

## Adaptogenic - a novelette by Neal Asher

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Another murder-lice made its scuttling charge, its trilobite body holding level as a pointer on me as its multitude of legs found purchase on the weed-slippery rocks. I watched the creature with a crawling sensation in my guts as it reached the perimeter. There was always the horrible suspicion that this time one might make it, that this time I'd end up as a paralysed egg-carrier or diced by those grinding mandibles. But no, with admirable and re-assuring efficiency the Tenkian strobed from its tripod and the louse became a messy explosion of legs, carapace, and pink ichor. This is, of course, adding to my problems. Every louse the autogun splatters means more food to attract more lice. They are coming with greater frequency now. Soon I'll have to move the crate to a cleaner area, try to find somewhere to hide it, where it won't be swept away. There's enough power left in the gun's batteries for it to follow on its impellers... A cleaner area... In a day or so all areas on this side of the planet will be swept clean. I face choices; the lice, drowning, or ceasing to be human. Why the hell am I worrying about the crate? I really wish I'd missed that auction.

"Good morning Mr Chel," said the two and a half metre tall two hundred kilo monster who worked as security guard for Darkander. I gave Jane a look of long-suffering and stood still while I was scanned for comlinks or any of the other equipment Darkander considered an unfair advantage.

"You are clean, Mr Chel."

My chip card was next and the monster took it from me between a finger and thumb like the grab on a cometary mining ship. After a moment he returned it.

"Your credit is good, Mr Chel."

After she too had been checked out Jane joined me. I smiled mild approval at her cool.

"Is it always like that?" she asked, tucking her card into one of the many pockets of her coverall.

"Always. No extra information access. No comlinks and no AIs. Darkander is very strict about it."

"Isn't that a bit discriminating?"

"Some free AIs once took him to court on those grounds. They lost out on a protection of antiquities law about two centuries old. He then pointed out

to them that should they bring another action and win he would be forced to close down. They left him alone. Anyway, what do you think?"

Darkander's is an anachronism. It is a huge scan-shielded warehouse where all manner of items are stacked haphazardly and sold by lot. There is no computer bidding, no microsecond business transactions. Starting from lot one everything comes under Darkander's wooden hammer. It is a place for human experts with a relish for competition, an eye for bargains and deals, and a dislike of paying taxes. People like Jason Chel. Me.

"Now, I'm not going to point anything out to you, as I'm often watched. Anything that takes your interest mark on the list, then come back to me when you've finished. I'll tell you how high to go."

Jane smiled then swayed off amongst the chaos of goods. As I watched her go I felt a degree of discomfort. I'd promised her this visit some time ago, when I'd been drunk, and had since tried very hard to get out of it.

Well, now she was here. Hopefully she wouldn't cause too much harm. I slowly followed her in and allowed my gaze to wander casually to the objects I was after. There was a box of what looked like pre-runcible tiles, probably from the belly of a shuttle, a Thakework sculpture of Orbonnai skulls, something that looked like the shell of a mollusc -- I hadn't a clue what it was, but was prepared to risk a few credits on it -- and finally there was the Golem Six android, which after my cursory inspection the day before I felt sure had the mind of a three or four.

This last item was the one I really wanted. Made before the twenty third revision of the Turing test these Golem were much in demand. Of course, now the auction was starting I did not look too closely at it, I instead showed a great deal of interest in some chainglass blades which were quite obviously faked to look like Tenkian's.

The bidding started off with the usual lack of alacrity as Jane rejoined me.

"Let me see," I took the note screen from her and studied the items she had marked. To my annoyance I noted she had marked the tiles. "I think we'll have a cup of coffee. These-" I tapped the stylus against the lot number of the tiles. "Won't be up for a while, and they are the first on your... list."

I had decided to be generous.

We sat sipping our way through a cup of coffee each as the auction progressed. At the lot before the tiles we sauntered out. As soon as this was sold we moved into Darkander's view. The short bald-headed man who was reputed to be a multimillionaire flicked a glance in my direction and tried to start the bidding at five hundred. I caught hold of Jane's arm before she could raise it. The figure Darkander suggested dropped in fifties until it was fifty, then started to rise again in twenty fives.

Jane began to bid and as she did so I looked to see who she was bidding

against. When the figure reached four twenty-five I nudged her.

"Drop it."

"Why?"

"You're out of your league here and that's about all they're worth."

The bidding continued to the figure of five seventy-five.

"See the fat little guy over there..." Jane nodded. "He's the agent for the Ganymede runcible AI. It probably wants to give its containment sphere that old-world look."

