

Turquoise Days

‘Set sail in those Turquoise Days’

Echo and the Bunnymen

ONE

Naqi Okpik waited until her sister was safely asleep before she stepped onto the railed balcony that circled the gondola.

It was the most perfectly warm and still summer night in months. Even the breeze caused by the airship's motion was warmer than usual, as soft against her cheek as the breath of an attentive lover. Above, yet hidden by the black curve of the vacuum-bag, the two moons were nearly at their fullest. Microscopic creatures sparkled a hundred metres under the airship, great schools of them daubing galaxies against the profound black of the sea. Spirals, flukes and arms of luminescence wheeled and coiled as if in thrall to secret music.

Naqi looked to the rear, where the airship's ceramic-jacketed sensor pod carved a twinkling furrow. Pinks and rubies and furious greens sparkled in the wake. Occasionally they darted from point to point with the nervous motion of kingfishers. As ever, she was alert to anything unusual in movements of the messenger sprites, anything that might merit a note in the latest circular, or even a full-blown article in one of the major journals of Juggler studies. But there was nothing odd happening tonight, no yet-to-be catalogued forms or behaviour patterns, nothing that might indicate more significant Pattern Juggler activity.

She walked around the airship's balcony until she had reached the stern, where the submersible sensor pod was tethered by a long fibre-optic dragline. Naqi pulled a long hinged stick from her pocket, flicked it open in the manner of a courtesan's fan and then waved it close to the winch assembly. The default watercoloured lilies and sea serpents melted away, replaced by tables of numbers, sinuous graphs and trembling histograms. A glance established that there was nothing surprising here either, but the data would still form a useful calibration set for other experiments.

As she closed the fan -- delicately, for it was worth almost as much as the airship itself -- Naqi reminded herself that it was a day since she had gathered the last batch of incoming messages. Rot had taken out the connection between the antenna and the gondola during the last expedition, and since then collecting the messages had become a chore, to be taken in turns or traded for less tedious tasks.

Naqi gripped a handrail and swung out behind the airship. Here the vacuum-bag overhung the gondola by only a metre, and a grilled ladder allowed her to climb around the overhang unravel and scramble onto the flat top of the bag. She moved gingerly, bare feet against rusting rungs, doing her best not to disturb Mina. The airship rocked and creaked a little as she found her balance on the top and then was again silent and still. The churning of its motors was so quiet that Naqi had long ago filtered the sound from her experience.

All was calm, beautifully so.

In the moonlight the antenna was a single dark flower rising from the broad back of the bladder. Naqi started moving along the railed catwalk that led to it, steadying herself as she went but feeling much less vertigo than would have been the case in daylight.

Then she froze, certain that she was being watched.

Just within Naqi's peripheral vision appeared a messenger sprite. It had flown to the height of the airship and was now sprite. It had flown to the height of the airship and was now shadowing it from a distance of ten or twelve metres. Naqi gasped, delighted and unnerved at the same time. Apart from dead specimens this was the first time Naqi had ever seen a sprite this close. The organism had

the approximate size and morphology of a terrestrial hummingbird, yet it glowed like a lantern. Naqi recognised it immediately as a long-range packet carrier. Its belly would be stuffed with data coded into tightly packed wads of RNA, locked within microscopic protein capsomeres. The packet carrier's head was a smooth teardrop, patterned with luminous pastel markings, but lacking any other detail save for two black eyes positioned above the midline. Inside the head was a cluster of neurones, which encoded the positions of the brightest circumpolar stars. Other than that, sprites had only the most rudimentary kind of intelligence. They existed to shift information between nodal points in the ocean when the usual chemical signalling pathways were deemed too slow or imprecise. The sprite would die when it reached its destination, consumed by microscopic organisms that would unravel and process the information stored in the capsomeres.

And yet Naqi had the acute impression that it was watching her: not just the airship, but *her*, with a kind of watchful curiosity that made the hairs on the back of her neck bristle. And then -- just at the point when the feeling of scrutiny had become unsettling -- the sprite whipped sharply away from the airship. Naqi watched it descend back towards the ocean and then coast above the surface, bobbing now and then like a skipping stone. She remained still for several more minutes, convinced that something of significance had happened, though aware too of how subjective the experience had been; how unimpressive it would seem if she tried to explain it to Mina tomorrow. Anyway, Mina was the one with the special bond with the ocean, wasn't she? Mina was the one who scratched her arms at night; Mina was the one who had too high a conformal index to be allowed into the swimmer corps. It was always Mina.

It was never Naqi.

The antenna's metre-wide dish was anchored to a squat plinth inset with weatherproofed controls and readouts. It was century-old *Pelican* technology, like the airship and the fan. Many of the controls and displays were dead, but the unit was still able to lock onto the functioning satellites. Naqi flicked open the fan and copied the latest feeds into the fan's remaining memory. Then she knelt down next to the plinth, propped the fan on her knees and sifted through the messages and news summaries of the last day. A handful of reports had arrived from friends in Prachuap-Pangnirtung and Umingmaktok snowflake cities, another from an old boyfriend in the swimmer corps station on Narathiwat atoll. He had sent her a list of jokes that were already in wide circulation. She scrolled down the list, grimacing more than grinning, before finally managing a half-hearted chuckle at one that had previously escaped her. Then there were a dozen digests from various special interest groups related to the Jugglers, along with a request from a journal editor that she critique a paper. Naqi skimmed the paper's abstract and thought that she was probably capable of reviewing it.

She checked through the remaining messages. There was a note from Dr Sivaraksa saying that her formal application to work on the Moat project had been received and was now under consideration. There had been no official interview, but Naqi had met Sivaraksa a few weeks earlier when both of them happened to be in Umingmaktok. Sivaraksa had been in an encouraging mood during the meeting, though Naqi couldn't say whether that was because she'd given a good impression or because Sivaraksa had just had his tapeworm swapped for a nice new one. But Sivaraksa's message said she could expect to hear the result in a day or two. Naqi wondered idly how she would break the news to Mina if she was offered the job. Mina was critical of the whole idea of the Moat and would probably take a dim view of her sister having anything to do with it.

Scrolling down further, she read another message from a scientist in Qaanaaq requesting access to some calibration data she had obtained earlier in the summer. Then there were four or five automatic weather advisories, drafts of two papers she was contributing to, and an invitation to attend the amicable divorce of Kugluktuk and Gjoa, scheduled to take place in three weeks' time. Following that there was a summary of the latest worldwide news -- an unusually bulky file -- and then there was nothing. No further messages had arrived for eight hours.

There was nothing particularly unusual about that -- the ailing network was always going down -- but for the second time that night the back of Naqi's neck tingled. Something *must* have happened, she thought.

She opened the news summary and started reading. Five minutes later she was waking Mina.

'I don't think I want to believe it,' Mina Okpik said.

Naqi scanned the heavens, dredging childhood knowledge of the stars. With some minor adjustment to allow for parallax, the old constellations were still more or less valid when seen from Turquoise.

'That's it, I think.'

'What?' Mina said, still sleepy.

Naqi waved her hand at a vague area of the sky, pinned between Scorpius and Hercules. 'Ophiuchus. If our eyes were sensitive enough, we'd be able to see it now: a little prick of blue light.'

'I've had enough of little pricks for one lifetime,' Mina said tucking her arms around her knees. Her hair was the same pure black as Naqi's, but trimmed into a severe, spiked crop which made her look younger or older depending on the light. She wore black shorts and a shirt that left her arms bare. Luminous tattoos in emerald and indigo spiralled around the piebald marks of random fungal invasion that covered her arms, thighs, neck and cheeks. The fullness of the moons caused the fungal patterns to glow a little themselves, shimmering with the same emerald and indigo hues. Naqi had no tattoos and scarcely any fungal patterns of her own; she couldn't help but feel slightly envious of her sister's adornments.

Mina continued, 'But seriously, you don't think it might be a mistake?'

'I don't think so, no. See what it says there? They detected it weeks ago, but they kept quiet until now so that they could make more measurements.'

'I'm surprised there wasn't a rumour.'

Naqi nodded. 'They kept the lid on it pretty well. Which doesn't mean there isn't going to be a lot of trouble.'

'Mm. And they think this blackout is going to help?'

'My guess is official traffic's still getting through. They just don't want the rest of us clogging up the network with endless speculation.'

'Can't blame us for that, can we? I mean, everyone's going to be guessing, aren't they?'

'Maybe they'll announce themselves before very long,' Naqi said doubtfully.

While they had been speaking the airship had passed into a zone of the sea largely devoid of bioluminescent surface life. Such zones were almost as common as the nodal regions where the network was thickest, like the gaping voids between clusters of galaxies. The wake of the sensor pod was almost impossible to pick out, and the darkness around them was absolute, relieved only by the occasional mindless errand of a solitary messenger sprite.

Mina said: 'And if they don't?'

'Then I guess we're all in a lot more trouble than we'd like.'

For the first time in a century a ship was approaching Turquoise, commencing its deceleration from interstellar cruise speed. The flare of the lighthugger's exhaust was pointed straight at the Turquoise system. Measurement of the Doppler shift of the flame showed that the vessel was still two years out, but that was hardly any time at all on Turquoise. The ship had yet to announce itself, but even if it turned out to have nothing but benign intentions -- a short trade stopover, perhaps -- the effect on Turquoise society would be incalculable. Everyone knew of the troubles that had followed the arrival of *Pelican in Impiety*. When the Ultras moved into orbit there had been much unrest below. Spies had undermined lucrative trade deals. Cities had jockeyed for prestige, competing for technological tidbits. There had been hasty marriages and equally hasty separations. A century later, old enmities smouldered just beneath the surface of cordial intercity politics.

It wouldn't be any better this time.

'Look,' Mina said, 'it doesn't have to be all that bad. They might not even want to talk to us. Didn't a ship pass through the system about seventy years ago without so much as a by-your-leave?'

Naqi agreed; it was mentioned in a sidebar to one of the main articles. 'They had engine trouble, or something. But the experts say there's no sign of anything like that this time.'

'So they've come to trade. What have we got to offer them that we didn't have last time?'

'Not much, I suppose.'

Mina nodded knowingly. 'A few works of art that probably won't travel very well. Ten-hour-long nose-flute symphonies, anyone?' She pulled a face. 'That's supposedly my culture, and even I can't stand it. What else? A handful of discoveries about the Jugglers, which have more than likely been replicated elsewhere a dozen times. Technology, medicine? Forget it.'

'They must think we have something worth coming here for,' Naqi said. 'Whatever it is, we'll just have to wait and see, won't we? It's only two years.'

'I expect you think that's quite a long time,' Mina said.

'Actually----'

Mina froze.

'Look!'

Something whipped past in the night, far below, then a handful of them; then a dozen, and then a whole bright squadron. Messenger sprites, Naqi realised -- but she had never seen so many of them moving at once, and on what was so evidently the same errand. Against the darkness of the ocean the lights were mesmerising: curling and weaving, swapping positions and occasionally veering far from the main pack before arcing back towards the swarm. Once again one of the sprites climbed to the altitude of the airship, loitering for a few moments on fanning wings before whipping off to rejoin the others. The swarm receded, becoming a tight ball of fireflies, and then only a pale globular smudge. Naqi watched until she was certain that the last sprite had vanished into the night.

'Wow,' Mina said quietly.

'Have you ever seen anything like that?'

'Never.'

'Bit funny that it should happen tonight, wouldn't you say?'

'Don't be silly,' Mina said. 'The Jugglers can't possibly know about the ship.'

'We don't know that for sure. Most people heard about this ship hours ago. That's more than enough time for someone to have swum.'

Mina conceded her younger sister's point. 'Still, information flow isn't usually that clear-cut. The Jugglers store patterns, but they seldom show any sign of comprehending actual content. We're dealing with a mindless biological archiving system, a museum without a curator.'

'That's one view.'

Mina shrugged. 'I'd love to be proved otherwise.'

'Well, do you think we should try following them? I know we can't track sprites over any distance, but we might be able to keep up for a few hours before we drain the batteries.'

'We wouldn't learn much.'

'We won't know until we've tried,' Naqi said, gritting her teeth. 'Come on -- it's got to be worth a go, hasn't it? I reckon that swarm moved a bit slower than a single sprite. We'd at least have enough for a report, wouldn't we?'

Mina shook her head. 'All we'd have is a single observation with a little bit of speculation thrown in. You know we can't publish that sort of thing. And anyway, assuming that sprite swarm did have something to do with the ship, there are going to be hundreds of similar sightings tonight.'

'I just thought it might take our minds off the news.'

'Perhaps it would. But it would also make us unforgivably late for our target.' Mina dropped the tone of her voice, making an obvious effort to sound reasonable. 'Look, I understand your curiosity. I feel it as well. But the chances are it was either a statistical fluke or part of a global event everyone else will have had a much better chance to study. Either way we can't contribute anything useful, so

we might as well just forget about it.' She rubbed at the marks on her forearm, tracing the Paisley-patterned barbs and whorls of glowing colouration. 'And I'm tired, and we have several busy days ahead of us. I think we just need to put this one down to experience, all right?'

'Fine,' Naqi said.

'I'm sorry, but I just know we'd be wasting our time.'

'I said fine.' Naqi stood up and steadied herself on the railing that traversed the length of the airship's back.

'Where are you going?'

'To sleep. Like you said, we've got a busy day coming up. We'd be fools to waste time chasing a fluke, wouldn't we?'

An hour after dawn they crossed out of the dead zone. The sea below began to thicken with floating life, becoming soupy and torpid. A kilometre or so further in and the soup showed ominous signs of structure: a blue-green stew of ropy strands and wide, kelp-like plates. They suggested the floating, half-digested entrails of embattled sea monsters.

Within another kilometre the floating life had become a dense vegetative raft, stinking of brine and rotting cabbage. Within another kilometre of that the raft had thickened to the point where the underlying sea was only intermittently visible. The air above the raft was humid, hot and pungent with microscopic irritants. The raft itself was possessed of a curiously beguiling motion, bobbing and writhing and gyring according to the ebb and flow of weirdly localised current systems. It was as if many invisible spoons were stirring a great bowl of spinach. Even the shadow of the airship, pushed far ahead of it by the low sun, had some influence on the movement of the material. The Pattern Juggler biomass scurried and squirmed to evade the track of the shadow, and the peculiar purposefulness of the motion reminded Naqi of an octopus she had seen in the terrestrial habitats aquarium on Umingmaktok, squeezing its way through impossibly small gaps in the glass prison of its tank.

Presently they arrived at the precise centre of the circular raft. It spread away from them in all directions, hemmed by a distant ribbon of sparkling sea. It felt as if the airship had come to rest above an island, as fixed and ancient as any geological feature. The island even had a sort of geography: humps and ridges and depressions sculpted into the cloying texture of layered biomass. But there were few islands on Turquoise, especially at this latitude, and the Juggler node was only a few days old. Satellites had detected its growth a week earlier, and Mina and Naqi had been sent to investigate. They were under strict instructions simply to hover above the island and deploy a handful of tethered sensors. If the node showed any signs of being unusual, a more experienced team would be sent out from Umingmaktok by high-speed dirigible. Most nodes dispersed within twenty to thirty days, so there was always a need for some urgency. They might even send trained swimmers, eager to dive into the sea and open their minds to alien communion. Ready -- as they called it -- to *ken* the ocean.

But first things first: chances were this node would turn out to be interesting rather than exceptional.

'Morning,' Mina said when Naqi approached her. Mina was swabbing the sensor pod she had reeled in earlier, collecting the green mucus that had adhered to its ceramic teardrop. All human artefacts eventually succumbed to biological attack from the ocean, although ceramics were the most resilient.

'You're cheerful,' Naqi said, trying to make the statement sound matter-of-fact rather than judgmental.

'Aren't you? It's not everyone gets a chance to study a node up this close. Make the most of it, sis. The news we got last night doesn't change what we have to do today.'

Naqi scraped the back of her hand across her nose. Now that the airship was above the node she was breathing vast numbers of aerial organisms into her lungs with each breath. The smell was

redolent of ammonia and decomposing vegetation. It required an intense effort of will not to keep rubbing her eyes rawer than they already were. 'Do you see anything unusual?'

'Bit early to say.'

'So that's a "no", then.'

'You can't learn much without probes, Naqi.' Mina dipped a swab into a collection bag, squeezing tight the plastic seal. Then she dropped the bag into a bucket between her feet. 'Oh, wait. I saw another of those swarms, after you'd gone to sleep.'

'I thought you were the one complaining about being tired.'

Mina dug out a fresh swab and rubbed vigorously at a deep olive smear on the side of the sensor. 'I picked up my messages, that's all. Tried again this morning, but the blackout still hasn't been lifted. I picked up a few short-wave radio signals from the closest cities, but they were just transmitting a recorded message from the Snowflake Council: stay tuned and don't panic.'

'So let's hope we don't find anything significant here,' Naqi said, 'because we won't be able to report it if we do.'

'They're bound to lift the blackout soon. In the meantime I think we have enough measurements to keep us busy. Did you find that spiral sweep programme in the airship's avionics box?'

'I haven't looked for it,' Naqi said, certain that Mina had never mentioned such a thing before. 'But I'm sure I can programme something from scratch in a few minutes.'

'Well, let's not waste any more time than necessary. Here.' Smiling, she offered Naqi the swab, its tip laden with green slime. 'You take over this and I'll go and dig out the programme.'

Naqi took the swab after a moment's delay.

'Of course. Prioritise tasks according to ability, right?'

'That's not what I meant,' Mina said soothingly. 'Look, let's not argue, shall we? We were best friends until last night. I just thought it would be quicker...' She trailed off and shrugged. 'You know what I mean. I know you blame me for not letting us follow the sprites, but we had no choice but to come here. Understand that, will you? Under any other circumstances----'

'I understand,' Naqi said, realising as she did how sullen and childlike she sounded; how much she was playing the petulant younger sister. The worst of it was that she knew Mina was right. At dawn it all looked much clearer.

'Do you? Really?'

Naqi nodded, feeling the perverse euphoria that came with an admission of defeat. 'Yes. Really. We'd have been wrong to chase them.'

Mina sighed. 'I was tempted, you know. I just didn't want you to see how tempted I was, or else you'd have found a way to convince me.'

'I'm that persuasive?'

