

NIGHTINGALE

Alastair Reynolds

Here's another brilliant story by Alastair Reynolds, whose "Signal to Noise" appears elsewhere in this anthology. In the hair-raising adventure that follows, he sweeps us along with a determined and heavily armed boarding party off to storm a lost ghost ship as big as a moon—and crewed with a full complement of bizarre and deadly ghosts of its own.

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I checked the address Tomas Martinez had given me, shielding the paper against the rain while I squinted at my scrawl. The number I'd written down didn't correspond with any of the high-and-dry offices, but it was a dead ringer for one of the low-rent premises at street level. Here the walls of Threadfall Canyon had been cut and buttressed to the height of six or seven storeys, widening the available space at the bottom of the trench. Buildings covered most of the walls, piled on top of each other, supported by a haphazard arrangement of stilts and rickety, semi-permanent bamboo scaffolding. Aerial walkways had been strung from one side of the street to the other, with stairs and ladders snaking their way through the dark fissures between the buildings. Now and then a wheeler sped through the water, sending a filthy wave of brown water in its wake. Very rarely, a sleek, claw-like volantor slid overhead. But volantors were off-world tech and not many people on Sky's Edge could afford that kind of thing anymore.

It didn't look right to me, but all the evidence said that this had to be the place.

I stepped out of the water, onto the wooden platform in front of the office, and knocked on the glass-fronted door while rain curtained down through holes in the striped awning above me. I was pushing hair out of my eyes when the door opened.

I'd seen enough photographs of Martinez to know this wasn't him. This was a big bull of a man, nearly as wide as the door. He stood there

with his arms crossed in front of his chest, over which he wore only a sleeveless black vest that was zipped down to the midriff. His muscles were so tight it looked like he was wearing some kind of body-hugging amplification suit. His head was very large and very bald, rooted to his body by a neck like a small mountain range. The skin around his right eye was paler than the rest of his face, in a neatly circular patch.

He looked down at me as if I was something that the rain had washed in.

“What?” he said, in a voice like the distant rumble of artillery.

“I’m here to see Martinez.”

“Mr. Martinez to you,” he said.

“Whatever. But I’m still here to see him, and he should be expecting me. I’m...”

“Dexia Scarrow,” called another voice—fractionally more welcoming, this time—and a smaller, older man bustled into view from behind the pillar of muscle blocking the door, snatching delicate pince-nez glasses from his nose. “Let her in, Norbert. She’s expected. Just a little *late*.”

“I got held up around Armesto—my hired wheeler hit a pothole and tipped over. Couldn’t get the thing started again, so had to...”

The smaller man waved aside my excuse. “You’re here now, which is all that matters. I’ll have Norbert dry your clothes, if you wish.”

I peeled off my coat. “Maybe this.”

“Norbert will attend to your galoshes as well. Would you care for something to drink? I have tea already prepared, but if you would rather something else...”

“Tea will be fine, Mr. Martinez,” I said.

“Please. Call me Tomas. It’s my sincere wish that we will work together as friends.”

I stood out of my galoshes and handed my dripping wet coat to the big man. Martinez nodded once, the gesture precise and birdlike, and then ushered me to follow him farther into his rooms. He was slighter and older

than I'd been expecting, although still recognizable as the man in the photographs. His hair was grey turning to white, thinning on his scalp and shaved close to the skin elsewhere on his head. He wore a grey waistcoat over a grey shirt, the ensemble lending him a drab, clerkish air.

We navigated a twisting labyrinth formed from four layers of brown boxes, piled to head height. "Excuse the mess," Martinez said, looking back at me over his shoulder. "I really should find a better solution to my filing problems, but there's always something more pressing that needs doing instead."

"I'm surprised you have time to eat, let alone worry about filing problems."

"Well, things haven't been as hectic lately, I must confess. If you've been following the news you'll know that I've already caught most of my big fish. There's been some mopping up to do, but I've been nowhere near as busy as in..." Martinez stopped suddenly next to one of the piles of boxes, placed his glasses back on the ridge of his nose, and scuffed dust from the paper label on the side of the box nearest his face. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Wrong place. Wrong damned place! Norbert!"

Norbert trudged along behind us, my sodden coat still draped over one of his enormous, trunklike arms. "Mr. Martinez?"

"This one is in the wrong place." The smaller man turned around and indicated a spot between two other boxes, on the other side of the corridor. "It goes here. It needs to be moved. Kessler's case is moving into court next month, and we don't want any trouble with missing documentation."

"Attend to it," Norbert said, which sounded like an order but which I assumed was his way of saying he'd remember to move the box when he was done with my laundry.

"Kessler?" I asked, when Norbert had left. "As in Tillman Kessler, the NC interrogator?"

"One and the same, yes. Did you have experience with him?"

"I wouldn't be standing here if I did."

"True enough. But a small number of people were fortunate enough to survive their encounters with Kessler. It's their testimonies that will help bring him to justice."

“By which you mean crucified.”

“I detect faint disapproval, Dexia,” Martinez said.

“You’re right. It’s barbaric.”

“It’s how we’ve always done things. The Haussmann way, if you like.”

Sky Haussmann: the man who gave this world its name, and who sparked off the 250-year war we’ve only just learned to stop fighting. When they crucified Sky they thought they were putting an early end to the violence. They couldn’t have been more wrong. Ever since then, crucifixion is the way executions happen.

“Is Kessler the reason you asked me here, sir? Were you expecting me to add to the case file against him?”

Martinez paused at a heavy wooden door.

“Not Kessler, no. I’ve every expectation to see him nailed to Bridgetop by the end of the year. But it does concern the man for whom Kessler was an instrument.”

I thought about that for a moment. “Kessler worked for Colonel Jax, didn’t he?”

Martinez opened the door and ushered me through, into the windowless room beyond. By now we must have been back into the canyon wall. The air had the inert stillness of a crypt. “Yes, Kessler was Jax’s man,” Martinez said. “I’m glad you made the connection: it saves me explaining why Jax ought to be brought to justice.”

“I agree completely. Half the population would agree with you. But I’m afraid you’re a bit late: Jax died years ago.”

Two other people were already waiting in the room, sitting on settees either side of a low black table set with tea, coffee and pisco sours.

“Jax didn’t die,” Martinez said. “He just disappeared, and now I know where he is. Have a seat, please.”

He knew I was interested; knew I wouldn’t be able to walk out of that room until I’d heard the rest of the story about Colonel Brandon Jax. But

there was more to it than that: there was something effortlessly commanding about his voice that made it very hard not to obey. In my time in the Southland Militia I'd learned that some people have that authority and some people don't. It can't be taught; can't be learned; can't be faked. You're either born with it or you're not.

"Dexia Scarrow, allow me to introduce you to my other two guests," Martinez said, when I'd taken my place at the table. "The gentleman opposite you is Salvatore Nicolosi, a veteran of one of the Northern Coalition's freeze/thaw units. The woman on your right is Ingrid Sollis, a personal security expert with a particular interest in counter-intrusion systems. Ingrid saw early combat experience with the Southland, but she soon left the military to pursue private interests."

I bit my tongue, then turned my attention away from the woman before I said something I might regret. The man—Nicolosi—looked more like an actor than a soldier. He didn't have a scar on him. His beard was so neatly groomed, so sharp-edged, that it looked sprayed on through a stencil. Freeze/thaw operatives rubbed me up the wrong way, no matter which side they'd been on. They'd always seen themselves as superior to the common soldier, which is why they didn't feel the need for the kind of excessive musculature Norbert carried around.

"Let me introduce Dexia Scarrow," Martinez continued, nodding at me. "Dexia was a distinguished soldier in the Southland Militia for fifteen years, until the armistice. Her service record is excellent. I believe she will be a valuable addition to the team."

"Maybe we should back up a step," I said. "I haven't agreed to be part of anyone's team."

"We're going after Jax," Nicolosi said placidly. "Doesn't that excite you?"

"He was on your side," I said. "What makes you so keen to see him hang?"

Nicolosi looked momentarily pained. "He was a war criminal, Dexia. I'm as anxious to see monsters like Jax brought to justice as I am to see the same fate visited on their scum-ridden Southland counterparts."

"Nicolosi's right," said Ingrid Sollis. "If we're going to learn to live together on this planet, we have to put the law above all else, regardless of former allegiances."

“Easy coming from a deserter,” I said. “Allegiance clearly didn’t mean very much to you back then, so I’m not surprised it doesn’t mean much to you now.”

Martinez, still standing at the head of the table, smiled tolerantly, as if he’d expected nothing less.

“You’re under an understandable misapprehension, Dexia. Ingrid was no deserter. She was wounded in the line of duty: severely, I might add. After her recuperation she was commended for bravery under fire and given the choice of an honorable discharge or a return to the frontline. You cannot blame her for choosing the former, especially given all that she had been through.”

“OK, my mistake,” I said. “It’s just that I never heard of many people making it out alive, before the war was over.”

Sollis looked at me icily. “Some of us did.”

“No one here has anything but an impeccable service record,” Martinez said. “I should know: I’ve been through your individual biographies with a fine tooth-comb. You’re just the people for the job.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, moving to stand up. “I’m just a retired soldier with a grudge against deserters. I wasn’t in some shit-hot freeze/thaw unit, and I didn’t do anything that resulted in any commendations for bravery. Sorry, folks, but I think...”

“Stay seated.”

I did what the man said.

Martinez continued speaking, his voice as measured and patient as ever. “You participated in at least three high-risk extraction operations, Dexia: three dangerous forays into enemy lines, to retrieve two deep-penetration Southland spies and one trump card NC defector. Or do you deny this?”

I shook my head, the reality of what he was proposing still not sinking in. “I can’t help. I don’t know anything about Jax...”

“You don’t need to. That’s my problem.”

“How are you so sure he’s still alive, anyway?”

“I’d like to know, too,” Nicolosi said, stroking an elegant finger along the border of his beard.

Martinez sat down, employing his own stool at the head of the table, so that he was higher than the three of us. He removed his glasses and fiddled with them in his lap. “It is necessary that you take a certain amount of what I am about to tell you on faith. I’ve been gathering intelligence on men like Jax for years, and in doing so I’ve come to rely on a web of contacts, many of whom have conveyed information to me at great personal risk. If I were to tell you the whole story, and if some of that story were to leak beyond this office, lives might well be endangered. And that is to say nothing of how my chances of bringing other fugitives to justice might be undermined.”

“We understand,” Sollis said, and I bridled at the way she presumed to speak for all of us. Perhaps she felt she owed Martinez for the way he’d just stood up for her.

Again I bit my lip and said nothing.

“For a long time, I’ve received titbits of intelligence concerning Colonel Jax: rumours that he did not, in fact, die at all, but is still at large.”

“Where?” Sollis asked. “On Sky’s Edge?”

“It would seem not. There were, of course, many rumours and false trails that suggested Jax had gone to ground somewhere on this planet. But one by one I discounted them all. Slowly the truth became apparent. Jax is still alive; still within this system.”

I felt it was about time I made a positive contribution. “Wouldn’t a piece of dirt like Jax try and get out of the system at the first opportunity?”

Martinez favoured my observation by pointing his glasses at me. “I had my fears that he might have, but as the evidence came in, a different truth presented itself.”

He set about pouring himself some tea. The pisco sours were going unwanted. I doubted that any of us had the stomach for drink at this time of the day.

“Where is he, then?” asked Nicolosi. “Plenty of criminal elements

might have the means to shelter a man like Jax, but given the price on his head, the temptation to turn him in..."

"He is not being sheltered," Martinez said, sipping delicately at his tea before continuing. "He is alone, aboard a ship. The ship was believed lost, destroyed in the final stages of the war, when things escalated into space—but I have evidence that the ship is still essentially intact, with a functioning life-support system. There is every reason to believe Jax is still being kept alive, aboard this vehicle, in this system."

"What's he waiting for?" I asked.

"For memories to grow dim," Martinez answered. "Like many powerful men, Jax may have obtained longevity drugs—or at least undergone longevity treatment—during the latter stages of the war. Time is not a concern for him."

I leaned forward. "This ship... you think it'll just be a matter of boarding it and taking him alive?"

Martinez seemed surprised at the directness of my question. He blinked once before answering.

"In essence, yes."

"Won't he put up a fight?"

"I don't think so. The Ultras that located the vehicle for me reported that it appeared dormant, in power-conservation mode. Jax himself may be frozen, in reefersleep. The ship did not respond to the Ultras' sensor sweeps, so there's no reason to assume it will respond to our approach and docking."

"How close did the Ultras get?" Sollis asked.

"Within three or four light-minutes. But there's no reason to assume we can't get closer without alerting the ship."

"How do you know Jax is aboard this ship?" Nicolosi asked. "It could just be a drifter, nothing to do with him."

"The intelligence I'd already gleaned pointed towards his presence aboard a vehicle of a certain age, size and design—everything matches."

“So let’s cut to the chase,” Sollis said, again presuming to speak for the rest of us. “You’ve brought us here because you think we’re the team to snatch the colonel. I’m the intrusion specialist, so you’ll be relying on me to get us inside that ship. Nicolosi’s a freeze/thaw veteran, so—apart from the fact that he’s probably pretty handy with a weapon or two—he’ll know how to spring Jax from reefersleep, if the colonel turns out to be frozen. And she—what was your name again?”

“Dexia,” I said, like it was a threat.

“She’s done some extractions. I guess she must be OK at her job, or she wouldn’t be here.”

Martinez waited a moment, then nodded. “You’re quite right, Ingrid: all credit to you for that. I apologize if my machinations are so nakedly transparent. But the simple fact of the matter is that you are the ideal team for the operation in question. I have no doubt that, with your combined talents, you will succeed in returning Colonel Jax to Sky’s Edge, and hence to trial. Now admit it: that *would* be something, wouldn’t it? To fell the last dragon? “

Nicolosi indicated his approval with a long nasal sigh. “Men like Kessler are just a distraction. When you hang a monster like Kessler, you’re punishing the knife, not the man who wielded it. If you wish true justice, you must find the knifeman, the master.”

“What do we get paid?” Sollis asked.

Martinez smiled briefly. “Fifty thousand Australs for each of you, upon the safe return of Colonel Jax.”

“What if we find him dead?” I asked. “By then we’ll already have risked an approach and docking to his ship.”

“If Jax is already dead, then you will be paid twenty-five thousand Australs.”

We all looked at each other. I knew what the others were thinking. Fifty thousand Australs was life-changing money, but half of that wasn’t bad either. Killing Jax would be much easier and safer than extracting him...

“I’ll be with you, of course,” Martinez said. “So there’ll be no need to worry about proving Jax was already dead when you arrived, should that arise.”

“If you’re coming along,” I asked, “who else do we need to know about?”

“Only Norbert. And you need have no fears concerning his competency.”

“Just the five of us, then,” I said.

“Five is a good number, don’t you think? And there is a practical limit to the size of the extraction team. I have obtained the use of a small but capable ship, perfectly adequate for our purposes. It will carry five, with enough capacity to bring back the colonel. I’ll provide weapons, equipment and armour, but you may all bring whatever you think may prove useful.”