The mollusc shell was next but no one made a bid. It went into the next lot which appeared to be a collection of all sorts of junk, but I'd seen a really old digital watch lying in there and not expected a chance at it. I swore to myself for not going for the shell straight away. I just wasn't paying attention. On this next lot the bidding was tried at fifty then dropped to ten. No one went for it so I gave Darkander the nod. "Going once," he told me. "Going twice." I couldn't believe it. I saw the runcible agent glance at me suspiciously and begin to raise his hand. He was too late. The hammer went down. "Sold to Mr Chel." I managed to keep a straight face.

"Good?" Jane asked.

"Yes, very good... I think."

The Thrakework sculpture went to the woman in black. She'd always had a taste for the macabre. I bid against her a couple of times, but when I saw that wild look come into her eyes I gave up. I knew her of old.

There was half an hour before the Golem was to come up for auction, so with a nod to the lady -- she didn't see, she was fumbling with her death's head charm and staring at the sculpture with a horrible avidity -- I went to authorize the credit transfer for my buy, and leaving Jane to her own devices, took the boxes out to my Ford AGV.

The mollusc shell was interesting. I noted that the box it came in had the same shipment marks, stamps, and tape, as the packing strewn about the Golem. This told me no more than that they'd come from the same world. I wanted some hint as to value. I did not relish the prospect of initiating a computer search to identify this shell. Life, in its unbelievable abundance in the fifth of the galaxy thus far explored, had often used this sensible method of self-preservation. There were probably more types of shell than excuses for taxation. I put the shell aside and opened the other box.

Most of the contents of this box I could justify the price paid with resale through my shop, but no more. The digital watch was a dog. The case and the strap, which I thought to be ceramal greyed with age, turned out to be one of the later matt ceramals. There was nothing inside the case. I swore and was about to sling the box to the front of the van compartment when something caught my eye.

It was a bracelet set with jewels. The jewels were manufactured diamonds and therefore of little value. It was cheap costume jewelry, yet something gave me pause. Something wrong with it... I glanced back into the auction room and saw that it would soon be the Golem's turn. I'd have to find out later. In a rather distracted mood I returned, after another scanning, to Jane's side in the auction room, and bid two hundred over the odds for the Golem. Only as Jane and I were leaving did I notice the desperate gaze of a late arrival.

Chaplin Grable is the kind of man you learn to avoid at Darkander's, the kind of man who'll sidle up beside you and start asking the kind of questions you really don't want to answer if you're after anything in particular. Then, he'll give you his jaundiced opinion on various objects in the warehouse, and sidle away. After he's gone you feel the immediate urge to check your pockets, your credit rating, then go home for a shower. That day he stuck to me like a piece of dog shit on an instep.

"Look, all I want is a copy, downloaded copy, it's easy money."

I glanced towards Jane who was then involved in bidding for an arty looking mobile made from genuine fossil-fuel-based plastic, if the label was to be believed. I felt a certain relief that she was not at my side then.

"How much?"

"Four hundred, that's fair. I'll use all my own stuff. It's easy-"

I was curious.

"A thousand."

"Oh come on, for that piece of junk? I only want it for the Historical Society. Six hundred."

"Funny, I thought I said a thousand."

"Seven fifty. That's it, easy, final offer, no more, capiche capoot."

"Not interested."

Of course I was, very interested, but if there was good money to be made here I intended to make it, not to pass it on to this slime bag.

"Okay okay, a thousand, done, a thousand."

"Go away," I told him. Then I saw something in his expression I didn't like at all, something incongruous. I turned away and headed for my AGV with the android walking along behind me.

"A thousand is a lot," it said.

"It is."

I inspected it contemplatively. But for the loss of the syntheflesh covering of one side of its face and one arm it might well have been human. Many of its kind had since been accepted as such. It was just an unfair quirk of the law that defined this one as a machine and later models as sentient creatures.

"What's your name?" I asked it.

"Paul G6B33."

"Why do you think he's interested in your memory, Paul?"

"I do not know. I have no long term memory other than Cybercorp contract and base program."

Grable had obviously loused. There was nothing of value in this android's mind. I should have sold him a copy. Too late now.

"Get in the back of the AGV, Paul."

My android obeyed me.

The Tenkian autogun followed with its impeller humming like an AC transformer and its turret turning with martinet vigilance. A couple of lice came out from the rocks behind but it did not fire. They did not come into the shifting perimeter. They stayed to feed on the remains of their fellows, their mandibles clacking with relish.

I had a hell of a time with the crate. I slipped once and grazed my knee, then sat on a wet rock, swearing, with water soaking into the bum of my trousers. I could open the crate and maybe its contents would follow me as obediently as Paul G6B33, if its power pack wasn't down. Finally I abandoned it in a suitable crevice weighed down with crusted rocks, then I moved on. The world-tide is coming with the rise of Scylla's binary companion and I have to prepare myself. I don't like to think about how.

