bubble. It's seen me drink wine a few hundred thousand times, under a few hundred thousand times, under a few hundred thousand times. moment. Burdock's impostor lay on its side, with one dry hand open to the sky. I had faith that it would get there in the end: I often set it the task of interpreting Prior languages, just to keep its mental muscles in shape. Then there were trees and woods. I'm teaming you up with Nero; you'll be working basic robot repair and maintenance. AROUND. "Can you hear me?" he said. It doesn't help my wife at all." "I haven't finished. "You compos mentis?" Gaunt squinted against the brightness of the room's lighting, momentarily adrift from his memories. I don't know if it was her, an effect of the magnetic field, or just my fears affecting my sense of self. He had been busy during the cruise phase, so we couldn't begrudge him a little time off, especially as he was going to have to nurse the ship home again. Anyway, back to your suit. A slight misalignment of a shaped charge, a misdirected laser blast, and I could shatter David's cheek or brow beyond repair. She hasn't even threatened to turn me over to Authority, and what good would it do her if she did? I don't think they actually do anything anymore; it's just too much bother to shut them down." But for the life of her she could not imagine why the airship was now descending to rendezvous with a Scaper. "Of course you do." Her look, suddenly, was contemptuous. And it was a kindness, too: no one who tasted Transenlightenment ever wanted to go back to the experiential mundanity of retarded consciousness. I watched him climb the jib ladder, tools hanging from his belt. Sometimes they have concocted evidence when Three short novels by some of science fiction's greatest writers -- Ursula K. by Jonathan Strahan, 2014 "Story Notes" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2016. It shows a confusion of gleaming lines, racing to perspective points. Together we walked back toward the auditorium where the others waited. "We had our work cut out." She gives a small dry laugh, but it's clear that the memory's still raw. "I heard someone used one of these against Happy Jack." The eye swivelled sharply onto me. Definitely so by the time you wake from your next bout of sleep. "You're wrong. Tonally, it's guite similar to some of my Revelation Space pieces, but I think it would have been a struggle to shoehorn it into that universe, so I didn't bother. "That stone you had your father give me...the one we talked about just after I came out of the cabinet?" "The worthless thing Dowitcher convinced my father was of cosmic significance?" "It wasn't worthless to you. Interstellar exploration, A Hugo and Nebula Award Finalist novel from a Grand Master of science fiction! A modern day Genghis Khan rules the world 30 years from now, after it has been ravaged by the Virus Wars. Gecko." Merlin reached into the box and retrieved one of the few intact vials. "You can scrape it away, but they just come and paint it on again. A clever looking girl like you wouldn't have to fill in the holes." "We'll do what we can," Purslane said. The water had rushed into the fill the caldera left after the main island's departure, and now there was no trace that it had ever existed. And I haven't even mentioned Forqueray's arm, or the medical equipment aboard the shuttle." "I still don't see what you're getting at." "I don't know what leverage Childe's used to get his cooperation—it's got to be more than bribery or avarice— but I have a very, very nasty idea. Ahead, reflecting back the sun like a sheet of polished metal, was what appeared to be a large lake or even a small sea. "We don't know who you are," I said. "That meant he couldn't participate very actively in city affairs. SIX "I'VE HAD ENOUGH of this shit," Hirz said. It's empty now." In his voice was something between relief and dizzy incomprehension. Go now, Peter Vandry. "What about the worms' altering the orbit?" "That was our doing," Galiana said. Then a pair of Conjoiners helped him unsteadily to his feet and waited patiently while he caught his breath from the mask. No machine can ever perform that task as well as a conscious mind He's Gentian flesh." "That's nothing to be proud of," the man said. My dear Lev, lost to me. He tried explaining to them that though an atomic rocket might be primitive compared to the engines in Tyrant, that didn't mean it was simple, or that its construction didn't involve many subtle principles. "You just took to art? The crewman's torso was completely detached from his hips and legs. He had become pure experience. So I hid. Quite possibly. One figure was gesticulating, directing the armed squads to take up specific positions. Either the front moved a lot closer to Tango Oscar while I was out, or I'm not home just yet. Those Juggler routines are kicking in again." She took her time replying. Trying to get as many children Conjoined as you can. "I think we're finished," Voi said. But you're not. I know that some of those territorial boundaries are disputed. No lies; no deception; nothing to hold a grudge about." I looked at him, angrily. "This," she said. If a word, paragraph or scene needs to be changed here and there, fine, but I don't set out with some vastly different structural methodology. "I am sorry about the other head." "There is no need to apologise. Every hour that I stayed aboard the Devilfish made me complicit in that crime, and any other attacks that were yet to take place. "I'm OK. The fact is, faster-than-light travel — or signalling, for that matter—looks even less likely now than it did a million years ago. "We can talk later. This is what Ultras do. "You flying this thing, or me, comrade?" "You are, definitely." I scratched at chin stubble. It was only possible to make adjustments to the starboard engine, since the port engine had no external controls. "It's all right," I said softly. But won't give in. It was a spartan, cloistered life, not much different to being in a monestary or a prison, but for that reason the slightest variation in routine was to be cherished. "Brothers, like you and I." I watched the suited figures advance towards us. We've always had contingencies in place to disrupt any research that might be headed in the right direction. It was a false strand that had set this entire enterprise in motion, I had to remind myself. What is your accumulated experience in space operations? It's only permafrost deeper in the cave mouth. "I am field medical unit KX-457." "No, Mike. But there's no one that'll touch him, because they're scared of his father. Is your environment sophisticated enough to allow that?" I couldn't lie. It's yellow, with an angled shovel on the front. At ten thousand kilometres, the Cockatrice released a squadron of pirates, each of whom would be carrying hull-penetrating gear and shipboard weapons, in addition to their thruster packs and armour. Twenty million orbits of my old world, two hundred thousand lifetimes. "We had a pretty good view from orbit, of course. I thought he was dead to begin with, but then I realised that it was trembling, caught in a state of infant terror, clinging to the fixed certainty of you while he shivered in its armour. Being a machine, it goes without saying that I am incapable of the commission of crime. Under us, the fires of creation consumed my little world while, far above it, aquatics gathered in squadrons and schools, ready for their long migration. You're even wearing his coat. The view was equally impressive, with the suit projecting an image directly into my visual field rather than forcing me to peer through a visor. From across the compound, diesel generators commence their nightly drone. "I could have been there as a tourist." "But you weren't." "No," he said eventually. People in boxes, stacked like mass-produced commodities, tended by the absolute minimum of living caretakers. Gentian protocol forbade backups, or last minute neural scans. Not now." "I'm sorry," I said again. The whirl reached a loop out to me, but I threw myself against the wall and the loop merely brushed the chest of my suit before flicking back into the mass. "It's not overall brain volume that counts so much as the developmental history." It'l be good to see Shirin," she said. They didn't seem to be anywhere near a dome. Our caskets were designed to keep people frozen for five to ten years, not four-fifths of a century. Don't check the comms registry. He was still on the same body as last time—no assassination attempt or accidental injury had befallen him. I needed the maximum amplification of my struggling suit. But the implants work differently. In any event they seemed less awed by his arrival than intrigued, shrewdly aware of what he could do for them. It may mean nothing. "Who are you? It's not as if he's going to be paying you a courtesy call just to pass the time of day." "But if he did find out..." She looked at me intently, lifting her chin. He would not be alone in doing so." I realised, belatedly, where all this was heading. Celestine did not immediately accede; she looked long and hard at the right-hand frame before concurring with the original choice. I could have survived." "Not unless you think you could have held that spar on by sheer force of will." She hissed back her reply. Equally, maybe it was a case of muddling one thing with another. "No," I admitted. Why not? An hour later, against all my expectations, we had the assassin himself. The red glare skittered over the wrong solution and lingered there. "Of course, I made further changes to myself after my time on Kharkov Eight-improving my sensory capabilities-but the essence of what I am was laid down under the knife in Cobargo's clinic." "So before you arrived on Kharkov Eight you were a normal man?" I asked. That right, or was it just a ruse to get me near to you, so you could reach into my head and make me see and think whatever you like?" She appeared not to hear him. If you were a bad ruler, this would be easy for me. Then she found his hat—the Homburg—which he had placed at the head of the operating couch. They were like currants jammed into doughy flesh. It was still not clear whether the locals regarded him as their prisoner, or honoured guest. I hear the clatter of a kettle, the squeak of a tap, a half-hearted dribble of water, then she returns. At midnight, the line members and their guests dispersed to sleep and dream. I kept seeing her face, frozen in the corridor lights. It was a handwritten log, rather than a series of data entries. KX-457 is the machine treating you. "No one follow me until I've checked out the problem, understood?" "Fine by me," Hirz said, peering back at the escape route. The figures, bent and faceless as they were, seemed to writhe in torment. The real work of art—the piece that would herald his retirement—must be somewhere else, as yet unseen, waiting to be revealed in all its immensity. Once every thirty seconds or so it reached a kind of crescendo, like a great slow inhalation. I am on my way to collect Eunice when I hear a commotion, coming from somewhere near one of the big community tents. And no one could know that the impactor had been sculpted because that made it a crime, not an accident—and if that had come out, it wouldn't have been long before the rest of it was public as well. Van Ness was wise enough not to push the point when no one took him up on his offer. Then we found him. He was mumbling under his breath. And so long as the engines kept working, few of us had any inclination to do so. There may only be two hundred thousand of us, but we still impose a measurable drag factor, and the effect on the Realm of the two billion sleepers isn't nothing. Just a moment, then. The flow continued, increasing in pressure. "What I have to tell you concerns these patterns," he said. But after the elaborate charade with the blue card, the robot and the conveyor, the last thing I wanted to be discussing with Zima was my own imperfect recall. Knowing that, it was fractionally easier to take the next step closer to the base. Twenty years ago, you revealed certain truths to my father." Before he could say anything, Minla produced one of the sheets Merlin had given to Malkoha and his colleagues. "Are you strong?" "That is an odd question." "Not really." I reached beneath my chest pack, fumbling with my equipment belt until I found the hard casing of a demolition charge. If you're using HTTPS Everywhere or you're unable to access any article on Wikiwand, please consider switching to HTTPS (). All that bothers me now is this." I patted the Spire's thrumming floor. She should not have allowed Peter to delay her with his good intentions. "Yes, of course. There's only one thing you can do with those buttons. There had once been colorful markings round the visor and crest, but they were mostly faded or rubbed away now. Galenka pushed aside the joystick and tugged down a set of waldo controls, slipping her fingers into the heavy, sensor-laden gloves and sleeves. "It won't crack. I'd lapsed, yes, but it wasn't really my fault. "What happened?" Suzy asks, when she's over the grogginess. "How long?" I repeated. Like me, you will need to move on and take another name. "There's some mistake." "I'm afraid he's right," Clavain said. That was only one step above being mauled and eaten by a wild animal. "I want to see things as they really are. I have a certain dependency on it, after all. I've never forgotten that. But you know something?" "What?" "If this thing is from the future—from our future—then maybe it's Russian as well. Zima indicated that I should take one of the seats. It might have been tens of thousands of years since these humans had been in contact with a wider galactic civilisation; they might have been tens of thousands of years since these humans had been in contact with a wider galactic civilisation; they might have endured world-changing catastrophes and retained only a hazy notion of their origins. Didn't Fescue's ship mistake it for a real battle? "I'll be back in a moment." He let go of the particle gun. This is the first time anyone's seen it with their own eyes." Yakov turned slowly from the porthole. Here, with this tale of a sculptural installation gone somewhat awry, it's very much to the fore. But it wasn't the possibility of cracking, or even failing in his duties, that was bothering him. Gennadi must have been shorter than me, his trousers not quite reaching my ankles, but I'm in no mood to complain. The Lexman Spacedrive gave man the stars--but at a fantastic price. Fewer babies, then—but still a vision of hulking grey machines, bathed in snaking light. had carefully assembled. "No," Childe said. "It must be related to the slowness of interstellar communication," I mused. I can't give you much, but you're welcome to these." My fingers feel like awkward tele-operated waldos, the kind we'd had on the Progress. was already entering notes into a clattering electromechanical transcription device squatting on her lap, pecking away at its stiff metal input pads with surprising speed. I am the cosmonaut, Dimitri Ivanov. We were inside the Matryoshka—the first humans to have made it this far. Oh, God. The lobots were different: they neither feared nor admired us, but simply did what we wanted with the instant obedience of machines. None of the mythical or heroic figures corresponded to the old constellations of Plenitude, but the same archetypal forms were nonetheless present. "I always knew he'd turn back as soon as the going got tough. It was said to be happening to the enemy machines as well. But for the moment, I'd like you to let me do the talking." They must have pumped something into me, because for the time being I don't feel like arguing with anyone or anything. "Go ahead," I told Weather. There were illustrations of courtly goings-on: princes and kings, balls and regattas, assassinations and duels. To get you on the table and get those implants out of your head." Something like hope crossed her face. The device he held in his fist was all the encouragement we needed. A death among the line was a terrible and rare thing. But never anything this purposeful. Childe looked up at her from his recovery couch. I've had my tabs on you, and it was pretty obvious that not being selected for that expedition was a crushing disappointment. As much in shock as recognition that the man's life was no longer his to save, Clavain released his grip. Why is that?" "Ask the machines." It took Gaunt a few moments to make out what Nero had already seen. I see it now." The Conjoiner nest lay a third of the way from the Wall's edge, not far from the footslopes of Arsia Mons. My own fear was now as sharp and clean and precise as a surgical instrument. How long did it take?" "It doesn't matter, Mike." "It moment I felt as if no bone in my body could possibly have survived unbroken. Men like Skanda Abrud." "I moved with the times." The skaters execute lazy ellipses on the ice. The way the signals started and stopped suggested some kind of agonisingly slow communication via radio pulses, one that probably had nothing to do with Merlin's arrival. Through the pod's insulation, and beyond the background noise of the medical systems, I can still hear the occasional pulse-bomb or plasma cannon discharge. "Is it a weapon, something to do with this war you keep mentioning?" Gaunt asked. He turned his back to me and set off in the direction of the chalet. Not because there is anything wrong with it, I think—it heals as well as it has ever done—but because it has decided that my time has grown sufficient, just as it will eventually decide the same thing with you." Kathrin touched the other object, the thing that looked like a sword's handle. "If Grisha's telling the truth, that at least explains the change in Burdock's behaviour. It was something else, the seed of an idea that he wished Steiner had not planted in his mind. Let's go inside and talk it over, shall we?" TRAUMA POD WHEN I come round I'm in a space about the size of a shower cubicle, tipped on its side. He's wary. "He trusted me, and a handful of others. I see half her face—her right eye, prematurely wrinkled skin, a wisp of grey hair. Really, she isn't worth our inconvenience. "Sleepover was a cover, even then," Nero said. Within about twenty seconds I was already feeling drowsy. I've already prepared and edited my strand to my complete satisfaction. You can't do anything about it, ergo you forget about it until it happens. Her hair was styled in stiff spiral arms, like the structure of our galaxy. "If that repulses you, I suggest you concede defeat now." "I'll decide what repulses me," I said. "Prakash," I say, in the hope that he might be hearing. Need to remind myself of that, because it would be easy to lose track of things. "But it was a grand plan at the time. It's rather a short one, even by the standards of the retarded." "Inigo Standish, shipmaster. "Just a theory, that's all. Because once we've touched a world, it stays touched." He reached over and turned off the head-up display. I hoped it was painless. Something large had smashed into my world. "Where am I?" he asked. Surely it isn't beyond your immense capabilities to engineer a distraction." "Flattery," I said, "will get you almost anywhere. In fact, it seems to be spreading—just being in contact with the survivors of the mission seems to be having an un-hinging effect. A woman's voice crackles through the grille above the buzzers. If they're still there. He didn't want heavily augmented crew anywhere near her, either: not when (as he evidently believed) she had the means to control any machine in her vicinity, and might therefore overpower or even commandeer any crewperson who had a skull full of implants. Each time, it trawled itself—making a copy of its memories. By now I hope someone from the company will have been in touch. It was better for both of us this way." "But the deception..." Childe put one hand on my shoulder, calmingly. Derek is not much for scenery or science. Kathrin knew that she would be shivering long before she reached the tollgate at the crossing, miles down the river. "The flier gave it to me," Widow Grayling said, observing Kathrin's reaction. That was the fuel conduit. Then we looked at Rasht, both of us in turn, and Rasht looked as frightened as we felt. If anyone'll pick out those subtleties, it's her." She turned to him. I'd been looking forward to getting this view for months, but I'd always assumed it would be at mission's end, as we were about to ride the Soyuz back into Earth's atmosphere. "The murder of an entire line? It swivelled onto Burdock and locked steady as a snake. And they will, of course. Lost Gimenez, and Nero's been hurt. You got to me in the end." Then she reaches into her pocket again and takes out the change she's saved for the bread. A narrow-spectrum β-lactam antibiotic, according to the ship: exactly the sort of thing the locals might use to treat a gram-positive bacterial infection—something like bacterial meningitis, for instance—if they didn't have anything better. Of course, since I couldn't call in much in the way of assistance, it took a long time. It was one of her few mistakes. "I'm glad that's done: it's been weighing on all of our minds for quite some time. So what's the prob?" "The prob is a slot just opened up. "Logged and compressed and stored, so that it can be sent back to the Soyuz and then back to the Tereshkova, and then back to the Tereshkova, and then back to the Soyuz and the Soyu well. It was good to visit the old planet again, especially now that they've moved it into a warmer orbit. The door slid open. The Ultra knew what he meant. He had a face full of stubble, with bad yellow teeth. "Beautiful, isn't it." He-whoever he was-meant Neptune. "Tell me what you found," the emperor said, when I returned to the reception

chamber. Her lips move. You didn't pop out of the right aperture." "Oh, Christ." I took off my bib cap. But something had gone wrong. It had stopped growing during the war, hit by some sort of viral weapon which crippled its replicating into space, pressure declining inevitably toward the Martian norm of one seven-thousandth of an atmosphere. \*\*\* SHE STAYED IN the submerged buggy while he took the helmet and the companion into the airtight building. We were going to have to land and make repairs. He rummaged in the bag and drew out the pig's head. First appeared in Godlike Machines ed. I've tried everything in the book. Years, easily. Then something slithered out of one wall. Orphaned worlds were caught erupting from the towers, little sperm-like shapes trailing viscera of dust. It felt old for her, already cobwebbed by history. It's a small place near Smolensk. "He's talking now—almost lucid. He will think he can turn the fact of me to profit. When he was wearing you, he barely noticed that he was wearing a suit at all. It doesn't matter. By all that is natural, I should be. I'd like to take a few more samples before I detach, but from then on it's seat of the pants stuff." She was right: it was a good plan. "Gennadi was a good man. Although I don't contain antimatter, the resultant fusion blast would easily equal the damage that the assassin could have wrought, if he'd put a bomb inside that bullet. She's been out there, having her own adventures—visiting some of the same places as yourself. It was the euphoria of drunkenness combined with an absolute, crystalline clarity of mind. I only knew him a short while, but I think it was enough to tell." "He often spoke of you, Merlin. Terrified. That hasn't stopped any of us including them in our strands when the mood suits us. But if my enemies had the slightest suspicion I was still alive, they might have attacked the ship. empire. "So where the hell is everyone?" In a while he had part of the answer, if not the whole of it. It hardly matters, anyway. Then more. You remember those pieces of the wreck I went to so much trouble to position around you? You think Julact is an old world, but that's not the half of it. There were agreed rules of behaviour. We checked your syntax, and there wasn't a mistake. "Do you mind if I sit down?" "Of course." The widow hobbled around the table to one of the rickety stools and dragged it out. "Is it really so bad in the facility? It would have been wiser to send a drone, I thought. "You did well with the aquatics," he said absently. It kept knocking the paw against the ground, trying to loosen it up. To her, cast so far downstream from those early events on Mars, the names must have held something of the resonance of saints or apostles. Fifty-two years ago, at the time the impactor's course was adjusted, to place it on a collision vector for Naiad." Then she pauses, and delivers her coup de grâce, the thing that tells me she's not just making this up. It depended, of course, on where exactly they were headed. I kept a stiff, strained smile on my face as I made my rounds of the Thousandth Night revellers, accepting compliments. "Keep making mistakes, and learning from them. The industrial concern that the two men work for will pay a bitter price if that happens. Then they were up another level, passing equipment lockers and electrical distribution cabinets, and then up a spiral stairwell that emerged into a draughty, corrugatedmetal shed smelling of oil and ozone. From a distance it had even looked superficially intact. The reserves were close to being tapped out when I went under." "Dormitories," Da Silva said. "Ise that what you think?" "Why bring me here, if not to kill me?" "I could have killed you already, sir." "And taken the Great House with you? I remembered indescribable pain, before the analgesics kicked in. "Do you agree?" "Yes," Purslane said, but with the tiniest note of hesitation in her voice. It can't hurt. In the interests of their own selfpreservation, they would rather see all conscious life eliminated on Earth. Our engines were fine until we let her aboard. And I tell her aboard. And I tell her aboard. And I tell her about the day I met Skanda Abrud. Even our little thumbnail of African soil has not been immune to these arguments. A cooling-off period." She sounded sad. The man is a thief." As if I had not worked that out for myself. It isn't exerting the same gravitational pull it used to. The Petronel was a big ship and our paths didn't need to cross in the course of day-to-day duties. "On the other side. I don't." \*\*\* MERLIN WAS ABOARD Tyrant, alone except for Minla, while he prepared to enter frostwatch again. Black ink for my own entries, the style changing abruptly when I lost my old hand and slowly learned how to use the new one; red annotations in the same script for comments and know-how gleaned from other shipmasters, dated and named. I guess I'm the exception that proves the rule." The waiters were glass mannequins, the kind that had been fashionable in the core worlds about twenty years ago. I looked on, stunned at what had just happened. In that time he had barely spoken to anyone but Clausen, Nero and Da Silva. You heard them long before you saw them. The wealth we had accrued on Childe's expedition meant nothing now, and what small influence my family had possessed before the crisis had diminished even further. We were making good time. "They don't fail. Or the emergence event, or the wormhole skip. Think of them as jumper leads, wiring different parts of your head together. It must have brought us here for a reason. I was the billionaire CEO of a global company. "I merely repair what the Spire damages." "Yeah. Progress systems stable. "A keepsake," I said, wondering aloud. "Why do you call 'it' a 'she'?" Voi asked. He could have hurt me easily enough then, just with his bare hands." "I don't know, sir. Prakash tells me that if I can accrue enough proficiency credits, we might be relocated. Galenka notched up the speed, until the Progress was falling inwards at a kilometre every ten seconds. Presently we reached the flat plateau I'd seen on my approach in the conveyor. The girl should have obeyed me instantly. Another killed herself. Childe's modifiers had given us a healthy respect for the difficulty of what she was doing, and—as before—her second choice had been the correct one; the one that opened a route back to the Spire's exit. "You can prove what you like," he said. Her eyes darted from screen to screen. I just had to ask." She tugged down one of the spiral arms in her hair and bit on it nervously. We'll have an operational squadron of supersonic aircraft in the air within two years, subject to fuel supplies." "Rocketry?" "That too. I had to find her again. Twenty, thirty years ahead of me?" "Give or take." "I'm giving you those years! Isn't that worth something? I should be able to find my way around it quite easily, provided he hasn't altered too many of the fittings." "Does the ship know we're here?" "Oh, yes. Stress hormones peaking. Presently four golden robots emerged from a crack in the side of the city wall. He pulled the cloak tighter, anxious not to spend a minute longer on the surface than necessary. It was not a question of strength, but of having no firm point of leverage. I froze for a few moments, not so much in panic as out of a need to pause and concentrate, to assess the situation and decide on the best course of action. the one thing you don't want to do now is topple over. "Peter Vandry," she said, and then did something horrible and unexpected; something no lobot should ever do. They grew weary of the scale of their galaxy and sought to shrink it. The data hinted that the elements of the outer layer—Shell 1—were bound together by some kind of force-field. "In which case, you'll be allowed all the time you need to make your case, before a jury of your peers. Anyway, that's not the only problem with his story. Next thing you know, they've got their claws in your skull." I closed my eyes, forcing self-control as the conversation veered off course. "Where is everyone? If it helps...don't think of it as lying. I unclipped the grenade-sized device, presenting it before me like an offering. "I can manage without a hand until we're back in Chasm City. Even Celestine made it through, the flashing arc snipping off only one of her arms. "Red or white, Carrie?" I opened my mouth as if to answer him, but nothing came. Every waking thought could be our last." "At least we get waking thoughts," Nero said. It's like nothing anyone's seen since the first apparition. Closest to us was a trunk or branch with thornlike protrusions. "Brendan Lynch's daughter, isn't it?" She nodded meekly, but bit her lip rather than answer. Confine him to his quarters?" "And have him loose aboard the ship again, looking for a way to escape?" "I'm not sure we have any other choice." "We lock him in the forward module," Galenka said decisively. "I can't say why." "It does. He had been assembled by a hobbyist, a talented young man with an interest in practical robotics. I'm sure you've heard your share of them, over the years. And the cost really isn't that much compared to some of the things they're involved in. I reached out my hand again, caressed the wall. Beyond Yinning and Tarabulus or anyone else. \*\*\* "WHAT IS ALL this about?" "It's about your thread, among other things." She looked at me astutely, reclining in the lounge chair that her ship had provided. "Eunice is fine," she tells me. I've already remembered all that I'm ever going to. "We talked about the fallibility of memory," he said. Zima led me into the chalet, through an old-fashioned kitchen and an old-fashioned kitchen and an old-fashioned lounge, full of thousand-year-old furniture and ornaments. "I thought we based our activities on intelligence, not fairy tales." "I heard someone already found those weapons," Lenka said, as if that was all the convincing Rasht would need. Greta says nothing. You've come through that with flying colours." As if I had done something altogether more demanding than simply scooping a man off the ground. But they'll outlast these many times over. She had a strand of it between her lips. "I hear you, Lenka. It punishes us when we make mistakes, but then so do mountains. The sense of motion was so compelling that I found myself gripping the table, seized by vertigo. I believed him. That the Demarchy knew of this ship? THE LAST LOG OF THE LACHRIMOSA I KEEP TELLING people that I'm not done with the Revelation Space universe, but in the absence of new novels, the only way to keep delivering on that promise is to write new short stories. Rising through the suit. "Too bulky, and too liable to be snatched away. Only three ships ahead of us. My father had been diagnosed with terminal cancer in the late summer of 2009, and was not expected to survive much longer than spring of the following year. Surveillance confirmed that they were all safely under: including Burdock. "I'm glad you know the way," I said, with mock cheerfulness. {{::readMoreArticle.title}} {{bottomLinkText}} This page is based on a Wikipedia article written by contributors (read/edit). They peeled away from Moonlighter in eager droves. The barbs were still in me. What happened between you and the captain, while you were gone?" The truth couldn't hurt, I decided. "I needed to establish the scale that we're dealing with. But if it's any consolation, what happened wasn't at all your fault. "The engine's damaged, but it could still work if the computations weren't so complicated." Weather answered me guardedly. The burden of work began to take its toll on me, draining my concentration. "It is, at least in polite circles, customary to reciprocate a greeting," the thing—the old man inside the armor—said. "Almost everyone else out there has accepted the inevitable." "It takes machines to manage a thousand years of memory. It was a handler robot, similar to the ones she had seen fussing around at the docks, except maybe a bit older and less cared for. The hiss of creation. And ahead—rising, ever rising—was the thing we had come all this way to best. I got even with Happy Jack. Then fifteen, then twenty-one..." Celestine paused. He'll want to get hold of any technologies you've hidden away. "It was me. If it was going to wake up, it would have done so during he first two apparitions. Fiddle music spilled from the open doorway of the Dancing Panda: an old folksong with nonsense lyrics about sickly sausage rolls. "Vanya Ingvar." And she conjures up a floating accreditation sigil and it all falls into place. There were four hundred worlds out there, up to a dozen surface ports on every planet, and none of them smelled bad in quite the same way. That pisses me off. "I'm with Sandra Voi. And for a moment I'm almost, almost, almost, sorry for her. If there are alien cultures out there, each stumbling on their own local domain, why haven't any of them ever come through the aperture, the way we did?" Again that smile. I don't see what the problem is I can't ever go back. The lunar colonisation and materials-extraction programme had run into unanticipated difficulties, requiring that the Arks be assembled from components made on Lecythus. The impacting asteroids struck her like fists, bludgeoning her in furious quick-time. "Nice to see someone who really enjoys his work," I said. Her fingers tightened around mine. The overlander, the thing you're controlling. At first it looks deserted—there are no gangs here—but then a figure emerges from the gloom, trudging through ankle-deep caramel-brown flood-water. It approached what was clearly some kind of secure compound, judging by the guarded fence that encircled it. Vapour was jetting from a dozen apertures along her father's friends there were individuals with—in her opinion—rather more money than sense. No, I'm not leaving you—not just yet. She skulked near a doorway until a heavy cart came rumbling along, top-heavy with beer barrels from the Blue Star Brewery, drawn by four snorting dray-horses, a bored-looking drayman at the reins, huddled so down deep into his leather coat that it seemed as if the Great Winter still had its icy hand on the country. It's the nightmare that all ship crews live with on every trip. It seemed to crush me into a little ball of concentrated fire, like an insect curling under the heat from a magnifying glass. Meantime, if you feel like puking, do it now rather than later. I knew there were nine, and only nine, because they came through Zeal's room on a regular basis, for minor tweaks to their control circuitry. Every now and then I had introduced some minor change-moving a passage here, or a staircase there, and my efforts were generally deemed to have been worthwhile. My twentieth birthday, to the day. Curving around me, close enough to touch, are walls of antiseptic white. No more than you regret what you did." "It was different back then, between the Soviets. It's almost as if he did the maze because he felt obliged to do so...but that it just wasn't difficult for him." "There's something else, too," I said. The story had a long, difficult gestation, taking several years to get straight. He smiled quickly. "I'm just sorry we aren't meeting under better circumstances," she said. They talk about what she did in the past, how she was ridiculed. Immortality's the least of our problems." "I don't understand." "You will, Gaunt," Clausen said. Teterev seemed to have made the cephalopod's head more bulbous, more cerebral, the lava tubes more muscular and tentacle-like. "We may as well go a little deeper." "A little," I said, against every rational instinct. Why not just have more caretakers awake in the first place, so that the system was able to absorb some losses? I still tell her everything. "How soon until we're in position?" I asked. I willed time to move more slowly. Garret Kinnear was snake thin, all skin and bone, but much stronger than he looked. But I can't leave, not having come this far. That kind of directness unnerved. Ever since he had made the decision to leave Lecythus he had rehearsed the occasion in his mind, replaying it time and again. We can patch up a lot of things, but not a missing leg. He found Clausen alone, washing dirty coffee cups in a side-room of the canteen. "Or what, exactly?" I didn't have the strength to answer. I got a hit of ozone, fuel and dinosaur dung. I knew it wasn't good news as soon as I saw her face. Next to the ornament was something like the handle of a broken sword: a grip, with a criss-crossed pattern on it, wit end of the hilt to the other. I just didn't want to deal with that, any more than I wanted to deal with the here and now. His feet scuffed through the topsoil, and while he seemed to be crossing ground, the dyke obstinately refused to come any closer. It is unlikely that you will see its like again, unless of course I am called upon to perform a similar procedure." We were sitting inside the shuttle, still parked on Golgotha's surface. Easier for her." "How, then?" She led me along an extension to the catwalk, so that we walked directly over the trapped animal. "You're still concerned that I might want to kill us all?" "I can't ignore my duty to this ship." "Then this will be difficult for you. I could not have a long an extension to the catwalk, so that we walked directly over the trapped animal." delay the screening of the island any longer. That would certainly be one way to go. With your permission, I'd like to leave the Capital Nexus to pursue the matter further." He ruminated on this for a few seconds. In the best of outcomes, he'd be doing well to see more than a hundred other human faces before he died. But perhaps out of this terrible event we can find some common ground. A close match doesn't imply a unique match." "Still. A routing error." Suzy's already shaking her head. Thank you, Merlin. You wethead. I specialise in clandestine infiltration for high-level corporate clients in the Glitter Band—physical espionage, some of the time. Through the partition, on the opposite wall of the adjoining tactical room, Merlin watched another orderly make microscopic adjustments to the placement of the aerial land masses on an equal-area projection map of Lecythus. The drive was bright, and I tracked it until it was too faint to detect. Warren was overlaid with the official insignia of the Coalition and a dozen system-wide media cartels. It felt less like shock than brutal disappointment. I even imagined the two of us jumping ship at the next port, leaving Rasht with his monkey. I've been unhappy. I had lost no great quantity of blood, for while I had suffered one or two gashes from close approaches of the pendulum, my limbs had been detached below the points where they were anchored to flesh and bone. "I'm not sure about this," she told the companion and then closed it quietly. It only took three or four minutes to get out of the bulky suits and into the new ones; most of this time was taken up running status checks. I've already edited down my own strand so as not to embarrass him. The capture net was still deployed. Tell me if it hurts, and I'll try to do something about it." "You won't need to," she said. "Come here, lass. I'd had a mental flash of a dark limousine driving through a blizzard, and scribbled an idea down onto a scrap of paper, something like "cosmonauts driven mad by Prokofiev" and left it at that. There's no sound, no reassuring response. I didn't go to all that trouble to have you back out now." "All right," I said. And if Gimenez hadn't died... well, you get the picture. Not even in the darkest days, when they punished me through Gennadi." Nesha walks on a few paces. They'll still be interested in what you have to say, but don't expect blind acceptance of the picture. your every word. At least now we have an extra half-day to get them run out and tested." "Let's hope so," I agreed, fully aware that it was hopeless. "Do you remember the year you went under?" Da Silva asked. Then the sheriff was replaced by another man, and he in turn by another. Mary can make you some bread and cheese. The truth this time Perhaps they had guessed that it would be futile to stop him, given the likely capabilities of his technology. At best they have arisen on a single world. I can just feel it through the sole of my shoe." "Don't you touch her." He increased the pressure on my chest, crushing the wind from my lungs. You'd have told them about our game, how easy it would be for me to escape. Sleek dark forms were surfacing from the midnight waters, black as night themselves. A spacefarer. It not only knewn of our presence, but it knew—intimately—what we were. He had a penchant for digging through the ruins of ancient human cultures, looting their tombs for quaint technologies, grisly weapons, and machine minds driven psychotic by two million years of isolation. Bits of computer drifted around the ship on pilgrimages of their own, until one of us needed some cable or connector. Longer if Zeal couldn't find a replacement. This, after all, was what most of my clients wanted. Oversight is a patchwork of blind spots. I knew with a cold certainty that they'd never tell the truth about Yakov. "Be careful." I touched the wall. For a moment I wish I were back out there, alone on the solar system's edge. light hours from any other thinking thing. There was surprisingly little in the way of organic matter. "After painting entire planets, isn't this is a bit of a let-down?" I asked. Why not just open all the doors along her route?" "I confess it troubled me as well," Trintignant said. I don't feel another body tagging along next to mine. "This is preposterous." "It may well be," Fescue allowed. After a long while my repair systems activated. "What's happening?" Gaunt asked, as the helicopter made a steep turn, the sea tilting up to meet him. He had forgotten to assign the ship's radio frequency to the suit. Do you think you can manage that? The older brother's agreed to go out with him to examine the spot—it's too sensitive a matter to trust to corporate security." "He doesn't suspect?" "Not a thing. In all that time, it's been acting entirely autonomously, relying on its own in-built intelligence. When the skies were clear again, the rockets rose up with renewed fury. He was fifteen when his enshrinement began. The cold hit him like a lover's slap. "We're not going to make it, Dimitri. Were it not for their uniforms, which still carried a recognisable form of the Skylanders' crescent emblem, he could easily believe that he had been abducted by forces from the surface. Nesha locks her apartment, turning keys in three separate locks, then we walk slowly to the elevator, still where I left it, on the ninth floor. Later that I learn that the tug caused the station to tilt from its normal alignment, meaning that its mirrors were much brighter as seen from Earth. "Maybe that was true." If I