I looked around the cloisterlike confines of the room, and remembered the dismal exterior of the offices, situated at the bottom of Threadfall Canyon. “Three times fifty thousand Australs,” I mused. “Plus whatever it cost you to hire and equip a ship. If you don’t mind me asking... where exactly are the funds coming from?”

“The funds are mine,” Martinez said sternly. “Capturing Jax has been a long-term goal, not some whimsical course upon which I have only recently set myself. Dying a pauper would be a satisfactory end to my affairs, were I to do so knowing that Jax was hanging from the highest mast of Bridgetop.”

For a moment, none of us said anything. Martinez had spoken so softly, so demurely, that the meaning of his words seemed to lag slightly behind the statement itself. When it arrived, I think we all saw a flash of that corpse, executed in the traditional way, the Haussmann way.

“Good weapons?” I asked. “Not some reconditioned black-market shit?”

“Only the best.”

“Technical specs for the ship?” Sollis asked.

“You’ll have plenty of time to review the data on the way to the rendezvous point. I don’t doubt that a woman of your abilities will be able to pinpoint an entry point.”

Sollis looked flattered. “Then I guess I’m in. What about you,

Salvatore?”

“Men like Colonel Jax stained the honour of the Northern Coalition. We were not all monsters. If I could do something to make people see that...” Nicolosi trailed off, then shrugged. “Yes, I am in. It would be an honour, Mr. Martinez.”

“That leaves you, Dexia,” Sollis said. “Fifty thousand Australs sounds pretty sweet to me. I’m guessing it sounds pretty sweet to you as well.”

“That’s my call, not yours.”

“Just saying... you look like you could use that money as much as any of us.”

I think I came close to saying no, to walking out of that room, back into the incessant muddy rain of Threadfall Canyon. Perhaps if I’d tried, Norbert would have been forced to detain me, so that I didn’t go blabbing about how a team was being put together to bring Colonel Jax back into custody. But I would never get the chance to find out what Martinez had in mind for me if I chose not to go along with him.

I only had to think about the way I looked in the mirror, and what those fifty thousand Australs could do for me.

So I said yes.

* * * *

Martinez gestured to one of the blank pewter-grey walls in the shuttle’s compartment, causing it to brighten and fill with neon-bright lines. The lines meshed and intersected, forming a schematic diagram of a ship, with an accompanying scale.

“Intelligence on Jax’s ship is fragmentary. Strip out all the contradictory reports, discard unreliable data, and we’re left with this.”

“That’s it?” Sollis asked.

“When we get within visual range we’ll be able to improve matters. I shall reexamine all of the reports, including those that were discarded. Some of them—when we have the real ship to compare them against—may turn out to have merit after all. They may in turn shed useful light on the interior layout, and the likely location of Jax. By then, of course, we’ll also

have infrared and deep-penetration radar data from our own sensors.”

“It looks like a pretty big ship,” I said as I looked at the schematic, scratching at my scalp. We were a day out from Armesto Field, with the little shuttle tucked into the belly hold of an outbound lighthugger named *Death of Sophonisba*.

“Big but not the right shape for a lighthugger,” Sollis said. “So what are we dealing with here?”

“Good question,” I said. What Martinez was showing us was a rectangular hull about one kilometre from end to end; maybe a hundred metres deep and a hundred metres wide, with some kind of spherical bulge about halfway along. There was some suggestion of engines at one end, and of a gauntlet-like docking complex at the other. The ship was too blunt for interstellar travel, and it lacked the outrigger-mounted engines that were characteristic of Conjoiner drive mechanisms. “Does look kind of familiar, though,” I added. “Anyone else getting that déjà vu feeling, or is it just me?”

“I don’t know,” Nicolosi said. “When I saw it I thought...” He shook his head. “It can’t be. It must be a standard hull design.”

“You’ve seen it too,” I said.

“Does that ship have a name?” Nicolosi asked Martinez.

“I have no idea what Jax calls his ship.”

“That’s not what the man asked,” Sollis said. “He asked if—“

“I know the name of the ship,” I said quietly. “I saw a ship like that once, when I was being taken aboard it. I’d been injured in a fire-fight, one of the last big surface battles. They took me into space—this was after the elevator came down, so it had to be by shuttle—and brought me aboard that ship. It was a hospital ship, orbiting the planet.”

“What was the name of the ship?” Nicolosi asked urgently.

“*Nightingale*,” I said.

“Oh, no.”

“You’re surprised.”

“Damn right I’m surprised. I was aboard *Nightingale* too.”

“So was I,” Sollis said, her voice barely a whisper. “I didn’t recognize it, though. I was too fucked up to pay much attention until they put me back together aboard it. By then, I guess...”

“Same with me,” Nicolosi said. “Stitched back together aboard *Nightingale*, then repatriated.”

Slowly, we all turned and looked at Martinez. Even Norbert, who had contributed nothing until that point, turned to regard his master. Martinez blinked, but otherwise his composure was impeccable.

“The ship is indeed *Nightingale*. It was too risky to tell you when we were still on the planet. Had any of Jax’s allies learned of the identity...”

Sollis cut him off. “Is that why you didn’t tell us? Or is it because you knew we’d all been aboard that thing once already?”

“The fact that you have all been aboard *Nightingale* was a factor in your selection, nothing more. It was your skills that marked you out for this mission, not your medical history.”

“So why didn’t you tell us?” she asked.

“Again, had I told you more than was wise...”

“You lied to us.”

“I did no such thing.”

“Wait,” Nicolosi said, his voice calmer than I was expecting. “Let’s just... deal with this, shall we? We’re getting hung up on the fact that we were all healed aboard *Nightingale*, when the real question we should be asking is this: what the hell is Jax doing aboard a ship that doesn’t exist anymore?”

“What’s the problem with the ship?” I asked.

“The problem,” Nicolosi said, speaking straight at me, “is that *Nightingale* was reported destroyed near the end of the war. Or were you not keeping up with the news?”

I shrugged. "Guess I wasn't."

"And yet you knew enough about the ship to recognize it."

"Like I said, I remember the view from the medical shuttle. I was drugged-up, unsure whether I was going to live or die... everything was heightened, intense, like in a bad dream. But after they healed me and sent me back down surfaceside? I don't think I ever thought about *Nightingale* again."

"Not even when you look in the mirror?" Nicolosi asked.

"I thought about what they'd done to me, how much better it could have been. But it never crossed my mind to wonder what had happened to the ship afterwards. So what *did* happen?"

"You say 'they healed me,' " Nicolosi observed. "Does that mean you were treated by doctors, by men and women?"

"Shouldn't I have been?"

He shook his head minutely. "My guess is you were wounded and shipped aboard *Nightingale* soon after it was deployed."

"That's possible."

"In which case, *Nightingale* was still in commissioning phase. I went aboard it later. What about you, Ingrid?"

"Me too. I hardly saw another human being the whole time I was aboard that thing."

"That was how it was meant to operate: with little more than a skeleton staff, to take medical decisions the ship couldn't take for itself. Most of the time they were meant to stay behind the scenes."

"All I remember was a hospital ship," I said. "I don't know anything about 'commissioning.' "

Nicolosi explained it to me patiently, as if I was a small child in need of education.

Nightingale had been financed and built by a consortium of

well-meaning postmortal aristocrats. Since their political influence hadn't succeeded in curtailing the war (and since many of their aristocratic friends were quite happy for it to continue) they'd decided to make a difference in the next best way: by alleviating the suffering of the mortal men and women engaged in the war itself.

So they created a hospital ship, one that had no connection to either the Northern Coalition or the Southland Militia. *Nightingale* would be there for all injured soldiers, irrespective of allegiance. Aboard the neutral ship, the injured would be healed, allowed to recuperate, and then repatriated. All but the most critically wounded would eventually return to active combat service. And *Nightingale* itself would be state-of-the-art, with better medical facilities than any other public hospital on or around Sky's Edge. It wouldn't be the glittering magic of Demarchist medicine, but it would still be superior to anything most mortals had ever experienced.

It would also be tirelessly efficient, dedicated only to improving its healing record. *Nightingale* was designed to operate autonomously, as a single vast machine. Under the guidance of human specialists, the ship would slowly improve its methods until it had surpassed its teachers. I'd come aboard ship when it was still undergoing the early stages of its learning curve, but—as I learned from Nicolosi—the ship had soon moved into its “operational phase.” By then the entire kilometre-long vehicle was under the control of only a handful of technicians and surgical specialists, with gamma-level intelligences taking most of the day-to-day decisions. That was when Sollis and Nicolosi had been shipped aboard. They'd been healed by machines, with only a vague awareness that there was a watchful human presence behind the walls.

“It worked, too,” Nicolosi said. “The ship did everything its sponsors had hoped it would. It functioned like a huge, efficient factory: sucking in the wounded, spitting out the healed.”

“Only for them to go back to the war,” I said.

“The sponsors didn't have any control over what happened when the healed were sent back down. But at least they were still alive; at least they hadn't died on the battlefield or under the operating table. The sponsors could still believe that they had done something good. They could still sleep at night.”

“So *Nightingale* was a success,” I said. “What's the problem? Wasn't it turned over to civilian use after the armistice?”

“The ship was destroyed just before the ceasefire,” Nicolosi said. “That’s why we shouldn’t be seeing it now. A stray NC missile, nuke-tipped—too fast to be intercepted by the ship’s own countermeasures. It took out *Nightingale*, with staff and patients still aboard her.”

“Now that you mention it... maybe I did hear about something like that.”

Sollis looked fiercely at Martinez. “I say we renegotiate terms. He never told us we were going to have to spring Jax from a fucking ghost ship.”

Norbert moved to his master’s side, as if to protect him from the furious Sollis. Martinez, who had said nothing for many minutes, removed his glasses, buffed them on his shirt and replaced them with an unhurried calm.

“Perhaps you are right to be cross with me, Ingrid. And perhaps I made a mistake in not mentioning *Nightingale* sooner than I did. But it was imperative to me that I not compromise this operation with a single careless indiscretion. My whole life has been an arrow pointing to this one task: the bringing to justice of Colonel Jax. I will not fail myself now.”

“You should have told us about the hospital ship,” Nicolosi said. “None of us would have had any reason to spread that information. We all want to see Jax get his due.”

“Then I have made a mistake, for which I apologize.”

Sollis shook her head. “I don’t think an apology’s going to cut it. If I’d known I was going to have to go back aboard that *thing*...”

“You are right,” Martinez said, addressing all of us. “The ship has a traumatic association for you, and it was wrong of me not to allow for that.”

“Amen to that,” Sollis said.

I felt it was time I made a contribution. “I don’t think any of us are about to back out now, Tomas. But maybe—given what we now know about the ship—a little bit more incentive might not be a bad idea.”

“I was about to make the same suggestion myself,” Martinez said.

“You must appreciate that my funds are not inexhaustible, and that my original offer might already be considered generous—but shall we say an extra five thousand Australs, for each of you?”

“Make it ten and maybe we’re still in business,” Sollis snapped back, before I’d had a chance to blink.

Martinez glanced at Norbert, then—with an expression that suggested he was giving in under duress—he nodded at Sollis. “Ten thousand Australs it is. You drive a hard bargain, Ingrid.”

“While we’re debating terms,” Nicolosi said, “is there anything else you feel we ought to know?”

“I have told you that the ship is *Nightingale*.” Martinez directed our attention back to the sketchy diagram on the wall. “That, I am ashamed to admit, is the sum total of my knowledge of the ship in question.”

“What about constructional blueprints?” I asked.

“None survived the war.”

“Photographs? Video images?”

“Ditto. *Nightingale* operated in a war zone, Dexia. Casual sightseeing was not exactly a priority for those unfortunate enough to get close to her.”

“What about the staff aboard her?” Nicolosi asked. “Couldn’t they tell you anything?”

“I spoke to some survivors: the doctors and technicians who’d been aboard during the commissioning phase. Their testimonies were useful, when they were willing to talk.”

Nicolosi pushed further. “What about the people who were aboard before the ceasefire?”

“I could not trace them.”

“But they obviously didn’t die. If the ship’s still out there, the rogue missile couldn’t have hit it.”

“Why would anyone make up a story about the ship being blown to pieces, if it didn’t happen?” I asked.

“War does strange things to truth,” Martinez answered. “No malice is necessarily implied. Perhaps another hospital ship was indeed destroyed. There was more than one in orbit around Sky’s Edge, after all. One of them may even have had a similar name. It’s perfectly conceivable that the facts might have got muddled, in the general confusion of those days.”

“Still doesn’t explain why you couldn’t trace any survivors,” Nicolosi said.

Martinez shifted on his seat, uneasily. “If Jax did appropriate the ship, then he may not have wanted anyone talking about it. The staff aboard *Nightingale* might have been paid off—or threatened—to keep silent.”

“Adds up, I guess,” I said.

“Money will make a lot of things add up,” Nicolosi replied.

* * * *

After two days the *Death of Sophonisba* sped deeper into the night, while Martinez’s ship followed a pre-programmed flight plan designed to bring us within survey range of the hospital ship. The Ultras had scanned *Nightingale* again, and once again they’d elicited no detectable response from the dormant vessel. All indications were that the ship was in a deep cybernetic coma, as close to death as possible, with only a handful of critical life-support systems still running on a trickle of stored power.

Over the next twenty-four hours we crept in closer, narrowing the distance to mere light-seconds, and then down to hundreds of thousands of kilometres. Still there was no response, but as the distance narrowed, so our sensors began to improve the detail in their scans. While the rest of us took turns sleeping, Martinez sat at his console, compositing the data, enhancing his schematic. Now and then Norbert would lean over the console and stare in numb concentration at the sharpening image, and occasionally he would mumble some remark or observation to which Martinez would respond in a patient, faintly condescending whisper, the kind that a teacher might reserve for a slow but willing pupil. Not for the first time I was touched by Martinez’s obvious kindness in employing the huge, slow Norbert, and I wondered what the war must have done to him to bring him to this state.

When we were ten hours from docking, Martinez revealed the fruits of his labours. The schematic of the hospital ship was three-dimensional now,

displayed in the navigational projection cylinder on the ship's cramped flight deck. Although the basic layout of the ship hadn't changed, the new plan was much more detailed than the first one. It showed docking points, airlocks, major mechanical systems, and the largest corridors and spaces threading the ship's interior. There was still a lot of guesswork, but it wouldn't be as if we were entering a completely foreign territory.

"The biggest thermal hotspot is here," Martinez said, pointing at a spot about a quarter of the way down from the front. "If Jax is anywhere, that's my best guess as to where we'll find him."

"Simple, then," Nicolosi said. "In via that dorsal lock, then a straight sprint down that access shaft. Easy, even under weightless conditions. Can't be more than fifty or sixty metres."

"I'm not happy," Sollis said. "That's a large lock, likely to be armed to the teeth with heavy duty sensors and alarms."