After taking the precaution of dropping Jane off at her residence -- I didn't want her with me where I was going next -- I took Paul straight to a prospective buyer. There was the usual jam up at the atmosphere lock and it took two hours before we were out of the city dome and cruising into the outlands. Paul had remained silent until we were speeding towards the distinctly curved horizon over the landscape of yellow ice-cliffs and weirdly phosphorescent mists.

"What place is this?" he asked with idiot precision.

I pointed out of the screen.

"I'll suppose I could give you a total of twelve guesses, but no, you only get three."

He looked out of the screen at the massive loom of Jupiter filling half the sky, its red eye-storm gazing down at us speculatively.

"We are on one of Jupiter's moons," he said. I decided he definitely had the mind of a three. A five never felt the need to state the obvious. But as far as antique value went a five was half the value of a three.

"Yes, but can you figure which moon?"

There was a long pause then the statement, "Ganymede." If he'd got it wrong I would have been most surprised. Threes are not capable of guessing. If they do not have enough data to come to a conclusion they say so.

"Correct," I told him, superfluously, and slowly began to bring the AGV down towards an expensive residence set in the face of a sulphur-cruste cliff. The lock of a garage opened for us and we were soon climbing out of the AGV to be greeted by the goddess. Why do I call Henara the goddess? Because that is precisely what she looks like; Aphrodite, Diana, some supernal woman. She is nearly two metres tall and has the kind of build that will leave a man with a hollow feeling in the region of his groin. She has long luxuriant hair and a face to leave sculptors and painters feeling inadequate.

"Jason, so glad to see you... and who is this?"

Her voice set bits of me vibrating I did not know existed. She was fantastic. The AI that designed her deserved some kind of award, if it hadn't already got one. She was a Golem twenty-three, I think. Human beings are never that close to perfection, or apotheosis.

"This is Paul G6B33," I said, making the introductions. "Paul, this is Henara Indomial, who I hope will soon be your new owner."

Paul greeted her politely, and she led us into her home. In a few minutes I was sunk in a sofa, which was ridiculously luxurious, with a large scotch in my hand. Henara and I had an agreement that went back for ten years. She paid me a retainer so I would buy up any Golem that came up for auction at Darkander's and offer it to her on a percentage basis. She was a free Golem and very very rich. The work of her endless life now was to make other Golem free. She bought them, upgraded them, and put them through the revised Turing test. Then she set them free.

"There was a great deal of interest in him," I told her. "I had to pay two hundred more than expected."

The credit transfer was made and I relaxed.

"One strange thing. Chaplin Grable offered me a thousand for a download copy of Paul's memory. Yet Paul only has his short term memory and his base Cybercorp contract and programming."

"Interesting," said Henara with a noblesse oblige nod, then she turned her attention to Paul. "Who owned you prior to Jason here?"

"I was attached to the Planetary Survey Corps in 2433," was his reply and I knew that was all she'd get. Assignment was in the contract memory. His skills and personality were in his base memory. I didn't think there was much to be learnt, so after a while I took my leave.

Back at my apartment I spread my remaining purchases out on a repro twentieth century glass-top coffee table (no-one can afford the real thing) and inspected each of the items minutely. Eventually, reluctantly, I picked up the bracelet and studied it. The metal it was made from, like the watch, was ceramal. There were eight lozenge diamonds spaced evenly round it, one for each colour of the rainbow plus one clear one. What made

me suspicious about the object was the thickness of the ceramal. It was over a centimetre thick. Perhaps the thickness needed for a chain used to tow asteroids, but hardly what was required for costume jewelry. I popped it open and inspected the clasp and hinges. What I found there increased my suspicion, and stirred up a little of the excitement I always thought dead until each time it re-appeared. Where the bracelet opened there were pins on one side and sockets on the other. Where it hinged there were flexible mini conduits. The pins, I realised on seeing their reddish lustre, were made of carbon sixty doped ceramal, a very hard room temperature superconductor. What I was holding certainly wasn't cheap costume jewelry. What it was I hadn't a clue. It was about then that the phone let me know someone wanted to speak with me.

"Yes, who is it?"

"Ah..."

The hologram of Chaplin Grable's most unbecoming features flickered into life before me.

"Henara Indomial has it. Go bother her."

"I'm authorised to offer you two thousand for... what?"

"Henara Indomial."

I waved my hand in the general direction of the eye and the face flickered out of existence. I didn't like the man. The phone called for my attention again.

"Look, you piece of--"

Henara appeared before me, her legs chopped off at the knees by the coffee table.

"Sorry, I thought you might be Grable."

She looked at me quizzically and I explained the previous call to her. She smiled. I asked her what she wanted.

"Paul has his basic personality, his Cybercorp programming and a few giga of short term memory. His long term memory has actually been removed."

"I told you that," I said, confused.

"No, you misunderstand me. Until Golem fifteen compartmentalisation was used, not wholemind programming. The LTM unit has been physically removed. Probably at about the same time as the missing syntheflesh and skin.