'Don't underestimate yourself, sis. I know I never would.' Mina paused and took back the swab. 'I'll finish this. Can you handle the sweep programme?'

Naqi smiled. She felt better now. The tension between them would still take a little while to dissipate, but at least things were easier now. Mina was right about something else: they were best friends, not just sisters.

'I'll handle it,' Naqi said.

Naqi stepped through the hermetic curtain into the air-conditioned cool of the gondola. She closed the door, rubbed her eyes and then sat down at the navigator's station. The airship had flown itself automatically from Umingmaktok, adjusting its course to take cunning advantage of jet streams and weather fronts. Now it was in hovering mode: once or twice a minute the electrically driven motors purred, stabilising the craft against gusts of wind generated by the microclimate above the Juggler node. Naqi called up the current avionics programme, a menu of options appearing on a flat screen. The options quivered; Naqi thumped the screen with the back of her hand until the display behaved itself. Then she scrolled down through the other flight sequences, but there was no preprogramme

spiral loaded into the current avionics suite. Naqi rummaged around in the background files, but there was nothing to help her there either. She was about to start hacking something together -- at a push it would take her half an hour to assemble a routine -- when she remembered that she had once backed up some earlier avionics files onto the fan. She had no idea if they were still there, or even if there was anything useful amongst the cache, but it was probably worth taking the time to find out. The fan lay closed on a bench; Mina must have left it there after she had verified that the blackout was still in force.

Naqi grabbed the fan and spread it open across her lap. To her surprise, it was still active: instead of the usual watercolour patterns the display showed the messages she had been scrolling through earlier.

She looked closer and frowned. These were not her messages at all. She was looking at the messages Mina had copied onto the fan during the night. Naqi felt an immediate prickle of guilt: she should snap the fan shut, or at the very least close her sister's mail and move into her own area of the fan. But she did neither of those things. Telling herself that it was only what anyone else would have done, she accessed the final message in the list and examined its incoming time-stamp. To within a few minutes, it had arrived at the same time as the final message Naqi had received.

Mina had been telling the truth when she said that the blackout was continuing.

Naqi glanced up. Through the window of the gondola she could see the back of her sister's head, bobbing up and down as she checked winches along the side.

Naqi looked at the body of the message. It was nothing remarkable, just an automated circular from one of the Juggler special-interest groups. Something about neurotransmitter chemistry.

She exited the circular, getting back to the list of incoming messages. She told herself that she had done nothing shameful so far. If she closed Mina's mail now, she would have nothing to feel really guilty about.

But a name she recognised jumped out at her from the list of messages: Dr Jotah Sivaraksa, manager of the Moat project. The man she had met in Umingmaktok, glowing with renewed vitality after his yearly worm change. What could Mina possibly want with Sivaraksa?

She opened the message, read it.

It was exactly what she had feared, and yet not dared to believe.

Sivaraksa was responding to Mina's request to work on the Moat. The tone of the message was conversational, in stark contrast to the businesslike response Naqi had received. Sivaraksa informed her sister that her request had been appraised favourably, and that while there were still one or two other candidates to be considered, Mina had so far emerged as the most convincing applicant. Even if this turned out not to be the case, Sivaraksa continued -- and that was not very likely -- Mina's name would be at the top of the list when further vacancies became available. In short, she was more or less guaranteed a chance to work on the Moat within the year.

Naqi read the message again, just in case there was some highly subtle detail that threw the entire thing into a different, more benign light.

Then she snapped shut the fan with a sense of profound fury. She placed it back where it was, exactly as it had been.

Mina pushed her head through the hermetic curtain.

'How's it coming along!'

'Fine,' Naqi said. Her voice sounded drained of emotion even to herself. She felt stunned and mute. Mina would call her a hypocrite were she to object to her sister having applied for exactly the same job she had... but there was more to it than that. Naqi had never been as openly critical of the Moat project as her sister. By contrast, Mina had never missed a chance to denounce both the project and the personalities behind it.

Now that was real hypocrisy.

'Got that routine cobbled together?'

'Coming along,' Naqi said.

'Something the matter?'

'No,' Naqi forced a smile, 'no. Just working through the details. Have it ready in a few minutes.'

'Good. Can't wait to start the sweep. We're going to get some beautiful data, sis. And I think this is going to be a significant node. Maybe the largest this season. Aren't you glad it came our way!'

'Thrilled,' Naqi said, before returning to her work.

Thirty specialised probes hung on telemetric cables from the underside of the gondola, dangling like the venom-tipped stingers of some grotesque aerial jellyfish. The probes sniffed the air metres above the Juggler biomass, or skimmed the fuzzy green surface of the formation. Weighted plumb lines penetrated to the sea beneath the raft, sipping the organism-infested depths dozens of metres under the node. Radar mapped larger structures embedded within the node -- dense kernels of compacted biomass, or huge cavities and tubes of inscrutable function -- while sonar graphed the topology of the many sinewy organic cables which plunged into darkness, umbilicals anchoring the node to the seabed. Smaller nodes drew most of their energy from sunlight and the breakdown of sugars and fats in the sea's other floating micro-organisms but the larger formations, which had a vastly higher information-processing burden, needed to tap belching aquatic fissures, active rifts in the ocean bed kilometres under the waves. Cold water was pumped down each umbilical by peristaltic compression waves, heated by being circulated in the superheated thermal environment of the underwater volcanoes, and then pumped back to the surface.

In all this sensing activity, remarkably little physical harm was done to the extended organism itself. The biomass sensed the approach of the probes and rearranged itself so that they passed through with little obstruction, even those scything lines that reached into the water. Energy was obviously being consumed to avoid the organism sustaining damage, and by implication the measurements must therefore have had some effect on the node's information-processing efficiency. The effect was likely to be small, however, and since the node was already subject to constant changes in its architecture -- some probably intentional, and some probably forced on it by other factors in its environment -- there appeared to be little point in worrying about the harm caused by the human investigators. Ultimately, so much was still guesswork. Although the swimmer teams had learned a great deal about the Pattern Jugglers' encoded information, almost everything else about them -- how and why they stored the neural patterns, and to what extent the patterns were subject to subsequent postprocessing -- remained unknown. And those were merely the immediate questions. Beyond that were the real mysteries, which everyone wanted to solve, but right now they were simply beyond the scope of possible academic study. What they would learn today could not be expected to shed any light on those profundities. A single data point -- even a single clutch of measurements -- could not usually prove or disprove anything, but it might later turn out to play a vital role in a chain of argument, even if it was only in the biasing of some statistical distribution closer to one hypothesis than another. Science, as Naqi had long since realised, was as much a swarming, social process as it was something driven by ecstatic moments of personal discovery.

It was something she was proud to be part of.

The spiral sweep continued uneventfully, the airship chugging around in a gently widening circle. Morning shifted to early afternoon, and then the sun began to climb down towards the horizon, bleeding pale orange into the sky through soft-edged cracks in the cloud cover. For hours Naqi and Mina studied the incoming results, the ever-sharper scans of the node appearing on screens throughout the gondola. They discussed the results cordially enough, but Naqi could not stop thinking about Mina's betrayal. She took a spiteful pleasure in testing the extent to which her sister would lie, deliberately forcing the conversation around to Dr Sivaraksa and the project he steered.

'I hope I don't end up like one of those deadwood bureaucrats,' Naqi said, when they were discussing the way their careers might evolve. 'You know, like Sivaraksa.' She observed Mina pointedly, yet giving nothing away. 'I read some of his old papers; he used to be pretty good once. But now look at him.'

'It's easy to say that,' Mina said, 'but I bet he doesn't like being away from the front line any more than we would. But someone has to manage these big projects. Wouldn't you rather it was someone who'd at least *been* a scientist?'

'You sound like you're defending him. Next you'll be telling me you think the Moat is a good idea.'

'I'm not defending Sivaraksa,' Mina said. 'I'm just saying----' She eyed her sister with a sudden glimmer of suspicion. Had she guessed that Naqi knew? 'Never mind. Sivaraksa can fight his own battles. We've got work to do.'

'Anyone would think you were changing the subject,' Naqi said. But Mina was already on her way out of the gondola to check the equipment again.

At dusk the airship arrived at the perimeter of the node, completed one orbit, then began to track inwards again. As it passed over the parts of the node previously mapped, time-dependent changes were highlighted on the displays: arcs and bands of red superimposed against the lime and turquoise false-colour of the mapped structures. Most of the alterations were minor: a chamber opening here or closing there, or a small alteration in the network topology to ease a bottleneck between the lumpy subnodes dotted around the floating island. Other changes were more mysterious in function, but conformed to other studies. They were studied at enhanced resolution, the data prioritised and logged.

It looked as if the node was large, but in no way unusual.

Then night came, as swiftly as it always did at those latitudes. Mina and Naqi took turns, one sleeping for two- or three-hour stretches while the other kept an eye on the readouts. During a lull Naqi climbed up onto the top of the airship and tried the antenna again, and for a moment was gladdened when she saw that a new message had arrived. But the message itself turned out to be a statement from the Snowflake Council stating that the blackout on civilian messages would continue for at least another two days, until the current 'crisis' was over. There were allusions to civil disturbances in two cities, with curfews being imposed, and imperatives to ignore all unofficial news sources concerning the nature of the approaching ship.

Naqi wasn't surprised that there was trouble, though the extent of it took her aback. Her instincts were to believe the government line. The problem, from the government's point of view at least, was that nothing was yet known for certain about the nature of the ship, and so by being truthful they ended up sounding like they were keeping something back. They would have been far better off making up a plausible lie, which could be gently moulded towards accuracy as time passed.

Mina rose after midnight to begin her shift. Naqi went to sleep and dreamed fitfully, seeing in her mind's eye red smears and bars hovering against amorphous green. She had been staring at the readouts too intently, for too many hours.

Mina woke her excitedly before dawn.

'Now I'm the one with the news,' she said.

'What!'

'Come and see for yourself.'

Naqi rose from her hammock, neither rested nor enthusiastic. In the dim light of the cabin Mina's fungal patterns shone with peculiar intensity: abstract detached shapes that only implied her presence.

Naqi followed the shapes onto the balcony.

'What,' she said again, not even bothering to make it sound like a question.

'There's been a development,' Mina said.

Naqi rubbed the sleep from her eyes. 'With the node?'

'Look. Down below. Right under us.'

Naqi pressed her stomach hard against the railing and leaned over as far as she dared. She had felt no real vertigo until they had lowered the sensor lines, and then suddenly there had been a

physical connection between the airship and the ground. Was it her imagination, or had the airship lowered itself to about half its previous altitude, reeling in the lines at the same time?

The midnight light was all spectral shades of milky grey. The creased and crumpled landscape of the node reached away into mid-grey gloom, merging with the slate of the overlying cloud deck. Naqi saw nothing remarkable, other than the surprising closeness of the surface.

'I mean *really* look down,' Mina said.

Naqi pushed herself against the railing more than she had dared before, until she was standing on the very tips of her toes. Only then did she see it: directly below them was a peculiar circle of darkness, almost as if the airship was casting a distinct shadow beneath itself. It was a circular zone of exposed seawater, like a lagoon enclosed by the greater mass of the node. Steep banks of Juggler biomass, its heart a deep charcoal grey, rimmed the lagoon. Naqi studied it quietly. Her sister would judge her on any remark she made.

'How did you see it?' she asked eventually.

'See it?'

'It can't be more than twenty metres wide. A dot like that would have hardly shown up on the topographic map.'

'Naqi, you don't understand. I didn't steer us over the hole. It appeared below us, as we were moving. Listen to the motors. We're *still* moving. The hole's shadowing us. It follows us precisely.'

'Must be reacting to the sensors,' Naqi said.

'I've hauled them in. We're not trailing anything within thirty metres of the surface. The node's reacting to us, Naqi -- to the presence of the airship. The Jugglers know we're here, and they're sending us a signal.'

'Maybe they are. But it isn't our job to interpret that signal. We're just here to make measurements, not to interact with the Jugglers.'

'So whose job is it?' Mina asked.

'Do I have to spell it out? Specialists from Umingmaktok.'

'They won't get here in time. You know how long nodes last. By the time the blackout's lifted, by the time the swimmer corps hotshots get here, we'll be sitting over a green smudge and not much more. This is a significant find, Naqi. It's the largest node this season and it's making a deliberate and clear attempt to invite swimmers.'

Naqi stepped back from the railing. 'Don't even think about it.'

'I've been thinking about it all night: This isn't just a large node, Naqi. Something's happening -- that's why there's been so much sprite activity. If we don't swim here, we might miss something unique.'

'And if we do swim, we'll be violating every rule in the book. We're not trained, Mina. Even if we learned something -- even if the Jugglers deigned to communicate with us -- we'd be ostracised from the entire scientific community.'

'That would depend on what we learned, wouldn't it?'

'Don't do this, Mina. It isn't worth it.'

'We won't know if it's worth it or not until we try, will we?' Mina extended a hand. 'Look. You're right in one sense. Chances are pretty good nothing will happen. Normally you have to offer them a gift -- a puzzle, or something rich in information. We haven't got anything like that. What'll probably happen is we'll hit the water and there won't be any kind of biochemical interaction. In which case, it doesn't matter. We don't have to tell anyone. And if we do learn something, but it isn't significant -- well, we don't have to tell anyone about that either. Only if we learn something major. Something so big that they'll have to forget about a minor violation of protocol.'

'A minor violation----?' Naqi began, almost laughing at Mina's audacity.

'The point is, sis, we have a win-win situation here. And it's been handed to us on a plate.'

'You could also argue that we've been handed a major chance to fuck up spectacularly.'

'You read it whichever way you like. I know what I see.'

'It's too dangerous, Mina. People have died...' Naqi looked at Mina's fungal patterns, enhanced and emphasised by her tattoos. 'You flagged high for conformality. Doesn't that worry you slightly?'

'Conformality's just a fairy tale they use to scare children into behaving,' said Mina. ' "Eat all your greens or the sea will swallow you up forever." I take it about as seriously as I take the Thule kraken, or the drowning of Arviat.'

'The Thule kraken is a joke, and Arviat never existed in the first place. But the last time I checked, conformality was an accepted phenomenon.'

'It's an accepted research topic. There's a distinction.'

'Don't split hairs----' Naqi began.

Mina gave every indication of not having heard Naqi speak. Her voice was distant, as if she were speaking to herself. It had a lilting, singsong quality. 'Too late to even think about it now. But it isn't long until dawn. I think it'll still be there at dawn.'

She pushed past Naqi.

'Where are you going now?'

'To catch some sleep. I need to be fresh for this. So do you.'

They hit the lagoon with two gentle, anticlimactic splashes. Naqi was underwater for a moment before she bobbed to the surface, holding her breath. At first she had to make a conscious effort to start breathing again: the air immediately above the water was so saturated with microscopic organisms that choking was a real possibility. Mina, surfacing next to her, drew in gulps with wild enthusiasm, as if willing the tiny creatures to invade her lungs. She shrieked delight at the sudden cold. When they had both gained equilibrium, treading with their shoulders above water, Naqi was finally able to take stock. She saw everything through a stinging haze of tears. The gondola hovered above them, poised beneath the larger mass of the vacuum bladder. The life-raft that it had deployed was sparkling-new, rated for one hundred hours against moderate biological attack. But that was for mid-ocean, where the density of Juggler organisms would be much less than in the middle of a major node. Here, the hull might only endure a few tens of hours before it was consumed.

Once again, Naqi wondered if she should withdraw. There was still time. No real damage had yet been done. She could be back in the boat and back aboard the airship in a minute or so. Mina might not follow her, but she did not have to be complicit in her sister's actions. But Naqi knew she would not be able to turn back. She could not show weakness now that she had come this far.

'Nothing's happening...' she said.

'We've only been in the water a minute,' Mina said.

The two of them wore black wetsuits. The suits themselves could become buoyant if necessary -- the right sequence of tactile commands and dozens of tiny bladders would inflate around the chest and shoulder area -- but it was easy enough to tread water. In any case, if the Jugglers initiated contact, the suits would probably be eaten away in minutes. The swimmers who had made repeated contact often swam naked or near-naked, but neither Naqi nor Mina were yet prepared for that level of abject surrender to the ocean's assault. After another minute the water no longer felt as cold. Through gaps in the cloud cover the sun was harsh on Naqi's cheek. It etched furiously bright lines in the bottle-green surface of the lagoon, lines that coiled and shifted into fleeting calligraphic shapes as if conveying secret messages. The calm water lapped gently against their upper bodies. The walls of the lagoon were metre-high masses of fuzzy vegetation, like the steep banks of a river. Now and then Naqi felt something brush gently against her feet, like a passing frond or strand of seaweed. The first few times she flinched at the contact, but after a while it became strangely soothing. Occasionally something stroked one hand or the other, then moved playfully away. When she lifted her hands from the sea, mats of gossamer green draped from her fingers like the tattered remains of expensive gloves. The green material slithered free and slipped back into the sea. It tickled between her fingers.

'Nothing's happened yet,' Naqi said, more quietly this time.

'You're wrong. The shoreline's moved closer.'

Naqi looked at it. 'It's a trick of perspective.'

'I assure you it isn't.'

Naqi looked back at the raft. They had drifted five or six metres from it. It might as well have been a mile, for all the sense of security that the raft now offered. Mina was right: the lagoon was closing in on them, gently, slowly. If the lagoon had been twenty metres wide when they had entered, it must now be a third smaller. There was still time to escape before the hazy green walls squeezed in on them, but only if they moved now, back to the raft, back into the safety of the gondola.

'Mina... I want to go. We're not ready for this.'

'We don't need to be ready. It's going to happen.'

'We're not trained!'

'Call it learning on the job, in that case.' Mina was still trying to sound outrageously calm, but it wasn't working. Naqi heard it in her voice: she was either terribly frightened or terribly excited.

'You're more scared than I am,' she said.

'I am scared,' said Mina, 'scared we'll screw this up. Scared we'll blow this opportunity. Understand? I'm *that* kind of scared.'

Either Naqi was treading water less calmly, or the water itself had become visibly more agitated in the last few moments. The green walls were perhaps ten metres apart, and were no longer quite the sheer vertical structures they had appeared before. They had taken on form and design, growing and complexifying by the second. It was akin to watching a distant city emerge from fog, the revealing of bewildering, plunging layers of mesmeric detail, more than the eye or the mind could process.

