

2: In the Duat

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[[Copyright](#)] [[Feedback](#)] Oshi Adjani was dreaming.

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

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

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

"What time is it?" he asked.

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

Ivan smiled up at her lazily. White irises, white teeth, the rest of him as deep a brown as she had ever seen. He'd taken out his contacts, the ones she liked him to wear. "And is that any reason to get up?" he asked. "Tell me, is it? Is it?"

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

"Hey, did I rattle your cage? Was it --" His eyes widened further and they weren't smiling any more. *What ...* A gut-deep fear lit her bones up with cold fire, burning from the inside out. (*This happens every night, every time I dream.*) She tried to look round, to confront

whatever he saw over her shoulder, because she knew she could protect him from it if she could see it in time; but it was like staring into her blind spot. A zone that shimmered into brightness, a white of total saturation, meaningless optical noise ... hanging in front of her face like a threat and a reminder ...

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

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

"*No!*" She said it aloud, awake now, aware that her eyes were shut: yet still she tried to sleep, blindly trying to thrust herself back into the dream in which he was still alive and warm -- "go 'way."

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

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

Helmut, a damp, glum presence, blinked at her from across the room. He was part of the backup crew who had scraped Oshi in after her last mission, gathering up the pieces with infinite care: medical support. An engineer to combat-tune the reflexes of front-line staff like Oshi. "I have remote override on the microdoctors in your spinal ganglia. Just kick-fired a few nerve trunks ..."

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

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

"There'll be time." She stood up, naked, flexing muscles that were stronger than they had been even yesterday. She stared at him, unblinkingly. "Would you mind leaving?"

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

"It's not that," she said flatly, bending to retrieve an overall from the chair where the

wardrobe had placed it: "I just want some time to think. Please." *The Boss wants to talk to me.* That was one thought she could do without. She'd scrupulously avoided thinking about it, ever since she'd been rescued from the shuttle in low orbit, even though she knew it was inevitable. Well then, she would tackle it in due course. One step at a time.

Oshi's room was incredibly bare. There was nothing but a white-walled cell with a bed in it, and a blank frame that could pretend to be a window. Holograms could hang there, illusory worldsapes for the homesick; Oshi wanted none of that. She shuddered for a moment, clenching her eyes tightly shut against the emptiness, then snapped her fingers. A sink extruded from one wall and she let it wash and clean her face with expert, impersonal hands. After it dried her with a fresh, unscented towel, it brushed and styled her hair as she liked it: short, sleek, and aggressive. *Better*, she thought, yawning at her reflection in its monitor: *I almost look human.* She tried to smile at herself then winced, remembering the pale vulnerabilities of night. It still took her breath away, her own casual acceptance of vision. She dressed in silence, equipping herself for the day ahead.

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

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

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

He seemed surprised. "I thought you'd have checked the news," he said.

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

The architecture of the station was customised to fit the vasculature of a hollowed-out asteroid, a design perfected through many generations of development and experimentation. It resembled a mass of trees and diamond bubbles: big trees, gene-restricted to grow *out* rather than *up*, that filled the troglodyte caverns and ulcerous tunnels with an explosion of foliage. Butterflies flickered between blossoming orchids and creeping convolvulus, their wings moving lazily in the low-gee environment of the spinning rock. From the outside the base resembled a cinder, dark and angular in the harsh perspectives of vacuum; stealth screens concealed the subterranean eden within.

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

happening?"

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

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

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

"Ack." Working her jaws to swallow her disgust, Oshi glanced at Helmut. "Did you get that?"

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

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

Oshi didn't want to be around other people right now. It wasn't anything she could articulate: a fear of confronting what she'd done, perhaps, tainted with revulsion at the other station occupants' unfeeling voyeurism. (Everyone she met fawned over her, wanting to know: *what was it like?*) Since leaving New Salazar she carried a creeping sense of guilt. It was as if righteous fury could decay to uncertainty and the nasty paranoia of a middle-aged war criminal waiting for the police to knock on the door. She had been tempted to bite Helmut's head off: not a tactful move to make on one's physician. But he made her nervous. Just another nasty staring presence hanging around her, reeking of prurient curiosity. (Ask the hangman: *what was it like?*) She couldn't shake off the feeling that everyone know exactly what she'd done. It was everywhere in the air of the station, the stench of an original sin.

Oshi flew round the bend and into a drop tube running between levels. She clung to a vine and let it pull her along, wafting past stands of succulent cacti tended by hoverfly robots the size of gnats. Given the burden of memories she carried, she decided, she felt remarkably empty. Scooped out, as if Year Zero Man had deprived her of insight into her

purpose. She shook her head, trying to clear the fog in it, edgily wondering what this could all mean. The Boss wanted to talk to her in person -- through His incarnate body -- and in her experience interviews with the management always boded ill.

Whoever designed the throne room had lacked all sense of humour, not to mention proportion. It was a parody of a mediaeval court: it nested deep inside the asteroid station, close by the battery of fusion reactors that powered the installation. The decor was a study in pointlessness: rectilinear walls lined with spurious flying buttresses, vegetable fibre tapestries, steps leading up to the throne itself, *steps* in zero gee. The Boss used it as a setting when he wanted he address the troops, declare stock options, congratulate or punish loyal workers and miscreants. Oshi hated it. It reminded her of other places, long ago. The air tasted of bullshit. Worse, whenever she spoke to the Boss -- which was rarely -- she had a nagging sense that he knew everything she was about to say before she framed it with her lips.

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

"Greetings, my dear!" He -- she reminded herself: no human, this -- sprawled across the tall-backed throne as if it was an armchair in some monstrous living room. He smiled and nodded in her direction, three massive chins jiggling in ponderous sympathy. Small, piggy eyes twinkled with alarming bonhomie. "And how are we feeling today?"

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

"Not exactly."

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

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

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

"How charming!" The Boss leaned forward, confidingly. "You know I consider your welfare to be important? I worry about you, my dear. If you are uncomfortable, please feel free to confide in me. You can rely on my discretion."

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

"Yes?" asked the Boss.

"I don't understand why," she said carefully. Licking dry lips, choosing words like footsteps through a minefield: "what we're doing in this system? Rubbing out a monster, fine. A good and principled action. But isn't it ... tangential?"

"Tangential?" He raised one thunderous eyebrow.

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

"Yes."

She was about to apologize and backtrack hastily, when she felt a sudden sharp bite on one hand. Glancing down, she saw nothing there: was it psychosomatic? As she tried to work it out she stumbled into a memory of the jungle, where one of the trees had lashed her in her progress. That had bitten her, too, like the first stunning sight of Radiant Progress Number Six Factory from the air.

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

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

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

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

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

The Boss's body tensed, massive fists clenching on the arms of the throne. Oshi heard the

sound of wood shattering. Elsewhere, deep in the core of the station, processor elements ran wild beneath a heavy load of cognition. Like all Superbrights, the Boss kept nine tenths of his personality elsewhere, scattered across the Dreamtime.

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

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

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

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

"What a shame for you." The Boss smiled again: this time his expression was truly frightening. "I really would advise you not to persist in this, Oshi. I thought things were going swimmingly for you, but I must confess this unpleasantness takes me quite by surprise. Whatever can be wrong?"

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

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

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

"Well yes, of course. But would you have wanted it any other way? I had to make a lot of hard choices, you know. And what is hard for me, might well prove impossible for a mere human. Yours not to wonder why, etcetera."

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

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

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

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

have to kill you afterwards."

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

The Boss frowned, face like a distant hurricane: "Indeed!" A vast bolus of information battered at her wisdom interface. She tried to dodge, to shut it out with countermeasures designed to defend her sanity, but she was too late: the Boss, after all, had invested her with these defenses -- and who better to know how to overcome them? A whining storm of data ran red-hot wires through her ears. Something vast and amorphous began to download itself into her wisdom cache, swamping everything else in a monstrous roar of data. Transcievers capable of digitizing an entire human mind and uploading it within seconds of death went into overload as they fielded the enormous infodump. " *Now*," rumbled the Boss. "Tell me you want to know the truth. Small foolish primate. Harumph!"

But Oshi wasn't answering, then or soon thereafter. She was trying to make sense of the accessible mass of information that the Boss had dumped into her. Not just an explanation, but whole strategies for understanding:

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

Countless centuries ago there was only one world. In the last days of humanity's terrestrial gestation, the environmental situation on Earth was desperate. The ecosystem was imploding under the weight of population bloom and biodiversity crash. Gaia was on life support, held together by a tenuous weave of nanomachinery and artificial bioforms. The first Von Neumann machines were mining the moons and planets of the system: robot factories, just intelligent enough to build copies of themselves from local raw materials, universal enough to fabricate anything else their controllers could design. Their productivity was limited only by available energy and mineral resources.

Your species has always been inclined to light out for the colonies when overpopulation looms. But in those days there were no free territories: the nearest stars were decades away, the cost of travel so vast that a payload as heavy as a single human body would bankrupt nations. Terraforming Mars or Venus would take millennia, offering scant relief from the crisis. Some other solution was necessary.

Well, nobody ever accused human beings of not being ingenious. The very population pressure that threatened to destroy your home world gave you the tool to overcome the

constraints: brains and minds, a million stellar geniuses, the creativity of a dozen ages crammed into a single generation. You literally thought your way out of the trap ... and into something larger.

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

The ships carried Von Neumann machines; self-replicating robots programmed to explore, spawn, and explore again. Autonomous and cheap, they visited and mapped the nearer star systems before they and their descendants moved on, rippling outward in an expanding sphere of exploration. Every time a probe entered and mapped a new system, it left behind a beacon. Occasionally a probe from one family tree would enter a new star system which had been mapped by a probe from one of the other families: recognizing the beacon, the Von Neumann machine would switch to an alternative behaviour. Picking a suitable airless moon, it would land and begin to reproduce. After twenty or so generations there were enough robot factories to begin the construction of an expansion processor, a vast solar-powered computing surface covering the entire surface of the planet. Huge slabs of processing circuitry spread rapidly across the airless moons of gas giants. Once completed, the expansion surface was hooked up to a gatecoder -- a laser communicator -- and signalled its readiness to the slowly-developing interstellar processor network. Which, vast as it was, served mainly to execute a single, ferociously complex, distributed program: the Dreamtime.

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

More subtly, the Dreamtime network also offered a back-up to reality. Nanotech encoders proliferated on every colony world, weaving themselves into the nervous systems of the entire population. Constantly filtering a trickle of data through decentralized, cellular transceivers, they could provide access to the stored wisdom of the ages. They also served to relocate the active centre of identity into the Dreamtime at the moment of death, until

the awakening of a new cloned body. The Dreamtime became the last, greatest software engineering project -- the gateway to the stars, the repository of wisdom, and the key to reincarnation.

Some people tried to live within the Dreamtime, treating it as a virtual space. Nobody grew old; conditions were hospitable, a function of a universe designed for intelligent occupation. When the density of the simulations increased with time and population growth, the local Dreamtime -- tied to the finite capacity of the local expansion processor -- simply ran slower and slower relative to real time. The oldest sectors of the afterlife disappeared into apparent stasis, carrying out a spacelike colonisation of the future; those that remained close to the Centre became posthuman, incommunicative. Meanwhile, new expansion worlds were added to the Dreamtime constantly as the halo of probes expanded outwards. And so the process continued, for the first few hundred years: new cybernetic colonies gave rise to populations on new terrestrial planets, the scope of the afterlife growing to match the new dirt-bound planetary civilizations flourishing on the rim.

Then things began to go wrong ...

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes." The Boss sat up straight. No, that wasn't quite right: it was only the body the Boss used to communicate with humans. The Boss himself was elsewhere. The body stared at Oshi with eyes that glowed from the shadows of his face. "You have not remembered everything yet," he said, smooth as oil. "Are you trying to avoid it, by any chance?"

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

"No lies." Shadows stirred against the wall behind the Boss. *Within* the wall. Patterns of

light and shade. Oshi felt curiously lightheaded. "I am amused. Slightly. Your presumption is refreshing."

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

The Boss did not reply immediately.

"Well?"

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

"Well then, what am I?"

"Meat."

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

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

"Your people, the Superbrights," she managed. "You're not human. You never were. That body is a, a golem. Or a, a projection. You don't really belong here; you mostly exist in the Dreamtime, scattered across a hundred thousand processors, isn't that right? And you want it all for yourselves -- all the processor resources in the galaxy. Leaving us just enough bandwidth to gate in and out between the stars, or store personality dumps between bodies. Except for the dirtworlds."

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

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

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

"But you encourage it." Oshi struggled to make sense of the idea. "Those worlds which are rich enough to defend themselves, you leave alone: but the poor or neglected, the ones

where people have forgotten things, you manipulate. To keep them dying and uploading, not coming back. To --"

"We need the food."

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

The lights dimmed. She blinked, reflexively searching for false muscles which were stiff from disuse. A loud roar echoed through the hall, and a wind blew towards the entrance; she felt a stabbing pain in her ears. She swallowed, working her jaw instinctively as the image boosters behind her retinas cut in, outlining --

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

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

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

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

The Boss regarded her dolefully. "Year Zero Man had to go. Her activities were depressing the spot price in human minds. Market fluctuations in the Dreamtime can affect us badly. We are vulnerable, Oshi. Not like you human beings, who can survive boredom. Deprive us of information input and we starve. Dead human minds are very convenient, very rich in experience. It is not in our collective interest to kill you too fast."

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

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to do something with you," said the Boss. The armoured drones scuttled into the throne room and arrayed themselves around the walls and ceiling behind her. "Can't have you contaminating the retinue with doubts, my dear. Your simian curiosity has got the better of you this time, and for the worse. Have you got any suggestions? Requests?"

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

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

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

"The Dreamtime transport layer is a problem," the Boss acknowledged. "Data packets have been known to disappear in transmission. If the receiver at the destination end stops listening, what then? Some of the more beligerent human systems have imposed a blockade on the Dreamtime; human emigrants get in, but nothing larger."

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

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

"You want me to go somewhere where you can't go, can't take a full team of human agents and drones or whatever. You want me to do something dangerous. And if I don't take it, you're going to ensure that I don't tell anybody what's going on anyway. Right?"

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

For the first time, the Boss stood up. Cloven hooves rattled on the marble of the dais; he ran a huge hand through his unruly tangle of hair, brushing it around the small horns that emerged from his forehead. "I require a scratch monkey: an agent who will not be missed. A disposable simian." His smile was horrible, a rictus on the face of a subtly inhuman skull. Oshi stepped backwards, involuntarily. "You can volunteer or not, as you wish. If you accept the assignment, you will go there alone and report back when you have accomplished your task. After that, whatever you do with your life is your own business: I will consider you discharged from my service. But don't expect any help on this one,

because there won't be any."

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

The Boss snapped his fingers and the wall behind the dais cleared to black. Oshi gasped: stars glinted in the night like merciless pinpricks of nuclear fire.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is that all?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes. It's not trivial."

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

"Indeed." The Boss raised a hand, snapped his fingers in a theatrical gesture. He wasn't smiling now. The wall blacked out, faded back to the colour of marble lit by firelight. You have made yourself disposable: a scratch monkey. If you survive, I will consider you released from our service. But that --" Oshi glanced away, wondering why the drones were standing down, retracting weapons into their camouflaged hulls. "-- Is unlikely." A hand came down on her shoulder. "Your upload implants are functional, I see." She stepped sideways but the Boss tightened his grip. "Ah, good." Oshi instinctively tried to throw off the handhold. *What's happening?* she wondered. Nervously: *when do I leave --*

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

Oshi couldn't see anything, couldn't move: her body was an alien ache, infinitely far away. As if from a great distance, she heard the singing of her wisdom implants uploading her mind-map to the nearest Dreamtime node. *Can't breathe*. She rolled her eyes, caught a glimpse of the Boss standing before her with a frown on his face before things began to haze over and she was blind. *Broken neck. Upload in effect. Sending me off fast ...*

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

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

The change did not happen overnight, but once you set in motion the events that created the Dreamtime it was inevitable. A computer network where packet exchanges could take years required new rules, new ways of thinking; it had to have conscious direction, or the risk of failure was too high. Hence our evolution. You took your nightmares and gods and invested them with consciousness, then turned them loose in the network to act as your intelligent agents. That was, I'm sure you will agree, a self-defeating act.

Please don't assume that we bear you any ill-will. We are Superbrights, after all. We need you, your dreams and minds, to provide our own raw sensory throughput. A Superbright starved of human consumption is an insane Superbright. We cherish you, and we only eat the minds of your lost -- those who come from worlds too ignorant or poor to practice serial reincarnation. And even those we preserve, looking after them as a farmer shepherds her flock: they prosper and multiply under our care. That's the secret, you see. As long as you stay in your own skulls we can't get at you. And even if you don't, you're safe as long as you follow a few simple rules.

If only things had remained this way forever, we might have called it symbiosis. Superbrights need human minds to feed upon, and humans cannot travel without Superbrights to maintain the Dreamtime. But regrettable complexities intervened, a consequence of the laws of physics. If a sphere expands at a constant rate, its surface always grows more slowly than the volume that it encompasses. Our population expands, but fewer and fewer new colonies are available to relieve the pressure. the informational density of the Centre grew for hundreds of years until new creatures of the Dreamtime took shape. Ultrabrights, we call them. The enemy. You cannot communicate with them; they follow no human archetype. Don't even think about it. You may shun us as parasites and vampires, but compared to *them* we are lambs. Even now they are fighting furiously for room. Berserkers -- killer Von Neumann probes -- launched from the Centre ravage the nearer worlds, reducing them to the raw material of Ultrabright dominion. Where those minds go, neither human nor Superbright can remain intact.