didn't care about you all, I'd have left twenty years ago." "You very nearly did. But it was hard to shake the feeling that we were little warm animals." little shivering mammals with fast heartbeats, caught in a cold dark trap that we had just sprung. You'll be hearing from my sponsors." "There's no need," Maria says. "I think I do. She was also the most obvious spokesperson among them. "No: what you see here is deliberate, done for our mutual benefit. "We're in time," I said, as the box neared the island. After long moments, his shadow juts above my own. Are you ready for number two?" "Yes," she said, with the tone of someone half aware that they were walking into a trap. It had stopped working. Some ghost of a memory now pushed its way into my consciousness. Above all he would have the self-respect of knowing he had chosen the difficult path, rather than the easy one. "It'll all have been for nothing, Merlin. I command the view to stop tracking. Took her to their machines. The gun felt alien in his hands; something he had never expected to carry again. That was why it was so hard for her, and so upsetting for you. "Laser's cutting into something, whatever it is. "Not really. \*\*\* THE CAPTAIN WAS tougher to crack than I'd expected. "Baby," the girl called. "They'll find you in Zvezdniy Gorodok. "I am accustomed to it, you know." "Used to what?" I said. "Bravo, Campion!" I heard someone say. But in fact it was the highest honour imaginable Only Malkoha followed him all the way to Tyrant's boarding ramp. I've never seen an aperture. "Luttrell, try to stay awake. I did not know what had happened to the few survivors, but it could not have been coincidence that I suddenly noticed we were carrying three new lobots. Voi's stuffy in here." "Luttrell, try to stay awake. I did not know what had happened to the few survivors, but it could not know what had happened to the fe death was tragic—no escaping that. I suggest you start thinking about them straight away." "I will get this to Shama," Coucal said, taking the drawing of a jet engine and preparing to slip it into his case. There was something not quite right about the shape of his skull, as if some childhood deformity had never healed in the right way. "I am sixty years old now." "I'm sure there's still life left in you." "If we should encounter a problem, a crisis—" "Listen to me," Merlin said, with sudden emphasis. "It's a big solar system. Now tell me where you came from." He tells me his story. He looked between the backs of the forward seats at the cockpit instrumentation. He thought there was a hint of yellow. But it was home, of a sort. He'd made no attempt to leave, and they'd made no effort to prevent him from returning to his ship when it was time to collect the vials of antibiotic. "Where do you think we are?" "The heart of it. It wasn't accidental. I formed a test query, asking the AM to name the planet where I'd celebrated my seven hundredth birthday. The frostwatch casket can give me a few dozen years beyond a normal human lifespan, but it can't give me eternal life. It was worse than trying to find Lost Earth. Gennadi, meanwhile, thought we should sit back and do what the referee was telling us. And I keep losing antenna lock." "It's what they pay you for," I said. "Consider me suitably emboldened." But though I strove for a note of easy-going jocularity, I could not shake the sense that our adventure had taken a turn into something far more serious. "That's what we're doing now, all of us. It'll be tastefully restrained...and very, very dull." "Good luck with your strand," I said icily. She watched the ground hurtle by, thinking of Corax in his armor, the old man and the Martian sea. She felt sorry for herself, but she was too drained to cry. So had everyone in it. Withhold it from us, and you'll have the blood of a million dead on your hands." Merlin almost laughed. And the problem itself was not simply a numerical exercise, but—as far as Celestine could say with any certainty—a problem about topological transformations in four dimensions. She was never lonely. Gaunt knew then that the rig could not be saved, and that if he wished to live he would have to take his chances in the water. "What's happening to them? But that's art. Through the window Clavain saw the white worm racing toward them with undulating waves of its segmented robot body. And then we went from millions to billions. \*\*\* I WAS ALWAYS the last one into a surge tank. Barely a ring system worth mentioning, no metastable storms in the atmosphere. We're better than people think. I'd seen my share of the system but Skanda had been places I'd only dreamed of visiting. It flashed through the air astronauts stared in mute incomprehension at the sliced-through interior of the robot, its tight-packed, labyrinthine innards gleaming back at them with the polish of chrome. It used to belong to someone very famous, before he went missing." "Who?" "We'll come to that tomorrow. Doubtless you'll have gained expertise in high-altitude flight. What was it about dismal hotels and dying carp? So was I." "What happened to you?" "Oh, they patched me up well enough after my ship was recovered. The exercise was, Merlin knew, akin to knitting together humanshaped sculptures from a bloody stew of meat and splintered bone, and then hoping that those sculptures would retain some semblance of mind. He recognised two or three of them as older versions of people he had already met, greyed and lined by twenty years of war—there was Triller, Jacana and Sibia, Triller now missing an eye—but most of the faces were new to him. If we meet between now and the next reunion, it must be by chance alone." "Then we'll never meet." "No. Probably not." "That's a silly rule, isn't it? A white and orange male broke the water with his barbled head, puckering silver-white lips at the force-shielded sky above the Great House. Even if he no longer realised it on a conscious level. The drugs flooding his system, the utter absence of sadness or longing as he bid farewell to the old world, with all its vague disappointments. When, days later, I stepped back from the immediate problem of Suzy, I realized that something was different. She was a technician, an expert in Martian landscaping. The probes decelerated by use of solar sails, picked the most interesting worlds to explore, and then fell into orbit around them. He's not a bad man really." "Perhaps I misheard, but didn't you say his name was Van Ness, yes." I must have looked surprised. "It's a good head," the widow said. And if he had that much to hide, it would not have been hard to avoid the maze entirely. "We're nearly there now. No crew, not even frozen. Then she made the square rotate until i was edge-on again, and all we could see was the line. By then he wasn't even using you as a suit at all—you'd become his bodyguard, his personal security expert. If you don't want visitors, try making yourself less visible!" "I would, if it were within my means. You'll see wonderful things and live to tell your grandchildren of the way it used to be, before the change-clouds finished their work." He smiled. "It isn't. Two simple white chairs sat either story." \*\*\* THE PLANETARY GOVERNMENT aircraft was a sleek silver flying wing with its own atomic reactor, feeding six engines buried in air-smoothed nacelles. THE SLEDGE-MAKER'S DAUGHTER I SPENT THREE years of my life in Newcastle, on the Northeast coast of England. "Not just her prisoner," Voi said. And no one was beyond the surgeon's reach, even the captain. But the pattern of grooves refused to snap into any neat mathematical order. Watching ice-skating." Ingvar shivers in her coat. A gift from the past to a Martian civilization that doesn't even exist yet. With their visors reflecting the landscape, and with the bulkiness of the suits hiding their physiques, I had to take Fury's word that these were human male siblings. The younger brother tugged the tube from the sand. There'll be weather and storms and history. It's not just some lump of rock with a gravitational field. I don't envy them a moment of their lives." That was when something in Merlin gave way, some mental slippage that he must have felt coming for many hours without quite acknowledging it to himself. A breeze came in from the sea, blowing sand into my eyes. "These are just markings." But there was an edge in his voice, a kind of questioning rise, as if he sought reassurance and confirmation. I sensed that they didn't want blood on their hands if something went wrong with him. You didn't make us any worse." "That strain of bacterial meningitis was very infectious," Merlin said. We turned on our helmet lights again—Rasht leaning down to activate the light on the monkey, which was too stupid to do it on its own. Beyond the airship loomed the streaked grey vastness of the great cliff. "This is the original pool," Zima said. "After all these years." "Yes." "I've known I was right for nearly thirty years. \*\*\* IN THE MORNING I catch sight of a screen, propped up on a pile of medical supply boxes. "How long can we hold?" I asked But I don't feel the slightest flicker of elation. He pressed the ruined hand against his chest, grimacing but managing to stay on his feet. \*\*\* IF WE'D EXPECTED to encounter serious resistance aboard the damaged ship, we were wrong. "About the accident, ship." performance-related bonus." I smiled. "It's just dark," I said. You have to leave me here, with this..." That was all she managed before slumping into unconsciousness. You made me feel special, Merlin. At last, thanks to the artilects, we had a complete understanding of our universe and our place in it." "Wait," Gaunt said, smiling slightly, because for the first time he felt that he had caught Nero out. We wore carnival masks, the game being to match the dreamer to the dreamer to the dreamer to the dreamer to the dream before the masks were ripped away. "That's around five thousand gees." "I can't survive that." "No; you can't. The humans of the Luquan Emergence had not, of course, evolved on this world. "It has to be. Not having the AM's prompt felt like a mental stall in my thoughts. Not so now. "Welcome to Deimos," Warren said. They probably aren't around any more. "And now? But we'll have lost something as well. "Mud," I heard someone say dispiritedly, the day after. Do you want to live?" "I'm sorry?" "Think about it. Greyblue light poured down through hexagonal grids in the arched ceiling. Not long after I left the Cohort...there was a world named Exoletus, about the same size as Lecythus. A couple of seagulls pecked disconsolately at something in the corner. I watched a lot of sunsets." "Sunsets," she said. But he hadn't finished with the head of David, had he? But I was wrong, and so are you. I think of gulping down its sweet clear contents. Tried everything I can. I had become a tool shaped so efficiently for one purpose that it could not be ignored. "It's all risky. Some dust that could have come from anywhere." I maintained a blank expression, giving no hint at my anger that the forensic information had been leaked. Even lying down in the pallet, she could see other freight pods stacked around. "A cryptic statement in an ancient tongue. It's enough to remove my capacity for retaliation, but they haven't touched my processor core. All round us the revellers were looking at the sea. "Then go back, if that's what you want. And no one has a clue how long that could take. And then what will you have learned?" The tone shifted to one of gentle encouragement. It could have been a kind of paradise, Clavain thought, if the war had not ruined everything. The Matryoshka had fallen out of reach of our instruments and robots, but we had more than enough to keep busy until the next apparition. Everyone went mad for it but all I saw was various superficial gimmicks used to conceal a profound absense of technique. He did not need to take any tools or parts with him because he would find al that he needed when he arrived, as well as ample rations and medical supplies. You were Richard Swift, for heaven's sake. I thought the lethal, shifting maze of field-lines. But—along with Doctor Kizim's security pass—the little metal box is still there. Windchimes hang from one corner of the roof, cut from buckled aluminium tent-poles. What am I doing with these things? They stopped coming. "Of course not. "Are you all right?" I said. Most urgently. I had no intention of disappointing him. I had no knowledge of what had become of them." "But you could guess." "It did not mean that I could give up, and allow what I had found to escape. Time and space would change some of us. Accelerate it, yes—and maybe the arrival of the Matryoshka would do just that—but not prevent it. She just didn't matter. The soldier would be dead in minutes; maybe sooner than that. Instead, laser light stuttered the mass of sensors and scanners jammed into my eyesockets. The Mechs have shoulder and arm-mounted plasma cannon batteries locked onto me. Probably a mid-sequence star, maybe a late F- or early G-type. What about you, Richard?" "Indeed," I answered, flinching at the memory of that one. Whereas if they knew that we controlled a devastating weapon..." Minla looked at the other Skyland officials. I could—quite literally—do them on autopilot. He chided me when I made mistakes, but was also careful to let me know when I had done something well: when I'd sewn up a wound nicely, or when I'd wired in a neuromotor implant without causing too much surrounding brain damage. "Why not? I shivered with an almost religious ecstasy. "Of course," Merlin said. They'll have won, and the last sixty years may as well not have happened." He felt preternaturally calm, knowing exactly what was coming. A sudden influx of cosmic rays, triggering half the monitoring telescopes and satellites in existence. Something was happening. "But let's be quick about it, all right? We're still married, but..." Greta left the sentence hanging. "Away from the pipeline?" I query. With fuel now running low-just enough to get it back to the Tereshkova, with some in reserve-the Progress had opted to make one final attempt. The truth that we'd discovered—it wasn't going to be something our political masters wanted to hear. The other lobot. "I have enough. "Was," I corrected. When a Zil pulls onto the street I feel a tightness in my throat. He blinked and directed his attention somewhere else, but when he returned his gaze to the pit, the thing he imagined he had seen—milky, spectral—was still there, and becoming sharper and brighter by the second. Even in Conjoiner society, even given all that we have the skills necessary to tame and manage the reactions in the heart of a C-drive. Two window events could fall within minutes of each other, or there might be a ten-hour wait before the next one. With, of course, one exception." "Me," she said, with a slow, dawning nod. It was an exact thing, specified scientifically in terms of angstroms and intensities. "But she'd been expecting me. I saw it with astonishing, diamond-hard clarity. Both had embraced war once but like a fickle lover Clavain had wearied of its glories. "Meant to inspire confidence, is it?" I asked. The monkey, stupid to the last, tried to lick at the coating through the visor of its helmet. He showed me the engines and...encouraged me to make certain changes. Thankfully, I had means. The machines were soon on them. It'll be the hardest thing you've ever done. "Then let me make things clear. I squirmed. How it changed you." "You were old enough to remember it. So that my companion got better at copying me. I'm ordering my ship to move to a safe distance..." I looked over the heads, beyond the island to the forest of parked ships, and counted to five in my head. Perhaps it was a kind of recurrent pathology, destined to afflict civilisations once they reached a certain evolutionary state. "That kind," Childe said. "Hank God, Richard. "Mm. How did you guess?" "Intuition," she said. We weren't even made on Earth. Fear centre lighting up like a football stadium. Genocide." Warren might have been about to answer when there was a bustle of activity down the docking tube, at the far end from the waiting spacecraft. I told you that Lenka was in trouble. Perhaps he had imagined himself in the presence of a benevolent steel angel. She had taken a frightful risk in revealing the information, for now our enemies had every incentive to move against us, even if that meant killing everyone else on the island. It was just that Richard had spent so much time devising increasingly alien scenarios that he'd become more interested in the implied psychologies behind the tests. He obeys. There was a grey rush of ruined stone, and then we were in the city proper, winging over smashed buildings; what had once been towers or elegantly domed halls. I was dizzy with what it had shown me. He can take a look at the q-planes." "Nothing wrong with those planes," Ray said. Oh, don't look so crushed, Richard. Argyle's expedition would surely have employed a slightly different mix, so it is not simply the case that the Spire has a long memory." I shivered. They damaged our pump as they tried to steal from it. "Which is?" "Childe knows too much about this place." \*\*\* ANOTHER ROOM, ANOTHER wrong answer, another punishment. The Shadowlands would have won by default. The mere existence of this chamber struck me as profoundly, upsettingly wrong, as if it were my moral duty to remove it from the universe. All the way." I did what she said. "The one going on all around us," Clausen said. We are not meant to cross into that part of the camp, but we have done it before and no one has questioned us. A little to the west, the terrain bulged up sharply, forming a kind of rounded upwelling. Minor matters such as gender, build, pigmentation and sexual orientation were left to our discretion, but we were all obliged to carry the facial characteristics of Abigail Gentian: her high cheekbones, her strong jaw and the fact that her left eye was green and the other a wintery, jackdaw blue. Another spiral culture that had gone down the same path—and ended up extinct; wiped out in a cosmological instant. It had not been visible before, but directly above us was a circle of utter blackness against the mere gloom of the Spire's underside. There was an uneasy silence. I expected to see three tasers, bound with security foils. "Typical false modesty." She pushed a glass of red wine into my hand before I could refuse. My father spoke of utter blackness against the mere gloom of the Spire's underside. it many times, his joy when you changed your mind." "I had a change of heart," Merlin said. It seemed to me—though I would never have voiced such a conviction publically—that it was less important to my country what we found out here, than that we were seen to be doing something no one else could. First appeared in Spectrum SF #1, February "Weather" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2006. I don't need these eyes because I have much better multispectrum sensors, as well as radar and laser ranging systems. \*\*\* "HOW LONG WAS it before you found out about the voidship?" Ingvar asks. By the time I reached the emperor's reception chamber the building was buzzing with rumours of the assassination attempt. It grasped that there had only ever been one path. You want to do something useful, you can fetch me some food." "I think that might be within my capabilities," I said. I wash my hands and face in the bedroom basin, straightening back my hair, but there's nothing I can do to tidy or trim my beard. "Your purpose is to die here. In that sense, I'm an individual. I was just starting to mull on that when I saw something extend itself from the wall of the chamber. New control systems had been grafted over the old machinery. Why would anyone not find that enough? "Twenty minutes, give or take." "We spend two hours on station. She has prosopagnosia; the inability to distinguish faces. I could never be satisfied with anything less than the entire solar system, in all its cold and dizzying magnificence. Peter suggested roughly where I might take it, and the result is unquestionably a much better story. There may be something useful in the remaining data, but there's still a good chance that the clues fell into the gaps. "Why the gaps in the first place? That loved ones will be years older when they reach home. Haven't you ever read a book before?" He gave her a tolerant smile. What have you got?" "An equilateral triangle." "Good. You've never struck me as the calculating kind, Samphire: I doubt that you put this together without assistance." A wave of change overcame Samphire: his expression hardening. Now I have to get this man to help." "You've done your bit. I visualise my trauma pod, lit up like a neon gravestone. Eventually Corax brought the buggy to a halt. Russish was not my strongest tongue, but the script was clear enough. "You'le be assigned a full work roster tomorrow. But the only time I had ever come around feeling anywhere near this bad was after that trip I took to the edge of the Bubble. And also makes you an accomplice." "Fine. There was a mistake. We'll leave Childe to his bloody Spire." \*\*\* CELESTINE'S SIGH WAS one of heartfelt relief. I'd been staring into its face, locked overhead like a vast ceiling ornament. It's just such a shame you won't ever see them with your own eyes..." I paused, aware that I stood on the thrilling, dangerous threshold of something. Make them remember Rasht of the Lachrimosa. "Been a while, ship. For all her frailty, for all that the years had taken from her, astonishing steel remained in that grip. And set hull to stealth." Merlin's ship nosed in behind the struggling aircraft. It was a ruse. That's fine. No machine may think, unless it does so voluntarily. Only way. We haven't begun to leave a trace. Shortly after departure I was hard, though, so she took out the companion and opened the covers so that it recorded the view through the buggy's forward window. She doesn't look much older than Eunice. The collar was a crude old thing that had been lying around the Petronel since her last bruising contact with pirates. I scroll through the log, going back minutes, tens of minutes, hours. If it had been a living thing, I would have expected to see others like it, with evidence of a supporting ecology of different organisms. A second visit confirmed that the protocol had not changed since the last time: Burdock wasn't using some randomly varying key. Maybe she was hoping to die aboard it." "She looked like she was trying to stay alive to me, Captain. He's bound to do it one of these days." "I suppose you're right," I said, not quite able to suppress my disappointment. But I can't just give in, without knowing the odds of rescue. But I'd never stoop so low. This was laughably slow compared to our oldest ships, but it didn't matter to the Advocates. And I believe you. If the ship above had proven largely valueless, there did not seem much hope of finding glories in the wreck. "How many? \*\*\* THE SHIP STILL had a slow tumble. They had been living in the same system for two million years, ever since settling it by generation ark. "That means there must be a way through." "Or this obstruction wasn't here," I answered. "Company authorized?" she asked. I pushed myself to my feet and stumbled to the slumped form of Purslane. What does it have to do with my revival?" Clausen seemed on the verge of answering his question before something made her change her mind. Something was wrong. They lolled and bellied in the waves, pushing great flukes and flippers into the sky, jetting white spouts of water from blowholes. Time oozed to a crawl. "She's right. \*\*\* WE SHOULD HAVE turned back there and then, shouldn't we? At the same moment a chunk of wall, including the entire hexagonal array, pushed itself out from the surrounding metallic-blue material in which it had appeared to have been seamlessly incorporated. "Climb," I said. There were wide ledges, dizzying promontories and cathedral-sized shadowed caves. "The other one—Deimos—was lost during one of the empire's early wars. 'Perhaps not, after all this time. The ground rose up slowly. Time and again I confessed that I couldn't even be sure that I had lined up for the final night, and time and again I confessed that I couldn't even be sure that I had lined up for the final night. lined anything up at all. That was not to say that there were not difficulties, or that the programme was exactly on schedule. If it did, they'd be brutally disappointed. With the drive off, the glass lining the tube would have been midnight black. "You'd better be right, Nevil. He kept talking all the while, even in Main, and did all that he could to encourage the locals to talk back in their own tongue. I twisted my neck to glance back at the girl, and saw her pain. Your sexual relations verge on the monogamous. The surviving members of the wave were levelling out now, commencing long, ground-hugging runs from all directions. What was clear was that the culture had reached a plateau of social and technological development. The walls plunged vertically, Gaunt's guts twisting at the dizzying transition. Nonetheless we made good progress for another eleven rooms. A hell of a lot harder." "I'm fully aware of that." "Then maybe we should retreat. I'm surrendered to the fall, ready for white annihilation. How they were going to have to be a part of it whether they liked it or not when the Huskers came calling, but if they could only be ready for that—" "It didn't work." "I made things twenty times worse. "Something's wrong, isn't it?" So much for the notion that Conjoiners were not able to interpret facial expressions. Not with these suits on." There had been no real need to tell us that "It's not our job to find Teterev's corpse." "Someone should find it," Lenka said sharply. "You're late, Soya. Just as there are savants amongst the retarded, so we have our Conjoined equivalents. The tide reached me a few moments later. How wide is the Local Bubble, Thom? You'd better be ready to take some of the blame." It was too much effort to keep on tiptoe so she lowered down. I don't want that lunatic running around when I'm trying to steer the Progress through Shell 3." I breathed in hard, trying to focus. Obviously, he was rich. Doing it as a relay didn't help—it took two of us to nurse the object between us, all the while making sure we didn't drift away from the structure. Isn't it, my dear?" Rasht interrupted his monologue to pop a morsel into the stinking, tooth-rotted mouth of Kanto, squatting on his shoulder like a hairy disfigurement. She didn't seem to be real keen on being rescued from that wreck, did she? The wheels were turning, but there was nobody inside except me and Garret. They'd do it out of kindness and compassion. Perhaps. Killing you would never have been Van Ness's style." I finished disinfecting her neck and began to rummage through the medical kit for a strip of bandage. A little later the chrome tide came to wash us away again. That bought us yet more time, but to my dismay the pirates still found a way to squeeze a little more out of their engines. That's why the artilects came back to us: not to report on the absolute nature of reality, but to persuade us that we needed to act. Captain Van Ness asked her angrily. As I had discovered, the praise burned off very quickly, and what was left was a dark, ominous clinker of responsibility. The attack wave broke orbit hard and steep above the Wall; five hundred fireballs screeching toward the nest. I remembered a swift metallic flicker of machines emerging from hatches which opened in the seamless walls: not javelins now, but jointed, articulated pincers and viciously curved scissors. You go out into space and look at the universe through a layer of armoured glass, if you're lucky. They didn't just go missing between cities. He fell into the sea, last we ever saw of him." "I'm sorry about that." "I'm sorry about that." "I'm sorry about that." "I'm sorry about that." say—is not to dwell on the skull," Khorog mused. But I didn't need much time to reflect. It took a few moments for it all to click in. It had lots of age spots and blemishes and a few sparse tufts of very white hair. Always red wine, or always white wine, for instance?" "It's not that simplistic," I said. If you hadn't shadowed the Waynet, they'd have found you even sooner." "We aren't using the ramscoop design. Time after time we woke her and tried a different approach. You don't have time for it. Later I learn that fifteen people drowned in that wall failure. Once they turned a corner and passed another kind of buggy, left parked there as if its owners had only just abandoned it. "It's easier," she said. Take a splinter of comet a couple of kilometers across, chisel it with lasers and plasma and variable yield shaped charges until it had exactly the right profile, the right profile, the right profile, the right profile yield shaped charges until it had exactly the right profile yield shaped charges until it had exactly the right profile. occurred deep inside it, accompanied by a shift in my own weight as the thrust increased by five or six per cent. It's too late for her...too late for her...too late for her...too late for you, if I'm still reaching a part of her. I understand now why he might not feel positively disposed towards Conjoiners." "And does that alter the way you think about me?" I said nothing for several paces Because it had been a long time since I'd seen someone who looked even remotely human, let alone someone pretty. The structure on Golgotha was too symmetric for that, and entirely too solitary. That was about where it all started to go wrong. No, Captain, I don't think I would have. "I'm through now," she said, going back on tiptoe. "They could almost be prehuman," I said, wondering how we might go about dating the age of these impressions, if such a thing were even possible. "Tricky," Celestine said, after studying the latest puzzle for many minutes. I found Galenka in the pilot's position. But even the sea would only last a few thousand years after that. "I'm telling you," she said. I'd rather go with you than stay here on my own." "Not an option, I'm afraid. Decided by people who didn't know you, didn't care about you. Whoever made this, whoever made this far, could easily have gone the extra step necessary to have you killed, not just your puppet." The ancient dark eye regarded me. "It is. Then we will be drowning in water. What do you have to lose?" "My existence?" "I wouldn't harm you, brother. Whatever they made you do, we're not like them." She hissed back, "You're Ultras. They fought as well as they could, which was with a terrible individual determination, but no overall coordination. There is something inside here that you will find disturbing. And when it tried to engage her in conversation, when it tried to act like a friend or even a sister, it wasn't clever enough to come out with the sort of thing a real person would have said. Leave the rig, leave the rig Rasht said. And then a new visitor—a new species." I guessed that we were still in the distant past. That couldn't come out, though the cargo bay. But now that I've had time to think about it, mull things over, it occurs to me that there may be something I can do for you." I looked at her. Imagine that, Minla: millions of stars bound by threads of accelerated spacetime, each thread of silk, each ship moving so close to the speed of light that time itself slowed almost to stillness. I don't know how much of the original mass was used for that, but I'm guessing it was guite a significant fraction. Same story with Suzy. Except you," I thought of all that the Devilfish had done. That was the one to press, "It's you," she says. Let's just get back to the ship as guickly as possible." As I spoke, the comms window blipped out, "They're nearly there Clavain said. Many of them were Advocates, like Fescue himself. My hand tightened on the gun, still tucked into my belt. "God, the threading. Didn't you, you lying rat?" "It's easily removed," he said, all innocence. A few days later Galenka wakes up and tells me she dreamed she was in Klushino, a place she's never visited." I pause, trying to find words that would not make me sound crazy. The bullet had a hollow cavity at the front, inside the glass cone. I still wasn't happy about shooting the girl...but then it wasn't as if Zeal was going to kill her. "Alright," Galiana said. What really annoyed them was that I'd apparently gone out of my way to have as dull a time as possible. As he walked, his muscles flexed and bulged beneath the pewter flesh. I need to add her library of fears to my own. They must have been confident that we had nothing else to throw at them. \*\*\* HE WALKED ME around the island, as the sun slipped under the sea and the colours turned ashen. As we walked we heard a pattern of notes repeat, with subtle variations. The first thing Forqueray knew of his misfortune was when his arm clanged to his feet. Me and the two others...I'll remember their names in a moment. For a company like Ashanti Industrial, that can make a lot of difference. I smile and wait a beat before continuing. Perhaps the water thief will be strong enough, with or without medicine. The mad yellow stars in Van Gogh's picture look nothing like the stars I saw during my deep space expeditions. Suddenly, the ship's idea of sending out a proctor first sounded splendidly sensible. "But that was then and this is now. "Always plenty of jobs on the..." And then he halted, as if he'd been meaning to say something else, but had caught himself in time. But because he'd bought his ticket out." "He's going back into the box?" "He has to. The plasma batteries glow a vile pink. Then he turned as if to leave, but stopped and spoke again. I look at a photograph on the coffee table—a young woman and a young man, holding hands in front of some grand old church or cathedral I don't recognise, in some European city I'll never see. They were telling me to kill Fescue, and save us all. It was all ablaze with blue-green light, like a glass sculpture lit from within. She nodded and then allowed me to withdraw my hand. I've come to investigate a crime." "The attempted assassination of the emperor, I presume," Fury said casually. It took spring tides and neap tides to lay down those patterns. Photos of our family, drawings made by our children, were tacked to the walls between panels and grab rails. Zeal advanced toward me, boots clanging on the catwalk. "No," he said, "you can keep it, Minla. Now he had that feeling again. And I assure you that I will detonate, unless you comply with my exact demands. But we all saw the sense, even Hirz coming around to our line of thinking in the end. Isn't quite the same thing. The universe had already been in existence for more than eleven billion years by the time the Watchers learned its age. A ship like that was not normally a man-rated vehicle, but the usual variants had a hatch at the front, so that space station crews could enter the vehicle when it was docked. "Tasteful restraint...beautifully simple!" I stepped onto a low plinth, so that I was head and shoulders above the crowd. But Hirz's change had been the most dramatic of all, something even Childe was taken aback by. Through what little visibility remained Gaunt saw only open sea, a plain of undulating, white-capped grey. Overhead, the meteor assault had become continuous, and the horizon was aglow with fire. I squinted against the glare from the alien thing. "He'll be safe in there. I reach out with my arms. That, at some point, there'd be a chance of me being brought out of sleep to become a caretaker. He still didn't believe me, and I didn't expect him to. "Well done." She grinned at me. Yet the children seemed at ease with them, listening attentively when the adults had something to say. My brother's called Fury. Once it marked the limit of Roman occupation, with only the unruly wilds of Scotland to the north, and the crumbling remains of Hadrian's Wall still stir the imagination today. \*\*\* SO MANY NAMES, so many ships. Entire histories slipped through their fingers, unwitnessed, unmourned. Just as I was admiring his bravery I felt the floor shudder. "No more than thirteen hours. Frankly, I don't know what to make of it. "Stop!" she shouted. No glass between us then—just a sea of numbers." Nesha looks at me sternly. "We're safe here: in a few seconds, I'll screen the island. Those pieces of debris I set around you are curved mirrors. What's interesting, though, is that reference to the Winchester Mystery House, a famous and spooky tourist attraction near San Jose, California. Her head did not loll in zero gravity, her jaw did not droop open, but her eyes were closed and her hand had slackened on the joystick. "Tethered where we left it, over by the wreck. Damned convenient, Minla." "I'll have you shot for this, Merlin." "Good luck. Spidery highways linked the settlements, but not once did Merlin see any evidence of traffic or commerce. I'm taking over from Gimenez, so you have to cover for me here," "You have a labour shortage, so you brought me out of hibernation?" "That about covers it." Da Silva said, And for hundreds of thousands of years we thought no more of it; just one observational curiosity among the many gathered by our Priors." "What did the spiral culture do?" I asked. It wouldn't get him all the way, but his chances of surviving the drop were a lot better than his chances of surviving the sea-dragon. Hand to eye coordination OK? Three blocky steps led up to it. And that medicine." "They should have done us all a favour," I say. I scan my field of view for concealment options, and decide to duck into the corrugated shoebox that used to contain an indoor amusement park. You came all this way to give me this?" "I did." "Then the rumours were right," Nesha says. \*\*\* THE FLIER CAME not long after the buggy climbed back into the Scaper's belly. She had her chance to join us." "If you've got something to say, why not say it to her face?" He looked away, to the brush-thin line of the horizon. "Think of all those myriad human cultures," Purslane said. What if they believe me?" "They won't be able to find any chinks in my story because there aren't any. You'd have found it interesting, I think. "One thing's for certain," Lenka said. "I'm glad we're underway." I brushed a wall panel as we walked. "Do I need to spell it out, Mercurio?" "I don't think so. But first we had to save the aliens. Why should we tarnish the memory of our planet by enshrining our less noble deeds?" "Spoken like a true leader, Minla." At that moment one of the guards raised his rifle and projected a line of tracer fire into the middle distance. She had been instrumental in brokering the peace between the Conjoiners and Clavain's own Coalition. It couldn't get much more fucked-up if it tried. To convince ourselves that were indeed able to leave, we had Hirz go back the way we had come in. He peered into its dark depths, frowning. The thing we saw out at sea. This time there were no gusts. "It was as if something in the machine had touched us and removed some fundamental barrier in our heads, some wall or moat that keeps one person from becoming another. I know this because I'm definitely not in the trauma pod any more. She had been very useful, has Teterev. \*\*\* LATER—IT SEEMED HOURS, but in fact could only have been tens of minutes—Clavain found that he was able to breathe normally again. You get help. "But you won't know my strand," Purslane said. Since it was voluntary, I couldn't be accused of violating his mental privacy. It took time, obviously. "I said this isn't the world I was expecting." "Yeah," Da Silva said. I had nothing do to with wars or the military." "We know what you did," she said. We had similar equipment, so there was no question of working out how to use it. It was a strange thing to feel despised. He counted perhaps half a dozen adult Conjoiners kneeling among the children. The seas were emptying of life. "The reaction computations are made, for both the starboard and port drives. Tonight the stars are out. People will have other worlds to green by then, and maybe they'll let Mars return to its primal state. I could see that the monkey was going to take some persuasion. Century after century, across hundreds of thousands of years. Do you think there's any chance of the rest of us following your line of argument?" "I don't know. I keep seeing shapes in a new light. Knowing that, Merlin allowed himself a momentary flicker of empathy. It might take days to repair oversight, assuming the fault isn't in me. It toiled endlessly up and down and along the ceramic sides of the pool, scrubbing them clean. Easily. The Tereshkova's main engine was a "variable specific impulse magnetic rocket": a VASIMIR drive. By then the pilot—now properly a soldier—would have a comprehensive computer-generated map of the nest's nooks and crannies; enemy positions graphed in realtime from the down-looking spysats. This is very, very important. "After all this time, he's still with me." Fury nodded, watching me with great attentiveness. "There is," I said. Greta nodded. He was a scream." "I'll take your word for it, I think." The servitors escorted us into the central part of house, then took us through a maze of chill, dark corridors. She's looking right at me—close enough that it's almost uncomfortable. Perhaps it made them fight even more fiercely, given that ours was now the only halfway-intact ship. You've got a fully laden ship to push; all they have is a stripped-down skeleton." It was meant well, but I knew better than to underestimate my adversary. No one was saying. I'd never been near a Conjoiner before, let alone one like this. None of us will leave here the same person he or she was a thousand days ago, and when we return, we will have changed again. The expectation, however, was that it wouldn't be long before we were invited into the club. Where you are now, in the machine...you're not safe. As if invoked by the act of touching the prize, a monstrous machine roars toward me out of the night. "Dimitri?" "I'm here." "I thought you were gone for a while there." I turned to face my comrade. His voice was a low rumble. Across the galaxy twenty-kilometre-high sheets of blue towered over private islands or rose from stormwracked seas. There's only one way you're going to get help, and that's to relinquish control of the field medical unit. It was a lustrous slate-green in colour and the waters ran off it in thunderous curtains. It was close, but if there's one thing to be said for Waymaker-level technology, it's that it's almost childishly easy to use. He could see the foreshortened shapes of hovering land masses, turned nearly edge-on. But I'm OK about it. "Who'd have guessed we'd end up meeting like this?" Greta nodded and offered the palms of her hands in a kind of apology. "What is this?" "The flier's weapon. It had taken three apparitions to achieve this feat. "I could use some help here." But Prakash does not answer. The dials were set into quadrant-shaped recesses, all now glowing a calm blue-green. But both hands were holding knives. I might starve before I found my way back to the part of the ship I knew. Locked it tight, in fact. I'm flat on my back, resting on a soft padded surface. I am constantly mining the lower reaches of this iceberg for material, and occasionally entire stories calve off it and achieve a life of their own, sometimes quite unexpectedly. Was I remembering accurately, or had Celestine intended to press a different solution? The thinking is this would be a good chance to try you out." It wasn't a total surprise; he had known enough of the work patterns to know that, sooner or later, he would be shipped out to one of the other rigs for an extended tour of duty. Robbed of their sting, Fescue's warnings only emboldened the two of us. "It was about three days after their accident—three days after their hull ruptured during atmospheric entry. It admitted warm, wet, pungent air. Another Zil slides by. Every bit as...challenging...as you said." "Go on. My AM followed us, fluttering at my shoulder. The damaged part was still airtight, and the suit's mobility and critical systems remained unimpaired. Sometimes, high above the ecliptic, I'd turn Moonlighter's main dish away from the system's hum and bustle and tune in to the cosmic microwave background. "What do you want me to do?" "I want you to bring the girl?" "Don't try my patience, Peter." He closed my hand around the grip. I pass the white plastic rectangle to Nesha But not every planet defined capital crimes in exactly the same way. The stretchered figure wore a breathing mask and another carried a saline drip which ran into Steiner's arm. When I walked on it I did so with only the tiniest trace of a limp, and that would surely vanish once I had grown accustomed to the replacement. The runes? The atrium's ceiling was a cloudy mass of jagged sculptures: interlocked metal birds. "What kind?" "Dreams that I kept waking. And perhaps, distantly, I did. \*\*\* BUT THE ODDS never did. Just do it." The aircraft's engine gave out just as Tyrant reached position. "TELL DEREK STORY." This is clearly addressed for Maria's benefit. "There's a reason other ships never dealt with Mazamel." "A little late for recrimination, don't you think? Once I started writing, though, the action flowed more or less effortlessly and I had a great deal of fun with some of the gruesome details of this quasi-gothic-space-horror piece, which just happens to be another strange love story. There were four more shapes on the right, superficially similar to those we had already seen. "We've found the assassin, sir, as you'll doubtless have heard." "I hadn't, but please continue." "And the weapon. I had witnessed a terrible crime, a genocide worse than anything recorded in our history." "Why did you cover it up?" Purslane asked. She had been as kind to him as anyone, but he wasn't sure if that had much to do with friendship. "Kill them all. The buildings, set back from the intersecting roads in long ranks, look drearily similar, as if stamped from the same machine tool—even the party images flickering on their sides are the same from building." I didn't think there were many of them left now. \*\*\* I REMEMBERED ARKANGEL as well. The cart tipped to the side, spilling beer barrels onto the ground. If things conclude satisfactorily...well, we'll see." The curl became a thin, uncharitable smile. When I woke the dream's melancholic after-effects dogged my thoughts for hours. Primate stock, isn't he?" "Gorilla, I think." "He actually planned this?' "I'm not sure 'planned' is exactly the word I'd use. Soon, it was what the other crew were calling her, and the name that—grudgingly at first, then resignedly—she deigned to respond to. Most of that intelligence originates from our own side, but some of it comes from intercepting enemy transmissions, and doubtless they're doing something similar with ours. But don't change the subject. The airship would be on its way again soon. They were creatures of space: all that they really craved was release. "You've been kind to me. For now I'm still lucid enough to recognise the hypothermia creeping over me. In the last two million years there had been many instances of contact between those lines. "I'm not letting you touch her." "Fine, then." Zeal aimed the gun and shot me. I believe those were your words?" "I've had enough." "SIT. But now the tides are the same from day to day. You wait ages for one and then two come along at once. The shipmaster sneered at my remaining credit. Shouldn't you be on Resurgam, Celestine? That's when oversight picks up a squadron of enemy scout drones, coming in low just under the cloud deck. He'd be high in the air, vertigo never quite leaving him, with only metal and concrete and too much grey ocean under his feet. The strand was threading into their collective memories. They bisect the face of the world like a knife slash, very nearly as magnificent as the rings of Saturn. "He's pretty good, give him that." Now the ramscoop field was oscillating wildly, caught between two distorted extremes. I wasn't in the habit of looking inside the skulls of other line members, just to make sure they were really who I assumed them to be. I suppose it can't be, or you wouldn't have stowed away on an airship." "Can you get me home?" "Undoubtedly. "This is my fault," I say to Nesha. I hadn't seen Yakov as I moved through the ship, but that wasn't any cause for alarm. Only her face and lower arms remained visible, surrounded by a thick red collar that threatened to squeeze shut at any moment. The process consumed many centuries of equivalent human thought, but at the end of it I was still none the wiser. If one of our allies was targeted with an atomic weapon..." Minla left the sentence unfinished, her point adequately made. "We could be in this bloody room for weeks before any of us grasp the solution." There's been a mistake. I know you said we shouldn't wake Suzy and Ray, but that was before a one-day stopover turned into a week." Greta shrugged. In the region of twenty-eight minutes." "That's nowhere near enough time," I said. At least you know you'll die doing something useful, something worthwhile." "It would help if you told me why," Gaunt said. The very least I can do is live up to my own high moral standards,