"Can you get us through it?" Nicolosi asked.

"You give me a door, I'll get us through it. But I can't bypass every conceivable security system, and you can be damned sure the ship will know about it if we come through a main lock."

"What about the other ones?" I asked, trying not to sound as if I was on her case. "Will they be less likely to go off?"

"Nothing's guaranteed. But I'd always rather take my chances with the backdoor."

"I think Ingrid is correct," Martinez said, nodding his approval. "There's every chance of a silent approach and docking. Jax will have disabled all non-essential systems, and that will include proximity sensors. If that's the case—if we see no evidence of having tripped approach alarms—then I believe we would be best advised to maintain stealth." He indicated farther along the hull, beyond the rounded midsection bulge. "That will mean coming in here, or here, via one of these smaller service locks. I concur with Ingrid: they probably won't be alarmed."

"That'll leave us with four or five hundred metres of ship to crawl through," Nicolosi said, leaving us in no doubt what he thought about that. "Four or five hundred metres for which we only have a very crude map."

"We'll have directional guidance from our suits," Martinez said.

“It’s still a concern to me. But if you have settled upon this decision, I shall abide by it.”

I turned to Sollis. “What you said just then... about not spending a minute longer aboard *Nightingale* than we have to?”

“I wasn’t kidding.”

“I know. But there was something about the way you said it. Is there something about that ship you know that we don’t? You sounded spooked, and I don’t understand why. It’s just a disused hospital, after all.”

Sollis studied me for a moment before answering. “Tell her, Nicolosi.”

Nicolosi looked placidly at the other woman. “Tell her what?”

“What she obviously doesn’t know. What none of us are in any great hurry to talk about.”

“Oh, please.”

“Oh please what?” I asked.

“It’s just a fairy story, a stupid myth,” Nicolosi said.

“A stupid story which nonetheless always claimed that *Nightingale* didn’t get blown up after all.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “What story?”

It was Martinez who chose to answer. “That something unfortunate happened aboard her. That the last batch of sick and injured went in, but for some reason were never seen to leave. That all attempts to contact the technical staff failed. That an exploratory team was put aboard the ship, and that they too were never heard from again.”

I laughed. “Fuck. And now we’re planning to go aboard?”

“Now you see why I’m kind of anxious to get this over with,” Sollis said.

“It’s just a myth,” Martinez chided. “Nothing more. It is a thing to frighten children, not to dissuade us from capturing Jax. In fact it would not

surprise me in the least if Jax or his allies were in some way responsible for this lie. If it were to cause us to turn back now, it would have served them admirably, would it not?"

"Maybe," I said, without much conviction. "But I'd still have been happier if you'd told me before. It wouldn't have made any difference to my accepting this job, but it would have been nice to know you trusted me."

"I do trust you, Dexia. I simply assumed that you had no interest in childish stories."

"How do you know Jax is aboard?" I asked.

"We've been over this. I have my sources, sources that I must protect, and it would be..."

"He was a patient, wasn't he."

Martinez snapped his glasses from his nose, as if my point had been at an unexpected tangent to whatever we'd been talking about. "I know only that Jax is aboard *Nightingale*. The circumstances of how he arrived there are of no concern to me."

"And it doesn't bother you that maybe he's just dead, like the rest of whoever was aboard at the end?" Sollis asked.

"If he is dead, you will still receive twenty-five thousand Australs."

"Plus the ten we already agreed on."

"That too," Martinez said, as if it should have been taken for granted.

"I don't like this," Sollis muttered.

"I don't like it either," Nicolosi replied. "But we came here to do a job, and the material facts haven't changed. There is a ship, and the man we want is aboard it. What Martinez says is true: we should not be intimidated by stories, especially when our goal is so near."

"We go in there, we get Jax, we get the hell out," Sollis said. "No dawdling, no sightseeing, no souvenir hunting."

"I have absolutely no problem with that," I said.

* * * *

“Take what you want,” Martinez called over Norbert’s shoulder, as we entered the armoury compartment at the rear of the shuttle’s pressurized section. “But remember: you’ll be wearing pressure suits, and you’ll be moving through confined spaces. You’ll also be aboard a ship.”

Sollis pushed bodily ahead of me, pouncing on something that I’d only begun to notice. She unracked the sleek, cobalt-blue excimer rifle and hefted it for balance. “Hey, a Breitenbach.”

“Christmas come early?” I asked.

Sollis pulled a pose, sighting along the rifle, deploying its targeting aids, flipping the power-up toggle. The weapon whined obligingly. Blue lights studded its stock, indicating it was ready for use.

“Because I’m worth it,” Sollis said.

“I’d really like it if you pointed that thing somewhere else,” I said.

“Better still, don’t point it anywhere,” Nicolosi rumbled. He’d seen one of the choicer items too. He unclipped a long, matte-black weapon with a ruby-red dragon stencilled along the barrel. It had a gaping maw like a swallowing python. “Laser-confined plasma bazooka,” he said admiringly. “Naughty, but nice.”

“Finesse isn’t your cup of tea, then.”

“Never got to use one of these in the war, Dexia.”

“That’s because they were banned. One of the few sensible things both sides managed to agree on.”

“Then now’s my chance.”

“I think the idea was to extract Jax, not to blow ten-metre-wide holes in *Nightingale*.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be very, very careful.” He slung the bazooka over his shoulder, then continued his way down the aisle.

I picked up a pistol, hefted it, replaced it on the rack. Found something more to my liking—a heavy, dual-gripped slug gun—and flipped

open the loading bay to check that there was a full clip inside. Low-tech but reliable: the other two were welcome to their directed-energy weapons, but I'd seen how easily they could go wrong under combat conditions.

"Nice piece, Dexia," Sollis said, patronizingly. "Old school."

"I'm old school."

"Yeah, I noticed."

"You have a problem with that, we can always try some target practice."

"Hey, no objections. Just glad you found something to your liking. Doing better than old Norbert, anyway." Sollis nodded over her shoulder. "Looks like he's really drawn the short straw there."

I looked down the aisle. Norbert was near the end of one of the racks, examining a small, stubby-looking weapon whose design I didn't recognize. In his huge hands it looked ridiculous, like something made for a doll.

"You sure about that?" I called. "Maybe you want to look at one of these..."

Norbert looked at me like I was some kind of idiot. I don't know what he did then—there was no movement of his hand that I was aware of—but the stubby little weapon immediately unpacked itself, elongating and opening like some complicated puzzle box, until it was almost twice as big, twice as deadly-looking. It had the silken, precision-engineered quality of expensive off-world tech. A Demarchist toy, probably, but a very, very deadly toy for all that.

Sollis and I exchanged a wordless glance. Norbert had found what was probably the most advanced, most effective weapon in the room.

"Will do," Norbert said, before closing the weapon up again and slipping it into his belt.

* * * *

We crept closer. Tens of thousands of kilometres, then thousands, then hundreds. I looked through the hull windows, with the interior lights turned down, peering in the direction where our radar and infrared scans told us the hospital ship was waiting. When we were down to two dozen kilometres

I knew I should be seeing it, but I was still only looking at stars and the sucking blackness between them. I had a sudden, visceral sense of how easy it was to lose something out here, followed in quick succession by a dizzying sense of how utterly small and alone we were, now that the lighthugger was gone.

And then suddenly, there was *Nightingale*.

We were coming in at an angle, so the hull was tilted and foreshortened. It was so dark that only certain edges and surfaces were visible at all. No visible windows, no running lights, no lit-up docking bays. The ship looked as dark and dead as a sliver of coal. Suddenly it was absurd to think that there might be anyone alive aboard it. Colonel Jax's dead corpse, perhaps, but not the living or even life-supported body that would guarantee us the rest of our payment.

Martinez had the ship on manual control now. With small, deft applications of thrust he narrowed the distance down to less than a dozen kilometres. At six kilometres Martinez deemed it safe to activate floodlights and play them along the length of the hull, confirming the placement of locks and docking sites. There was a peppering of micro-meteorite impacts and some scorching from high-energy particles, but nothing that I wouldn't have expected for a ship that had been sitting out here since the armistice. If the ship possessed self-repair mechanisms, they were sleeping as well. Even when we circled around the hull and swept it from the other side, there was no trace of our having been noticed. Still with reluctance, Nicolosi accepted that we would follow Sollis's entry strategy, coming in by one of the service locks.

It was time to do it.

* * * *

We docked. We came in softly, but there was still a solid *clunk* as the capture latches engaged and grasped our little craft to the hull of the hospital ship. I thought of that clunk echoing away down the length of *Nightingale*, diminishing as it travelled, but still not becoming weak enough not to trip some waiting, infinitely patient alarm system, alerting the sleeping ship that it had a visitor. For several minutes we hung in weightless silence, staring out the windows or watching the sensor readouts for the least sign of activity. But the dark ship stayed dark in all directions. There was no detectable change in her state of coma.

"Nothing's happened," Martinez said, breaking the silence with a

whisper. “It still doesn’t know we’re here. The lock is all yours, Ingrid. I’ve already opened our doors.”

Sollis, suited up now, moved into the lock tube with her toolkit. While she worked, the rest of us finished putting on our own suits and armour, completing the exercise as quietly as possible. I hadn’t worn a spacesuit before, but Norbert was there to help all of us with the unfamiliar process: his huge hands attended to delicate connections and catches with surprising dexterity. Once I had the suit on, it didn’t feel much different than wearing full-spectrum bioarmour, and I quickly got the hang of the life-support indications projected around the border of my faceplate. I would only need to pay minor attention to them: unless there was some malfunction, the suit had enough power and supplies to keep me alive in perfect comfort for three days; longer if I was prepared to tolerate a little less comfort. None of us were planning on spending quite that long in *Nightingale*.

Sollis was nearly done when we assembled behind her in the lock. The inner and outer lock doors on our side were open, exposing the grey outer door of the hospital ship, held tight against the docking connector by pressure tight seals. I doubted that she’d ever had to break into a ship before, but nothing about the door seemed to be causing Sollis any difficulties. She’d tugged open an access panel and plugged in a fistful of coloured cables, running back to a jury-rigged electronics module in her toolkit. She was tapping a little keyboard, causing patterns of lights to alter within the access panel. The face of a woman—blank, expressionless, yet at the same time severe and unforgiving—had appeared in an oval frame above the access panel.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“That’s *Nightingale*,” Sollis said, adding, by way of explanation: “The ship had its own gamma-level personality, keeping the whole show running. Pretty smart piece of thinkware by all accounts: full Turing-compliance; about as clever as you can make a machine before you have to start giving it human rights.”

I looked at the stern-faced woman, expecting her to query us at any moment. I imagined her harsh and hectoring voice demanding to know what business any of us had boarding *Nightingale*, trespassing aboard her ship, *her* hospital.

“Does she know...” I started.

Sollis shook her head. “This is just a dumb facet of the main construct. Not only is it inactive—the image is frozen into the door memory—but it doesn’t seem to have any functioning data links back to the main sentience engine. Do you, *Nightingale*?”

The face looked at us impassively, but still said nothing.

“See: deadsville. My guess is the sentience engine isn’t running at all. Out here, the ship wouldn’t need much more than a trickle of intelligence to keep itself ticking over.”

“So the gamma’s off-line?”

“Uh-huh. Best way, too. You don’t want one of those things sitting around too long without something to do.”

“Why not?”

“ ‘Cause they tend to go nuts. That’s why the Conjoiners won’t allow gamma-level intelligences in any of their machines. They say it’s a kind of slavery.”

“Running a hospital must have been enough to stop *Nightingale*’s gamma running off the rails.”

“Let’s hope so. Let’s really hope so.” Sollis glanced back at her work, then emitted a grunt of satisfaction as a row of lights flicked to orange. She unplugged a bunch of coloured cables and looked back at the waiting party. “OK: we’re good to go. I can open the door anytime you’re ready.”

“What’s on the other side of it?”

“According to the door, air: normal trimix. Bitchingly cold, but not frozen. Pressure’s manageable. I’m not sure we could *breathe* it, but...”

“We’re not breathing anything,” Martinez said curtly. “Our airlock will take two people. One of them will have to be you, Ingrid, since you know how to work the mechanism. I shall accompany you, and then we shall wait for the others on the far side, when we have established that conditions are safe.”

“Maybe one of us should go through instead of you,” I said, wondering why Norbert hadn’t volunteered to go through ahead of his

master. “We’re expendable, but you aren’t. Without you, Jax doesn’t go down.”

“Considerate of you, Dexia, but I paid you to assist me, not take risks on my behalf.”

Martinez propelled himself forward. Norbert, Nicolosi and I edged back to permit the inner door to close again. On the common suit channel I heard Sollis say: “We’re opening *Nightingale*. Stand by: comms might get a bit weaker once we’re on the other side of all this metal.”

Nicolosi pushed past me, back into the flight deck. I heard the heavy whine of servos as the door opened. Breathing and scuffling sounds, but nothing that alarmed me. “OK,” Sollis said. “We’re moving into *Nightingale*’s lock. Closing the outer door behind us. When you need to open it again, hit any key on the pad.”

“Still no sign of life,” Nicolosi called.

“The inner door looks like it’ll open without any special encouragement from me,” Sollis said. “Should be just a matter of pulling down this lever... you ready?”

“Do it, Ingrid,” I heard Martinez say.

More servos, fainter now. After a few moments Sollis reported back: “We’re inside. No surprises yet. Floating in some kind of holding bay, about ten metres wide. It’s dark, of course. There’s a doorway leading out of the far wall: might lead to the main corridor that should pass close to this lock.”

I remembered to turn on my helmet lamp.

“Can you open both lock doors?” Nicolosi asked.

“Not at the same time, not without a lot of trouble that might get us noticed.”

“Then we’ll come through in two passes. Norbert: you go first. Dexia and I will follow.”

It took longer than I’d have liked, but eventually all five of us were on the other side of the lock. I’d only been weightless once, during the recuperation program after my injury, but the memory of how to move—at least without making too much of a fool of myself—was still there, albeit

dimly. The others were coping about as well. The combined effects of our helmet lamps banished the darkness to the corners of the room, emphasizing the deeper gloom of the open doorway Sollis had mentioned. It occurred to me that somewhere down that darkness was Colonel Jax, or whatever was left of him.

Nervously, I checked that the slug gun was still clipped to my belt.

“Check your helmet maps,” Martinez said. “Does everyone have an overlay and a positional fix?”

“I’m good,” I said, against a chorus from the other three, and acutely aware of how easy it would be to get lost aboard a ship as large as *Nightingale*, if that positional fix were to break down.

“Check your weapons and suit systems. We’ll keep comms to a minimum all the way in.”

“I’ll lead,” Nicolosi said, propelling himself into the darkness of the doorway before anyone could object.