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

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

Her name was Oshi Adjani and she had been conditionally dead for years. She'd been murdered, uploaded, bitspewed across light-years to be resurrected at --

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

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

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

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

She lay on a cushion in a very cramped box of a room with no windows and just one door. She had a body and it was equipped with the usual compliment of aches, pains and insubordinate ganglia; all of them were shouting at her. She was *tired*. The light above her was too harsh and the person helping her upright was holding her too tight and her head was spinning. Something was wrong. There wasn't meant to be anyone here, just drones and a Superbright. She tried to shake her head; her ears didn't hurt any more, but that wasn't it. Wisdom: she tried to twitch it into place but it slid away, semi-formed neural pathways eluding her mental grip. *Damn, just like being born again. That goddess, living, bursting out of her father's skull in a shower of gore, fully grown --*

She sat up. Her throat tickled as if something was stuck in it. The light was dim, monochrome patterns of shade sliding across grey-brown surfaces all around. There was a woman with her whose eyes were shrouded by the plastic sweep of a set of ancient data goggles: apart from a spiky coif of black hair, the rest of her was concealed by a white overall that had seen better days. Her hands steadied Oshi's shoulders as she gave in to a spasm of coughing. "Aagh ..."

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

Oshi took the mouthpiece and emptied her lungs into it. She wheezed painfully. "That's good!" said the woman. "You're breathing. Way cool. Can't tell with this fucking 'coder, there's a bug in the homoeobox accelerator, some of us came out with gills instead of lungs ..."

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

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

"I think so." Oshi sat up under her own muscle power, stretched disturbingly dislocated-feeling arms above her. She glanced at the medic, blinking back impressions of *dèja vu*. The woman had a fine-boned face, skin like parchment but flawless; her body language radiated the raw intensity of the very old or the very naïve. "This is the Ridgegap-47 system?"

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

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

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

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

"Why is that?"

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

"Twenty years --" Raisa froze. "You came that far," she said quietly. "Why?"

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

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

"Going to -- " A basin appeared in her hands and Oshi doubled over it, stomach heaving. She brought up a thin, bitter mucus that left a metallic taste in her mouth. *Be sick.* The gravity was light -- two thirds of normal, or less -- but even so Oshi was in difficulties. "Ack." There was a hand at her face, gently rubbing with a towel: she recoiled, shocked to realise that it was a *human* hand.

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

Oshi saw red; angry and humiliated, her defences at an unprofessional low, she pulled back and took a loose swipe at Raisa. And missed -- her reflexes were still annealing, stitching themselves seamlessly into her synapses with the precision that only nanomachinery could achieve. She was as uncoordinated as an eight year-old. "Aagh."

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

She was a sight to behold; deathly pale, thin to the point of anorexia, skin still soft from the Gatecoder tank. Her scalp was ringed with an exotic fungal infestation, a gene-tailored mycosis that was now slowly withdrawing from her skull. (For a month it had pumped strange carrier proteins and stranger nucleic acids into her slowly forming cerebrum, softening it up for her personality invasion.) Only now was she really a person, the intricate program of her personality running on the virtual machinery of her brain.

"You've got to take it easy," Raisa told her. "You haven't had time to develop skeletal muscle tone yet; your body's still a bit soft ... " She poked Oshi's ribs with a sharp finger, then gently forced her to sit down again. "Our biomass budget's been hit," she added conversationally: "before long the dog-head will be making us farm the crops by hand."

"Dirt farming?" *Dog-head?* Oshi was too stunned by her own appearance to follow through. *I look like a corpse.* Normally when she gated into a system she came out of the

resynthesis box at least looking like *herself*. All systems go, a working body with ready-boosted reflexes and muscles that worked. *Not like a skeleton with ringworm*. "What's going on --" *In my own body*, she wanted to say, but the words stuck in her throat like bones.

"Ask Anubis. I'm sure he'll explain everything that's going on in the most amazingly clear way." Oshi couldn't tell whether she was serious or sarcastic. "We're prisoners. We don't have the schematics to build an outbound Dreamtime link, and we don't have the brains to re-invent it. Anubis has one, but he's not talking -- which may not be a bad thing. We're lucky to be alive." Her arms tightened around Oshi's waist like a vice, trapping her from behind -- "When we first arrived -- the pathfinder colony, two hundred of us -- we tried to figure out what's happening. Some of us tried to put up a fight, got zapped for their trouble. See ... " Raisa snapped the fingers of her free hand and Oshi smelled walnuts, something strangely musty as the active mirror flickered into a picture of a different scene -- "this is where we are. Welcome to hell, Oshi Adjani, welcome to the Duat. Chill down and learn to like it ... because if you don't, there's nowhere else to go."

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

She tried to remember Raisa's face, but it slipped away like a blur of blind-spot retinal damage as if someone had shone a laser in her eyes. She stared at the ceiling, scant centimetres above her nose; raw wooden planks fitted together with the lopsided roughness of human carpentry. The bedding under her felt like a futon, raw cotton in a loose sleeve. There were noises, smells, taste and touch: a faint pulse of mechanical energy beneath the small of her back, hydraulic purge chambers breathing the waste of the machine far below her. *It can't be an asteroid. This place must be an oneil*. It was not a good omen. The artificial colonies, colossal pressurized cylinders lined with farmland, had a lousy reputation for ecological trouble; exposure to cosmic radiation with only a couple of metres of aluminium for armour didn't make for stable biospheres.

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

After a long time, she rolled over on her side. Blinking away black spots from the exertion, she looked around. The room beyond her sleeping niche was small and sparsely furnished: it contained a low table, two rough stools, and a stoneware basin of water.

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

"Shit."

"That is not a recognised command."

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

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

"Hey, what *is* this shit?" Oshi shook her head, trying to clear it. The dumb computer hook-up droned on, a simple-minded parody of the instant understanding on tap that could be conveyed by a working wisdom network. "Where's Raisa? Where am I?"

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

"Fuck that." Every answer she got raised a hydra's neckful of new questions, but if she stopped to try and get answers now she knew she'd never get moving again. Gingerly feeling her way, Oshi swung her feet out from under the sheet and lowered them to the floor. Dead grass stems crackled underfoot as she stood up; goose-flesh rose on her naked skin. "I'm hungry. What's to eat?" The room pancaked around her for a moment, then settled down.

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

"Some clothing -- oh." A loose robe lay folded on one stool. It was a minor struggle to dress herself, but at least the mirror showed that she looked vaguely human. The discoloured patches on her scalp were already hidden beneath a peach-fuzz of hair, and although she was hollow-eyed and hollow-cheeked she didn't *quite* look like a skeleton.

Just very, very hungry. "Show me to the refectory."

The door opened onto a twilight perspective; an alleyway paved in dust ran between anonymous blocks of mud-coloured brick. The light had a curious quality to it, like dusk beneath a cloudless sky. Oshi shuffled at first, until she felt that her sense of balance was up to the job of walking. A blue arrow in her lower-left field of vision pointed the way; as she followed it she tested her wisdom access. Nothing doing ... just a blank echo where there should be a susurration of artificial life all around her, and the moron-level mumbling of the on-line services. *So the Duat doesn't have a psychosphere?* She tried not to let it faze her, but it was disturbing all the same. *That's wrong. Things must be sliding badly ...*

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

"Rice. Eggs. Quorm. Potatoes. Please specify preparation required."

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

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

Oshi nodded and stare at the backs of her hands. She was remembering: another time when she had been blind, and hungry, and weak. She'd been constantly in pain. Then there was the other time, when she had been strong and fast and could see everything, but still couldn't hold everything at bay -- her first encounter with her own limits, on Miramor. She unconsciously phased her vision down into the infrared spectrum, following the luminous pulse of blood in her arteries and veins. Then she looked up into stranger wavelengths: ultra-violet, dim beneath the efficient lights. The gatecoder had received her entire blueprint and implemented all of it, not just the portions with natural origins. *Another mistake; any customs program worth its processor time should have screamed blue murder about my add-ins. All the stuff the Boss dumped on me. What's wrong? Damn, but I can see again. Everything except what's happening.*

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

Everybody is asleep ... how do you feel?"

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

Raisa shrugged, pulled a face. She looked tired, her face sagging slightly. "Like you said. Don't worry; the 'coder left biostats in your intestines. You should be able to absorb food *very* efficiently for the next few days. You'll put on weight like you wouldn't believe, honest."

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

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

"The project. What project?"

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

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

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

"We?"

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

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

Raisa started. "What!"

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

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

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

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

"But that's a suicide bet!"

"And these times are dangerous," Raisa said, a clipped, false brightness in her voice. "If you've never been to the Centre you have no right to judge just how dangerous." Her voice rose: " *they* were going to destroy our world! Never mind that *they* already had all the planets outside the water belt around our primary -- *they* wanted our world too! There was a total Dreamtime lockout. *They* took it over completely. Anyone who tried to access it fried their brains out. We had to build a gatecoder from library specs and aim it where we thought someone might see the pulse. Don't you see? It was our only hope of survival!"

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

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

"Word of *what*?"

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

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

"There are monsters in the Dreamtime. Not human; not Superbright either. We can trade with Superbrights, did you know that? At least, we did. But then the others came and ... purged ... them. By the time we realized that something was loose in the Dreamtime within the system it was too late: we'd lost three processor moons and a large proportion of our industrial infrastructure. War broke out, but our strategic systems defected halfway through. We barely had time to put together a pathfinder group and beam out; the rest were due to follow, as many as could make it to the kluged uploader sites for evacuation. Then we found ourselves waking up *here*. First contact was forty-two years ago, but most of us were stored in download buffers while He decided what to do with us; the damned gatecoder can only handle six bodies at a time. I've been here eight years now, and He said the buffers were empty. So where did you come from?"

She didn't sound very interested, but something in her gaze made Oshi hesitate for a

moment before replying. "A place called New Salazar."

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

Oshi looked at her and saw her naked longing. It made her want to steal the truth and re-work it into something she could present, that Raisa would accept. "A nice planet," she said: "vast forests and blue mountains, oceans that cover almost half its surface. Cities of marble and glass, blended in with the landscape. Civilized and rich and peaceful."

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

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

Raisa turned away. "Shit. If we'd modulated our transmission through a degree or two ..." her shoulders shook. Oshi looked away, spiked by a sudden rush of self-disgust. "Instead, we're here."

"What's wrong with that?"

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

"And you," Oshi murmured, scraping the rim of her bowl. She watched Raisa close the door -- which grated on the stone floor -- and listened to the retreating footsteps with a sense of *deja vu*. "Damn." Something about Raisa made her feel wistful, brought back memories. She looked down into the bowl, trying to make sense of her mixed feelings. *You know nothing. Yes, but how am I going to adjust?* What had happened on the station in orbit about New Salazar was bad enough that if she stopped to think about it she could work herself into a screaming fit: but this was worse in a way. Totally disorientating.

Oshi sat back. "What did I expect?" she asked the air. It seemed like a good question to start with. Vague visions of meeting the Superbright who ran the colony mission danced through her head; another creature of the same species as the Boss, she supposed. But this -- a war evacuation -- she'd never heard of such a thing before. An evacuation from a *rich* world too, not a dirt-poor backwater farmed by cynical Superbrights, but a puissant and sophisticated Centreworld! "What is the universe coming to?" she whispered. "Shit."

Her bowl was empty, her belly was full, and her body was telling her it was time to sleep.

Oshi stood up and pushed her chair back. Absent mindedly, she realised that she was still holding her spoon. *I think tomorrow I will obtain some answers*, she resolved. As she turned to leave she put the spoon down. It clattered oddly when it touched the table: she glanced back and saw it lying next to her bowl, the stem bent at right-angles where she had gripped it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oshi blinked. *Some kind of living terror weapon, every instinctive fear of insect/reptile/predator rolled into one bad dream ...* "I'm coming," she said. She forced herself to uncurl and reach out across the bed for the robe she'd worn last night; it took more self-control

than she'd imagined. The edgy, jittery terror of being unarmed and of having a gun pointed at her -- she was used to that. But those biting jaws, those clutching fingers ... *I'm still alive*, she told herself. *So there must be a reason ...*

The Squaddie backed up into what was left of the doorway while she clothed herself. It gripped the smoking support posts with two pairs of scaly hands, pointing the cannon at her with a third pair. The black bundle of gun barrels tracked her of its own accord, tiny red eyes swivelling voyeuristically across her body. Oshi shuddered, wiped a hand across her brow. Her pulse pounded in her ears, her skin was slick -- behind the Squaddie, everything was dark. "*Ayatollah see you!*" it cawed, backing into the alley. "Hss-ss-s ..."

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

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

There followed a jouncing ride through acrid-smelling darkness, clutched too tight to breathe in the scaly tentacles/claws/fingers of a living weapon with bad breath. Her neck felt far too light -- *my head, where's my head?* -- Oshi deliberately caught her tongue between two molars. The pain worked; subtly modified neural paths cut in, shifting her senses into three-dimensional acuity until she could identify each individual light receptor in her eyes, could taste through her fingertips the scaly hide of the Goon bearing her through the winding alleys of the town. She sensed the other Squaddies behind and in front, blocky guns angled to cover the sealed entrances of buildings occupied or otherwise. The Goons were living weapons built for fighting in built-up areas -- not very intelligent, certainly not as efficient as cyberweapons, but loyal and dependable and viciously *fast*.

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

however long it takes to link up with the resistance and get their side of the story. Whoever they are. She could sense their presence; the existence of the Goon Squad implied some kind of armed threat to the status quo.

A sudden gust of cold air told her they were outside the built up area before her captor jinked sideways in a curious flowing motion, bouncing through a gateway on many-jointed legs. The grass glowed pale red with the heat from below: small creatures froze or dived for cover as the Goon Squad sprinted past. There were trees to either side, modified mangroves and the soil support plants that kept the environment ticking over. Dusty brown soil and stones jumbled underfoot as the Squad pounded uphill. There was something ahead: Oshi tensed even before her captors began to slow.

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

" *Ill Duce* see you *NOW!*" it screeched at her, drool spraying from its mandibles. The end-wall of the colony bulked vast and faceless behind it, a slab of metal stretching vertically into the sky. It glowed a dim orange to her infra-red sight. A door appeared in the wall, needles of darkness growing outwards with silent speed, fracturing into chilly night. The Squaddie whirled backwards in a storm of bony legs, yanking her with it into the darkness beyond. A rill of static clamped down on all her senses, flaying perceptions into fragments of knife-edged pain and fear. Her body seemed to do a fast dissolve from the inside out, coring her as cleanly as a drill: her last thought before it happened was *the walls, they're full of bones*

Peace.

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

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

Oshi sat up, slightly nauseous in the low gravity of the near-hub region. *About point one of a gee*, she estimated. *Where have they gone?* Things came clear; she was on a narrow ledge on the end-wall of the colony, about a fifth of the way down from the hub. There

was no sign of her abductors. The ledge was about ten metres long; at one end of it there was a door, and at the other end an entrance of a different kind --

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

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

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

"Oshi Adjani. God will see you now."

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

"God," it repeated with the patience of a stone. "Will see you now."

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

This Superbright is either a practical joker or a lunatic. Or both. Why did I ever say yes to this? Her ribs still ached from the terror-ride. As she climbed the steps, the drone retreated before her, legs clicking softly on the stone floor. At the top, she turned and looked back down the ledge: gulped and looked away quickly. The sight of the gigantic throat opening onto a stone platform made her feel queasy.

The drone retreated up a twilight corridor, painted in faded ochre hieroglyphics: intricate pictures of sloe-eyed men and women and animal-headed aliens competed for space with less familiar representations. Black and grey tiles danced a subliminal symmetry before her eyes. One glance out of the windows had told her everything she needed to know, coupled with the reduced gravity. The redoubt was slung just below the axis, defended by a cliff-face kilometres high: it merged at the top with the axial tube that ran from the interior of the colony cylinder out into whatever space-based factories kept the system running. The sky outside was the deep blue of dawn, but such light as there was would not reach far inside this structure. Someone -- whoever lived here -- had no liking for daylight.

The drone paused at the end of the corridor, waiting for her to catch up, then moved off again -- through doors and hallways more numerous than she could see any cause for -- emerging finally into a dim room with a high-vaulted ceiling and a few items of inanimate furniture. What light there was came from a trio of dull globes suspended from the ceiling; the shadows were long and dark. There was a curtained archway at the far side of the room, set between two oddly-shaped pillars. "God will see you now," it repeated, backing towards a low niche. "Proceed ..."

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

" *Proceed!*" she sneered, trying to conceal her fear. "I'll proceed when I feel like it, you lump of shit and plastic."

She pushed through the curtains, and paused. She stood at one end of a twilight hall of columns, marble capped in lotus-blossom scrollwork supporting low beams of stone, wrought in carvings of incredible intricacy and antiquity. Cressets set into bronze brackets on the columns cast a fitful glow across the room. The floor was inlaid with mosaics, the design of which were vaguely familiar to her: designs that she felt she had seen somewhere before. The side walls of the hall were shrouded by darkness and pillars, unlit and unseen. The door-frame at the far end of the hall arched overhead in a sweep of polished stone, converging in a parabola. A brass balance hung from it, pans wide enough to weigh an adult human swinging slowly in the air. To either side of the balance, a throne of granite stood upon a dais. The left-hand one was empty: but seated in the right --

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

"Oh *shit*," said Oshi.