wouldn't you say?" It was a rhetorical question, since he allowed me no time to answer. The sea, still being stirred around by the tail end of the storm, appeared normal enough. To back down now would involve crushing loss of face to the senior lines. I ought to know this stuff by heart, but Suzy's the routing expert, not me. Huge, loud, demanding popular, but ultimately soulless. But don't think about ship business now. I know how it works with trauma pods, and she's right; they'll grow me a new leg. "Comms burst from Tereshkova," I said, as alphanumeric gibberish scrolled past. "We injected a small cluster of medichines into your head. I followed Weather into the engine. Yukimi was glad when Corax got out of the armor. Its puppet-strings all but severed, the robotic spacecraft would be relying more and more on the autonomous decision-making of its onboard computers. The ship at least was real. Great fissures now reached to the surface of Mars. I actually feel better, more alert, than before we left the Soyuz." "That's how I feel," I said. Yukimi felt a jolt as the robot coupled onto the open-topped pallet. "We'll wait on this side. "Slowed down almost to death. "But if there's another war, we might all die. Your neural computation rate will increase. Not until you'd come to me." \*\*\* IT MAY BE difficult to countenance, but by the time I returned to the Great House my resolve was absolute. I remember what the snowplough driver said. The additional processing resources—coupled with my own limited abilities—may make enough of a difference." "For what?" "For you to get wherever it is you are going. Fucking amateurs. It wasn't unpleasant. "I won't fuse his bones after all," Captain Rasht continued. First a few hundred thousand. The room had changed completely. Why have I suddenly been deemed good enough for this?" "Because everyone who really does have the skills is trying to sort out that mess at the Japanese station. Suzy was always the best of us at coming out of the tank. "Has a good pair of hands on him, so try and make this one last." Zeal looked up from his work. "It still meant something to you when you gave it to me. You think they'd go that far, just to cover up an earlier crime?" "And more," Burdock said gravely. She took me to the dome again. Usually all he had to do was remove a panel, unclip a few connections and swap out a part. "Well?" Hirz was looking over my shoulder. "Fuck, I don't know. Oh, it weighs something—but nowhere near as much as it should, based on its size and appearance. The hill rose up and up from the mouth, almost sheer in places, but there was an overhang above the entrance, covered in a sheath of smooth clean ice—the "beak" of Teterev's drawing. The emergence event was indeed the opening of a local wormhole throat, but only so that the Matryoshka (which incorporated wormhole-manipulating machinery in Shells 1 and 2) could complete the last leg of its journey. He could drift free in space, staring into the face of a star, or wander the searing canyons of a planet where metals ran like lava. A medical area, by the look of things. The white lightalmost too bright to look at now-could not escape. The children's clothes were a headache of bright, clashing colours and patterns. The weapon had killed him instantly. Yukimi had been down into them during school field trips. Tough black plaques slid over each other like the carapacial segments of a lobster. It is absurd to suggest that I could not tear myself away from the matter of nomenclature, or that I was in some way gladdened by the failure of the Engine-control assembly now," Weather said, bracing myself as the ship took another hit. Weather was awake when I arrived. "We've reached the heart of the engine-control assembly now," Weather said, kneeling by the stump. You'll be warm the whole trip. Ahead of them something coiled out of the ground with lightning speed, metallic jaws opening in its blunt, armoured head. Some of them don't feel ready. "No one ever does. "I knew I had to dig back into that past, if I was to ever understand the significance of Zima Blue." "How far back did you get?" "It was like archaeology," he said. I am old and weakening. "We've all seen the evidence of Zima Blue." "How far back did you get?" "It was like archaeology," he said. I am old and weakening. "We've all seen the evidence Purslane submitted. If we don't succeed in unloading everything, we still leave. "I never allowed for...this." as I thought. Monsters would have been unsettling, but they would not have plumbed the deep well of dread that these figures seemed to reach. I wanted to ask her more questions, but that wasn't the only reason. His rounded skull lacked Abigail's prominent cheekbones, and his eyes were pure matched blue of a deep shade, piercing even in the subdued light of the command deck. At least I didn't dip myself in it deliberately." But my suit had indeed suffered some ill effects, as became apparent while we resumed our trek to the cave mouth. It's just where Teterev said it was. "We stabilised the Wall's degradation with software running on dumb machines," she said. He has been rushed off his feet, brokering assignments. The movement was glacially slow, more like a flower following the sun than the movement of an animal. It was a surprise when she said: "This is how they get at us. Details that didn't fit into the plan, and which therefore had to be brushed aside or suppressed or given a subhuman name. But I don't think you're ready for it. "You try finding something that dark, when you don't even know in which direction it's moving." "Even from the Tereshkova, it was hard to believe it was actually out there." "To begin with, we still didn't know what to make of it. Did I come close? "The younger brother set this up a long time ago. "He's just a sad old man with too much time on his hands." "The funny thing," I said, "is that he's no older than the rest of us." "He acts old. In that moment I wanted it. But Zeal kept advancing, sharpening the knives on each other, showing no indication that the baby was having any effect on his weapons. Were you going to make me into one of them as well, or were you just planning on taking my hands?" "Stand aside, lad. Anything's within our reach now. He looked back. This time she continued to hold it. "But the fact is, whoever did this only reached the body, not me. "Look," I heard someone say, pointing to the zenith. After that, I began to take a quiet pride in the fear and respect Zeal and I enjoyed. I doubt she wanted to go on, no. Hereyou may as well have it now." Without waiting for his response, I tossed the bullet to him. And the surface was not the nearly-invisible membrane of the real thing, but something like etched glass. "That surprise you, Gaunt? They'll shoot you." "Not if I smile and come bearing exotic alien flowers. But these devices will let us stay alert when we need alertness. All the data stored aboard the Tereshkova would get home eventually—assuming, of course, that we did—but in the meantime I was anxious to provide Baikonur with what I regarded as the highlights. When's your strand, Samphire? There was the usual yawning moment of expectation; a moment that stretched agonisingly. Transmitted at light-speed up-system, then copied into the memory buffer of the next outgoing ship. Inside it." While we were talking, Weather had brough to far. That wouldn't be thorough enough. Clavain saw the wave of discomposure sweep over the others almost simultaneously. "Trust me, Thom," she said. I couldn't tell. I didn't think he was really serious about all that Star City stuff. "Never mind. Is it about Katerina?" She bit her tongue. His breath stinks of alcohol. I thought back to the engagement with the other ramscoop; the way its intake field had become fatally distorted. "It's good to have you back, Mercurio." "Good to be back," I said. It's empty. "After all, the evidence is all out there in the public realm. But Merlin isn't actually named after the Welsh Wizard of Camelot, although of course I like the connection. It was as if the Matryoshka was dragging a chunk of another universe around with it. It was a heavy ring fashioned from rough black metal. Then the ceiling started moving, and she realized that she was being unloaded. We shouldn't do anything until we've arrived at a consensus. The Spire seemed to draw out the moment sadistically while behind me I continued to hear the frantic hissing of the whirling cable. Why would I? You must be worn out." "Whatever it takes, Mike. Our eyes had been removed, the sockets scrubbed and packed with far more efficient sensory devices, wired back into our visual cortices. Concussion from the multiple impacts was already unhinging the delicate clockwork of the planet's magnetohydrodynamic core. No one knows much about that, either. No other thinking creature had seen this far. Take what you can use." "Thank you." Even though I'm beginning to warm up, it's good to change out of the sodden old clothes. "Do you realise who I am?" He wondered how recognisable he was, under the breather mask. I enjoyed feeling my mind filling with bright new experience; multiple snapshots of a dizzyingly complex and teeming Galaxy. There doesn't appear to be anything wrong with it." "That's not an answer." "I know." Tyrant sounded sullen. As dispiriting as the surroundings were, he had no reason to doubt that this was the reality of life in twenty-two seventeen. Why would the Emergence take against me now?" "It doesn't end there, sir. Sorry, but that's not an argument." She put down her pen and leaned back in her chair. "She's still a person. When you said air, Doctor Trintignant, you didn't say it was anything we could breathe." The Doctor's answer was a melodious piped refrain. I seemed to stand outside myself. "Where will you go?" "Back into space. "Set a couple of hot-dust charges at maximum delay, get back to the ship." She was already preparing to unclip one of the demolition charges from her belt. You'll be hanging by your neck within hours, with the entire weight of your suit trying to rip your skull from your spine. "Of course it's black. I trust however that the manner of my demise—and the annotated state to which I have reduced myself—will provide some small amusement to future scholars of cybernetics. So did the weak mixing angle, the fine-structure constant, Newton's constant. "Risible plastrum?" "Yes," Merlin said. The ultimate artistic statement, a piece of planetary resculpting to dwarf the ages." I think things over for a moment. You wanted them to fail. Many worlds saw nothing wrong in turning criminals into lobotomized slave labour. "The other two were Galenka Makarova and Yakov Demin. But that's still not the same as moving fifty thousand people out of the system, or however many it needs to be. Mostly it is work a child could do, if a child had the strength of a hundred men-moving stone blocks, spraying rapid-setting concrete. So when I'm under cover, out of range of spying eyes and snooping drones, I'll pull what remains of Mike out of the trauma pod and smash his central nervous system to a mushy grey-pink pulp. Or what's left of the poor bastard." We had found several body parts by then, but his was the only one that was anywhere near being complete. "They need help," Prakash admits. We can seal the connecting lock from our side, until Baikonur come up with a treatment regime. Contact occurred with the faintest of bumps. Plans were already being drawn up for missions to rendezvous with the object and penetrate that outer layer. The next time, you might well choose white, and the time after. I seized here by the left arm and forced her to look at me. The other part of me only wanted her more, as if her bluntness had succeeded only in sharpening my desire. You might as well send out robots. He paused a while before continuing, leaving no doubt as to what he had said. But it was still something of a shock to see his plans made concrete, so closely to the way he had imagined it. Energy and mass are related by this simple formula. "The dream with the hat, right?" "My God, yes." I grinned like a madman. We duct-taped him into a sleeping hammock and locked the door on him. Because there's something I want you to know." "Then tell me." "I'd rather show you. But now that we're part of something larger..." "Transenlightenment, you mean?" It was the Conjoiners' term for the state of neural communion they shared, mediated by the machines swarming in their skulls. I suggested she use the time to scour the docks for any hot syntax patches. The mouth, I now realised, was Teterev's way of drawing the cave entrance. He'd been in enough private helicopters to know what the manual override controls looked like and there was nothing weirdly incongruous here. There are claims and counter-claims. You weren't very likely to turn him down." As we flew on, the conveyor's shock wave gouged a foaming channel in the sea behind it. "Do you think that thing is really..." I moved a tiny distance away from Purslane and the gun flicked its attention onto me. I slept for two hours, dreaming of being back on Earth on a warm spring day, sitting with my wife in the park, the mission happily behind me, deemed a success by all concerned. He improved your systems, added layers of sophistication. I don't, as a rule, keep huge reams of detailed story ideas lying around. Early-onset hypothermia. A message from the future, intended for us? "Warn...you," she said. She had not failed Mother Russia and the Second Soviet. The stone fell into a dark crack between two shattered paving slabs, Merlin hearing the chink as it bounced off something and fell even deeper. If this was indeed Mars—and I could think of no reason why Fury would lie to me now —then the world had almost certainly undergone many phases of climate modification. We can do the same for you, I promise. Another memorial, no less heartfelt, had taken the form of a single stone kiln on an airless moon. There'll never be a moment when I'm not looking after you protecting you against those who would do you harm. "It's come from the future," I said. "He's been poisoned. "This is our only chance. They live on Mars, but also elsewhere in the system. "You placed your best spy-sats directly over the nest. I'm thinking." "I know, I know, I know, I know, I know." would be exactly the excuse she needs to force our hands." We were in his cabin, with the door locked: I'd warned him I had a matter of grave sensitivity that we needed to discuss. Another robot lived in his swimming pool. We didn't know it at the time—didn't know it until much later, when we'd actually boarded her—but the Cockatrice had fallen victim to the oldest hazard in space: collision with debris. First appeared in Reach for Infinity, ed. The people on Lecythus knew they'd come from the stars. "Nesha?" "There were three cosmonauts." I lean into the grille again. "Why are you doing it, then?" asked Hirz. But I still didn't have any names. I had no idea why such an elaborate charade might have been staged...but I couldn't rule it out, either. All they saw was the emperor and his most trusted aide, going about their business. Phantasms. This is not right. We have better equipment, and we're not down to our last hope of survival. "You don't need this extra task load. The only guidance came from the door's thick metal frame, which was inscribed with faint geometric markings. His skin functioned as a kind of antenna, giving him sensitivity to electrical field changes. What will we turn into by the time we beat this thing?" He shrugged. "It doesn't make any sense," I said, studying the recumbent, damaged form. "There's a risk, but there's also a risk in doing nothing. As you pointed out, I'm not even operating on the same intellectual plane as yourself. Birth control, government-sanctioned euthanasia, the dormitory rigs springing up out at sea...we knew from the moment we were old enough to understand anything that this wasn't our world any more. They'll be too distracted to plan anything in advance, and they won't be expecting a last-minute surprise." "I like the way you say 'we'." "We're in this together now," I said. Who is Luttrell? Robots were commonplace, but I was something more than that. The girl cannot carry all that wood and her bags. Remember Orpine, during the third carnival?" Orpine had made a fool of herself near the Whipping Star, SS433, nearly crashing her ship in the process. The words seemed to lodge in the back of his throat, hard as pebbles. We give them a certain amount of autonomy; they pay their taxes and agree to our trifling requests that they instigate democratic rule and cut down on the number of executions. Merlin opted to say nothing: if the pilot hadn't got the message by now, no further persuasion was going to help. "But don't let that spoil it for you." \*\*\* I SETTLED IN front of the camera and started speaking. Or at the very least a very different man. Glory and annihilation, balanced on a knife edge. "Which is why that was only suggestion number one. I've had the dust analysed and it's speaking. Or at the very least a very different man. absolutely harmless. He could have lived for another fifty or sixty years with the right treatments, but I think by then he knew it would be a waste of time." "You faked your death a century and a half ago," I said. The bulge where its head should have been was a low bronze dome, caked in grease and dirt, with nothing at all that could pass for a face. Once they'd turned us into a lame duck, they could make a forced hard docking and storm our ship. It's not often you'll get to see close action, so you might as well make the most of it." Something in Zeal's tone surprised me. The surface of the sphere was barely visible, lost under a spiky, spiny accretion of spokes and barbs and twisted unicorn horns, pushing out into the otherwise empty band gap for many kilometres. Merlin made a point of never giving her flowers from a particular world twice, even when she wanted more of the same. The shape of the head, the ribbed chest, the placement and articulation of the limbs—it was all too familiar to be alien. Extreme faculties of memory or spatial positioning had to be turned off before participation. They were not like me. They're in a state of anticipation. But let us give Garret due credit. "Not insane," he said, turning back to us. He put them there. I wasn't. I compared the canyons and bluffs through the window with something in my recent experience, and realised that I had seen the view before, albeit from a different angle. "Why would you envy me?" "Because you went inside it. How does that sound?" "It sounds..." I pawed ineffectually at the leather of his apron, slick with blood and oil. Home was just three shells and a sprint across vacuum away. I can use a sensor specialist like Lenka. In the nearest pond one of the fish—I recognised it as one of the Asagi Koi, with the blue-toned scales laid out in a pine-cone pattern—opened and closed its mouth as if trying to tell me something vital. At the end of the maze of corridors—far under Mars now—Galiana brought him to a nursery. "Are you all right, girl?" Kathrin lowered herself onto the stool. They're not stable enough to exist here for ever, but they can hold together just long enough to do damage." Gaunt nodded, at last feeling some of the pieces slot into place. The Americans called it the Easter Egg for a little while, but eventually everyone started using the Russian name." I know that when she talks about "we", she means the astronomical community as a whole, rather than her own efforts. We're very flexible, very good at downgrading our expectations. "I painted on a huge scale because that was what the subject matter seemed to demand." "It was good work," I said. "And is it something you'd like to talk about?" "Not really." She would, actually. Maybe you're right, too. Information hung in veils in the air; icons and diagrams and numbers clustering around the beds of the injured, thinning out into the general space like fantastically delicate neon sculptures. One of those old terraforming mechs." She held the companion open and aimed down through the window, so that it could capture the view of the enormous machine, with chimneys sprouting in double rows along its back, angled slightly rearward like the smokestacks on an ocean liner. Stowaway on a robot cargo dirigible that runs into trouble. To you it's just a stopover, an incidental adventure "Beginning thruster translation," she said, touching keys. That means they'll want to reward us." Van Ness fixed me with an indulgent smile. I scoop up the figure, sliding my arms under their body, as if they are a sack of grain and I am a forklift. His movements were fluid and he had regained his usual repertoire of facial expressions. "No shit." remember fragments, not the whole story. You can speak, too. Some other reason you pulled my name out of the hat." "I'd like to help you," he said. You created something marvellous, a thing of wonder. Or the ship itself might been generating external magnetic fields of great precision, steering the foci into my skull and stimulating microscopic areas of my mind. Ten thousand days, if he was very lucky. Of all of us, Mullein could relax now. Yet those misremembered details will themselves become part of your memory, gaining solidity and texture with each instance of recall. by Peter Crowther, DAW Books, 2005. The question is: could either of us live with that?" "What if I chose not to?" "I'd make your name." "As a convicted criminal, locked away in some Authority cell?" Ingvar's shrug suggests that this is no more than a trifle. I gather the fatalities were numbered in the millions..." "You don't have to sound so bloody cheerful about it." Trintignant navigated to the side of the couch where Celestine was resting. Aren't you?" "It's not a matter of enjoyment. "I never trusted you." "I did all in my power to save you." "Then why are you standing there looking so calm, when you know we're going to die?" But before Merlin had time to answer, Minla had seen the answer for herself. "Yes..." Prakash says absently. My father was out of hospital and receiving palliative care at his home, and I'd drive down to visit him as often as possible. They are pathways between the stars." "There are no pathways in the void," Sibia retorted. "Like a great sword. That's also encouraging. Even the Demarchists would turn against us if we were seen to murder a diplomat." Taking another suck from the mask, he looked into her face. We've obviously done something wrong already." Childe moved over and palmed the other symbol on the top row. Small consolation, but you take what you can get. There were at least thirty incoming pirates from the Cockatrice, and they had better gear. "But that isn't a bird," Tyrant said, highlighting a larger moving shape. I will." At fifteen kilometres, the Progress cleared Shell 1 and passed into a volume of open space largely devoid of moving obstacles or field lines. "I'm a Conjoiner. Mostly, we can ignore their presence." "We should have been warned. "Let me address that body image problem," Annabel says. They all turned to look at the point where the machine had come in. They were keeping an eye on us, sampling our strands, judging our wisdom and readiness. The falling man was almost upon him. There's something else, as well." "Which is?" I was about to tell her about Katerina, how she'd have been expecting me back already. Thousands of years before their emergence as a galactic mini-power, they must have crossed interstellar space from Lost Earth, to settle and perhaps terraform this unpromising pebble. When ships meet for trade, stories are exchanged—and you've done a lot of trading. Did you see how old Teterev's helmet was? My host for the evening is Derek, a fully-grown Tyrannosaurus Rex. We're not frozen bodies stacked in boxes, merely existing from one instant to the next." She gave a shrug. Nothing had changed. "Medicine?" "Plastrum," the man said, taking the box back from Merlin. My father would have been so happy to see you again." "I'd like to have spoken with him again." After a moment, Minla said: "How long will you stay with us, before you go back to sleep again? But don't let it put you off." He helped us aboard, then climbed inside himself, sealed the door and knocked on the roof. "Not this time." Widow Grayling closed her eyes. I crave some last moment of connection with the woman I've risked my life to visit. We didn't know about him when we hatched this plan." "He still had to act like Burdock," I said. But he never knew when to shut his mouth. The door itself was one metre wide and perhaps twice that in height. He shivered. "Complaining?" Khorog asked. I watched her asymmetric shape loom next to mine: she lopsided; me a thin, elongated wraith. I frowned, as if that might make my memory work just that little bit harder. It was not put up to honour the sheriff, or commemorate the arrival of a Winged Man." Now the widow looked at her intently. I have always been a robot." "Those suits were robots, to all intents and purposes. We're still none the wiser about who's actually behind this. That's important, because my witnesses have to understand that I mean what I say. It was as if the picture had transported her back to her childhood, before she had set her life on the trajectory that, seventy years later, would bring it to this bed, this soundproofed room, the shameful survival of this one ship. For a minute or so, with the exception of Hirz, we had all breathed Spire air. "Forced birth control, and mass evacuation," he said, grimacing. Go now then get off ship." \*\*\* ZEAL AND I were midway through another minor procedure when the engagement began. But I must have been out for hours. "It's looking as if she won't make it." "Do you think she's dead?" Purslane dipped her head. "The implants. I suppose I should wish you the best of luck, except it would sound irredeemably trite." He shrugged; one of the few human gestures now available to him. She was holding station, hovering a few kilometres over Shell 3. In the meantime I continued my own survey of the room, counting myself lucky that my suit had not provoked a stronger reaction. "No. I'm not. It's a great pleasure to be here." "SHOW DEREK PICTURE." I've been briefed, and this is my cue to launch into a series of images and video clips, to which I provide a suitably evocative and poetic narrative. And he paid for that with his sanity." Galenka was silent for long moments. It was a long time since that brain had been protected by a cage of bone. And I realized then where I had seen the small, dark thing that Trintignant had retrieved from the surface of Golgotha. The first of the wave came arcing in at supersonic speeds. He identified the speaker as Sibia, a woman of high political rank. "We'll get to that. The energy will be used to do useful things like the supplying of power to coastal desalination plants. "Nevil and myself could still be on Mars in three days." "Don't be, is my advice." Disgusted, Voi turned and stepped into the green cool of the shuttle. But the sheer scale of the galaxy always crushed them. "Then you're right: it's much less dense than I expected. The brave cosmonauts who were reaping this harvest of riches were mentioned by name on several occasions. She's an old machine and she needs help to keep going." "Why?" "There are people who care about such things. Not to begin with. They followed a winding path through scorched rubble and junk, taking care not to trip over the obstacles and broken ground. But the point is I can tie you to the impactor, and " "I'd have at least appreciated a warning, Roland," I said. We circled it, stepping between the jagged mirrors of its hull. "You have to stay there for now. Both had been appropriate. "Hirz is—for want of a better "Except I prefer to think of myself as an information retrieval specialist. I could have changed things. There was a palpable sadness amongst all the gaiety. I loathed your fucking monkey. Childe and I had certainly taunted each other with higher-dimensional puzzles in our youth, but never had so much depended on an intuitive grasp of those mindshattering mathematical realms. "Leave him, Richard. KX-457, assign me full command authority. I fingered the metal shape under my flame-colored costume. The hardest part was often getting the panel off in the first place, struggling with corroded fixtures and tools that weren't quite right for the job. "You're a thinking machine. His face was etched with the strain of controlling the generators. Maybe if I did I could have spared Lecythus all this bloodshed." "And now you understand everything?" "I understand everything?" "I understand that the moon's new. "Widens out again. "The dread." The Captain did not answer immediately, and I feared that I had done my standing even more harm than when I questioned his judgement. Someone else can have that pleasure. She lifted it from the table, feeling its weight. "It—the new me—went back into the Spire and attempted to make further progress than its predecessor. "For a while back there, Swift, I really thought this place was getting to you." "It isn't," I said. "Two, three days," he said. Then the figure was taken inside and the crowd broke up, the workers returning to their tasks. "Let's take a few more while our luck's holding, shall we?" She pulled out of the waldo controls, disengaged the sticky anchors and applied translational thrust, shifting the Progress to a different platelet. "I'll be sure to pass on your regards to my next owner." "Just make the flowers and stop complaining." Five minutes later Merlin steeled himself as the lock sequenced and the ramp lowered to kiss the ground. I'd make everyone else start playing out of key." "I think you're being too fatalistic. He didn't seem to mind whether I listened in or not. He was frozen, unsure what to do next. And it would be magnificent. "I thought it might be you," she told Fescue. But against a dozen or more enemy Mechs and drones? I can see the field medical unit. Maybe fifty in total before the guns could no longer acquire targets. This collar's bad enough, without feeling you watching my every move." "Maybe the collar isn't going to help us," I said. Until this evening all we had done was indulge in harmless surveillance: an indulgence that had added spice to our days. So my instincts weren't totally off-beam. We Demarchists build for posterity, you know." Yes, and it worried his own side. "But the worms—" "Don't exist anymore." She spoke with the same tutorly patience with which Remontoire had addressed him on the same subject not long before. In less than a day, every ship you see here will be on its way out of the system. Then the light slowly subsided, and the waves returned to their normal surging ferocity, and the patch of the ocean where the apparition had appeared was indistinguishable from the seas around it. "She says she's sorry she hasn't been in touch as often as she'd have liked." "I'm sorry as well." "She means it, Yukimi. I could have just woken her up and let her deal with the news as best as she could, but that seemed cruel and unsatisfactory. "Her name's Katerina." "That's because we're only on in-system motors at the moment." "There's a problem with the ramscoop?" "We don't switch on the scoop until she signified grudging satisfaction. It wanted to break us, not stress us. So what if I didn't know what I was getting into? Why do you think they sent us out here, Galenka? You told me you are a shipmaster, so you doubtless have some familiarity with the principles involved." I thought back to the adjustments I had made to our own engines, when we still had ambitions of fleeing the pirates. Dirt. Now and then the whole chamber was bathed in the stuttering violet flicker of a cutting torch. Eventually my origin as a suit was completely forgotten, even by those I worked for. He remained on his feet, while all around pieces of unsecured metal broke away, dropping to decks or the sea. We were all still on suit air, even though our helmet readouts were patiently informing us that the outside atmosphere was fully breathable, and (at the limit of our sensors) absent of any significant toxins. It was better now. Things were different. But it would be immodest to presume too much. What the fuck was I doing here anyway? Can you walk?" "I can try." Merlin tried. How far downstream had it come? "Change is coming, Campion—violent, sudden change. "Zima will be here in a moment," it said, before returning to the conveyor and vanishing back into the sky. "He's tried to keep Campion and I apart. He didn't remember the thud of its rotors or being hauled out of the nest, taking up defensive positions around the domes and the dyke's edge. When so much had already been taken from her, what difference did a little bit more make? But the trajectory of a jointed pendulum was ferociously difficult to predict: a nightmarish demonstration of the mathematics of chaos. But it's entirely reversible, and if we can lessen your distress in any way, think that the small risk involved is acceptable." "Your body says otherwise. My finger tightened on the trigger. And I wondered. They were of a peculiar dark hue, a shade that ought to have appeared black in the room's subdued gold lighting yet which was clearly and unmistakably purple, revealed by its own soft inner illumination. "I think he picked that world out of a hat, never imagining you'd visit it just when he claimed to be there." "But his strand was threaded after mine. Many sharp tools gleamed on one wall, some of them fashioned with blades of skydrift. I wish I had something to say. But that must have been hurting all the while." "I told you I could turn off pain." "Are you turning it off now?" "Why?" "Because you keep flinching." Weather reached up suddenly and took my wrist, almost making me drop the same." "Why should the robots and doctors fuss over her, when they're needed elsewhere? I went back to the surge tanks and checked that Suzy and Ray were all right. Instead, I've spent time gathering together the resources and the people for a highly unusual expedition." Now he made the table change its projection, zooming in on one particular star. Reaches out...shapes. The fist relaxed, letting something small and metallic drop to the floor. "You did go mad after all." \*\*\* FALLING INWARD, THE Progress began to pass through another swarm of free-flying obstacles. "Still." "Yes," I said, trying not to flinch against the cold touch. In fact you could say that everything began here." "You're going to tell me this is really Lost Earth?" "No; this isn't Earth. It's made to kill the likes of you." "Who did this to him?" Purslane asked. Childe handed out viewers which floated into existence above the polished mahogany surface. \*\*\* YOU KNOW HOW the Milky Way Galaxy looks; you've seen it a thousand times, in paintings and computer simulations. He had a lot of friends beyond our line." "I hated him," I said. If you're willing, I can attempt to reassert your normal body image." "Again: why wait until I'm awake, if there's something you can do?" "Again, I need consent. \*\*\* THE OFFICIAL WAS a high-ranking technocrat on Selva, one of the major power centres of the Luquan Emergence. They'll be worried." "I understand," Greta said. It was a landscape, a Martian landscape together like a jigsaw. Anyone else could spot those discrepancies if they paid enough attention." "That's the point, though: I don't think anyone else will. The old body's reflexes were still excellent, for he caught it easily. Names of such beauty and terror they made me weep. Instantly the infected had become the enemy. He could see the nest much more clearly now; details leaping out of the haze. While Mike's inside me, they'll let me live. Dimly, it began to dawn on me that this was just a lie to dissuade the curious. It was a relief when the helmets flooded with the cold, tasteless air of the suits' backpack recyclers. A calm and lucid watchfulness, as if she's used to studying faces and reactions, taking nothing at face value. Ray's tank had been customized at the same time that Suzy had had hers done. "Oxygen low," he says, his voice little more than a whisper. And I doubted Skanda would settle for second best. Veins and arteries the size of plumbing ducts wrapped the cerebellum. A ladder or something." I looked around. Nothing ventured nothing gained." It took something to make our ramshackle equipment look better than someone else's, I thought to myself. That's where you are now: in the pod. "What happened?" I asked. I had not noticed them before. Would there even be pain, or just a sudden cold numbness from half our bodies? Yet the moon's still there, in what appears to be the same orbit. I became steadily more independent and resourceful. "Maintain stealth. I know you don't want to, but it's important that you understand what's happened to you, and —just as vitally—what's going to happen next. Just enough to negotiate a victory, and then no more. "Do you know why chimpanzees are less intelligent than humans?" He blinked at the change of tack. Maybe this makes a difference." I pulled a black bundle from inside my jacket, peeling back enough of the cloth to let him see the weapon. After all that he had survived so far, both during his time with the Cohort and since he had become an adventuring free agent, it would be something of a let-down to die by being shot with a chemically propelled projectile. I could only see his face. It didn't take all that long, considering. Even then I could feel my weight increasing. It was all I could do to stare at the pilot. Gaunt squinted against the wind, trying to pick out faces. The Eighty was the perfect cover. "There's a reinforced observation bubble not far from here. Garret Kinnear is filth. You may not be completely conversant with the treaty's fine print, but we've discovered that it allows us to storm Galiana's nest without breaking any terms. I did it. "The void is vacuum: the same thing that makes birds suffocate when you suck air out of a glass jar." "You may think it absurd," Merlin said. You slot in, and in a few months even you'll have a hard time remembering the way in time, but he would only have needed to be." "What about you, Nero? He'd snatched his hand out of the way in time, but he would only have needed to hesitate, or to have his clothing catch on something, for the machine to roll over him. In the time it had dipped its paw into the pool, a host of microorganisms had begun to form a rust-coloured secondary glove around the original, making the monkey's paw look swollen and diseased. They never wanted to believe you." She glances up at the birdshit-stained edifice, the premier's moving face. "What do you mean, you can't wait? "Don't want to keep Nero waiting on F." "Who's Nero?" Gaunt asked. During surgery I inserted some neural probes at strategic sites around the injured part of your brain. Other display facets rose from the floor like Japanese paper screens, flooded with data. That was the idea, at least. Can you begin to grasp the drag factor we were creating? Far from darkness ahead, there was a silvery emanation. I know. We'll treat you well and get you back to your people." "Why?" she snarled. And that worries me. I squeezed a jewelled button and the gun moved as if in an invisible grip, nearly dragging itself from my fist. They liked it. And what it could not use, it had thrown away. Most of the overspill from the war the affects us here is because of differences of opinion between our own artilects." "Some things don't change, then. "The beacon was also a steering motor. Kathrin turned sharply at the sound. "It wouldn't be worth it," I said. "Yes." "But there isn't anything natural about being alive a thousand years after I was born," I said. A thousand years might have passed while you were riding the flow, but that didn't matter. It was Fescue, and he was kneeling by the figure I had shot. "I call it Golgotha." "Nice name," Celestine said. "You can do that, can't you?" "Of