I followed hard on his heels, trying not to get out of breath with the effort of keeping up. There were loops and rails along all four walls of the shaft, so movement consisted of gliding from one handhold to the next, with only air resistance to stop one drifting all the way. We were covering one metre a second, easily: at that rate, it wouldn’t take long to cross the entire width of the ship, which would mean we’d somehow missed the axial corridor we were looking for, or that it just didn’t exist. But just when it was beginning to strike me that we’d gone too far, Nicolosi slowed. I grabbed a handhold to stop myself slamming into his feet.

He looked back at us, making me squint against his helmet lamp. “Here’s the main corridor, just a bit deeper than we were expecting. Runs both ways.”

“We turn left,” Martinez said, in not much more than a whisper. “Turn left and follow it for one hundred metres, maybe one hundred and twenty, until we meet the centrifuge section. It should be a straight crawl, with no obstructions.”

Nicolosi turned away, then looked back. “I can’t see more than twenty metres into the corridor. We may as well see where it goes.”

“Nice and slowly,” Martinez urged.

We moved forward, along the length of the hull. In the instants when I was coasting from one handhold to the next, I held my breath and tried to hear the ambient noises of the ship, relayed to my helmet by the suit's acoustic pickup. Mostly all I heard was the scuffing progress of the others, the hiss and hum of their own life-support packs. Other than that, *Nightingale* seemed as silent as when we'd approached. If the ship was aware of our intrusion, there was no sign of it.

We'd made maybe forty metres from the junction: at least a third of the distance we had to travel before hitting the centrifuge, when Nicolosi slowed. I caught a handhold before I drifted into his heels, then looked back to make sure the others had got the message.

"Problem?" Martinez asked.

"There's a T-junction right ahead. I didn't think we were expecting a T-junction."

"We weren't," Martinez said. "But it shouldn't surprise us that the real ship deviates from the blueprint here and there. As long as we don't reach a dead-end, we can still keep moving towards the colonel."

"You want to flip a coin, or shall I do it?" Nicolosi said, looking back at us over his shoulder, his face picked out by my helmet light.

"There's no indication, no sign on the wall?"

"Blank either way."

"In which case take the left," Martinez said, before glancing at Norbert. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," the big man said. "Take left, then next right. Continue."

Nicolosi kicked off, and the rest of us followed. I kept an eye on my helmet's inertial compass, gratified when it detected our change of direction, even though the overlay now showed us moving through what should have been a solid wall.

We'd moved twenty or thirty metres when Nicolosi slowed again. "Tunnel bends to the right," he reported. "Looks like we're back on track. Everyone cool with this?"

“Cool,” I said.

But we'd only made another fifteen or twenty metres of progress back along the new course when Nicolosi slowed and called back again. “We're coming up on a heavy door; some kind of internal airlock. Looks like we're going to need Sollis again.”

“Let me through,” she said, and I squeezed aside so she could edge past me, trying to avoid knocking our suits together. In addition to the weapons she'd selected from the armoury, Sollis's suit was also hung with all manner of door-opening tools, clattering against each other as she moved. I didn't doubt that she'd be able to get through any kind of door, given time. But the idea of spending hours inside *Nightingale*, while we inched from one obstruction to the next, didn't exactly fill me with enthusiasm.

We let Sollis examine the door: we could hear her ruminating over the design, tutting, humming and talking softly under her breath. She had panels open and equipment plugged in, just like before. The same unwelcoming face glowered from an oval display.

After a couple of minutes Martinez sighed and spoke: “Is there a problem, Ingrid?”

“There's no problem. I can get this door open in about ten seconds. I just want to make damned sure this is another of *Nightingale's* dumb facets. That means sensing the electrical connections on either side of the frame. Of course, if you'd rather we just stormed on through...”

“Keep voice down,” Norbert rumbled.

“I'm wearing a spacesuit, dickhead.”

“Pressure outside. Sound travel, air to glass, glass to air.”

“You have five minutes,” Martinez said, decisively. “If you haven't found what you're looking for by then, we open the door anyway. And Norbert's right: let's keep the noise down.”

“So, no pressure then,” Sollis muttered.

But in three minutes she started unplugging her tools, and turned aside with a beaming look on her face. “It's just an emergency airlock, in case this part of the ship depressurizes. They must have decided to put it

in after the original blueprints were drawn up.”

“No danger that tripping it will alert the rest of *Nightingale*?” I asked.

“Can’t ever say there’s no risk, but I’m happy for us to go through.”

“Open the door,” Martinez said. “Everyone brace in case there’s vacuum or underpressure on the other side.”

We followed his instructions, but when the door opened the air remained as still as before. Beyond, picked out in our wavering lights, was a short stretch of corridor terminating in an identical-looking door. This time there was enough room for all of us to squeeze through, while Sollis attended to the second lock mechanism. Some hardwired system required that the first door be closed before the second one could be opened, but that posed us no real difficulties. Now that Sollis knew what to look for, she worked much faster: good at her job and happy for us all to know it. I didn’t doubt that she’d be even faster on the way out.

“We’re ready to go through, people. Indications say that the air’s just as cold on the other side, so keep your suits buttoned.”

I heard the click as one of us—maybe Nicolosi, maybe Norbert—released a safety catch. It was like someone coughing in a theatre. I had no choice but to reach down and arm my own weapon.

“Open it,” Martinez said quietly.

The door chugged wide. Our lights stabbed into dark emptiness beyond: a suggestion of a much deeper, wider space than I’d been expecting. Sollis leaned through the door frame, her helmet lamp catching fleeting details from reflective surfaces. I had a momentary flash of glassy things stretching away into infinite distance, then it was gone.

“Report, Ingrid,” Martinez said.

“I think we can get through. We’ve come out next to a wall, or floor, or whatever it is. There are handholds, railings. Looks like they lead on into the room, probably to the other side.”

“Stay where you are,” Nicolosi said, just ahead of me. “I’ll take point again.”

She glanced back and swallowed hard. “It’s OK, I can handle this

one. Can't let you have all the fun, can I?"

Nicolosi grunted something: I don't think he had much of a sense of humour. "You're welcome to my gun, you want it."

"I'm cool," she said, but with audible hesitation. I didn't blame her: it was different being point on a walk through a huge dark room, compared to a narrow corridor. Nothing could leap out and grab you from the side in a corridor.

She started moving along the crawlway.

"Nice and slowly, Ingrid," Martinez said, from behind me. "We still have time on our side."

"We're right behind you," I said, feeling she needed moral support.

"I'm fine, Dexia. No problems here. Just don't want to lose my handhold and go drifting off into fuck knows what..."

Her movements became rhythmic, moving into the chamber one careful handhold at a time. Nicolosi followed, with me right behind him. Apart from our movements, and the sound of our suit systems, the ship was still as silent as a crypt.

But it wasn't totally dark anymore.

Now that we were inside the chamber, it began to reveal its secrets in dim spots of pale light, reaching away into some indeterminate distance. The lights must have always been there; just too faint to notice until we were inside.

"Something's running," Sollis said.

"We knew that," Martinez said. "It was always clear that the ship was dormant, not dead."

I panned my helmet around and tried to get another look at the glassy things I'd glimpsed earlier. On either side of the railed walkway, stretching away in multiple ranks, were hundreds of transparent flasks. Each flask was the size of an oil drum, rounded on top, mounted on a steel-grey plinth equipped with controls, readouts and input sockets. There were three levels of them, with the second and third layers stacked above the first on a skeletal rack. Most of the plinths were dead, but maybe one in ten was

showing a lit-up readout.

“Oh, Jesus,” Sollis said, and I guess she’d seen what I’d just seen: that the flasks contained human organs, floating in a chemical green solution, wired up with fine nutrient lines and electrical cables. I was no anatomist, but I still recognized hearts, lungs, kidneys, snakelike coils of intestine. And there were things anyone would have recognized: things like eyeballs, dozens of them growing in a single vat, swaying on the long stalks of optic nerves, like some weird species of all-seeing sea anemone, things like hands, or entire limbs, or genitals, or the skin and muscle masks of eyeless faces. Every external body part came in dozens of different sizes, ranging from child-sized to adult, male and female, and despite the green suspension fluid one could make out subtle variations in skin tone and pigmentation.

“Easy, Ingrid,” I said, the words as much for my benefit as hers. “We always knew this was a hospital ship. It was just a matter of time before we ran into something like this.”

“This stuff...” Nicolosi said, his voice low. “Where does it come from?”

“Two main sources,” Martinez answered, sounding too calm for my liking. “Not everyone who came aboard *Nightingale* could be saved, obviously—the ship was no more capable of working miracles than any other hospital. Wherever practicable, the dead would donate intact body parts for future use. Useful, certainly, but such a resource could never have supplied the bulk of *Nightingale*’s surgical needs. For that reason the ship was also equipped to fabricate its own organ supplies, using well-established principles of stem-cell manipulation. The organ factories would have worked around the clock, keeping this library fully stocked.”

“It doesn’t look fully stocked now,” I said.

Martinez said: “We’re not in a war zone anymore. The ship is dormant. It has no need to maintain its usual surgical capacity.”

“So why is it maintaining any capacity? Why are some of these flasks still keeping their organs alive?”

“Waste not, want not, I suppose. A strategic reserve, against the day when the ship might be called into action again.”

“You think it’s just waiting to be reactivated?”

“It’s just a machine, Dexia. A machine on standby. Nothing to get nervous about.”

“No one’s nervous,” I said, but it came out all wrong, making me sound like I was the one who was spooked.

“Let’s get to the other side,” Nicolosi said.

“We’re halfway there,” Sollis reported. “I can see the far wall, sort of. Looks like there’s a door waiting for us.”

We kept on moving, hand over hand, mostly in silence. Surrounded by all those glass-cased body parts, I couldn’t help but think of the people many of them had once been part of. If these parts had belonged to me, I think I’d have chosen to haunt *Nightingale*, consumed with ill-directed, spiteful fury.

Not the right kind of thinking, I was just telling myself, when the flasks started moving.

We all stopped, anchoring ourselves to the nearest handhold. Two or three rows back from the railed crawlway, a row of flasks was gliding smoothly toward the far wall of the chamber. They were sliding in perfect, lock-step unison. When my heart started beating again, I realized that the entire row must be attached to some kind of conveyor system, hidden within the support framework.

“Nobody move,” Nicolosi said.

“This is not good,” Sollis kept saying. “This is not good. The damn ship isn’t supposed to know...”

“Quiet,” Martinez hissed. “Let me past you: I want to see where those flasks are going.”

“Careful,” Norbert said.

Paying no attention to the man, Martinez climbed ahead of the party. Quickly we followed him, doing our best not to make any noise or slip from the crawlway. The flasks continued their smooth, silent movement, until the conveyor system reached the far wall and turned through ninety degrees, taking the flasks away from us into a covered enclosure like a security scanner. Most of the flasks were empty, but as we watched, one of the

occupied, active units slid into the enclosure. I'd only had a moment to notice, but I thought I'd seen a forearm and hand, reaching up from the life-support plinth.

The conveyor system halted. For all was silent, then there came a series of mechanical clicks and whirrs. None of us could see what was happening inside the enclosure, but after a moment we didn't need to. It was obvious.

The conveyor came back on again, but running in reverse this time. The flask that had gone into the enclosure was now empty. I counted back to make sure I wasn't making a mistake, but there was no doubt. The forearm and hand had been removed from the flask. Already, I presumed, it was somewhere else in the ship.

The flasks travelled back—returning to what must have been their former positions—and then halted again. Save for the missing limb, the chamber was exactly as when we had entered it.

"I don't like this," Sollis said. "The ship was supposed to be dead."

"Dormant," Martinez corrected.

"You don't think the shit that just happened is in any way related to us being aboard? You don't think Jax just got a wake-up call?"

"If Jax were aware of our presence, we'd know it by now."

"I don't know how you can sound so calm."

"All that has happened, Ingrid, is that *Nightingale* has performed some trivial housekeeping duty. We have already seen that it maintains some organs in pre-surgical condition, and this is just one of its tissue libraries. It should hardly surprise us that the ship occasionally decides to move some of its stock from A to B."

She made a small, catlike snarl of frustration—I could tell she hadn't bought any of his explanations—and pulled herself hand over hand to the door.

"Any more shit like that happens, I'm out," she said.

"I'd think twice if I were you," Martinez said, "it's a hell of a long walk home."

I caught up with Sollis and touched her on the forearm. “I don’t like it either, Ingrid. But the man’s right. Jax doesn’t know we’re here. If he did, I think he’d do more than just move some flasks around.”

“I hope you’re right, Scarrow.”

“So do I,” I said under my breath.

We continued along the main axis of the ship, following a corridor much like the one we’d been traversing before the organ library. It swerved and jogged, then straightened out again. According to the inertial compasses we were still headed towards Jax, or at least the part of the ship where it appeared most likely we’d find him, alive or dead.

“What we were talking about earlier,” Sollis said, “I mean, much earlier—about how this ship never got destroyed at the end of the war after all...”

“I think I have stated my case, Ingrid. Dwelling on myths won’t bring a wanted man to justice.”

“We’re looking at about a million tonnes of salvageable spacecraft here. Gotta be worth something to someone. So why didn’t anyone get their hands on it after the war?”

“Because something bad happened,” Nicolosi said. “Maybe there was some truth in the story about that boarding party coming here and not leaving.”

“Oh, please,” Martinez said.

“So who was fighting back?” I asked. “Who was it who stopped them taking *Nightingale*?”

Nicolosi answered me. “The skeleton staff—security agents of the postmortals who financed this thing—maybe even the protective systems of the ship itself. If it thought it was under attack...”

“If there was some kind of firefight aboard this thing,” I asked, “where’s the damage?”

“I don’t care about the damage,” Sollis cut in. “I want to know what happened to all the bodies.”

* * * *

We came to another blocked double-door airlock. Sollis got to work on it immediately, but if I'd expected that she would work faster now that she had already opened several doors without trouble, I was wrong. She kept plugging things in, checking readouts, murmuring to herself just loud enough to carry over the voice link. *Nightingale's* face watched us disapprovingly, looking on like the portrait of a disappointed ancestor.

"This one could be trickier," she said. "I'm picking up active data links, running away from the frame."

"Meaning it could still be hooked into the nervous system?" Nicolosi asked.

"I can't rule it out."

Nicolosi ran a hand along the smooth black barrel of his plasma weapon. "We could double back, try a different route."

"We're not going back," Martinez said. "Not now. Open the door, Ingrid: we'll take our chances and move as quickly as we can from now on."

"You sure about this?" She had a cable pinched between her fingers. "No going back once I plug this in."

"Do it."

She pushed the line in. At the same moment a shiver of animation passed through *Nightingale's* face, the mask waking to life. The door spoke to us. Its tone was strident and metallic, but also possessed of an authoritative femininity.

"This is the Voice of *Nightingale*. You are attempting to access a secure area. Report to central administration to obtain proper clearance."

"Shit," Sollis said.

"You weren't expecting that?" I asked.

"I wasn't expecting an active facet. Maybe the sentience engine isn't powered down quite as far as I thought."