'It doesn't look as if they're expecting a gift this time,' Mina said.

Veined tubes and pipes coiled and writhed around each other in constant, sinuous motion, making Naqi think of some hugely magnified circuitry formed from plant parts. It was restless, living circuitry that never quite settled into one configuration. Now and then chequerboard designs appeared, or intricately interlocking runes. Sharply geometric patterns flickered from point to point, echoed, amplified and subtly iterated at each move. Distinct three-dimensional shapes assumed brief solidity, carved from greenery as if by the deft hand of a topiarist. Naqi glimpsed unsettling anatomies: the warped memories of alien bodies that had once entered the ocean, a million, or a billion years ago. Here was a three-jointed limb, there the shieldlike curve of an exoskeletal plaque. The head of something that was almost equine melted into a goggling mass of faceted eyes. Fleeting, a human form danced from the chaos. But only once. Alien swimmers vastly outnumbered human swimmers.

Here were the Pattern Jugglers, Naqi knew. The first explorers had mistaken these remembered forms for indications of actual sentience, thinking that the oceanic mass was a kind of community of intelligences. It was an easy mistake to have made, but it was some way from the truth. These animate shapes were enticements, like the gaudy covers of books. The minds themselves were captured only as frozen traces. The only living intelligence within the ocean lay in its own curatorial system.

To believe anything else was heresy.

The dance of bodies became too rapid to follow. Pastel-coloured lights glowed from deep within the green structure, flickering and stuttering. Naqi thought of lanterns burning in the depths of a forest. Now the edge of the lagoon had become irregular, extending peninsulas towards the centre of the dwindling circle of water, while narrow bays and inlets fissured back into the larger mass of the node. The peninsulas sprouted grasping tendrils, thigh-thick at the trunk but narrowing to the dimensions of plant fronds, and then narrowing further, bifurcating into lacy, fernlike hazes of awesome complexity. They diffracted light like the wings of dragonflies. They were closing over the lagoon, forming a shimmering canopy. Now and then a sprite -- or something smaller but

equally bright -- arced from one bank of the lagoon to another. Brighter things moved through the water like questing fish. Microscopic organisms were detaching from the larger fronds and tendrils, swarming in purposeful clouds. They batted against her skin, against her eyelids. Every breath that she took made her cough. The taste of the Pattern Jugglers was sour and medicinal. They were in her, invading her body.

She panicked. It was as if a tiny switch had flipped in her mind. Suddenly all other concerns melted away. She had to get out of the lagoon immediately, no matter what Mina would think of her.

Thrashing more than swimming, Naqi tried to push herself towards the raft, but as soon as the panic reaction had kicked in, she had felt something else slide over her. It was not so much paralysis as an immense sense of inertia. Moving, even breathing, became problematic. The boat was impossibly distant. She was no longer capable of treading water. She felt heavy, and when she looked down she saw that a green haze had enveloped the parts of her body that she could see above water. The organisms were adhering to the fabric of her wetsuit.

'Mina----' she called, 'Mina!'

But Mina only looked at her. Naqi sensed that her sister was experiencing the same sort of paralysis. Mina's movements had become languid; instead of panic, what Naqi saw on her face was profound resignation and acceptance. It was dangerously close to serenity.

Mina wasn't frightened at all.

The patterns on her neck were flaring vividly. Her eyes were closed. Already the organisms had begun to attack the fabric of her suit, stripping it away from her flesh. Naqi could feel the same thing happening to her own suit. There was no pain, for the organisms stopped short of attacking her skin. With a mighty effort she hoisted her forearm from the water, studying the juxtaposition of pale flesh and dissolving black fabric. Her fingers were as stiff as iron.

But -- and Naqi clung to this fact -- the ocean recognised the sanctity of organisms, or at least, thinking organisms. Strange things might happen to people who swam with the Jugglers, things that might be difficult to distinguish from death or near-death. But people always emerged afterwards, changed perhaps, but essentially whole. No matter what happened now, they would survive. The Jugglers always returned those who swam with them, and even when they did effect changes, they were seldom permanent.

Except, of course, for those who didn't return.

No, Naqi told herself. What they were doing was foolish, and might perhaps destroy their careers, but they would survive. Mina had flagged high on the conformality index when she had applied to join the swimmer corps, but that didn't mean she was necessarily at risk. Conformality merely implied a rare connection with the ocean. It verged on the glamorous.

Now Mina was going under. She had stopped moving entirely. Her eyes were blankly ecstatic.

Naqi wanted to resist that same impulse to submit, but all the strength had flowed away from her. She felt herself begin the same descent. The water closed over her mouth, then her eyes, and in a moment she was under. She felt herself a toppled statue sliding towards the seabed. Her fear reached a crescendo, and then passed it. She was not drowning. The froth of green organisms had forced itself down her throat, down her nasal passage. She felt no fright. There was nothing except a profound feeling that this was what she had been born to do.

Naqi knew what was happening, what was *going* to happen. She had studied enough reports on swimmer missions. The tiny organisms were infiltrating her entire body, creeping into her lungs and bloodstream. They were keeping her alive, while at the same time flooding her with chemical bliss. Drove of the same tiny creatures were seeking routes to her brain, inching along the optic nerve, the aural nerve, or crossing the blood-brain barrier itself. They were laying tiny threads behind them, fibres that extended back into the larger mass of organisms suspended in the water around her. In turn, these organisms would establish data-carrying channels back into the primary mass of the node... And the node itself was connected to other nodes, both chemically and via the packet-

carrying sprites. The green threads bound Naqi to the entire ocean. It might take hours for a signal to reach her mind from halfway around Turquoise, but it didn't matter. She was beginning to think in Juggler time, her own thought processes seeming pointlessly quick, like the motion of bees.

She sensed herself becoming vaster.

She was no longer just a pale, hard-edged thing labelled *Naqi*, suspended in the lagoon like a dying starfish. Her sense of self was rushing out towards the horizon in all directions, encompassing first the node and then the empty oceanic waters around it. She couldn't say precisely how this information was reaching her. It wasn't through visual imagery, but more an intensely detailed spatial awareness. It was as if spatial awareness had suddenly become her most vital sense.

She supposed this was what swimmers meant when they spoke of *kenning*.

She *kenned* the presence of other nodes over the horizon, their chemical signals flooding her mind, each unique, each bewilderingly rich in information. It was like hearing the roar of a hundred crowds. And at the same time she *kenned* the ocean depths, the cold fathoms of water beneath the node, the life-giving warmth of the crustal vents. Closer, too, she *kenned* Mina. They were two neighbouring galaxies in a sea of strangeness. Mina's own thoughts were bleeding into the sea, into Naqi's mind, and in them Naqi felt the reflected echo of her own thoughts, picked up by Mina...

It was glorious.

For a moment their minds orbited each other, *kenning* each other on a level of intimacy neither had dreamed possible.

Mina... Can you feel me?

I'm here, Naqi. Isn't this wonderful?

The fear was gone, utterly. In its place was a marvellous feeling of immanence. They had made the right decision, Naqi knew. She had been right to follow Mina. Mina was deliciously happy, basking in the same hopeful sense of security and promise.

And then they began to sense other minds.

Nothing had changed, but it was suddenly clear that the roaring signals from the other nodes were composed of countless individual voices, countless individual streams of chemical information. Each stream was the recording of a mind that had entered the ocean at some point. The oldest minds -- those that had entered in the deep past -- were the faintest, but they were also the most numerous. They had begun to sound alike, the shapes of their stored personalities blurring into each other, no matter how different -- how alien -- they had been to start with. The minds that had been captured more recently were sharper and more variegated, like oddly shaped pebbles on a beach. Naqi *kenned* brutal alienness, baroque architectures of mind shaped by outlandish chains of evolutionary contingency. The only thing any of them had in common was that they had all reached a certain threshold of tool-using intelligence, and had all -- for whatever reason -- been driven into interstellar space, where they had encountered the Pattern Jugglers. But that was like saying the minds of sharks and leopards were alike because they had both evolved to hunt. The differences between the minds were so cosmically vast that Naqi felt her own mental processes struggling to accommodate them.

Even that was becoming easier. Subtly -- slowly enough that from moment to moment she was not aware of it -- the organisms in her skull were retuning her neural connections, allowing more and more of her own consciousness to seep out into the extended processing-loom of the sea.

Now she sensed the most recent arrivals.

They were all human minds, each a glittering gem of distinctness. Naqi *kenned* a great gulf in time between the earliest human mind and the last recognisably alien one. She had no idea if it was a million years or a billion, but it felt immense. At the same time she grasped that the ocean had been desperate for an injection of variety, but while these human minds were welcome, they were not exotic enough, just barely sufficient to break the tedium.

The minds were snapshots, frozen in the conception of a single thought. It was like an orchestra of instruments, all sustaining a single, unique note. Perhaps there was a grindingly slow evolution in

those minds -- she felt the merest subliminal hint of change -- but if that were the case, it would take centuries to complete a thought... thousands of years to complete the simplest internalised statement. The newest minds might not even have recognised that they had been swallowed by the sea.

And now Naqi could perceive a single mind flaring louder than the others.

It was recent, and human, and there was something about it that struck her as discordant. The mind was damaged, as if it had been captured imperfectly. It was disfigured, giving off squalls of hurt. It had suffered dreadfully. It was reaching out to her, craving love and affection; it searched for something to cling to in the abyssal loneliness it now knew.

Images ghosted through her mind. Something was burning. Flames licked through the interstitial gaps in a great black structure. She couldn't tell if it was a building or a vast, pyramidal bonfire.

She heard screams, and then something hysterical, which she at first took for more screaming, until she realised that it was something far, far worse. It was laughter, and as the flames roared higher, consuming the mass, smothering the screams, the laughter only intensified.

She thought it might be the laughter of a child.

Perhaps it was her imagination, but this mind appeared more fluid than the others. Its thoughts were still slow -- far slower than Naqi's -- but the mind appeared to have usurped more than its share of processing resources. It was stealing computational cycles from neighbouring minds, freezing them into absolute stasis while it completed a single sluggish thought.

The mind worried Naqi. Pain and fury was boiling off it.

Mina *kenned* it too. Naqi tasted Mina's thoughts and knew that her sister was equally disturbed by the mind's presence. Then she felt the mind's attention shift, drawn to the two inquisitive minds that had just entered the sea. It became aware of both of them, quietly watchful. A moment or two passed, and then the mind slipped away, back to wherever it had come from.

What was that...?

She felt her sister's reply. *I don't know. A human mind. A conformal, I think. Someone who was swallowed by the sea. But it's gone now.*

No, it hasn't. It's still there. Just hiding.

Millions of minds have entered the sea, Naqi. Thousands of conformals, perhaps, if you think of all the aliens that came before us. There are bound to be one or two bad apples.

That wasn't just a bad apple. It was like touching ice. And it sensed us. It reacted to us. Didn't it? She sensed Mina's hesitation.

We can't be sure. Our own perceptions of events aren't necessarily reliable. I can't even be certain we're having this conversation. I might be talking to myself...

Mina... Don't talk like that. I don't feel safe.

Me neither. But I'm not going to let one frightening thing unnecessarily affect me.

Something happened then. It was a loosening, a feeling that the ocean's grip on Naqi had just relented to a significant degree. Mina, and the roaring background of other minds, fell away to something much more distant. It was as if Naqi had just stepped out of a babbling party into a quiet adjacent room, and was even now moving further and further away from the door.

Her body tingled. She no longer felt the same deadening paralysis. Pearl-grey light flickered above. Without being sure whether she was doing it herself, she rose towards the surface. She was aware that she was moving away from Mina, but for now all that mattered was to escape the sea. She wanted to be as far from that discordant mind as possible.

Her head rammed through a crust of green into air. At the same moment the Juggler organisms fled her body in a convulsive rush. She thrashed stiff limbs and took in deep, panicked breaths. The transition was horrible, but it was over in a few seconds. She looked around, expecting to see the sheer walls of the lagoon, but all she saw in one direction was open water. Naqi felt panic rising again. Then she kicked herself around and saw a wavy line of bottle-green that had to be the

perimeter of the node, perhaps half a kilometre away from her present position. The airship was a distant silvery teardrop that appeared to be perched on the surface of the node itself.

In her fear she did not immediately think of Mina. All she wanted to do was reach the safety of the airship, to be aloft. Then she saw the raft, bobbing only one or two hundred metres away. Somehow it had been transplanted to the open waters as well. It looked distant but reachable. She started swimming, fear giving her strength and sense of purpose. In truth, she was well within the true boundary of the node: the water was still thick with suspended micro-organisms, so that it was more like swimming through cold green soup. It made each stroke harder, but she did not have to expend much effort to stay afloat.

Did she trust the Pattern Jugglers not to harm her? Perhaps. After all, she had not encountered *their* minds at all -- if they even *had* minds. They were merely the archiving system. Blaming them for that one poisoned mind was like blaming a library for one hateful book.

But still, it had unnerved her profoundly. She wondered why none of the other swimmers had ever communicated their encounters with such a mind. After all, she remembered it well enough now, and she was nearly out of the ocean. She might forget shortly -- there were bound to be subsequent neurological effects -- but under other circumstances there would have been nothing to prevent her relating her experiences to a witness or inviolable recording system.

She kept swimming, and began to wonder why Mina hadn't emerged from the waters as well. Mina had been just as terrified. But Mina had also been more curious, and more willing to ignore her fears. Naqi had grasped the opportunity to leave the ocean once the Jugglers released their grip on her. But what if Mina had elected to remain?

What if Mina was still down there, still in communion with the Jugglers?

Naqi reached the raft and hauled herself aboard, being careful not to capsize it. She saw that the raft was still largely intact. It had been moved, but not damaged, and although the ceramic sheathing was showing signs of attack, peppered here and there with scabbed green accretions, it was certainly good for another few hours. The rot-hardened control systems were alive, and still in telemetric connection with the distant airship.

Naqi had crawled from the sea naked. Now she felt cold and vulnerable. She pulled an aluminised quilt from the raft's supply box and wrapped it around herself. It did not stop her from shivering, did not make her feel any less nauseous, but at least it afforded some measure of symbolic barrier against the sea.

She looked around again, but there was still no sign of Mina.

Naqi folded aside the weatherproof control cover and tapped commands into the matrix of waterproofed keys. She waited for the response from the airship. The moment stretched. But there it was: a minute shift in the dull gleam on the silver back of the vacuum bladder. The airship was turning, pivoting like a great slow weather vane. It was moving, responding to the raft's homing command.

But where was Mina?

Now something moved in the water next to her, coiling in weak, enervated spasms. Naqi looked at it with horrified recognition. She reached over, still shivering, and with appalled gentleness fished the writhing thing from the sea. It lay in her fingers like a baby sea serpent. It was white and segmented, half a metre long. She knew exactly what it was.

It was Mina's worm. It meant Mina had died.

TWO

Two years later Naqi watched a spark fall from the heavens.

Along with many hundreds of spectators, she was standing on the railed edge of one of Umingmaktok's elegant cantilevered arms. It was afternoon. Every visible surface of the city had been scoured of rot and given a fresh coat of crimson or emerald paint. Amber bunting had been hung along the metal stay-lines that supported the tapering arms protruding from the city's towering commercial core. Most of the berthing slots around the perimeter were occupied by passenger or cargo craft, while many smaller vessels were holding station in the immediate airspace around Umingmaktok. The effect, which Naqi had seen on her approach to the city a day earlier, had been to turn the snowflake into a glittering, delicately ornamented vision. By night they had fireworks displays. By day, as now, conjurors and confidence tricksters wound their way through the crowds. Nose-flute musicians and drum dancers performed impromptu atop improvised podia. Kick-boxers were being cheered on as they moved from one informal ring to another, pursued by whistle-blowing proctors. Hastily erected booths were marked with red and yellow pennants, selling refreshments, souvenirs or tattoo-work, while pretty costumed girls who wore backpacks equipped with tall flagstuffs sold drinks or ices. The children had balloons and rattles marked with the emblems of both Umingmaktok and the Snowflake Council, and many of them had had their faces painted to resemble stylised space travellers. Puppet theatres had been set up here and there, running through exactly the same small repertoire of stories that Naqi remembered from her childhood. The children were enthralled nonetheless; mouths agape at each miniature epic, whether it was a roughly accurate account of the world's settlement -- with the colony ship being stripped to the bone for every gram of metal it held -- or something altogether more fantastic, like the drowning of Arviat. It didn't matter to the children that one was based in fact and the other was pure mythology. To them the idea that every city they called home had been cannibalised from the belly of a four-kilometre-long ship was no more or less plausible than the idea that the living sea might occasionally snatch cities beneath the waves when they displeased it. At that age everything was both magical and mundane, and she supposed that the children were no more nor less excited by the prospect of the coming visitors than they were by the promised fireworks display, or the possibility of further treats if they were well-behaved. Other than the children, there were animals: caged monkeys and birds, and the occasional expensive pet being shown off for the day. One or two servitors stalked through the crowd, and occasionally a golden float-cam would bob through the air, loitering over a scene of interest like a single detached eyeball. Turquoise had not seen this level of celebration since the last acrimonious divorce, and the networks were milking it remorselessly, overanalysing even the tiniest scrap of information.

This was, in truth, exactly the kind of thing Naqi would normally have gone to the other side of the planet to avoid. But something had drawn her this time, and made her wangle the trip out from the Moat at an otherwise critical time in the project. She could only suppose that it was a need to close a particular chapter in her life, one that had begun the night before Mina's death. The detection of the Ultra ship -- they now knew that it was named *Voice of Evening* -- had been the event that triggered the blackout, and the blackout had been Mina's justification for the two of them attempting to swim with the Jugglers. Indirectly, therefore, the Ultras were 'responsible' for whatever had happened to Mina. That was unfair, of course, but Naqi nonetheless felt the need to be here now, if only to witness the visitors' emergence with her own eyes and see if they really were the monsters of her imagination. She had come to Umingmaktok with a stoic determination that she would not be swept up by the hysteria of the celebrations. Yet now that she had made the trip, now that she was amidst the crowd, drunk on the chemical buzz of human excitement, with a nice fresh worm hooked onto her gut wall, she found herself in the perverse position of actually enjoying the atmosphere.