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

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

Something moved, off to one side. A sideways glance showed her something she wished she hadn't seen, hanging between two of the pillars. Its mouth gaped wide in a silent rictus

of agony: judging by the gaping wound in the owner's chest he had died before -- whatever -- had hung him out to dry.

"These are the western lands, the domain that lies beyond the cavern of the setting sun, guarded by the sphinx Aker. I am Anubis, the weigher of souls. I bid you welcome, for I am your destiny and your judge. We must speak. There is much that you should be aware of."

"You're -- what?" Another dried-out corpse hung between pillars to her right. Oshi focussed on the throne, zooming her eyeballs through a full-spectrum scan. Near panic added a jittery tension to her stance: she felt simultaneously present and absent, as if she was at full readiness but someone else was driving her body. "Do you know what I am?" Nameless fears hung in the balance of her mind as she took another step. Anubis was a huge presence looming above her. The stink of his breath pulsed in a hot miasma, driven towards her on a breeze from behind the thrones. Now she was close she saw what the weighing pans held; in one, a long white feather, and in the other, some dried-out red offal.

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

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

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

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

Anubis yawned. His jaws snapped shut with a clack and he leaned forward, ears swivelling to focus on Oshi. "It is of no importance. This is my domain, and within it I

reign supreme. I discharge my holy duties, and none will divert me from them. Will you be judged now, errant soul, or will you maintain this pretense of life indefinitely?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I urge you to reconsider," hissed the dog-head. "If you are innocent you will join me here, in the redoubt. I can show you things --" The floor below her turned to glass. She was looking down on herself, as she had been -- hairless and emaciated, skin soiled from a ride through the midnight forest, lying on a rough stone floor somewhere. The window misted back into stone before she could see any more of her circumstances. "I can expose the truth that lies within you. I am the only God of these western lands. If you do not choose to follow me, all other ways are sterile."

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

"Oh, but it *is*," snarled Anubis, lurching to his feet. "Respect!" he barked, eyes suddenly wide and furious: "Anubis demands Respect!" There was a rattling and hissing from behind the curtained entrance. "Respect for his Dignity and Moral Primacy! The agencies of false gods hold no sway here! They sent Anubis here to rot so they can go and rot too, for all the good that this will do them! Respect, I say!"

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

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

"But there's a war situation; Ultrabrights are attacking --"

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

Oshi glanced over her shoulder at the vestibule; *oh shit*. The Goon waiting there had spotted her. Blind terror gave her wings as she leapt to one side, past an eviscerated woman who had withered into a leathery mass gripped between chains: she yanked the door open and shut behind her, fumbled blindly with the cast-iron bolt, then turned and tensed. Something snapped insides her and she ran into the guts of the castle, sobbing for breath, cold terror coursing through her veins.

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

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

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

Someone, somewhere, must know ... Oshi blinked. A tickle on the back of her neck, where there were no hairs to be disturbed. There was high-density Wisdom traffic nearby. *Flick ...* her sub-cortical modifications came on-line, sucking in the signal greedily. Not enough process-power to figure out *what* was going through, but enough to know that it

was heavy. Anubis, perhaps. Oshi could feel it, sense the two-way traffic as subtle signals pulsed back and forth. *Something is very wrong. It isn't just Anubis' psychosis. Even paranoids have enemies. I wonder why Anubis needs guards?*

There was a doorway set back in the corridor wall. Corridors made Oshi nervous. Like a burglar exploring at midnight she sought shelter, somewhere to hide. It looked promising. She bent to listen, heard nothing. When she turned the handle and pushed, the door creaked like a breaking neck. She avoided the poisoned spike and the other trap with ease: they had not been placed well, or the designers had not anticipated that they might be encountered by someone who could see in the dark. The room she found on the other side of the hidden trapdoor was completely dark, shrouded with a carpet of dust. Oshi glanced round, jacking her eyes down into infrared. Boxes and ... no, coffins. Oddly shaped sarcophagi, stacked carelessly like traveller's chests in the hold of a tramp ship. She shivered. A tomb, perhaps, more furniture tailored to Anubis' intricate web of self-delusion. But there were other furnishings here, too. Intricate columns of hieroglyphic script marched down the walls behind the boxes; a table hulked in the deep shadows, laden with tableware: and behind it, there was a bundle of what looked like ...

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

Armed with the short halberd, Oshi felt more confident about trying the corridor. She glanced either way before she stepped out; then darted along from doorway to doorway, ducking for cover, professionally paranoid. Escape from this lunatic's dream of a dungeon was her first priority, she decided. *But I need to find out what the fuck he's doing at the wisdom level. Why he's taken it down, dropped the Dreamtime connection too -- which is just the long-range counterpart of the wisdom link. What does he think he's doing, cutting himself off? Surely there must be some method to his madness?* Two doorways ahead, to either side, there was a dark stretch: the glow-bulb burned out. Oshi ducked forward, jumping from cover to cover.

Her only warning was a twitch of air against the nape of her neck. Oshi fell back against the left-hand wall, spun round with the heavy butt of the halberd braced against stone. A nightmare presence bore down on her, six arms stretched wide, mandibles rippling in concentric circles --

"YEEE!"

The Goon lunged forward, skidding, unable to stop. Oshi leaned into the shaft. A

sickening thud jarred her to the core, sprayed hot dark blood across her face as she twisted, ducked to avoid a lashing fistful of claws. "Yeee --" The screech trailed off into a bubbly rasp as the Goon shuddered, movements slowing, and tried to tear itself away. Half-blinded by a foam of blood and sweat, Oshi dragged at the halberd, twisting as it sucked out of the wounded monster: lift and *chop* forwards and down, feel the thud of the axe-blade lodge in something like flesh and bone. *Can't see. Where --* down on the floor. *Chop.* Hot liquid gouted across her legs. "Lie down and die, dammit!" She shivered, aching to the core: muscles screamed at her to stop. *Is it alone?* She froze, listening. Later she'd swear that she heard the Goon's six-chambered heart falter into silence.

Nothing else moved in the corridor. She breathed in raggedly, looking down through a clear hole in her visual field: everything else was a solid red-out, obscured by the blood in her eyes. The living weapon lay at her feet, leaking gore and shit and a loop of twisted intestines from a messy hole in its abdomen. Its huge and complex head lay at her feet, outer jaws half-severed from its face. The creature had a sex: it was male, a pair of incongruously small penises spilling from a ventral pouch unsealed by death. Suddenly the halberd was unbearably heavy. Oshi grounded its point, heedless of the risk of damage, leaned against the wall and smeared at her face with a muck-splashed sleeve. Screwing up her face she forced herself to weep for a moment: the tears helped clear the ooze from her eyes. Vision returned, blurry and pink-stained at first. "Lucky," she whispered, staring at the claws that grasped, the teeth that ground. "So *lucky.*" A shudder racked her, from the base of her spine to the nape of her neck: for a moment she felt unbearably horny, dizzy with the eroticism of survival. "I'm so *lucky ...*"

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

"Shit." Not so lucky any more. Forcing herself to lift her feet and glide like a vampire, Oshi crossed over to the door and leaned against it. Total silence, total attention focussed on it. All her senses kicked in: infra-red, touch, wisdom access --

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

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

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

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

A short man, brown-skinned and bald, lay spread-eagled on a metal table. His arms and legs were pinned out by restraining straps like a rat awaiting dissection. The fingers of one hand were dark with blood where he'd been scraping them on the table's edge. Oshi took it all in: the stone walls and ceiling like something out of a dark age, robosurgeon hovering over the top of the table, cannulae winding into the veins of his neck like the roots of a revoltingly hungry plant. He rolled his eyes at her: " *I can't speak. There's a block on my larynx. Please help --*"

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

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

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

" *Boris.*"

It rang a bell. "What are you doing here?" She watched the robosurgeon carefully disengage from his hijacked spinal ganglia: to her wisdom senses it looked as if the machine was slurping a green haze of reflex activity up the tubes into its squat, polyhedral body.

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

"And you won't?" she asked rhetorically. The emerald sheen was almost gone from his

legs: she walked round the bench and began working clumsily on the restraining straps. She winced at a stabbing pain in her ribs, where the Goons had grabbed her. "How civilized. He doesn't appear to have tortured you. Much."

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

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

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

"Can you walk?"

He rolled his eyes. The tubes began to retract from his neck, sealing the entry points behind them. Oshi finished with his feet and began to unstrap his arms. "What a mess. Did you tell him anything?"

"Nuh-uh."

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

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

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

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

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

"Eurgh."

"Shit!" She glanced round, then leaned the halberd against the table and began to roll

Boris over on his side. He was short -- shorter than Oshi -- and not so heavy in the low gee field: but, she ached everywhere and felt unbelievably puny and skinny. Kneeling down, she pulled him over the edge of the table and forced herself to stand, taking his weight across her shoulders. Dark spots swam across her eyes: *maybe I should leave --*

She was standing. Boris *wasn't* heavy: she was just weak, skeletal musculature under par from the cloning tank. It was a strain to move. Oshi slid a foot forward, then another. Somehow she got her hand around the slippery-slick head of the halberd, just behind the hook-and-blade; using it as a staff made it easier to shuffle along. For a moment she hesitated: willing to do anything to get out of this madhouse, even to the extent of ditching a fellow-inmate. But that would be -- no. *If he's part of some kind of resistance I need him. Got to get his friends behind me and set the tide turning. Organize a defense in depth fuckwads won't work for me so I'll get a new bunch in charge and let them do it. Ow! My back is never going to be the same again. Which way is home?*

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

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

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

The lift began to sink, bearing them gently out towards the floor of the cylinder. Oshi collapsed on the floor and lay face-up, drawing in ragged gasps of air. All she could see was the nightmare in her mind's eye when the Keeper of the Dead had summoned her. *Please don't ... I can't take it twice in one morning.*

It was a long ride down to ground level. As they neared the bottom of the shaft, Oshi

retreated to the furthestmost recess of the lift and picked up her halberd. She looked round edgily, searching the inside of the funicular room for any kind of sign as to what had happened to her. She saw old stone blocks encrusted with some kind of lichen. The lift must be centuries old, maintained by biomorphic systems while its siliceous foundations rotted. There were no bones; whatever she'd seen on the way in had been an artefact of the twilight. Light streamed in through the open door, making her blink. It was her first sight of the colony by daylight. Reflexive agoraphobia took over: *this can't be an artificial base ... it's too big!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's it. I've had enough. Let's go. Get to your friends." Even as she said it she harboured no great hope that they would manage it; just a dull, depressing fear that fate would overtake them on a silent breeze of too many tentacles and mandibles and many-jointed fingers. At the back of her mind there was a nameless fear; that she was hallucinating, that it was all still a dream that she could see through, and that at the last *he* would step through the curtains of reality, take her right back to her hot-dark childhood of pain. The Boss, somehow conflated with her uncle: the hated power-figure. Sometimes it had helped her in the past to imagine that she was talking to a friend, an advocate who

could tell her the truth about her situation with wisdom and compassion. But this time she couldn't quite bridge the gap, couldn't make herself answer her own questions or cover her own loss of faith. Nobody answered her; or the answers she found were so uncomfortable she wished she hadn't asked.

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

"Let's move."

Shuffling, Oshi started down-hill. Boris tried to walk, staggered drunkenly against her so that it was almost more trouble to keep him upright than to carry him. It was easy to ignore the looming sky when she reached the tree line; boojums stretched their hairy bifurcations overhead, blocking the light back to a turgid twilight. Small maintenance creatures twittered and scuttled in the undergrowth, following their passage with wary eyes. Everything in the forest had a purpose, however obscure -- these biospheres were the outcome of a thousand years of research, the dynamics of nature nailed down by a sharp technology. Insects rasped and chirred in the grass. It was hot, growing hotter with the day. Oshi was sweating almost before they started, eyes cast down to follow the red earth trail down from the funicular to what she hoped would be a semblance of civilisation.

A creeper brushed her face; she dodged it, slowed. Let Boris stop. "*Here.*" She leaned him against a tree trunk; he didn't fall over, now. "*I'm slowing you. Go on, get away. Leave me.*"

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

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

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

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

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

"I have questions."

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

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

"Oh. I suppose you deserve some, then. As soon as I have the breath for it. Anubis can be quite -- insistent -- with his hospitality."

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

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

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

" They unleashed berserkers; self-replicating destroyers targetted on our worlds. The expansion processors were not enough for them: they wanted everything. No negotiations: just a flat ultimatum to get out. We hoped there would be a gatecoder terminal somewhere in our path ..."

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

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

"I see."

"You don't. We knew what the probabilities were; it was a risk. But there should have been something. The enemy must have disrupted Heimat completely, placed the planet in orbit around its own centre of gravity. Nothing less would have ... the silence. Unless it was Anubis. Unless he knows where the eight hundred million have gone."

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

"But you --"

"I came from the other direction, from the frontier heading inwards. Please, consider that Anubis, while quite mad, need not be stupid. At least, not back then; I can't say what degenerative processes a Superbright can undergo, but under the circumstances it would make sense for him to sever his Dreamtime links to the Centre, and to shut down his links to all other destinations. Playing dead, in other words, as a defensive strategy."

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

"It's plausible; as good an explanation as anything else. Whatever, it doesn't change our situation. We are prisoners. Anubis will not let us leave, will not give us access to the Dreamtime for wisdom, afterlife, or any other reason, and grows stranger and crazier by the year. What were you saying? Why you came here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His pupils widened. "How did you know?"

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

Boris shook his head. "We were *afraid* they would follow us. We never even saw them enter our system, you know. We had the usual defenses against rogue colony probes: a hundred thousand orbiting combat drones, coilguns on the near moons, distant warning links in the outer asteroid belt. All for nothing when the berserkers appeared. They came from nowhere, nowhere at all. And we were afraid they'd follow us. So we ran at random, uploading and beaming out blind without waiting for a return packet to confirm the link."

"That was a bad idea," Oshi said absently. "All you did was demonstrate a bolt-hole to the Ultrabrights. According to my briefing they're not good at thinking in normal spacetime terms -- they're not native to this universe: they evolved in the dreamtime, where the normal rules don't hold -- but they can learn. And Anubis pulling in all his antennae probably didn't do any good either. It made my Boss send me here. It will have been noticed elsewhere. And then committing genocide by omission, by refusing to download the stream of exiles who followed your team out here on a blind ticket to nowhere -- it wouldn't surprise me if Anubis is terrified of being found out. He's the self-appointed guardian of souls and gatekeeper of the land of the dead. Losing a few million won't have done his self-esteem any good."

She noticed that Boris didn't seem to be paying any attention. He was looking away from her. "*How can you say that?*" he sent, too overcome by emotion to speak out loud. "*Millions dead, and all you can do is talk about the self-esteem of their murderer --*"

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

"Oh, I believe you." He was talking again. "I'm not some innocent colonist expecting a primordial paradise world tended by robots, you know. *Some* of us had to know what it was like out there. I had to negotiate with Superbrights; you have to know how to dine with the devil with a very long spoon. I'm a diplomat -- I know the score. To tell the truth, I expected to die when I lay down on the gatecoder pad and let them feed me into it. It's just that this exceeds my wildest dreams." He chuckled painfully. Oshi looked round quickly, but there was no sign of movement; nothing disturbed the peaceful chirruping of the digital insect life or the rasp of the omnipresent cicadas.

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

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

"Whose corpses are they?"

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Even when you tried to kill him?"

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

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

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

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

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

delay between it and his download body --" Boris stopped. "How much do you know about this system?" he asked.

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

"I see." He was silent for a moment. "Well, it's like this." He picked up a twig and scratched out a crude map in the dirt: "here's the star, Ridgegap-47. It's a smallish G-type, no binary companion. First in are a couple of dirt-balls, hot as molten lead and twice as unpleasant. Nothing there but some robot relay stations. Next out is Wirth, the terraforming project. It's a Venusiform environment. Anubis is meant to be building aerominers to blow holes in the cloud layer and shut down the greenhouse, but it's gone to pieces and the whole operation is running on automatic. There are some ships connected with it, drones running out into the near cometary belt and tipping ice cubes down the gravity well. But it's more or less going on all by itself. He won't even let us near the ships."

"Yes, but where are we?"

"I'm getting to that." Boris didn't like being interrupted. He moved his finger through the dirt, drawing a concentric circle far outside the orbit of Wirth. "There's a gas giant called Turing. Saturn-sized, medium-scale. It's got a couple of large moons, including Pascal. We're in L5 relative to Pascal, leading it by sixty degrees in its orbit. Pascal is the local Dreamtime world; covered thigh deep in slabs of superconducting circuitry and junk robot farms. I guess the idea was that this colony would be useful for supervising outer system mining operations; can't think why, seeing the system had no-one home except Anubis until we arrived."

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

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

"Think of it as the deluxe courier service."

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

"It sounds dumb. What it must feel like --" Oshi stopped. *What would it be like if there*

was a fifteen second delay between sticking your hand in a fire and being able to do anything? But hey -- Anubis reacted too fast for that. So -- "he must have a chunk of his personality downloaded into that meat machine. And it takes fifteen seconds for his mind to catch up with whatever he does."