course I can." "But you won't. Maybe if you told me something about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." "There is not much to tell. There's going to have to come a point where we put our faith in Celestine's about yourself, that would help." judgment. What if the whole story about Grisha and the assassination agent had been the lie, and the real Burdock was standing in front of me? That they'll end up so far from home that getting back will take years, not months. They had chosen neutrality while the Coalition tried to contain—some said sterilise—zones of Conjoiner takeover. By then was conscious that my arms were picking up the same sort of furry red contamination that had affected the monkey's paw. The brain needs to be cooled like a turbopump. "It wasn't. After that, I began to see things in the proper perspective again. What I didn't expect was that I was about to get the chance. "You're a man with machine parts, not a machine." "The clinic records were very clear. It's not you, it's us. "I need to be getting back home," she said, trying to sound as if they had discussed nothing except the matter of the widow's next delivery of provisions. Silver waves had been sculpted into his head-mask, so that he resembled a bewigged Regency fop dipped in mercury. And now we're in the air." She paused, tiptoeing to peer through a grubby, dust-scoured window as her home fell slowly away. But patience had never been the Captain's strong point. Lenka went first, then Rasht, then I. Counting on your instinct for decency and forgiveness. Intimated by the intrusion of the abstract blue forms, casual buyers turned away from Zima. There is no other way, Kathrin. I can probably find you another few thousand tonnes, but we'll still only be looking at prolonging the inevitable." "We'll have the short-range weapons," Van Ness said resignedly. "I'll take you to Venus Deep," he said. It got messy otherwise. All of you." "You have an explanation for this travesty?" Fescue asked. "But it just wasn't possible. They sent ships at the last minute, tried to deflect the impactor..." Ingvar shakes her head. Beyond the Bubble?" "Beyond the Bubble?" "Beyond the Bubble, yes." Her voice grows small and childlike. You just take a cube and extend it outwards; just the same way that you make a cube from a square." Celestine paused, and for a moment I thought she was going to throw up her hands in despair. It was cut low from her neck, in a rectangular shape. You left with Kanto, hobbling your way back to safety. But that didn't matter because there was almost no one left awake to need feeding. I always like watching ships coming and going, even when they're holding my own ship on the ground. But contrary to what some might think, even Conjoiners can't work miracles. "I'm sorry that we had to kill it," Clavain said. He wouldn't say anything, but the curl of his lip would soften and he'd favour my efforts with a microscopic nod of approval. Above the quadrangle, Neptune surveys proceedings with serene indifference. "But it's a nice piece. But Cobargo was gone, vanished elsewhere into the Bight. I pushed my head into the scuffed glass half-dome and looked around. "Even after what I've already adjusted to?" "You've only made half the journey, Thom." "But you made it." "I did, Thom. Wouldn't it be a little childish to go against it just to make a point about free will? Warren fingered the leathery patch over his ruined eye with the chrome gauntlet of his prosthetic arm, as if to remind Clavain of what the war had cost him; how little love he had for the enemy, even now. You think we were going to willingly throw all that expenditure away, just because he changed his mind?" "He never stopped pulling his weight," Nero said. The line war, just because he changed his mind?" tightened, then began to take my weight. "You know we call you the retarded. Is it any wonder that he kept you, even as his power accumulated? But occasionally they had to do unspeakable things; things that inspired dread and horror. I was faced with two equally numbing possibilities. "My God," I said. Above us was a dome several hundred metres wide, projecting a cloudless holographic sky. She braced herself for a stinging reproof, but instead her father rushed to Yukimi and hugged her. The huge fingers worked two rust-colored toggles and then moved up slightly to grasp the dome by the grills on either side of it. It was not necessary for her to tell us that the message was over. Maybe it just wasn't possible. "I'm not sure I like it." \*\*\* WE DID NOT speak again until we had traversed half a dozen new rooms, and then rested while the shunts mopped up the excess of tiredness which came after such efforts. "There are a number of candidate systems. That's all any culture ever does." That was exactly what they had done, across twenty painful years. It's perfectly normal to feel a sense of denial." "Denial?' "That what we are confronting is truly alien. Something's wrong, Mercurio. That was a long time ago. I gave the necessary commands, lowering the screen. Over our suit-to-suit comm I heard Kanto's irritated hiss. Just being close to it was enough." "Different in what way?" Nesha asks. "Nothing less than the pre-meditated, coldblooded murder of a peace envoy." And then a video clip sprang up to replace Warren. By the time we get back on course, however, we'll be about forty days behind schedule." I paused, eyeing the incrementing cost indicator. But it can't continue." "It must. But she realised that her father would be ashamed if the wheelwright were to learn of his present trade. They had to be, to operate so far from human supervision." "And I presume they found something?" I said. Now we were a top-listed item once more, squeezing out stories of indomitable Soviet enterprise and laughable Capitalist failure. They're just cargo, parcels of frozen meat on their way through time. Finally, my patience had reached breaking point. "We don't need you to remind us of the risks." "I'm talking about something that's going to happen sooner rather than later. "They made your side think we were still striving to escape, whereas our true escape route was already fully operational." "A pretty desperate diversion." "Not really. I was a true thinking machine. They have already cleared a wing of the museum for me, and now I must brave the crowds in the street and fight my way to the limousine. Clavain reached up and examined his head, gingerly. My blood's running cold at the idea of flying the Soyuz into that thing. "Your wife died the moment they took her." "That'd be nice to believe, wouldn't it? But then again our provocation had been of an entirely different nature. As coldly calculated as it might appear, Van Ness knew that it would be better for the sleepers to be taken by another ship than suffer a purposeless death in interstellar space. \*\*\* IN THE MORNING the dust settles. By then I'd have said anything to get off Mokmer. Merlin reached to pick it up, but it was too late. She had just been forced to get out of her original suit and put on one of the skintights; even her small frame was now too large to pass through the constricted doors. But I doubt that she'll attach any significance to those memories. It sloped a little more, and eventually the ice under our feet gave way to solid rock, meaning that we no longer had Teterev's prints as a guide. We won't have time to realise that we've lost." "Then we're powerless. Bickerstaffe-Drew) describes how a simple solitary girl, half Puritan, half Spaniard, with a dash of Indian blood, on a ranch in Western America develops a Scientists and Scoundrels As if history and nature had not provided wonders enough, through the ages humans themselves have contrived more marvels to deceive one another. That's all. "That took longer than I'd hoped, but the threading is still taking place. But some of the cleanly cut grooves were deeper than the others. A season ago—before the dust stormshe drove out to this exact spot and buried a weapon. These are my hands you're feeling." But they're not, and she knows it. But I'm afraid you'll get over it, just the way I did." "I'll get over it, just th had already buckled herself in; she had a glazed look now, as if staring into infinity. The flat red floor buckled upwards, shaping itself into the seamless form of a moulded couch. They all wore slightly timeworn ochre overalls, flashed with too many company sigils. She listened to the figure's wheezing. "Numbers are truth." You placed your life in danger in trying to save him." "He didn't have to die." Galiana nodded sagely. Mechanisms buried inside the shrine ensured that it was winding side by side. There should have been a place for you on that ship, and you damned well knew it." "It wasn't that simple," I said, resuming my walk. He needed to feel it on a purely sensory level, as a flood of inputs reaching directly into his brain. Gaunt peered intently at the windows and decks but saw no sign of human activity on any of the structures. But by then the pirates were all dead, and we were in no mood to take prisoners. And Van Ness's wife wasn't like me. \*\*\* SHE STOOD BEFORE the hexagonal arrangement of input dials, as I had done a thousand times before. As long as we don't interfere, they let us be." "You live in the Scaper?" "Most of the time." He sat down opposite Yukimi, tapping a knuckle against the metal tabletop. Purslane wouldn't understand that. She slowed her climb. "There's a chamber up there," Forqueray said. Small, dark and hard. Sure, I could fix that kind of damage easily enough. "But she can stop it, can't she?" She's switched to heavy slugs," Zeal said. He wasn't expected to diagnose faults just yet, so he had only to follow a schedule of repairs drawn up by Nero: go to this robot, perform this action. It had a complicated, meandering shoreline. The dragon broke up shortly afterwards. But their weapons and armour were simply inadequate. He gathered his kit and went out to check over the planes. "You know, it wouldn't hurt to show a little gratitude. "You can tell me now." "I'm afraid it won't make much sense." Malkoha looked at him beseechingly. I wasn't going to take any chances on it being breathable. Gradually I started to think in terms of an extended future history, taking my model from Larry Niven's Known Space sequence, and one of the things that most interested was to dig right back into the roots of my invented universe. He'd given me a rough idea of where I ought to head. "The pleasure is entirely mine," he said. I saw that now there were tiny glints on Golgotha's surface, almost like metallic flakes which had fallen from the side of the structure. "You were lucky," Trintignant said. Doctor Trintignant said." Between the stacked beer barrels she could see the top level of the scaffolding that was shoring up the other side of the arch, visible since no house or parapet stood on that part of the bridge. The monkey had bent down to dip its paw into a bubbling pool. "Where am I?" I try to look around, and nothing happens. It's good exercise for me, to get out of this place. What remained of him spasmed once or twice, then-with the exception of his replacement arm, which continued to twitch-he was mercifully still. All Galenka could do was wait until a window event began, then make a run for it-hoping that the aperture remained open long enough for the Progress to pass through. A spray-painting robot, a thing that moved along a fixed service rail, needed one of its traction armatures changed. "It's difficult for you now, I know. All the while I scanned the city for signs of concealed weaponry, half expecting to be blown out of the sky at any moment. It was modified from the connecting ring of a space helmet, the kind that would amputate and shockfreeze the head if it detected massive damage to the body below the neck. And that's what's been happening in our part. "I'm staying," he said quietly. She wished Corax hadn't called it a ghost town, and while she understood that he hadn't meant that the place was literally haunted, she couldn't turn her imagination off. As he thought about this, Galiana took him into another part of the nursery. Like us? There'd been a supernova near the Hesperus Veil, and a number of us had planned close approaches to it. Thank you for the food, and the offer of the wood." "You pass our regards onto your father," Mary said. Hundreds of robots, civilian and military, are already working to rebuild shattered defenses. But by then it was much too late to make amends. "If you insist." I'm still wearing my military contacts, although I only realise as much when the view of the trauma pod's scrubs out, replaced by a visual feed from the pod's own external camera. I though I only realise as much when the view of the trauma pod's scrubs out, replaced by a visual feed from the pod's own external camera. I though I only realise as much when the view of the trauma pod's scrubs out, replaced by a visual feed from the pod's own external camera. things with the captain. Presumably the necessary materials had been uplifted into the air when the unsupported chunks (and these must have been pieces that did not contain gravity-nullifiers, or which had been damaged beyond the capacity to support themselves) came hammering down. It transpired that the Watchers had witnessed something like the Great Work once already, in the distant spiral galaxy that they had been monitoring. Behind us is a wide picture window, with city lights twinkling across the great curve of Manhattan Atoll. The Tereshkova had been big news during its departure, but had fallen from the headlines during the long and tedious cruise to the Matryoshka. We knew him before this empire was even a glint in his eye. "We just had time to move the final ship out of range of the atomics. The ship recognised Clavain, its interior shivering to his preferences. Galenka pushed away from the Progress. "That means he'll have needed to dream your strand." "I hope you're right." "You only have to get through this one day. When Skanda insisted on accompanying me out to the rock, I'd hit him with my usual terms and conditions. Creating this venue was a major headache. We had taken a risk and it had paid off. In some cases, they fail even to be started. My father says there's no reason for anyone to be scared of Widow Grayling." "Not afraid she'll turn you into a toad, then?" "She cures people, not put spells on them." "When she's in the mood for it. This one's a 4-simplex; a hypertetrahedon. That's a very different thing! And we would have made a wonderful partnership." Maria soars to her zenith. His hand spasmed open to drop the gun. Then you...know." I let her go of her, conscious that I had been holding left her arm too tightly. "Where are we?" I asked, once I had stepped down. I had to trust my intuitive sense of what was false. You were meant to remember was not that you could leave by moon, but that you could leave by moon, but that you came by moon, but that you could leave by moon, but that you came by moon, bu ' Minla stared at the picture. What does it stand for? As before, there was an uncomfortable pause which probably lasted only half a second, but which felt abyssally longer, as if our fates were being weighed by distant judicial machinery. Their seats had tilted back and wrapped around them, applying pressure to the leas to maintain bloodhow to the head. It's a fiery ride home without it." "Why should we? "I was here when it was a sealed training facility." "You had something to do with the space program?" "I did my bit." Zvezdniy Gorodok—Starry Town, or Star City. "The natural orbit of Phobos is raising a tidal bulge on Mars but, because of friction, the bulge can't quite keep up with Phobos. I stood up from my own couch, testing the way my new leg supported my weight. Teterev's hand, barely clear to begin with, became progressively wilder and less legible. For that reason the room was equipped with the medical systems needed to maintain, modify and rejuvenate a body many times over. "Here was I, thinking maybe you needed some help...and when I arrive I find you having a good old chinwag with the lobot!" "Zeal make you lobot too," she said. But its unwillingness was becoming steadily more apparent. I retain enough intellectual detachment to understand that this response is neurological There was a tingle in my head that was not quite a headache just now, but which promised to become one. The only reason it's here at all is because there happens to be an aperture next door. "Whatever this is about, Mercurio, I doubt very much that you could have done anything to prevent it." His voice was thick-tongued, like a drunkard with a bad hangover. A life redeemed, if it needed redeeming. There is something else..." I said tentatively. There were tents and stalls, with skaters and sledges everywhere. We're human beings. "They didn't fight to put our faces on the covers of magazine, or give us lucrative publishing deals to talk about how we were uncovering the mysteries of the universe, touching the face of God. It was true that we were similar. Even with our eyes ramped down to normal sensitivity, there was more than enough brightness to be had from the veins. And there was one possibility that sprang to mind. I'm sorry to have to tell you this." Merlin had grown to think of the old man as his only adult friend on Lecythus, and had been counting on his being there when he returned from frostwatch. I just took his coat, so that I could escape. What they want, above all else, is for him not to get home. Do you recognise it, Richard?" I zoomed in on the object. \*\*\* THIRTEEN HOURS LATER we were on the surface, inspecting the suits Forqueray had provided for the expedition. She decided not to say anything, not to openly acknowledge his presence, even though their eyes had met for an electric instant. "I said we should be leaving. There was nothing obviously mechanical about him: even the close-up goggle he wore over his left eye was strapped into place, rather than implanted. I could just as well have made. The flier showed me how to remove it. "I guess you got your orders," she said cheerfully, already dressed for outdoor work despite still having a bandaged hand. I went back for Lenka, the way I said I would. "These things were made two hundred years ago, during the first flush of terraforming." "The table?" "The scaper. "This is Da Silva. It has gravity, but it's not enough to affect the oceans to the same degree. Doesn't that strike you as just the tiniest bit...infantile? Dirty smoke billowed from the side of the aircraft. Certainly, the publicly released data had contained more than enough atrocities for the average nightmare. And that we'd either wake up at the end of it in a completely different world, or not wake up at all. "There's something else, isn't there? But for all the concern the crowd was showing, there was something else, something almost adulatory. "Minla," he said tenderly. By the time they did, we knew we were going to be sitting on the ground was coming up fast and hard. But what possible harm could a robot wish upon the emperor? The thing I've come all this way to give Nesha, the thing that's been in my pyjama pocket, now in the trousers. Deciding that there was nothing I could contribute to the matter, I closed my eyes and waited for the moment. "And it was singing our music. It took you far beyond the Local Bubble." I groped for anger, even resentment, but all I felt was a dizzying sensation of falling. It was, too: but for the Cockatrice, not us. It's just scenery." "Two hundred thousand years of it?" "I'm not repentant. "I don't like this," Hirz said. Not you. My ship was caught in the blast. Then the figure reaches up and does something even riskier, which is to undo their face mask, allowing it to flop aside on its hinge. "Hey. But I can't give you back any of that. But apart from Teterev—and Lenka, if you included her—none of the other forms were human. Soon I make out the blue glass cube of the Hayden, lit from within by an eerie glow, and I mentally review my opening remarks, wondering if it is really necessary to introduce myself to a world that already knows everything there is to know about me. Even if you turned back now, you'd have been away for three hundred years, Thom." "Katerina," I said, her name like an invocation. "That's what you were wrong about. The figure moves again. But there are machines in your head now. There's a lot of ice and rubble in a moon, even one as small as Naiad, and enough subtle chemistry to provide beguiling variations in reflection and transmission. As we walked along the suit threw traceries of light across the scenery: an etchwork of neon which would now and then coalesce around an oddshaped rock or peculiar pattern of ground markings. Even if they don't increase their rate of closure, they'll be on us within eight days." "Unless we move." Weps nodded sagely. "At least let Trintignant take care of your hand," I said. There were scalelike glints in the skin on his back, as if it had been set with a mosaic of reflective chips. Merlin had already indicated to Minla's experts that they could expect to find a certain useful isotope of helium in the topsoil of the moon, an isotope that would enable the Arks to be powered by nuclear fusion engines of an ancient and well-tested design. Your silence will count for nothing. Full ship screens, of course." "It won't work. Accelerating at maximum power, they seemed to streak toward a completely featureless part of the sky. But I think we had all chosen to ignore it; to map it out of our perceptions, until we were much closer. I didn't think so. It had better shut the fuck up about what it was." "That sounds worse than sensory deprivation." Gaunt was trying to undo a nut and bolt with his bare fingers, the tips already turning cold. The lamp on the table threw red shadows and gold highlights across her face. I didn't want to distract you. I woke feeling angry and cheated, and resolved to confront him about it. He thought back to what Clausen and Da Silva had told him, each time trying to find a reason why they might be lying to him, wh lose at that point. Most of them aren't very good, but on Triton even the clumsiest achieve a measure of elegance. Mistakes that didn't make sense. "And you may also count yourself fortunate. I felt for Teterev. They'll find me naked and dead in the snow. Rather than the man Gaunt had been expecting, Nero turned out to be a tall, willowy woman with an open, friendly face and a mass of salmon-red curls. So I slept—or ceased to be, until my ship had need of me again—and the stars lurched to new and nameless constellations. But I knew nothing of the engine itself. He came to consciousness in a steel-framed bed in a grey-walled room that had the economical look of something assembled in a hurry from prefabricated parts. At her urging I resisted. She felt sure that her father was down there too, being told what to do and biting his tongue against answering back. He'd picked up and discarded more beautiful examples a thousand times in his travels. Green uniform, black hair tied back under a surgical cap. And he needed to be out here, witnessing. "That's a positive sign." "I'm Clausen." the woman said. They invited me to their compound in Tychoplex, on Earth's Moon, hoping I might be able to bring her back. You're having difficulty breathing? We were nearly done with David—just a couple more weeks of finishing-off, and then the head was complete. The cool, minimalist turguoise interior shifted liquidly into an emergency configuration; damage readouts competing for attention with weapons status options. I hope you can hear me." "What is it, friend?" I asked, hearing an edge in his voice I didn't like. Whatever happens, we're breathing, we're breathing, we're having conscious thoughts. I never doubted that you were still alive, somewhere. One of you had to be lving." "You said you'd been somewhere you hadn't," I said. You're one hundred and fifty thousand light-years from home." "No," I said, my voice little more than a moan of abject, childlike denial. It wasn't just my way with a biographical story. If you're lucky you may just survive long enough to be taken prisoner." "There won't be any prisoners," Galiana said. It was still important that the work be finished." "I'd been paid, and I had no reason to doubt that he'd be back." "Other than the completion of the head, what were the instructions?" "When his little ship docked, it came with a marker beacon. "Be careful, Yakov. A foreshortened circle of fizzing yellowgreen, a luminous cauldron just beneath the waves. Just before the moment of impact each pilot exploded into a mass of black shock-absorbing balloons, looking something like a blackberry, bouncing across the nest before the balloons deflated just as swiftly and the pilot was left standing on the ground. I only wanted to spare you any unnecessary emotional pain. You were cradling it, holding it to you like it was the most precious thing in your universe. But even though none of us felt like lingering, I was no longer having to work as hard to keep up with the other two. THE STAR SURGEON'S APPRENTICE THROUGH THE bar's windows Juntura Spaceport was an endless grid of holding berths, launch gantries and radiator fins, coiling in its own pollution under a smeared pink sky. That was enough for him. Something hissed and scurried into the cover of debris. All we had been told was to make our way to Murjek, a waterlogged world most of us had never heard of before. "It feels old," she said. They all had areas of expertise which could not be easily shared among other Conjoined; very distinct from the hive-mind of identical clones which still figured in the Coalition's propaganda. Beyond the level of individual self was the state of higher mental union that they called Transenlightenment, analogous to the fizzing sea of dissociated electrons in that same metallic lattice. This wasn't just some dumb invention, some alien equivalent of the probes we had been sending out. But for a little while some of us allowed ourselves to believe it." "If the monkey doesn't want to be found," I said, "nothing we do is going to make any difference." "The fix isn't moving. His screens are sensor-opaque, at least in all the useful bands." "Correct. I'd come further than almost anyone in history. Is that how you sum up a year of imprisonment? Afraid we've got other things to worry about now. found among skydrift near Wallsend." "A rider's gauntlet." "I don't think so. I stepped across the threshold, followed by the others. Ingvar continues. The car must be on its way to collect a party official from one of the better districts. I've changed my mind. The chunk was as thick as a bank-vault door. He rolled slightly and then became still. The black swallowing horror between the stars, a presence that eats ships. The bot deployed its trauma pod and hauled you inside. Do you remember the stone?" She looked at him oddly. Barely a man at all. He would have to wait until sunrise if anyone was going to believe that he had been engaged in his normal duties. "Galenka." "I'm here." She came through indistinctly, comms crackling with static. "That's the deal." "Occurs to me sometimes maybe it would be easier if there wasn't a deal, you know," Nero said. I shuffle wet feet to stave off the cold. Van Ness knew it, too. "There's no talk of being rescued, or even hoping of it. "Not exactly." Forqueray smiled his vampiric smile. I just gave you the best advice I could. They were the survivors of the war, people who hadn't submitted eagerly to the iron rule of Minla's new Planetary Government. It might have been imagination, but the lines where the handles had cut into her were paler and less sensitive to the touch. But in the meantime we have to make do and mend." "Who's they?" But she was already on the move, shinning up another ladder with him trailing behind. Mechs, humanoid and giant-sized, stalk and stride the hellscape that was once a city. Got that," Childe said, watching the two joined squares slide across each other with a hypnotically smooth motion, only one square visible, as the imagined cube presented itself face-on to the wall. The girl had been unconscious right up until that moment, but when the engines went up she twitched on the bunk where we'd placed her, just as if she'd been experiencing a vivid and disturbing dream. "What's in there?" Forqueray said. And we'll begin moving people into the Space Dormitories long before that." Merlin had seen the plans for the Dormitories, along with the other elements of Minla's evacuation programme. I have no weapons, as you know. But we both knew it was a lie. By the time they were eighty thousand kilometres out, things were looking very bad for us. Jammed in down there. There was no solidity to the square, no detail or suggestion of how it related to the landscape or the backdrop. They shone out of the walls in bands and deltas and tributaries, a flowing form frozen in an instant of maximum hydrodynamic complexity. Afterwards, when Clavain tried to imagine how he might describe it, he found that words were never going to be adequate for the task. Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong e Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog Please click Add in the dialog above Please click Add in the dialog Please click Add in the di download dialog, then click Install Please click the "Downloads" icon in the Safari toolbar, open the first download in the list, then click Install on Firefox Please help us solve this error, what browser you're using, and whether you have any special extensions/add-ons installed. "You completed your mission." Perhaps it was my imagination—I would never know for certain—but it seemed to me then that the head nodded a fraction, as if acknowledging what I had said. I stress that we had no practical option; if we hadn't gone in, we wouldn't be having this conversation now. The figure raised one of its huge arms and scraped dirt off a shipping label. This ancient inscription—the quote from that old text—harkens back to our very early history. Enhancement phased in. You're a true artist, Loti. "Now I'm going home." \*\*\* I WAS THERE when he did it. Events that happen in one order there don't necessarily correspond to the same order here. There was a pair of airstrips arranged in a crossformation, and a dozen or so aircraft parked around a painted copy of the crescent emblem. I only had to nudge two of the dials by a fraction of a millimetre before they shone a hard and threatening orange. Then something happened. Even with the bots, the work took its toll. What else were we going to call ourselves?" "Lucky sons of bitches," Clausen said. And I tracked down the would-be assassin. "To all of us." She makes the tea. There's plenty of power in the suit. Actually I do the monkey a disservice. We can try and put you through later, if you'd like to talk?" "No thanks," Yukimi said. It did tie in with the Work. He felt it slam into the rig. The man pinches the cap between his gloved fingers and removes it. I can't ever repay this." "Start by telling me why you're here. It was a replacement, rather than simply the old one salvaged, repaired and reattached. Where Steiner was is currently unmanned. "That's obvious now. About as good as if I was still out there in the battlefield, gushing blood into the dirt. Inside the collar was a noose of monofilament wire, primed to tighten to the diameter of a human hair in less than a second. When I arrived, the only other person there was Purslane. She heard a noise that sounded awfully like the cargo doors closing again. "You can stop. The engine was still burning, but at least the gee-load was a steady pressure now, like a firm hand rather than a fist. If there's any evidence pointing to a crime now, it'll be lost forever by the time we return here." "She's right," I said. It seemed to be enough for her to hear the cadences of a story, even if it was in an alien language. "Follow me," Weather

said. Pilot of one of the quick reaction ships we sent up to deflect the impactor, as soon as we saw it coming in. It must have pained him to see Clavain make it to the dyke...pained him to see Clavain called to talk about the tragedy. Early in my rock-carving days, but not so early that I wasn't building a small but respectable reputation. "The Flux Swimmer is the Devilfish's weapon against other ships," I said, speaking for the girl. So what if it took a while before anyone found us? She'd lied to me about the Blue Goose as well. He thought back to what he had been planning to do before the seadragon came, and wanted to crush the memory and bury it where he buried every other shameful thing he had ever done. "Nice trick," he said. It still looked devilishly hard to me, but now that I refocused my mind on it, I thought I began to see the faintest hint of an approach, if not a full-blooded solution. On this Thousandth Night, we gather to select one strand in particular that has touched us more than others. "What is it, Merlin?" "I've got something for you." He reached under the cloak and fished out the gift she had given him as a girl, holding it before him. Especially after my offer to help you with them bags. But, you know, sometimes it's easier not having a choice." "How long?" "Hard to say. I'm thinking of a radically different theme for my tour this time. I do not doubt that the best lawyers—the best legal expert systems—are already preparing their cases. I couldn't. With the challenge of the next door ahead of us, the last thing I needed was paranoiac theory-mongering. "I know," Galiana said. The problem was to identify the shadow that could only be formed with a shearing, in addition to the other operations. If the perpetrators were among us—and I had reason to think they were—they would have killed Grisha to silence him. Our last line of defense. "What have you just done?" I asked. There's nothing there, "Purslane said. She looked back with a puzzled look. The inscription appears to be a quote from an ancient religious text. We left the reception chamber. "Don't dilly-dally." Prakash puts a hold on the assignment, and I get back to him just in time to claim it for myself. In four centuries of deep space travel there had been no more than glimpses of alien sentience. "It's coming from behind us. There hadn't been some awful, life-scouring bio-catastrophe, forcing everyone to live in bunkers. Whatever it is." "When we get...when we—" Her face was contorted with the strain of trying to make herself understood. I remember how good it felt to find an elegant solution, when the parameters looked so unpromising. Just don't be too specific about where I went." "I promise you that. I can still do useful shit, even now. Then they get the picture. It was hard to keep up with the others. The dining area had been well lit before, but now the only illumination came from the table lamps and the subdued lighting panels set into the paving. \*\*\* PROGRESS WAS SMOOTH and steady for the next five chambers. And it's worked, too. If I'd been prepared to cut corners, the way Yinning and Tarabulus worked, I could have shaped that rock in weeks. The hopes and fears of the in-crowd had come up with exactly the same idea. You seem a bit distracted." I sighed. Softcontoured hills rise at an indeterminate distance. "I'm steady." "Steadiness is a given. I'll be sure to offer my heartfelt congratulations when everyone else is sticking the boot in." "Day eight hundred," he said easily. I didn't want to do it. How long was I under the knife? "Then who were you?" "A machine," he said. That's his best chance now." "And who is the expert now?" "This is what they tell me. I arranged for the uplift and his weapon. For years the river hardly thawed at all. He's just anxious, that's all." She brushed my hand away. They built them out at sea because we need OTEC power to run them, using the heat difference between surface water and deep ocean, and it's much easier if we don't have to run those power cables inland." "Coming back to bite us now," Clausen said. If he was going to create the head of David, it had to be as flawless as Michelangelo's original. Besides, we were inferring a great deal from just one helmet. The other lung's volume was filled by a device which circulated refrigerated fluid along a loop of tube, draining the excess heat generated by the stew of neural machines filling our heads. "Which are you?" "Neither," I said. If the worms can elevate the moon's apocentre—even accidentally—we can assume they also have the means to lower its pericentre. "No weapons," he said. I emerged from the booth. We were out of options. The robots bade me to step down, onto carpeted flooring. But Schedar was right on the periphery of the Bubble, where dust density began to ramp up to normal galactic levels, two hundred and twenty-eight light-years from Mother Earth. On the left-hand side of the door—extending the height of the frame—was a vertical strip marked by many equally spaced horizontal grooves, in the manner of a ruler. Unstable binaries would be dismantled like delicate time bombs. I always knew it would." I started to say something, but Greta pressed a finger to my lips. It was our moral duty, our obligation, to submit to the hibernation rigs. Each time it was enough to startle the monkey, but Rasht kept his spacesuited pet on a short leash. "So let's see," said the final guest. I reach out a numb finger and press the buzzer anyway. For a moment, I regretted that I had not arranged matters so that the aurorae had formed part of the show, somehow, so Get off ship. We know—we've counted the bodies." "Replacements can always be cloned." Clavain hoped that he hid his disgust satisfactorily. Trintignant had lost a leg. "I'll live," Forqueray managed. The constancy of the speed of light. Talking out of the side of her mouth she said: "Put him into a coma until we really need him." "I talked to Baikonur." Celestine, as usual, spent at least twenty minutes studying the problem, skating her fingers over the shallowly etched markings on the frame, her lips moving silently as she mouthed possibilities. Because I've come all the way from the facility just to see you, through the snow. I didn't see much of the ship from the shuttle: just enough to tell that the Iron Lady looked much the same as all the other ramscoops parked in orbit around Mokmer: a brutalist grey cylinder, swelling to the drive assembly at the back. Put it this way: they were nice to look at, but I wouldn't have hung one in my home. Maybe she's just delayed." "Why don't you come inside and stop moping?" Purslane said, edging me away from the balcony. Anyone who wanted it was welcome to it. There's this thing called timelag, you see, which would make it very slow for me..." She cuts me off. I knew you'd come through this." "I haven't come through this." "I haven't come through it yet," I said. Now that he was distracted with the battle, I assumed he wouldn't dwell overlong on my questions. I flinched back, just as Galenka had done. Clearly it intended to make them, no one's going to stop you. "Someone does appear to have survived, Merlin." He perked up. "In less than a human lifetime. Ones and twos at first, then whole schools of them, rising into the sky between the hovering cliffs of our ships, as if they were born to fly. Yukimi was pacing around, wondering what to do-with all sorts of impractical ideas flashing through her head - when the cargo doors began to open. There were thirteen hundred distinct human cultures in the atmospheres of gas giants. A year or two later, I'd lost the sense that there was a novel's worth in this material, but it still seemed interesting enough to warrant expansion into a short story. I was wearing combat exo-cladding, but the outer shell's gone now. Zeal teetered, fighting for balance. Merlin looked around in time to see a girl running across the apron, towards the two of them. "What could possibly spoil it?" I asked. There was alcohol, or something like it, available in small quantities. I think we must have taken some damage to one of the drives, during voulage's softening-up assault. We were looking at the central sixty kilometres of the Matryoshka, three quarters of the Water a low humming sound, and sometimes when I touched it I felt a rapid but erratic vibration. We didn't start calling it Shell 1 until we knew there were deeper strata. I did not know whether this thief was a man or a woman, but at least now I can pin my hate onto something. "And you can call me Annabel, if that helps. "Who sent them?" He looked at both of us and said, very quietly, "You did." \*\*\* WE WOKE BURDOCK. "Even if you didn't." She still had the companion in her hands from when she had shown it the lake. "Pick it up," the widow said. One of her incisors was missing a point. "It'll take several hours for the segments to fuse back into a functional worm." "Good," Voi said, pushing herself out of her seat. It wouldn't be a technical problem to build all the engines we need for the Exodus Arks. The figure stepped into the bay, and at last she saw it properly. Childe had looked to have his doubts, but Celestine was so certain of herself. "It's academic. "I was taken, all right? Was everything all right? Was ev be a crashing anti-climax. Burdock had perpetrated a lie, and now we were perpetrating another because of it. He could breathe, but anything more was an effort. But I could not be set up on tripods, while some even larger wheeled cannons were being propelled across the apron by teams of well-drilled soldiers. I'm thinking about moving. I should have a word with your father. I've never had the slightest doubt about Lenka's loyalty. I stared at it for a moment, wondering why it had my attention. "Do you mind if we wait a moment?" I ask of my escort. Introductions." The others looked at us with no more than mild interest. That's the way we did things in the Cohort: immortality through our deeds, rather than flesh and blood. But the pain abated quickly, replaced by digital numbness. We're coming back, understand?" "You don't have to take it personally," I said. Glories went unrecorded, unremembered. They were half-buried in dust, like the bluffs and arches of some ancient landscape rendered in miniature. "That is where I became what I am," Zima said. I still cut rock. More so, in all likelihood." "It's what you do with the machines that counts," I said. They would find nothing odd about him because in all significant respects he was biologically identical to the people administering the examinations. And you still haven't told me your name." "I told you: it's nothing you could understand. Probably somewhere a lot less exciting than the places that showed up in his strand." I felt a tingling sensation, wondering if Fescue might also be implicated in the Burdock business. Her long hair was the sheer black of interstellar space, pinned back from her face by a jewelled clasp which flickered with a constellation of embedded pastel lights. In a few years, it may not be possible at all—even with imperial blessing. Everyone sat down. "I want to believe you." "You will, shortly. I studied the slow, painful way she made her progress. There's no money for science and there's certainly none for space travel. Isn't that enough for you?" \*\*\* A LITTLE LATER, Purslane and I stood alone on the highest balcony of the island's central spire. Implants and mechanisms glittered like small, precisely jewelled ornaments. In the tunnels of Phobos, they had never had the luxury of knowing when a worm was close. Her eyes flashed olive. The eyes were blank silver surfaces, what I could see of his mouth a thin, slightly smiling slot. "It was pretty hard, even then. Didn't you read his file?" Da Silva grimaced. "These machines...the ones that murdered your people?" "Yes," Grisha said. 