And now everyone had noticed the falling spark.

The crowd turned their heads into the sky, ignoring the musicians, conjurors and confidence tricksters. The backpacked girls stopped and looked aloft along with the others, shielding their eyes against the midday glare. The spark was the shuttle of *Voice of Evening*, now parked in orbit around Turquoise.

Everyone had seen Captain Moreau's ship by now, either with their own eyes as a moving star, or via the images captured by the orbiting cameras or ground-based telescopes. The ship was dark and sleek, outrageously elegant. Now and then its Conjoiner drives flickered on just enough to trim its orbit, those flashes like brief teasing windows into daylight for the hemisphere below.

A ship like that could do awful things to a world, and everyone knew it.

But if Captain Moreau and his crew meant ill for Turquoise, they'd had ample opportunity to do harm already. They had been silent at two years out, but at one year out the *Voice of Evening* had transmitted the usual approach signals, requesting permission to stopover for three or four months. It was a formality -- no one argued with Ultras -- but it was also a gladdening sign that they intended to play by the usual rules.

Over the next year there had been a steady stream of communications between the ship and the Snowflake Council. The official word was that the messages had been designed to establish a framework for negotiation and person-to-person trade. The Ultras would need to update their linguistics software to avoid being confused by the subtleties of the Turquoise dialects, which, although based on Canasian, contained confusing elements of Inuit and Thai, relics of the peculiar social mix of the original settlement coalition.

The falling shuttle had slowed to merely supersonic speed now, shedding its plume of ionised air. Dropping speed with each loop, it executed a lazily contracting spiral above Umingmaktok. Naqi had rented cheap binoculars from one of the vendors. The lenses were scuffed, shimmering with the pink of fungal bloom. She visually locked onto the shuttle, its roughly delta shape wobbling in and out of sharpness. Only when it was two or three thousand metres above Umingmaktok could she see it clearly. It was very elegant, a pure brilliant white like something carved from cloud. Beneath the manta-like hull complex machines -- fans and control surfaces -- moved too rapidly to be seen as anything other than blurs of subliminal motion. She watched as the ship reduced speed until it hovered at the same altitude as the snowflake city. Above the roar of the crowd -- an ecstatic, flag-waving mass -- all Naqi heard was a shrill hum, almost too far into ultrasound to detect.

The ship approached slowly. It had been given instructions for docking with the arm adjacent to the one where Naqi and the other spectators gathered. Now that it was close it was apparent that the shuttle was larger than any of the dirigible craft normally moored to the city's arms; by Naqi's estimate it was at least half as wide as the city's central core. But it slid into its designated mooring point with exquisite delicacy. Bright red symbols flashed onto the otherwise blank white hull, signifying airlocks, cargo ports and umbilical sockets. Gangways were swung out from the arm to align with the doors and ports. Dockers, supervised by proctors and city officials, scrambled along the precarious connecting ways and attempted to fix magnetic berthing stays onto the shuttle's hull. The magnetics slid off the hull. They tried adhesive grips next, and these were no more successful. After that, the dockers shrugged their shoulders and made exasperated gestures in the direction of the shuttle.

The roar of the crowd had died down a little by now.

Naqi felt the anticipation as well. She watched as an entourage of VIPs moved to the berthing position, led by a smooth, faintly cherubic individual that Naqi recognised as Tak Thonburi, the mayor of Umingmaktok and presiding chair of the Snowflake Council. Tak Thonburi was happily overweight and had a permanent cowlick of black hair, like an inverted question mark tattooed upon his forehead. His cheeks and brow were mottled with pale green. Next to him was the altogether leaner frame of Jotah Sivaraksa. It was no surprise that Dr Sivaraksa should be here today, for the Moat project was one of the most significant activities of the entire Snowflake Council. His iron-grey eyes flashed this way and that as if constantly triangulating the positions of enemies and allies

alike. The group was accompanied by armed, ceremonially dressed proctors and a triad of martial servitors. Their articulation points and sensor apertures were lathered in protective sterile grease, to guard against rot.

Though they tried to hide it, Naqi could tell that the VIPs were nervous. They moved a touch too confidently, making their trepidation all the more evident.

The red door symbol at the end of the gangway pulsed brighter and a section of the hull puckered open. Naqi squinted, but even through the binoculars it was difficult to make out anything other than red-lit gloom. Tak Thonburi and his officials stiffened. A sketchy figure emerged from the shuttle, lingered on the threshold and then stepped with immense slowness into full sunlight.

The crowd's reaction -- and to some extent Naqi's own -- was double-edged. There was a moment of relief that the messages from orbit had not been outright lies. Then there was an equally brief tang of shock at the actual appearance of Captain Moreau. The man was at least a third taller than anyone Naqi had ever seen in her life, yet commensurately thinner, his seemingly brittle frame contained within a jade-coloured mechanical exoskeleton of ornate design. The skeleton lent his movements something of the lethargic quality of a stick insect.

Tak Thonburi was the first to speak. His amplified voice boomed out across the six arms of Umingmaktok, echoing off the curved surfaces of the multiple vacuum-bladders that held the city aloft. Float-cams jostled for the best camera angle, swarming around him like pollen-crazed bees.

'Captain Moreau... Let me introduce myself. I am Tak Thonburi, mayor of Umingmaktok Snowflake City and incumbent chairman of the Snowflake Council of All Turquoise. It is my pleasure to welcome you, your crew and passengers to Umingmaktok, and to Turquoise itself. You have my word that we will do all in our power to make your visit as pleasant as possible.'

The Ultra moved closer to the official. The door to the shuttle remained open behind him. Naqi's binocs picked out red hologram serpents on the jade limbs of the skeleton.

The Ultra's own voice boomed at least as loud, but emanated from the shuttle rather than Umingmaktok's public address system. 'People of greenish-blue...' The captain hesitated, then tapped one of the stalks projecting from his helmet. 'People of Turquoise... Chairman Thonburi... Thank you for your welcome, and for your kind permission to assume orbit. We have accepted it with gratitude. You have my word... as captain of the lighthugger *Voice of Evening*... that we will abide by the strict terms of your generous offer of hospitality.' His mouth continued to move even during the pauses, Naqi noticed: the translation system was lagging. 'You have my additional guarantee that no harm will be done to your world, and Turquoise law will be presumed to apply to the occupants... of all bodies and vessels in your atmosphere. All traffic between my ship and your world will be subject to the authorisation of the Snowflake Council, and any member of the council will -- under the... auspices of the council -- be permitted to visit *Voice of Evening* at any time, subject to the availability of a... suitable conveyance.'

The captain paused and looked at Tak Thonburi expectantly. The mayor wiped a nervous hand across his brow, smoothing his kiss-curl into obedience. 'Thank you... Captain.' Tak Thonburi's eyes flashed to the other members of the reception party. 'Your terms are of course more than acceptable. You have my word that we will do all in our power to assist you and your crew, and that we will do our utmost to ensure that the forthcoming negotiations of trade proceed in an equitable manner... and in such a way that both parties will be satisfied upon their conclusion.'

The captain did not respond immediately, allowing an uncomfortable pause to draw itself out. Naqi wondered if it was really the fault of the software, or whether Moreau was just playing on Tak Thonburi's evident nervousness.

'Of course,' the Ultra said, finally. 'Of course. My sentiments entirely... Chairman Thonburi. Perhaps now wouldn't be a bad time to introduce my guests?'

On his cue three new figures emerged from *Voice of Evening*'s shuttle. Unlike the Ultra, they could almost have passed for ordinary citizens of Turquoise. There were two men and one woman, all of approximately normal height and build, each with long hair, tied back in elaborate clasps.

Their clothes were brightly coloured, fashioned from many separate fabrics of yellow, orange, red and russet, and various permutations of the same warm sunset shades. The clothes billowed around them, rippling in the light afternoon breeze. All three members of the party wore silver jewellery, far more than was customary on Turquoise. They wore it on their fingers, in their hair, hanging from their ears.

The woman was the first to speak, her voice booming out from the shuttle's PA system.

'Thank you, Captain Moreau. Thank you also, Chairman Thonburi. We are delighted to be here. I am Amesha Crane, and I speak for the Vahishta Foundation. Vahishta's a modest scientific organisation with its origins in the cometary prefectures of the Haven Demarchy. Lately we have been expanding our realm of interest to encompass other solar systems, such as this one.' Crane gestured at the two men who had accompanied her from the shuttle. 'My associates are Simon Matsubara and Rafael Weir. There are another seventeen of us aboard the shuttle. Captain Moreau carried us here as paying passengers aboard *Voice of Evening*, and as such Vahishta gladly accepts all the terms already agreed upon.'

Tak Thonburi looked even less sure of himself. 'Of course. We welcome your... interest. A scientific organisation, did you say?'

'One with a special interest in the study of the Jugglers,' Amesha Crane answered. She was the most strikingly attractive member of the trio, with fine cheekbones and a wide, sensual mouth that looked to be always on the point of smiling or laughing. Naqi felt that the woman was sharing something with her, something private and amusing. Doubtless everyone in the crowd felt the same vague sense of complicity.

Crane continued, 'We have no Pattern Jugglers in our own system, but that hasn't stopped us from focusing our research on them, collating the data available from the worlds where Juggler studies are ongoing. We've been doing this for decades, sifting inference and theory, guesswork and intuition. Haven't we, Simon?'

The man nodded. He had sallow skin and a fixed, quizzical expression.

'No two Juggler worlds are precisely alike,' Simon Matsubara said, his voice as clear and confident as the woman's. 'And no two Juggler worlds have been studied by precisely the same mix of human socio-political factions. That means that we have a great many variables to take into consideration. Despite that, we believe we have identified similarities that may have been overlooked by the individual research teams. They may even be very important similarities, with repercussions for wider humanity. But in the absence of our own Jugglers, it is difficult to test our theories. That's where Turquoise comes in.'

The other man -- Naqi recalled his name was Rafael Weir -- began to speak. 'Turquoise has been largely isolated from the rest of human space for the better part of two centuries.'

'We're aware of this,' said Jotah Sivaraksa. It was the first time any member of the entourage other than Tak Thonburi had spoken. To Naqi he sounded irritated, though he was doing his best to hide it.

'You don't share your findings with the other Juggler worlds,' said Amesha Crane. 'Nor -- to the best of our knowledge -- do you intercept their cultural transmissions. The consequence is that your research on the Jugglers has been untainted by any outside considerations -- the latest fashionable theory, the latest groundbreaking technique. You prefer to work in scholarly isolation.'

'We're an isolationist world in other respects,' Tak Thonburi said. 'Believe it or not, it actually rather suits us.'

'Quite,' Crane said, with a hint of sharpness. 'But the point remains. Your Jugglers are an uncontaminated resource. When a swimmer enters the ocean, their own memories and personality may be absorbed into the Juggler sea. The prejudices and preconceptions that swimmer carries inevitably enter the ocean in some shape or form -- diluted, confused, but nonetheless present in some form. And when the next swimmer enters the sea, and opens their mind to communion, what they perceive -- what they *ken*, in your own terminology -- is irrevocably tainted by the

preconceptions introduced by the previous swimmer. They may experience something that confirms their deepest suspicion about the nature of the Jugglers -- but they can't be sure that they aren't simply picking up the mental echoes of the last swimmer, or the swimmer before that.'

Jotah Sivaraksa nodded. 'What you say is undoubtedly true. But we've had just as many cycles of fashionable theory as anyone else. Even within Umingmaktok there are a dozen different research teams, each with their own views.'

'We accept that,' Crane said, with an audible sigh. 'But the degree of contamination is slight compared to other worlds. Vahishta lacks the resources for a trip to a previously unvisited Juggler world, so the next best thing is to visit one that has suffered the smallest degree of human cultural pollution. Turquoise fits the bill.'

Tak Thonburi held the moment before responding, playing to the crowd again. Naqi rather admired the way he did it.

'Good. I'm very... pleased... to hear it. And might I ask just what it is about our ocean that we can offer you?'

'Nothing except the ocean itself,' said Amesha Crane. 'We simply wish to join you in its study. If you will allow it, members of the Vahishta Foundation will collaborate with native Turquoise scientists and study teams. They will shadow them and offer interpretation or advice when requested. Nothing more than that.'

'That's all?'

Crane smiled. 'That's all. It's not as if we're asking the world, is it?'

*

Naqi remained in Umingmaktok for three days after the arrival, visiting friends and taking care of business for the Moat. The newcomers had departed, taking their shuttle to one of the other snowflake cities -- Prachuap or the recently married Qaanaaq-Pangnirtung, perhaps -- where a smaller but no less worthy group of city dignitaries would welcome Captain Moreau and his passengers.

In Umingmaktok the booths and bunting were packed away and normal business resumed. Litter abounded. Worm dealers did brisk business, as they always did during times of mild gloom. There were far fewer transport craft moored to the arms, and no sign at all of the intense media presence of a few days before. Tourists had gone back to their home cities and the children were safely back in school. Between meetings Naqi sat in the midday shade of half-empty restaurants and bars, observing the same puzzled disappointment in every face she encountered. Deep down she felt it herself. For two years they had been free to imprint every possible fantasy on the approaching ship. Even if the newcomers had arrived with less than benign intent, there would still have been something interesting to talk about: the possibility, however remote, that one's own life might be about to become drastically more exciting.

But now none of that was going to happen. Undoubtedly Naqi would be involved with the visitors at some point, allowing them to visit the Moat or one of the outlying research zones she managed, but there would be nothing life-changing.

She thought back to that night with Mina, when they had heard the news. Everything had changed then. Mina had died, and Naqi had found herself taking her sister's role in the Moat. She had risen to the challenge and promotions had followed with gratifying swiftness, until she was in effective charge of the Moat's entire scientific programme. But that sense of closure she had yearned for was still absent. The men she had slept with -- men who were almost always swimmers -- had never provided it, and by turns they had each lost patience with her, realising that they were less important to her as people than what they represented, as connections to the sea. It had been months since her last romance, and once Naqi had recognised the way her own subconscious was drawing her back to the sea, she had drawn away from contact with swimmers. She had been

drifting since then, daring to hope that the newcomers would allow her some measure of tranquillity.

But the newcomers had not supplied it.

She supposed she would have to find it elsewhere.

On the fourth day Naqi returned to the Moat on a high-speed dirigible. She arrived near sunset, dropping down from high altitude to see the structure winking back at her, a foreshortened ellipse of grey-white ceramic lying against the sea like some vast discarded bracelet. From horizon to horizon there were several Juggler nodes visible, webbed together by the faintest of filaments -- to Naqi they looked like motes of ink spreading into blotting paper -- but there were also smaller dabs of green within the Moat itself.

The structure was twenty kilometres wide and now it was nearly finished. Only a narrow channel remained where the two ends of the bracelet did not quite meet: a hundred-metre-wide sheer-sided aperture flanked on either side by tall, ramshackle towers of accommodation modules, equipment sheds and construction cranes. To the north, strings of heavy cargo dirigibles ferried processed ore and ceramic cladding from Narathiwat atoll, lowering it down to the construction teams on the Moat.

They had been working here for nearly twenty years. The hundred metres of the Moat that projected above the water was only one tenth of the full structure -- a kilometre-high ring resting on the seabed. In a matter of months the gap -- little more than a notch in the top of the Moat -- would be sealed, closed off by immense hermetically tight sea-doors. The process would be necessarily slow and delicate, for what was being attempted here was not simply the closing-off of part of the sea. The Moat was an attempt to isolate a part of the living ocean, sealing off a community of Pattern Juggler organisms within its impervious ceramic walls.

The high-speed dirigible swung low over the aperture. The thick green waters streaming through the cut had the phlegmatic consistency of congealing blood. Thick, ropy tendrils permitted information transfer between the external sea and the cluster of small nodes within the Moat. Swimmers were constantly present, either inside or outside the Moat, *kenning* the state of the sea and establishing that the usual Juggler processes continued unabated.

The dirigible docked with one of the two flanking towers.

Naqi stepped out, back into the hectic corridors and office spaces of the project building. It felt distinctly odd to be back on absolutely firm ground. Although one was seldom aware of it, Umingmaktok was never quite still: no snowflake city or airship ever was. But she would get used to it; in a few hours she would be immersed in her work, having to think of a dozen different things at once, finessing solution pathways, balancing budgets against quality, dealing with personality clashes and minor turf wars, and perhaps -- if she was very lucky -- managing an hour or two of pure research. Aside from the science, none of it was particularly challenging, but it kept her mind off other things. And after a few days of that, the arrival of the visitors would begin to feel like a bizarre, irrelevant interlude in an otherwise monotonous dream. She supposed that two years ago she would have been grateful for that. Life could indeed continue much as she had always imagined it would.

But when she arrived at her office there was a message from Dr Sivaraksa. He needed to speak to her urgently.

*

Dr Jotah Sivaraksa's office on the Moat was a good deal less spacious than his quarters in Umingmaktok, but the view was superb. His accommodation was perched halfway up one of the towers that flanked the cut through the Moat, buttressed out from the main mass of prefabricated modules like a partially opened desk drawer. Dr Sivaraksa was writing notes when she arrived. For

a few moments Naqi lingered at the sloping window, watching the construction activity hundreds of metres below. Railed machines and helmeted workers toiled on the flat upper surface of the Moat, moving raw materials and equipment to the assembly sites. Above, the sky was a perfect cobalt-blue, marred now and then by the passing green-stained hull of a cargo dirigible. The sea beyond the Moat had the dimpled texture of expensive leather.

Dr Sivaraksa cleared his throat and, when Naqi turned, he gestured at the vacant seat on the opposite side of his desk.

'Life treating you well?'

'Can't complain, sir.'

'And work?'

'No particular problems that I'm aware of.'

'Good. Good.' Sivaraksa made a quick, cursive annotation in the notebook he had opened on his desk, then slid it beneath the smoky-grey cube of a paperweight. 'How long has it been now?'

'Since what, sir?'

'Since your sister... Since Mina...' He seemed unable to complete the sentence, substituting a spiralling gesture made with his index finger. His finely boned hands were marbled with veins of olive green.

Naqi eased into her seat. 'Two years, sir.'

'And you're... over it?'