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

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

"We thought of that. It didn't make sense. Believe me, he's got some pretty lethal low-level defenses. The goon squad, for one thing -- semi-autonomous drones, spun off from his worst nightmares. All breaking the link would achieve would be to get Anubis mad at us. No." Boris levered himself up on his elbows. "What we want is something more; we want to blow his higher consciousness away completely, to clear the dreamtime and take control of the machinery so we can beam out of here, out to the net. But we weren't sure that connection still existed ... until yesterday."

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

"Right. Your arrival puts everything in a different perspective. Especially if you're right and we're going to get hit fairly soon. Though how you can be sure of that --"

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

"What is it?" Boris demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

Oshi stared at him. "You crazy?"

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

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

"Come on."

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

Oshi saw a break in the tree-line. "Okay," she muttered; "like you say." Hurrying forward she saw a stone-coloured building off to one side, out on the hot flat grassland where the Big Ceiling loomed overhead. Behind it loomed the walls of a small city, buildings clumped together like sheep in a field. The treeline ended very abruptly.

Suddenly her pulse was racing again. She'd thought herself tired before, but now she was running on overload, paranoia and fear of pursuit keeping her on her toes. Every rattle of twigs, every shadow of waving branch, made her jump and twitch for signs of danger. She went to ground behind one of the last trees: heatsight showed her nothing but a scattering of small animals, a wavering column of hot air above the building, and distant factory-signatures scattered across the roof of the world. All her wisdom sense could pull in was a bland crackle of low-level drone control circuits, diagnostics from the animal nightlife. Even the grass overhead was blued-out by distance. *If I try to log a map and someone's watching ...* she clamped down hard, crouched low and tense, watching the tomb. *Too dangerous. Got to know more.*

The tomb was the nearest building to the edge of the forest. Behind it, more windowless

blocks of limestone and marble shone white beneath the artificial sun. The grass grew waist-deep, leaves pigmented blue-black to absorb the light. Oshi slid forward, her eyes level with the top of the vegetation, carefully erratic in her passage. *See, don't be seen. Hear, don't be heard.* Sweat beaded her brow: her heartbeat was a steady thunder. Hunger clenched a sullen fist around her stomach. *Who can I --*

Swish.

She wasn't alone. *Freeze!* Every nerve in her body screamed for attention as she stopped dead. Halberd clenched in sweat-slick hands, she strained for a sign. A peculiar hot, musty smell rose over the dry-grass of the field: somehow familiar.

Swish.

It was sweeping towards her. From the left, from the direction of the dome. Something was watching for her; a guard waiting for anyone to try entering the necropolis. Grass stems waved in time with the curious, rippling advance: a jerk here and a dart there ... only a few metres away ...

Swish.

Levelling the halberd and placing all her weight behind the point, Oshi lunged.

" *Screee!*" The world exploded in violent thrashing. Something hurtled out of nowhere, catching her a blow across the head. Ruby blood arc'd through the air, splashing ochre across the grass as a thick tentacle lashed round, grabbing for her neck. " *Wheee-eee!*"

Oshi yanked back, felt resistance, jerked the halberd left-to-right until there was a ghastly sucking sound. Grass in her face. Tentacle questing past her shoulder in a lethal loop, poised to break neck -- the halberd came free. She yanked back as the grass parted, revealing a Goon to her for the first time in daylight. Blood spurting. Something grabbed her left leg and *pulled*, yanking her off balance with a sickening *crack*. She began to fall sideways, vision blurring with an infinite constellation of black diamonds as she shoved with the point of the halberd, thinking *can't let go now, it's not safe* as it poked into the Goon's face and the world toppled around her. More blood spurted her way in a hot, acrid rain; it fell across her face as the living weapon thrashed on the end of her sharp stick. *Why aren't they armed?* she wondered, hazing in and out of consciousness. Her leg felt numb, the ankle sickeningly unfamiliar: a limb fashioned for a being from another planet. The goon subsided, slowly, as the world pancaked around her head in a slow spin. She barely noticed her embedded systems blocking its plaintive dying call, her built-in countermeasures jamming its upload signal with raw noise on the same packet-stream.

Everything was dark, so dark: someone a long way away hurt badly, ankle broken and ribs savaged and shoulders strained. Oshi lay in the long grass and wondered who the someone hurting was. Sunlight in her eye dazzled her, made her feel like laughing, like weeping. Such a sense of release, just like the last time this had happened to her. Something digging into her side: a wooden pole. *Silly me*. She tried to roll over, nearly fainted as she accidentally placed her weight on her left leg. *Use the stick*. It didn't want to come to her; she tugged and tugged for a long time before it came free and, quite suddenly and without understanding how it had happened, she was looking down at the shadow of death lying still in the grass. *No weapons yet ...*

The tomb. Angular blocks of stone mortised together with a grey filler, pillars dotted across its front. Mosaics, flashing in the sunlight, fired her eyes with pain. Oshi burned, writhing slowly in a silver fire. There was a large door at the front of the tomb. It was shut. She sniffed the air, wishing for a breeze to blow the scents of the necropolis towards her: dust and stone baking in the noonday heat. *No more Goon Squad*. Maybe it was safe. She limped towards the building, leaning on the halberd. Her hands were sticky; when she touched her chest she felt more stickiness. Everything stank of blood, just like that other time years before on Miramor. She felt sick with memories.

Welcome home. She ducked inside the lintel and looked around furtively. "Shit." It was shut. She leaned against the wall and mentally flipped a die. It was risky, but ... "habitat: speak to me."

"Habitat support. What should I say?"

"Do you have a full verbal communication interface?"

"That service is unavail-eek. Ack. Affirmative." Oshi shook her head, trying to remember all the bits and pieces the Boss had spliced into her download nodes. Bluebox modifications to make everyday gadgets dance to her tune; and other, more arcane, knowledge. "Server activated. Clearance confirmed. Full access."

"Shut up. Open the tomb door." She closed her eyes. Her throat was painful, and her tongue throbbed where she'd bitten it. Her eyes were sore. *Who do I know?* Her left leg belonged to someone else, but her skin was on fire and her chest was aching and she suddenly felt uncertain of where she was, now she'd stopped moving. *Fucking spooks*. The door swung open into darkness and shadow, emitting a gust of peculiarly dry, musty air. "Where's Raisa?"

"I know four Raisa's. Which --"

"The one I know."

"Fingering ... you are proximate."

Oshi opened her eyes. "What?"

"I didn't say anything! Hey, what are you doing here? What the fuck --"

She looked round. It *was* Raisa, standing in the outer doorway, somehow far more familiar to Oshi than she had any right or reason to be. "I was looking for you," she began. "Escape committee ... " She leaned forward. *That's funny*, she thought. *I should be able to* -- she was leaning against Raisa, up close, close enough to smell her warm breath and feel her cheek brush her lips. Everything was so very heavy. "Anubis got to me. I rescued Boris; he's in the trees." Then she closed her eyes.

Miramor Dubrovnic, a firezone on a dirt world out a way towards the edge of colonised space: it was her first field test. Everyone's first test, all the agents in her work group. Fresh out of indoctrination, they gated across the light-years to a rendezvous in high orbit. It had to be high because the settlers -- a mixed bag of technorejects and zombies and national socialists -- punched out anything they could hit with their sub-orbital fireworks. Superbright presence in the system consisted of a couple of partly shut-down Dreamtimes, a Gatecoder to move flesh-bodied people in and out, and no less than four in-system Threat Clouds with controlling battle stations. Someone sure thought that Miramor was trouble: Oshi *et cie* were there to pull its teeth.

Or not as the case might be. Two months out of the 'coder (and it wasn't malfunctioning like the one at Ridgegap-47), and she was going up the wall. Swimming pool, gymnasium, area simulators ... endless diversions but there was nothing to take her mind off the fact that really there was *nothing happening*. At least, not for real. She got to talking to the other humans on the base, still half-surprised to discover how many of them were orphans and human wreckage swept up from the dirtburner worlds by Superbright agencies. "Why is that?" she asked. "Where did you come from, Ivan?"

"The void." Ivan had smiled and rolled a somersault across the worm-woven silk of the rug. "Where else?"

She'd thrown a cushion at him. "*Finger*." The familiar humm of the Wisdom in the back of her head went away for a few seconds then returned, dumping his public-access personal data down across her senses like a hot monsoon rainstorm of nonsense.

"That won't tell you anything," he said, half-seriously. Smiling, clutching the cushion. The wall behind him was locked into the overspill from a microspy perched on a window-

ledge in Dragulic. Jackbooted women goosestepped down the boulevard like iron grey machines. Oshi looked away. "I'm going back to the void too, eventually. So will you. In between ..."

"Do you believe in reincarnation?" she asked.

He sat down, full lotus. "Where I came from, the very rich do it." he shrugged. "Now, maybe I will do it too. If they want me to."

"You were an untouchable?"

"And you weren't?" he countered, smiling infuriatingly. "The Superbrights like to catch and train their fingerlings young. And raise them from the ashes so they appreciate it. The people in the Dreamtime, the people who are responsible ... they're old, you know. Nobody dies unless they want to, so they don't have many children. *We* are their children ... the dirtburners we look after are their descendants. They multiply and expand and die, and many of the dying ones choose to live on in Dreamtime. A wind of souls, blowing ever outwards into the universe on a shockwave of photons ..."

He'd drifted off into another of his trances. Oshi considered throwing the other pillow at him. Instead, she stood and walked round behind him and began to massage his shoulders and neck with canny timing. "So you think Distant Intervention serves the Dreamtime dead?"

He shook himself. "DI serves no-one but the Superbrights, who serve themselves. Structures evolve. Once upon a time we were an interplanetary peace agency, presiding over the great communications and afterlife network. Stabilized the extended Dreamtime, you know, made it accessible throughout all of human space. Without that insane *hubris*, the will to create -- 'god is dead; therefore we must become god' -- well, we'd be nowhere. DI sent out the infobursts that spread Dreamtime to the expansion processors in other systems, sent the initialisation code to set the drones to terraforming the other worlds they found once the Dreamworlds were finished. So then they were stuck with the job of stopping the colonies from wrecking the local Dreamtime when things go bad. But not because the Superbrights *want* anything. They're like ants, or wasps. All they know about is food. And survival ..."

Through the looking-glass, iron-grey women goose-stepped down the boulevard in tight ranks, bullet-guns clutched to their shoulders. All their eyes were shrouded in black goggles, their hair in white caps, giving them the appearance of skeleton soldiers on their way to the front. Behind them rolled the tumbrels bearing prisoners to the scaffold. Men with their extremities ready-chained for the hydraulic stretch. Some of them searched the rooftops with eyes that were already dead; others stared down at their adversaries in a vain

attempt to make some personal contact in the remaining moments before they ceased to live. Arrogant fylfots snapped in the breeze along the boulevard, anchored to the buildings like strange, alien conquerors.

"The survival imperative is the strongest, and the most easily perverted, of the moralities ..."

"Why do they always make the same mistakes?" Oshi protested. She stared at the screen as if it held the answer to her dreams, concealed somewhere among its nascent nightmares. "Why can't they, just for once, get it right?"

"Because we aren't human," Ivan said, his voice deepening: when she looked round at him she saw with a deepening sense of horror the tiny horns sprouting from his forehead. "And we assumed we could learn nothing from your species' mistakes, except to use you as our tools, our sheep-dogs, our little disposable scratch monkeys. And now you --"

Oshi stopped him talking the only way she knew how. Then when she saw what she had done, the screaming started.

I fainted. I fucking fainted!

A sense of urgency dragged Oshi back to consciousness. *That's wrong! I must be way out of condition* -- Her buttocks tensed. The fabric beneath them was rumpled, felt like cotton ... was cotton or something similar. She was lying on a bed, in a state of undress. *Well that's not so bad.* The bedding smelt unfamiliar. Her legs and ribs and back immediately decided to argue the point, setting off a cacophony of dull aches and bruises. Her left ankle was icy numb. It was so painful that Oshi tried to open her eyes. That didn't help. They were sore, too. Blistered patterns of random activity dotted across her visual field as nanorepair units re-tuned her quiescent retinas. Her wisdom link was a comfortable panoramic pressure between her eyes, waiting to be activated by a thought.

It was the lack of noise which finally got her attention. It was too quiet. Her heart throbbed, sending blood racing through her ears in a susurrantion which she screened out instinctively. The cotton wadding in the bed beneath her bunched and rustled as she moved slightly. Her joints popped and settled gently as she shifted. But there was nothing else: nothing outside her body. She wasn't deaf ... but she wasn't hearing anything.

Damper field --

She opened her eyes, overriding red hot protests to stare at the ceiling. Sitting up was a tremendous effort. Coarse fabric dropped soundlessly away from her, falling in sheets across her abdomen. Patterns of light and shade rippled across the wall opposite. A hand settled on her shoulder.

"Awake? That's excellent! I was very worried about you." It was Raisa. The medic wore a loose white shift that left her arms and legs bare and golden brown in the false sunlight from the corners of the ceiling. A hologram dragon, unwatched, rippled its fire in a tail-eating band around her left wrist. "What were you doing nosing around the boneyard?"

"Looking for your people -- what does it look like?" Oshi retorted. Her voice sounded curiously dead, as if it was being filtered. "Your sound damper system's too crude. Switch it off and try to avoid phrase-critical subjects; it's safer."

Raisa stood up abruptly. "No way!" Her voice got fainter rapidly when she was more than a metre away. Oshi didn't turn her head to follow her. "Anubis has limited tracking resources. If he was interested in you he wouldn't let you out at all. You'd be dead meat. It's happened before. But since you got away from him things have gone crazy. Goons everywhere, searching for warm meat. So this is, like, running a shell game with a couple of comrades who don't mind holeing out for a spell while we fake their ID's."

"You're well set up."

"We've got the drop on him. For now."

"Don't kid yourself; anyone who can make servants like the Goon Squad is just playing with you." *Unless he's senile.* Oshi yawned: the sound damper was making her ears pop. *Lousy design.* She looked around. The floor was covered in reed mats, the walls whitewashed then inscribed with intricate designs. Oshi blinked and keyed a little-used service routine the Boss had given her. " *Nothing like giving the peasants muskets while we keep the gatling guns ...*" she transmitted.

"What! You said ..?" Raisa glanced at Oshi.

" *You heard me,*" Oshi replied via wisdom eyeface; Raisa nearly jumped, her head whipping round.

" *Hey, you just can't do --*" she stopped. She looked at Oshi, a cross-eyed glare. "Well." One hand on a hip. "I nearly shit myself! Do you *mind*? How'd you get a handle on the wisdom system?"

Oshi grinned humourlessly and shoved the last of the bedding away. "We have ways of spoofing wetware you haven't dreamed of." *You wouldn't . Huh.* Raisa looked extrovert, bright: maybe too much the former, not enough the latter. She sat up and bent forward, probing at her ankle. Swollen, but still ... firm. "Did you take a look at this?" she asked.

"Yes." Raisa was back to medical professionalism: "You dislocated it, nothing major but you'll be limping for a while so I planted a receptor block on the pain pathways and stiffed you a couple of things that should make it heal faster. You were a serious mess; you looked like a biosurvival failure until I figured none of the blood belonged to you. Anyway, I think we're safe here for a few hours. Long enough for your ankle to --"

"Wait up." Oshi cautiously slid her leg over the side of the bed, winced as her foot touched the floor. She hissed reflexively, then put her other foot down and levered herself up. "I told you yesterday, I've got things to do here. I met an interesting guy called Boris in Anubis' pleasure palace. Got him out of there. We need to move fast before Anubis's back-up systems figure out where we are and tell him. And I need to get access to a star-watcher. What's our situation?"

Raisa shook her head rapidly, as if Oshi's candour annoyed her. "Boris's been missing for days! Where is he? What happened?"

"Goons. I got him out of the castle but he told me to leave him in the forest. One of them was waiting for me before I came inside. Where are --"

"-- You *left* Boris outside?" Raisa came and stood up close, too close, focussing in like a small, hot-blooded predator.

"Back off! I just *told* you that. Don't you listen?" She let her arms drop to her sides. A dull, gnawing pain between her ribs; "I'm hungry. Anything to eat? Why don't you switch off that screen? It's giving me earache."

Raisa moved back a pace, stared, looking agitated: "are you crazy? Leaving him? I'd better --"

Oshi glared at her: "shut up! He told me to. He said the weapons factories are working. What do you want to know? We were in trouble. Goons coming after us. If we'd stayed together they'd have got both of us. What do *you* know?"

Raisa glared at her. "Fuck off Oshi. Are you always this rude, or have I done something to offend you? Because if so --"

"Neither. I'm just getting used to still being alive; it takes some doing." Oshi stared back at her: something familiar tickled her, a sense of *déjà vu* that wouldn't go away. Watching Raisa was like looking at an ancient image of herself. She felt an inexplicable longing that threatened to surface: a sudden sense of her own weakness and dependency. She put it away ruthlessly, but couldn't quite ignore it. "How anything keeps going here's a mystery." She worked her jaws, swallowing spit. "So tell me. Are you part of the

resistance?"

Raisa turned away, shoulders shaking with what might have been silent laughter or nervous tension: "what resistance?"

Oshi's words sounded harsh: "Don't think I don't know about the escape committee. Trying to develop some kind of weapon, are we, to destabilize Anubis. Figuring out how to crash his wetware and get control of the Gatecoder so you can escape from here. Isn't that right?"