'Fliers are warriors', he said. Its drive was a veined green bulb, flung out from the stern on a barbed stalk: it hung nose-down from the bulb, swaying gently in the late evening breeze. We were assembled in the Deimos manufactury complex and sent down to Mars, for use in the settlements." "I am not a suit," I said, shaking my head. They won't accept any kind of system that imposes limits on human creativity." "No one takes faster than light travel seriously, Campion." "It doesn't have to involve travel. "What?" I asked. From orbit we had seen that most of Holda was still covered in ice, but there were belts of exposed crust around the equator and tropics. Topological contours. If you hadn't told Malkoha to give me that gift—" "Then I'm glad I did, if it meant so much." Minla looked away, something between sadness and fascination on her face. But you would not answer her call. Nothing about his manner suggested anything untoward. The gag reflex kicked in, and then it was over. Hopefully it won't arrive until the afternoon. You told us we'd find helium three in the topsoil of our moon. Maybe at the back of my mind...at the back of our mind..." "You always hoped it might come to this?" Galiana smiled. Several times I had found myself staring at a problem, with even my new mathematical skills momentarily unable to crack the solution, when Childe had seen the answer. The movement was as swift as a snakebite, but although she held me firmly, I sensed no aggressive intentions. At least I didn't think I was. Since it seemed unlikely that there was a vast flow of commerce in and out of Saumlaki, our ship might be the first suitable outbound vessel. In practise, days and weeks would go by without Burdock doing anything that we both agreed was noteworthy or odd. It told her what it could do and how she could make it obey her. I had never understood mathematics with any great agility, but now I sensed it as a hard grid of truth underlying everything: bones shining through the thin flesh of the world. We were given that kind of autonomy, so that we could continue to remain useful in the fragmented society of a war zone." "You continued to function as a suit?" "They had their own. And while it's clear that she doesn't entirely approve of my decision to ship out, I'm still glad to have someone to talk to. I want to know what's really out there." "Just do it." She really has no option but to give me what I want. He looked sad, then, as if he had hoped for a different answer. I lifted up my mask to get a better look at it. You've learned something of what has happened in your absence: the advances we've made, the ongoing condition of war. "How can you know?" "Because his memories contradict yours. Even if Venus was on the other side of the sun. There were vast billowing backdrops of red and green cloud, veined and flawed by filaments of cool black. He went out in the underwater armor, a monster born anew. Clavain estimated the girl's age as ten standard years—perhaps fractionally older. \*\*\* WHEN THE ARMOURED door to the hangar was shut the Conjoiners attacked his m-suit with enzymic sprays. I take in what the map has to tell me, knowing should have done this sooner, rather than take Annabel's word that everything was going to be moonbeams and kittens. "You sound as if you're caught up in some kind of elaborate parlour game," the emperor said. Will that make you happy?" "What would make me happy..." Fescue began, before scowling and making to turn away. Conjoiners weren't supposed to be capable of anything so primitive as mercy. "Fair enough," he said. Take this cloak." She handed him a surprisingly heavy garment. It was built to. Not the main one, but one of the four or five largest colonies on the surface. So I'm doing something stupid and childish: I'm running away. When she was seventeen she would be legally entitled to receive the implants that gave her direct access to that shifting, teeming sea of universal knowledge. They're not my problem now. "You think someone was trying to tell me something? Overhead, the rotor began to turn. It's ecstasy, Inigo, when it goes wrong?" "When it goes wrong?" "When it goes wrong, you don't get much time to explore how it feels." Weather shut her eyes again, like a person lapsing into micro-sleep. \*\*\* SHE LED HIM through more grey-walled corridors, descending several levels deeper into the nest. I lost an arm and leg on one side, and watched—half in horror, half in fascination —as the room claimed these parts for itself; tendrils whipped out from the wall to salvage those useful conglomerations of metal and plastic. As to how people had come to the sky in the first place, or how the present political situation had developed, Minla's texts were frustratingly vague. I surveyed the planet from space, searching for possible clues. They can grow me a new one while I'm sleeping." The doctor's musical voice interrupted us, Trintignant's impassive silver mask poking through into Celestine's bubble-tent partition. ZIMA BLUE I DON'T THINK writers consciously set out to make certain tropes more or less prominent in their writing; it just develops organically over the course of things, and sometimes we're the last to notice it happening. It wasn't the only one either. It's just that no one's ever wanted to go back." "And you still tell me none of this was planned?" "No; but I don't expect you to believe me. But at the same time the pain would herald the possibility of blessed release, and that would make it bearable. You couldn't mistake it for any other place in the Bubble. I'd warned him that the Cockatrice's engines were in an unstable condition, and that we wouldn't have time to back off to a safe distance if the buckled drive spar finally gave way. I caught them at a time when they were inching towards some kind of ceasefire. "Admittedly, he doesn't have much prestige in the line—but there are other ways he could have won it by now, if it mattered to him that much. Only the tiniest, faintest hint of pixelation—seen whenever I changed my angle of view too sharply—betrayed the fact that this was not quite normal vision, but a cybernetic augmentation. By the time I learned I'd been turned down, you'd already decided to flush me out of your past. "Maybe if I had someone else from my crew to bitch about it all with, I wouldn't feel so bad. The thing reached the end of the bridge and swerved towards us. Bit like this Scaper, really. But Merlin saw no sense in playing his most valuable card so early in the game. He raised his right hand palm open, the newly spun flowers in his left. We plotted a path between bubbling pools, crossing bridges and isthmuses of strong ice. It came over the horizon. But for us it's about only one thing: species survival. They're pretty common out here, with the kind of work we do. Zeal's huge boots clanged ponderously closer. Zeal always knew we were going to win." I looked down at the creature again, looking so pitiful in its metal cage. It was there, fleetingly. We both knew that this triumph might be exceedingly short-lived, since the Progress would now find it even more difficult to remain in contact with the Tereshkova. You know you can't win. They're out there. It's ten thousand light-years from here; many days of shiptime, even in the Waynet. Her face was stony and unmoving, her eyes blank surfaces, but there was no hint of ageing or decay. She wanted to gorge on reality. You'd thrown your life into contemplation of the alien. "It certainly isn't the money," I said. THOUSANDTH NIGHT THE EDITOR, ANTHOLOGIST and writer Gardner Dozois was one of the first figures in American SF to take any notice of my work, and I've been enormously grateful for his support and generosity ever since. Doubtless there was more, out of sight. She had not failed the mission. The resonant frequency of the graviton pulse is at the low end: that means whoever's doing this was throwing up a big screen." Like blowing a low note in a small bottle. "Once upon a time the self-repair systems were adequate, but eventually even they stopped working properly. There wasn't much privacy on Moonlighter, but it would be strictly business all the way out and all the way back home. "An extravagance," Skanda said, as the craft docked. She had seen people adjust to the revelation with little more than a world weary shrug, as if this were merely the latest in a line of galling surprises life had thrown at them, no worse in its way than illness or bereavement or any number of personal setbacks. Well, congratulations. The Frost Fair stayed almost all year round. "Do you know their names?" "It was names I was after," he said. Conjoiners will consider any necessary act, up to and including local genocide, to protect the secrets of the C-drive." She paused for a moment, letting me think she was finished, before continuing on the same grave note, "But having said that, there are layers to our secrets. Instead of individual stars, I saw only smudges and motes, aggregations of hundreds of thousands of suns His gloved finger caressed the delicate little trigger. Clavain had never seen anything like it, but the nature of the thing was instantly obvious. From my low vantage point, she was soon out of my line of sight. I resist for a moment, looking back at Nesha. Quite what has happened, or is happening, or will happen, when it touched (or touches, or will touch) the nuclear-burning core is still far from clear. We made evacuation plans, of course; built ships so that some of us might cross space to another system. Its layered structure was borne of necessity; the way it had to be in order to complete its mission. Minor, but annoying. NOT MAKE DEREK CROSS." "The telemetry never made it to Earth, or the expedition's orbiting module," Maria continues. Or it might be—and here my thoughts choked on bitter alienness—that the ship had to be this big to contain its one living passenger. Childe wouldn't have cared about our past." Her eyes flashed behind the visor of her helmet. The view resembled an inverted landscape: a sea of fog, interrupted by the sleek, luminous spires of tall buildings. "Yes?" "It's silly, but they said a real Winged Man had come down, out of the sky." "And did your father place any credence in that story?" "Not really," Kathrin said. Got that?" "Yes." "With you so far." "You should have something resembling a Chinese chequerboard. "I followed the trail of my memories back to the earliest reliable event, which occurred shortly after the installation of the implants. There were many worlds, and the chain became fainter with each that I visited. "But you can tell he's itching to know more about it. Overhead, the clouds are mustard coloured, sagging with airborne toxicity. But I've never seen them completely empty, which I suppose is some kind of testament. They might to left, so that the figures on the right form the sequence which those on the right form the sequence which those on the right form the sequence which the figures on the right form the sequence which those on the right form the sequence which the sequence wh quickly?" "You've obviously never spent any time in reefersleep, Richard. I held it to my face, saw my visored form staring back. \*\*\* HE HAD BEEN on the new rig, alone, for two weeks. Whoever they had as shipmaster, I thought, they were good at their work. The second thing was those fierce, beautiful eyes. It boomed, reverberating down to the horizon and left a greenish aftertinge. "Are you going to tell us?" Purslane asked. At the end of the story, we find that it isn't Dimitri who's escaped, it's his doctor, who's gone off the rails so completely that he's started thinking he was one of the crew. So I had no reason to sense anything unusual as I selected and warmed a meal for Galenka Baikonur detected a change in the Matryoshka—a big one. "I'm not letting you go." "You've no option." The man's voice was placid. So how in hell is Doctor Annabel Lyze able to reach over from Tango Oscar and teleoperate her magic green hands? I should be on my way." "The stone belonged to a prisoner of mine, a man named Dowitcher. I would have been thirteen, I suppose. He was about to add that it been the kind of act which war normalised, but decided that the statement would have sounded hopelessly defensive. They shattered worlds and remade them into artful, energy-trapping forms. Kanto will find his own way out, once he knows he's gone the wrong way." "She's right," I said. It was war. And the Spire, for that matter." Childe returned his attention to the door, evidently torn between solving the problem and silencing Celestine. "They call me Corax," the old man said. The next chamber was a palace of horrors. "You'd better listen carefully—we could get cut off at any moment. But it was my world. All rights reserved. "I can't help that," I said, my voice piping from the speech synthesiser that replaced my sealed-up mouth. Given what Galiana had said about the girl's deficiencies—that by any reasonable definition she was hardly more than an automaton—what he was doing was very likely pointless, if not suicidal. I may not be provably culpable, but I am certainly perceived to have been the instrument of a wrongdoing. I watched it fall, waiting for the glint when it impacted the bubble. "I know about timelag." "So you do. Where eighteen previous versions of you were butchered and flayed by the thing." time. But something called me back to those notes and the result, a year and a half later, was "Fury". His eye sockets were stuffed with faceted blue crystals, radiating a spray of glowing fibres. I rise from the mattress and stretch away stiffness. How can I turn my back on you, and still have any self-respect?" "Plenty of people do exactly that," Nero said. The noise was patient, rhythmic, wheezing, and it was accompanied by a labored shuffling. Beyond was a kind of corridor, sloping down in a gently steepening arc, so that the end was not visible except as an intensification of that silvery glow. There was no reference to the Waynet, however, or anything connected to the Cohort or the Huskers. Too fast for anyone around Shiva-Parvati to come out and rescue you, too." "I know this." "Then you also know that you're not moving anywhere before your resources run out. "Could have been worse, Thom. "No, Ray can do something useful as well. Now I'll add all mapped connections, including those that have only ever been traversed by accident." The scribble did not change dramatically. The only problem was that Greta had something else in mind. Someone got to that ship before us—cleaned it out. The solar patches would provide him with all the energy he needed. To Galiana it would be just another technique in her arsenal. The thing is, it's starting to look as if Vratsa was a mole." "But he's on the staff for-how long, exactly?" There'd been no need for me to review the files-the information was at my immediate disposal, flashing into my mind instantly. Instead he'd been supplanted." "So he did ask too many questions," Purslane said. Under a permanently overcast sky (the surface of Titan is seldom visible from space) it could easily be mistaken for some dismal outpost of Alaska or Siberia. And in that respect she excelled herself: without actually saying anything, she managed to whip everyone into a state of heady expectation. For a while, as we passed room after room, a dangerous optimism began to creep over us. Eventually purple ones seemed to suck the very colour from the others. I watched in astonishment as the chunk slid in silence to one side, exposing a bulkhead-sized hole in the side of the engine wall. And you're quite right. Between cutting stints, when I was too tired to supervise the machines, I'd float with Skanda in the observation bubble. Brave Teterev, thinking of her son. Then a small, rational voice reminded me that this was exactly the effect the Spire's builders would have sought. By the time he clocked off on his first day, he had not caught up with the expected number of repairs, so he had even more to do on the second. Although the core was dead, Holda was not itself a dead world. When I looked into one—peering down into the geological strata of brain anatomy—I had to blink against the glare. "Visiting the dead again, Richard?" "Who's there?" I said, looking around, faintly recognising the speaker but not immediately able to place him. "Was Celestine right? "But I don't think I can carry the wood all the way home." "Not with two hog's heads as well. Many of those green and brown swatches of land mass were surrounded by water, as his first glimpse had indicated. You really didn't pay much attention to it on your way in to Lecythus, did you?" "It was a moon. Forqueray told us that each suit was capable of keeping its occupant alive almost indefinitely; that the suit would recycle bodily wastes in a near-perfect closed cycle, and could even freeze its occupant if circumstances merited such action. The cylinder had a flattened top and widened base that suggested the stump of a tree. "There's something I want you to see. Do you doubt for a minute that there's something going on behind my eyes? The four walls of the cubic chamber held rack upon rack of coffin-sized white boxes, stacked thirty high and surrounded by complicated plumbing, accompanied by an equally complex network of access catwalks, ladders and service tracks. Forqueray remained impassive, glancing slightly down as he absorbed the data being sent back to his suit. A pity none of it would last. A ghost of resistance, and then they were through. "Don't come any closer." There are two of them, both wearing full battle armour, backed up by a couple of infantry Mechs. I couldn't even be sure if you were in the system any more. Suzy came out of the fog, tugging her own mask aside. But she'll never turn on me." The monkey gibbered. She's done something to the engines, and now-if you get your way -we're going to let her get up close and personal with them." "And do what?" I asked. Another meteor slashed the sky, bringing a temporary daylight to the scene. And there was another dream in which I was inside some kind of -" I halted, waiting for the words to assemble in my head. It could be a sensor ghost, a hallucination she's making the Petronel see." "Captain—" "That would work for her, wouldn't it? In turn, these concentric bands shimmer with a hundred splendid hues of the most ethereal blue-white or pastel green or jade. It has similar capabilities?" "Give or take." Her tone told me she wasn't exactly signing up for my for idea with enthusiasm. I scoff at the paltry remuneration. But otherwise—I'm all right. Almost close enough to touch, like the space station that had sped across the sky over Klushino, when my father held me on his shoulders. Each layer was a form of armour or camouflage or passkey, evolved organically to enable it to slip through the threshing clockwork of a cosmic time machine. "He train you now...just to build up neuromotor patterns." "Listen to her," Zeal said mockingly. It's shorthand for the trip no one ever hopes to make by accident. No one, to date, has ever been eaten alive by Derek, but the possibility hangs heavy over every interview. The demonstration of one of these devices would surely be enough to collapse the Shadowland administration." Merlin shook his head slowly. "I lost my hat, and I felt this ridiculous urge to rescue it!" Celestine looked at me with something between icy detachment and outright hostility. An upstart rival had undercut my offer and stolen the prospective customer. Maybe they think I've already taken Mike apart. It was artificial, clearly, but it wasn't made of solid parts. "I'm sorry that you don't like it." "I could have got it fixed at one of the orbital clinics, I suppose," I said, "but there's always something else that needs fixing first. I got down there as quickly as I could, obviously. "Yours," he said. It's where I was born—or "made", if you insist upon it. He even made you look human." "And you?" I asked. "Sub-sector fifteen. But everyone who worked with them knew what would happen if, by accident or design, the engines were allowed to get more than sixteen hundred metres apart. The thing you are holding is the entire object." "Then I don't understand what it is for." "You shall, in time Now that he controlled almost the entire colonised galaxy, he sought only to become the figurehead of a benevolent, just government. Clavain knew the major routines which drove them; but that expertise did not guarantee his survival. The naming of things, the labelling of cartographic features—that's something that gives me great pleasure." "I don't think I could ever understand that." I try to help The Baby. "I wish the circumstances were better. "The fucking thing just woke up, that's why. The pilot was ghostly pale, wraithe-thin and naked, lying on a white metallic couch or rack that at first glance appeared to be an apparatus of torture or savage restraint. "Where is it now?" "Still anchored to one of the Shell 2 platelets. Similarly lethal field lines bound them, but this far in the predictive model became a lot less trustworthy. I couldn't begin to get a grip on it, even if I'd had the strength to stop him. Unfortunately—for reasons we'll come to—he was a bit of a miserable bastard. "And knew about this part of the deal, as well. "Well, I'm happy for you. Timing was tight—the Progress would have to begin its run within seconds of the window opening, if it had a chance of slipping through. Whether the one could be considered a distant prequel to the other, I'll leave as an exercise for the reader. "I'm a survivor." "A survivor of what?" asked. Arrest some troublemakers, ask them questions they can't possibly answer, about a crime they had nothing to do with, and then hang them on the pretext that they weren't cooperating with the Great House. "I'm more or less stuck here. Once, it had seemed axiomatic that things would only go from strength with each return. \*\*\* A NEW REPAIR estimate from Kolding. That was what they thought. It took a little while to understand its nature. My eyes take a moment to focus—the snow and the cold are making them water—but when they do there's no real doubt. "Fuel is always a problem," Minla said. If she's ever doubted that she was right, she now has concrete proof. Even when he was inside the compound, Tyrant was observing every exchange, thanks to the microscopic surveillance devices Merlin carried on his person. It was felt that meeting the man from space would be an important part of her education, one that could never be repeated at a later date. But perhaps the nurses, doctors and mantises have already done enough. And he was dying. The crux; the wellspring; the seed. The fact that I might not be telling the truth, or telling the truth, or telling the truth, or telling the truth are been just firm enough to take the others, but their passage—the weight of their heavy, power-assisted suits—had weakened it to the point where it could no longer support the last of us. Establish my existence as a true sentient being." "Just before someone takes an axe to you." Gaunt shook his head. At least two, sometimes three or four, arrived within every minute. Plywood panels cover some of the windows in the outer wall, where the glass has broken. We could all stay at home, and communicate via clones or robots. "So tell me about your sister, the one on Venus. "You were hoping I might be able to do something for you. Then it came back. "Not that there was much about it worth remembering." Burdock was a quiet, low-profile line member who never went out of his way to make a show of himself. But it was still a massive cake to eat in one bite." "And did you?" "No-it made much more sense to focus on what we were good at. How long would it take you to arrange this?" "It's trivial," I admitted. Inside the Spire they passed through a series of challenges, each of which was harder than the last. If it only takes a day or two of travel to get anywhere—remember what I said about clocks slowing down—then you don't need to haul all your provisions with you, even if you're crossing to the other side of the galaxy." "But could a bigger ship enter the Waynet, if it had to?" "The entry stresses wouldn't allow it. The next instant, she was still there, but everything about her had changed. I feel that I understand people. I won't stop you if you do, but it'd be remiss of me not to make sure you're absolutely certain of it. We found that as well." The emperor narrowed his eyes. He could have managed without them, but by bringing him the things he needed they made it easier. She wanted to be found now, no doubt about it. To the right lay the quickest route down to the quayside road to Jarrow Ferry. She remembered him punching commands into the buggy before he had stood up. Yukimi crouched low, cushioned on the blackened, snaking wreckage of a roller coaster, until I'm sure the drones won't pick out my infrared or EM signature. The air pressure behind it would slam it open in an instant, and both of us would be sucked into space long before emergency bulkhead seals protected the rest of the ship. But I'd accept anyone's help to finish them off." Galiana glanced quickly at her compatriots before answering. I stalled. But I'm not going to blow up the ship. Our eyes met, and we nodded. Fucked like an old clock. It'll be more like one very long dream. It may or may not have been the final one. A comfortable number of light-hours behind me, the Waynet has just cut into Calliope's heart. But Yukimi didn't mind, really. Months of just the two of us, stuck in my ship hundreds of light-minutes from civilisation. I had seen many dawns, but in all my travels I had never tired of them. It was created to endure for a specific moment in time. They have to be able to respond to those military-arithmetic attacks swiftly and efficiently, and mount counteroffensives of their own. By rights, you should have been on it. "My art, if you will. I made out a small panel of reflective blue set flat against the ground, surrounded by what appeared to be a set of tiered viewing stands. "Nothing you need worry about," Clausen said. "I'll make something up. I might be guilty of exactly the kind of post-hoc rationalisation I already warned about, but I'm as sure as I can be that the grey waters and grey structures of Sleepover's bleak, depopulated world connect back to that rain-soaked epiphany. The materials all felt perfectly mundane and commonplace, even a little frayed and worn in places. That airship could have carried on to Milankovic, and then where would you be?" "Hm," she said, remaining to be convinced. "Very nasty," he said appreciatively. The pursuit of optima leads only to local minima. "Clothes in the bedside locker: they should fit you. We crowded around the door and for two or three minutes—what felt like two or three minutes—what felt like two or three minutes." "Something was said. "If there's a tranquiliser dart in there, it won't work on me. Then be shook his head, dismissively. What was going on? Why them, and not me?" "Something was said." about particles of paint blocking intake filters. I went walkabout. I locate the railway station, and begin to explore the surrounding streets, certain I can't be wrong. They meed this done quickly." Typical of Prakash, always the job he knows I will not refuse until last. They'll take this world apart to safeguard the Great Work. They prates. A human signal, a sign that we shouldn't fear it. "Why didn't you warn us about the worms?" "Warn you?" For the first time something like doubt crossed her face, but it was only fleeting. After ditching that story, I started afresh and wrote The Six Directions of Space, a completely different piece. The area within the Great Wall was large enough to have an appreciable weather system: spanning enough Martian latitude for significant coriolis effects; enough longitude for diurnal warming and cooling to cause thermal currents. "This is what I found," I explain. When they emerged, you saw dark hulls scabbed and scarred by the blocky extrusions of syntax patterning, jibs and q-planes retracted for landing and undercarriages clutching down like talons. "Like, we just give them their duties and to hell with it." "You wouldn't have been too pleased if we didn't give you the choice," Da Silva said. Galenka had picked her spot well, the Soyuz resting on one of the out-jutting thorns. I sensed that the journey had not been a short one. All of these things only exist because of computational events occurring in the Realm. There was a gap between the mill and the six-storey house next to it, where some improbably narrow property must once have existed. We'll come to that. Not while I'm in charge." "That's very good, Mercurio. "I've got to visit someone on the Jarrow road, to settle an account." "Then you'd better take the wood now, I suppose," Peter said. It is a sort of roaring, gargling parody of actual language. He put down his tools and watched the arrival. We lose camera rotation, or blow some more memory, we're blind. I was sorry about what had needed to be done, but I made it understand that I had no choice at all." "How did it take it?' "How do you think, Nidra? Yes, there's risk in that as well—especially at night. It already looked magnificent. Good grief, no. The way she looked at me, it was as if she was looking at a piece of broken furniture, or a dripping tap, or a pattern of mould on the wall. There's nowhere for me to go. What did Zeal know that I didn't? Clavain thought of something. "Hurry. That's when I found evidence of the Titan transmission." "This is nonsense. She had rumours of something far worse. My back began to ache from all the leaning over the table. He is (or was) a fully adult individual who underwent neotenic regression therapy, until he attained the size and physiology of a six-month human. Artists have killed themselves for a stab at immortality. Jutting out into the water was some kind of treatment facility, consisting of a metal gangway ending in a blocky windowless grey structure rising from the reservoir. Leave the important things to the rest of us." Fescue stalked off. Not all of those twenty ships even use visible thrust. But it cannot just be the jangling men who drop things from the sky, or fall out of it." "Why not?" Kathrin asked, in the spirit of someone going along with a game. My last act, before dismissing the AM, was to transfer its observations into the vacant spaces of my enlarged memory. \*\*\* WHEN I SQUAT down before my wise purple eye and enter global workspace, Prakash is distracted. We've already mothballed all routes west of the Hasharud Loop. Corax picked at the edge of the book with his fingernail. I can say this now because I know that I did eventually create something worthwhile. We owed it to Burdock. He must have submerged and bobbed to the surface because when he came around he was coughing cold salt-water from his lungs, and it was in his eyes and ears and nostrils as well, colder than water had any right to be, and then a wave was curling over him, and he blacked out again. "This is the only way, Purslane. He'd surely have made some mention of that if the strand was real." She was right. Her skin is the black of interstellar space, and her small, exquisitely featured head is perched above a neck which has been extended by several vertebrae. In the background details of this story, incidentally you can see in germinal form some of the ideas I later fleshed out in the Poseidon's Wake sequence. There'll be a frank and fair exchange of information between our mutual space agencies. These out in the Poseidon's Wake sequence of the ideas I later fleshed out in the Poseidon's Wake sequence. big tourist ships hauled back towards interstellar space. "Not going to be easy, but...losing more of me now. "Yes, I remember it now. "One pig's head, and twenty candles, just as you wanted," she said brightly. "Normal vacuum in Gap 1," she murmured. My dosage was negligible." "You accept that they died, despite having no evidence." "I believe what Doctor Kizim told me. Where it had been squeezing her neck, the skin was marked with a raw pink band, spotted with blood. "Don't you get it? It's as good an example as I can think of how non-linear the creative process can be, and how it's all but futile to impose some kind of ad-hoc narrative on the development of a story. "Stupid. "The medichines in your brain have interfaced with your visual cortex," Galiana said. "Not exactly, no." Purslane looked on approvingly. I'm expecting to hear that she's tied me to some civil infringement not covered by any statute of limitations. It's a weapon, Gaunt reminded himself. The consequences would be brutal, for you and anyone you might have spoken to." "Then maybe you're better off not letting us see whatever you're so keen to keep hidden." "There's something I'm going to have to do. Then I realised that I was all right. "And do you regret it now?" "I'm older now," Weather said. "I don't need steel now," weather said." "I don't need steel now," weather said. "I don't need steel now," weather said." "I don't need steel now," weather said. "I don't need steel now," weather said." Ultra tossed the float-cam into the darkness. But one isn't." "Which is?" She pointed to one of the forms. Stopped it from growing, and from managing its own repairprocesses correctly...but you never truly killed it." Sandra Voi had guessed, Clavain realised. "It won't be so bad," she said. Real bad thing happen here. Effective, if a little on the brash side." "Yes, I remember now. "This is what's going to happen," I tell them. We've seen empires and dynasties pass like seasons. They rested on rails, one after the other. The descent to Mars was hard and steep. But it turned out that I wasn't quite special enough, so I was selected out of the programme." I looked at the swollen, fissured mind. "You're safe now. \*\*\* I THINK IT'S fair to say that things did not go as well in Babelsberg as I might have wished. Then I just made a run for it, dodging between robots and dock workers. I wasn't alive then, but from the moment Galiana brought our new state of consciousness into being, the thread of memory has never been broken. He pointed the gun at a pair of seats next to the bed. But still big enough when you have a journey to make, and a man who needs help. With a heavy heart I lifted the bill to inspect the damage. "Killed her outright, when they caught her." It is brutal, but in that moment I mean it. You can destroy me, that's true. "Nesha, you need to understand. Then Burdock taught Grisha how to speak his own tongue. We were looking down on the sea from a dizzy height now: the island had detached itself from Reunion, and was now climbing slowly into space, pushed by the vast motors I must have installed in its foundation rocks. My sponsors were assured that I would be given this lucrative interview slot to myself. "Like weightlessness? "See this? Matter of fact, I remember watching it on the newsfeeds from a bar in Huygens City, Titan. Just don't make the choice until we're forced into it." "If we get through this room, Childe..." "Yes?" "I'm going back. THE WATER THIEF THE BOY wants myself." eve again. Purslane's box led the way. All those innocent lives? But everyone knew that the Sheriff could only travel so fast, even when he had his flying machine. Not all of the embellishments had been arranged at strict right angles to their neighbours, and the style and apparent age of the house varied jarringly from place to place. I mean, why not just leave it intact?" "We take the lobots as we get 'em, son. There were nearly a thousand of them. "Yes," Maria says, rotating her elegant mask to face my own. Until now I never really gave much thought to those horror stories about the Spiders. Maybe that was why it shattered, out of neglect." "But we found it," I said. Putting his hand onto the service rail for balance, when the robot was about to move back along it. In a soundproofed private annexe of that same complex, Minla also lay in the care of machines. Aboard the ship, when we had been hunting her, she had seemed strong and potentially dangerous. Gather our strength and return. The airship skirted the edge of the town and then descended quickly. But doesn't it feel as if this place is forcing us to expose ourselves to it, to make ourselves maximally vulnerable? We just didn't know it then. Now his face was an expressionless mask. He allowed it to choose when it cleaned and when it surfaced to recharge its batteries via the solar panels grouped on its back. "It's tight," Lenka said. She'd had it customized on Carillon. They try and send these things through. "Fine by me. "Very old indeed." "But not of any cosmic significance." "I'm sorry. Draw a line from it to one of its six neighbours, and then another line to one of the two dots either side of the neighbour you just chose. He had expected to see something—some chunk of incomprehensible surgical equipment, perhaps—but the middle of the room was only an empty, smooth-walled, grey pit. She wolfed vile-looking paste into her mouth from some kind of spigot in the wall, the stuff lathering her metal hands. I never did! Admiration? "To show us how we've gone wrong. Just as brave? But a flicker of recognition nonetheless. Your ship may ride a smooth thrust beam, but the reactions going on inside the drive are anything but smooth. We know all about that, don't we? I looked at Galenka and she was still walking upright, at right angles to the surface of the floor. The air at the base of the Great Wall was technically breathable even now, but there seemed no point in taking chances when speed was of the essence. I knew that Lenka would succumb to Teterev's fate, and that if I remained in this place I would eventually join them. The space effort was winding down—even the Tereshkova was cobbled together from the bits of earlier, failed enterprises. "You think the punishment's over?" "I think we'd know if it wasn't," I said. His hand dithered over two bottles of wine. "I'm sorry I'm late, Thom." I turned to her as she approached the table. I hobble around to the cab, where the driver's glaring at me through an unopened window. "But that isn't living memory. "There's a lot of organic material in here, and a lot of cybernetic machinery. The question is: was that software running in the pod, or in my own head? Some bubbles erupted out of the door, and then there was nothing. An impulse, to kick into a collision course for Naiad. The accretionists argued that the surviving robots became the way we were gradually, through the slow augmentation of simpler machines. ABOUT what we've done to your suit. But to what purpose? His lips barely moved, but something was amplifying his words, or his intention to speak. But when another ship's magnetic field. "The pilot went mad." "You know this for a fact," Galenka said. The sponsors were worried he was getting a little too old for this kind of thing." "Corax isn't coming back," Yukimi said. The body became instantly still. You can turn up your suit temperature, or you can turn it down. I shook it, feeling the slightly plastic texture of his artificial skin. That was exactly what the Cockatrice wanted. She was right, too. "Even if we get it wrong, the punishment's not likely to be too severe at this stage." He nodded and palmed the right-side symbol. "You told us all the truth, didn't you? Galenka had even taken pains to make sure the forward escape hatch was not blocked. A very few manage to succeed in several facets at once, and still fewer achieve a gemlike perfection which shines down the ages. It looked for signals across the entire electromagnetic spectrum; it sifted the parallel data streams of neutrino and gravity waves. "It's difficult. I have some suggestions." "I'd be glad to hear them," Lenka said. I couldn't very well disguise myself otherwise." We crossed the bridge and navigated a path between the tall trees which sheltered the island's structure. "I'd need to run some scans," I hedged. Look, I can even touch you. Dreams and ambitions that didn't work out." The way she says this, I can't help but wonder if she isn't, on some level, alluding to the private trajectory of her own career. A hundred years? "I still don't have an explanation for what went wrong. It was a different time. There's a low coffee table with faded plastic flowers in a vase. It trailed sooty hyphens behind it. As expected, all six dials were now showing deep blue, which meant they were operating well inside the safety envelope. I've figured this out even if you haven't. What if they are now showing deep blue, which meant they are now showing deep blue, which means they are now showing deep blue. found out they had been revived and put back several times, each time refusing to take on the burden? I mean, that's a significant part of it, but I also want to explore the gift that the Jugglers have given you?" Before she had time to answer I continued, "I understand. We don't aspire to genetic unity, no matter what your propagandists think. Not because I can stand to hear it again, but because I want to be sure it still works. Yes, well done you. "No," Celestine said, who must have also been attuned to Childe's laser signals. She touched her claws against the controls, and then gasped, unable to complete whatever action she'd had in mind. Again, there was no doubt as to the truth of his words. They kept the lid on it for thirty years. But as far as I can see the fish didn't come to any harm." "Let's hope so. The hotel was an echoing, multilevel prefab structure, sunk deep into bedrock. Childe breezed through the group, drawing annoyed frowns but no actual recognition, although one or two of the people in the party were vague acquaintances of mine. Centuries would pass. Merlin liked holding the book up to the light of an open window, so that the illustrated pages shone like stained glass. I looked at Celestine, willing her to palm the frame, no matter what Childe said. Such engineering would have been impossible on a planet that had plate tectonics, but beneath its lithosphere Mars was geologically quiet. I find the prospect of my own dismantling a more palatable one than continuing to endure revulsion for a crime I do not believe I committed. "Fescue supported the Great Work," she said. It had been his first step on the long road to becoming an Ultra. "But I understand your reluctance to accept this, Celestine. Studied. "Yes, Doctor," Childe said, glancing back at him. Nothing I did made myself invisible to them. And she knows she's in trouble. And to make sure Zeal didn't put implants in my head. I was hoping you'd develop atomic rockets, not atomic bombs." "This is our world, Merlin, not yours. "It's all right," she says. Get a reading off these rocks, find out what that silver stuff really is." By which she meant, return to the ship in the meantime. "No," she said. Might get me back to the ship. Along the pipeline, to our left." For once, Luttrell seems alert. Malkoha, Triller, Coucal, Jacana, Sibia, Niltava, and about half a dozen more top brass Merlin had never seen before. "It's as if they're gathering in readiness for something," Purslane said. But instead she nodded. My original repair plan had been tight, but the unknown ship forced me to accelerate the schedule even further, despite what I'd told Weps. "The danger is passed," he said. No stars in that direction, just a big absence like the mother of all galactic supervoids. But they'd have been valuable to someone. It had still been a gift from Shirin, and if she stopped the companion talking back to her—which she mostly did, unless there was something she absolutely had to know—then it was still a place to record her thoughts and observations, and a useful window into the aug. Within that window, w could wake her up as many times as we liked, trying endless permutations of the revival scenario. Look, I couldn't abandon you, Mike. "Then take five minutes to clear your head. I smiled, realising that this must be the surprise I had arranged for Thousandth Night. The details were sketchy, but Gaunt learned that there had been another accident out on one of the rigs. We're not like that at all. We're looking at a two-dimensional figure this time; the shadow of a three-dimensional cube. Possibly. She kept her voice low. Watch." He watched. I can see Teterev's footprints." Rasht and the monkey next. It was dark outside. And who among us didn't have some secrets, anyway? I touched the universe with my mind, through mathematics. If the murderers were hanging around the system before then, they must have been very well camouflaged." "We can't just...give up," I said, thinking of the man we had left behind on Burdock's ship. Not a crime, but just something that would have made him look foolish." "We've all done foolish things. But I'm hoping we can get to know each other. The Interdiction was very efficient; as well it might be, given that Clavain had designed much of it himself. The interior structure of the atom. It's irrelevant though, isn't it? "Asphodel's ship still hasn't been sighted," Purslane said. Childe brought the volantor to a rest near the edge of the water and invited us to disembark. "Not for the machines. There was an unsettling temptation to just do it. Then we will speak of Lenka." \*\*\* SHALL I TELL you what I learned from her, Captain? Eco-engineers had invaded the Wall's liveable area with terran genestocks deftly altered in orbital labs. animosity toward Katerina, and I was sorry that I would never see her again. \*\*\* MINLA WALKED WITH a stick, clicking its hard metal shaft against the rigs' legs, and the horizon was now obscured behind