"Oh," I said brilliantly.

"I would of course like you to acquire this LTM should it become available..."

"I'll see what I can do," I told her.

Of course she was far too polite to bring my integrity into doubt. As she flickered out of existence I felt decidedly uncomfortable. I studied the bracelet. Could this be it? Seemed unlikely. I decided to check.

My hand scanner revealed a complexity it could not analyse. I used my system scanner and paid for time on one of the runcible subminds. It took

a few minutes, but I soon received the analysis, along with the bill. The bracelet went under the name of a four seasons changer. It was a twenty-seventh century adaptogen laboratory. Not particularly old, but quite valuable if you can find the right buyer, and the right buyer was almost always an adapted human to beyond the fifth generation. I wondered, as always with the kind of morbid fascination that comes with the discovery of such an artefact, if it still worked. I was not to know then that one day the answer to that question was something on which my survival might depend.

Three solstan days later I had expert advice on the changer and the advice was, "Use this at considerable risk, the construction is far too complex and old for any kind of study that would not involve deconstruction, and why the hell do you want to know?" I was of course hoping for documented proof of working order as this would double the value of the bracelet.

There are experts and there are experts.

On the same day as I received this piece of negative equity I picked up the mollusc shell and listened for the sound of the sea -- I hadn't identified the shell yet. There was no sound and feeling hard put upon I shook it in irritation as one would shake any other piece of malfunctioning hardware. A cuboid crystal with silver circuitry etched in three faces like strange glyphs, fell out and cracked the top of my coffee table. Okay, it wasn't that valuable, but I was attached to it, which was probably why I was pissed off enough to download a copy of what turned out to be Paul's LTM to sell to Grable before passing the original on to Henara. As was to be my luck at that time I discovered I could not find Grable anywhere. I ended up studying the memory myself, determined to make a decent profit somehow that week.

It took me a couple of days to run through the last mission. Much of my time was spent fast forwarding by hand or by computer instruction ie stop when something interesting occurs. It seemed to me that these Golem spent most of their time standing about waiting to be given orders. The tale I eventually managed to piece together was one of incompetence and failure. The PSC had tried to establish a base on a planet called Scylla before something called the world-tide occurred. This was to be done by a mixed crew of hired labourers and androids. The whole thing was severely disorganised. The androids weren't complex enough and the workers not clever enough to sort out the discrepancy. There were disputes about pay and an attempt, considering the time limit on the project, at what can only be described as extortion. I saw the base half-finished and a belated attempt at evacuation. Some of the humans got away, others boxed the androids and attempted to seal the base against the world-tide. Paul was not boxed because he was almost as useful as the humans. He was a very new design. The rest was like some Atlantean disaster; explosions, water,

sparks, floating bodies. When Paul's memory greyed into auto shutdown -- after a long period of time recording the marine life feeding -- I realised what Grable had been after. The androids. They were Golem twos, the first workable androids to be sold by Cybercorp -- there had only been one Golem one -- and if still there they were worth disgustingly huge amounts of money. I wondered then where he got his information from and why Paul's LTM had ended up in that shell. But even as I wondered I packed the equipment I would need and sought the required permissions for its transportation. By the next solstan day I had booked myself for transmission to Scylla's runcible, for while running through Paul's memory I had seen a map and a map reference. I knew where the base was.

The crate is hidden. The world-tide is coming. And there are only two things that stand between me and death. My Tenkian autogun keeps the lice away, but there is no sensible way it can keep me from drowning. There is another way though. Even as I record this I pull up my sleeve and look at the bracelet clasped around my wrist. The jewels seemed to have taken on a sinister glitter.

Jane was not happy about my sudden business trip, but I managed to bring her round, as I normally do. After spending one pleasant night with her I got up early and made my way to the transmission station. The runcible transmission, the longest and most unbelievable part of any interstellar journey, took no time at all. I don't even try to pretend to know anything about the technology that can shove me through an underspace non-distance and drag me out a hundred or more light years away, and in that I am more honest than most. Skaidon technology; brought about by the linking of a human mind and AI. It's impossible to understand unless you are both a genius, like Skaidon himself, and plugged in. In my life I have been neither and am unlikely to be. One moment I was there standing in the containment sphere as before the altar to Minotaur; silver bull's horns on a dais of black glass, horns holding the shimmering disk of the cusp, then one step after I am one hundred and twenty-three light years away on the other side of another cusp in an identical sphere: standardization across the galaxy -- as awesome as it is depressing.

Beyond the standard one G gravity in the containment sphere the gravity was rather less, but being a fairly well-seasoned traveller I soon adjusted. A wide concourse led from the row of containment spheres to a huge embarkation lounge, this being because I had arrived on the moonlet Carla; the closest companion to Scylla, which was too unstable for siting a runcible. At the opposite end of the lounge I could see a delta-wing shuttle waiting to heave itself into a violet sky and was surprised to see how few people there were waiting for the flight. I made my way to an

information console and called up one of the runcible subminds.