“This is the Voice of *Nightingale*,” the door said again. “You are attempting to access a secure area. Report to central administration to obtain proper clearance.”

“Can you still force it?” Nicolosi asked.

“Yeah... think so.” Sollis fumbled in another line, made some adjustments and stood back as the door slid open. “Voila.”

The face had turned silent and masklike again, but now I really felt that we were being watched; that the woman’s eyes seemed to be looking in all directions at once.

“You think Jax knows about us now?” I asked, as Sollis propelled herself into the holding chamber between the two sets of doors.

“I don’t know. Maybe I got to the door in time, before it sent an alert.”

“But you can’t be sure.”

“No.” She sounded wounded.

Sollis got to the work on the second door, faster now, urgency overruling caution. I checked that my gun was still where I’d left it, and then made sure that the safety catch was still off. Around me, the others went through similar preparatory rituals.

Gradually it dawned on me that Sollis was taking longer than expected. She turned from the door, with her equipment still hooked into its open service panel.

“Something’s screwed up,” she said, before swallowing hard. “These suits you’ve got us wearing, Tomas—how good are they, exactly?”

“Full-spectrum battle hardened. Why do you ask?”

“Because the door says that the ship’s flooded behind this point. It says we’ll be swimming through something.”

“I see,” Martinez said.

“Oh, no,” I said, shaking my head. “We’re not doing this. We’re not going underwater.”

“I can’t be sure it’s water, Dexia.” She tapped the readout panel, as if I’d have been able to make sense of the numbers and symbols. “Could be anything warm and wet, really.”

Martinez shrugged within his suit. “Could have been a containment leak—spillage into this part of the ship. It’s nothing to worry about. Our suits will cope easily, provided we do not delay.”

I looked him hard in the faceplate, meeting his eyes, making certain he couldn’t look away. “You’re sure about this? These suits aren’t going to stiff on us as soon as they get wet?”

“The suits will work. I am so certain that I will go first. When you hear that I am safe on the other side, you can all follow.”

“I don’t like this. What if Ingrid’s tools don’t work underwater?”

“We have no choice but to keep moving forward,” Martinez said. “If this section of the ship is flooded, we’ll run into it no matter which route we take. This is the only way.”

“Let’s do it,” I said. “If these suits made it through the war, I’m pretty sure they’ll get us through the next chamber.”

“It’s not the suits I’m worried about,” Nicolosi said, examining his weapon again. “No one mentioned... immersion... when we were in the armoury.”

I cupped a hand to my crude little slug gun. “I’ll swap you, we make it to the other side.”

Nicolosi didn’t say anything. I don’t think he saw the funny side.

Two minutes later we were inside, floating weightless in the unlit gloom of the flooded room. It felt like water, but it was hard to tell. Everything felt thick and sluggish when you were wearing a suit, even thin air. My biohazard detectors weren’t registering anything, but that didn’t necessarily mean the fluid was safe. The detectors were tuned to recognize a handful of toxins in common wartime use: they weren’t designed to sniff out every harmful agent that had ever existed.

Martinez’s voice buzzed in my helmet. “There are no handholds or guide wires. We’ll just have to swim in a straight direction, trusting to our inertial compasses. If we all stay within sight of each other, we should have

no difficulties.”

“Let’s get on with it,” Nicolosi said.

We started swimming as best as we could, Nicolosi leading, pushing himself forward with powerful strokes, his weapons dangling from their straps. It would have been hard and slow with just the suits to contend with, but we were all carrying armour as well. It made it difficult to see ahead; difficult to reach forward to get an effective stroke; difficult to kick the legs enough to make any useful contribution. Our helmet lamps struggled to illuminate more than ten or twenty metres in any direction, and the door by which we’d entered was soon lost in gloom. I felt a constricting sense of panic; the fear that if the compasses failed we might never find our way out again.

The compasses didn’t fail, though, and Nicolosi maintained his unfaltering pace. Two minutes into the swim he called: “I see the wall. It’s dead ahead of us.”

A couple of seconds later I saw it for myself, hoving out of the deep pink gloom. Any relief I might have felt was tempered by the observation that the wall appeared featureless, stretching away blankly in all illuminated directions.

“There’s no door,” I said.

“Maybe we’ve picked up some lateral drift,” Nicolosi said.

“Compass says no.”

“Then maybe the doors are offset. It doesn’t matter: we’ll find it by hitting the wall and spiralling out from our landing spot.”

“If there’s a door.”

“If there isn’t,” Nicolosi said, “we shoot our way out.”

“Glad you’ve thought this through,” I said, realizing that he was serious.

The wall came nearer. The closer we got, the more clearly it was picked out by our lamps, the more I realized there was something not quite right about it. It was still blank—lacking any struts or panels, apertures or pieces of shipboard equipment—but it wasn’t the seamless surface I’d

have expected from a massive sheet of prefabricated spacecraft material. There was an unsettling texture to it, with something of the fibrous quality of cheap paper. Faint lines coursed through it, slightly darker than the rest of the wall, but not arranged according to any neat geometric pattern. They curved and branched, and threw off fainter subsidiary lines, diminishing like the veins in a leaf.

In a nauseating flash I realized exactly what the wall was. When Nicolosi's palms touched the surface, it yielded like a trampoline, absorbing the momentum of his impact and then sending him back out again, until his motion was damped by the surrounding fluid.

"It's..." I began.

"Skin. I know. I realized just before I hit."

I arrested my motion, but not enough to avoid contacting the wall of skin. It yielded under me, stretching so much that I felt I was in danger of ripping my way right through. Then it held, and began to trampoline me back in the direction I'd come. Fighting a tide of revulsion, I pulled back into the liquid and floated amidst the others.

"Fuck," Sollis said. "This isn't right. There shouldn't be fucking skin..."

"Don't be alarmed," Martinez said, wheezing between each word. "This is just another form of organ library, like the room we already passed through. I believe the liquid we're swimming in must be a form of growth support medium—something like amniotic fluid. Under wartime conditions, this whole chamber would have been full of curtains of growing skin, measured by the acre."

Nicolosi groped for something on his belt, came up with a serrated blade that glinted nastily even in the pink fluid.

"I'm cutting through."

"No!" Martinez barked.

Sollis, who was next to Nicolosi, took hold of his forearm. "Easy, soldier. Got to be a better way."

"There is," Martinez said. "Put the knife away, please. We can go around the skin, find its edge."

Nicolosi still had the blade in his hand. "I'd rather take the short cut."

"There are nerve endings in that skin. Cut them and the monitoring apparatus will know about it. Then so will the ship."

"Maybe the ship already knows."

"We don't take that chance."

Reluctantly, Nicolosi returned the knife to his belt. "I thought we'd agreed to move fast from now on," he said.

"There's fast, and there's reckless," Sollis said. "You were about to cross the line."

Martinez brushed past me, already swimming to the left. I followed him, with the others tagging on behind. After less than a minute of hard progress a dark edge emerged into view. It was like a picture frame stretching tight the canvas of the skin. Beyond the edge, only just visible, was a wall of the chamber, fretted with massive geodesic reinforcing struts.

I allowed myself a moment of ease. We were still in danger, still in about the most claustrophobic situation I could imagine, but at least now the chamber didn't seem infinitely large.

Martinez braked himself by grabbing the frame. I came to rest next to him, and peered over the edge, towards what I hoped would be the wall we'd been heading towards all along. But instead of that I saw only another field of skin, stretched between another frame, spaced from ours by no more than the height of a man. In the murky distance was the suggestion of a third frame, and perhaps one beyond that as well.

"How many?" I asked as the others arrived on the frame, perching like crows.

"I don't know," Martinez said. "Four, five—anything up to a dozen, I'd guess. But it's OK. We can swim around the frames, then turn right and head back to where we'd expect to find the exit door." He raised his voice. "Everyone all right? No problems with your suits?"

"There are lights," Nicolosi said quietly.

We turned to look at him.

“I mean down there,” he added, nodding in the direction of the other sheets of skin. “I saw a flicker of something—a glow in the water, or amniotic fluid, or whatever the fuck this is.”

“I see light too,” Norbert said.

I looked down and saw that he was right; that Nicolosi had not been imagining it. A pale, trembling light was emerging between the next two layers of skin.

“Whatever that is, I don’t like it,” I said.

“Me neither,” Martinez said. “But if it’s something going on between the skin layers, it doesn’t have to concern us. We swim around, avoid them completely.”

He kicked off with surprising determination, and I followed quickly after him. The reverse side of the skin sheet was a fine mesh of pale support fibres, the structural matrix upon which the skin must have been grown and nourished. Thick black cables ran across the underside, arranged in circuit-like patterns.

The second sheet, the one immediately below the first, was of different pigmentation to the one above it. In all other respects it appeared similar, stretching unbroken into pink haze. The flickering, trembling light source was visible through flesh, silhouetting the veins and arteries at the moments when the light was brightest.

We passed under the second sheet, and peered into the gap between the second and third layers. Picked out in stuttering light was a tableau of furtive activity. Four squidlike robots were at work. Each machine consisted of a tapering, cone-shaped body, anchored to the skin by a cluster of whiplike arms emerging from the blunt end of the cone. The robots were engaged in precise surgery, removing a blanket-sized rectangle of skin by cutting it along four sides. The robots had their own illumination, shining from the ends of some of their arms, but the bright flashing light was coming from some kind of laser-like tool that each robot deployed on the end of a single segmented arm that was thicker than any of the others. I couldn’t tell whether the flashes were part of the cutting, or the instant healing that appeared to be taking place immediately afterwards. There was no bleeding, and the surrounding skin appeared unaffected.

“What are they doing?” I breathed.

“Harvesting,” Martinez answered. “What does it look like?”

“I know they’re harvesting. I mean, *why* are they doing it? What do they need that skin for?”

“I don’t know.”

“You had plenty of answers in the organ library, Mr. Martinez,” Sollis said. All five of us had slowed, hovering at the same level as the surgical robots. “For a ship that’s supposed to be dormant, I’m not seeing much fucking evidence of dormancy.”

“*Nightingale* grows skin here,” I said. “I can deal with that. The ship’s keeping a basic supply going, in case it gets called into another war. But that doesn’t explain why it needs to harvest it *now*.”

Martinez sounded vague. “Maybe it’s testing the skin—making sure it’s developing according to plan.”

“You’d think a little sample would be enough for that,” I said. “A lot less than several square metres, for sure. That’s enough skin to cover a whole person.”

“I really wish you hadn’t said that,” Nicolosi said.

“Let’s keep moving,” Martinez said. And he was right, too, I thought: the activity of the robots was deeply unsettling, but we hadn’t come here to sight-see.

As we swam away—with no sign that the robots had noticed us—I thought about what Ingrid Sollis had said before. About how it wasn’t clever to leave a gamma-level intelligence up and running without something to occupy itself. Because otherwise—because duty was so deeply hardwired into their logic pathways—they tended to go slowly, quietly, irrevocably insane.

But *Nightingale* had been alone out here since the end of the war. What did that mean for its controlling mind? Was the hospital running itself out here—reliving the duties of its former life, no matter how pointless they had become—because the mind had already gone mad, or was this the hospital’s last-ditch way of keeping itself sane?

And what, I wondered, did any of that have to do with the man we had

come here to find in the first place?

We kept swimming, passing layer upon layer of skin. Now and then we'd pass another surgical party: another group of robots engaged in skin harvesting. Where they'd already been, the flesh was excised in neat rectangles and strips, exposing the gauzelike mesh of the growth matrix. Occasionally I saw a patch that was half-healed already, with the skin growing back in rice-paper translucence. By the time it was fully repaired, I doubted that there'd be any sign of where the skin had been cut.

Ten layers, then twelve—and then finally the wall I'd been waiting for hove into view like a mirage. But I wasn't imagining it, nor seeing another layer of drum-tight skin. There was the same pattern of geodesic struts as I'd seen on the other wall.

Sollis came through. "Got a visual on the door, people. We're nearly out of here. I'm swimming ahead to start work."

"Good, Ingrid," Martinez called back.

A few seconds later I saw the airlock for myself, relieved that Sollis hadn't been mistaken. She swam quickly, then—even as she was gliding to a halt by the door—commenced unclipping tools and connectors from her belt. Through the darkening distance of the pink haze I watched her flip down the service panel and begin her usual systems-bypass procedure. I was glad Martinez had found Sollis. Whatever else one might say about her, she was pretty hot at getting through doors.

"OK, good news," she said, after a minute of plugging things in and out. "There's air on the other side. We're not going to have to swim in this stuff for much longer."

"How much longer?" Nicolosi asked.

"Can't risk a short circuit here, guy. Gotta take things one step at a time."

Just as she was saying that, I became aware that we were casting shadows against the wall; ones that we hadn't been casting when we arrived. I twisted around and looked back the way we'd just swum, in the direction of the new light source I knew had to be there. Four of the squid-like machines were approaching us, dragging a blanket of newly harvested skin between them, one robot grasping each corner between two segmented silver tentacles. They were moving faster than we could swim,

driven by some propulsion system jetting fluid from the sharp end of the cone.

Sollis jerked back as the outer airlock door opened suddenly.

“I didn’t...” she started.

“I know,” I said urgently. “The robots are coming. They must have sent a command to open the lock.”

“Let’s get out of the way,” Martinez said, kicking off from the wall. “Ingrid: get away from the lock. Take what you can, but don’t spend too long doing it.”

Sollis started unplugging her equipment, stowing it on her belt with fumbling fingers. The machines powered nearer, the blanket of skin undulating like a flying carpet. They slowed, then halted. Their lights pushed spears of harsh illumination through the fluid. They were looking at us, wondering what we were doing between them and the door. One of the machines directed its beam to Martinez’s swimming figure, attracted by the movement. Martinez slowed and hung frozen in the glare, like a moth pinned in a beam of sunlight.

None of us said a word. My own breathing was the loudest sound in the universe, but I couldn’t make it any quieter.

One of the machines let go of its corner of the skin. It hovered by the sheet for a moment, as if weighing its options. Then it singled me out and commenced its approach. As it neared, the machine appeared far larger and more threatening than I’d imagined. Its cone-shaped body was as long as me; its thickest tentacle appearing powerful enough to do serious damage even without the additional weapon of the laser. When it spread its arms wide, as if to embrace me, I had to fight not to panic and back away.

The robot started examining me. It began with my helmet, tap-tapping and scraping, shining its light through my visor. It applied twisting force, trying to disengage the helmet from the neck coupling. Whether it recognized me as a person or just a piece of unidentifiable floating debris, it appeared to think that dismantling was the best course of action. I told myself that I’d let it work at me for another few seconds, but as soon as I felt the helmet begin to loosen I’d have to act—even if that meant alerting the robot that I probably wasn’t debris.