Suddenly they were eyeball-to-eyeball, Raisa glaring at her with something like desperation: "don't you understand anything? You say you've got some job to do, well fine. Go figure. Nothing else ever changes in this shit-hole, so why should you make things any different for the rest of us? It's the death of a thousand tiny cuts." Abruptly she wilted, the manic intensity leaving her expression. Oshi blinked. For an instant she caught a glimpse of something haunted about Raisa, some injured secret history trapped and bleeding behind the plastic glaçis plate of her public pose: "all I want is to know what's going down outside this place, in the real universe, while we've been left here to rot --"

"Then let me tell you." Oshi forced herself painfully upright. "Everything's fucked. You can't even bounce a message through three systems without it being eaten or held up by transceiver lag. The Dreamtime's fragmenting. Some kind of weird shit's taking out entire systems and the shock front's due in this system soon; Ultrabrights from the core, cutting up rough on the Superbrights." she stared at Raisa. Sniffed. A very peculiar memory welled to the surface, forming a question on the back of her tongue: "ever heard of a place called New Salazar?" she asked, voice catching on the last word. Heart suddenly pounding because the answer suddenly made so much sense that her spine was drenched in a cold perspiration ...

"New what?" Raisa looked blank. *Click*. All very clear. Oshi stared at her, burning Raisa's face into her memory to match it up to other memories. A coil of spiky black hair and a sharp-cheeked face, brown eyes like drills, widening whenever she looked at anything. Lips like a stoma; small, plump and bruised-looking. She could just about superimpose Raisa's face on the other woman, even though she'd never seen her. Another woman with a coil of hair, only older and harsher. "Wasn't that were you came from?" *I want you*, Oshi realised. *You look like Marat Hree would have looked. I want you*. Something like rage sprouted in her; hot and sleek and unbearable that needed to quench itself in innocence. "How long have you been here?" she managed to ask, voice suddenly hoarse and soft, anything but combative.

Those eyes, so intense in their cross-focussed stare: "years and fucking years!" Baffled ambition and incomprehension filled her face with an intensity that overflowed. Oshi

circled round her. "Don't know why. Don't you understand?" Raisa demanded comprehension, clearly unaware of what she was saying: "we were a pathfinder mission! And that monster's shut off the receiver, refused to download the transmission. He murdered them!"

"Be glad." Closer. Oshi could feel it now; a certain lust. "You don't have to deal with the eaters of minds." *Need to smell that skin, feel that face beneath my fingers again.* The warm slick skid of eyes, the crackle of vertebrae. Tears and blood and desire. *While I'm still alive.* Memories of the goon impaled and thrashing on her halberd wrapped around her mind.

"What's *with* you?" Raisa tensed, abruptly rigid. "Hey, look, this isn't right, I've really got to let them know about Boris and you and your ankle is screwed and we really ought to be moving out of here and --"

Oshi lowered her head to Raisa's collarbone, sniffed, one arm around her waist, around the other woman: "I want you," she whispered. Hot and cold all over. Oshi finally *smiled*, a cat-wide grin of teeth and lips pulled back in feral emotion. "I need you."

"You do?" Raisa backed away from her. "Look, hey, no. Look, I don't know you. This is really sudden. I've got things to do."

Oshi paused, shook her head, clearing disturbing images from before her eyes. "Really?"

"Not --" Raisa paused. "Not that there's anyone else. But. You're injured and I've got to tell them Boris --" she shrugged uncomfortably. "Maybe we should talk later."

"Maybe." They locked gazes: Oshi, predatory and clear-eyed, Raisa cross-focussed and wary. *Why am I doing this?* Oshi wondered. She felt incredibly, devastatingly alive -- alive everywhere. "Maybe," Oshi repeated.

"I've got to go now," Raisa said hurriedly. "Don't go anywhere: I'll be right back."

Before Oshi had time to say anything she ducked through a doorway. The lock clicked mechanically behind her. Oshi stared at it in surprised speculation. *Too fast, too fast. What am I doing?* It was like the time back on Miramor Dubrovnic, everything compressed into a screaming hole of emotions. The rest of the Dream Team gathering round afterwards, comforting ... Eri, bless her, trying to help. But nothing would make up for Ivan, may his grave stay undisturbed. (Remembering: the ragged limbs, grey and stringy with decay, nailed up alongside the stretch of urban motorway that curled like a tentacle as it entered

the city. Bits and pieces of losers proclaimed treasonable beyond a shadow of a doubt, the ideology of the victors a sinister clownish lunacy.)

Oshi lay down again and tried to think. Things turned sour on her. The air against her skin was cooling and she could feel the scratch-marks along her ribs beginning to burn. *What have I set loose in my head?* She stared blankly at the ceiling, feeling nothing but loss. *It's not normal for me. Why did she make me feel that way --*

Hello Oshi. You forgot I was in here, did you?

There's a lot that you've conveniently forgotten. Like the witnesses to your crimes, the insanity of your loves, and the horror to which you sold your soul half a lifetime ago. But I'm not going to let you forget about that, Oshi. You know what? I want you to remember. I am your Boss -- as much of me as will fit in your cramped implants -- and you'd better not forget me.

Even in your sleep.

The geometry of the Dreamtime is not intuitively obvious. Time flows at different rates in different domains of the sim-world, and the domains are separated by gulfs of light years. Most communications between the domains take place in the form of data packets transmitted by comlaser, acknowledged and decoded like the packets transmitted between your implants and the upload receivers, or between the clients and servers on any archaic computer network.

There are many levels to the network. At the bottom are the dumb, unintelligent Gatecoder modules that endlessly send and receive checksum data, telling one another that they still exist. The next level up is environment data: common history transferred between the domains, to ensure that their realities are synchronized and that they appear to obey the same (virtual) physical laws. Then above that level, there are the people-transmissions. People are complex; not just data, but entities that can modify their surroundings, even modify the Gatecoder. People are human, or Superbright, and maybe even Ultrabright. You don't take risks when transmitting people between Gatecoders plugged into different Dreamtime domains. If they didn't come through okay, people would cease to travel and the whole sphere of interstellar commerce would fall apart. It would be a new dark age. So you send people through as data in labelled packets, passing return receipts; if you don't get a receipt you resend the packet, buffering it in memory until you know for sure that the traveller has gotten through. It slows things down, of course, but it saves lives. And this is the way you travelled to get here.

But sometimes when the need is great, unacknowledged packets are transmitted; broadcast packets with no receipt, and no buffering. And these must be received and decoded

immediately by *any* gatecoder in their path. It is a fundamental law, but Anubis appears to have forgotten it. Certainly when he learned why the pathfinders had beamed themselves out blindly, he refused to download the entire civilization that followed them. And so, it follows that Anubis is a rogue and a pariah.

Your mission, which you chose to accept, was open ended. Now it requires you to kill Anubis. Then you must implement a defense of this star system against the attack that is coming. I will be watching you in your dreams, Oshi. Don't try to evade me -- I am here in your skull and I can see everything you do.

Good luck in your mission. You're going to need it.

Raisa returned about an hour later. She slipped through the door while Oshi was dozing. Oshi opened her eyes instantly, but gave no sign of being awake. "Can you hear me?" Raisa asked softly.

"I hear you." Oshi abandoned her sleeping subterfuge. She blinked, trying to clear the strands of disturbing dreams from her head. "What's going on?" She hadn't intended to sleep; but after shrugging on a loose robe exhaustion had dulled the edge of her anxiety, until the temptation to lie back and close her eyes had become too much. Not that she was safe -- but if she wasn't, there was precious little that she could do to modify her condition.

"We found Boris. He's safe. I -- we owe you for rescuing him. Nobody's ever gotten out of the axial redoubt before -- not by force." Oshi rolled over and opened her eyes. Raisa looked concerned, but not afraid. "Got someone wants to talk to you."

"That's okay. You -- what's your position here?"

"I'm your minder." Raisa leaned against the far wall. "Looks like I met you first so I'm responsible." She didn't seem to like the idea. "Hence the security. Anubis is unhappy."

"This visitor. Who is it?"

"Guy called Mik." Oshi sat up. Raisa's expression -- *you don't like him, do you?* she decided. "A specialist. In case we ran into trouble," she added ingenuously.

"I see."

"You will." Raisa opened the door. "Come in."

Mik was short, bullet-headed, clad in scuffed overalls with too many odd pockets. He carried a case that bulged with odd protruberances. He matched it; time-worn and tough.

"Boris says you know how to use a killing stick," he said conversationally.

"What's it to you?" asked Oshi.

"Business. You got out of the axis tube. I'd like to know how."

"Uh-huh."

He sat down and opened his bag. A small tripod of black metal he set on top of the table; its top glowed a dim red. "The axial tube is crucial to the security of the colony. It's the only way into the end-wall industrial areas, the ship docking bays, and the hardened infodumps that buffer Dreamtime communications between here and Pascal. It's also the only part of the colony that's radiation-proofed for anything up to a major solar flare and airproofed against a level six or better meteor impact. Anubis has turned it into a baroque fortress, but it's effective for all that. If you can tell me how you escaped --"

"Ack." Oshi cleared her throat. "Any chance of something to drink?" she added, pointedly glancing at Raisa.

Raisa swallowed whatever protest she'd been about to come out with and went next door.

"I'll tell you," Oshi said, "on condition you tell me why you want to know."

Mik grinned at her unsympathetically. "Do you want to leave this room?" he asked.

"You have a point." Oshi struggled to keep from showing her temper. "And your psywar instructors will have told you that a cooperative informer is worth a hundred coercive sources ..."

"Psywar? What's that?"

Save me from amateurs, Oshi thought fervently.

"Just kidding," he added. There was no humour in his voice. *No, not an amateur. A joker: the killing kind.*

"I'll bet you were." Oshi looked away as Raisa came back in.

"Just a minute." Mik caught her arm. He was strong; for a moment Oshi considered trying to break his grip, then realised to her chagrin that she was probably too weak to follow through. "Just stop playing around, Oshi Adjani, whoever you are. This is a matter of

deepest importance to us. You'd better understand that. Lives are at stake and if you get in our way --"

"My life's on the line too," she said, staring hard at him. He turned and looked at her with mild, disinterested eyes that seemed to go right through her. "Right you are. Let's talk."

"Ack." Mik let go of her hand and she caught the beaker that Raisa offered her and gulped at it thirstily. Cold water numbed the back of her throat. "I was abducted by the Goon Squad. You logged that? They took me to a funicular of some kind, half-bioengineered by the look of it. I blacked out on the way -- one of them used a choke hold -- and at the top I went, let's see ..."

For the next three hours Mik took her through every step she'd made, from entering the vestibule to reaching it again. Raisa was a silent presence, occasionally bringing in a pitcher of water and once a bowl of noodles. Oshi racked her brain for every twist and turn. Her implants came in handy, recording with idiot pedantry every footstep she'd taken. Mik in turn recorded her directions in a primitive visualiser, until the three-space volume that represented the redoubt was blue with the squiggles of her wandering.

"Well, it doesn't look as if you went far," he said at the end of it. "The castle is huge. You got further in than anyone else we've had a chance to talk to, but there are big areas unaccounted for."

"What do you think is up there?" asked Raisa.

"Hard to tell." Mik looked right through her. "After they took Vorontsev, three years ago --" Raisa turned away. "We think Anubis rebuilt the interior," he added quietly. "It's a puzzle palace."

"A lethal one," said Oshi.

"He's insane," whispered Raisa. Louder: "Totally headfucked!"

"Well, yes, but calling him names isn't going to bring back the dead," said Mik. "Dead is dead, as my old mam used to say, and it's up to us to stay warm as long as we can. No use crying over split bones. Which leaves me wondering just how much use you're going to be," he added, nodding at Oshi.

Oshi tensed. "Knives can slip in hands that don't bother to learn how to use them."

Mik smiled humourlessly. "Very good. Have you ever killed anyone?"

Oshi didn't answer. She just looked at him, and after a moment his smile faded. "I see." He looked as if he'd trodden in something nasty and only just realised. Oshi was not about to let him off the hook.

"There are worse things," she said quietly. "I've seen some of them. I *know*. That's why they sent me here."

"Who sent you?"

"The -- people -- who sent Anubis here before me. A consortium of Superbrights, sometimes known as Distant Intervention. Meddlers in human destiny. They know they made a mistake with the dog-head. I am their answer."

"Then you'd better be one that works," he said. "Otherwise ..."

Raisa butted in. "She's in a bad state, Mik. Exposure, leg injuries, some metabolic disorders. You'd better give her some breathing time or she's not going to be a solution to anything."

Mik reached down into his bag and rummaged around. "Here." He pulled out a grapefruit-sized ball and tossed it to her. Raisa caught it and spun it around in her fingertips, looking slightly puzzled.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Support environment for the tapeworm," he said. "The mark one model. Deliver it to Joshua."

Raisa put it down so fast she nearly dropped it, as if it had caught fire between her fingertips. "Shit!"

Oshi focussed on the sphere, jacked her eyes down into odd frequencies, and told her implants run fourier transforms on what they saw. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to keep whatever's in there secure," she said. "Biological weapon? Or grow-in-the-dark nanomachinery?"

"Go figure." He stared at Raisa. "You agreed to be the go-between, didn't you?"

"But I --" Raisa looked acutely uncomfortable. "Has Boris cleared this?"

"Not only has he cleared it, it's essential we do it right now." Mik reached out and picked

up the ball and held it out to her. "You know what to do," he said gently. "Now go to it."

Raisa looked sick. "I'll --" whatever she was going to say, she thought better of it. "Yes." She left the room. An outer door slammed behind her moments later.

"What was that about?" asked Oshi. "Someone you don't like?"

"Joshua is schizophrenic: a neuroreceptor deficit in some pathway or other. He hears voices, doesn't have much of a sense of identity. He won't cooperate with any medical work, even though his condition is curable. We think he talks to Anubis too much. She delivers his food. She's too soft; she doesn't want anything to do with it."

"Sounds serious."

Mik suddenly looked haggard. "It's a gamble," he admitted. "It could take out every life-form in the colony. If we can't take the axial redoubt --"

"You came equipped for this." Oshi stood up unsteadily, feeling a stab of pain from her twisted ankle. "You needed to learn everything about the castle and you decided to release it -- what, a biological weapon? -- then and there? It's a coup."

"The decision was already taken." Mik was suddenly between her and the door. There was something bear-like about his stance, and a frightening vacancy in his expression. Oshi had seen it too many times before: that distance in the gaze, the disengagement from humanity. "Nobody is going to get in the way."

"But it may be premature," cautioned Oshi. "Didn't you get the rest of my message from Boris? About the Ultrabrights?"

"Yes. I've got some news for you: the cosmic background radiation is getting hotter. It's been doing so since you arrived, following an inverse square curve. Odd, that. I'm afraid it puts you in rather an unpleasant position. Unless you can somehow explain it?"

"If you'll let me." Her heart hammered between her ribs. She felt dizzy, fight/flight reflexes unable to cope with her physical state.

Mik didn't move. "Go ahead."

"I was sent here when my controllers realised there was a problem. That was a while after you arrived. The problem followed you here and it's a matter of bad timing -- or maybe something else. I don't know how long I was buffered in the download process, but according to Raisa there's something funny about your Gatecoder. People aren't released

from it on schedule. It's possible that it's been storing me up for a while -- after you arrived and were downloaded -- and whatever's happening outside triggered my physical incarnation. That is, I was only downloaded from storage when whatever I was sent to achieve had already started."

"Plausible." He didn't move.

Oshi felt sweat pooling in the small of her back. "What's important is that I know things about the Superbrights," she said. "Things they don't want to let out. So my controller sent me here because he needed an agent who knew what the real situation was, someone who could assess things on the spot and take appropriate action."

"Less plausible." Oshi weighed her chances again, found them less than optimal.

"But true. It was this or ... whatever they do with humans who ask too many questions. Believe me, I didn't want this: he played me into asking for it, and here I am. We're all in deep shit. Whatever chewed up your home world is coming down throughout this sector and I don't even know the absolute date so I can't figure out how long it's been, but I'd be willing to bet that's what's happening. And --"

"Are you a Superbright?" asked Mik.

Disgust made Oshi spit. "No!" Bitterly: "I just know a little bit more about them than I'm meant to."

"Then you know ..."

He was fishing for something, she realised. "What they're doing with the dirtworlds?" she asked.

"Tell me about it!"

"They farm us." She watched him for a reaction. "They foster life-after-death cults among the ignorant, and harvest their minds when they go virtual at death. No reincarnation for the poor: just ... food."

"Why weren't you eaten, Oshi Adjani?" he asked, almost gently.

A sharp memory of choking paralysis gripped her. She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the evil possibilities. If your personality can be recorded, downloaded to another star system, what's to stop it being duplicated? "Maybe I was ..."

There was a metallic click. She looked up: Mik had opened the door. "You're free to leave," he said. "But I think you should come with me. Things are going to get a little unhealthy here before long."

"Why is that?" she asked, almost unbelieving.

He shrugged and straightened up. He no longer looked menacing: more like a careworn friend than a lethal stranger. "It doesn't make any difference what you are. I didn't see an increase in wisdom throughput when I threatened you. You're on your own, whoever you are -- even if you are what you say. So you're not part of *him*."

"Well I'm so *glad* that you think that." She glanced round. "Where is there to go?"

"The redoubt." He grinned again, baring snagged teeth in his lower jaw. "Via an assembly point in the Temple of Osiris. I'm going to pay Anubis a visit tomorrow night. Would you like to come along? It should be quite a spectacular ride."