"Name?"

"Jason Chel."

"What information do you require, Jason Chel?"

"There are certain packages under my code and I wish to pick them-"

"The packages have arrived at cargo runcible four. There are AG drays available at all cargo runcibles."

I regarded the console with a degree of suspicion. It had been very quick for a submind. Perhaps it was Carla AI taking an interest itself. The contents of one of my packages were somewhat unusual.

"Er, could you also tell me when the next shuttle is leaving for Scylla?"

"There will not be another shuttle to Scylla for two hundred solstan days."

"What?"

"There will not be another shuttle-"

"I heard what you said. Why will there not be another shuttle to Scylla for two hundred days?"

"Because it is summer."

"I beg you pardon?"

There came a sound very like a sigh from the console as if it was tired of repeating this information to people who hadn't checked.

"Scylla is closed to all traffic for a period of two hundred and seventy three solstan days during its summer season. All ground bases are sealed. This is due to the accelerated activity of dangerous life forms at this time of the year."

I walked away from the console feeling like a complete idiot. Some of the equipment I had in my luggage was brought along to deal with the life forms I had seen in Paul's memory, a precaution which had cost me a fair lump of credit for transportation under seal. Now I'd discovered that in my eagerness I'd made a complete bollix. I'd have to go back to Ganymede and wait three quarters of a year before I could come back. In a daze I headed for one of the bars at the edge of the lounge with the vague idea of getting plastered.

I was into my third scotch when a vaguely familiar figure slipped into the seat on the other side of my table. It took me a moment to recognise him, even then I wasn't quite sure. He looked too clean, too suave, not the man I'd known.

"What a surprise to meet you here," said Chaplin Grable, and he grinned as amiably as a shark. I sat upright and looked at him in surprise. His smile made a small transition into a sneer as he took out a chainglass blade and began cleaning his nails. They didn't need cleaning.

"My contact tells me there was a small foul up. I didn't get time to put the LTM back so he concealed it in the hammer-whelk shell."

He glanced up from cleaning his nails and I wondered why I had always considered him to be a faintly ridiculous, irritating, but harmless fool.

"Seems the shell went into the next lot, which was then purchased by a Mr Chel. That would be you wouldn't it?"

He slid around the table into the seat next to me, his arm along the back of my chair and the chainglass knife held between his fingertips with its point pressing against his leg. I considered hitting down on the knife and driving it into his leg, but decided that was a fool's move. I needed to know how much he knew, how much he had planned. I put on my best buying and selling face.

"Grable, I doubt very much you could get away with using that here, so put it away and let's talk a little business."

He watched me coldly and the knife disappeared with practised neatness into a wrist sheath. I'd have to watch him.

"Correct on the first point, a little awry on the second."

"Your speech is somewhat altered Mr Grable."

"It suits the situation," he said with a nasty smile.

I needed to get a step ahead of him. I decided to take a little gamble.

"Of course, it is a shame you don't know the location. Didn't your contact have time?"

It was a hit. Grable turned a sickly white, then came back with, "But I'll have two hundred and seventy-three days in which to scan this planet and find the base."

His was a hit as well.

"An arrangement, perhaps," I suggested.

"Yes, it seems the most sensible course."

I'd never understood the expression 'eyes like gimlets' until that moment. Grable had shed his normal unpleasant exterior and what was revealed underneath wasn't much better.

About an hour ago I reached this location. It will do. There is a hollow in the surface with a sheltering overhang on the eastern side. Here I will be protected from the first destructive surge of the flood. All that remains is for me to survive when this area is under forty metres of sea. When I arrived here I sat on a fairly dry rock and fingered the bracelet. Nearby the autogun settled down on its tripod legs: an improbable steel mosquito. After a moment I pushed my fingernail under the edge of the green diamond. With a faint hum the diamond hinged out to reveal a polished cavity. I knew what to do next but was again reluctant. I looked across at the nearby scorched carcass of a murder-louse then moved over to it. It smelt of boiled lobster and was steaming slightly. Using a piece of shell I scooped up some ichor and dribbled it into the hollow in the bracelet. The diamond has now clicked back into place. I sit upon my rock

and wait.

Grable's contact on Carla was a man who ran an exclusive minishuttle service to Scylla. It wasn't illegal, just a little grey. The console had informed me that the planet was closed to all traffic at this time of its year, which didn't mean it was against any law to go there. All the individual protection laws had been thrown out centuries ago. If a person wanted to risk his own life that was his privilege, just so long as no other unconsenting individuals were put at risk. The powers that be look upon it as evolution in action, an eminently sensible view in my opinion. His name was Warrack Singh and he had the appearance of someone out of a flat screen pirate film; a kind of new millennium Errol Flynn, deliberately so, I think. His companion was one of the later Golem and was perhaps the reason Singh's launch equipment and shuttle were in such good order, but then, with the money he charged there should have been no reason for the situation to have been otherwise.