'I wouldn't exactly say I'm over it, no. But life goes on, like they say. Actually I was hoping...' Naqi had been about to tell him how she had imagined the arrival of the visitors would close that chapter. But she doubted she would be able to convey her feelings in a way Dr Sivaraksa would understand. 'Well, I was hoping I'd have put it all behind me by now.'

'I knew another conformal, you know. Fellow from Gjoa. Made it into the elite swimmer corps before anyone had the foggiest idea...'

'It's never been proven that Mina was conformal, sir.'

'No, but the signs were there, weren't they? To one degree or another we're all subject to symbiotic invasion by the ocean's micro-organisms. But conformals show an unusual degree of susceptibility. On one hand it's as if their own bodies actively invite the invasion, shutting down the usual inflammatory or foreign cell rejection mechanisms. On the other, the ocean seems to tailor its messengers for maximum effectiveness, as if the Jugglers have selected a specific target they wish to absorb. Mina had very strong fungal patterns, did she not?'

'I've seen worse,' Naqi said, which was not entirely a lie.

'But not, I suspect, in anyone who ever attempted to commune. I understand you had ambitions to join the swimmer corps yourself?'

'Before all that happened.'

'I understand. And now?'

Naqi had never told anyone that she had joined Mina in the swimming incident. The truth was that even if she had not been present at the time of Mina's death, her encounter with the rogue mind would have put her off entering the ocean for life.

'It isn't for me. That's all.'

Jotah Sivaraksa nodded gravely. 'A wise choice. Aptitude or not, you'd have almost certainly been filtered out of the swimmer corps. A direct genetic connection to a conformal -- even an unproven conformal -- would be too much of a risk.'

'That's what I assumed, sir.'

'Does it trouble you, Naqi?'

She was wearying of this. She had work to do: deadlines to meet that Sivaraksa himself had imposed.

'Does what trouble me?'

He nodded at the sea. Now that the play of light had shifted minutely, it looked less like dimpled leather than a sheet of beaten bronze. 'The thought that Mina might still be out there... in some sense.'

'It might trouble me if I were a swimmer, sir. Other than that... No. I can't say that it does. My sister died. That's all that mattered.'

'Swimmers have occasionally reported encountering minds -- essences -- of the lost, Naqi. The impressions are often acute. The conformed leave their mark on the ocean at a deeper, more permanent level than the impressions left behind by mere swimmers. One senses that there must be a purpose to this.'

'That wouldn't be for me to speculate, sir.'

'No.' He glanced down at the compad and then tapped his forefinger against his upper lip. 'No. Of course not. Well, to the matter at hand----'

She interrupted him. 'You swam once, sir?'

'Yes. Yes, I did.' The moment stretched. She was about to say something -- anything -- when Sivaraksa continued, 'I had to stop for medical reasons. Otherwise I suppose I'd have been in the swimmer corps for a good deal longer, at least until my hands started turning green.'

'What was it like?'

'Astonishing. Beyond anything I'd expected.'

'Did they change you?'

At that he smiled. 'I never thought that they did, until now. After my last swim I went through all the usual neurological and psychological tests. They found no anomalies; no indications that the Jugglers had imprinted any hints of alien personality or rewired my mind to think in an alien way.'

Sivaraksa reached across the desk and held up the smoky cube that Naqi had taken for a paperweight. 'This came down from *Voice of Evening*. Examine it.'

Naqi peered into the milky-grey depths of the cube. Now that she saw it closely she realised that there were things embedded within the translucent matrix. There were chains of unfamiliar symbols, intersecting at right angles. They resembled the complex white scaffolding of a building.

'What is it?'

'Mathematics. Actually, a mathematical argument -- a proof, if you like. Conventional mathematical notation -- no matter how arcane -- has evolved so that it can be written down on a two-dimensional surface, like paper or a readout. This is a three-dimensional syntax, liberated from that constraint. Its enormously richer, enormously more elegant.' The cube tumbled in Sivaraksa's hand. He was smiling. 'No one could make head or tail of it. Yet when I looked at it for the first time I nearly dropped it in shock. It made perfect sense to me. Not only did I understand the theorem, but I also understood the point of it. It's a joke, Naqi. A pun. This mathematics is rich enough to embody humour. And understanding that is the gift they left me. It was sitting in my mind for twenty-eight years, like an egg waiting to hatch.'

Abruptly, Sivaraksa placed the cube back on the table.

'Something's come up,' he said.

From somewhere came the distant, prolonged thunder of a dirigible discharging its cargo of processed ore. It must have been one of the last consignments.

'Something, sir?'

'They've asked to see the Moat.'

'They?'

'Crane and her Vahishta mob. They've requested an oversight of all major scientific centres on Turquoise, and naturally enough we're on the list. They'll be visiting us, spending a couple of days seeing what we've achieved.'

'I'm not too surprised that they've asked to visit, sir.'

'No, but I was hoping we'd have a few months' grace. We don't. They'll be here in a week.'

'That's not necessarily a problem for us, is it?'

'It mustn't become one,' Sivaraksa said. 'I'm putting you in charge of the visit, Naqi. You'll be the interface between Crane's group and the Moat. That's quite a responsibility, you understand. A mistake -- the tiniest gaffe -- could undermine our standing with the Snowflake Council.' He nodded at the compad. 'Our budgetary position is precarious. Frankly, I'm in Tak Thonburi's lap. We can't afford any embarrassments.'

'No sir.'

She certainly did understand. The job was a poisoned chalice, or at the very least, a chalice with the strong potential to become poisoned. If she succeeded -- if the visit went smoothly, with no hitches -- Sivaraksa could still take much of the credit for it. If it went wrong, on the other hand, the fault would be categorically hers.

'One more thing.' Sivaraksa reached under his desk and produced a brochure that he slid across to her. The brochure was marked with a prominent silver snowflake motif. It was sealed with red foil. 'Open it; you have clearance.'

'What is it, sir?'

'A security report on our new friends. One of them has been behaving a bit oddly. You'll need to keep an eye on him.'

For inscrutable reasons of their own, the liaison committee had decided she would be introduced to Amesha Crane and her associates a day before the official visit, when the party was still in Sukhothai-Sanikiluaq. The journey there took the better part of two days, even allowing for the legs she took by high-speed dirigible or the ageing, unreliable trans-atoll railway line between Narathiwat and Cape Dorset. She arrived at Sukhothai-Sanikiluaq in a velvety purple twilight, catching the tail end of a fireworks display. The two snowflake cities had only been married three weeks, so the arrival of the off-worlders was an excellent pretext for prolonging the celebrations. Naqi watched the fireworks from a civic landing stage perched halfway up Sukhothai's core, starbursts and cataracts of scarlet, indigo and intense emerald green brightening the sky above the vacuum-bladders. The colours reminded her of the organisms that she and Mina had seen in the wake of their airship. The recollection left her suddenly sad and drained, convinced that she had made a terrible mistake by accepting this assignment.

'Naqi?'

It was Tak Thonburi, coming out to meet her on the balcony. They had already exchanged messages during the journey. He was dressed in full civic finery and appeared more than a little drunk.

'Chairman Thonburi.'

'Good of you come to here, Naqi.' She watched his eyes map her contours with scientific rigour, lingering here and there around regions of particular interest. 'Enjoying the show?'

'You certainly seem to be, sir.'

'Yes, yes. Always had a thing about fireworks.' He pressed a drink into her hand and together they watched the display come to its mildly disappointing conclusion. There was a lull then, but Naqi noticed that the spectators on the other balconies were reluctant to leave, as if waiting for something. Presently a stunning display of three-dimensional images appeared, generated by powerful projection apparatus in the *Voice of Evening's* shuttle. Above Sukhothai-Sanikiluaq, Chinese dragons as large as mountains fought epic battles. Sea monsters convulsed and writhed in the night. Celestial citadels burned. Hosts of purple-winged fiery angels fell from the heavens in tightly knit squadrons, clutching arcane instruments of music or punishment.

A marbled giant rose from the sea, as if woken from some aeons-long slumber.

It was very, very impressive.

'Bastards,' Thonburi muttered.

'Sir?'

'Bastards,' he said, louder this time. 'We know they're better than us. But do they have to keep reminding us?'

He ushered her into the reception chamber where the Vahishta visitors were being entertained. The return indoors had a magical sharpening effect on his senses. Naqi suspected that the ability to turn drunkenness on and off like a switch must be one of the most hallowed of diplomatic skills.

He leaned towards her, confidentially. 'Did Jotah mention any----'

'Security considerations, Chairman? Yes, I think I got the message.'

'It's probably nothing, only----'

'I understand. Better safe than sorry.'

He winked, touching a finger against the side of his nose. 'Precisely.'

The interior was bright after the balcony. Twenty Vahishta delegates were standing in a huddle near the middle of the room. The captain was absent -- little had been seen of Moreau since the shuttle's arrival in Umingmaktok -- but the delegates were talking to a clutch of local bigwigs, none of whom Naqi recognised. Thonburi steered her into the fray, oblivious to the conversations that were taking place.

'Ladies and gentleman... I would like to introduce Naqi Okpik. Naqi oversees the scientific programme on the Moat. She'll be your host for the visit to our project.'

'Ah, Naqi.' Amesha Crane leaned over and shook her hand. 'A pleasure. I just read your papers on information propagation methods in class-three nodes. Erudite.'

'They were collaborative works,' Naqi said. 'I really can't take too much credit.'

'Ah, but you can. All of you can. You achieved those findings with the minimum of resources, and you made very creative use of some extremely simplistic numerical methods.'

'We muddle through,' Naqi said.

Crane nodded enthusiastically. 'It must give you a great sense of satisfaction.'

Tak Thonburi said, 'It's a philosophy, that's all. We conduct our science in isolation, and we enjoy only limited communication with other colonies. As a social model it has its disadvantages, but it means we aren't forever jealous of what they're achieving on some other world that happens to be a few decades ahead of us because of an accident of history or location. We think that the benefits outweigh the costs.'

'Well, it seems to work,' Crane said. 'You have a remarkably stable society here, Chairman. Verging on the utopian, some might say.'

Tak Thonburi caressed his cowlick. 'We can't complain.'

'Nor can we,' said the man Naqi recognised as quizzical-faced Simon Matsubara. 'If you hadn't enforced this isolation, your own Juggler research would have been as hopelessly compromised as everywhere else.'

'But the isolation isn't absolute, is it?'

The voice was quiet, but commanding.

Naqi followed the voice to the speaker. It was Rafael Weir, the man who had been identified as a possible security risk. Of the three who had emerged from Moreau's shuttle, he was the least remarkable looking, possessing the kind of amorphous face that would allow him to blend in with almost any crowd. Had her attention not been drawn to him, he would have been the last one she noticed. He was not unattractive, but there was nothing particularly striking or charismatic about his looks. According to the security dossier, he had made a number of efforts to break away from the main party of the delegation while they had been visiting research stations. They could have been accidents -- one or two other party members had become separated at other times -- but it was beginning to look a little too deliberate.

'No,' Tak Thonburi answered. 'We're not absolute isolationists, or we'd never have given permission for *Voice of Evening* to assume orbit around Turquoise. But we don't solicit passing traffic either. Our welcome is as warm as anyone's, we hope, but we don't encourage visitors.'

'Are we the first to visit since your settlement?' Weir asked.

'The first starship?' Tak Thonburi shook his head. 'No. But it's been a number of years since the last one.'

'Which was?'

'The *Pelican in Impiety*, a century ago.'

'An amusing coincidence, then,' Weir said.

Tak Thonburi narrowed his eyes. 'Coincidence?'

'The *Pelican's* next port of call was Haven, if I'm not mistaken. "It was *en route* from Zion, but it made a trade stopover around Turquoise.'" He smiled. 'And we have come from Haven, so history already binds our two worlds, albeit tenuously.'

Thonburi's eyes narrowed. He was trying to read Weir and evidently failing. 'We don't talk about the *Pelican* too much. There were technical benefits -- vacuum-bladder production methods, information technologies... but there was also a fair bit of unpleasantness. The wounds haven't entirely healed.'

'Let's hope this visit will be remembered more fondly,' Weir said.

Amesha Crane nodded, fingering one of the items of silver jewellery in her hair. 'Agreed. All the indications are favourable, at the very least. We've arrived at a most auspicious time.' She turned to Naqi. 'I find the Moat project fascinating, and I'm sure I speak for the entire Vahishta delegation. I may as well tell you that no one else has attempted anything remotely like it. Tell me, scientist to scientist, do you honestly think it will work?'

'We won't know until we try,' Naqi said. Any other answer would have been politically hazardous: too much optimism and the politicians would have started asking just why the expensive project was needed in the first place. Too much pessimism and they would ask exactly the same question.

'Fascinating, all the same.' Crane's expression was knowing, as if she understood Naqi's predicament perfectly. 'I understand that you're very close to running the first experiment?'

'Given that it's taken us twenty years to get this far, yes, we're close. But we're still looking at three to four months, maybe longer. It's not something we want to rush.'

'That's a great pity,' Crane said, turning now to Thonburi. 'In three to four months we might be on our way. Still, it would have been something to see, wouldn't it?'

Thonburi leaned towards Naqi. The alcohol on his breath was a fog of cheap vinegar. 'I suppose there wouldn't be any chance of accelerating the schedule, would there?'

'Out of the question, I'm afraid,' Naqi said.

'That's just too bad,' said Amesha Crane. Still toying with her jewellery, she turned to the others. 'But we mustn't let a little detail like that spoil our visit, must we?'

They returned to the Moat using the *Voice of Evening's* shuttle. There was another civic reception to be endured upon arrival, but it was a much smaller affair than the one in Sukhothai-Sanikiluaq. Dr Jotah Sivaraksa was there, of course, and once Naqi had dealt with the business of introducing the party to him she was able to relax for the first time in many hours, melting into the corner of the room and watching the interaction between visitors and locals with a welcome sense of detachment. Naqi was tired and had difficulty keeping her eyes open. She saw everything through a sleepy blur, the delegates surrounding Sivaraksa like pillars of fire, the fabric of their costumes rippling with the slightest movement, reds and russets and chrome yellows dancing like sparks or sheets of flame. Naqi left as soon as she felt it was polite to do so, and when she reached her bed she fell immediately into troubled sleep, dreaming of squadrons of purple-winged angels falling from the skies and of the great giant rising from the depths, clawing the seaweed and kelp of ages from his eyes.

In the morning she awoke without really feeling refreshed. Anaemic light pierced the slats on her window. She was not due to meet the delegates again for another three or four hours, so there was

time to turn over and try and catch some proper sleep. But she knew from experience that it would be futile.

She got up. To her surprise, there was a new message on her console from Jotah Sivaraksa. What, she wondered, did he have to say to her that he could not have said at the reception, or later this morning?

She opened the message and read.

'Sivaraksa,' she said to herself. 'Are you insane? It can't be done.'

The message informed her that there had been a change of plan. The first closure of the sea-doors would be attempted in two days, while the delegates were still on the Moat.

It was pure madness. They were months away from that. Yes, the doors could be closed -- the basic machinery for doing that was in place -- and yes, the doors would be hermetically tight for at least one hundred hours after closure. But nothing else was ready. The sensitive monitoring equipment, the failsafe subsystems, the backups... None of that would be in place and operational for many weeks. Then there was supposed to be at least six weeks of testing, slowly building up to the event itself...

To do it in two days made no sense at all, except to a politician. At best all they would learn was whether or not the Jugglers had remained inside the Moat when the door was closed. They would learn nothing about how the data flow was terminated, or how the internal connections between the nodes adapted to the loss of contact with the wider ocean.

Naqi swore and hit the console. She wanted to blame Sivaraksa, but she knew that was unfair. Sivaraksa had to keep the politicians happy, or the whole project would be endangered. He was just doing what he had to do, and he almost certainly liked it even less than she did.

Naqi pulled on shorts and a T-shirt and found some coffee in one of the adjoining mess rooms. The Moat was deserted, quiet except for the womblike throb of generators and air-circulation systems. A week ago it would have been as noisy now as at any other time of day, for the construction had continued around the clock. But the heavy work was finished; the last ore dirigible had arrived while Naqi was away. All that remained was the relatively light work of completing the Moat's support subsystems. Despite what Sivaraksa had said in his message there was really very little additional work needed to close the doors. Even two days of frantic activity would make no difference to the usefulness of the stunt.

When she'd calmed down, she returned to her room and called Sivaraksa. It was still far too early, but seeing that the bastard had already ruined her day she saw no reason not to reciprocate.

'Naqi.' His silver hair was a sleep-matted mess on the screen. 'I take it you got my message?'

'You didn't think I'd take it lying down, did you?'

'I don't like it any more than you do. But I see the political necessity.'

'Do you? This isn't like switching a light on and off, Jotah.' His eyes widened at the familiarity, but she pressed on regardless. 'If we screw up the first time, there might never be a second chance. The Jugglers have to play along. Without them all you've got here is a very expensive mid-ocean refuelling point. Does that make political sense to you?'

He pushed green fingers through the mess of his hair. 'Have some breakfast, get some fresh air, then come to my office. We'll talk about it then.'

'I've had breakfast, thanks very much.'

'Then get the fresh air. You'll feel better for it.' Sivaraksa rubbed his eyes. 'You're not very happy about this, are you?'

'It's bloody madness. And the worst thing is that you know it.'

'And my hands are tied. Ten years from now, Naqi, you'll be sitting in my place having to make similar decisions. And ten to one there'll be some idealistic young scientist telling you what a hopeless piece of deadwood you are.' He managed a weary smile. 'Mark my words, because I want you to remember this conversation when it happens.'

'There's nothing I can do to stop this, is there?'

'I'll be in my office in----' Sivaraksa looked aside at a clock, 'thirty minutes. We can talk about it properly then.'

'There's nothing to talk about.'

But even as she said that she knew she sounded petulant and inflexible. Sivaraksa was right: it was impossible to manage a project as complex and expensive as the Moat without a degree of compromise.

Naqi decided that Sivaraksa's advice -- at least the part about getting some fresh air -- was worth heeding. She descended a helical staircase until she reached the upper surface of the Moat's ring-shaped wall. The concrete was cold beneath her bare feet and a pleasantly cool breeze caressed her legs and arms. The sky had brightened on one horizon. Machines and supplies were arranged neatly on the upper surface ready for use, although further construction would be halted until the delegates completed their visit. Stepping nimbly over the tracks, conduits and cables that crisscrossed each other on the upper surface, Naqi walked to the side. A high railing, painted in high-visibility rot-resistant sealer, fenced the inner part of the Moat. She touched it to make sure it was dry, then leaned over. The distant side of the Moat was a colourless thread, twenty kilometres away, like a very low wall of sea mist.