curtains of storming rain, broken only by the flash of lightning. The thicket lay ahead or below, depending on my mental orientation. But the top two shapes aren't rotationally symmetric. With the helicopter safely down on the pad, Clausen and Da Silva told him to follow them into the depths of the other rig. Stars: incalculable numbers of them—hard white and bloodred gems, strewn in lacy patterns against deep velvet blue. He had no need to breathe, since his entire cardiovascular system had been replaced by closed-cycle life-support mechanisms. I enjoyed every minute of it." Purslane sighed and shook her head: I was her hopeless case, and she didn't mind if I knew it. They're not all at the same distance from the Spire. Now make a knot and tie off. Will even that be enough to make thinking machines." One of the vague disappointments hardened into a specific, life-souring defeat. He'd even said he'd feel naked without me. The transition will be difficult...ah, here it comes. "I realise now that being unique... being adored...is not the greatest thing in the world. "Road repair," Prakash declares grandly, as if this is meant to stir the soul. The precious syrinx was still functional—I touched it and felt the familiar tremble that indicated it was still sensing the nearby Waynet —but that was about the only flight-critical system that hadn't been buckled or blown or simply wiped out of existence by the unscheduled egress. As we speed away from Star City, I press my face against the glass and watch the white world rush by as if in a sleigh-ride. Each machine had a human torso, but only a very small glowing sphere for a head. Trust me on this, all right?" "You're the pilot." "That's the general idea." She un-cupped the microphone. Nothing about the goggle had changed, except for the thin wisp of smoke curling away from it, where it contacted his skin. Would he get rid of me, or try to have me destroyed? No engines, no guidance—just celestial mechanics, taking it all the way home." "You own that flow?" He'd kiss me as if to say: don't trouble yourself with such matters. Tear a glove on sharp metal, and you might as well have cut your hand off. So long as the Great Winter held, the celestial war must still be raging. "I waited until after we'd made love. "This is where it gets difficult," Zima said, picking his way carefully along the trail. We could have their slot—but only if we got our model up and running that evening, with all the modifications the referee wanted us to make." "You weren't going to make it to that band." "That was when the IAU telegram came in to my inbox. "Julact was the heart of the Luquan Emergence in those days. The Shrouders were little better: secretive minds cocooned inside shells of restructured spacetime. "Then you'll feel the old girl shiver her timbers." On the way to the surgeon we passed other members of the Iron Lady's redoubtable crew, none of whom Khorog saw fit to introduce. Your work has always seemed truthful to me, Carrie. That information was scrubbed out of you thirty centuries ago, accidentally or otherwise. Do you see where I'm headed?" "Not really." "Crowe's Landing is almost gone now, and in a hundred years it'll be completely forgotten. Whatever happens now, it's between you and the Spire. Your loyal crewmember, good, dependable Lenka. Before I sat down in the booth I always had an eloquent and economical speech queued up in my head, one that conveyed exactly what needed to be said, with the measure and grace of a soliloquy. That was our one error. He raised his free hand to Clausen in a silent high-five, Clausen reciprocating. Who'd marvel at a sandcastle, if sandcastles lasted forever?" "Or sunsets, I suppose," I said. When it became clear that the Cockatrice was on our tail, following us out from Shiva-Parvati, I recommended that we discard fifty thousand tonnes of nonessential hull material, in order to increase the rate of acceleration available from our Conjoiner drives. Or just too young and fortunate not to have needed them yet?" "It's nothing to do with being squeamish. The name Matryoshka didn't come until after the first flyby probes, when we glimpsed Shell 2. Purslane and I made our move. "On the other hand, we can't afford to spend weeks solving every room. "Did we make it back?" I ask her to tell me the last thing she remembers. Since I ran the venue, my signal consisted of a change to the patterning of the floor tiles on the thirtieth level terrazzo, cunningly encoding the time of the unusual event in the Burdock data. Then Celestine, who was still clutching her ruined arm, nodded emphatically. Petrova. Our lander threw out its landing skids. But this alters things, doesn't it?" I still had my thumb on the trigger, ready to unleash a matter-antimatter conflagration. Her hands moved before her in slow, precise gestures. He came around again what must have been minutes later. "Campion?" she asked cautiously. "No one expects it to take that long, though," Nero said, as she finished demonstrating a circuit-board swap. The winner of the strand...the best strand winner...is...the winner. It is you, isn't it?" "I wasn't sure you'd recognize me. Droves of subcellular machines swarmed in, invading the nascent nervous system. Usually all they'd find would be bits of hot metal, all warped and runny like melted sugar." "Skydrift," Kathrin said. The native artilects won't tolerate the risk of another intrusion from this part of the Realm. But they gave me nothing that a good telepresence drone couldn't offer any artist." "I think you're being a little harsh on yourself," I said. The worm reared up, wearing the ship like a garland. On the other side of the door was a similar ruler, but with a different arrangement of deeper grooves, not lining up with any of those on the right. I take another look at that fence. Floating in the space, pinned into place by gravity neutralisers, was a trembling sphere of oxygenated water, more than a hundred meters across. They scudded sideways, nose down, until they had cleared the side of the building. A billion teeming worlds, waiting on your every word. The figure left, "Captain—this is Richard Swift and...um. Doctor Trintignant," "Pleased to meet you," I said, leaning across the table to shake Forgueray's hand. But I am resigned to my fate, I'd treasure the flowers afterwards and go to sleep imagining the strange, beautiful places they'd come from. I'd always had an excellent relationship with Van Ness, one that came very close to bordering on genuine friendship. Pain flowered in my skull. The ratios of the various gases are remarkably close to those we employ in our suits." "Which isn't possible. "Thank you," she said, with as much sincerity as she could muster. It began with a surprise strike from the surface, using a wave of commandeered atomic rockets. We sailed through the two closely-packed shells, into the luminous blue-green interstitial space above Shell 4. Palsy?" "I'm fine," I said, realising that Yakov was ahead of me; that he had opened the locker-against all rules; it was only supposed to be touched in an emergency—and taken the weapons. Perhaps the magnetic emanations were affecting it more strongly than the rest of us, reaching deeper into the poor animal's fear centre. "Good," he said. The only man amongst them wore an elaborately ornamented exoskeleton: a baroque support structure of struts, hinged plates, cables and servomechanisms. I stayed calm at first, expecting that after ten or twenty minutes of random wandering, I'd find a corridor I recognised. Schedar was a K supergiant out toward the edge of the Local Bubble. "We're only going down there so you can say you explored all avenues of negotiation before sending in the troops." I didn't ask you to defend me, Richard." "I'm sorry. The evidence trail was beginning to get muddy, to say the least...but I asked the right kinds of databases, and eventually found out where I'd come from. His chameleoflage armour was dappled with vivid purple patches, ruining its stealthiness. We held our fire from the moment her eyes first flashed at us, for we knew she could not be one of them. "You know I couldn't complain." "Not much to ask for a pig's head, is it?" With his free hand, he fumbled open his trousers, tugging out the pale worm of his cock. Perhaps we had passed each other amongst the shrines in the Monument to the Eighty, visiting the dead. "You're too low and slow. "I don't know what is." "I want to know what happened to her," I said. It's pointless, though. "I'd discount any rumours if I were you." A mouthful of concentric teeth gnashed against the glass, rotating and counter-rotating like some industrial drilling machine. "Do you want a drink, Thom?" "No, thanks. I thought the meteor shower was an end to it." They were everywhere now, surfacing in multitudes. I put the dust inside it, I put the words on the casing. In the meantime I got to know as still standing, looked at his injury with something close to fascination. But what I was angry at was not her insinuation but the cold-hearted truth of it. Our captain just wants to get away from this time bomb as quickly as possible. It's the hand of a cosmonaut, urging me to do something before he slips into coma. The answer, when it came, was simple. After that—everything was different." "Does it matter now?" "I think it does." Now is the moment. There were, of course, dissenting voices. The two ships were still locked alongside each other. A conveyor hovered in waiting, floating a metre above the water. I touch the metal prize in my pocket, reassuring myself that it's still there. "Will they make a difference?" "They'll give your ship a fighting chance. If she hadn't released me, they might well have nuked her out of existence." "So there was absolutely nothing personal?" "No," Clavain said. 'Not an angel, really. That's all that matters." Samphire's revelation improved my mood, and I took great delight in telling Purslane what I had learned. I was still alive, and there were still people around to provide love and partnership and a web of social relations. "No impacts that I can see. But you'd have to be quite mad to go anywhere near that thing." "Mad? But it needn't come to that. "I forgot to check...did the robot insist that you leave behind your Aide Memoire?" "Yes." "Good. "Minla, Minla, Minla, "I her what was clearly a rhetorical question: "Gastric spar oxen, fey legible, Minla?" "Gorse spelter," she said, sounding contrite. "Or Hirz's suit." "It pulled her apart," Childe said, his face drained of blood. I made out the little yellow sun which we now orbited, and felt both inconsequential and godlike as I imagined myself on a watery world circling that star, a thing tiny beyond measure, yet with an entire galaxy wheeling inside my head. In my peripheral vision I saw the cable retreating back into the wall, like a snake's tongue laden with scent. Her voice was low, dark-tinged, untrusting. The weapons had been aimed with surprising accuracy. Turn off your lights." "The monkey first," I said. She didn't know which one to hit. They have done it a thousand times, with a thousand cultures. How is this possible?" Merlin gestured around him. It was a monster. He might not be happy then, but at least he would be settled, ready to play out the rest of his existence. "Thank you," I said, breathless and distraught. We inverted that thinking. Holda's not meant to have much of a magnetosphere. Back in Dar es Salaam I had ambitions be a doctor. If there was more I could do, I would. Of course you did. "The interdiction guarantees that. He isn't aware that we're onto him." "Let's check out the command deck," she said. "They were never here," Rasht said. The man strolls across the concrete concourse into one of the adjoining buildings, a briefcase swinging from his hand. "She mentions Lev. It's difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends. Forgueray's death would have been bad enough, but by then the Spire was already inflicting further punishment. It was soon obvious. It was merely one ball of red yarn amongst many, spaced out across tens of thousands of light-years. We still don't understand the mechanism, but after the business with Malyshev we thought we'd put in enough safeguards to stop it happening twice. That was what I'd been told, anyway, but I still found myself wondering. "If you think it's for the best." "I do," Annabel says. The heavy gloves protected his fingers from sharp metal and cold wind, but they were too clumsy for most of the tasks, so he mainly ended up not using them. An extension you use may be preventing Wikiwand articles from loading properly. There's a darkness between then and now, and when it comes we aren't ready." We were still walking, following the arcing downslope of the corridor, towards the silver-blue radiance at its end. "Let me drive you." "Mike," Annabel interrupts. But we did not anticipate how distressing this might be to those who had known the candidates beforehand." "He felt that she didn't love him any more." "That wasn't the case. Yakov was starting to needle both of us. Simply looking at it sent my mind careering down avenues of mathematical possibility, glimpsing deep connections between what I had always assumed were theoretically distant realms of logical space. That's why I came back." "She's lying," Childe said. "All through history, the things they've seen out there. He did not know whether the rest of the Advocates could be trusted." She paused. "Have you looked at it yet, Campion?" I could tell from her tone that she wasn't impressed. Then it found a way into my head They were, she realized, the roofs and walls of submerged buildings. "Not to make a point. Our Progress had been augmentd with scientific gear, computers, additional fuel and batteries. If we don't find out what Burdock's up to now, we may never have another chance." Purslane's eyes gleamed thrillingly. Her prints were a muddle, as if she had dwelled here for quite some time, pacing back and forth and debating her choices. Instantly my suit detected the transition to a new environment and began informing me of this sudden change of affairs—indices of temperature, acidity, alkalinity and salinity scrolling down my faceplate, along with mass spectrograms and molecular diagrams of chemical products. "So what were you after?" "This and that. The wireframe display started showing signs of fuzziness, as if the computer was having trouble decoding the radar returns. It—he or she, I cannot decide—is lying on their back, arms at their side, legs slightly spread. They were clearly very simple machines, not much smarter than automatic window-cleaners. "You'll do nothing until you have further information. A human brain, on the other hand, keeps growing through years of learning. And if you hadn't, none of this would ever have happened." "I didn't have..." he began, still in the same harsh whisper. "You were one of the early ones, it must've been sometime near the middle of the century." "Twenty fifty-eight. The men come for him. They desired absolute omniscience. That's not how you felt at the time." I fumbled for an answer which was not too distant from the truth. Handing over a chunk of ice that I'd trimmed, watching as the pusher engines were fixed on at one end, a spiderlike control nexus at the other,

witnessing the start of its long, long cruise to the hungry economies of the inner system, there was some satisfaction in that. By the time we got back, I knew that we weren't going to get an easy ride. A thinking, conscious machine." "Except it was a dead end." "Still led to some useful spin-offs, didn't it?" she went on. "I am Richard Swift," I answer. It was common knowledge that space crews made extensive use of lobots for menial labour, but quite another to see the evidence. But she's right about Skanda, and it did happen when she said. My little research area—stellar pulsation modes—it wasn't the most glamorous." She gives a rueful smile. Our choice will depend on the trajectory the Coalition forces upon us." "What about the Demarchists?" "They won't stop us." It was said with total assurance—implying, what? Shall I tell you something of me, Nidra? And these other artilects had been there a very long time, in so far as time has any meaning in the Realm. I paused a moment while my brain retrieved the necessary reading skills from deep recall. This was something she could never win, and her realisation was now plainly evident in her face. What the hell was the point of that?" "I wanted to talk things through. He could still see the vague shape of her grey outfit, but layered around it were billowing skeins of light, unravelling at their edges into chains of Boolean logic. "Do you mind if I ask what this is about?" I said, doing my best to sound as reasonable as possible, rather than someone on the verge of losing their temper in polite company. I had been mortally tired, but when I finally slept, it was only to submerge myself in yet more labyrinthine dreams, much like those Childe had pumped into our heads during the reefersleep transition. "I wish there was some alternative, but there isn't. "That's just the start. At the time, I'd justified that omission as an act of kindness toward my wife. "Oh, you shouldn't sound so surprised," he said. "There's no sign of it now, is there?" "No, and it doesn't matter. Inigo says it isn't fixable." "Inigo's right. But that still wasn't the final answer They can't exclude a sufficiently strong field, not completely. You have Fescue's gratitude." "How can you know?" I asked. There were vacuum dwellers and star dwellers. "I made orbital insertion last night—my vehicle is above us right now. It is in your blood now, in your marrow, just as the jangling man's ichor was in the flier's. But that wasn't acceptable. No one gave me the toolkit for that. But don't think of it in those terms. There are no crags, no animals or vegetation. Then nothing. She nodded so hard I thought her neck was going to break. Because of that, because we knew, theoretically, that we might be called upon, we had no problem at all dealing with the adjustment? I twitch trying to raise my head enough to get a good look at myself. On its first attempt, it had travelled no more than a third of a kilometre beneath the nominal surface before reaching a narrowing it couldn't pass through. I feel silly for not realising that it is a pipeline, not a fence. A shattering, into vastly smaller domains. I quietened myself, damped my energies. "What's in it for you? None could ever be restarted turning the wheel in the opposite direction, grunting at first with the effort. They've got families expecting them. Most are too far apart from that: at best they might have some vague knowledge of each other's existence, based on transmissions and data passed on by the likes of you and me. "Did you learn all that you needed to know?" he asked. "No, not now." "Unfortunately, it doesn't work for us. "But now I've met something that tests me." "And?" Celestine smiled thinly. Instead of legs he just had a long tail, with a kind of fluke at the end of it. Soon as can. It was like pulling back from a close-up view of a forest. "I had the ship prepare these documents. Come inside for a moment, instead of standing there like a starved thing." He called over his shoulder, telling his wife to put the water on the fire. But this time it wasn't the machines that found him. We were half way to the Soyuz-I could see it overhead, tantalisingly near-when Galenka halted, only just below me. They were humanoid, but clearly no more than clever servitors. "What are those?" I asked. Who's in charge?" The leader shouted another order. What I want, Loti, is for you to carve me the head of Michelangelo's David.' \*\*\* INGVAR HAS LED me to the public ice-rink on the western cusp of Stilt-Town. "Yes, you feel its power," Widow Grayling said admiringly. Is that what you were doing, bringing medicines?" "Tangible," the man repeated. Though the shuttle was the tiniest peacetime vessel Clavain had been in, it was a cathedral compared to the dropships he had flown during the war; so small that they were assembled around their occupants like Medieval armour before a joust. "The only good deal is being alive," Nero replied. The Wall was unzipping along those flaws. "Inigo. It was as if someone had constructed a building slightly above the ground, kicked away the stilts, and it had simply stayed there. But she looks as if she could use a break. He's in a state of permanent unconscious flow, like someone engaged in an enormously challenging game. But he didn't think it would involve going back into the box. From somewhere out of sight came a tortured groan, heralding some awful structural failure. stinger-laden jellyfish. A moment of nothing and then I am elsewhere. It was white, but not killingly so. If he was going to lie..." "I don't think he paid enough attention to your catalogue of sunsets," Purslane said. Icons danced in her hair like angels. "It isn't personal. Just try and do it a little faster, that's all." Celestine turned away from the frame. "Before you say I should have listened to you," she said. "You're just going to have to trust me on this," Nero said. Like a bird with a lot of puffed-up plumage, hiding delicate bones. She pays for the hogs a year in advance, twenty-four whole pounds." "And you're not scared by her?" "I've no cause to be." "There's some that would disagree with you." Remembering something her father had told her, Kathrin said, "There are folk who say the Sheriff can fly, or that there was once a bridge that winked at travellers like an eye, or a road of iron that reached all the way to London. "You promised." "I said that I should probably need one. The island shook again. If the mother has enough influence over magnetic fields to twist the ramscoop of a ship thirty kilometers away...surely she can stop the captain and his crew? "How old are you now?" "Sixteen," Kathrin answered. I reached down to touch it, feeling a hard, dull alloy which nonetheless seemed as if it would yield given sufficient pressure. The prosthesis had interfaced with my existing nervous system so perfectly that I had already accepted the leg into my body image. It would be a mistake to wait another year." "I still don't understand." "Take the bracelet. I had seen the real, dying Burdock aboard his ship—at least, I believed I had. "There are three of us—four if you include Kanto. The difficulty was finding as much time to visit Weather as I would have liked. From the white pagoda, the amateur band mangles another passage. Either you side with us, completely, or we all die." Merlin closed his eyes, wishing a moment to puzzle over the ramifications. The twenty-third century, he thought. She hardly dared move in case it saw or heard her. The door into the rest of the building can only be opened by someone inside. "Now what kind of way to talk is that, Kathrin Lynch? But if there's a silver lining it's that I won't be far behind it. We'd be goggled up, our naked bodies intertwined. They dream in runes. "It just seemed more prudent to implant the devices while you were all asleep anyway, so as not to waste any more time than necessary." "It's not just the thing in my wrist," I said, "whatever it is." "It's something to keep us awake," Celestine said, her anger just barely under control. It's odd to feel myself part of a lineage—in many respects I am totally unique, a creature without precedence—but there's no escaping the sense that these brave Explorers and Pioneers and Surveyors are my distant, dim forebears. He brought it back to the table, blowing the dust off it in the progress, coughing as he breathed some of it in, and set the helmet down before Yukimi. Of course, it had numerous civilian applications, but that isn't where you made your billions." She looked at him sharply. "Identify the individual or organisation for whom you are working." "Please come with us." I realised that it was futile expecting to get anything out of these idiot machines. "That sounds about right," I say. Clavain guessed she was uploading a copy of the treaty through her implants, scrolling it across her visual field, trying to find the loophole; probably running a global search for any references to police actions. That, of course, was contingent on several assumptions. I wondered if the thing before me would speak again. But I still felt something, and if it reached me up the flow of the Waynet, if that impulse bypassed the iron barrier of causality itself, I can't begin to imagine the energies that must have been involved, or what must have happened to the strand of the Waynet behind me. The only thing I could be absolutely certain of was that I'd known the emperor for a very long time. "Get in. It was brutal, and once it would have killed us. I kept thinking: what's the worst that can happen? At the last count there were ten million settled solar systems ou there. But he did believe that I was capable of killing him, and only a lethal instant away from doing so. "Any idea what we're looking at here?" Merlin asked. "When you have been deprived of willing subjects as long as I have, it's only natural to take pleasure in those little opportunities for practice that fate seems fit to present." Hirz nodded knowingly. Hundreds of worlds, thousands of towns and cities. I held up a thickly gauntleted hand and felt the breeze of Golgotha's thin atmosphere caress my palm. You did spend a lot of time associating, after all. It's photography: a mechanical recording process. Are you trying to adjust that temperature setting? Its edges expanded and then anglec upward to form a box. Galenka brought the Soyuz in against the trunk until the hull shuddered with the contact. If it kept that up, there was no way it was going to fail to notice Yukimi. Also sponsored by a transnational amalgamation of major spacefaring superpowers? I could have recorded it again, but I doubted that I would have been any happier. "You're saying he fiddled his strand?" "A few details here and there. "As I said, I won't have much room left for consciousness. I heard the shriek of a severed air line. The conveyor shed altitude and speed, bobbing down until it stopped just outside the area enclosed by the viewing stands. And if the field acts on the right part of our brains, we might feel it. But should that never happen, I can at least hope that you will hear this message. Too much money was changing hands. It's not for the likes of me to decide, but I will say this." I allow myself a profound reflective pause. There was no thrust and parry; no fishing for information. The original Few, the first two hundred thousand." "Holy shit." "There has to be more than this," I said. I can be something of a bore, when the mood takes me. Yes, Lenka is alive. You will need to temporarily disable your Ad-blocker to view this page. Jamming them into the ice, like mirrored sculptures. We'll be erased, deleted, scrubbed out of existence. He had inherited the memories from eighteen predecessors, all of whom had died within the Spire's pain-wracked chambers. Derek is chained up, and there are staff outside the cage with anaesthetic guns and electrical cattle prods. As blood surges back to my chilled extremities, I'll start to feel hot rather than cold. There are only a couple left, perhaps the best of them, orbiting each other like a pair of binary pulsars. The contact could not have lasted more than an instant, but the information that had gushed through was ringing in my skull like the after-chime of God's own church bell. When her ship was underway, while she slept, the black cubes began to show signs of life. You cosmonauts think all astronomers are the same. "You built these islands, after all." "Yes," I allowed. The box rose into the air, carrying Purslane, and then suddenly accelerated away from the island. Naturally, I signalled my imminent return long before I reached the Capital Nexus. Kolding lied. Everything else was up for grabs. Fear of breakup had forced me to throttle our engines back down to zero thrust leaving only our in-system fusion motors running. In this instance Galenka would have no option but to admit that my grasp of Baikonur politics was superior to hers. \*\*\* LATER THAT EVENING, after a successful presentation, my schedule has me booked onto a late night chat show on the other side of town. No one had done such a thing as this. Every now and again, yes—but you could tell only because she was feeling bad about not doing it before." "I suppose she was busy." "We promised each other. "It would." "My name would ring down the ages. The navigations logs should be about...here." She halted at one of the mushrooms and flexed her hands in the stiffly formal manner of a dancer. She was still looking at Corax, still inside the galley. What if Burdock did something?" "A crime?" "It's not unthinkable." But unthinkable was precisely what it was. It was broken only by the tick of pulsars and the crack and whistle of quasars half way to the universe's edge. Merlin caught the shine of glass lenses being pointed at him. "I didn't send them in ahead of me, Richard. A trickle of oil, the world's last black hiccough, to keep the helicopters running. I told her to wait at the door to her room, which faced a long service corridor. My lenses tint it, tracing geopolitical boundaries. A thousand years from now, your memory of this conversation might bear little resemblance to reality. He unbuckled, feeling light-headed as he stood for the first time in Martian gravity. I won't be there to catch you. "I'll forbid you from taking part in any of my games. "Upon my return I naturally tried to locate Cobargo. My hackles rose. It would stay like that for the better part of another hundred and eighty thousand years, until our return. Every waking moment of my consciousness, with every breath, you were there. It was simply not the done thing to go snooping around without permission. I'm stuck back here and I can't even escape into the aug. "I'm in the middle of a procedure. A gift, but neither she nor her father would have any use for this ugly broken thing, save for its value to a scrap man. "Leave enough cranial structure for the victim to retain consciousness. But I did not think they had been present until now. We'll flood the cabin with foam. But what can two cultures on either side of the Galaxy know of each other? He was on a bed, fully clothed apart from the outer layer of chameleoflage armour. "You're better off eatinc alone." "Do you like him, Inigo?" "He has his flaws, but next to someone like Voulage, he's pretty close to being an angel." "No comment." "I thought not," Maria says. Over the next decade or so, the abstract shapes became more dominant, squeezing out the other elements of each composition. "Until the people who pay for my upkeep decide otherwise." He glanced sideways, a cockeyed grin on his face. Until you look closer." We spun round the Spire, or whatever it was, viewing it from all directions. You think you can solve the Spire, where eighteen previous versions of you have failed. Too many factors jostled for consideration. It had a ghost-thin haze of atmosphere and no evidence of surface biology. "We'll feel this." We did. Most of it was snow- or ice-covered, except for the top. That was already against every God-given instinct." Then Van Ness rumbled, "And I'd thank you not to mention the Spider again, Inigo. But the road was empty and the sky was clear. "Wait," I said. My head's like a house with too much furniture. Everything smelled oppressively oceanic, a constant shifting melange of oil and ozone and seaweed, as if the ocean was never going to let anyone forget that they were on a spindly metal and concrete structure hopelessly far from dry land. "That thing must be thousands of years old. I hope you're serious." "I'm deadly serious," Galiana said. Not until I fully understood the scope of that threat, and the motivating agency behind it. But then such a long-distance connection might have been engineered differently from the others. Merlin had even risked taking it outside once, to see for himself if he had the nerve to repeat his distant ancestor's brave crossing. Nothing of any consequence has happened to me since the last time." Purslane fixed me with a knowing smile. She was sure she could do without food and water for two days (not that it would be fun, even with the apple for rations) but it had never occurred to her that it might get seriously cold. Risible plastrum." The red-faced man studied him for what felt like many minutes. How can there be holes in the sky, when the air is already too thin to breathe?" "He said that the fliers and the jangling men make these holes, just as armies may dig a shifting network of trenches and tunnels as part of a long campaign. But then we came along. Again: not good. They'red a shifting network of trenches and tunnels as part of a long campaign. But then we came along the shifting network of trenches and tunnels as part of a long campaign. too good to waste like that." "You're not getting any part of me." He clucked a little purr of amusement and knelt down just far enough to stab the tip of one of the knives—the one he held in his right hand—against my chest. I take it he's here, too?" "No. Our work took us in different directions. Well, if that was what it took to get through to her parents, so be it. Someone screaming "Medic!" Someone who sounded a lot like me. "You don't seem to care very much. Like the airlock chamber, it was lit by randomly spaced light nodes, embedded in the fleshy walls like nuts wedged into the bark of a tree. Frozen cells and robot wombs. The data already returned to Earth, the channel said, offered a bounty that would keep the keenest minds engaged for many years. "Stop, please," said a voice. Lintan Three, in the Muara Archipelago." The AM's absence was like a missing tooth. The belly door sealed shut and I sensed a lurch of rapid movement. That phantom image is still there, but it's much less troubling than when I was jammed into the trauma pod. Dirt under my nails. "You're a kind man, Thom." Then she kisses me. This aircraft was even flimsier and slower. For a while, yes. "We are good for insertion," Galenka said, as if that had ever been in doubt. I just had to be there. Since our arrival in the cave the overhead lights had dimmed, simulating the onset of dusk, but only a few windows were illuminated, clustered together in the left-hand wing. "We will take you to the one you wish to meet." "The one I spoke to from space?" "Please come with us," the robots repeated, standing aside to give me room. "What about weapons?" Celestine asked, once we had been shown how to command the suits to do our bidding. It was that last quality that I found most attractive of all. The island was dominated by a thicket of slender, dark poplars partly concealing a pale structure situated near its middle. A shooting star, I thought: a good omen, perhaps. "Riven with prejudice, you mean?" "In his way," I said, shrugging. "So cheer up." "She'll be rough in the tunnel. I risked collapsing my containment fields, until they were out of range. I'd like to go deeper, at least until we have a full hold." "You want to consult with Baikonur?" "We have discretion here, Dimitri. But the history of the Luquan Emergence was a bewildering thicket of half-truths and lies, designed to confound imperial legislators. "Why don't we?" Gaunt ignored here sarcasm. We can't leave without Suzy." I heard boot heels clicking toward us. I often show it to my daughter, as if to say, we can be more than this. Numbers flickered around it. It'll always mean something to me for that reason." "Thank you for not leaving us. I've seen your strength and courage." "I wasn't strong today." "Yet you took the bridge, when you knew Garret would be on it. And it'll all still be inside that helmet when they find it again." Yukimi had trouble thinking much further in the future than her seventeenth birthday, when she would receive the golden gateway into the aug. If, as you said, there are other things in his strand that don't check out..." "I don't like it." "Me neither "Start talking, dickhead." Childe spoke with quiet calm. Talk to me." "In my helmet now. Then something dawns. More than that: he realised that life in this world, with all its hardships and disappointments, was going to be infinitely preferable to death beyond it. Her holds had been looted for cargo. Then he waved the gun for emphasis. Tell him that there's wood here if he wants it." She shook her head sympathetically at Kathrin. But it's not enough to make a difference. Shall we leave it here?" "No. We'll bring it with us, and we'll take good care of it. Just come a wee bit closer." "So you can do what you did last time?" "I don't remember any complaints." He let the head fall, then caught it again, Kathrin's heart in her throat. Now that we were closer, it was clear that the thing's surface was densely detailed; patterned and textured with geometrically complex forms, around which snaked intestinal tubes and branching, veinlike bulges. Instead, she had only come to a deeper understanding of her own microscopic insignificance. Spillage from the transcendental war between the AI s, being fought in the interstitial gaps of reality. And as much as that revolting thing disgusts me, it's a small price to pay. "Besides: it isn't just the strand we have to think about. Try laying a hand on me, and see how far it gets you. In all my visits, I'd never found her sleeping. "I took a spike of the modifiers as well." "I doubt that it gave you much of an edge over what you already had." "Maybe not." She paused. While she paused that that." He managed a despairing laugh. Then resumed her descent. The vehicle will take care of itself. It would be a matter of professional pride that his work was technically reversible. They reach from star to star, binding together the entire galaxy. "It's not good news, I'm afraid. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book. "What about Warren's attack?" "We endured three waves. "But without fallibility there is no art. A month later I was frozen aboard Forqueray's ship They had spades with them, clipped to the sides of their backpacks, but they must have decided not to use them until they were certain they'd have to dig down more than a few centimetres. It was worse than anything we had experienced before, as if the entire ship were being shaken violently in a dog's jaw. "I wasn't. The afternoon light made it hard to be sure—we were in deep shadow now—but their colour looked to be very close to Zima Blue. It had the means to generate stealthing fields to confuse our anti-intrusion systems, so once it was loose in the grounds of the Great House it could move without detection. I'd been scouting around, checking out the old place one last time before the waters rise..." He paused. It wasn't just that my memories had added nothing startling to the whole. We had no cause to wake you." He pushed himself from the effort. But for now the door was sealed by a smooth sheet of metal, which would presumably slide across once we had determined how to open it. The Goose came in last night, local time, and I've been in a hotel since then. But we'll have to make a decision on him sooner or later." "Well, there's no hurry right now. There was blue ocean down there, swatches of green and brown land mass, large islands rather than any major continental masses, cyclonic swirls of water-vapour clouds. So they began with the Few, and then expanded the operation slowly. She let go suddenly, gasping as if she had reached for a stick and picked up an adder, squirming and slippery and venomous. Then you help." I looked at her. He was literally thinking in ways that had not been possible microseconds earlier. Zeal slipped with a knife, ruining half an hour's work, and swore in one of the ancient trade languages. The Matryoshka was getting to him in a way it wasn't yet getting to Galenka, or me for that matter. Silhouetted, huge and bulbous against the blue light beyond, came something like a man, but swollen out of all proportion, with the head no more than a bulge between wide, ogrelike shoulders. "It's a tranquiliser gun," he said. Not a cop, not Authority, but a private dick. Just a small medichine infusion—" I tried to keep my temper. I can't help but smile. But what about breaking into his ship? "You mean there was someone else involved?" Purslane's voice rang out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice rang out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice rang out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice rang out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice range out clear and true. You amuse me. "That's what I think it is, anyway a someone else involved?" Purslane's voice ra Did you?" "I understood myself," Zima said. Beneath lay the most difficult part of its journey so far. He'd calculated everything. I did all this without ever setting foot within a hundred light years of the Capital Nexus." "If you wanted to kill the emperor..." "I could have done it; trivially. It was then that it had got itself stuck, lodging in a part of the thicket like a bullet in gristle. That's good enough for me." "I really think we should land. "When the man elected to die, the sacrifice was not absolute for him. When they found it they assumed it was one of my personal effects—something I'd taken aboard the ship when we left. Only a few select members of the Childe dynasty had even known of the Program's existence, and that number had dwindled as time passed. Vincent's committal was voluntary. She tried to get me to understand, but I'm not sure I have the imagination. I feel as if every vein in my body has been filled with finely powdered glass. VAINGLORY OFFICIALLY IT'S Ruach City but everyone calls it Stilt Town. Like Deimos without fortifications. "Would he have taken credit, do you think? White citadels rise above the treeline, towers linked by a filigree of delicate bridges." "Then there are people on Lacertine?" Merlin thought of the occupants, and nodded. "It can't be easy," I said. We kept pulling back. I just never thought it would happen so soon." Then he looked at Felka. It might have made all the difference. I was born in nineteen ninety-five, in Klushino. If your captain is like most Ultras, there's at least as much of the machine about him as there is about me. "It wasn't as bad as it looked," Zeal told me, when the patient had gone. I'm not one for the hustle and bustle of modern Martian civilization, so the cities don't suit me. But don't touch anything until I give you permission." I knew there wasn't much harm she could do here, even if she started pushing the dials. You might as well be standing in a welded suit of armour, for all the success you'll have in moving. So you engineered the whole Regressive attack, set it up as a pretext for an early departure." "The Regressives were real!" Minla hissed. Eight frantic months had passed since his revival, with the progress attaining a momentum of its own that Merlin felt sure would carry through to his next period of wakefulness. Here and soon. I thought of asking Zima if he could lend me one, but I was concerned not to derail his thoughts from wherever they vhenever we like. Later, I returned to the characters and basic premise of this story for the setting of my novel House of Suns, although the plots are guite different. "I can't promise that this is the right one, either." "We'll take that chance. But from the moment he heard about Weather, I know between us. But I can't see why she wouldn't help us, if we treat her like a human being." "That'd be our big mistake," Van Ness said. The merely rich, rather than the super-rich. "We'll need to haul her out," Rasht said. She had been standing in the gap. An entire pattern of behaviour would have been altered by one instance of deviation. "I didn't want to win this time. It was a trick answer; an apparently correct solution which contained a subtle flaw. Not exactly, anyway." But even as I said it, I knew that in a sense it was about Katerina, and how long it was going to be before we saw each other again. \*\*\* "IT'S BLACKER THAN I was expecting." I paused in my hamfisted typing. That, thought Clavain, was all that Warren had ever wanted. I've never liked the place. Merlin now knew that Malkoha was her "spelter" or father, although he did indeed look old enough to have been spaced from her by a further generation. The life-jacket was keeping his head out of the water, except when the waves crashed onto him. My mind processed its course and extrapolated its trajectory with deadening precision. Just hit them in sequence—best choice, before she had analysed the problem more deeply and seen a