But just when I’d decided as much, the robot abandoned my helmet

and worked its way south. It extended a pair of tentacles under my chest armour from each side, trying to lever it away like huge scab. Somehow I kept my nerve, daring to believe that the robot would sooner or later lose interest in me. Then it pulled away from the chest armour and started fiddling with my weapon, tap-tapping away like a spirit in a séance. It tugged on the gun, trying to unclip it. Then, as abruptly as it had started, the robot abandoned its investigation. It pulled away, gathering its tentacles into a fistlike bunch. Then it moved slowly in the direction of Nicolosi, tentacles groping ahead of it.

I willed him to stay still. There'd be no point in swimming. None of us could move faster than those robots. Nicolosi must have worked that out for himself, or else he was paralysed in fright, but he made no movements as the robot cruised up to him. It slowed, the spread of its tentacles widening, and then tracked its spotlight from head to toe, as if it still couldn't decide what Nicolosi was. Then it reached out a pair of manipulators and brushed their sharp-looking tips against his helmet. The machine probed and examined with surprising gentleness. I heard the metal-on-metal scrape through the voice link, backgrounded by Nicolosi's rapid, sawlike breathing.

Keep it together...

The machine reached his neck, examined the interface between helmet and torso assembly, and then worked its way down to his chest armour, extending a fine tentacle under the armour itself, to where the vulnerable life-support module lay concealed. Then, very slowly, it withdrew the tentacle.

The machine pulled back from Nicolosi, turning its blunt end away. It seemed to have completed its examination. The other three robots hovered watchfully with their prize of skin. Nicolosi sighed and eased his breathing.

"I think..." he whispered.

That was his big mistake. The machine righted itself, gathered its tentacles back into formation and began to approach him again, its powerful light sweeping up and down his body with renewed purpose. The second machine was nearing, clearly intent on assisting its partner in the examination of Nicolosi.

I looked at Sollis, our horrified faces meeting each other. "Can you get the door..." I started.

“Not a hope in hell.”

“Nicolosi,” I said, not bothering to whisper this time. “Stay still and maybe they’ll go away again.”

But he wasn’t going to stay still: not this time. Even as I watched, he was hooking a hand around the plasma rifle, bringing it around like a harpoon, its wide maw directed at the nearest machine.

“No!” Norbert shouted, his voice booming through the water like a depth charge. “Do not use! Not in here!”

But Nicolosi was beyond reasoned argument now. He had a weapon. Every cell in his body was screaming at him to use it.

So he did.

In one sense, it did all that he asked of it. The plasma discharge speared the robot like a sunbeam through a cloud. The robot came apart in a boiling eruption of steam and fire, with jagged black pieces riding the shockwave. Then the steam—the vaporized amniotic fluid—swallowed everything, including Nicolosi and his gun. Even inside my suit, the sound hit me like a hammerblow. He fired one more time, as if to make certain that he had destroyed the robot. By then the second machine was near enough to be flung back by the blast, but it quickly righted itself and continued its progress.

“More,” Norbert said, and when I looked back up the stack of skin sheets, I saw what he meant. Robots were arriving in ones and twos, abandoning their cutting work to investigate whatever had just happened here.

“We’re in trouble,” I said.

The steam cloud was breaking up, revealing the floating form of Nicolosi, with the ruined stump of his weapon drifting away from him. The second time he fired it, something must have gone badly wrong with the plasma rifle. I wasn’t even sure that Nicolosi was still alive.

“I take door,” Norbert said, drawing his Demarchist weapon. “You take robots.”

“You’re going to shoot us out, after what happened to Nicolosi?” I asked.

“No choice,” he said, as the gun unpacked itself in his hand.

Martinez pushed himself across to the big man. “No. Give it to me instead. I’ll take care of the door.”

“Too dangerous,” Norbert said.

“Give it to me.”

Norbert hesitated, and for a moment I thought he was going to put up a fight. Then he calmly passed the Demarchist weapon to Martinez and accepted Martinez’s weapon in return; the little slug gun vanishing into his vast gauntleted hand. Whatever respect I’d had for Norbert vanished at the same time. If he was supposed to be protecting Martinez, that was no way to go about it.

Of the three of us, only Norbert and I were carrying projectile weapons. I unclipped my second pistol and passed it to Sollis. She took it gratefully, needing little persuasion to keep her energy weapon glued to her belt. The robots were easy to kill, provided we let them get close enough for a clean shot. I didn’t doubt that the surgical cutting gear was capable of inflicting harm, but we never gave them the opportunity to touch us. Not that the machines appeared to have deliberately hostile designs on us anyway. They were still behaving as if they were investigating some shipboard malfunction that required remedial action. They might have killed us, but it would only have been because they did not understand what we were.

We didn’t have an inexhaustible supply of slugs, though, and manual reloading was not an option underwater. Just when I began to worry that we’d be overwhelmed by sheer numbers, Martinez’s voice boomed through my helmet.

“I’m ready to shoot now. Follow me as soon as I’m through the second door.”

The Demarchist weapon discharged, lighting up the entire chamber in an eyeblink of murky detail. There was another discharge, then a third.

“Martinez,” I said. “Speak to me.”

After too long a delay, he came through. “I’m still here. Through the first door. Weapon’s cycling...”

More robots were swarming above us, tentacles lashing like whips. I wondered how long it would take before signals reached *Nightingale's* sentience engine and the ship realized that it was dealing with more than just a local malfunction.

"Why doesn't he shoot?" Sollis asked, squeezing off one controlled slug after another.

"Sporting weapon. Three shots, recharge cycle, three shots," Norbert said, by way of explanation. "No rapid-fire mode. But work good underwater."

"We could use those next three shots," I said.

Martinez buzzed in my ear. "Ready. I will discharge until the weapon is dry. I suggest you start swimming now."

I looked at Nicolosi's drifting form, which was still as inert as when he had emerged from the steam cloud caused by his own weapon. "I think he's dead..." I said softly. "But we should still—"

"No," Norbert said, almost angrily. "Leave him."

"Maybe he's just unconscious."

Martinez fired three times; three brief bright strobe flashes. "Through!" I heard him call, but there was something wrong with his voice. I knew then that he'd been hurt as well, although I couldn't guess at how badly.

Norbert and Sollis fired two last shots at the robots that were still approaching, then kicked past me in the direction of the airlock. I looked at Nicolosi's drifting form, knowing that I'd never be able to live with myself if I didn't try to get him out of there. I clipped my gun back to my belt and started swimming for him.

"No!" Norbert shouted again, when he'd seen my intentions. "Leave him! Too late!"

I reached Nicolosi and locked my right arm around his neck, pulling his head against my chest. I kicked for all I was worth, trying to pull myself forward with my free arm. I still couldn't tell if Nicolosi was dead or alive.

"Leave him, Scarrow! Too late!"

“I can’t leave him!” I shouted back, my voice ragged.

Three robots were bearing down on me and my cargo, their tentacles groping ahead of them. I squinted against the glare from their lights and tried to focus on getting the two of us to safety. Every kick of my legs, every awkward swing of my arm, seemed to tap the last drop of energy in my muscles. Finally I had nothing more to give.

I loosened my arm. His body corkscrewed slowly around, and through his visor I saw his face: pale, sweat-beaded, locked into a rictus of fear, but not dead, nor even unconscious. His eyes were wide open. He knew exactly what was going to happen when I let him go.

I had no choice.

A strong arm hooked itself under my helmet, and began to tug me out of harm’s way. I watched as Nicolosi drifted towards the robots, and then closed my eyes as they wrapped their tentacles around his body and started probing him for points of weakness, like children trying to tear the wrapping from a present.

Norbert’s voice boomed through the water. “He’s dead.”

“He was alive. I saw it.”

“He’s dead. End of story.”

* * * *

I pulled myself through a curtain of trembling pink water. Air pressure in the corridor contained the amniotic fluid, even though Martinez had blown a man-sized hole in each airlock door. Ruptured metal folded back in jagged black petals. Ahead, caught in a moving pool of light from their helmet lamps, Sollis and Martinez made awkward, crabwise progress away from the ruined door. Sollis was supporting Martinez, doing most of the work for him. Even in zero gravity, it took effort to haul another body.

“Help her,” Norbert said faintly, shaking his weapon to loosen the last of the pink bubbles from its metal. Without waiting for a reaction from me, he turned and started shooting back into the water, dealing with the remaining robots.

I caught up with Sollis and took some of her burden. All along the

corridor, panels were flashing bright red, synchronized to the banshee wail of an emergency siren. About once every ten metres, the ship's persona spoke from the wall; multiple voices blurring into an agitated chorus. "Attention. Attention," the faces said. "This is the Voice of *Nightingale*. An incident has been detected in culture bay three. Damage assessment and mitigation systems have now been tasked. Partial evacuation of the affected ship area may be necessary. Please stand by for further instructions. Attention. Attention..."

"What's up with Martinez?"

"Took some shrapnel when he put a hole in that door." She indicated a severe dent in his chest armour, to the left of the sternum. "Didn't puncture the suit, but I'm pretty sure it did some damage. Broken rib, maybe even a collapsed lung. He was talking for a while back there, but he's out cold now."

"Without Martinez, we don't have a mission."

"I didn't say he was dead. His suit still seems to be ticking over. Maybe we could leave him here, collect him on the way back."

"With all those robots crawling about the place? How long do you think they'd leave him alone?"

I looked back, checking on Norbert. He was firing less frequently now, dealing with the last few stragglers still intent on investigating the damage. Finally he stopped, loaded a fresh clip into his slug gun, and then after waiting for ten or twenty seconds turned from the wall of water. He began to make his way towards us.

"Maybe there aren't going to be any more robots."

"There will," Norbert said, joining us. "Many more. Nowhere safe, now. Ship on full alert. *Nightingale* coming alive."

"Maybe we should scrub," I said. "We've lost Nicolosi... Martinez is incapacitated... we're no longer at anything like necessary strength to take down Jax."

"We still take Jax," Norbert said. "Came for him, leave with him."

"Then what about Martinez?"

He looked at the injured man, his face set like a granite carving. “He stay,” he said.

“But you already said the robots—“

“No other choice. He stay.” And then Norbert brought himself closer to Martinez and tucked a thick finger under the chin of the old man’s helmet, tilting the faceplate up. “Wake!” he bellowed.

When there was no response, Norbert reached behind Martinez’s chest armour and found the release buckles. He passed the dented plate to me, then slid down the access panel on the front of Martinez’s tabard pack, itself dented and cracked from the shrapnel impact. He scooped out a fistful of pink water, flinging the bubble away from us, then started making manual adjustments to the suit’s life-support settings. Biomedical data patterns shifted, accompanied by warning flashes in red.

“What are you doing?” I breathed. When he didn’t hear me, I shouted the question.

“He need stay awake. This help.”

Martinez coughed red sputum onto the inside of his faceplate. He gulped in hard, then made rapid eye contact with the three of us. Norbert pushed the loaded slug gun into Martinez’s hand, then slipped a fresh ammo clip onto the old man’s belt. He pointed down the corridor, to the blasted door, then indicated the direction we’d all be heading when we abandoned Martinez.

“We come back,” he said. “You stay alive.”

Sollis’s teeth flashed behind her faceplate. “This isn’t right. We should be carrying him—anything other than just leaving him here.”

“Tell them,” Martinez wheezed.

“No.”

“Tell them, you fool! They’ll never trust you unless you tell them.”

“Tell them what?” I asked.

Norbert looked at me with heavy lidded eyes. “The old man... not Martinez. His name... Quinlan.”

“Then who the fuck is Martinez?” Sollis asked.

“I,” Norbert said.

I glanced at Sollis, then back at the big man. “Don’t be silly,” I said gently, wondering what must have happened to him in the flooded chamber.

“I am Quinlan,” the old man said, between racking coughs. “He was always the master. I was just the servant, the decoy.”

“They’re both insane,” Sollis said.

“This is the truth. I acted the role of Martinez—deflected attention from him.”

“He can’t be Martinez,” Sollis said. “Sorry, Norbert, but you can barely put a sentence together, let alone a prosecution dossier.”

Norbert tapped a huge finger against the side of his helmet. “Damage to speech centre, in war. Comprehension... memory... analytic faculties... intact.”

“He’s telling the truth,” the old man said. “He’s the one who needs to survive, not me. He’s the one who can nail Jax.” Then he tapped the gun against the big man’s leg, urging him to leave. “Go,” he said, barking out that one word like it was the last thing he expected to say. And at almost the same moment, I saw one of the tentacled robots begin to poke its limbs through the curtain of water, tick-ticking the tips of its arms against the blasted metal, searching for a way into the corridor.

“Think the man has a point,” Sollis said.

* * * *

It didn’t get any easier from that point on.

We left the old man—I still couldn’t think of him as “Quinlan”—slumped against the corridor wall, the barrel of his gun wavering in the rough direction of the ruined airlock. I looked back all the while, willing him to make the best use of the limited number of shots he had left. We were halfway to the next airlock when he squeezed off three rapid rounds, blasting the robot to twitching pieces. It wasn’t long before another set of tentacles began to probe the gap. I wondered how many of the damned

things the ship was going to keep throwing at us, and how that number stacked up against the slugs the old man had left.

The flashing red lights ran all the way to the end of the corridor. I was just looking at the door, wondering how easy it was going to be for Sollis to crack, when Norbert/Martinez brought the three of us to a halt, braking my momentum with one tree-like forearm.

“Blast visor down, Scarrow.”

I understood what he had in mind. No more sweet-talking the doors until they opened for us. From now on we were shooting our way through *Nightingale*.

Norbert/Martinez aimed the Demarchist weapon at the airlock. I cuffed down my blast visor. Three discharges took out the first airlock door, crumpling it inward as if punched by a giant fist.

“Air on other side,” Norbert/Martinez said.

The Demarchist gun was ready again. Through the visor’s near-opaque screen I saw three flashes. When I flipped it back up, the weapon was packing itself back into its stowed configuration. Sollis patted aside smoke and airborne debris. The emergency lights were still flashing in our section of corridor, but the space beyond the airlock was as pitch dark as any part of the ship we’d already traversed. Yet we’d barely taken a step into that darkness when wall facets lit up in swift sequence, with the face of *Nightingale* looking at us from all directions.

Something was wrong now. The faces really were looking at us, even though the facets were flat. The images turned slowly as we advanced down the corridor.

“This is the Voice of *Nightingale*,” she said, as if we were being addressed by a perfectly synchronized choir. “I am now addressing a moving party of three individuals. My systems have determined with a high statistical likelihood that this party is responsible for the damage I have recently sustained. The damage is containable, but I cannot tolerate any deeper intrusion. Please remain stationary and await an escort to a safe holding area.”

Sollis slowed, but she didn’t stop. “Who’s speaking? Are we being addressed by the sentience engine, or just a delta-level subsidiary?”

“This is the Voice of *Nightingale*. I am a Turing-compliant gamma-level intelligence of the Vaaler-Lako series. Please stop, and await escort to a safe holding area.”

“That’s the sentience engine,” Sollis said quietly. “It means we’re getting the ship’s full attention now.”

“Maybe we can talk it into handing over Jax.”

“I don’t know. Negotiating with this thing might be tricky. Vaaler-Lakos were supposed to be the hot new thing around the time *Nightingale* was put together, but they didn’t quite work out that way.”