What could be done in two days? Nothing. Or at least nothing compared to what had always been planned. But if the new schedule was a *fait accompli* -- and that was the message she was getting from Sivaraksa -- then it was her responsibility to find a way to squeeze some scientific return from the event. She looked down at the cut, and at the many spindly gantries and catwalks that spanned the aperture or hung some way towards the centre of the Moat. Perhaps if she arranged for some standard-issue probes to be prepared today, the type dropped from dirigibles...

Naqi's eyes darted around, surveying fixtures and telemetry conduits.

It would be hard work to get them in place in time, and even harder to get them patched into some kind of real-time acquisition system... But it *was* doable, just barely. The data quality would be laughable compared to the supersensitive instruments that were going to be installed over the next few months... But crude was a lot better than nothing at all.

She laughed, aloud. An hour ago she would have stuck pins into herself rather than collaborate in this kind of fiasco.

Naqi walked along the railing until she reached a pair of pillar-mounted binoculars. They were smeared with rot-protection. She wiped the lens and eyepieces clean with the rag that was tied to the pedestal, then swung the binoculars in a slow arc, panning across the dark circle of water trapped within the Moat. Only vague patches of what Naqi would have called open water were visible. The rest was either a verdant porridge of Juggler organisms, or fully grown masses of organised floating matter, linked together by trunks and veins of the same green biomass. The latest estimate was that there were three small nodes within the ring. The smell was atrocious, but that was an excellent sign as well: it correlated strongly with the density of organisms in the nodes. She had experienced that smell many times, but it never failed to slam her back to that morning when Mina had died.

As much as the Pattern Jugglers 'knew' anything, they were surely aware of what was planned here. They had drunk the minds of the swimmers who had already entered the sea near or within the Moat, and not one of those swimmers was ignorant of the project's ultimate purpose. It was possible that that knowledge simply couldn't be parsed into a form the aliens would understand, but Naqi considered that unlikely: the closure of the Moat would be about as stark a concept as one could imagine. If nothing else, geometry was the one thing the Jugglers did understand. And yet the aliens chose to remain within the closing Moat, hinting that they would tolerate the final closure that would seal them off from the rest of the ocean.

Perhaps they were not impressed. Perhaps they knew that the event would not rob them of every channel of communication, but only the chemical medium of the ocean. Sprites and other airborne organisms would still be able to cross the barrier. It was impossible to tell. The only way to know was to complete the experiment -- to close the massive sea-doors -- and see what happened.

She leaned back, taking her eyes from the binoculars.

Now Naqi saw something unexpected. It was a glint of hard white light, scudding across the water within the Moat.

Naqi squinted, but still she could not make out the object. She swung the binoculars hard around, got her eyes behind them and then zigzagged until something flashed through the field of view. She backed up and locked onto it.

It was a boat, and there was someone in it.

She keyed in the image zoom/stabilise function and the craft swelled to clarity across a clear kilometre of sea. The craft was a ceramic-hulled vessel of the type that the swimmer teams used, five or six metres long from bow to stern. The person sat behind a curved spray shield, their hands on the handlebars of the control pillar. An inboard thruster propelled the boat without ever touching water.

The figure was difficult to make out, but the billowing orange clothes left no room for doubt. It was one of the Vahishta delegates. And Naqi fully expected it to be Rafael Weir.

He was headed towards the closest node.

For an agonising few moments she did not know what to do. He was going to attempt to swim, she thought, just like she and Mina had done. And he would be no better prepared for the experience. She had to stop him, somehow. He would reach the node in only a few minutes.

Naqi sprinted back to the tower, breathless when she arrived. She reached a communications post and tried to find the right channel for the boat. But either she was doing it wrong or Weir had sabotaged the radio. What next? Technically, there was a security presence on the Moat, especially given the official visit. But what did the security goons know about chasing boats? All their training was aimed at dealing with internal crises, and none of them were competent to go anywhere near an active node.

She called them anyway, alerting them to what had happened. Then she called Sivaraksa, telling him the same news. 'I think it's Weir,' she said. 'I'm going to try and stop him.'

'Naqi...' he said warningly.

'This is my responsibility, Jotah. Let me handle it.'

Naqi ran back outside again. The closest elevator down to sea level was out of service; the next one was a kilometre further around the ring. She didn't have that much time. Instead she jogged along the line of railings until she reached a break that admitted entry to a staircase that descended the steep inner wall of the Moat. The steps and handrails had been helpfully greased with antirot, which made her descent that more treacherous. There were five hundred steps down to sea level but she took them two or three at a time, sliding down the handrails until she reached the grilled platforms where the stairways reversed direction. All the while she watched the tiny white speck of the boat, seemingly immobile now that it was so far away, but undoubtedly narrowing the distance to the node with each minute. As she worked her way down she had plenty of time to think about what was going through the delegate's head. She was sure now that it was Weir. It did not really surprise her that he wanted to swim: it was what everyone who studied the Jugglers yearned for. But why make this unofficial attempt now when a little gentle persuasion would have made it possible anyway? Given Tak Thonburi's eagerness to please the delegates, it would not have been beyond the bounds of possibility for a swimming expedition to be organised... The corps would have protested, but just like Naqi they would have been given a forceful lesson in the refined art of political compromise.

But evidently Weir hadn't been prepared to wait. It all made sense, at any rate: the times when he had dodged away from the party before must have all been abortive attempts to reach the Jugglers. But only now had he been able to seize his opportunity.

Naqi reached the water level, where jetties floated on ceramic-sheathed pontoons. Most of the boats were suspended out of the water on cradles, to save their hulls from unnecessary degradation. Fortunately, there was an emergency rescue boat already afloat. Its formerly white hull had the

flaking, pea-green scab patterning of advanced rot, but it still had a dozen or so hours of seaworthiness in it. Naqi jumped aboard, released the boat from its moorings and fired up the thruster. In a moment she was racing away from the jetty, away from the vast, stained edifice of the Moat itself. She steered a course through the least viscous stretches of water, avoiding conspicuous rafts of green matter.

She peered ahead through the boat's spray-drenched shield. It had been easy to keep track of Weir's boat when she had been a hundred metres higher, but now she kept losing him behind swells or miniature islands of Juggler matter. After a minute or so she gave up trying to follow the boat, and instead diverted her concentration to finding the quickest route to the node.

She flipped on the radio. 'Jotah? This is Naqi. I'm in the water, closing on Weir.'

There was a pause, a crackle, then: 'What's the status?'

She had to shout over the abrasive *thump, thump, thump* of the boat, even though the thruster was nearly silent.

'I'll reach the node in four or five minutes. Can't see Weir, but I don't think it matters.'

'We can see him. He's still headed for the node.'

'Good. Can you spare some more boats, in case he decides to make a run for another node?'

'They'll be leaving in a minute or so. I'm waking everyone I can.'

'What about the other delegates?'

Sivaraksa did not answer her immediately. 'Most are still asleep. I have Amesha Crane and Simon Matsubara in my office, however.'

'Let me speak to them.'

'Just a moment,' he said, after the same brief hesitation.

'Crane here,' said the woman.

'I think I'm chasing Weir. Can you confirm that?'

'He isn't accounted for,' she told Naqi. 'But it'll be a few minutes until we can be certain it's him.'

'I'm not expecting a surprise. Weir already had a question mark over him, Amesha. We were waiting for him to try something.'

'Were you?' Perhaps it was her imagination, but Crane sounded genuinely surprised. 'Why? What had he done?'

'You don't know?'

'No...' Crane trailed off.

'He was one of us,' Matsubara said. 'A good... delegate. We had no reason to distrust him.'

Perhaps Naqi was imagining this as well, but it almost sounded as if Matsubara had intended to say 'disciple' rather than 'delegate'.

Crane came back on the radio. 'Please do your best to apprehend him, Naqi. This is a source of great embarrassment to us. He mustn't do any harm.'

Naqi gunned the boat harder, no longer bothering to avoid the smaller patches of organic matter. 'No,' she said. 'He mustn't.'

THREE

Something changed ahead.

'Naqi?' It was Jotah Sivaraksa's voice.

'What?'

'Weir's slowed his boat. From our vantage point it looks as if he's reached the perimeter of the node. He seems to be circumnavigating it.'

'I can't see him yet. He must be picking the best spot to dive in.'

'But it won't work, will it?' Sivaraksa asked. 'There has to be an element of cooperation with the Jugglers. They have to invite the swimmer to enter the sea, or nothing happens.'

'Maybe he doesn't realise that,' Naqi said, under her breath. It was of no concern to her how closely Weir was adhering to the usual method of initiating Juggler communion. Even if the Jugglers did not cooperate -- even if all Weir did was flounder in thick green water -- there was no telling the hidden harm that might be done. She had already grudgingly accepted the acceleration of the closure operation. There was no way she was going to tolerate another upset, another unwanted perturbation of the experimental system. Not on her watch.

'He's stopped,' Sivaraksa said excitedly. 'Can you see him yet?'

Naqi stood up in her seat, even though she felt perilously unbalanced. 'Wait. Yes, I think so. I'll be there in a minute or so.'

'What are you going to do?' Crane asked. 'I hesitate to say it, but Weir may not respond to rational argument at this point. Simply requesting that he leave the water won't necessarily work. Um, do you have a weapon?'

'Yes,' Naqi said. 'I'm sitting in it.'

She did not allow herself to relax, but at least now she felt that the situation was slipping back into her control. She would kill Weir rather than have him contaminate the node.

His boat was visible now only as a smudge of white, intermittently popping up between folds and hummocks of shifting green. Her imagination sketched in the details. Weir would be preparing to swim, stripping off until he was naked, or nearly so. Perhaps he would feel some kind of erotic charge as he prepared for immersion. She did not doubt that he would be apprehensive, and perhaps he would hesitate on the threshold of the act, teetering on the edge of the boat before committing himself to the water. But a fanatic desire had driven him this far and she doubted that it would fail him.

'Naqi----'

'Jotah?'

'Naqi, he's moving again. He didn't enter the water. He didn't even look like he had any intention of swimming.'

'He saw I was coming. I take it he's heading for the next closest node?'

'Perhaps...' But Jotah Sivaraksa sounded far from certain.

She saw the boat again. It was moving fast -- much faster than it had appeared before -- but that was only because she was now seeing lateral motion.

The next node was a distant island framed by the background of the Moat's encircling rim. If he headed that way she would be hard behind him all the way there as well. No matter his desire to swim, he must realise that she could thwart his every attempt.

Naqi looked back. The twin towers framing the cut were smothered in a haze of sea mist, their geometric details smeared into a vague suggestion of haphazard complexity. They suggested teetering, stratified sea-stacks, million-year-old towers of weathered and eroded rock guarding the narrow passage to the open ocean. Beneath them, winking in and out of clarity, she saw three or four other boats making their way into the Moat. The ponderous teardrop of a passenger dirigible was nosing away from the side of one of the towers, the low dawn sun throwing golden highlights

along the fluted lines of its gondola. Naqi made out the sleek deltoid of the *Voice of Evening's* shuttle, but it was still parked where it had landed.

She looked back to the node where Weir had hesitated.

Something was happening.

The node had become vastly more active than a minute earlier. It resembled a green, steep-sided volcanic island that was undergoing some catastrophic seismic calamity. The entire mass of the node was trembling, rocking and throbbing with an eerie regularity. Concentric swells of disturbed water raced away from it, sickening troughs that made the speeding boat pitch and slide. Naqi slowed her boat, some instinct telling her that it was now largely futile to pursue Weir. Then she turned around so that she faced the node properly and, cautiously, edged closer, ignoring the nausea she felt as the boat ducked and dived from crest to trough.

The node, like all nodes, had always shown a rich surface topology: fused hummocks and tendrils; fabulous domes and minarets and helter-skelters of organised biomass, linked and entangled by a telegraphic system of draping aerial tendrils. In any instant it resembled a human city -- or, more properly, a fairy-tale human city -- that had been efficiently smothered in green moss. The bright moving motes of sprites dodged through the interstices, the portholes and arches of the urban mass. The metropolitan structure only hinted at the node's Byzantine interior architecture, and much of that could only be glimpsed or implied.

But this node was like a city going insane. It was accelerating, running through cycles of urban renewal and redesign with indecent haste. Structures were evolving before Naqi's eyes. She had seen change this rapid just before Mina was taken, but normally those kinds of changes happened too slowly to be seen at all, like the daily movement of shadows.

The throbbing had decreased, but the flickering change was now throwing out a steady, warm, malodorous breeze. And when she stopped the boat -- she dared come no closer now -- Naqi heard the node. It was like the whisper of a billion forest leaves presaging a summer storm.

Whatever was happening here, it was about to become catastrophic.

Some fundamental organisation had been lost. The changes were happening too quickly, with too little central coordination. Tendrils thrashed like whips, unable to connect to anything. They flailed against each other. Structures were forming and collapsing. The node was fracturing, so that there were three, four, perhaps five distinct cores of flickering growth. As soon as she had the measure of it, the process shifted it all. Meagre light flickered within the epileptic mass. Sprites swarmed in confused flight patterns, orbiting mindlessly between foci. The sound of the node had become a distant shriek.

'It's dying...' Naqi breathed.

Weir had done something to it. What, she couldn't guess. But this could not be a coincidence.

The shrieking died down.

The breeze ceased.

The node had stopped its convulsions. She looked at it, hoping against hope that perhaps it had overcome whatever destabilising influence Weir had introduced. The structures were still misshapen, there was still an impression of incoherence, but the city was inert. The cycling motion of the sprites slowed, and a few of them dropped down into the mass, as if to roost.

A calm had descended.

Then Naqi heard another sound. It was lower than anything she had heard before -- almost subsonic. It sounded less like thunder than like a very distant, very heated conversation.

It was coming from the approximate centre of the node.

She watched as a smooth green mound rose from the centre, resembling a flattened hemisphere. It grew larger by the second, assimilating the malformed structures with quiet indifference. They disappeared into the surface of the mound as if into a wall of fog, but they did not emerge again. The mound only increased its size, rumbling towards Naqi. The entire mass of the node was changing into a single undifferentiated mass.

'Jotah...' she said.

'We see it, Naqi. We see it but we don't understand it.'

'Weir must have used some kind of... weapon against it,' she said.

'We don't know that he's harmed it... He might just have precipitated a change to a state we haven't documented.'

'That still makes it a weapon in my book. I'm scared, Jotah.'

'You think I'm not?'

Around her the sea was changing. She had forgotten about the submerged tendrils that connected the nodes. They were as thick as hawsers, and now they were writhing and thrashing just beneath the surface of the water. Green-tinged spume lifted into the air. It was as if unseen aquatic monsters were wrestling, locked in some dire, to-the-death contest.

'Naqi... We're seeing changes in the closest of the two remaining nodes.'

'No,' she said, as if denying it would make any difference.

'I'm sorry...'

'Where is Weir?'

'We've lost him. There's too much surface disturbance.'

She realised then what had to be done. The thought arrived in her head with a crashing urgency.

'Jotah... You have to close the sea-doors. Now. Immediately. Before whatever Weir's unleashed has a chance to reach open ocean. That also happens to be Weir's only escape route.'

Sivaraksa, to his credit, did not argue. 'Yes. You're right. I'll start closure. But it will take quite a few minutes...'

'I know, Jotah!'

She cursed herself for not having thought of this sooner, and cursed Sivaraksa for the same error. But she could hardly blame either of them. Closure had never been something to take lightly. A few hours ago it had been an event months in the future -- an experiment to test the willingness of the Jugglers to cooperate with human plans. Now it had turned into an emergency amputation, something to be done with brutal haste.

She peered at the gap between the towers. At the very least it would take several minutes for Sivaraksa to initiate closure. It was not simply a matter of pressing a button on his desk, but of rousing two or three specialist technicians, who would have to be immediately convinced that this was not some elaborate hoax. And then the machinery would have to work. The mechanisms that forced the sea-doors together had been tested numerous times... But the machinery had never been driven to its limit; the doors had never moved more than a few metres together. Now they would have to work perfectly, closing with watchmaker precision.

And when had anything on Turquoise ever worked the first time?

There. The tiniest, least perceptible narrowing of the gap. It was all happening with agonising slowness.

She looked back to what remained of the node. The mound had consumed all the biomass available to it and had now ceased its growth. It was as if a child had sculpted in clay some fantastically intricate model of a city, which a callous adult had then squashed into a single blank mass, erasing all trace of its former complexity. The closest of the remaining nodes was showing something of the same transformation, Naqi saw: it was running through the frantic cycle that had presaged the emergence of the mound. She guessed now that the cycle had been the node's attempt to nullify whatever Weir had used against it, like a computer trying to reallocate resources to compensate for some crippling viral attack.

She could do nothing for the Jugglers now.

Naqi turned the boat around and headed back towards the cut. The sea-doors had narrowed the gap by perhaps a quarter.

The changes taking place within the Moat had turned the water turbulent, even at the jetty. She hitched the boat to a mooring point and then took the elevator up the side of the wall, preferring to sprint the distance along the top rather than face the climb. By the time she reached the cut the doors were three-quarters of the way to closure and, to Naqi's immense relief, the machinery had yet to falter.

She approached the tower. She had expected to see more people out on the top of the Moat, even if she knew that Sivaraksa would still be in his control centre. But no one was around. This was just beginning to register as a distinct wrongness when Sivaraksa emerged into daylight, stumbling from the door at the foot of the tower.

For an instant she was on the point of calling his name. Then she realised that he was stumbling because he had been injured -- his fingers were scarlet with blood -- and that he was trying to get away from someone or something.

Naqi dropped to the ground behind a stack of construction slabs. Through gaps between the slabs she observed Sivaraksa. He was swatting at something, like a man being chased by a persistent wasp. Something tiny and silver harried him. More than one thing, in fact: a small swarm of them, streaming out the open door. Sivaraksa fell to his knees with a moan, brushing ineffectually at his tormentors. His face was turning red, smeared with his own blood. He slumped on one side.

Naqi remained frozen with fear.