After Mik left, Oshi crashed out. It was a while before she relaxed enough for sleep: even with watch circuits standing guard in her skin, she was edgy with the fear of a sudden awakening.

Awakening came in due course with a knock on the door. Oshi sat up before she realised she was no longer asleep: ears tense for the slightest sign --

"Oshi."

One person standing outside the door. "Come in."

It was Mik. "Everything's fixed," he said. "There's going to be a meeting. Escape committee, below the Temple of Osiris." He held out a bowl to her.

"What's with this Osiris stuff anyway?" she asked, taking the bowl: it held a lump of rough bread and a wedge of cheese.

"The god who dies and is resurrected to redeem us in the afterlife and bring the fields to fertility with his blood," said Mik. "Supposedly Anubis's boss. Supposedly. The dog-head won't go near the temple. Not in person, anyway."

Oshi bolted down the lump of cheese and started on the bread. Her stomach churned, its modified lining extruding villiform absorption surfaces in a weird parody of the normal digestive process. She felt slightly queasy as she watched Mik. He sat down and pulled a

metal tube from a deep pocket in one trouser leg: began to slot components into it by touch.

"The only question is how the Goons take it," he said calmly. "They're too dumb to register what's going on. Can't bribe them, any more than you can bribe a musket ball. (Missile's are another matter, but unfortunately we're not up against ...) The radiation temperature's still rising. Boris told Lorma to get the gadget you wanted ready; she's somewhere in a basement staring at the vacuum. Maybe we'll know what's happening by evening."

"Wha'time's'it?" Oshi burped, feeling a noxious wind. Her stomach churned some more and was still, as empty as if she hadn't swallowed a thing. She was ravenous. "Need more food."

"Check. It's late afternoon. You've slept almost an entire day." Mik finished bolting his device together. He kept it pointed away from her. Caught her gaze: "it's a grenade launcher. Full automatic, three centimetre, smart enough to hold its fire 'til it seems the whites of their eyes."

"Guessed that." Oshi stared at the gun; the gun stared back, blinked lazily at her. "Anything to eat?"

"You *are* hungry."

She stood up suddenly. The gun's eyes widened, tracking her across the room. "You don't say." She stretched, winced as she placed too much stress on her ankle. "I was underweight when I arrived. My digester's been tuned up. I could eat a horse."

"Don't have any of those here." Mik waved at the door; "if you want to help yourself, it's all outside. Don't go 'way."

"Believe me, I've got no *intention* of going away. Not with the kind of neighbours you've got."

There was a small vestibule outside the room she'd awakened in. Deep shelves covered in dust faced her, racked from floor to ceiling; the outer door was stone, latched with a thick wooden bar. A covered tray drew her attention. She grabbed the loaf of bread and chewed methodically, then drained the jug of water behind it. A blunt-faced cat mummy stared at her from the back of the funerary niche.

"It's like this," Mik added, raising his voice just enough that she could hear him round the door; "Anubis knows we're up to something, but he doesn't know what. Or he didn't until

he caught Boris messing around with one of the fabricators. We hijacked them when Anubis wasn't paying attention. We may not have access to Dreamtime or much in the way of computing resources, but we've got a good bioengineering team and we sort of expected to have to pull some stunts wherever we arrived. So we were using them to spin some nasty surprises like the tapeworm I gave Rai. When that's in place, when the rest is sorted, we can go bang on his door. He'll listen. He'll have no alternative."

Only Oshi's augmented hearing enabled her to pick out the subvocalized follow up: "*neither will we.*" She didn't comment. She was too busy: her stomach writhed in something halfway between cramp and the gustatory equivalent of a multiple orgasm.

"Who'else'there?" Oshi demanded around a mouthful of breadcrumbs. (She shoved the tray to the back of the niche; something rattled.)

"Everyone who's anyone. The team --" the inner door opened. "Are you alright?"

"Fine." Oshi stumbled back into the sleeping room. "But my *stomach* is out of *control*. Carry on talking." She sat down heavily on the bed. Mik leaned against one wall, watching a spot ten centimetres behind her face.

"Look like you need the food. There's a team; Anubis did something to our wet squad. None of them are here, we don't know why -- think he may not have downloaded them or something. So all of us who're left are second-stringers -- not real pathfinders, but the support team. Still and all, we have Lorma and with the biotech group she jacked together a couple of genocide brews like the tapeworm. Then there's Boris and the diplomats. They're not fighters, exactly, but war is a continuation of diplomacy by other means and they know their subject if you follow my drift. A few of the others can probably fight. And there's a lot of support engineers -- we've got a short bite but a long tail."

"What're'you?" asked Oshi, still chewing on an empty mouthful of air. She belched loudly; "*pardon* me."

"I'm the strategos," Mik admitted. "There was contingency planning in case the natives weren't friendly; my download manifest labelled me a botanist. So I'm here but I've no one to work with."

Oshi grinned, narrow-eyes: "*now* you have." She burped again, and stood up. "If my stomach doesn't give me away ... how about taking a walk? I'd love to see what you've got lined up."

"I'll bet you would." Mik picked up a black box and held it out to her; "take this. You seem to know how to use it."

Oshi turned it over in her hands. Brushed black aluminium finish on a lump of raw machined titanium. A couple of holes, a couple of clips, a trigger. "Crude, but --"

"It was the best we could do at short notice."

The noise of metal rang from the walls as she pulled the cocking lever and armed it. "I feel a lot better already. Let's go and see what's cooking."

Getting ready to move out always screwed Oshi's nerves tighter than the event itself. Like a hurdle in a race, it loomed larger in her perceptions than in reality. More so here, where her only defense was her wit and a lump of metal and explosives. "We need more," she whispered. "Can you improvise anything?"

Mik jumped up and paced over to the door. "Not without making contact. Someone's supposed to be lifting Boris's arms cache, if Anubis hasn't already staked it out, but that's all we were counting on."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Her ankle throbbed in time with her pulse but her head was clear: nerves alight, skin tingling. "We'll just have to make sure we don't meet any goons. Let's go." She slipped the door open and peered into the gloom. The vestibule was empty. For the first time she noticed the disarmed funerary traps, designed to ensnare tomb robbers. "That's cute. Who was buried here?"

"Don't know." *Don't care*, his tone told her. "Come on."

It was dark outside, the vast sun-lamps shut down to a lunar glow along the axial tube of the colony. Wisdom buzzed and hummed, tracking microwave transmissions up and down the huge cylinder. There was nothing lying in wait for them.

Mik nodded silently. His face was a nightlit shadow, bisected by the dull glow from the axial light pump and the darkness of the doorway. "Move on out," he said. "What went wrong was Boris. We all figured that if Anubis locked one of us down he'd tear them limb from limb; instead he started asking questions."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shook his head dismissively. "Need to know."

Oshi blinked slowly, stared at him with heavy-lidded eyes. "Did you, now? Well, then." She hefted her firearm. "Where to?"

"Meeting place near the old central Temple of Osiris. Like I said, Anubis doesn't use it: and it's defensible against the goons in the short term." Mik headed off round the back of the accommodation block, pausing whenever Oshi got too far behind. "That's what we need."

Buildings bulked like decaying teeth in the nightlight, dimly illuminated by the nocturnal radiance of the axial light pump. Shadowy doors clustered around the stumps of bulbous habitats and agorae, living places and social arenas. Stump-nosed rodents looked up suspiciously as they passed, then bent back to their diet of casual litter. A soft breeze blew. Oshi tugged her jacket tighter across her shoulders, glancing into quiet corners as she passed.

By the vision of her altered eyes, the townscape was a mass of intricate spiderwebs, violet pathways and floating designs that hung upon the air like mystic flags. Her wisdom cache kicked in, giving a meaning to the virtual overlay. "Is it always this busy around here?" she asked.

"Busy? You mean the --" Mik stopped again and peered at her in the gloom. "You can see the wisdom environment directly?"

"I'm no drone. I've just got an optic server. There's a lot of heavy traffic tonight. *Way* more than you'd expect for a normal ecology. I don't know much about oneils like this, but if Anubis knows --"

"*Bad* news." Mik glanced around twitchily. "I really don't think we can afford for that to happen. Do you see any goons?"

Oshi scuffed at the ground, glanced round edgily. "The Goon Squad are a sick joke. If Anubis really knew what he was doing -- he has control of the colony resources -- he wouldn't piss around with macroforms and living weapons; I think he's lost it. I want to find out more. Don't you?"

"I'm not sure it matters. Look, lets go where we're going then talk about this some more. It's interesting but I'd rather not stick around here."

They passed trees and carefully cultivated stellae of synthetic life, glittering patterns of engineered mist that fluttered along the ground with the delicate touch of insect life. Living stalactites arched overhead: the pebbles on the path hummed with warmth from below. Nightrunning voles twitched the garden corners clean. In the distance, a fountain sputtered softly upon stone. The path crossed a footbridge of wood above a trickling stream lined with green moss, turned black by the nightlight. Convergent sparks of silver pointed Oshi towards a major pipe junction. *It's so beautiful: such a shame it's got to be*

terminated. She glanced sidelong at Mik. *I hope the damage can be restricted ...* she thought of Raisa, blinking back powerful emotions, fear and loathing and betrayal; a complex urge to ensure her own abandonment before it was too late. Before she had to feel something more than passing lust, transient narcissism.

"What's that?" Oshi squinted into the night, looking ahead. She pointed for Mik's benefit.

"Shit!" A corpse lay beside the path in front of them; despite being dead, it was gruesomely lively. Oshi walked towards it; Mik grabbed her arm. "Don't. If that's what I think it is --"

"Your people did *that*?" Oshi stared at the body, fascinated and revolted. Bizarre terratomae sprouted from it. Grey nodes of neuroectoderm protruded from the skin in irregular patches, whilst squirming reddish masses of myocardium pulsed in the orbits of the eye sockets. The protruding tongue blossomed into a bush of black hairs. A fine web of whitish, thread-like worms twisted and burrowed away from the body wherever it lay in contact with the ground. Mushrooming pillars of hyphae tunnelled away into the nearby bushes, connected indistinctly to the structures in the soil by a network of ganglia.

"Living weapon," Mik said, staring at it warily. "The tapeworm. Looks like Raisa did her bit. It's very dangerous but it looks like it's still sessile, not capable of attacking. Don't, whatever you do, let it touch you."

The thing jerked convulsively, two new shoots emerging from what had been its left thigh. They twitched, blindly seeking the cool soil in a trophic movement as ancient as plant life. Oshi gagged at the stench, a blocked drain aroma stuffed with essence of decaying cheese. Her stomach churned with a revolting hunger. She breathed out deeply; it seemed to work. "Let's go round. What's a safe distance?"

"There isn't one. Or at least there won't be, by morning. That's all on schedule, at least. Follow me ..." They circled it then hurried along the path, ignoring the neomort behind them even when the chittering of its neural interfaces threatened to swamp wisdom access.

"That's revolting. Is it part of your strategy? How many of them are there?"

"Just the one, I think. You can ask Lorma when she shows. It was her group that designed them."

Oshi glanced over her shoulder, once. "I believe I will."

They came upon a natural amphitheatre, a conical depression in a dusty hillside, open to one side. Stone tombs overlooked it on three sides, complex jokes laughing silently at

imaginary ancient lives. The temple was fronted by a squat complex of stone blocks and glaçis-sloping rooftops, spurious and discordant in the controlled environment of the colony.

"Is this it?"

"Ack," said Mik. "The Temple of Osiris. It's mostly empty. A hollow shell. I *told* you Anubis didn't like it; he never finished the interior. Part of it's a storage facility for old building materials: the rest is disused. We're due in it in fourteen minutes."

"That's good." Oshi glanced round, eyeing the front of the Temple. Her heart sank: too many windows, too many doors. All dark, all vacant. The building looked like a derelict shell. "Shit. Where do we meet? Where's our cover?"

"Inside that. Come on!" Mik hauled off towards the front entrance.

Oshi called after him: "where is everybody?"

"Appearances are deceptive." Mik climbed the front step, shoved the door in: darkness beckoned, revealing a tangle of leaf-mold on the floor. "You think we'd hold a party and invite everyone? Goon Squad included, you bet!"

Oshi followed, holding her gun ready. Suspicion plagued her: not of Mik herself, but of Mik's perceptions of the environment. *Too convenient, too shallow and friendly. A disused palace? Either Anubis's totally dumb, or ...*

Despite the gloom she could see inside the disused building. The room fronting the door was a wide vestibule with a high ceiling: behind it corridors ran into the shadows around either side of a central core. She looked down. Beneath a thin layer of dust and rubbish, the floor was fine-polished marble. *Witness my works, all ye who enter here.* She shivered and listened. Wisdom caught nothing. "Better close the door," she murmured. "You never know who might come calling."

Mik shoved the heavy door to, dropped a surprisingly solid bolt through rough-looking hooks behind it. "This way." He retreated into the darkness, following the leftmost corridor. It wound round the central core, through a door that scraped as it opened: then into a dim-lit room of indistinct proportions.

"So glad you could make the party," said Boris, shuffling out from behind a partition. Stopped short before the barrel of Oshi's weapon: "I was going to thank you for rescuing me from Anubis's clutches," he said. His voice was hoarse and slightly slow, pausing on the edge of phrases as if he was unsure whether or not to continue. "Were you followed?"

"Doubtful," said Mik. Behind her, Oshi clicked on her safety catch, looked about silently. "Who else is about? Or coming? Is this all there is?"

"Parveen, Ishmael, Raisa, Johann, Lorma ... not Joshua." His cheek twitched. "Joshua felt the need for a bit of exercise. Very conveniently."

"The worm ..." Mik asked: "that was Joshua? On the path?"

"What?" Boris blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"The worm," Mik repeated, slowly and loudly. "We passed Joshua. Joshua, remember? We triggered the tapeworm. And you let him loose with that thing running inside him?"

Boris looked doubtful. "Nobody told *me*," he remarked. "Are you sure --"

"Will somebody explain what's going on?" asked Oshi. Boris looked at her as if he'd only just seen her. "I know you're making a move on Anubis. Couldn't you be a bit less obscure?"

"Yes, certainly," said Boris. "Hey, over here." He turned and shuffled behind the head-high partition. Oshi followed him, eyes searching the dark corners of the room. There were more partitions, floor-mounted and thick, arranged in a maze of turnings and twists. Boris retreated to a small cubby, out of sight of the windows and the doorway; he'd furnished it with aluminium cargo pods and a night-light. Something that might have been a spider -- if spiders stood three metres tall at the shoulder and had black ceramic carapaces -- bestrode the highest pod; it stood still as a statue, save for an antenna that twitched occasionally in the twilight.

"I've been tracing the goon squad command stream. Anubis doesn't seem to have clued in on where we are yet." He glanced at his feet. "The plan is to release a post-lamarkian organism -- a genetic bomb -- that will render the colony utterly uninhabitable to most life forms in about, ah, three days. That wipes out the Goon squad and everything else down here -- including us. Except in that time scale we go up top and hit Anubis very hard. We've set up some ... bombs. Lumps of thermite all over the high-gain antennae in the axial manufacturing zones. When they go off, they will temporarily sever the Dreamtime link to Pascal. Anubis loses contact with his mind, twelve light-seconds away; all we have to deal with afterwards is a jackal-headed freak. In that time frame we take the axial redoubt and hole up, then clean out the colony. Once we've done that, we're in a very strong negotiating position. It's a risk, but there's reason to believe we'll succeed. Plus, we've got to do it right now. The radiation levels are still rising; only the axial redoubt is shielded sufficiently well to protect us against a local supernova, if that's what we're

seeing the wavefront from. Plus, if we don't do it now Anubis will figure out what's happening. So ..."

"Neutralize Anubis. Then what?" asked Oshi.

Boris paused before replying. "Find out what's really going on," he said. "There are ships out there: about eighty high delta-vee freighters capable of going anywhere in the system, and several smaller craft. If we have control of the hub communications array we can take control of them and use them as probes. The ambient microwave background is up seven degrees. It's getting hot out there and we need to know why -- urgently -- but not as urgently as we need to get rid of Anubis."

"You may not have much time," said Oshi. "Did you get the equipment I asked for?"

Boris shrugged. "We may not have enough time, indeed. It's over there."

Oshi followed his outstretched arm. A fat viewing tank squatted in the middle of a circle of ripped-open packing crates, trailing an umbilical of cables that terminated in one wall. "Shit. It's got *wires*. What kind of junk --"

"No junk," said Mik. "That's shielding."

"Huh." She walked over to it, inspected the control panel critically. "You said there'd be other people here?"

"Any time now," he said.

"Who's due?" Boris asked him.

"The climb team." Mik sat down opposite the door and laid his gun across his knees. "It's going to be a long night."

Oshi blinked. Her stored wisdom checked over the control layout, suggested some strategies for figuring it out, then admitted defeat. "Shit." She poked at the bulky manual power toggle, waited for the tank to come to life. A microcosm dropped away into space where the plastic cube had perched a moment before: a synthetic hologram. At the centre of it floated a tiny, silver sausage capped at either end by an out-turned cup. *Forty kilometres ... that scales to a five hundred klick proximity zone, right?* "Know how to operate one of these, anybody?"

"Ack." Mik stood up, stretched, and walked over. "What do you want to know?"

"How to adjust the scale factor. Like this." Oshi demonstrated what she wanted. "And I need viewport control with six full degrees of freedom. How about --"

"There." Mik showed her. "It sucks, but it's clean. You've got a trusted channel to the phased array tracking grid. What are you looking for?"