"We agreed on a percentage basis," said Grable. He showed no anger and could have been discussing something completely irrelevant by the tone of his voice. It had been some time since Singh had told us he wanted a straight credit payment for transportation. I watched while Singh grinned rakishly then I turned to help the Golem with the loading of our supplies and equipment.

"You want to go down there to find something in the summer, friend Grable, then you pay me first."

Which didn't say much for his confidence in our chances. I wondered just how bad it could get down there. Perhaps I should have left Grable to it and come back in the winter. Too late now.

"We had an agreement," said Grable, his tone not so easy now.

"We had an agreement in the winter, and you're in no position to argue, Grable."

I took no part in the exchange. All I knew was that if I was Singh I would be watching my back from then on.

Singh's craft was not the usual delta-wing but a glide effect re-entry shuttle covered with a ceramic outer skin. As I had noted on first seeing it; it was beautifully maintained. But I still felt queasy when looking at it. It was old. The AG units were a new addition -- about a century back -- as were the bolt-on fusion boosters. I knew we were going to be in for a rough ride.

Once everything was loaded and we had clearance from the runcible AI we boarded and the craft was sealed. Grable and I had the only seats available. The rest of the row had been folded down into the floor to make room for our baggage. Singh took a seat in the pilot's chair while the Golem checked something at the back of the shuttle. I stared through the

front screen and saw huge bay doors sliding aside. Beyond was the tight curve of a not too distant horizon. The moonlet Carla was only a few tens of kilometres across.

"Please, strap yourselves in."

I glanced up at the Golem then did as instructed. I was too used to travelling on shuttles with shock fields in the passenger areas. Grable seemed to have some trouble with his straps.

"Let me help you," said the Golem.

It reached down and buckled his straps for him.

"We would not want you to get hurt," it said, in the flattest of voices. I think Grable got the message.

The hum of the AG units made my teeth ache, but the lift was smooth and the shuttle slid out of the bay doors without a perceptible waver. I glanced across at Grable and noted with satisfaction that he had gone white. I had thought I was the soft one. Soon we were gliding rapidly above a landscape of jagged rocks with the glitter of runcible installations between like spilt mercury, then there was a roar as the old shuttle motors flung us out of Carla's well. The acceleration shoved me back into my seat and I prepared myself for more. We weren't far enough from the moonlet for the fusion motors to be ignited. When we were far enough I certainly knew it; the world grew a little dim around the edges. It comes as a surprise when you find out how much internal AG shields you from reality on the commercial passenger shuttles. The journey took us two solstan days and I'll say no more about it than that it was strained. Entry into Scylla's atmosphere was frightening, but it came as a relief.

There are fifth generation adapted people who can survive in vacuum. They live in the Outlink stations which travel on the edge of human expansion into the galaxy. Their adaptations are somewhat different from the kind the bracelet would deliver. It used localized genetic material whether DNA based or not. It read the code, picked the high level survival characteristics, transposed them. I once saw a Sundancer human at Darkander's; his skin silver as mercury. It has never been made clear whether they are adapted humans or Sundancers with human shape. Everyone has seen high G adapted humans. In all cases it was done with nanotech and biointegration. I am about to join the ranks...

A sharp pain in my wrist as my blood follows a new path, round the bracelet where it is used as a source of raw materials, and from where it comes out much changed. They are in: the nanobots and nanofactories; reforming legions of the invisible. I feel dizzy...

Now my heart is thundering at double speed. The Tenkian...!

Ah, better. I altered its programming, widened its recognition parameters.

Don't want to be shot by my own weaponry. Now I will lie down on the sandy

mud and stare at the sky. This is why I spend so much time at Darkander's and why I have such a love for antiquities: technology like sorcery, it scares the shit out of me.

Losing it...

Blacking-

It was two hours until dawn and the sky was the colour of old blood and had clouds across it as ambiguous as Rorschach blots. We stepped down the ramp onto rocky ground that had been incinerated in a half kilometre radius from where we stood. According to Singh this was what was called taking adequate precautions.

"How far do you have to travel from here?" he asked Grable.

"You don't have to know that. All you have to know is that we'll be back here in two days solstan."

Grable took precautions as well, but then he had no choice, that was the only information I had given him. He did not know the direction in which we would be going just yet. I took my own precautions.

"We'll see you then."

The ramp retracted with swift finality and the shuttle rose with an eerie lack of sound on its AG. A few minutes later we saw the accelerating flare of its engines. The sound reached us as we hurriedly unpacked our equipment. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Grable quickly get hold of some kind of hand gun and glance at me speculatively. By then I had a control box in my hand and was stepping back from my luggage.