A person stepped from the open door.

The figure was garbed in shades of fire. It was Amesha Crane. For an absurd moment Naqi assumed that the woman was about to spring to Sivaraksa's assistance. It was something about her demeanour. Naqi found it hard to believe that someone so apparently serene could commit such a violent act.

But Crane did not step closer to Sivaraksa. She merely extended her arms before her, with her fingers outspread. She sustained the oddly theatrical gesture, the muscles in her neck standing proud and rigid.

The silver things departed Sivaraksa.

They swarmed through the air, slowing as they neared Crane. Then, with a startling degree of orchestrated obedience, they slid onto her fingers, locked themselves around her wrists, clasped onto the lobes of her ears.

Her jewellery had attacked Sivaraksa.

Crane glanced at the man one last time, spun on her heels and then retreated back into the tower.

Naqi waited until she was certain the woman was not coming back, then started to emerge from behind the pile of slabs. But Sivaraksa saw her. He said nothing, but his agonised eyes widened enough for Naqi to get the warning. She remained where she was, her heart hammering.

Nothing happened for another minute.

Then something moved above, changing the play of light across the surface of the Moat. The *Voice of Evening's* shuttle was detaching from the tower, a flicker of white machinery beneath the manta curve of its hull.

The shuttle loitered above the cut, as if observing the final moment of closure. Naqi heard the huge doors grind shut. Then the shuttle banked and headed into the circular sea, no more than two hundred metres above the waves. Some distance out it halted and executed a sharp right-angled turn. Then it resumed its flight, moving concentrically around the inner wall.

Sivaraksa closed his eyes. She thought he might have died, but then he opened them again and made the tiniest of nods. Naqi left her place of hiding. She crossed the open ground to Sivaraksa in a low, crablike stoop.

She knelt down by him, cradling his head in one hand and holding his own hand with the other. 'Jotah... What happened?'

He managed to answer her. 'They turned on us. The nineteen other delegates. As soon as---- ' He paused, summoning strength. 'As soon as Weir made his move.'

'I don't understand.'

'Join the club,' he said, managing a smile.

'I need to get you inside,' she said.

'Won't help. Everyone else is dead. Or will be by now. They murdered us all.'

'No.'

'Kept me alive until the end. Wanted me to give the orders.' He coughed. Blood spattered her hand.

'I can still get you----'

'Naqi. Save yourself. Get help.'

She realised that he was about to die.

'The shuttle?'

'Looking for Weir. I think.'

'They want Weir back?'

'No. Heard them talking. They want Weir dead. They have to be sure.'

Naqi frowned. She understood none of this, or at least her understanding was only now beginning to crystallise. She had labelled Weir as the villain because he had harmed her beloved Pattern Jugglers. But Crane and her entourage had murdered people, dozens, if what Sivaraksa said was correct. They appeared to want Weir dead as well. So what did that make Weir, now?

'Jotah... I have to find Weir. I have to find out why he did this.' She looked back towards the centre of the Moat. The shuttle was continuing its search. 'Did your security people get a trace on him again?'

Sivaraksa was near the end. She thought he was never going to answer her. 'Yes,' he said finally. 'Yes, they found him again.'

'And? Any idea where he is? I might still be able to reach him before the shuttle does.'

'Wrong place.'

She leaned closer. 'Jotah?'

'Wrong place. Amesha's looking in the wrong place. Weir got through the cut. He's in the open ocean.'

'I'm going after him. Perhaps I can stop him...'

'Try,' Sivaraksa said. 'But I'm not sure what difference it will make. I have a feeling, Naqi. A very bad feeling. Things are ending. It was good, wasn't it? While it lasted?'

'I haven't given up just yet,' Naqi said.

He found one last nugget of strength. 'I knew you wouldn't. Right to trust you. One thing, Naqi. One thing that might make a difference... if it comes to the worst, that is----'

'Jotah?'

'Tak Thonburi told me this... the most top secret, known only to the Snowflake Council. Arviat, Naqi----'

For a moment she thought she had misheard him, or that he was sliding into delirium. 'Arviat? The city that sinned against the sea?'

'It was real,' Sivaraksa said.

*

There were a number of lifeboats and emergency service craft stored at the top of near-vertical slipways, a hundred metres above the external sea. She took a small but fast emergency craft with a sealed cockpit, her stomach knotting as the vessel commenced its slide towards the ocean. The boat submerged before resurfacing, boosted up to speed and then deployed ceramic hydrofoils to minimise the contact between the hull and the water. Naqi had no precise heading to follow, but she believed Weir would have followed a reasonably straight line away from the cut, aiming to get as far away from the Moat as possible before the other delegates realised their mistake. It would

require only a small deviation from that course to take him to the nearest external node, which was as likely a destination as any.

When she was twenty kilometres from the Moat, Naqi allowed herself a moment to look back. The structure was a thin white line etched on the horizon, the towers and the now-sealed cut faintly visible as interruptions in the line's smoothness. Quills of dark smoke climbed from a dozen spots along the length of the structure. It was too far for Naqi to be certain that she saw flames licking from the towers, but she considered it likely.

The closest external node appeared over the horizon fifteen minutes later. It was nowhere as impressive as the one that had taken Mina, but it was still a larger, more complex structure than any of the nodes that had formed within the Moat -- a major urban megalopolis, perhaps, rather than a moderately sized city. Against the skyline Naqi saw spires and rotundas and coronets of green, bridged by a tracery of elevated tendrils. Sprites were rapidly moving silhouettes. There was motion, but it was largely confined to the flying creatures. The node was not yet showing the frenzied changes she had witnessed within the Moat.

Had Weir gone somewhere else?

She pressed onwards, slowing the boat slightly now that the water was thickening with micro-organisms and it was necessary to steer around the occasional larger floating structure. The boat's sonar picked out dozens of submerged tendrils converging on the node, suspended just below the surface. The tendrils reached away in all directions, to the limits of the boat's sonar range. Most would have reached over the horizon, to nodes many hundreds of kilometres away. But it was a topological certainty that some of them had been connected to the nodes inside the Moat. Evidently, Weir's contagion had never escaped through the cut. Naqi doubted that the doors had closed in time to impede whatever chemical signals were transmitting the fatal message. It was more likely that some latent Juggler self-protection mechanism had cut in, the dying nodes sending emergency termination-of-connection signals that forced the tendrils to sever without human assistance.

Naqi had just decided that she had guessed wrongly about Weir's plan when she saw a rectilinear furrow gouged right through one of the largest subsidiary structures. The wound was healing itself as she watched -- it would be gone in a matter of minutes -- but enough remained for her to tell that Weir's boat must have cleaved through the mass very recently. It made sense. Weir had already demonstrated that he had no interest in preserving the Pattern Jugglers.

With renewed determination, Naqi gunned the boat forward. She no longer worried about inflicting local damage on the floating masses. There was a great deal more at stake than the well-being of a single node.

She felt a warmth on the back of her neck.

At the same instant the sky, sea and floating structures ahead of her pulsed with a cruel brightness. Her own shadow stretched forward ominously. The brightness faded over the next few seconds, and then she dared to look back, half-knowing what she would see.

A mass of hot, roiling gas was climbing into the air from the centre of the node. It tugged a column of matter beneath it, like the knotted and gnarled spinal column of a horribly swollen brain. Against the mushroom cloud she saw the tiny moving speck of the delegates' shuttle.

A minute later the sound of the explosion reached her, but although it was easily the loudest thing she had ever heard, it was not as deafening as she had expected. The boat lurched; the sea fumed, and then was still again. She assumed that the Moat's wall had absorbed much of the energy of the blast.

Suddenly fearful that there might be another explosion, Naqi turned back towards the node. At the same instant she saw Weir's boat, racing perhaps three hundred metres ahead of her. He was beginning to curve and slow as he neared the impassable perimeter of the node. Naqi knew that she did not have time to delay.

That was when Weir saw her. His boat sped up again, arcing hard away. Naqi steered immediately, certain that her boat was faster and that it was now only a matter of time before she

had him. A minute later Weir's boat disappeared around the curve of the node's perimeter. She might have stood a chance of getting an echo from his hull, but this close to the node all sonar returns were too garbled to be of any use. Naqi steered anyway, hoping that Weir would make the tactical mistake of striking for another node. In open water he stood no chance at all, but perhaps he understood that as well.

She had circumnavigated a third of the node's perimeter when she caught up with him again. He had not tried to run for it. Instead he had brought the boat to a halt within the comparative shelter of an inlet on the perimeter. He was standing up at the rear of the boat, with something small and dark in his hand.

Naqi slowed her boat as she approached him. She had popped back the canopy before it occurred to her that Weir might be equipped with the same weapons as Crane.

She stood up herself. 'Weir?'

He smiled. 'I'm sorry to have caused so much trouble. But I don't think it could have happened any other way.'

She let this pass. 'That thing in your hand?'

'Yes?'

'It's a weapon, isn't it?'

She could see it clearly now. It was merely a glass bauble, little larger than a child's marble. There was something opaque inside it, but she could not tell if it contained fluid or dark crystals.

'I doubt that a denial would be very plausible at this point.' He nodded, and she sensed the lifting, partially at least, of some appalling burden. 'Yes, it's a weapon. A Juggler killer.'

'Until today, I'd have said no such thing was possible.'

'I doubt that it was very easy to synthesise. Countless biological entities have entered their oceans, and none of them have ever brought anything with them that the Jugglers couldn't assimilate in a harmless fashion. Doubtless some of those entities tried to inflict deliberate harm, if only out of morbid curiosity. None of them succeeded. Of course, you can kill Jugglers by brute force----' He looked towards the Moat, where the mushroom cloud was dissipating. 'But that isn't the point. Not subtle. But this is. It exploits a logical flaw in the Jugglers' own informational processing algorithms. It's insidious. And no, humans most certainly didn't invent it. We're clever, but we're not *that* clever.'

Naqi strove to keep him talking. 'Who made it, Weir?'

'The Ultras sold it to us in a presynthesised form. I've heard rumours that it was found inside the topmost chamber of a heavily fortified alien structure... Another that it was synthesised by a rival group of Jugglers. Who knows? Who cares, even? It does what we ask of it. That's all that matters.'

'Please don't use it, Rafael.'

'I have to. It's what I came here to do.'

'But I thought you all loved the Jugglers.'

His fingers caressed the glass globe. It looked terribly fragile. 'We?'

'Crane... Her delegates.'

'They do. But I'm not one of them.'

'Tell me what this is about, Rafael.'

'It would be better if you just accepted what I have to do.'

Naqi swallowed. 'If you kill them, you kill more than just an alien life form. You erase the memory of every sentient creature that's ever entered the ocean.'

'Unfortunately, that rather happens to be the point.'

Weir dropped the glass into the sea.

It hit the water, bobbed under and then popped back out again, floating on the surface. The small globe was already immersed in a brackish scum of grey-green micro-organisms. They were beginning to lap higher up the sides of the globe, exploring it. A couple of millimetres of ordinary

glass would succumb to Juggler erosion in perhaps thirty minutes... But Naqi guessed that this was not ordinary glass, that it was designed to degrade much more rapidly.

She jumped back down into her control seat and shot her boat forward. She came alongside Weir's boat, trapping the globe between the two craft. Taking desperate care not to nudge the hulls together, she stopped her boat and leaned over as far as she could without falling in. Her fingertips brushed the glass. Maddeningly, she could not quite get a grip on it. She made one last valiant effort and it drifted beyond her reach. Now it was out of her range, no matter how hard she stretched. Weir watched impassively.

Naqi slipped into the water. The layer of Juggler organisms licked her chin and nose, the smell immediate and overwhelming now that she was in such close proximity. Her fear was absolute. It was the first time she had entered the water since Mina's death.

She caught the globe, taking hold of it with the exquisite care she might have reserved for a rare bird's egg.

Already the glass had the porous texture of pumice.

She held it up, for Weir to see.

'I won't let you do this, Rafael.'

'I admire your concern.'

'It's more than concern. My sister is here. She's in the ocean. And I won't let you take her away from me.'

Weir reached inside a pocket and removed another globe.

They sped away from the node in Naqi's boat. The new globe rested in his hand like a gift. He had not yet dropped it in the sea, although the possibility was only ever an instant away. They were far from any node now, but the globe would be guaranteed to come into contact with Juggler matter sooner or later.

Naqi opened a watertight equipment locker, pushing aside the flare pistol and first-aid kit that lay within. Carefully she placed the globe within, and then watched in horror as the glass immediately cracked and dissolved, releasing its poison: little black irregularly shaped grains like burnt sugar. If the boat sank, the locker would eventually be consumed into the ocean, along with its fatal contents. She considered using the flare pistol to incinerate the remains, but there was too much danger of dispersing it at the same time. Perhaps the toxin had a restricted lifespan once it came into contact with air, but that was nothing she could count on.

But Weir had not thrown the third globe into sea. Not yet. Something she had said had made him hesitate.

'Your sister?'

'You know the story,' Naqi said. 'Mina was a conformal. The ocean assimilated her entirely, rather than just recording her neural patterns. It took her as a prize.'

'And you believe that she's still present, in some sentient sense?'

'That's what I choose to believe, yes. And there's enough anecdotal evidence from other swimmers that conformals do persist, in a more coherent form than other stored patterns.'

'I can't let anecdotal evidence sway me, Naqi. Have the other swimmers specifically reported encounters with Mina?'

'No... ' Naqi said carefully. She was sure that he would see through any lie that she attempted. 'But they wouldn't necessarily recognise her if they did.'

'And you? Did you attempt to swim yourself?'

'The swimmer corps would never have allowed me.'

'Not my question. Did you ever swim?'

'Once,' Naqi said.

'And?'

'It didn't count. It was the same time that Mina died.' She paused and then told him all that had happened. 'We were seeing more sprite activity than we'd ever recorded. It looked like coincidence---'

'I don't think it was.'

Naqi said nothing. She waited for Weir to collect his own thoughts, concentrating on the steering of the boat. Open sea lay ahead, but she knew that almost any direction would bring them to a cluster of nodes within a few hours.

'It began with *Pelican of Impiety*,' Weir said. 'A century ago. There was a man from Zion on that ship. During the stopover he descended to the surface of Turquoise and swam in your ocean. He made contact with the Jugglers and then swam again. The second time the experience was even more affecting. On the third occasion, the sea swallowed him. He'd been a conformal, just like your sister. His name was Ormazd.'

'It means nothing to me.'

'I assure you that on his homeworld it means a great deal more. Ormazd was a failed tyrant, fleeing a political counterrevolution on Zion. He had murdered and cheated his way to power on Zion, burning his rivals in their houses while they slept. But there'd been a backlash. He got out just before the ring closed around him -- him and a handful of his closest allies and devotees. They escaped aboard *Pelican in Impiety*.'

'And Ormazd died here?'

'Yes -- but his followers didn't. They made it to Haven, our world. And once there they began to proliferate, spreading their word, recruiting new followers. It didn't matter that Ormazd was gone. Quite the opposite. He'd martyred himself: given them a saint figure to worship. It evolved from a political movement into a religious cult. The Vahishta Foundation's just a front for the Ormazd sect.'

Naqi absorbed that, then asked, 'Where does Amesha come into it?'

'Amesha was his daughter. She wants her father back.'

Something lit the horizon, a pink-edged flash. Another followed a minute later, in nearly the same position.

'She wants to commune with him?'

'More than that,' said Weir. 'They all want to *become* him; to accept his neural patterns on their own. They want the Jugglers to imprint Ormazd's personality on all his followers, to remake them in his own image. The aliens will do that, if the right gifts are offered. And that's what I can't allow.'

Naqi chose her words carefully, sensing that the tiniest thing could push Weir into releasing the globe. She had prevented his last attempt, but he would not allow her a second chance. All he would have to do would be to crush the globe in his fist before spilling the contents into the ocean. Then it would all be over. Everything she had ever known; everything she had ever lived for.

'But we're only talking about nineteen people,' she said.

Weir laughed hollowly. 'I'm afraid it's a little more than that. Why don't you turn on the radio and see what I mean?'

Naqi did as he suggested, using the boat's general communications console. The small, scuffed screen received television pictures beamed down from the comsat network. Naqi flicked through channels, finding static on most of them. The Snowflake Council's official news service was off the air and no personal messages were getting through. There were some suggestions that the comsat network itself was damaged. Yet finally Naqi found a few weak broadcast signals from the nearest snowflake cities. There was a sense of desperation in the transmissions, as if they expected to fall silent at any time.

Weir nodded with weary acceptance, as if he had expected this.

In the last six hours at least a dozen more shuttles had come down from *Voice of Evening*, packed with armed Vahishta disciples. The shuttles had attacked the planet's major snowflake cities and atoll settlements, strafing them into submission. Three cities had fallen into the sea, their vacuum-bladders punctured by beam weapons. There could not have been any survivors. Others were still

aloft, but had been set on fire. The pictures showed citizens leaping from the cities' berthing arms, falling like sparks. More cities had been taken bloodlessly, and were now under control of the disciples.

None of those cities were transmitting now.

It was the end of the world. Naqi knew that she should be weeping, or at the very least feel some writhing sense of loss in her stomach. But all she got was a sense of denial; a refusal to accept that events could have escalated so quickly. This morning the only hint of wrongness had been a single absent disciple.

'There are tens of thousands of them up there,' Weir said. 'All that you've seen so far is the advance guard.'

Naqi scratched her forearm. It was itching, as if she had caught a dose of sunburn.

'Moreau was in on this?'

'Captain Moreau's a puppet. Literally. The body you saw was just being tele-operated by orbital disciples. They murdered the Ultras and commandeered the Ship----'

'Rafael, why didn't you tell us this before?'

'My position was too vulnerable. I was the only anti-Ormazd agent my movement managed to put aboard *Voice of Evening*. If I'd attempted to warn the Turquoise authorities... Well, work it out for yourself. Almost certainly I wouldn't have been believed, and the disciples would have found a way to silence me before I became an embarrassment. And it wouldn't have made a difference to their takeover plans. My only hope was to destroy the ocean, to remove its usefulness to them. They might still have destroyed your cities out of spite, but at least they'd have lost the final thread that connected them to their martyr.' Weir leaned closer to her. 'Don't you understand? It wouldn't have stopped with the disciples aboard the *Voice*. They'd have brought more ships from Haven. Your ocean would have become a production line for despots.'