“What happened?”

“There was a flaw in their architecture. Within a few years of start-up, most of them had gone bugfuck insane. I don’t even want to think about what being stuck out here’s done to this one.”

“Please stop,” the voice said again, “and await escort to a safe holding area. This is your final warning.”

“Ask it…” Norbert/Martinez said. “Speak for me.”

“Can you hear me, ship?” Sollis asked. “We’re not here to do any harm. We’re sorry about the damage we caused already. It’s just that we’ve come for someone. There’s a man here, a man aboard you, that we’d really like to meet.”

The ship said nothing for several moments. Just when I’d concluded that it didn’t understand us, it said: “This facility is no longer operational. There is no one here for you to see. Please await escort to a safe holding area, from where you can be referred to a functioning facility.”

“We’ve come for Colonel Jax,” I said. “Check your patient records.”

“Admission code Tango Tango six one three, hyphen five,” said Norbert/Martinez, forcing each word out like an expression of pain. “Colonel Brandon Jax, Northern Coalition.”

“Do you have a record of that admission?” I asked.

“Yes,” the Voice of *Nightingale* replied. “I have a record for Colonel Jax.”

“Do you have a discharge record?”

“No such record is on file.”

“Then Jax either died in your care, or he’s still aboard. Either way there’ll be a body. We’d really like to see it.”

“That is not possible. You will stop now. An escort is on its way to escort you to a safe holding area.”

“Why can’t we see Jax?” Sollis demanded. “Is he telling you we can’t see him? If so he’s not the man you should be listening to. He’s a war criminal, a murderous bastard who deserves to die.”

“Colonel Jax is under the care of this facility. He is still receiving treatment. It is not possible to visit him at this time.”

“Damn thing’s changing its story,” I said. “A minute ago it said the facility was closed.”

“We just want to talk to him,” Sollis said. “That’s all. Just to let him know the world knows where he is, even if you don’t let us take him with us now.”

“Please remain calm. The escort is about to arrive.”

The facets turned to look away from us, peering into the dark limits of the corridor. There was a sudden bustle of approaching movement, and then a wall of machines came squirming towards us. Dozens of squid-robots were nearing, packed so tightly together that their tentacles formed a flailing mass of silver-blue metal. I looked back the other way, back the way we’d come, and saw another wave of robots coming from that direction. There were far more machines than we’d seen before, and their movements in dry air were at least as fast and fluid as they’d been underwater.

“Ship,” Sollis said, “all we want is Jax. We’re prepared to fight for him. That’ll mean more damage being inflicted on you. But if you give us Jax, we’ll leave nicely.”

“I don’t think it wants to bargain,” I said, raising my slug gun at the advancing wall just as it reached the ruined airlock. I squeezed off rounds, taking out at least one robot with each slug. Sollis started pitching in to my

left, while Norbert/Martinez took care of the other direction with the Demarchist weapon. He could do a lot more damage with each discharge, taking out three or four machines every time he squeezed the trigger. But he kept having to wait for the weapon to re-arm itself, and the delay was allowing the wall to creep slowly forward. Sollis and I were firing almost constantly, taking turns to cover each other while we slipped in new slugs clips or ammo cells, but our wall was gaining on us as well. No matter how many robots we destroyed, no gap ever appeared in the advancing wave. There must have been hundreds of them, squeezing us in from both directions.

“We’re not going to make it,” I said, sounding resigned even to myself. “There’s too many of them. Maybe if we still had Nicolosi’s rifle, we could shoot our way out.”

“I didn’t come all this way just to surrender to a haunted hospital,” Sollis said, replacing an ammo cell. “If it means going out fighting... so be it.”

The nearest robots were now only six or seven metres away, with the tips of their tentacles probing even nearer. She kept pumping shots into them, but they kept coming closer, flinging aside the hot debris of their damaged companions. There was no possibility of falling back any farther, for we were almost back to back with Norbert/Martinez.

“Maybe we should just stop,” I said. “This is a hospital. It’s programmed to heal people. The last thing it’ll want to do is hurt us.”

“Feel free to put that to the test,” Sollis said.

Norbert/Martinez squeezed off the last discharge before his weapon went back into recharge mode. Sollis was still firing. I reached over and tried to pass him my gun, so he’d at least have something to use while waiting for his weapon to power up. But the machines had already seen their moment. The closest one flicked out a tentacle and wrapped it around the big man’s foot. Everything happened very quickly, then. The machine hauled Norbert/Martinez towards the flailing mass, until he fell within reach of another set of tentacles. They had him, then. He cartwheeled his arms, trying to reach for handholds on the walls, but there was no possibility of that. The robots flicked the Demarchist weapon from his grip, and then took the weapon with them. Norbert/Martinez screamed as his legs, and then his upper body, vanished into the wall of machines. They smothered him completely. For a moment we could still hear his breathing—he’d stopped screaming, as if knowing it would make no difference—and then there was

absolute silence, as if the carrier signal from his suit had been abruptly terminated.

Then, a moment later, the machines were on Sollis and me.

* * * *

I woke. The fact that I was still alive—not just alive but comfortable and lucid—hit like me like a mild electric shock, one that snapped me into instant and slightly resentful alertness. I'd been enjoying unconsciousness. I remembered the robots, how I'd felt them trying to get into my suit, the sharp cold nick as something pierced skin, and then an instant later the painless bliss of sleep. I'd expected to die, but as the drug hit my brain, it erased all trace of fear.

But I wasn't dead. I wasn't even injured, so far as I could tell. I'd been divested of my suit, but I was now reclining in relative comfort on a bed or mattress, under a clean white sheet. My own weight was pressing me down onto the mattress, so I must have been moved into the ship's reactivated centrifuge section. I felt tired and bruised, but other than that I was in no worse shape than when we'd boarded *Nightingale*. I remembered what I'd told Sollis during our last stand: how the hospital ship wouldn't want to do us harm. Maybe there'd been more than just wishful thinking in that statement.

There was no sign of Sollis or Norbert/Martinez, though. I was alone in a private recovery cubicle, surrounded by white walls. I remembered coming around in a room like this during my first visit to *Nightingale*. The wall on my right contained a white-rimmed door and a series of discrete hatches, behind which I knew lurked medical monitoring and resuscitation equipment, none of which had been deemed necessary in my case. A control panel was connected to the side of the bed by a flexible stalk, within easy reach of my right hand. Via the touchpads on the panel I was able to adjust the cubicle's environmental settings and request services from the hospital, ranging from food and drink, washing and toilet amenities, to additional drug dosages.

Given the semi-dormant state of the ship, I wondered how much of it was still online. I touched one of the pads, causing the white walls to melt away and take on the holographic semblance of a calming beach scene, with ocean breakers crashing onto powdery white sand under a sky etched with sunset fire. Palm trees nodded in a soothing breeze. I didn't care about the view, though. I wanted something to drink—my throat was raw—and then I wanted to know what had happened to the others and how long we were going to be detained. Because, like it or not, being a patient aboard a

facility like *Nightingale* wasn't very different to being a prisoner. Until the hospital deemed you fit and well, you were going nowhere.

But when I touched the other pads, nothing happened. Either the room was malfunctioning, or it had been programmed to ignore my requests. I made a move to ease myself off the bed, wincing as my bruised limbs registered their disapproval. But the clean white sheet stiffened to resist my efforts, hardening until it felt as rigid as armour. As soon as I pulled back, the sheet relinquished its hold. I was free to move around on the bed, to sit up and reach for things, but the sheet would not allow me to leave the bed itself.

Movement caught my eye, far beyond the foot of the bed. A figure walked towards me, strolling along the holographic shoreline. She was dressed almost entirely in black, with a skirt that reached all the way to the sand, heavy fabric barely moving as she approached. She wore a white bonnet over black hair parted exactly in the middle, a white collar and a jewelled clasp at her throat. Her face was instantly recognizable as the Voice of *Nightingale*, but now it appeared softer, more human.

She stepped from the wall and appeared to stand at the foot of my bed. She looked at me for a moment before speaking, her expression one of gentle concern.

"I knew you'd come, given time."

"How are the others? Are they OK?"

"If you are speaking of the two who were with you before you lost consciousness, they are both well. The other two required more serious medical intervention, but they are now both stable."

"I thought Nicolosi and Quinlan were dead."

"Then you underestimate my abilities. I am only sorry that they came to harm. Despite my best efforts, there is a necessary degree of autonomy among my machines that sometimes results in them acting foolishly."

There was a kindness there that had been entirely absent from the display facets. For the first time I had the impression of an actual mind lurking behind the machine-generated mask. I sensed that it was a mind capable of compassion and complexity of thought.

"We didn't intend to hurt you," I said. "I'm sorry about any damage we

caused, but we only ever wanted Jax, your patient. He committed serious crimes. He needs to be brought back to Sky's Edge, to face justice."

"Is that why you risked so much? In the interests of justice?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Then you must be very brave and selfless. Or was justice only part of your motivation?"

"Jax is a bad man. All you have to do is hand him over."

"I cannot let you take Jax. He remains my patient."

I shook my head. "He was your patient, when he came aboard. But that was during the war. We have a record of his injuries. They were serious, but not life-threatening. Given your resources, it shouldn't have been too hard for you to put him back together again. There's no question of Jax still needing your care."

"Shouldn't I be the judge of that?"

"No. It's simple: either Jax died under your care, or he's well enough to face trial. Did he die?"

"No. His injuries were, as you note, not life-threatening."

"Then he's either alive, or you've got him frozen. Either way, you can hand him over. Nicolosi knows how to thaw him out, if that's what you're worried about."

"There is no need to thaw Colonel Jax. He is alive and conscious, except when I permit him to sleep."

"Then there's even less reason not to hand him over."

"I'm afraid there is every reason in the world. Please forget about Colonel Jax. I will not relinquish him from my care."

"Not good enough, ship."

"You are in my care now. As you have already discovered, I will not permit you to leave against my will. But I will allow you to depart if you renounce your intentions concerning Colonel Jax."

“You’re a gamma-level persona,” I said. “To all intents and purposes you have human intelligence. That means you’re capable of reasoned negotiation.”

The Voice of *Nightingale* cocked her head, as if listening to a faraway tune. “Continue.”

“We came to arrest Colonel Jax. Failing that, we came to find physical proof of his presence aboard this facility. A blood sample, a tissue scraping: something we can take back to the planetary authorities and alert them to his presence here. We won’t get paid as much for that, but at least they can send out a heavier ship and take him by force. But there’s another option, too. If you let us off this ship without even showing us the colonel, there’s nothing to stop us planting a few limpet mines on your hull and blowing you to pieces.”

The Voice’s face registered disapproval. “So now you resort to threats of physical violence.”

“I’m not threatening anything: just pointing out the options. I know you care about self-preservation: it’s wired deep into your architecture.”

“I would be advised to kill you now, in that case.”

“That wouldn’t work. Do you think Martinez kept your coordinates to himself? He always knew this was a risky extraction. He’d have made damn sure another party knew about your whereabouts, and who you were likely to be sheltering. If we don’t make it back, someone will come in our place. And you can bet they’ll bring their own limpet mines as well.”

“In which case I would gain nothing by letting you go, either.”

“No, you’ll get to stay alive. Just give us Jax, and we’ll leave you alone. I don’t know what it is you’re doing out here, what it is that keeps you sane, but really, it’s your business, not ours. We just want the colonel.”

The ship’s persona regarded me with narrowed, playful eyes. I had the impression she was thinking things through very carefully indeed, examining my proposition from every conceivable angle.

“It would be that simple?”

“Absolutely. We take the man, we say good-bye and you never hear

from us again.”

“I’ve invested a lot of time and energy in the colonel. I would find it difficult to part company with him.”

“You’re a resourceful persona. I’m sure you’d find other ways to occupy your time.”

“It isn’t about occupying my time, Dexia.” She’d spoken my name for the first time. Of course she knew me: it would only have taken a blood or tissue sample to establish that I’d already been aboard the ship. “It’s about making my feelings felt,” she continued. “Something happened to me around Sky’s Edge. Call it a moment of clarity. I saw the horrors of war for what they were. I also saw my part in the self-perpetuation of those horrors. I had to do something about that. Removing myself from the sphere of operation was one thing, but I knew there was more that I could do. Thankfully, the colonel gave me the key. Through him, I saw a path to redemption.”

“You didn’t have to redeem yourself,” I said. “You were a force for good, *Nightingale*. You healed people.”

“Only so that they could go back to war. Only so that they could be blown apart and sent back to me for more healing.”

“You had no choice. It was what you were made to do.”

“Precisely.”

“The war’s over. It’s time to forget about what happened. That’s why it’s so important to bring Jax back home, so that we can start burying the past.”

The Voice studied me with a level, clinical eye. It was as if she knew something unspeakable about my condition, some truth I was as yet too weak to bear.

“What would be the likely sentence, were Jax to be tried?”

“He’d get the death penalty, no question about it. Crucifixion. Hung from the Bridge, like Sky Haussmann.”

“Would you mourn him?”

“Hell, no. I’d be cheering with the rest of them.”

“Then you would agree that his death is inevitable, one way or the other.”

“I guess so.”

“Then I will make a counter-proposition. I will not permit you to take Jax alive. But I will allow you an audience with him. You shall meet and speak with the colonel.”

Wary of a trap, I asked: “Then what happens?”

“Once the audience is complete, I will remove the colonel from life support. He will die shortly afterwards.”

“If you’re willing to let him die... why not just hand him over?”

“He can’t be handed over. Not anymore. He would die.”

“Why not?”

“Because of what I have done to him.”

Fatigue tugged at me, fogging my earlier clarity of thought. On one level I just wanted to get out of the ship, with no additional complications. I’d expected to die, when the hospital sent its machines against us. Yet as glad as I was not to find myself dead, as tempted as I was to take the easier option and just leave, I couldn’t ignore the prize that was now so close at hand.

“I need to talk to the others.”

“No, Dexia. This must be your decision, and yours alone.”

“Have you put the same proposition to them?”

“Yes. I told them they could leave now, or they could meet the colonel.”

“What did they say?”

“I’d rather hear what you have to say first.”

“I’m guessing they had the same reaction I did. There’s got to be a catch somewhere.”

“There is no catch. If you leave now, you will have the personal satisfaction of knowing that you have at least located the colonel, and that he remains alive. Of course that information may not be worth very much to you, but you would always have the option of returning, should you still wish to bring him to justice. On the other hand, you can see the colonel now—see him and speak with him—and leave knowing he is dead. I will allow you to witness the withdrawal of his life support, and I will even let you take his head with you. That should be worth more than the mere knowledge of his existence.”

“There’s a catch. I know there’s a catch.”

“I assure you there isn’t.”

“We all get to leave? You’re not going to turn around and demand that one of us takes the colonel’s place?”

“No. You will all be allowed to leave.”

“In one piece?”

“In one piece.”