phantom trap. Wiped them out with Homunculus weapons. Would it have touched him with the same alchemical force, bypassing the rational mind to speak to that animal part from which we were separated by only an evolutionary heartbeat? It's a common enough kind of stone on a planet like this one, wherever you have tides, shorelines and oceans." Merlin had fished out the stone earlier; now he held it in his hand, palm open, like a lucky coin. If my stone kept you here, it served a useful purpose." "I'm glad I chose to stay. Nobody lived there." "That," Ingvar says, "is only what they want you to think." "They?" "Authority. I watched the monkey's tail pendulum out from side to side as it walked. I came to sentience in the research compounds of the European Central Cybernetics Facility, not far from Zurich. That's what I want to tell you about. Lenka and I looked at each other through our visors. That would explain the occasional thick band. Is that something you ever get used to?" Not for the first time, Merlin smiled tolerantly. It hadn't been a building at all, at least not the kind he had been thinking of. We watched moons, habitats, stations, shuttles and ships. "It was hack work. I was scared. But I managed to talk him into letting us hunt down the girl. I can take it. "But here's my advice to you, lad." Van Ness's iron grip tightened on my shoulder. On top of that there were rotas that saw people working in the kitchens and medical facilities, even when they had already done their normal stint of duty. They all lead into the Spire, and there are almost none leading to the bodies." "Meaning what?" I said. He clicked his fingers and one entire wall of the room whisked back to reveal a sterile, machine-filled chamber. "What is it?" Merlin asked. Skanda should have seen this, I think. That first view of it was like the first glimpse of a cathedral's spire through morning fog. It all happened silently, with deathly slowness. The Wall needed to be very tall because the low Martian gravity meant that the column of atmosphere was higher for a fixed surface pressure than on Earth. Instead, she looked completely calm and resigned. Each represents a possible task assignment. The hospital, the facility, the madhouse, whatever you want to call it, will have been visible in the distance on a clear day —a forbidding smudge of dark, tiny-windowed buildings, tucked behind high, razor-topped security fencing. But she knew Widow Grayling too well for that. \*\*\* HE HAD THE feeling he was running back into a burning building. In half a minute, they were in true space. A history lesson. "I am sorry for what happened between us, Rafe—more sorry than you can ever know. Below, the worm inched higher despite the harm the Conjoiners had inflicted on it. It isn't possible to make practical weapons using atomic energy. "You really feel wrong, don't you?" "Kolding's games aren't helping, that's for sure." The waiter brought our wine, setting it down, the bottle chinking against his delicately articulated glass fingers. A world offers better camouflage—it has mass and heat. Who wants to join me?" "Wait," I said. All I heard for five minutes was our own breathing; backgrounded by the awful slow thrumming of the Spire itself. But he has not done that yet. They had not even had to worry about tailings. "Good. She nods, touches a hand to her throat as if coughing before speaking. "You've done it before, after all." But when we returned to Chasm City we found that Childe had not been lying. It'll take me a little while to get back here, but I'll come as quickly as possible." She lifted her forearm as far as it would go, until the restraints stiffened. They're from...the old place, aren't they?" "I forget. Would we even notice it at first? There might be enough buoyancy to make the thing float, like a balloon." "There isn't," Forqueray said, opening a fist to catch the cam, which flew into his grasp like a trained kestrel. Behind her faceplate I watched her try to conceal the revulsion she obviously felt. A mountain achieves the same effect with frostbite. "Thousandth Night. One of them was a man, cradling a bowl of something and spooning quantities of it into his mouth, as if he was eating his breakfast on the run. "That we wouldn't be able to do. But I can read his public memories well enough." "What good will that do?" "The fullerene tubes, artificial neuronal connections supplanting your existing synaptic pathways. We've had the nest under constant surveillance for fifteen years. They're given a series of refresher lectures about what's happened to the world and why it's the way it is. Already I was clearing my mind, readying myself to engage with the many tasks that were my responsibility. "That isn't true." "Then why turn back when we've come so far?" "Because it isn't worth it." "Or is it simply that the problem's become too difficult; the challenge too great?" "Ignore him," Celestine said. As the blue became more intense, more dominant, I felt I was closer to an answer. Then we would be off Holda, out of this system, and that was a good thought. "You're leaving us?" "Damn right I am." "You disappoint me." "Fine, but I'm still shipping out." Childe stroked his forehead, tracing its shape with the new steel gauntlet Trintignant had attached to his arm. But our domain—the one in the Local Bubble—must be outnumbered hundreds to one by all the others. It poked through the outside of the wing like the claw of a bat. And I can promise you that there is nothing you can do but obey my every word." "What are you going to do?" "Make you pay," I said. But by the time it reaches the nuclear-burning core...I'd say all bets are off." "Can it be mended? There was some dried blood on the scalp, matted with his hair; some numbness, but it could have been a lot worse. He removed the weapon and allowed Merlin sufficient time to examine it by eye. EIGHT OUTSIDE, IN THE long, steely-shadowed light of what was either dusk or dawn, we found the pieces of Hirz for which the Spire had had no use. Argyle learned that much. It was making a noise while it attacked, an awful, slowly rising and falling foghorn proclamation. A machine with a taste for blood, too. "But there were meant to be two of them." "Can you manage with just the one, until I visit again? It's all right," I said. The point is, all the corresponding forms on the right should be the shadows of the same polytopes after a simple rotation through higher-dimensional space. "My diary," she added. They're in one of the older trading languages of the Luquan Emergence. I'll be watching you very carefully." Weather looked amused. Industrial flows; streams of processed matter on their way from launcher to customer. Means the ship's still out there, though." "I could have told you that as well." It could have told you tha took twenty minutes to convey one sample back to the Soyuz. He knew the route she'd normally take back home, and the alternatives would mean a much longer journey. "You asked for it," she said. Smoothly, silently, something rose from the darkness. "The fact is, no one's doing much of that any more. When all is well, when the engine is intact and running inside its normal operational envelope, the burden is manageable. "It must have known it would die in there as well." "It thought it had a significantly better chance of survival than the last one. The rear-looking camera showed the window sealing behind the Progress. Well, that isn't a problem either. I'll pass it through the hatch. Think of it as a form of defense." "Against the outside world?" I had my hands on her suit now, and I tried to rip the silver strands away from it, while at the same time applying as much force as I could to drag Lenka back to safety. Except one. "She came back here to find the monkey, not to hurt you. There will always be Conjoiners, and nothing that is committed to the collective memory will ever be lost. Feuds were out, marriages were in. Some pathetic act of animal cruelty that makes them realise they can do better than that, being human? Before Zeal take away...me. They're cyborgs, after all. "You're kidding, aren't you?" The Ultra shook his head. Something went wrong with the insertion right?" "Maybe. But not that much brighter. "What happened with the clones? I collect my daughter from Ramatou. That was why she was coming along now: Galiana had only agreed to Clavain's mission provided he was accompanied by a neutral observer, and Voi had been the obvious choice. Clavain was left alone with his brother for a moment Such a path—a mathematical trajectory in space, like an orbit—offered a means of conveying a signal or object to any previous point in time, provided it was no earlier than the moment of the time machine's construction. Celestine wasn't consulted..." "I assumed she was on the team." Celestine stepped into the new room. "What are you suggesting we should give her—a free pass to the rest of the ship?" "Only that we could let her out of her prison cell." "She's recuperating." "She's restrained. Look at it, Loti. They don't matter. But I'm still not done with Zima, odd as it seems. It's the Realm. Ten million, maybe. As I was leaving his cabin, he said, "You're still a fine shipmaster, lad. "Are you all right, Thom? This made them easy to understand and fix, even with basic tools, but it also meant there was almost always a robot breaking down somewhere, or on the point of failure. She looked at me before Childe had a chance to answer. I accept that we're really in space." His voice came through a speaker grille, tinny and distant. "Time enough...for what?" "To get you to the surgeon's room. "What is it, Widow?" "It's yours. Evening turned to night. Galiana assumed that we would, and I don't blame her for that. "That's all we need." Suddenly there was a commotion. Others were at treacherous opposition to my plans. Skanda had been as good as his word. And that, of course, years will have already passed, even before they begin the return trip. She considers my question carefully. Tell him that there's more, if he wishes to collect it." "I haven't got any money for wood." "I'd take none. Yakov stopped mumbling and became more pliant, like a big rag doll. Unfortunately, the sense of wrongness didn't end with the tank. Isn't there a danger that she's going to steal your thunder? But it's the being smart part that worries me. What? Now most of Lenka was out of our sight, swallowed into the cleft. It won't count as weightless, I think sourly, but surely working. I think sourly, but surely working that she's going to steal your thunder? under Lunar gravity must count as something. But Katerina steps toward me and places a calming hand on my shoulder. "What do you mean?" "You're not quite ready yet. Kathrin felt her mood easing as the dray ambled across the bridge, nearing the slight rise over the narrow middle arches. In the fifth and sixth hours, more Dormitories fell to the assault. Perhaps exercise a smidgeon of economy with regard to the strict veracity of the events portrayed..." "Make things up, you mean." "We need a distraction," I said. Perhaps some of them were those children, conscripted from the nursery since his visit, uploaded with fighting reflexes through their new implants. I thought of what lay on the other side of that wall. The only person that small Yukimi had ever met had been her aunt, the one who sent the snow globe, and she had been born on Earth, under the iron press of too much gravity. It tapered as it rose, constricting to a thin neck before flaring out again into a bulb-shaped finial, which in turn tapered to a needle-sharp point. If Burdock had indeed committed a crime, and if that crime came to light, then we might well be excluded from the Great Work. "And then?" "I said that we were not truly intelligent, Mercurio. No way off this planet unless she found something deeper in the cave, something she could use to wake up the orbiting ship. The four-metre tall robot is circling the pod, keeping the area clear. An adult was always stationed nearby, but to all intents and purposes Merlin and the girl were permitted to interact freely. They squeaked a little under her, but if she stayed still there was no sound. When does it happen?" "Soon; very soon." "You're rushing them, aren't you. But it was much too late for second thoughts now. But then why are they treating him like he's won the lottery, if that's not what he wanted?" "Because what else are you going to do? "All right," I agreed. The reason? All he really cared about was the line. She started back from me, vanishing into deeper shadow and then around a bend at her end of the corridor. "There'll always been shadow and then around a bend at her end of the corridor." another one." He took me on a different route through the house, leaving by a different door than the one we'd come in. I know your side thinks we have better intelligence than that, but it happens not to be the case." "Actually, I believe you." The shuttle's airframe was flexing around them, morphing to a low-altitude profile with wide, batlike wings Their descent vehicle had suffered a hull rupture as it tried to enter Titan's atmosphere, and by the time they landed they only had a limited amount of power and air left to them. She touched her finger to the bottom right corner and dragged it sideways, so that the book revealed the next pair of pages. "Here's one idea," I said. I die here." "No," I said. Zima had no need for sleep, so he worked uninterrupted until a piece was complete. If there's the slightest problem with the engine..." "Anything happens, mission control can help us." I worked my way down to the door. You won't be able to return to your emperor, but you'll at least have died knowing you did the decent thing." He waited a beat, the eye-slits in his gargoyle mask giving nothing away. For a moment he saw his reflection in the glass: older than he felt he had any right to look, the grey beard and hair making him look ancient rather than patriarchal; a man deeply wearied by recent circumstance. The thought of him pumping tiny machines into my skull made my skin crawl But none of the previous entries were the slightest help. I remembered, even if you didn't. THE WATER THIEF ARC, A NEW publishing venture launched under the wing of New Scientist, invited me to submit a short story with a relatively near-future setting. Tragedy for the crew, but fresh challenges, fresh news from home, for us. Of course they haven't. By the time the second wave was rising, orbital defences had sprung into action, but by then it was too late to intercept more than a handful of the missiles. "Every bit as...dreadful as I'd been led to expect." My voice was slurred, sentences taking an age to form in whatever part of my brain it was that handled language. Almost an obsessive compulsive disorder. But you don't have enough depth ever to fascinate me." "There's more to love than fascination. There are a couple of other glitches: nothing quite so egregious, but enough to make me pick through the whole thing looking for anomalies. You were born, but—and I hope you don't mind me saying this—you're also the result of profound genetic intervention. "It's been going on, in some shape or form, since before you went under. We both know it." "All right. Slumped down on the deck, I could barely reach his waist, let alone the knives. "Something he was allowed to bring with him from the future. I wore a moon mask and a simple outfit patterned in sunset shades, with a repeating motif of half-swallowed suns. No crime can go unpunished. They made interception above the lacerated atmosphere of my dying world and lit the sky with obscene energies. Then-although I can't say I'm sorry for a little company—you can be on your way, before you get both of us into trouble." I return to the same seat I used before. Twenty minutes later we were deep into the thicket, with blue-green structures crowding around us. That's why it's been opened up, so that the heat can dissipate more easily." "It's a monstrosity." "Not to us," she said sharply. If they still remember you, or want to remember. I thought we went over this. The empire's very existence hinged upon a single evil act. She deserves better than to be forgotten. You continue to associate with her to the exclusion of others. For all its strangeness; for all that it mocked our petty assumptions about the way matter and gravity should conduct themselves, it was recognisably a manufactured thing. Now-with the nest being abandoned-the component had no further use. "What happened?" Gaunt asked, nodding at the foil-wrapped body. Now his fears seemed groundless. How would the Matryoshka respond to our burning a hole in it? It'll be marvelous to see boats sailing across Martian seas, under Martian skies. "I'd have thought you'd have jumped at work. I think you'd find it difficult to adjust." I couldn't help laughing. "I take full responsibility for this incident." He waved aside my apology. We can visit Earth if you like, but in truth there's not much to see. If you wish answers to your questions, descend to the perimeter of the abandoned settlement from which this transmission is originating. It's like being nursed by an angel. We're interacting, touching it, feeling it." "And I think you need to get some sleep," Galenka said. "You've got a problem with the service, find someone else to fix your ship." Then he stuck his little finger into the corner of his mouth and began to dig between his teeth. They'll tear down the domes when the atmosphere gets thick enough to breathe, but they won't tear down the hotels." He paused. You're cold? There would have been records, I suppose. Close enough for me." "We should put guns on the rigs." "And where would the manpower come from, exactly? The clinic remained, but now his grandson was running it." "I bet he wasn't keen on talking." "No; he took some persuading. Shut off the steam leak and managed to drag Gimenez back here," Da Silva said. "The stone?" "You asked your father to give it to me, when I was due to leave Lecythus." "Oh, that thing," Minla said. The engines on the gondola turned on their mountings, trying to shove the airship back into position. If you weren't, you wouldn't be paying for the head of David." "I'm glad you see it that way." He kissed me on the cheek, forestalling any objection. Lenka? An instant later I felt a kind of mental prickle as something touched my brain, groping its way in like an octopus seeking a way into a shell. It was an oil rig or production platform of some kind, or at least, something repurposed from one. Burdock told us that the Advocates had been covertly resurrecting Prior methods of stellar engineering, contesting them against each other to find the most efficient processes. The huge room Galiana showed him was almost painfully bright and cheerful; a child's fantasy of friendly shapes and primary colours. "Until then we need a degree of focus." "Focus yourself," I said, turning away. Ultras often wore a lock of braided hair for every crossing they had made across interstellar space and survived all the myriad misfortunes which might befall a ship. If you are innocent, we'll prove it and ask your forgiveness—just as we did with Betony, all those years ago. And once again, I urge you to take all necessary precautions. Licensed investigator: hardly the most glamorous or remunerative profession in the system. \*\*\* GRISHA'S PEOPLE WERE archaeologists. "I have to unscrew this, sometimes. Well, we didn't. "I was hoping someone would make it this far," Burdock said, opening his eyes. Now that I thought of that, there was a twinge of familiarity about it...the memory of doing so not completely defined." "And now? "Cut there. He had been adjusting. She'll be all right. That was true of our own Lachrimosa—no ship makes it between solar systems without some cost—but here the damage was much worse. She sat us at a table. The buildings were rectangles, cylinders, and domes, all with small black windows and circular, airlock style doors set out from the main structure in rounded porches. And how many times have I obeyed? The sea-dragon was holding coherence. There'll be a thousand by the time we're finished. "Blasted up just as they were coming in. I was told to fix it onto the head." "And the...function...of this beacon? "Whatever you have to show me, show me and go." "I'd really like to talk to you first." I hold up my gloveless, numb-fingered hands. We see how the energy of the atom could carry us into space, and beyond range of our sun. It sat next to the Flux Swimmer. If I'm to make any difference, I'll have to hand over all available neural resources." "But you'll be helpless. Another pond full of diseased carp. I am the vehicle. "I'm prepared to press it." "Wait. I climbed the steps and walked over the threshold, joining Childe. The timing wasn't exactly ideal, after what happened to Voi." "Yes. "And a way off Mars," Clavain said. "We still have our minds, after all. What else am I expected to do?" He ate his breakfast in silence and then went to find Nero. Despite this, no watertight algorithm had ever been devised to predict the window events with any precision. Sleep well, Merlin. Purslane's original strand wasn't as bad as I had feared: there was actually some promising material in it, if only it could be brought out more effectively. You did the right thing, Campion." "I killed him." "You saved us all. So I did what I had always done. Everything else felt painfully abstract, whereas before the opposite had been the case. At least that was what Greta told me. Something I couldn't grasp, except in the nature of its outcome. Giles didn't expect it to be immediate, of course—the envoys would take decades to reach the closest systems they'd been assigned to, and there'd still be the communicational timelag to take into consideration. Rasht swore at Kanto and went on himself, his suit grinding and clanging against the pincering rock. With my sensors damaged, I genuinely don't know what they're doing. "Completely and utterly. Trust me, ship: this is the quickest way for take into consideration. Rasht swore at Kanto and went on himself, his suit grinding and clanging against the pincering rock. With my sensors damaged, I genuinely don't know what they're doing. them to understand I'm not a threat." "It's been a pleasure having you aboard," Tyrant said acidly. I looked at him shrewdly. \*\*\* IT WAS VERY hard to behave normally in the days and weeks that followed. She looked at the bridge again, measuring it once more with clinical eyes, eyes that were older and sadder this time, because she knew something. that the people on the bridge could never know. Teterev had gambled her salvation on finding relic technology, something that could buy her extra time in the wreck. He reached out for Galiana, needing some anchor against what was about to hit him. The seas will rise, Mars will be greened. Forty minutes or so." "Forty-three, to be precise, Trintignant said. "Even the ones with an unusually high mud content." Mullein laughed good-naturedly, and, for a moment, he was the star of the show again. I'd hoped that the maze would tell me something about Burdock's state of mind, if only he would participate. "Wait," I called after her. No one was going to disturb them. I tried to contact you but without success. Not incinerated, not mashed, but spat out whole, so that there can be no question of its biological origin. Of course, if you don't want to stay upright, that's one way out of this for you. And they were still alive. Everything was circular, ultimately. All around the island, the ships were raising their screens again, as protection against the bombardment. I knew some of these people; had even worked with some of them back when they trimmed payloads for the big combines. "There was nothing wrong—" "I know. "Six minutes left," he said. Under those circumstances, who wouldn't be a little rattled?" For all that she's right—I am rattled—and for all that I have no desire to spend another second with my phantom self crammed into the pod, my combat instincts momentarily trump all other concerns. All of it." "You won't like it." "You won't like it." "You won't like it." "All right, Thom. There's only one thing anyone ever thinks about on Thousandth Night." even had the almost-obligatory large single moon. The entry wound was small, but the internal bleeding... it would have killed you, had we not intervened." Before he could ask the inevitable guestion she answered it for him. "I'm a lot older than you, lad. I grew up not far from Ferry, in the darkest, coldest years of the Great Winter." "How long ago? "The Sheriff then was William the Questioner. He began to uncover a silver tube, buried upright in the dust. But overlaid on that was a transparent view of something else entirely. I think I knew, even before the Spire responded, that the choice had not been the correct one. Stuck down here. "Or even two pairs." forbidden outside of threading," Burdock said heavily. One of the lenses sticking out of its head swiveled into place, telescoping out to peer at the label. Good, it's coming back to you. Conditions, as you'll have gathered, were still extremely perilous. "If anyone should be quitting, it isn't you, Hirz. "Where's here?" I remember what Greta told me. But when I conjured a mirror and examined my face in it I saw a quivering, tic-like tightness around the mouth. The other children have already gone through it now. She always returned to same silent, standing posture. It's still rising. In better days, Trintignant's work could probably have been undone. But I am not an evil man. I crawled from the edge, belly down, until I felt confident enough to risk standing. Unless a window was in view, the movement of the inner sphere could not be measured. A miscalculation, a problem with the injection into the time machine. And I know the tricks and dodges that will make it difficult or time-consuming for the link to be snapped. But I also appreciate that you're incredibly valuable to me-not just as a friend, but as my closest and most trusted advisor. "I mean, morally. Greta steps toward Suzy. The equivalence of mass and energy. And what looked like the clearly wrong answer turned out to be the right one." "Right. There: twenty-odd bright lights, accompanied by one much fainter. "That would help The old soldier had his coat drawn tight across his chest, even though the wind was still and the evening not particularly cold. I know you feel pretty isolated right now, Sergeant Kane, and that's only natural. A party of visitors was arriving, attended by servitors and a swarm of bright, marble-sized float-cams. But records can be wrong. Then we pu as much distance between us and that wreck as God and physics will allow." I nodded, knowing that it was pointless to expect more of Van Ness. "This is the view," Greta said. Too tight for a grown woman but the accelerometers and postural sensors still function. "Not at all. The worms would be locking onto their seismic patterns already, if there were any nearby. Off on her next grand adventure." After a moment one of my hosts says: "Aren't you..." "Envious?" I finish for them. I speculated to myself that the silver contamination was indeed having some effect, but that my exposure to the pond's microorganisms had provided a barriering layer, a kind of inocculation. That we got this far..." "I know; we should be very proud of ourselves." She stared at the screen, her eyes still sleepy. "What do you mean, not quite ready?" Galiana looked deep into his eyes now. Even though we're indoors she wears big fur boots. Yukimi considered herself lucky now not to be stuck on it all the way to Milankovic. "But it'll only make it slower and messier for both of you." With both hands—he couldn't have been hurt that badly—he delved into the progress we've made in your absence." "I'm cheered." "You encouraged us to make these improvements," Minla said, chidingly. "God's teeth!" Zeal said, flinging aside his soldering iron. She was alone. "Something that's been bothering me since I came out of the tank." A mannequin came to take our order. We started moving, taking stiff, slow paces in our EVA suits. There were only a handful of surface communities and the political balance of the planet—not to mention the whole system—was still in a state of flux. They'd shadow every move you made, even if you tried to shake them off." "You promised us—" "I promised you nothing. Upon midnight, the revellers assembled on a high balcony flung out from the side of the main tower on an arm of curved ivory. The door opened, exposing the next chamber. When I'm back, I'll tell you everything you want to know—and I guarantee you'll be bored within five minutes." He kissed me again. "But still. I clenched and opened my fist. Whatever life you had before, whatever you did in the old world, it's gone." She knuckled her good hand against the metal rigging. Of course, there'll almost certainly have to be a limited war of some kind...but he's ready to pay that price. But she is otherwise intact. This room was smaller than the last one, and the environment was suddenly a lot more claustrophobic. "In seventy—make that fifty— years, you'll be facing collective annihilation. I didn't think I'd be able to convince you guite that easily." I nodded towards the door, suggesting that she sketch out what she thought was the likely solution. Merlin, we already were monsters. "Their captain was called Argyle. Quite literally. As she descended she could see Twenty Arch Bridge from above, a thread of light across the shadowed ribbon of the river. Not only shouldn't they have been there, but Authority screwed up in not protecting them when the impactor came in. She closed the covers on the companion and let it slip to the hard metal deck, gaining another dent or dog-ear in the process. But she had visitors, all the same. I care for all the lost souls. God, I hate being me." She felt a lurch then, as if the airship had punched its way through the pressure bubble that surrounded the whole of Shalbatana City and its suburbs. Then a third, and so on. "It's April, twenty-two seventeen. By now the monkey almost needed to be dragged or carried. It might make a difference. "I thought it was just me. In an army, it would be to wait and see what the Matryoshka had in mind for us. "You've spent years putting this together, haven't you. "No one else came back sane from the Conjoiners. It was sheathed in several layers of conventional hull material, anchored to the Petronel by a shock-absorbing cradle and wrapped in a mesh of sensors and steering-control systems. It was the one Trintignant had already worked on. It was matte black, a lean, waspish thing made of angles rather than curves, and aside from some sinister bulges and pods, there was nothing particularly futuristic about it. Suicide, perhaps—dive into a star. We'll get that arm looked at properly, and then we'll come back with lightweight suits. The eyes were still looking at me, but all of a sudden I sensed no intellect behind them. "Put it on the table, will you?" Kathrin put the bag down. For a moment she was paralyzed with fear, but even when the moment passed she didn't know what to do. But early on she had fallen into the habit of making the entries as if she was telling them to her sister, and she had never broken it. Just a bottleneck. With the hand that she still had, Celestine pressed the correct symbol. Mike won't miss it, after all. "She's already been dead a century." \*\*\* HOW DO YOU adjust to something like that? Young adult protagonist. And exceptionally good for him, if he handles things well. Galiana was their leader only inasmuch as she had founded the lab here from which the original experiment had sprung and was accorded some respect deriving from seniority. Enraged, it flung itself against the rim wall, chipping off scabs of concrete the size of boulders. You've got all that, haven't you? "I've seen the natural-language summaries, and there's no doubt about the legality of a police action. "Stick with me, and you'll see a lot worse." "Does that mean you'll let me stay?" Zeal picked up an oily rag and threw it my way. Then there'd be real progress, with each achievement leading to the next. Now and then he'd do or say something that hinted at a dark personal secret—but under that level of scrutiny, it was difficult to think of anyone who wouldn't. It's not that they care the next. Now and then he'd do or say something that hinted at a dark personal secret—but under that level of scrutiny, it was difficult to think of anyone who wouldn't. It's not that they care the next. Now and then he'd do or say something that hinted at a dark personal secret—but under that level of scrutiny, it was difficult to think of anyone who wouldn't. It's not that they care the next. Now and then he'd do or say something that hinted at a dark personal secret—but under that level of scrutiny, it was difficult to think of anyone who wouldn't. It's not that they care the next. Now and then he'd do or say something that hinted at a dark personal secret—but under that level of scrutiny, it was difficult to the next. Now and then he'd do or say something that hinted at a dark personal secret—but under that level of scrutiny, it was difficult to the next. Now and then he'd do or say something that hinted at a dark personal secret. about me. I'll improvise. If nothing else we should make sure we've got unique samples from both Shell 1 and Shell 2." "I'm going to try and bring out the first chunk. There was no way the Conjoiners could not have seen this for themselves, but it seemed inhuman not to acknowledge what had happened. Our minds now ran too rapidly to communicate verbally, but, though she moved slowly herself, she deigned to reply. I hope you're ready." "As I'll ever be." Weather planted a hand on either side of the stump and closed her eyes momentarily. "Is it the one you thought it was originally?" "No." "Great," Hirz said. I thought about how she had looked naked, memories that I'd kept buried for a decade spooling into daylight. "I don't think you should be in here alone." He looked at me with something resembling gratitude. Food, clothing, somewhere to sleep, whatever medicine we can provide." He shrugged. I won't trouble you again." She watched his cock stiffen. Everything was a blank after that. We'll take very good care of him. "Are you certain?" "It's what Gennadi would have wanted. Yet after what felt like many hours we were done: the two halves reunited, the interconnects joined, the other ship, the orbiting lighthugger. The Waymakers forged an empire where a thousand years was just a lazy afternoon, a time to put off plans for another day." Merlin looked sadly at Minla. When Van Ness had the chance to upgrade the guns, he'd chosen instead to spend the money on newer reefersleep caskets for the passenger hold. So they only get an hour or two before I'm on to my more lucrative appointments. We don't have time to worry about anything extraneous." Reluctantly, I agreed. The BVM was always in a spacesuit, carrying a little spacesuited Jesus. Earlier, unwitnessed, I had primed the weapon onto Burdock. Time is going to eat up those seventy years faster than you can blink." "I know how quickly time can eat years, Merlin." "I want to wake to rockets and jet aircraft. Make it that Yakov's madness didn't start until they were very close to the Matryoshka. I don't want you to die before we've even begun! It was lucky, what happened with the winch. Every waking mind increases the burden on the Realm. "Or Ridgeback City on Iapetus. Some are prepared to make that adjustment; not all are willing. Could someone have stayed behind, nursing a potent grudge? "This is it, then," Galenka said. Add one to two to three, and you've got six. The air elsewhere in the nest was thicker and warmer than in the hangar, which meant he could dispense with the mask. She had drifted into the recreation area quite silently. It was an aircraft: a ludicrously fragile assemblage of canvas and wire. Any spacer, any Ultra, is bound to care a little about the fate of another. As the worm descended on her, Clavain could do nothing but turn his gaze away and pray for her death to be quick. That old fool captured thousands of hours, and that's not including all the log entries he made, all the thoughts he put down for posterity. Still. "Stand here and look into the air." "There's nothing there." But as soon as he had spoken, he knew he was wrong. "But why? It might just be waking up, running systems checks, rebooting itself. For a moment I felt a lurching sense of dizziness, and—though I tried to stop it before I made a fool of myself—I found myself grasping the side of the table, as if to prevent myself from falling into the infinite depths of the view. This, I knew, must be what it felt like to an idiot savant, gifted with astonishing skill in one highly specialised field of human expertise. "They will never work with us, unless they become us." "You can't believe how frightening that sounds." "It's the only way," Minla said. When we're done with this... I hope you'll let me show you more of the system. The Conjoiners managed to launch one every six weeks or so; had been doing so for six months. "We can negotiate. Her fears are like a new colour, a new smell. I want you out of my jurisdiction. Beneath the plinth, icy with frost, was a thick tangle of pipes and coiling, intestinal machinery. The alarm was drilling into my head. Think carefully, won't you?" I said I would. She was still overseeing his initiation and knew his daily schedule, where he was likely to be at a given hour. Since no manmade signal could penetrate Shell 3, comms could only squirt through when a window was open, in whatever direction that happened to be. You could dine on one world, ride your ship to the Waynet and then take supper on some other world, under the falling light of another sun. Along the way we've come." "It sounds like the doors opening and closing in sequence." "Yes." "Why would they do that?" "Something must be coming through the rooms towards us." Childe thought about that for what felt like minutes, but was probably only a matter of actual seconds. I crawled out along the pressurised access tunnel that pierced the starboard Conjoiner drive was mated to the structural fabric of the Petronel. Borage dropped replicators on their nearest moon and converted part of it into a toroidal defence screen, shielding their planet from the infall of dislodged comets. But when I consulted my log book and made the tiny adjustments that should have taken all the dials into the blue-green—still nicely within the safety envelope—I got a nasty surprise. The weather's all right." "So they say. There was an impact, near David's right eye. Wheels, mostly awaiting spokes or iron tyres, rested against another. But they were still people, and he was amongst them. But would that necessarily be the right thing to do?" Ingvar studies her boots. In my peripheral vision I saw my detached hand, still gloved, perched on the floor like an absurd white crab. Most stories—if we're going to be honest about it, though - are abject failures. Knowing he would not see Thousandth Night, let alone another reunion, he was turning away from the line. The face that Clavain was looking at was much like his own, except that the face on the screen was missing an eye. Celestine held out her hand. So I'm told, at least." "Then what's the issue?" Her hand gripped the walking stick like a talon. "Meaning that they got inside, the way Argyle claimed. But she knows my name, and that's worrying. His art was everything. Other than that it's a work and it's great. I made out the tiny dots of people frolicking on the bridge, dancing in the spray. Merlin brought his ship down on a clear part of the apron and doused the engines as soon as the landing skids touched the ground. I had to do my share of lecturing, and fighting my corner for the department, but I still had plenty of time for independent research. What ultimate function did the Spire serve? "There can only be one outcome from such an action—something the Conjoiners must have well understood. Without an understanding of that obsession, there was no story: just anecdote. She was losing the war by then; one more recruit to her side wouldn't have made any real difference. But because she doesn't talk to me enough, my companion can't pretend to be her." Yukimi felt a wave of sadness slide over her. Yet Blood Spire was different. By contrast this was the mistake. Inigo, If they're still recognizable, or alive. They'll be after our cargo," "Pirates, you mean?" "Ave. son. I can't tell you what a relief it is to find you." "Do I know you?" "Of course you know me. I love." "Well, isn't that heartwarming," said a voice behind us. That was in the early days of the Radiant Commonwealth, when it only encompassed a few hundred systems. There'd be races, jousting competitions, fireworks, mystery players, even printing presses to make newspapers and souvenirs just for the Frost Fair. You're being kept alive in a technological coffin, while the war continues around you. Given the circumstances, that's not in the best possible taste, is it?" "Never mind." We were struggling out of our suits now. "Celestine, don't cut yourself up about this. If the door shuts on you, we'll give you a minute and then we'll open it ourselves." Childe walked up the three steps and across the threshold. I tried to remember the name of my first newspaper, back on Mars. For the first time, Clavain felt genuine hatred for Warren. The Progress anchored itself by firing sticky-tipped guy-lines onto the obstacle. You felt nothing, and you will continue to feel nothing. "But I'm glad you didn't." "Do you mind if I ask you something?" "As long as it isn't to do with mathematics." "Why did you care about Childe," she said firmly. It seemed like a fantasy when I was a little girl, something that would never come to pass in the real world. The emperor's new body rose from his throne as the doors finished opening. That wasn't the last ship, either. Still, the machinery was definitely damaged. But the walls were still whispering to me, inviting me to stroke my hand against them. All of a sudden the bridge appeared deserted. The repair work, where Garret was most likely to be, was now well behind her. Did you clone yourself?" "Of course he did," she said. I remember what you used to tell me about space travel." "Yeah? "Please." "Something is going to come out of the sky," Merlin said. You're already paralyzed, effectively, but just to make sure that the systems don't begin to recover, I've opened your main control box and disabled all locomotive power. And you?" "Luttrell. "Sledge-maker's daughter!" called a rough voice from across the road. Clearly, we were wrong about that. I'm actually more fascinated by the liquid coming out of The Baby. I am getting better at anticipating this timelag delay now, issuing my commands accordingly. My name is a flow of experiential symbols, a string of interiorised qualia, an expression of a particular dynamic state that has only ever happened under a conjunction of rare physical conditions in the atmosphere of a particular kind of gas giant planet. "Is that how far out we've come?" I asked. Physiologically, you're still a sixty-year-old man, with about twenty or thirty years ahead of you." "Then why have you woken me, if the process isn't ready?" "There isn't one," Da Silva said. Its writhing was so fast that it took on a quasi-solidity: an irregularly shaped pillar of flickering, whistling metal. There was no kindly surgeon on the other side of that screen. "I'll save you the bother," Clausen said. If there were ever to be... difficulties again, we wouldn't take candidates so indiscriminately." "But you'd still take some." "We'd still consider it a kindness," Weather said. "It's approaching from the west." Still shaken by what he'd seen, Merlin took the stealthed ship closer. The other ship was firing on us, discharging massive energy and projectile weapons from hull emplacements. It is not the deepest secret, but it is a secret nonetheless, and shortly you will know it. A dozen-then a dozen more. "A new hand could have been cultured and regrafted in a few hours. Turbulent times are coming. Fold its memories and personality into my own. Haven't you learned that with your shuttles?" "The shuttles were only ever a diversionary tactic." Galiana said. The other was her father, looking worried and gray. Thirty-two thousand years. Please, take me to Zvezdniy Gorodok. "Thank you," she said. "It was good that you remembered the one in the wreck. With Burdock cooled below consciousness, the consumption was retarded to a glacially slow attack. But why had I never seen this one before?