"This should keep us secure," I said, and flicked a nail against a touch plate.

The Tenkian autogun rose out of the box like some terrible chrome insect. Red and green lights flickered on its various displays and its barrel glimmered in the starlight. Soon it was hovering above the box with its turret revolving, pausing, considering.

"I have it programmed for a twenty metre circle from me," I said. I watched as Grable carefully holstered his gun. He didn't know what else I had it programmed for.

The sun was a spherical emerald when it breached the horizon and gave even the ash around us the appearance of life. Scylla's binary companion was days away yet, on the other side of the planet, where it had dragged the planetary sea. As the sun cleared the horizon the tint became less gharish but by then the life of Scylla was coming to meet us. The first murder-louse approached with the dainty and deadly purpose of a spider. The autogun killed it at an invisible line.

"If one of those gets through its a toss-up between whether you get eaten or injected full of eggs," Grable told me after he had named the creature.

"I'd have thought you more prepared," I said.

He smiled bleakly and pulled on gloves that keyed in at the wrists to the body armour he was wearing under his normal clothing. I felt a little foolish.

"I've an autogun as well, but not as good as that Tenkian."

It killed nine more lice before we had the portable AGC assembled and the rest of our equipment on it. Only when we were twenty metres above the ground with the autogun perched at the back of the craft did we relax, though not for long, the Tenkian's purpose then was one of dealing with creatures like a cross between a moth and a crab which seemed to want to come and visit.

"Okay, which way?" Grable asked. I took out my palm computer and called up my satlink, direction-finder and map, after a moment I read off the co-ordinates to him. There was a pause. I expected him to make his move then, but it wasn't to be. He punched the co-ordinates into the autopilot and off we went, just as if we were partners. I thought it likely he wanted to be sure I was telling the truth.

The trip took five hours. Once we passed over the edge of the incinerated area we got a look at what the surface of Scylla was really like. I realised then why this planet had first been named Shore. (Like probably a hundred other planets. How many Edens, New Earths and Utopias would there be if the naming of planets had been left to humans?) The surface was a tideland. The plant life was sea weeds: kelps and wracks and huge rotting masses of something like sargassum. There were rocky areas, muddy areas, sandy areas, and pools dotted across the shorescape like silver coins. Through a set of image intensifiers I observed a multitude of different kinds of molluscs. There were plenty of arthropods as well, the murder-lice being the most prevalent. Perhaps there were other dominant kinds, but I didn't like to keep the intensifiers to my eyes for too long, as it meant my eyes weren't on Grable.

As we drew close to our destination we began to see centuries-old wreckage. I passed the intensifiers to Grable and pointed at the blurred squares and lines in the mud flats below us.

"Looks like the remains of an earlier attempt," I said.

He glanced over but didn't accept the intensifiers.

"Where shall I put us down?"

I pointed to where a rock field rose up out of the mud flats. The entrance to the base was in such an area, if this place had not changed too much since Paul had been here. As Grable brought the craft down between two huge boulders he gazed out at the mud flats dubiously.

"It's an underground installation?" he asked.

"Yes, and before you ask, I brought a pump."

A wide-field metals resonator found us the entrance in a matter of minutes. A shot from Grable's handgun turned the door into a molten ruin.

After that we had to leave my pump labouring away for hours to get rid of the water and liquid mud. Sitting in the AGC we ate a meal of recon steak, croquette potatoes and courgettes, and watched the Tenkian splattering murder-lice with metronomic regularity. Off to one side the roar of the outlet hose was like the warming up of a shuttle engine. It was a good pump; made of nano-built ceramics and powered by a couple of minipiles. After we had eaten we checked on the pump and found that a couple of rooms were now accessible and that the inlet hose had attached itself to a wall like a leech. I turned the pump off, moved the hose down into an underwater stairwell, and turned it on again. The exposed rooms contained little of value or interest other than orgiastic clumps of those molluscs called hammer-whelks, one shell of which had got me into all this. The floor was half a metre deep in reddish slimy mud.

Two hours passed and the outlet hose of the pump shifted, as one of its ground staples came out, and created a geyser over the mud flats. For a while we had a blue-shifted rainbow, until I went out and drove another staple into the rock. In another hour the next floor was revealed and things became a lot more interesting.

I hadn't expected to find human remains and was most surprised when I did. The man, or woman, had climbed into an armoured diving suit and died there. What I found was a skeleton inside a thick crust of grey corrosion. I only knew the skeleton was there because the salts that had corroded the armour had kept the faceplate clear, inside and out.

"The Golem twos might be the same. They didn't make very good ceramal then," said Grable.

"They crated them. There's a good chance the crates were some kind of vacuum-sealed plastic. Let's just hope we're lucky," I told him.