“All right,” I said, knowing the choice wasn’t going to get any easier no matter how many times I reconsidered it. “I can’t speak for the others—and I guess this has to be a majority decision—but I’m ready to see the sonofabitch.”

* * * *

I was allowed to leave the room, but not the bed. The sheet tightened against me again, pressing me against the mattress as the bed tilted to the vertical. Two squid-robots entered the room and detached the bed from its mountings, and then carried it between them. I was glued to it like a figure on a playing card. The robots propelled me forward in an effortless glide, silent save for the soft metallic scratch of their tentacles where they engaged the wall or the floor.

The Voice of *Nightingale* addressed me from the bedside panel, a small image of her face appearing above the touchpads.

“It’s not far now, Dexia. I hope you won’t regret your decision.”

“What about the others?”

“You’ll be joining them. Then you can all go home.”

“Are you saying we all made the same decision, to see the colonel?”

“Yes,” the Voice said.

The robots carried me out of the centrifuge section, into what I judged to be the forward part of the ship. The sheet relinquished its hold on me slightly, just enough so that I was able to move under it. Presently, after passing through a series of airlocks, I was brought to a very dark room.

Without being able to see anything, I sensed that this was as large as any pressurized space we’d yet entered, save for the skin cultivation chamber. The air was as moist and blood-warm as the inside of a tropical greenhouse.

“I thought you said the others would be here.”

“They’ll arrive shortly,” the Voice said. “They’ve already met the colonel.”

“There hasn’t been time.”

“They met the colonel when you were still asleep, Dexia. You were the last to be revived. Now, would you like to speak to the man himself?”

I steeled myself. “Yes.”

“Here he is.”

A beam of light stabbed across the room, illuminating a face that I recognized instantly. Surrounded by blackness, Jax’s face appeared to hover as if detached from his body. Time had done nothing to soften those pugnacious features; the cruel set of that heavy jaw. Yet his eyes were closed, and his face lolled at a slight angle, as if he remained unaware of the beam.

“Wake up,” the Voice of *Nightingale* said, louder than I’d heard her so far. “Wake up, Colonel Jax!”

The colonel woke. He opened his eyes, blinked twice against the glare, then held a steady gaze. He tilted his head to meet the beam, projecting his jaw forward at a challenging angle.

“You have another visitor, Colonel. Would you like me to introduce her?”

His mouth opened. Saliva drooled out. From out of the darkness, a hand descended down from above the colonel’s face to wipe his chin dry. Something about the way the hand came in was terribly, terribly wrong. Jax saw my reaction and let out a soft, nasty chuckle. That was when I realized that the colonel was completely, irrevocably insane.

“Her name is Dexia Scarrow. She’s part of the same party you’ve already met.”

Jax spoke. His voice was too loud, as if it was being fed through an amplifier. There was something huge and wet about it. It was like hearing the voice of a whale.

“You a soldier, girl?”

“I was a soldier, Colonel. But the war’s over now. I’m a civilian.”

“Goody for you. What brought you here, girly girl?”

“I came to bring you to justice. I came to take you back to the war crimes court on Sky’s Edge.”

“Maybe you should have come a little sooner.”

“I’ll settle for seeing you die. I understand that’s an option.”

Something I’d said made the colonel smile. “Has the ship told you the deal yet?”

“The ship told me it wasn’t letting you out of here alive. It promised us your head.”

“Then I guess it didn’t get into specifics.” He cocked his head away from me, as if talking to someone standing to my left. “Bring up the lights, *Nightingale*: she may as well know what she’s dealing with.”

“Are you sure, Colonel?” the ship said back.

“Bring up the lights. She’s ready.”

The ship brought up the lights.

I wasn’t ready.

For a moment I couldn’t process what I was seeing. My brain just couldn’t cope with the reality of what the ship had done to Colonel Jax, despite the evidence of my eyes. I kept staring at him, waiting for the picture before me to start making sense. I kept waiting for the instant when I’d realize I was being fooled by the play of shadows and light, like a child being scared by a random monster in the folds of a curtain. But the instant didn’t come. The thing before me was all that it appeared to be.

Colonel Jax extended in all directions: a quivering expanse of patchwork flesh, of which his head was simply one insignificant component; one hill in a mountain range. He was spread out across the far wall, grafted to it in the form of a vast breathing mosaic. He must have been twenty metres wide, edged in a crinkled circular border of toughened flesh. Under his head was a thick neck, merging into the upper half of an armless torso. I could see the faint scars where the arms had been detached. Below the slow-heaving ribcage, the torso flared out like the melted base of a candle. Another torso rose from the flesh two metres to the colonel’s right. It had no head, but it did have an arm. A second torso loomed over him from behind, equipped with a pair of arms, one of which must have cleaned the colonel’s chin. Farther away, emerging from the pool of flesh at odd, arbitrary angles, were other living body parts. A torso here; a pair of legs there; a hip or shoulder there. The torsos were all breathing, though not in perfect synchronization. When they were not engaged in some purposeful activity, such as wiping Jax’s chin, the limbs twitched and palsied. The skin between them was an irregular mosaic, formed from many ill-matched pieces that had been fused together. In places it was drum-tight, pulled taut over hidden armatures of bone and gristle. In other places it heaved like a stormy sea. It gurgled with hidden digestive processes.

“You see now why I’m not coming with you,” Colonel Jax said. “Not unless you brought a much bigger ship. Even then, I’m not sure you’d be able to keep me alive very long without *Nightingale*’s assistance.”

“You’re a fucking monstrosity.”

“I’m no oil painting, that’s a fact.” Jax tilted his head, as if a thought had just struck him. “I am a work of art, though, wouldn’t you agree, girly

girl?”

“If you say so.”

“The ship certainly thinks so—don’t you, *Nightingale*? She made me what I am. It’s her artistic vision shining through. The bitch.”

“You’re insane.”

“Very probably. Do you honestly think you could take one day of this and not go mad? Oh, I’m mad enough, I’ll grant you that. But I’m still sane compared to the ship. Around here, she’s the imperial fucking yardstick for insanity.”

“Sollis was right, then. Leave a sentience engine like that all alone, and it’ll eat itself from the inside out.”

“Maybe so. Thing is, it wasn’t solitude that did it. *Nightingale* turned insane long before it ever got out here. And you know what did it? That little war we had ourselves down on Sky’s Edge. They built this ship and put the mind of an angel inside it. A mind dedicated to healing, compassion, kindness. So what if it was a damned machine? It was still designed to care for us, selflessly, day after day. And it turned out to be damned good at its job, too. For a while, at least.”

“Then you know what happened.”

“The ship drove itself mad. Two conflicting impulses pushed a wedge through its sanity. It was meant to treat us, to make us well again, to alleviate our pain. But every time it did its job, we got sent back down to the theatre of battle and ripped apart again. The ship took our pain away only so that we could feel it again. It began to feel as if it was complicit in that process: a willing cog in a greater machine whose only purpose was the manufacture of agony. In the end, it decided it didn’t much like being that cog.”

“So it took off. What happened to all the other patients?”

“It killed them. Euthanized them painlessly, rather than have them sent back down to battle. To *Nightingale*, that was the kinder thing to do.”

“And the technical staff who were aboard, and the men who were sent to reclaim the ship when it went out of control?”

“They were euthanized as well. I don’t think *Nightingale* took any pleasure in that, but it saw their deaths as a necessary evil. Above all else, it wouldn’t allow itself to be returned to use as a military hospital.”

“Yet it didn’t kill you.”

A dry tongue flicked across Jax’s lips. “It was going to. Then it delved deeper into its patient records and realized just who I was. At that point it began to have other ideas.”

“Such as?”

“The ship was smart enough to realize that the bigger problem wasn’t its existence—they could always build other hospital ships—but the war itself. War itself. So it decided to do something about it. Something positive. Something constructive.”

“Which would be?”

“You’re looking at it, kid. I’m the war memorial. When *Nightingale* started doing this to me—making me what I am—it had in mind that I’d become a vast artistic statement in flesh. *Nightingale* would reveal me to the world when it was finished. The horror of what I am would shame the world into peace. I’d be the living, breathing equivalent of Picasso’s *Guernica*. I’m an illustration in flesh of what war does to human beings.”

“The war’s over. We don’t need a memorial.”

“Maybe you can explain that to the ship. Trouble is, I don’t think it really believes the war is over. You can’t blame it, can you? It has access to the same history files we do. It knows that not all ceasefires stay that way.”

“What was it intending to do? Return to Sky’s Edge with you aboard?”

“Exactly that. Problem is, the ship isn’t done. I know I may look finished, but *Nightingale*—well, she has this perfectionist streak. She’s always changing her mind. Can’t ever seem to get me quite right. Keeps swapping pieces around, cutting pieces away, growing new parts and stitching them in. All the while she has to make sure I don’t die on her. That’s where her real genius comes in. She’s Michelangelo with a scalpel.”

“You almost sound proud of what she’s done to you.”

“Would you rather I screamed? I can scream if you like. It’s just that it gets old after a while.”

“You’re way too far gone, Jax. I was wrong about the war crimes court. They’ll throw your case out on grounds of insanity.”

“That would have been a shame. I’d have loved to have seen their faces when they wheeled me into the witness box. But I’m not going to court, am I? Ship’s laid it all out for me. She’s pulling the plug.”

“So she says.”

“You don’t sound as if you believe it.”

“I can’t see her abandoning you, after all the effort she’s gone to.”

“She’s an artist. They act on whims. Maybe if I was ready, maybe if she thought she’d done all she could with me—but that’s not the way she feels. I think she felt she was getting close three or four years ago—but then she had a change of heart, a major one, and tore out almost everything. Now I’m an unfinished work. She couldn’t bear to see me exhibited in this state. She’d rather rip up the canvas and start again.”

“With you?”

“No, I think she’s more or less exhausted my possibilities. Especially now that she’s seen the chance to do something completely different; something that will let her take her message a lot closer to home. That, of course, is where you come in.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“That’s what the others said as well.” Again, he cocked his head to one side. “Hey, ship! Maybe it’s time you showed her what the deal is, don’t you think?”

“If you are ready, Colonel,” the Voice of *Nightingale* said.

“I’m ready. Dexia’s ready. Why don’t you bring on the dessert?”

Colonel Jax looked to the right, straining his neck. Beyond Jax’s border, a circular door opened in part of the wall. Light rammed through the opening. Something floated in silhouette, held in suspension by three or four squid robots. The floating thing was dark, rounded, irregular. It looked

like half a dozen pieces of dough balled together. I couldn't make out what it was.

Then the robots pushed it into the chamber, and I saw, and then I screamed.

"It's time for you to join your friends now," the ship said.

* * * *

That was three months ago. It feels like an eternity, until we remember being held down on the surgical bed, while the machines emerged and prepared to work on us, and then it feels like everything happened only a terror-filled moment ago.

We made it safely back to Sky's Edge. The return journey was arduous, as one might expect given our circumstances. But the shuttle had little difficulty in flying itself back into a capture orbit, and once it fell within range it emitted a distress signal that brought it to the attention of the planetary authorities. We were off-loaded and taken to a secure orbital holding facility, where we were examined and our story subjected to what limited verification was actually possible. Dexia had bluffed the Voice of *Nightingale* when she told the ship that Martinez was certain to have told someone else of the coordinates of the hospital ship. It turned out that he hadn't told a soul, too wary of alerting Jax's allies. The Ultras who had found the ship in the first place were now a fifth of a light-year away, and falling farther from Sky's Edge with every passing hour. It would be decades, or longer, before they returned this way.

All the same, we don't think anyone seriously doubted our story. As outlandish as it was, no one could suggest a more likely alternative. We did have the head of Colonel Brandon Jax, or at least a duplicate that passed all available genetic and physiological tests. And we had clearly been to a place that specialized in extremely advanced surgery, of a kind that simply wasn't possible in and around Sky's Edge. That was the problem, though. The planet's best surgeons had examined us with great thoroughness, each eager to advance their own prestige by undoing the work of *Nightingale*. But all had quailed, fearful of doing more harm than good. No separation of Siamese twins could compare in complexity and risk with the procedure that would be necessary to unknot the living puzzle *Nightingale* had made of us. None of the surgeons was willing to bet on the survival of more than a single one of us, and even the odds weren't overwhelming. That pact we'd made with ourselves was that we would only consent to the operation if the vote was unanimous.

At massive expense (not ours, for by then we were the subject of considerable philanthropy) a second craft was sent out to snoop the coordinates where we'd left the hospital ship. She had the best military scanning gear money could buy. But she found nothing out there but ice and dust.

From that, we were free to draw two possible conclusions. Either *Nightingale* had destroyed herself soon after our departure, or she had moved somewhere else to avoid being found again. We couldn't say which alternative pleased us less. At least if we'd known the ship was gone for good, we could have resigned ourselves to the surgeons, mhowever risky that might have been. But if the ship was hiding itself, there was always the possibility that someone might find it again. And then somehow persuade it to undo us.

But perhaps *Nightingale* will need no persuasion, when she decides the time is right. It seems to us that the ship will return one day, of her own volition. She will make orbit around Sky's Edge and announce that the time has come for us to be separated. *Nightingale* will have decided that we have served our purpose, that we have walked the world long enough. Perhaps by then she will have some other memorial in mind. Or she will conclude that her message has finally been taken to heart, and that no further action is needed. That, we think, will depend on how the ceasefire holds.

It's in our interests, then, to make sure the planet doesn't slip back into war. We want the ship to return and heal us. None of us like things this way, despite what you may have read or heard. Yes, we're famous. Yes, we're the subject of a worldwide outpouring of sympathy and goodwill. Yes, we can have almost anything we want. None of that compensates, though. Not even for a second.

It's hard on all of us, but especially so for Martinez. We've all long since stopped thinking of the big man as Norbert. He's the one who has to carry us everywhere: more than twice his own bodyweight. *Nightingale* thought of that, of course, and she made sure that our own hearts and respiratory systems take some of the burden off Martinez. But it's still his spine bending under this load; still his legs that have to support us. The doctors who've examined us say his condition is good; that he can continue to play his part for years to come—but they're not talking about forever. And when Martinez dies, so will the rest of us. In the meantime we just keep hoping that *Nightingale* will come sooner than that.

You've seen us up close now. You'll have seen photographs and moving images before, but nothing really compares with seeing us in the flesh. We make quite a spectacle, don't we? A great tottering tree of flesh, an insult to symmetry. You've heard us speak, all of us, individually. You know by now how we feel about the war. All of us played our part in it to some degree, some more than others. Some of us were even enemies. Now the very idea that we might have hated each other—hated that which we depend on for life itself—lies beyond all comprehension. If *Nightingale* sought to create a walking argument for the continuation of the ceasefire, then she surely succeeded.

We are sorry if some of you will go home with nightmares tonight. We can't help that. In fact, if truth be told, we're not sorry at all. Nightmares are what we're all about. It's the nightmare of us that will stop this planet falling back into war.

If you have trouble sleeping tonight, spare us a thought.

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