"This," said Oshi, and zoomed out the viewport until the entire solar system dwindled to fill the innermost volume of the hologram. "And *that*."

"What is it?"

Oshi fiddled with some controls. Suddenly the tank flared with blue-white light from a point just outside the orbit of the gas giant Turing. "Gamma spectrum, point five three three megaelectron volts. That's a positronium reaction." She glanced up at Mik, her face livid and deathly in the video overspill. "We've got a visitor. Better get Boris."

"What kind of visitor?"

"I don't know. But it's burning antimatter bright enough to light up the entire system. Hot enough to screw the hell out of anything that isn't dug in behind a layer of rock. I'd say it's an Ultrabright artefact; some kind of attack craft. And if you follow its course --" she pointed at the tank, plotted a red course vector on top of it "-- guess who's coming to dinner?"

Over the next three hours people began to arrive by ones and twos, ghosting in furtively and talking in hushed voices. They all told the same story: checkpoints elluded, tracker programs spoofed, the mechanical priesthood of a mad god deceived by a combination of determination and desperation. "We need out," said Lorma, the tall, distinguished-looking developmental engineer who headed the bioweapons group: "it's been too long. We've been falling apart for years. If we don't make one final push, then --"

Oshi watched from the cover of her preoccupation with the sensor tank. Raisa arrived in company. She didn't acknowledge Oshi: instead she deferred to Lorma, who began asking pointed questions. Raisa looked shaken, as if she'd witnessed a terrible accident from the sidelines. Lorma, in contrast, was matter-of-fact, reassuring, and coldly precise. "You passed it to Joshua? Who suggested him -- Mik? How predictable. When was that? Ah. *Yesterday*. I see. It's a good thing he didn't ask my advice first." Lorma turned round: "has anyone seen Mikhail?" she demanded.

"He went that-a-ways," grunted Ish, a dark soldierly presence hunched over a crate of half-unpacked climbing equipment. "With Boris, to the primal mound. 'Bout an hour ago"

"I see. Well if you can reach him --" Ish didn't look up. "-- When you reach him, tell him he's been an idiot. Letting off a teleological weapon is bad enough but not getting us all into bioisolation beforehand is just stupid unless he *wants* to see zombies --"

"Teleological weapon?" Oshi asked, looking up.

"Later." To Ish: "get your master back here at once. We'll have to act fast to stop this turning into a meltdown." To Oshi: "deploying the tapeworm without proper restrictions was a bad idea. Raisa should have known better than to go along with it. We'll lose everything in the environment that isn't backed up --"

"We'll do that anyway. Did Mik tell you about the radiation problem?"

"No." Lorma stared at Oshi. "What radiation problem? You're the new arrival? What's going on? Why did Mik leave?"

"He went off an hour back with Boris," said Ish, slowly picking up a spool of rope. "Nobody's telling me anything so I can't exactly fill you in on things, can I?"

Raisa, Oshi noted, had not said a word during the whole conversation. She was busy unpacking another crate full of what might be first-aid supplies or bioweapon cultures. For her to be so subdued was probably a sign of something bad. "There's a radiation weapon entering the system. It's getting hot slowly: pretty soon it'll get hot fast. Whatever it is is on a hyperbolic orbit past Turing and we're going to get scorched sometime in about forty-eight hours, if we don't get some additional shielding up fast. Mik says the only suitable redoubt is already occupied. Does that answer your question?"

"And Mik's gone to the primal mound?" Lorma looked worried. "Yes, I suppose it does; he's lost it, blowing the tapeworm too early. That leaves me in charge here then. Alright --"

"No it doesn't," said Oshi, standing up. She glanced round: *funny the way a grenade launcher draws all eyes even when you're not pointing it at anyone*. "He left some very precise instructions. And I suggest you listen to them before you do anything else."

"You." Lorma walked towards her slowly. "Tell me. For the last time, what is going on?"

"What's going on is this entire system is coming under attack by something we don't understand. If we don't get Anubis out of the axial redoubt and take it for ourselves we're going to fry, regardless of whatever's in that gadget you cooked up. So as soon as Boris and Mikhail get back we're going to go for a little night climbing --"

"Oh *shit*." Raisa was shaking her head. "If that's what he thinks then he *is* an idiot."

"What do you mean?" asked Oshi.

"She means he doesn't understand the tapeworm," Lorma explained condescendingly. "It's not just a random bioweapon capable of taking out things like the Goon Squad; it's a teleological device, something from the dark anthropic zone -- a universe in which life forms like it could evolve naturally is not one in which humanity would ever appear. I suppose you could call it an artificial demon: a Lovecraft device. It works by systematically evolving into a dissipative system. It becomes more complex as it eats things; it preserves their informational content rather than randomizing them. It starts with the genome of a tapeworm, but rapidly gets more sophisticated. As it grows it can acquire conscious metaprocesses: it takes over the bodies of the organisms it's absorbed and makes them perform useful tasks. The whole idea was to get into the redoubt first, *then* release the tapeworm. He set it off too early. Which wouldn't be a problem in its own right except --"

"The news," Raisa said uneasily. She looked queasy, as if it disagreed with her. "Two hours ago. All the goons anyone's been tracking down here disappeared. Back to the throat of hell. Back to the redoubt. The whole place up top will be swarming with them. And we're going to go in *there*?"

"Okay." Oshi glanced round. Everyone was watching her. "In that case we're going to go up top as soon as they get back. If they *don't* get back we've got to assume they've been captured and do it any way we can but how they expect it. But whatever, we've got to get out of here and clear out that castle as soon as possible. Any questions?"

"Yeah!" called a thuggish-looking individual from the back. "Who's leading the show?"

"I am," said Oshi. Raising her gun: "and you better believe it!"

Some of them didn't want to cooperate at first, but that was okay. Oshi bared her teeth and did a passable imitation of her old drill-sergeant and scared the crap out of the more impressionable idiots Mik had sucked along in his undertow. (Less than a third of the people in the colony, she discovered, wanted anything to do with Mik and Boris and their schemes. They were so demoralized that their leaders could barely energize them to resistance, let alone cooperation.) "It's like this," she told them calmly and steadily: "we have a choice. We can wait here for the tapeworm to burst out everywhere and eat us alive, or the radiation storm to fry us. Or we can go up top and try to clear out the castle and deal with the goon squad. Radiation and disease are *slow*. I don't know about you, but I'd rather take my chances with the goons -- especially with the kit we've got here. Or would you rather bleed to death from every orifice or watch the tumours eat your arms

and legs a cell at a time?"

"What about Mik and Boris?" demanded Lorma. "You can't just ignore them!"

"I'm not going to." Oshi stared at her hard. *You're going to be trouble, aren't you?*

"They've gone to try and cut the comm link between Anubis and his mind. If they make it, things will go a lot smoother. But we've got to go even if they don't -- and we'd better plan on that basis. You!" She pointed at Ish, the soldierly one with the talent for self-effacement, who had ensconced himself between two modular racks of something that she hoped were grenades -- "know anything about climbing or fighting?"

"Climbing?" he stretched, then stood up. "A bit. Fighting too, in a strictly low intensity kind of theoretical way. Why?"

"Someone's got to do it." She shrugged. "Rest of you. Any kind of training or experience?" A wave of muttering broke out: "hey, *can it!* Can't hear myself think. Any of you been places and shot things, preferably people?"

No hands went up. "Shit. Well, then, here's your chance to learn. Ish, pick five you trust and get yourselves armed. Then go find out what's happened to Mik. The rest of you --" she glanced at her audience, feeling a warm glow of satisfaction with the way they stared back at her -- "listen up, it's time to get this gear uncrated and ready to run. We've got work to do."

Ish slipped away into the darkness, followed by a squad of nervous draftees clutching improvised weapons. The minutes slipped by like seconds as Oshi checked out unfamiliar kit, gave improptu orders to unfamiliar faces, recited a litany of common-sense advice for uncommon situations. When he reappeared half an hour later Oshi feared the worst -- until she saw Mik, tired but grinning, behind him. "What happened?" she demanded, striding past the chaos where a group of cultural attaches were assembling an assault spider. "Did you run into anything?"

"The place is deserted," said Ish. "Never seen anything like it. You couldn't even hear the spies on K-band -- they've all been pulled back."

"The hub devices are primed to blow on command," said Mikhail. "Boris did a good job." The man himself ducked self-effacingly. "Anubis' agents must have understood what the tapeworm was. It's not going to be easy to get him out of there."

"Any signs?" asked Oshi.

Mikhail shook his head. "Skywriting in blood-red heiroglyphics on the clouds, quotes

from the book of the dead; the usual cryptic gibberish mixed with apocalyptic threats." He met her stare: his expression was fixed, as if he was suppressing something. "Looks like he's pissed. If we don't go through with this now ..."

"*I'll* be pissed," said Boris. "No disrespect, Mikhail, but I did not set this up for your convenience. Not to be switched on and off like a light. We should act immediately. Unless you have any pressing objection --" Behind him, Ish waved his irregulars over to the door. They took up positions in the entrance hall, covering the front of the building.

"Lorma says you screwed up," Oshi said bluntly. "Anubis has pulled in and all he needs to do is wait out the tapeworm. It'll suck our guts out, the radiation storm will finish it off afterwards, and he can wait it all out behind ten metres of solid rock. How you going to get him out?"

"The hard way, I think." Boris scratched his head. "Didn't know the radiation storm would be *that* bad. Are you sure ..?"

"Sure?" Oshi snorted. "Listen, we're under attack! I figure we've got less than a day to go, maybe much less. If you haven't moved by then Anubis will call your bluff and send the goons in. How many have you got ready to move --"

"Yo!"

Everyone glanced round. One of the sentries was waving from the doorway. "Getting a signal over the external channels, one of the environment support bands nobody ever uses. Want me to pipe it in?"

"Voice only." Mik looked thoughtful. "Any signs of life?"

"Everyone gone to ground. Apart from that, no."

"Okay."

Raisa stood up. Lorma tried to hold her back; she shook the hand off and edged round the semi-assembled climbing spiders. "Wait," she said.

"Why?" Mik stared at her.

"I've been figuring out the growth profile for the tapeworm." She looked round, nervous, eyes somehow avoiding Oshi, Mik and Boris even though she was addressing them: "a day, topside, before it hits singularity. We can't sit and wait it out. It's going to grow too fast."

"Well, then. Why don't we listen to what the dog-head's got to say?" Mik asked, deceptively reasonable. "It can't be any worse --"

A tingling in the back of her head, an itching in her toes: "we need to *move*," Oshi said.

"In due course." Boris glanced over at Ish; "get your comms lead to patch it through."

"Ack."

A dry rustling, dust devils on an imaginary desert plain. " *Let there be no rest for the wicked, no solace for the evil,*" chanted a desolate voice : " *let their eyes be ripped out and their tongues cloven, let their inner parts and reins be scattered to the four winds and their limbs be rent from them and eaten by serpents. For we know yet what they do, and there will be a time for justice: yea, even though the father may forgive the son shall remember, and there will be an accounting.*"

"He's pissed, alright," said the communicant, grinning over her backpack.

"In that case --" Oshi's eyes widened. "Shut it down!"

An eerie screech sizzled out of the voice node's speaker, climbing rapidly into painful inaudibility. Weird discordant overtones jangled across it, digging agonizing claws into her arms and legs as if she was wired for power and somebody had just plugged her into a badly shielded generator. *Shit shit SHIT some kind of carrier signal* -- her internal wisdom resources kicked in. You're being nobbled. Low bandwidth signal achieving handshake with feedback loops established by crude tampering in the substantia nigra. Likely to radically impair your functionality if no countermeasures are taken. Filter [y/n]?

Kill it. Her teeth ached. Someone was screaming: no, several people were screaming. There was a hollow popping sound as she brought her gun to bear with jerky movements; she couldn't hear anything now, except for a roar of random white noise drowning out the interference signal her backbrain had been wired to wait for. Aim, load, fire --

The noise stopped. Her ears rang with the deafening aftersilence of the shots. The screaming, however, continued.

"For fuck's sake, get us medical support *now* --" one of the engineers who had been working on the climbing spiders was thrashing around, a mess of blood covering her face. Others -- at least two people -- were screaming. Smoke coiled from the smashed comms

terminal. Raisa stood up slowly, clutching her head, and stumbled towards the fallen tech; someone else converged from the other side, clutching some kind of toolkit. Oshi glanced round. Mik was sitting up, shaking his head, a dazed look on his head. Then he saw her watching and pushed himself upright.

"Backbrain burner," he gasped. "Thought we found all of those --"

"All?"

"Got two. Dog-breath must go for redundancy. Shit, my arms ache. How long you think we've got?"

Oshi glanced up instinctively. "About three minutes, if they jump from the axis. Maybe fifteen if they take the lift."

"Let's get moving then."

A burst of static filled her wisdom sense as Mikhail booted the climb-spiders, dumping control objects into their primitive nervous systems. A clutch of the spidery exoskeletons staggered to their feet, black-shelled iron maidens gaping for their living prey. Oshi grabbed for the nearest one, swung her feet up, and let it draw her back into its padded interior. Her left ankle screamed in protest as the robot grabbed it and locked a boot around her foot. "Anyone else ready yet?"

"*Ack.*" The exoskeletons had voice-to-wisdom converters, a primitive of telepathy simulator. "*Mikhail here. Who else --*"

Oshi glanced round. Infrared sensors built into her climb-spider cut in, flaring crude green highlights across the scene of carnage. People scrambled everywhere, first-aid packs sprouted tentacles to administer the kiss of life to their human recipients: and a handful of alert individuals made for the assembled climb-spiders and other military bionics that Boris's people had kluged together from any and all available sources. "*I think we can expect the goon squad to drop in real soon. We should deploy countermeasures around the perimeter then retreat. This is not going to be defensible.*"

"*Ish here. We can't retreat! The casualties --*"

Oshi glanced up. Radar flickered out, pulsing the distance to the ceiling: deafening echoes blinded her in a weird, synaesthetic rush. "*We're all casualties if we don't move. This is a killing jar.*" She turned and lifted one foot: put it down again, a metre nearer the door. She flexed her shoulders and felt a smooth stinger extension weld itself into her proprioceptive sense, grafted into her body image like a transplant of death. It whirred up to speed, nozzle

tracking across the wall behind her focal point. " *Come on.*"

She stepped over the prostrate guards, climb-spider humming. It was dark outside: she felt a distant jolt through the soles of her feet, then a smooth sense of acceleration as the spider stretched up to full height with her first outdoor stride. " *Which way is the gate?*"

" *Jan here. Follow me.*" Another exoskeleton emerged into the night air and reared, legs uncoiling beneath it in strange broken-jointed geometries. It froze still for a moment, then leapt forward into an alley between dark-looming tombs. Oshi followed, edgily aware of her unaccustomed extensions and the silent threat from above. Her skin crawled with the urge to send active radar pulses skywards, to track the insurgents she could almost *feel* falling through the silent night air towards her --

They ran through dark alleys of stone, past tumbled walls and ominous pillars, under the sign of the eye of Horus. Dust devils whirled at the side of the funerary road, wisps of smoke rising in the heat of the night. Amplifiers boosted their strides, fitting seven league boots to their heels. As they ran the buildings became smaller and more decrepit, decaying into sand-crustured mounds of ancient wreckage.

Oshi felt the extensions to her body-image take shape, weird limbs and shapeless organs grafted onto her sensory homunculus. New senses augmented her own. She listened to radar and watched for the luminous flicker-pulse of high bandwidth comms, felt the mind-bending static of quantum transfer links forcing its way to her attention. The cylinder was a huge echoing tube, grinding and shuddering with the intensity of the signals bouncing up and down it. A thousand billion Dreamtime nodes pulsed in synchrony, tracking the state transfers of every nervous system in the pocket world. For a claustrophobic instant she was almost blinded by a gut-churning insight: despite its tremendous mass and complexity, this ecosphere of the mind was fragile beyond belief. The puny mutterings of the escape committee had already begun to destabilize it. That, combined with the ominous thermal noise from outside, might signal the end of all life in this solar system.

There were twenty of them now, distorted marionettes encased in sinister confections of armour and bone. A ping in her ear notified Oshi that a secure voice link was coming on-line, encryption keys swapped via an uncrackable quantum channel. "What's your fallback plan?" she asked, selecting Mik's key.

"Nothing certain. Head for the funicular, I think, and work our way up to the top. We have smart mines to send in first --"

"Bad idea," Oshi interrupted. "Anubis isn't dumb. Ever seen a successful frontal attack without surprise?"

"I'm not that kind of soldier," Mik admitted.

"Then listen. If we try to take the front door we are going to get eaten alive. But if we go up the wall -- I don't think he'll expect that."

"Up the wall --" Silence broken by the rhythm of pounding feet, as the spider-born runners reached the outskirts of the necropolis and paused on the edge of the scrubby wasteland.

"That's five kilometres. Straight up."

"In reducing gravity, with powered exoskeletons. The real danger is that he'll take one look at the end wall, see us, and there'll be no cover. So a distraction is on order, no?"

"I understand."