We found three crates and our scans showed us the contents were intact. I felt a surge of joy, excitement, justification. Grable showed unexpected friendliness. We attached AG units and loaded two of the crates with efficient co-operation. Grable was all smiles.

"You get that last one and I'll detach the pump," he suggested. Grinning, I raised my hand and entered the base. Only when I reached the crate, turned on the AG unit and found it didn't work, did the nasty distrustful part of my mind come out from under its stone and say, "You dumb fuck." I ran outside in time to see the AGC ten metres up in the air and rising. Its units were struggling and I noticed that a cluster of hammer-whelks was clinging to the underside.

"Grable you bastard!"

"The world-tide should be along in a few days! Enjoy your swim!"

For a moment I considered programming the Tenkian to go after him. But it was still splattering murder-lice. I shuddered to think what would happen to me without its protection.

I am using the keypad now to input this. I have no choice. I came out of the blackness with a leaden heaviness in my lungs and a strange numbness to my skin. I staggered to my feet and felt the skin of my arm. It is no longer skin. It is an exoskeleton. I reached up to my face with hands like complex pincers and screamed at what I found there. My face has deformed horrifically. I looked down and saw my teeth lying in the mud. I have no need of them now. I managed to click my mandibles a few times before I blacked out again. I thought that perhaps my mind was becoming as irrelevant as my teeth. When I woke next I was feeding on the remains of the murder-lice I was stealing my shape from, and I felt no inclination to stop. That wasn't what got to me. What got to me was that I wasn't breathing, not at all.

The nightmare lasted perhaps ten hours before either I began to accept or something in the structure of my brain was altered or excised. I was frighteningly hungry and the lice beyond the perimeter of the autogun looked good. I turned the gun off and waited. In moments the lice were on me, mandibles grating on my shell and ovipositors thumping against my torso like bayonettes. I tore them apart like handfuls of weeds, then turned the autogun back on while I fed, cracking open legs and carapaces with my mandibles. It sure beat the hell out of the nutcrackers they provide in restaurants.

A minute ago the autogun showed a red light and I shut it down. No more lice came though. A steady vibration is shaking the air and the ground under my feet is jerking spastically. The binary is rising; another sun, a small blue sun. The horizon it breaches is a line of white and silver. The world-tide. At the first signs I folded the autogun and, copying the lice I could see, I found a crevice and jammed myself in it. Here I am. The initial wave I estimate to be about twenty metres high; a mountain of water swamping the world. Behind it the sea is mounded up like a leashed monster. The sight is terrifying, exhilarating, magnificent. Now I must hold on.

The tide has passed. How many days? I don't know. All I know is that there was a time when I watched the surface get closer, then a time when I stood up and swatted away a murder-lice like an irritating fly, before sliding the nictitating membranes from my eyes. I thought Grable would be gone as would my lift off-planet. Even so, when the water was round my feet I reached into the remains of my jacket, extracted my palm computer, called up a map to locate the pick-up point and headed that way.

In the first moments of the tide I had nearly been dislodged from my crevice. Then the surges passed and in the company of murder-lice I swam in the sea, and I breathed. I did not have gills, but somehow my lungs had

been altered to extract oxygen from the water. The lice left me alone as they fed on the masses of flotsam caught in the flood. I was almost enjoying myself when the first dark shape blotted out the blue and green light.

They were a kind of flatfish but the size of great whites and there was nothing amusing about their sideways opening jaws and offset eyes. I got into my crevice with all speed as they hit the murder-lice. The water clouded with ichor and legs and pieces of carapace drifted before being snapped up by smaller fish.

There was little pleasure from then on. Next came the giant rays that ate lice and flatfish alike. There was a particularly unpleasant squid that I only saved myself from by discharging the Tenkian's cell into it. The rest of the time was a waking nightmare. I wasn't even safe in my crevice. A hammer-whelk joined me and I ignored it until it attached itself to my leg and drilled a centimetre diameter hole through my shell. I managed to pull it away and extract its siphon from my leg before it hit any arteries, but the pain was beyond belief, and I didn't know how to scream. I swore then that Chaplin Grable was going to really pay. I swore that if I got out of this I would use the form I now had before being adapted back to human normal. I was going to eat him feet first.

I stand by what remains of the AGC. It is jammed between two shellfish crusted slabs of rock where the world-tide left it. My laughter sounds like coughing and the ratchetting of claws. I pulled the hammer-whelks from the metal they had been clinging to when Grable lifted the craft and saw the holes they had made through into the oh so delicate control circuits. Grable's hand, in his armoured glove, is gripping the control column. I don't know where the rest of him is. I shall move on now. The Golem twos are in a nearby crevice. My fortune in the human world is assured. I am heading for one of the sealed bases that were finally established here. It is about five hundred kilometres away and there will be more world-tides to be endured before I reach it. The Tenkian follows, operating on batteries taken from the AGC. I will survive.

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