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. By tightening my grip on the railings I managed not to slip off the catwalk. "I am speaking of something men. "I'll take whatever I can get. They know you're human now." "I never said I wasn't." "You didn't, no They'll still find every excuse to humiliate her at every turn, given the chance. "So-any news?" "Nothing. "Keep at it, Thom. On Kharkov Eight I was a quick-thinking machine with human-level intelligence. You're clever and fast, and you understand human nature better than your makers. You're already admitted that you broke into his ship, after all The question is, what do we do with our knowledge?" I wonder if there's a trap I'm missing. The older brother toppled back into the dust, a fist-sized black wound burned into his chestplate. But as the tunnel progressed, so the walls began to pinch together. Consciousness was a step-change in the computational load. "Now though..." "There was no waiting any longer, was there?" Eventually they reached a chamber with the same echoing acoustics as the topside hangar. Then one day he chanced upon it. But at the same time I couldn't deny that worrying about another human being had helped me with my own adjustment. I had no sooner registered this than a small shard slammed out of the sky no more than fifteen kilometers from the island, punching a bright frothing wound into the sea. It's kinder." "If you say so." "Trust me on this one, Thom. I asked her to try and remember the last of them. Then we could really start doing something." I almost laughed. Software clever and agile enough to mimic a reassuring presence. They have her on a makeshift bed, a table with a mattress on, hemmed by white-coated peacekeepers and green-outfitted nurses. It was slippery between my fingers. Childe sounded reasonable. "I don't think it is." "I'm not sure. The others would see that the thing I had killed was not a man, but a bloodless construct. There's just a handful of us still awake, playing caretaker, watching over the rigs and OTEC plants." "Four hundred thousand waking souls," I said. All that took place long before any pain signals had a chance to reach his brain. Fescue—and a handful of other line members—had almost certainly been tipped off. "I....the winner. Then it was gone. Of course I knew that something had gone wrong—I'd heard the signals from Earth, trying to reestablish contact. I reached out my hand, my right one, and she flinched back. "No; I honestly don't think I do." Clavain stepped through the airlock just before it sphinctered shut. For centuries, no sickness or infirmity will touch you." Kathrin stroked the bracelet. "This was bad timing," he heard Nero say. It exaggerates the brightness of the stars, so that the human eye registers the differences between them. You swam with the Jugglers, didn't you, Celestine?" "Once or twice." "And allowed them to reshape your mind, transforming its neural pathways into something deeply—albeit usually temporarily—alien." "It wasn't that big a deal," Celestine said. "They'll either win or lose by then, and we'll only know one way. Coldness would mean she felt some recognisably human emotion, even if it was dislike or contempt. It's dark now, the camera viewing the world in grey-green infrared. "We couldn't help it. "We'll build our bomb in our own time, without your help, and use it to secure peace for the whole world. I felt that if only I could immerse myself in that colour, then I would know everything I desired to know. I asked him if he was a kind of soldier. They would regain strength in time, but for now he needed help. It had to be me. "We all make the best of things," I say. But if they're on the usual sweep pattern, we'll be fine once they've passed over." "Then there's no reason for me not to take a look at that body image issue, is there?" "It's not bothering me as much as it did." "Let me fix it anyway. The conference room must have dated back to the days when the nest was a research outpost, or even earlier, when it was some kind of mining base in the early 2100s. "You saw what happened to those poor bastards outside. The figure twitches and turns to look at me. "No—it wasn't punishment. "Wait!" I called. Shortly afterward, something else came. Before that, I was a simpler machine...like an heirloom or a pet. The pilot had removed his goggles now, revealing the lined face of an older man, his grey-white beard and whiskers stark against ruddy, weatherworn skin. "I thought you wanted to get away from Mokmer as soon as possible." "No," I said. "Yes." He tried to sound as calm as possible. This has to be something to do with Thousandth Night." "I know." I winced at the pain in my chest, certain that the mob had broken a rib. "Spelter Malkoha, ursine Malkoha, ursine Malkoha." The red-faced man knelt down—his eyes were still damp—and ran a gloved finger through the girl's unruly fringe of black hair. The cut was deep, but clean. "He's got other things on his mind now. Many of the atomic rockets were being piloted by suicide crews, steering their charges through Minla's hastily erected countermeasure screens. "Of course there is," Celestine said. The Skylanders had been first, though, which was why the weapons had a special name on Lecythus. But we can't run the risk of you trying to open the hatch again." "I accept that this isn't a simulation now. Wants us to let him out of the module." "Not likely." "I agree. None of us could speak for long minutes. Except for that one occasion when a bright new star shone in Fornax and Skanda forced himself back into my consciousness. "The tune it makes..." She starts turning the little handle, the notes tinkling out. There were complications. "Neural implants, fully integrated into the participant's sense of self. Her feet were bare and oddly elongated. And even if I did have cause to fear for myself—which I don't—I wouldn't dwell on it. Without thinking, Clavain hugged closer to the wall, locking his limbs around the ladder. I've been out there for twenty years, visiting world after world, and I've barely scratched the surface." "Then you don't feel any..." The Baby makes a show of searching for the right word, rolling his eyes as if none of this is scripted. There was just one troubling thought which I could not guite dismiss. He knew it would work. I've never been entirely at ease with numbers, and mathematics has seldom felt like a native language to me. I thought we were coming down here to look at the situation, to talk about them, Inigo. "What's going on, Roland?" "I've found something. I'd checked everything, but I was all too conscious of the thin membranes of fabric protecting me from lung-freezing death. She tugged it down into the surface of the couch until it lapped around my wrist, warm as blood. I'm your brother. I think this is a point where you have to take what you're given." "Perhaps. The artilects weren't trusted at first. You won't be able to take the raw reality of what's happened to you. "It's very smooth." smudge of sickly yellow-green against the grey and white everywhere else. But I don't recommend that we do that for any length of time—at least not until we're forced into it." "Forced?" Celestine said. "Feels like I was in that thing for an eternity. Occasionally they overflew a little hamlet of huts or the scratch of a minor track. "Naturally, Nidra." When Rasht had quenched Kanto's light, the rest of us followed suit. "I probably did. Its armored green hull had something of the same semi-translucence as polished turtleshell. But the Sheriff is real, and he was once able to fly. The statue was indeed older than the Great Winter, when they tore it down. "I'm sure I'll think of something." \*\*\* BECAUSE I WAS dreading its arrival, Thousandth Night was suddenly upon us. Look up, emperor. It was only later, when we had the benefit of footage from the hull cameras, that we were able to piece together what had occurred. Before long, I was able to address the alien through the direct manipulation of internal mental states. Bioremediation Black Sea. He took some persuading before he even agreed to look at Weather, and even then he wouldn't come within twenty metres of her. But when we reached the junction, the intersection of four tunnels, Rasht made us halt. That had never been in Warren's simulations. Until I woke up on my back. "I just got another prognosis from your frience to look at Weather, and even then he wouldn't come within twenty metres of her. But when we reached the junction, the intersection of four tunnels, Rasht made us halt. Kolding. They walked down the corridor, passing a set of open double doors that led into some kind of mess room or commons. It was as far beyond the Matryoshka as the Matry never been good with heights and the drainage holes in the floor were already too large for comfort. She caught a glimpse of it this time as it locked onto the next pod and hauled it out of the cargo bay. His synthesised voice had a curious piping quality. In your reflexes are going to be no match for the robot's own battle routines." But if I'm going to die out here, I'd sooner be doing something than just being carried along for the ride. Mars was a Descrutinized Zone. Why wouldn't I? Take this." She passed him a heavy toolkit, a hard hat and a bundle of brownish work-stained clothing piled on top of it. "Will you come with us now, Georgi? "Might I?" "Go ahead." He ride. Mars was a Descrutinized Zone. Why wouldn't I? Take this." touched the covers with his old man's fingers, which were bony and yellow-nailed and sprouted white hairs in odd places. In your time there was another way out. It's time to start being a soldier again. Most of it was war-surplus. Reluctantly I crawled back along the starboard spar and confronted the engine settings again. Comes a day when it all just clicks into place and you know the set-up so well you always have the right tools and parts with you, without even thinking." "Weeks, months, depends on the individual. He saw now that the cylinder was the repository for dozens more of these wooden boxes, most of which must have been smashed when Merlin had nudged the aircraft with Tyrant. Other Lines favour rigid regimentation: a thousand identical clones, each programmed to respond to the same stimulus in exactly the aircraft with Tyrant. same way. "Something worries me, though," Purslane said. "You wanted to see our anticollision fields, I believe." "That'll tell us who did it," Purslane said. You think old Corax's getting too old for the job?" "I don't know," she answered truthfully. He'd threaded his strand a few weeks earlier. What do you think they should do with the body?" I look around at the ranged exhibits of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum—the fire-scorched space capsules and the spindly replicas of early space probes, like iron crabs and spiders. Had I truly engineered these aquatics for flight, equipping them with implanted field generators, and enough animal wisdom to use them? "Not for me," Zima said. If it's any consolation, the two of you wouldn't have been his only suspects. Still, like she said, she was the pilot. "One culture," Samphire said. "For the time being. That's when the fight or flight response kicks in. If the people in the know had come out into the open and announced their plans, no one would have believed them. There was, of course, no word about how one of those brave cosmonauts had gone stark staring mad. "Less than one per cent of the entire galactic population." Zima sniffed his wine and looked through the glass at the sky. As they neared the water, Yukimi made out a series of sketchy shapes floating just beneath the surface: pale rectangles and circles, some of them deeper than others, and reaching a considerable distance from the shore. And if they can't, they'll just put him under again until they have the means." "Sounds like he got a good deal out of it in the end," Gaunt said. He may still be alive. "I need to get out of here," I said. Would any part of the nest be safe? I didn't. 15.56.31.07—zero validated packets 15.56.14.11—zero validated packets 15.55.09.33—zero validated packets ... 11.12.22.54—zero validated packets And I learn that KX-457 has been out of contact with Tango Oscar—or any command sector, for that matter— for more than nineteen hours. Again it filled with the violent red scribble of the aperture network. Subjective time? Even if someone else had fabricated all or part of their strand, there was no reason to assume they had made the same kind of mistake." "I thought my ship was going to blow up." "Of course you did. You did well. Let the robot extract you, if that's what you insist on doing. The deck was spaciously laid out, with a crescent window set into one curve of wall. Yet he called: "I'm through." Kanto was still on the leash, which was now tight against the edge of the rock. There'd been a machine not much more advanced than that in the archive inside the Palace of Eternal Dusk, preserved across thirteen hundred years of family history. What exactly happened? Even if the engines kept working as they were now, we'd take far too long to reach relativistic speed, where time dilation became appreciable. The emperor was floating, as weightless as the water surrounding him. "It never rains. "Richard?" Childe said again, more insistent this time. It took an hour, but eventually Celestine felt certain that she had selected the right answer. The older brother stopped his own digging and looked at what the other man was in the process of uncovering. It won't be a smooth ride home." I shrugged. I had little appetite and less small talk. "I suppose the orbital alterations could also be a by-product of some less meaningful worm activity." "I agree," Clavain said. Needless to say, I'm not having any of that. First appeared in One Million A.D. ed by Gardner Dozois, Science Fiction Book Club, 2005 "Troika" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2010. We thought we could prevent a repeat of what happened with Yakov, the bleed-over of personality and memory, but we were wrong. Would they be given an ultimatum or allowed to return to sleep? Zima poured me a glass of red, then held it up to the sky to inspect its clarity. But only because the timing was on my side." Clavain was reciting an old argument now; as much for his own benefit as Voi's. I'd see if there was a bomb in it. I've been walking for an hour, trying not to glance over my shoulder too often, when I find Nesha's building. "Look. I'd see if there was a bomb in it. I've been walking for an hour, trying not to glance over my shoulder too often, when I find Nesha's building. "Look. I'd see if there was a bomb in it. I've been walking for an hour, trying not to glance over my shoulder too often, when I find Nesha's building. plumbed into my own unpainted surge tank and closed the lid. "I heard you the first time." The rotor reached takeoff speed. It was difficult to see at first, efficiently camouflaged by the play of light and shadow on the rock, almost as if it meant to hide itself. Rather than orbiting 82 Eridani directly, Holda spun around a fat banded gas giant which in turn orbited the star. An hour or so later Nero came up to see him. Like Michelangelo." "That's true," she agrees. So my uncle resigned himself to forty or fifty years of waiting, and that was erring on the optimistic side." He paused and sipped from his wine. It hadn't shown any sign of having noticed it. "It was brave of you to hold your silence, Kathrin. Their makers were thinking long-term, making plans for things they had no real expectation of ever living to see. When she locked it together, the join was nearly invisible. Two months later he stained the entire equatorial belt of a gas giant blue, and I had a ringside seat for that as well. Everything that happens, everything that has ever happened, is due to events occuring in the Realm. "The edge of Valles Marineris," Corax told her. Nestled around a natural harbour on its southern shore was the largest community Merlin had seen so far. Even if it does hit, most of its kinetic energy will be soaked up by the ablation ice. I glanced at Celestine, trying to judge if she felt as oddly as I did. Something astonishing that I want you to be a part of; a challenge that makes every game you and I ever played in our youth pale in comparison." "A challenge?" "The ultimate one, I think." He had pricked my curiosity, but I hoped it was not too obvious. A silence fell, and endured. And all of it points to something even more disturbing." I was wearying of this. But the risk to yourself was too great. It's strong here-much stronger than outside. "Oh, and secure the Great House. The original artilects were already out there, already in the Realm." "They hadn't noticed us." "And the global population had only just spiked at eight billion. There was still a commotion going on by the dray, but no one there was paying any attention to what was happening further along the bridge. I was one of the few who stayed on Murjek, returning to the stands each day. They were people. "But good seasoned beech, which'll never warp. I'm going to drown, Dimitri. I was a young that I didn't have dreams and the bridge. I was one of the few who stayed on Murjek, returning to the stands each day. They were people. "But good seasoned beech, which'll never warp. I'm going to drown, Dimitri. I was a young that I didn't have dreams and the bridge. and plans." "You must be sorry about that now." "Sometimes. For that very reason they're necessarily plastic, malleable, subject to error and distortion." "Fallible," I said. The drone had eavesdropped on the exchange of recognition protocols between the box and the hovering ship. Maintenance of algae bloom control and containment systems." Cleaning slime from pumps, in other words. "You can have your pig back. "No." ELEVEN "I CAN HEAR something." "Of course you can. I already knew more about the Matryoshka than any other living person, with the possible exception of Galenka. Beneath that living shell lay the hard armour of a sentient machine. In little over a year machines would pulverise the islands, turning their spired buildings into powdery rubble. Derek has a vocabulary of about one hundred and sixty words and can form relatively simple expressions. "It's not against the law." "You spend a lot of time with her." "Again...whose business is it? What if Burdock had enemies among the line, and they wanted him dead, with someone else to pin the blame on? Haven't you got it yet, Richard? But Warren's skills were a lot less transferable." "So that gives him a right to edge us closer to another war?" The way Voi spoke, it was as if her own side had not been neutral in the last exchange. But then the rumours started spreading, the rumours that there was something more to Sleepover." "The dragons didn't help," Da Silva said. You can check out the one on your right, if you think Kanto's gone that way. But no one knew where the lander had ended up, or what condition it was still in one piece." I look through the bars of the cage at the studio audience. That was when he saw the sea-glow. "I need to make some calls, so people know where you are. "Long story." "Start at the beginning, then." Roland Childe placed a hand on the smooth side of my parents' shrine. This was something finer, more ingenious. She has travelled well, this Lenka. Nevil Clavain looked into his brother's one good eye; the one the Conjoiners had left him with after the battle of Tharsis Bulge. He had created many robots, tinkering them together from kits, broken toys and spare parts. Give baby more food. "You haven't told me your name." "Ingvar," she says. He was dead scarcely a year later. "She took a risk, and it didn't work out for her. You're handicapping us before we go in?" "No—far from it. But her honesty had endeared her to the rest of us. But here's the thing: it's not the end of the world. High hard heels on marble, the swish of an evening gown. Like any shipmaster, my understanding of those elements was so total that it no longer counted as acquired knowledge. Their footprints ran all the way back to a primitive surface vehicle—a pressurised cabin mounted on six balloon-like wheels. Given Derek's limited vocabulary, it must have been quite a bother to add a new word like "Titan". "I disobey. Now, the law said that fell on the bridge if you touched something that fell on the br cabin, borne aloft by many pairs of willing hands. To our delight, early surveys of the Matryoshka on its third return had shown that the impacted obstacle had not repaired itself. "If they had an accident," Lenka said, "why didn't the big ship send down a rescue party?" "Maybe Teterev was the rescue party?" I said. "Look, it's senseless taking my word for it. "Trintignant found this outside, by the Spire. It would not have been simple, but there were those who relished such a challenge, and I would probably have had to fight off several competing offers: rival cyberneticists vying for the prestige of tackling such a difficult project. Yet the sun itself is sitting right in the middle of a four-hundred-lightyear-wide hole in the dust, a bubble in which the density is about a twentieth of its average value. "They're beautiful," Minla said. They were staring at small flickering slate-blue screens, whispering into microphones. "Right. She didn't think it would take him long to place the helmet and the companion, especially if he already knew his way around the building. Weather took a step back. After all, no one who had been assimilated seemed to regret it. "Something bothered me," Forqueray said. "It's about duty," he said. Now there is a big argument about whether or not to keep giving her medicine." "One woman won't make any difference." "It's the principle," Busuke tells me. You wouldn't do any damage to the engine, but the engine might damage you." "I'm fine right here," Van Ness said. A sea-dragon was coming through, a sinuous, living weapon from the artilect wars. "Quite nice." Purslane conjured a grape and popped it into my mouth. Kathrin hesitated at the entrance to the narrow alley, watching as Garret held the head out over the roiling water. Da Silva rides up front with me." Da Silva slung his zip-up bag into the rear compartment where Gaunt was settling into his position, more than a little apprehensive about what lay ahead. Certainly we could have afforded something better—something better—something much better—if I had not been forced to put aside money in readiness for this day At least we're in one piece." Routing errors. That's a deep principle, embodied in the logical architecture at a very profound level." "Then run off a blueprint of your engines. The other ship was a wreck: a huge hole punched amidships, through which I saw glowing innards and pieces of tumbling debris, some of which looked horribly like people. She did her best to memorize the shape of the lake, the way it would look from above, so that she could find it on a map. For obvious reasons, in light of what happened. First appeared in Postscripts, Summer 2005 "Fury" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2008. I did not want to fucking drown." "Galenka?" I heard a choked scream, then a gurgle. We had seen the way the Spire harvested first Forqueray's drone and then Trintignant's leg, and it was likely it would do the same with our equipment if we left it unattended. "Are you ready to show me now?" \*\*\* SHE TOOK HIM to see Felka again, passing on the way through deserted nursery rooms, populated now only by bewildered mechanical animals. It was a supernova, about a million years ago. Whatever I am, I must be as large as a truck. "You say we're not the first?" I said. I cannot speak of the other things, but when I was boy I met someone who had seen the Sheriff's flying machine. Even now, with the weight of all that had happened and all that we had learned, some part of me stood aside from the moment to acknowledge the simple beauty of sunrise on another world. Would that settle your doubts?" I felt myself on the threshold of something terrifying, but which I had no choice but to confront. That was the part I liked the best. I judged that we were only experiencing a tenth of a gee. \*\*\* LATER, WHEN SHE is asleep, I drift to the community tent. I imagined some future civilisation stumbling on this painstakingly shaped rock, a million or billion years from now, as it tumbled around the Sun. It was broken off at the wrist, but you could tell that it used to belong to something that was also made of metal. They've bussed in hundreds of schoolchildren for the event, and frankly I'm flattered by their attention. They're famous for their beauty." Minla lifted her head from the pillow, her eyes brightening with curiosity. Wonderful. You'd spent the better part of your life thinking about possible modes of alien sentience. I think it will make it easier for you to understand what is to happen to me. Hidden from view before, but visible now, was a smaller version of the same cage. "When you talked about the computations, you seemed to be saying that the engine needed to be saying that the engine married to me." \*\*\* ALL ALONG, CHILDE had known she was here. "Don't try and pull me," I said, as Lenka made to lean in. Seen from orbit, it was a pale, circular ring on the surface of Mars, two thousand kilometres wide. It took quarter of an hour, but after that time we had all—Hirz included—convinced ourselves by brute force that Celestine was right. I moved to touch the silver, to dust it from myself. Grisha stood by the couch, his gun still in his hand. The thing had arrived here, hadn't it? They'll find a way to fix him up, I'm sure. "Even if it is a ship," she said softly, "you'll never get them all aboard." "I'll die trying." "And us? "When you say 'encouraged'..." I began. But bringing her back in just wasn't the right decision, given what I knew at the time." "I fully concurred, Galenka. Merlin saw the rubble-strewn remains of towns and cities, some with the hearts gouged out by kilometre-deep craters. Running manual override on a tunnel project in the Tasman Straits. We'll have saved her life just by taking her off the Cockatrice." "Maybe she doesn't want it saved. She watched him enter the building via the porch airlock. She converted more and more of her ship into the architecture of their prison. He kicked the body on the floor. It was the one that belonged to Dowitcher." "It's very pretty. "Is this guesswork?" "Of course not. Perhaps it was just the right time for it. "What else?" Childe said. You do occasionally sense that there's something going on in her circuits. That was when I knew we were outside the Waynet, dumped back into the crushing slowness of normal space. "This is the only part of you that isn't organic?" "As far as I know." "Doesn't that limit you? But not to Corax; not to this scraggy old man with tufts of white hair who lived alone in a giant, obsolete terraforming machine. But in five years, or in ten, people will start to remark upon your uncommon youthfulness. Maybe he learned a few things from Argyle, before he died." "Then what about Doctor Trintignant? They couldn't censor it, or take it down — not then. A temporary ceasefire in the seventh hour was only caused by the temporary occultation of the launch complex by a mediumsized aerial land mass. It had something of death about it. "Turn that. I was stolen, snatched away from my people. That makes it personal between me and the worms. Who's to say they weren't about to notice, or they wouldn't do so in the next hundred years, or the next thousand? You look like you've lost half your nest." "It's much worse than that," Galiana said. Why keep it here?" "Devilfish needs Flux Swimmer," she said. "There are too many gaps." "Burdock may say nothing." "We won't know unless we try. Silly question, really. The room was still austere to the point of oppressiveness. Should he wait until the weather was perfect for flying, or would that risk matters appearing too stage-managed? "Trintignant must have thought you would." I looked down at the thing, trying to see it anew. Even as the battle raged, brutal tidal waves ravaged the already-frail coastal communities. Then he put the moon back together again and (this was a touch of genius, we had to admit) he wrote his signature on the back of the tide-locked moon in a chain of craters. The conversation has been as lopsided as Ingvar's walk. "I would consider that a distinct possibility, were Childe himself not conspicuously tainted by the same lack of success." "Then there must be another reason." "Which I'll reveal in due course," Childe said. "Let me tell you something. I'm still alive, aren't I?" "Nonetheless, there was clearly a flaw in my arrangements." "Perhaps," he allowed. The man on the left—the older of the two brothers—is at heart a pacifist. They must have been ejected from different heights, suggesting that some got closer to the summit than others. "It was a day last night." Kolding shrugged. Maybe not. "I...knew you." "Knew me? It was like they were treating him as a hero." "They were, in a way. I looked at Childe, seeing no greater comprehension in his face. Here are some of the notes that preceded this piece: Very distant future on Mars. All I was doing was expanding the margin of the pool. And the head of David is as nothing against the rings of Neptune. Her mouth formed a silent exclamation of horror and surprise. The web may be late locking onto us, but it'll still get us in the end." "It would," Galiana said. Here I'm the tourist." They drove on, crossing kilometers of Martian terrain. "Maybe you should have let me stew until this system had passed. That should have entry in the passed. That should have been untraceable." They may have only just beginning to find his feet, only just beginning to feel that he had a future. I flexed it, hearing the tiny, shrill whine of actuators. Pots simmered on fires. "I'll be sorry if she doesn't make it. Even if this ship doesn't blow up, you're still drifting at twenty-five per cent of the speed of light. I would understand myself as an artist." "And? Then my thoughts suddenly quietened, as if I'd found an epicentre of mental calm. Despite my best efforts, the news would be out of the Nexus within the hour, hopscotching from world to world, system to system to system, spreading into the galaxy like an unstoppable fire. Her box transmitted recognition protocols and the airlock opened like a gummed eye. "You wouldn't be called Minla, by any chance?" Merlin asked. For a moment the possibilities feel equally balanced. On Thousandth Night—the final evening of the reunion—the person who had threaded the most acclaimed strand would be charged with designing the venue for the next gathering. in near-total ignorance. Nonetheless it was still unsettling to find it changed so arbitrarily. Now, it's not an exact science. The roof was a jumbled collision of angles and spires, jutting turrets and sinister oubliettes. It was an antiquated, rumbling sound, accompanied by a odd, rhythmic sort of drumming, quite unlike any machine I had experienced. "I studied the mathematics once, for a century. "In a room, being woken up," the woman said. I can't let you go now. Which it did, advancing several rooms beyond the point where the old me died." "What made it go in?" Celestine said. Whatever we did then, it had no bearing on our future." "I don't know how you could stand it." "It wasn't a barrel of laughs. Just enough to shiver at the wonder of it." "It's probably gone now," I said sadly. "Although I can see how useful it would have been for you. And we were making a kind of progress. Most of the news was unexceptional, but there had been three more breaches—sea-dragons being pushed through from the Realm—and one of them had achieved sufficient coherence to attack and damage an OTEC plant, immediately severing power to three rigs. Scratchy, cryptic transmissions in strange, foreign-sounding accents. It had almost failed him in Phobos. The chamber was an elongated cylinder, hexagonal in cross section. A man called Marcel." "Marcel," I said, ruminatively, as if the name had cosmic significance. Then I asked him if there was anything else I could do to help him, all the while glancing over my shoulder in case anyone should come upon us. The jangling men coveted our world for themselves. I'd already crossed swords with Van Ness, but he was still my captain, and I wanted to spare him the difficulty of a frightened crew, at least until I knew all the facts. She had one hand raised above her head, grasping for the next thorn. It's compiled from intelligence gathered by Mechs, drones, cameras, even the still-functioning armour of dead or immobilised combatants. "What about you, if it isn't the same thing that keeps me coming back?" "I want to solve the problems, that's all. They became expert in the art of stellar husbandry: tampering in the nuclear burning processes of stars to prolong their lifetime, or to fan them to hotter temperatures. Yet she'd survived, and the prognosis for a complete recovery—so Merlin was informed—was deemed higher than seventy-five per cent. Or, if not keep up, then at least not lose sight of you completely. As was Gentian custom, everyone wore a costume that, subtly or otherwise, reflected the content of their dream. Figured the cosmic dice..." She was looking at Gaunt intently, meeting his eyes as she spoke. But there was, he sensed, nothing remotely magical or enchanted about what was happening under that yellow-green smear. If any of the dials were to show red, or if more than three showed orange, than we'd be in real danger of losing the Petronel. You see, there's something on Golgotha." "What kind of something?" Celestine asked. The atmosphere itself was dynamically unstable. And I hear a man speak, and it is not Prakash. Merlin had never taken kindly to being woken from normal sleep, let alone the deep hibernation of frostwatch. They'll be grateful. It's what I live for. Tracking down the truth. That was Sandra Voi, the Demarchist woman who would be coming with him to Mars. That's God's truth." \*\*\* HER HANDS WERE hurting again by the time she reached Twenty Arch Bridge. "Kathrin?" Peter asked. But you could have done without us, ultimately. It's about survival. "I think I've got it." "Good," Celestine replied. Even if we take the line with us." Purslane sniffed her wineglass. Sometimes, a drone falls out of the clouds. Not because he'd done anything heroic, or anything they hadn't all done at some time or other. But you're still treating me with kindness." "You assumed that as soon as my usefulness to you had come to an end—" "You assumed that as soon as my usefulness to you had come to an end—" "You assumed that as soon as my usefulness." "I know," I say. Not all of them got anywhere, but enough did. The thought that the Spire—this vast breathing through which we were scurrying like rats—had somehow reached inside the hard armour of our suits to snatch a sample of air, without our knowing, made my guts turn cold. Rich sponsors, for the most part. Well, nothing I could do anything about, anyway. Soon there isn't going to be much of me left to talk to you." "Is it working?" "Yes. Or perhaps they had guessed—correctly, as it happened—that Tyrant would be going nowhere until it was repaired and fuelled. But at one end of its segmented, exoskeletal body was a thing like a head and inside the brittle cage of that head was a dense mass of connected cells that had something of the topological complexity of what had once been my own brain. Then said: "We were aware of this, but you weren't to know that." Gratitude? But Merlin could only help in a limited fashion. I'm always a little cautious when I get that optimistic rush, as so often it doesn't result in anything—see my remarks about the sunken part of the iceberg—but in this case the story did in fact develop fairly painlessly. "As I said, maybe I imagined it." But we all knew she had done no such thing. "You want me to press this, or not?" "On my word. One option might ensure the future survival of the passengers. Once ensconced, I turned around to acquaint myself with the other passenger, and then flinched as I saw him properly. He could only submit to it. Did he have the nerve to find out? For some reason I felt guilty, as if I had been in some way neglectful. The meteor shower was over, I noticed. These were inherited by the next clone." "I still don't get it," I said. You must tell us what you've learned of the Great Work." "I only know parts. It put things into perspective. It was shockingly unlike his expectations. "Is that right, Zeal? Then the monkey swelled to be the largest of all, its armoured arms and hands swinging low with each stride, its bow legs like scuttling undercarriage. There was still ice under our feet, and we were flanked on either side by the steadily widening lava tubes, which were already ten or fifteen times taller than any of us. "Celestine," I said. She had a small, monkey-like face, one that conveyed both mischief and cleverness. Shouldn't be too hard." "And when I've found her?" "Then you shoot her." He raised a warning finger. But something was containing the blast. She was growing uncomfortable in the widow's presence. Then, of course, we start loading more work onto you. Fescue's generators were running out of power, Fescue running out of concentration... He looked at me and nodded. They plugged in airtanks and went to the shuttle's door. They could slow an attack, but not much more than that. I was imagining the reception I'd get when I returned to the Cohort with that prize, the slate of all my sins wiped clean when they saw that I'd actually found it, that it was real after all, and that finally we had something to use against the Huskers. And then—like millions of others—I heard about Zima's final work of art, and made my way to the fake Venice on Murjek. There were microscopic traces of almost every other stable isotope in the periodic table, with the odd exception of silver. Even now I am instinctively wary, my enhanced eyes dwelling on the various crudely fashioned blades and crossbows that the gangs flaunt. He gives her the musical box. He's at least allowed me aboard his ship, even if I haven't been invited to dine in his quarters." "Dining for Van Ness is a pretty messy business," I said confidingly. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?" "Yes. Just the same way he did you, with the same veiled hints about having found something." "Your ex-wife?" She nodded. I watched the Bubble itself contract, becoming just one member in the larger froth of voids. "Childe," Celestine said, "I'm making the choice in five seconds, whether you like it or not." "Wait, will you?" The cable moved with blinding speed now, rearing up so that its motion was no longer confined to a few inches above the floor. It's just a pity it didn't last." "The cable moved with blinding speed now, rearing up so that its motion was no longer confined to a few inches above the floor. It's just a pity it didn't last." dial indications might be in error, suggesting that there was a fault where none existed...but that isn't the case." "You can feel that the engine is really damaged?" "Yes," she told me. He wondered why these meetings were allowed. "But don't blame him for that. But if Lenka and I had tried to argue with you on that one, how far do you think we'd have got? "Let me go," the man said. The facets swell and contract as Prakash offers me options. The universe simply isn't wired to permit it. But if you'd sooner take your chances and wait for extraction, I'll respect that decision." The tone of her voice, the look in her eyes, make it abundantly clear what she thinks of my chances if I decide not to opt for surgery. Now you must achieve it for yourselves." "In seventy years?" Malkoha asked. But I had to be disciplined. "You're as wise as I always quessed you were, Kathrin Lynch. "I've just soiled myself. I loved you, Rafe Van Ness. We can work something out." "That's what we're already doing." Choosing my moment, I turn around to present my back to them. Slaved to my telepresence rig, the bots let me work the rock as if it was clay beneath my fingers. Big deal. Never thought it would happen to me." "No one ever does," Clausen said. I don't blame her: Suzy's beautiful, but she's also smart. After the probes had gone by, there was data to analyse. "Your ship matched the size profile...and when you ruined Campion's ploy..." "I don't think he meant to," I said. A holoclavier sat in one corner, with a book of sheet music spread open above the projected keyboard. We had long expected they were out there somewhere. The ocean was a memory: boiled into a dust-choked vapour. He always gives good dream." Purslane looked at me pityingly. I had no warning when the ice gave way under me. The checkpoint is a disused ruin and the labs and training facilities have been turned into austere community buildings. Also by Alastair Reynolds from Gollancz: Novels Revelation Space Redemption Ark Absolution Gap Chasm City Century Rain Pushing Ice The Prefect House of Suns Terminal World Blue Remembered Earth On the Steel Breeze Poseidon's Wake The Medusa Chronicles (with Stephen Baxter) Short Story Collections: Diamond Dogs, Turquoise Days Galactic North Zima Blue Copyright First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Gollancz an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment London EC4Y 0DZ An Hachette UK Company This eBook first published in 2016 by Gollancz. "Either it just died," Galenka said, "or it just came back to life. "No tricks." \*\*\* EVEN BEFORE TYRANT had made progress in the cracking of the local language, Merlin had managed to hammer out a deal with Malkoha. At once he saw the similarity and knew that she was telling the truth. "I suppose the only way to find out is to keep going." \*\*\* WE PASSED THROUGH another eight rooms, taking between one and two hours to solve each. When the sun is up it will be harder to move around, but until then there's still time to locate Nesha Petrova. I won't stop you. The air in his ship might have been thick with machines, able to swim into neural spaces and tap into direct mental processes. Just before I was about to go under, the attack calmed. Dust swirled around him as he walked towards me, suggesting that he was not a projection. It didn't seem to be turning around, or be in any kind of a hurry to continue its journey. The tactile transmission was flawless, and when I moved, the suit flowed with me so effortlessly that I had no sense of being encumbered by it. That'd be 'nothing at all'. Someone else's act of self-sacrifice? When he died, the cleaner passed to his daughter. It's a mountain, falling through space. We're on Triton, under Neptune. When I found him he was covered in armour, hot enough to turn the snow to water and make the water hiss and bubble under him. No engines, no weps. The original artilects, the ones who were already in the Realm." "No," Nero said. We don't need anything like that—not with these suits. I'd cry when they died, but then you'd always bring new ones." "I used to like the look on your face." "Tell me about the stone," she said, after a silence. But the burst was soon over. "Are we really out of options?" I asked. Worse, if anything, because now you've heard it from me. If anything, there appeared to be more of them than when I had first arrived. But the burst was soon over. "Are we really out of options?" I asked. Worse, if anything, because now you've heard it from me. If anything heard it from me. If anytheard it from me. If anythin the likes of you. It appeared to be self-repairing, even self-cleaning. How long would you last, sitting in a coma?" "That isn't an issue. But someone needs to know, Kathrin, and the bracelet is losing its power to keep me out of the grave. John Joseph Adams, Baen, 2012 "The Last Log of the Lachrimosa" Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2014. Will you give me permission to push imagery into your heads?" Purslane and I looked at each other uneasily. But as soon as the walls detected the slightest suggestion of frustration, the geometry of the maze underwent a sly modification: walls and gaps moving to block one route and open up another. But as it is, I'm the only survivor." His ship had crawled away from the butchered system with tens of thousands of refugees aboard. I thought that was the point of going to all that trouble with the access protocol." "I know," she said. I remembered an unwanted and brutal lesson in the anatomy of the human body; the elegance with which muscle, bone and sinew were anchored to each other and the horrid ease with which they could be flensed apart—filleted—by surgically sharp metallic instruments. By the time he hit the dirt the membrane had hardened itself around his soles and had begun to contour itself with ribs and accordioned joints, even though it stayed transparent. You saw how old that ship was: it probably has pretty ancient screen generators, or pretty ancient sensors, or both." "Why the anticollision screens?" "Debris," Purslane said. "Oh, they were. Let me hold one up to your face. But you'll get there eventually." One of Nero's hands was bandaged, a white mitten with a safety pin stuck through the dressing. He'd fixed that it never once occurred to me that he'd been lying the entire time. It's fat and stupid enough for a monkey. Three of the five dials were now showing orange, indicating that those settings were now outside what the Conjoiners deemed the recommended envelope of safe operation. The same agespots, the same hairy knuckles, the same scars and loose, lizardy skin. Sorry, Thom. A sequence of booming crashes followed, as if boulders were being dropped into the waves. The area around Tyrant was still present, albeit enlarged and adapted. Had the wheels been sledges, it could have been her father's workshop when he had been busier. \*\*\* I SQUAT DOWN on my mattress. And yes, she does give a very good impression of Turing compliance. Childe's been to this planet already." "She's lying," Childe repeated. By the setting sun. I guess we didn't notice when we took so long to move from room to room." "That doesn't make much sense," Celestine said. "Calliope?" Merlin nodded gravely. She raised a calming hand. It was full of images of what Suzy called the BVM: the Blessed Virgin Mary.

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