'Why did they hesitate, if they had such a crushing advantage over us?'

'They didn't know about me, so they lost nothing by dedicating a few weeks to intelligence-gathering. They wanted to know as much as possible about Turquoise and the Jugglers before they made their move. They're brutal, but they're not inefficient. They wanted their takeover to be as precise and surgical as possible.'

'And now?'

'They've accepted that things won't be quite that neat and tidy.' He flipped the globe from one palm to another, with a casual playfulness that Naqi found alarming. 'They're serious, Naqi. Crane will stop at nothing now. You've seen those blast flashes. Pinpoint anti-matter devices. They've already sterilised the organic matter within the Moat, to stop the effect of my weapon from reaching further. If they know where we are, they'll drop a bomb on us as well.'

'Human evil doesn't give us the excuse to wipe out the ocean.'

'It's not an excuse, Naqi. It's an imperative.'

At that moment something glinted on the horizon, something that was moving slowly from east to west.

'The shuttle,' Weir said. 'It's looking for us.'

Naqi scratched her arm again. It was discoloured, itching.

Near local noon they reached the next node. The shuttle had continued to dog them, nosing to and fro along the hazy band where sea met sky. Sometimes it appeared closer, sometimes it appeared further away, but it never left them alone, and Naqi knew that it would be only a matter of time before it detected a positive homing trace, a chemical or physical note in the water that would lead it to its quarry. The shuttle would cover the remaining distance in seconds, a minute at the most, and then all that she and Weir would know would be a moment of cleansing whiteness, a fire of holy purity. Even if Weir released his toxin just before the shuttle arrived, it would not have time to dissipate into a wide enough volume of water to survive the fireball.

So why was he hesitating? It was Mina, of course. Naqi had given a name to the faceless library of stored minds he was prepared to erase. By naming her sister, Naqi had removed the one-sidedness of the moral equation, and now Weir had to accept that his own actions could never be entirely blameless. He was no longer purely objective.

'I should just do this,' he said. 'By hesitating even for a second, I'm betraying the trust of the people who sent me here, people who have probably been tormented to extinction by Ormazd's followers by now.'

Naqi shook her head. 'If you didn't show doubt, you'd be as bad as the disciples.'

'You almost sound as if you want me to do it.'

She groped for something resembling the truth, as painful as that might be. 'Perhaps I do.'

'Even though it would mean killing whatever part of Mina survived?'

'I've lived in her shadow my entire life. Even after she died... I always felt she was still watching me, still observing my every mistake, still being faintly disappointed that I wasn't living up to all she had imagined I could be.'

'You're being harsh on yourself. Harsh on Mina too, by the sound of things.'

'I know,' Naqi said angrily. 'I'm just telling you how I feel.'

The boat edged into a curving inlet that pushed deep into the node. Naqi felt less vulnerable now: there was a significant depth of organic matter to screen the boat from any sideways-looking sensors that the shuttle might have deployed, even though the evidence suggested that the shuttle's sensors were mainly focused down from its hull. The disadvantage was that it was no longer possible to keep a constant vigil on the shuttle's movements. It could be on its way already.

She brought the boat to a halt and stood up in her control seat.

'What's happening?' Weir asked.

'I've come to a decision.'

'Isn't that my job?'

Her anger -- brief as it was, and directed less at Weir than at the hopelessness of the situation -- had evaporated. 'I mean about swimming. It's the one thing we haven't considered yet, Rafael. That there might be a third way: a choice between accepting the disciples and letting the ocean die.'

'I don't see what that could be.'

'Nor do I. But the ocean might find a way. It just needs the knowledge of what's at stake.' She stroked her forearm again, marvelling at the sudden eruption of fungal patterns. They must have been latent for many years, but now something had caused them to flare up.

Even in daylight, emeralds and blues shone against her skin. She suspected that the biochemical changes had been triggered when she entered the water to snatch the globe. Given that, she could not help but view it as a message. An invitation, perhaps. Or was it a warning, reminding her of the dangers of swimming?

She had no idea, but for her peace of mind, however -- and given the lack of alternatives -- she chose to view it as an invitation.

But she did not dare wonder who was inviting her.

'You think the ocean can understand external events?' Weir asked.

'You said it yourself, Rafael: the night they told us the ship was coming, somehow that information reached the sea -- via a swimmer's memories, perhaps. And the Jugglers knew then that this was something significant. Perhaps it was Ormazd's personality, rising to the fore.'

Or maybe it was merely the vast, choral mind of the ocean, apprehending only that *something* was going to happen.

'Either way,' Naqi said. 'It still makes me think that there might be a chance.'

'I only wish I shared your optimism.'

'Give me this chance, Rafael. That's all I ask.'

Naqi removed her clothes, less concerned that Weir would see her naked now than that she should have something to wear when she emerged. But although Weir studied her with unconcealed

fascination, there was nothing prurient about it. What commanded his attention, Naqi realised, were the elaborate and florid patterning of the fungal markings. They curled and twined about her chest and abdomen and thighs, shining with a hypnotic intensity.

'You're changing,' he said.

'We all change,' Naqi answered.

Then she stepped from the side of the boat, into the water.

The process of descending into the ocean's embrace was much as she remembered it that first time, with Mina beside her. She willed her body to submit to the biochemical invasion, forcing down her fear and apprehension, knowing that she had been through this once before and that it was something that she could survive again. She did her best not to think about what it would mean to survive beyond this day, when all else had been shattered, every certainty crumbled.

Mina came to her with merciful speed.

Naqi?

I'm here. Oh, Mina, I'm here. There was terror and there was joy, alloyed together. *It's been so long.*

Naqi felt her sister's presence edge in and out of proximity and focus. Sometimes she appeared to share the same physical space. At other times she was scarcely more than a vague feeling of attentiveness.

How long?

Two years, Mina.

Mina's answer took an eternity to come. In that dreadful hiatus Naqi felt other minds crowd against her own, some of which were so far from human that she gasped at their oddity. Mina was only one of the conformal minds that had noticed her arrival, and not all were as benignly curious or glad.

It doesn't feel like two years to me.

How long?

Days... hours... It changes.

What do you remember?

Mina's presence danced around Naqi. *I remember what I remember. That we swam, when we weren't meant to. That something happened to me, and I never left the ocean.*

You became part of it, Mina.

The triumphalism of her answer shocked Naqi to the marrow. *Yes!*

You wanted this?

You would want it, if you knew what it was like. You could have stayed, Naqi. You could have let it happen to you, the way it happened to me. We were so alike.

I was scared.

Yes, I remember.

Naqi knew that she had to get to the heart of things. Time was passing differently here -- witness Mina's confusion about how long she had been part of the ocean -- and there was no telling how patient Weir would be. He might not wait until Naqi reemerged before deploying the Juggler killer.

There was another mind, Mina. We encountered it, and it scared me. Enough that I had to leave the ocean. Enough that I never wanted to go back.

You've come back now.

It's because of that other mind. It belonged to a man called Ormazd. Something very bad is going to happen because of him. One way or the other.

There was a moment then that transcended anything Naqi had experienced before. She felt herself and Mina become inseparable. She could not only not say where one began and the other ended, but it was entirely pointless to even think in those terms. If only fleetingly, Mina had *become* her. Every thought, every memory, was open to equal scrutiny by both of them.

Naqi understood what it was like for Mina. Her sister's memories were rapturous. She might only have sensed the passing of hours or days, but that belied the richness of her experience since merging with the ocean. She had exchanged experience with countless alien minds, drinking in entire histories beyond normal human comprehension. And in that moment of sharing, Naqi appreciated something of the reason for her sister having been taken in the first place. Conformals were the ocean's way of managing itself. Now and then the maintenance of the vaster archive of static minds required stewardship -- the drawing-in of independent intelligences. Mina had been selected and utilised, and given rewards beyond imagining for her efforts. The ocean had tapped the structure of her intelligence at a subconscious level. Only now and then had she ever felt that she was being directly petitioned on a matter of importance.

But Ormazd's mind...?

Mina had seen Naqi's memories now. She would know exactly what was at stake, and she would know exactly what that mind represented.

I was always aware of him. He wasn't always there -- he liked to hide himself -- but even when he was absent, he left a shadow of himself. I even think he might be the reason the ocean took me as a conformal. It sensed a coming crisis. It knew Ormazd had something to do with it. It had made a terrible mistake by swallowing him. So it reached out for new allies, minds it could trust.

Minds like Mina, Naqi thought. In that instant she did not know whether to admire the Pattern Jugglers or detest them for their heartlessness.

Ormazd was contaminating it?

His influence was strong. His force of personality was a kind of poison in its own right. The Pattern Jugglers knew that, I think.

Why couldn't they just eject his patterns?

They couldn't. It doesn't work that way. The sea is a storage medium, but it has no self-censoring facility. If the individual minds detect a malign presence, they can resist it... But Ormazd's mind is human. There aren't enough of us here to make a difference, Naqi. The other minds are too alien to recognise Ormazd for what he is. They just see a sentience.

Who made the Pattern Jugglers, Mina? Answer me that, will you?

She sensed Mina's amusement.

Even the Jugglers don't know that, Naqi. Or why.

You have to help us, Mina. You have to communicate the urgency of this to the rest of the ocean.

I'm one mind amongst many, Naqi. One voice in the chorus.

You still have to find a way. Please, Mina. Understand this, if nothing else. You could die. You could all die. I lost you once, but now I know you never really went away. I don't want to have to lose you again, for good.

You didn't lose me, Naqi. I lost you.

She hauled herself from the water. Weir was waiting where she had left him, with the intact globe still resting in his hand. The daylight shadows had moved a little, but not as much as she had feared. She made eye contact with Weir, wordlessly communicating a question.

'The shuttle's come closer. It's flown over the node twice while you were under. I think I need to do this, Naqi.'

He had the globe between thumb and forefinger, ready to drop it into the water.

She was shivering. Naqi pulled on her shorts and shirt, but she felt just as cold afterwards. The fungal marks were shimmering intensely; they appeared almost to hover above her skin. If anything they were shining more furiously than before she had swum. Naqi did not doubt that if she had lingered -- if she had stayed with Mina -- she would have become a conformal as well. It had always been in her, but it was only now that her time had come.

'Please wait,' Naqi said, her own voice sounding pathetic and childlike. 'Please wait, Rafael.'

'There it is again.'

The shuttle was a fleck of white sliding over the top of the nearest wall of Juggler biomass. It was five or six kilometres away, much closer than the last time Naqi had seen it. Now it came to a sudden sharp halt, hovering above the surface of the ocean as if it had found something of particular interest.

'Do you think it knows we're here?'

'It suspects something,' Weir said. The globe rolled between his fingers.

'Look,' Naqi said.

The shuttle was still hovering. Naqi stood up to get a better view, nervous of making herself visible but desperately curious. Something was happening. She *knew* something was happening.

Kilometres away, the sea was bellying up beneath the shuttle. The water was the colour of moss, supersaturated with micro-organisms. Naqi watched as a coil of solid green matter reached from the ocean, twisting and writhing. It was as thick as a building, spilling vast rivulets of water as it emerged. It extended upwards with astonishing haste, bifurcating and flexing like a groping fist. For a brief moment it closed around the shuttle. Then it slithered back into the sea with a titanic splash; a prolonged roar of spent energy. The shuttle continued to hover above the same spot, as if oblivious to what had just happened. Yet the manta-shaped craft's white hull was lathered with various hues of green. And Naqi understood: what had happened to the shuttle was what had happened to Arviat, the city that drowned. She could not begin to guess the crime that Arviat had committed against the sea, the crime that had merited its destruction, but she could believe -- now, at least -- that the Jugglers had been capable of dragging it beneath the waves, ripping the main mass of the city away from the bladders that held it aloft. And of course such a thing would have to be kept maximally secret, known only to a handful of individuals. For otherwise no city would ever feel safe when the sea roiled and groaned beneath it.

But a city was not a shuttle. Even if the Juggler material started eating away the fabric of the shuttle, it would still take hours to do any serious damage... And that was assuming the Ultras had no better protection than the ceramic shielding used on Turquoise boats and machines...

But the shuttle was already tilting over.

Naqi watched it pitch, attempt to regain stability and then pitch again. She understood, belatedly. The organic matter was clogging the shuttle's whisking propulsion systems, limiting its ability to hover. The shuttle was curving inexorably closer to the sea, spiralling steeply away from the node. It approached the surface and then, just before the moment of impact, another misshapen fist of organised matter thrust from the sea, seizing the hull in its entirety. That was the last Naqi saw of it.

A troubled calm fell on the scene. The sky overhead was unmarred by queuing machinery. Only the thin whisper of smoke rising from the horizon, in the direction of the Moat, hinted of the day's events.

Minutes passed, and then tens of minutes. Then a rapid series of bright flashes strobed from beneath the surface of the sea itself.

'That was the shuttle,' Weir said, wonderingly.

Naqi nodded. 'The Jugglers are fighting back. This is more or less what I hoped would happen.'

'You asked for this?'

'I think Mina understood what was needed. Evidently she managed to convince the rest of the ocean, or at least this part of it.'

'Let's see.'

They searched the airwaves again. The comsat network was dead, or silent. Even fewer cities were transmitting now. But those that were -- those that had not been overrun by Ormazd's disciples -- told a frightening story. The ocean was clawing at them, trying to drag them into the sea. Weather patterns were shifting, entire storms being conjured into existence by the orchestrated circulation of vast ocean currents. It was happening in concentric waves, racing away from the precise point in the ocean where Naqi had swum. Some cities had already fallen into the sea, though it was not clear whether this had been brought about by the Jugglers themselves or because of damage to their

vacuum-bladders. There were people in the water: hundreds, thousands of them. They were swimming, trying to stay afloat, trying not to drown.

But what exactly did it mean to drown on Turquoise?

'It's happening all over the planet,' Naqi said. She was still shivering, but now it was as much a shiver of awe as one of cold. 'It's denying itself to us by smashing our cities.'

'Your cities never harmed it.'

'I don't think it's really that interested in making a distinction between one bunch of people and another, Rafael. It's just getting rid of us all, disciples or not. You can't really blame it for that, can you?'

'I'm sorry,' Weir said.

He cracked the globe, spilled its contents into the sea.

Naqi knew there was nothing she could do now; there was no prospect of recovering the tiny black grains. She would only have to miss one, and it would be as bad as missing them all.

The little black grains vanished beneath the olive surface of the water.

It was done.

Weir looked at her, his eyes desperate for forgiveness.

'You understand that I had to do this, don't you? It isn't something I do lightly.'

'I know. But it wasn't necessary. The ocean's already turned against us. Crane has lost. Ormazd has lost.'

'Perhaps you're right,' Weir said. 'But I couldn't take the chance that we might be wrong. At least this way I know for sure.'

'You've murdered a world.'

He nodded. 'It's exactly what I came here to do. Please don't blame me for it.'

Naqi opened the equipment locker where she had stowed the broken vial of Juggler toxin. She removed the flare pistol, snatched away its safety pin and pointed it at Weir. 'I don't blame you, no. Don't even hate you for it.'

He started to say something, but Naqi cut him off.

'But it's not something I can forgive.'

She sat in silence, alone, until the node became active. The organic structures around her were beginning to show the same kinds of frantic rearrangement Naqi had seen within the Moat. There was a cold sharp breeze from the node's heart.

It was time to leave.

She steered the boat away from the node, cautiously, still not completely convinced that she was safe from the delegates even though the first shuttle had been destroyed. Undoubtedly the loss of that craft would have been communicated to the others, and before very long some more of them would arrive, bristling with belligerence. The ocean might attempt to destroy the new arrivals, but this time the delegates would be profoundly suspicious.

She brought the boat to a halt when she was a kilometre from the fringe of the node. By then it was running through the same crazed alterations she had previously witnessed. She felt the same howling wind of change. In a moment the end would come. The toxin would seep into the node's controlling core, instructing the entire biomass to degrade itself to a lump of dumb vegetable matter. The same killing instructions would already be travelling along the internode tendril connections, winging their way over the horizon. Allowing for the topology of the network, it would only take fifteen or twenty hours for the message to reach every node on the planet. Within a day it would be over. The Jugglers would be gone, the information they'd encoded erased beyond recall. And Turquoise itself would begin to die at the same time, its oxygen atmosphere no longer maintained by the oceanic organisms.

Another five minutes passed, then ten.

The node's transformations were growing less hectic. She recalled this moment of false calm. It meant only that the node had given up trying to counteract the toxin, accepting the logical inevitability of its fate. A thousand times over this would be repeated around Turquoise. Towards the end, she guessed, there would be less resistance, for the sheer futility of it would have been obvious. The world would accept its fate.

Another five minutes passed.

The node remained. The structures were changing, but only gently. There was no sign of the emerging mound of undifferentiated matter she had seen before.

What was happening?

She waited another quarter of an hour and then steered the boat back towards the node, bumping past Weir's floating corpse on the way. Tentatively, an idea was forming in her mind. It appeared that the node had absorbed the toxin without dying. Was it possible that Weir had made a mistake? Was it possible that the toxin's effectiveness depended only on it being used once?

Perhaps.

There still had to be tendril connections between the Moat and the rest of the ocean at the time that the first wave of transformations had taken place. They had been severed later -- either when the doors closed, or by some autonomic process within the extended organism itself -- but until that moment, there would still have been informational links with the wider network of nodes. Could the dying nodes have sent sufficient warning that the other nodes were now able to find a strategy for protecting themselves?

Again, perhaps.

It never paid to take anything for granted where the Jugglers were concerned.

She parked the boat by the node's periphery. Naqi stood up and removed her clothes for the final time, certain that she would not need them again. She looked down at herself, astonished at the vivid tracery of green that now covered her body. On one level, the evidence of alien cellular invasion was quite horrific.

On another, it was startlingly beautiful.

Smoke licked from the horizon. Machines clawed through the sky, hunting nervously. She stepped to the edge of the boat, tensing herself at the moment of commitment. Her fear subsided, replaced by an intense, loving calm. She stood on the threshold of something alien, but in place of terror what she felt was only an imminent sense of homecoming. Mina was waiting for her below. Together, nothing could stop them.

Naqi smiled, spread her arms and returned to the sea.