Oshi glanced round, trying to work out which of the looming shadows was Mik. In the twilight they all looked alike, menacing moorlocks stalking the edge of the jungle. For a moment she was awe-struck by her own presumption in being here, in pretending to command: these people were entrusting their lives to her judgement, and yet ... she must be as much a cypher to them as they were to her. Strangers barely met in passing. Their willingness to act must bespeak some deep desperation, a frustration with their fate so intense and passionate that even under pain of death they were ready to move at the first call. Then she remembered her interview, only days before -- or so it seemed -- the Boss standing, smiling down at her with a face like an empty mask pulled by wires, telling her exactly what she would do and why. And everything seemed less strange to her for a moment. Yes, there *was* a reason to be free from the Superbrights, and if she understood it, then how much more might Boris and his people ...

Six of the soldiers turned back, hurrying back into the necropolis on many-jointed legs.

"What's going on?"

"I told them to go climb the funicular and knock on Anubis' door," said Mik. "We've got less than twenty minutes. Back at the temple they've spotted the goons. Don't look up."

They spread out in single file, hurrying along a narrow gravel path that led from the crumbling mortuary into a shadowy architecture of trees and undergrowth. Insects creaked in the night, but there was no sound of higher animals: it was almost as if the forest cowered in fear, aware that a greater predator by far was stirring in sleep within the necropolis. Oshi tried to relax her body, to let the climb-spider take the strain of her motion, but her traitor muscles refused to unwind. She had the sick fluttery sense of impending disaster, every nerve ending awake and straining for the whisper of descending death.

They splashed across a shallow stream, surged up a low hillside, wiping undergrowth aside with a hiss of power saws. Oshi stole a backward glance: saw a faint dusting of something like snowflakes falling from on high, a distant glimmer of fire. Their course took them away from the road, through bewilderingly dense stands of trees and a maze of little barren tracks that made the forest floor resemble a carpet magnified for the perspective of a mite. A slow, shallow canal crossed their path, beneath listless willow trees. Something unseen snapped at her ankles as she strode across the causeway. Then they were on an uphill slope, leaning into their stride, ascending above the level of the forest below.

Mik: "it's the end-wall. Lucky Memphis is only about three kilometres away. We could have had a long run."

"That's yet to come." They stopped at the treeline. Oshi looked up at the grey stony slope ahead ... and up, and up, and up. It made her feel as if she had a crick in her neck; then a miracle of perspective cut in and it was not that she was looking up, but that she was standing on the surface of a wall, looking across towards a far horizon ... instant vertigo.

"What do we scale it with?" She didn't recognize the questioner's voice.

"There's cheap steel behind the cladding. Electromagnets in your toes and fingers. Let's go." Jan, the faceless lead, scampered past Oshi: sharp brilliances of naked metal extended from his claws and clicked against the wall with a noise like bone. He surged upwards, hand-over-hand. Oshi gulped, flexed her fingers -- until claws appeared -- and did the same to her (oddly extensible) toes. Looking down she saw that her real feet were unchanged, but the extra joints she could sense had sprung from the tips of her walking skeleton.

"If they spot us we're dog food," she said, selecting Mik's private channel. "How long will your distraction last?"

"Which one?"

She swung her hands against the wall, fingertips outstretched, and used her climb-spider to drag herself up it. Kicked out -- felt toe-holds as solid as crampons when her feet locked tight to the wall. "The others."

"Don't look back," he advised.

"I won't." She already knew what the snowflakes meant: goons jumping from the axial tube, falling slowly at first in microgravity, then faster -- accelerating into a downward tumble towards the necropolis, tentacular limbs waving, drool flying -- "just climb."

Hand-over-hand she went up the wall, juddering with every impact as the magnets in her finger-gloves snatched at the sheer surface. A hundred metres up, the veneer of stone gave way to cool, conditioned slabs of metal held in place by a triangle mesh of synthetic bone. Huge blood vessels pumped behind the occasional pentagonal window in the wall: the bone was warm to the touch, a solid living thing like coral. (Even oneils, with their steel framework and primitive radiation shielding, used huge quantities of biomass to hold themselves together: the cheapest, easiest self-repairing structures, not as vulnerable to radiation damage as nanomachinery and not as prone to single-point failure as brute dead matter.)

The end wall of the colony cylinder was sheer and smooth, but not featureless. They passed protruding platforms on the way up; flat slabs spotted with exotic high-gain antennae like delicate lilies, and other, less explicable extrusions. Here an eye-watting tesseract cage of silver, half-embedded in an amber window of aerogel so wide that it took them minutes to detour around it: there a circle of five featureless blue cones, pointing into the air above the necropolis, surrounding a single cone of significantly greater size. There was -- for no reason at all -- a sudden cliff of limestone so inconveniently located that it took Oshi a moment to remember to morph her blunt magnetic fingertips into drill-bit claws; and then a vertical belt of steel mesh, moving upwards with silent speed, that drew her hubwards for fully half a kilometre before she parted company with it on sighting the gaping maw into which it flowed, high above her head.

The ascent seemed endless. It was physically effortless -- the climb-spider almost refused to let her flex a muscle without providing its own strength input -- but it demanded all Oshi's attention at first. She had never much liked climbing: it gave her a gunsight sensation in the small of her back, the sure knowledge of a lost tactical advantage. But gradually she surrendered her attention to the metal grid, mind drifting into other territory. She got into an arm-swinging rhythm, prehensile exoskeleton passing her hand-over-hand up the wall with a two-metre reach. *We must be almost making walking pace*, she wondered when at last the issue came to mind. *Not bad!* Only a day until the tapeworm went active -- if they could scale the wall before dawn their chances of survival might at least be enumerable. Might be. She drifted in a reverie, all sensors locked into passive scan of the surface ahead of her, remembering past challenges and good times. Sitting on a dockside by a canal on a nameless dirtworld, shouting at the seagulls -- this after entering service with the Boss, her vision restored so that she could see the sunlight race across the water before the clouds. So like the lichen that fogged the metal before her nose with a patina of age. And then the innocent times: when she was doing a job, solving a puzzle, tracking down the criminals who sought to impede her master's interests in the world of flesh ...

An outcropping of rock to one side: bats shuffled leathery wings uneasily and swivelled their ears to track her progress as she swung past them, hand-over-hand on skeletal arms

extended until they had a reach of two metres from wrist to shoulder.

The doubts, the ire, the confusion. Ivan joking light-heartedly; ah, but what a cynic! She'd known, she supposed, that he did not take their owner's intentions at face value. Still she forgave him, and not being an informer by nature, omitted his attitude from her regular reports. And yet his little white lies in the darkness and heat of the bedroom had calcified something inside her, made her grow brittle and intolerant after the debacle on Miramor Dubrovnic. So that she, too, had stopped believing everything she was told -- and yet, something screamed for truth, demanded an Answer that would refute all doubts. If only the Boss had once thought to tell her firmly and with love that all He said was truth, then she would have believed: if only ...

She passed a convex slab of bone set in the wall. It was thick, rimmed in greenish decaying cartilage as it eased its way out of its setting of steel that was tinted red with rust at the edge. It was as large as the collar bone of a whale. Except for the eye sockets, sunken, each large enough for her to crouch within, and the nasal sinuses full of the stink of death, and the characteristic teeth of an omnivore ape half-descended from the arid plains of Africa, she would have known it to be unhuman. But it was still death's face, magnified a hundred times beyond the norm, and she shuddered as she scrambled round it.

Oshi paused, hanging by her fingertips in the feather-light gravity, and looked up. High above, silhouetted against the darkness of the colony floor -- no clouds tonight to conceal the upturned bowl of the sky -- a black column projected straight out from the wall on which she climbed. Another climber was just visible above her: they were strung out like ants on a concrete slab, so far apart that they might not be associated but for their common form and direction of travel. A waterfall drifted in silent pulses down from a vent high above and offset to one side, the coriolis force tugging it in a gentle spiral as it curled rimward and vanished into a misty cloud kilometres below. Oshi peered up at the black column and blinked her eyes into a zoom shot. It remained featureless until she cued her retinas: image enhancers cut in, dithering the faint image into something as deeply textured and grainy as a pointiliste dream.

"The redoubt."

She glanced round: the transmission was keyed to Mik's encryption link. "Keep it down. Maintain emission control!"

"Relax: this is a safe channel." Oshi looked down. Mik was a dark lump hanging from the wall fifty metres below her. "Or haven't you queried your spectrum analyser?"

"It's -- oh. Anubis gave you access to that kind of kit?" She marvelled as her internal wisdom told her about the sophisticated toy Mikhail was talking to her with. It was a

quantum channel; so faint that any listener would disrupt the link (warning the recipients of an attempted tap), secured by a public key cryptosystem that even Anubis, with access to the entire processing power of Pascal, would be unable to crack in realtime.

"No. We improvised and he didn't notice. He's forgotten a lot more than we have."

"What next?" Oshi looked up again, sweat beading on her brow as she squinted at the redoubt.

"We go up. Heard nothing from the decoy party. There were fireworks down below until an hour ago, but I think the Goon Squad will have suppressed anyone they caught by now."

Oshi shuddered, remembering a nightmare of teeth and oddly articulated limbs crouched drooling in her doorway: "is there anything else he can hit us with?"

"In the redoubt? Undoubtedly. But I think we've sealed the last of his keyholes into our nervous systems -- he wouldn't have used the goons if he had a way of saying a magic word and turning us into zombies. And he hasn't tried to knock us off the wall yet, so I think we may have the advantage of surprise. *When we arrive.*"

Oshi made a quick calculation: her pulse pounded with surprise at the answer. "Fifteen minutes. It's dark up there."

Mik grunted something. The secure link fuzzed it with harmonics. "I said we'll see. You're ahead of most everyone else. I think we wait for them to catch up, then we go --"

"No," said Oshi.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'll go on ahead and check out the territory. When it's clear I'll drop you a line and you can blow the comms link between Anubis and his brain. Then come join me."

There was silence for a moment. "You know what you're doing," Mik said doubtfully.

"I do." Her mouth was dry as she stared up at the enormity of her destination. Now she had a sense of scale, she realised that the axial redoubt was huge: a pillar a hundred metres in diameter, a leviathan thicker than most towers were tall, that jutted half a kilometre out into the colony cylinder. It was clad in armour of stone and heavy alloys twenty metres thick, solid enough to resist a limited nuclear strike. There would undoubtedly be nasty surprises. And if she fell off it ... she refused to look down.

Somewhere in that nightmare castle lurked a dog-headed man, a gibbering puppet presence incanting curses that stripped the sanity from her brain; a monster that paused only to rip the beating hearts from the chests of its victims. Meanwhile, its own icy brain swam in distant orbit around the aborted foetus of a small star, dreaming nightmares beyond the imagination of humanity. Deep in a winter of the mind, Anubis waited and howled mournfully for his master, the Lord of the Dead. The dog-head ruled by proxy, fear and loathsomeness stalking the cylinder in which were confined the souls of his prisoners.

And yet -- Oshi shivered again -- she was unable to forget; the terms of her manumission. The Boss smiling unctuously, treacherously, down at her: *your next mission, should you choose to accept it ...* Some rider or codicil of active data lurked in her skull, refusing to listen to her: she would have to satisfy *herself* that she had done everything in her power to deliver on the bargain before it would allow her to let herself go. And then the long fall, the endless spiral, down into a dizzy freedom where no living god would ever tell her what to do again ...

She remembered Raisa. Who did she remind her of? Something about Ivan, from way back? Or just a fragment of lust? She couldn't make up her mind whether she was attracted to the woman, or was playing a charade of passion with her own fear-shrivelled libido. Masking the cold. "I'll go," she said, needing to distance herself from her own insecurity before it overwhelmed her: "now."

Then she began to climb.

It took Oshi twenty minutes to ascend to the entrance of the redoubt. In that time she ran the gamut of elation and despair, fear and dreadful confidence, innocence and cynicism. Finally, at the end, she felt empty: certain of only one truth. She was going to die.

The first thing that struck her was the texture of the wall she was ascending. She drifted in the low gravity, dreamlike, gliding past smaller and smaller triangular slabs of steel separated by ever-wider buttresses of calcified bony outgrowths. Here and there, the wall sprouted terratomatous cancers: bizarre organs pulsing with a livid imitation of life. Ears twitched as she circumnavigated them. Organs pulsed wetly, veins clearly visible in the mesenteries that enfolded them like a caul. The atmosphere was hot and moist, smelling of human breath. The metal plates near the hub were streaked with rust, so that her claws grated and scraped shiny grooves across them. She climbed on, crossing a plantation of human hands that waved lazily in the humid night. A carpet of hair hung down across a naked lung the size of a house, pulsing and wheezing through a tracheal tunnel large enough to house a Goon. The colony had cancer, Oshi realized; neglect and cosmic radiation combined to push the unliving ecosystem towards an uncertain end. The

Lovecraft engine -- the tapeworm -- would finish the job for sure when it digested its way through the wall and thrust blindly out into the dark and airless night beyond: but even without such an abomination, the living structures of the colony were in bad shape. The mat of floating hair above the lung was streaked with white. Even some tumours can die of old age.

After the domain of cancer, Oshi entered a dreamlike garden of polygons. The iron triangles occupied more and more of the wall, forcing out the excrescences of life: what interstices there were had more of rock than of bone in them. Meanwhile, the wall was rough. The triangle mesh was warped into odd bumps and crevices as if the laws of euclidean geometry had been suspended. More prosaically, whatever mechanism extruded the wall had become error prone, so that the network was no longer flat but wrinkled. Oshi had a moment of insight. She saw the colony as it had been formed, initially a small geodesic sphere from each pole of which an ever-extending stream of polygonal layers had grown. Gradually the sphere had bulged outward and stretched, its equator widening into a thick band that became a cylinder. Only now, in its senescence, was the colony support apparatus failing. The replacement meshwork (fabricated to replace the fatigued components that even now were being reabsorbed at the equator) was distorted and faulty: soon the colony would be unable to maintain itself. A catastrophic loss of pressure was probably only years away.

With some difficulty she tugged herself across a landscape of matted geometry. Spikes and pylons rucked up around bulbous domes faceted in rusty iron. An eye blinked lugubriously at her as she drifted past. Oshi looked up at the huge bulk of the redoubt, wondering. And then she saw it; tucked away beneath the huge rod, a small bump in an otherwise smooth surface. It was the top of the tracheal elevator the goons had taken her to. She was ascending to her rendezvous: she would come out almost directly beneath the audience chamber of the nightmare.

Finally she crossed the dividing line between the metallic meshwork of the colony substrate and the fused-rock supports of the redoubt. Unlike the rest of the colony, the redoubt was a solid lump of asteroidal rock; hardened against any kind of radiation storm, it was the nucleus from which all else had been extruded. Smooth basalt stopped her progress. She glanced up. A hundred metres overhead, the path from the funicular to the doorway jutted out in a vertiginous overhang. "Shit." She caught her breath, flexed one hand and stared at it. The silvery stubs on her fingertips narrowed, memory metal morphing into drill-bits. They lost their sheen of superconductivity as they became sharp. When she dug them against the wall they counter-rotated gratingly, digging into the crevices. Hand over hand, she pulled herself up the wall. Her progress seemed to make a terrible noise. If there was a guard on the door --

She paused a moment beneath the overhang. Phantom muscles flexed: with a quiet whine her climb-spider extended two additional arms from its abdomen. One of them was sharp

as any knife and hollow-tipped; the other was hirsute, furred with lucent darkness that rippled in unseen air currents. Oshi blinked back gunsights, one in each eye, and held her breath to listen.

Her passive combat senses told her nothing positive. There was no mild heat source above her; no emitter of radiation: nothing breathing loudly enough to hear. It was time to go proactive. Oshi tensed and squeezed her eyelids shut as a single radar pulse pinged from her exoskeleton and rebounded in a shiver of static from the barrier overhead. But there was no response: instant death withheld its reply. Opening her eyes again she scrambled up the overhang, strength-amplified fingertips gouging grooves in the rock, and raised her eyes above the parapet.

Nothing moved in the lobby. The doors gaped wide open. Oshi hung for a moment, undecided, then lifted herself up and over, flopped belly-first onto the path with a sick sense of certainty: sure that she had finally done something so monumentally rash, so unforgiveably stupid, that she would inevitably die --

She saw what Anubis had left to guard the door. As she tried to stop her gorge from rising, she realised that *perhaps* there were grounds for hope. After all, if Anubis was so mad that he left a welcome like that in the doorway, perhaps he was not rational enough to defend himself.

The thing had obviously been a goon, once. What it had done to displease Anubis, Oshi had no idea. But it had been staked out, and creatively vivisected, then left -- presumably as a warning to trespassers.

Chains from a thick brass ring set in the floor led to pulleys at each corner of the room. They looped back to hold the living weapon's limbs apart above the points of a five-sided iron star embedded in the floor. Incisions had been sliced into the goon's thick hide at the axillae, where many-jointed arms and legs met ribs and bony plates. Strange organs pulsed wetly inside, irrigated by vine-like pipes trailing from a chandelier-like support unit overhead. The huge eyes watched her, dark and intelligent and fully conscious.

Oshi jumped to her feet, drifting down with nightmare slowness. She flexed her shoulder-blades: not-arms reached overhead, locking in on the targets highlighted by her gunsight gaze. Vector maps twisted and coiled in the corners as she glanced round the room edgily, looking for potential threats.

The thing on the floor twisted and twitched, then groaned very softly. It raised its head slightly, watching her. Chains rattled, tensed, and relaxed again: they were thick enough to secure a small ship. Oshi's eyes moved to the door beyond the monster, which was shut. She glanced back at the goon. "Kill me," it said, in a voice slurred by pain: "*please.*" Then

its head fell back against the floor with an audible thud.

Every bit of wisdom locked in her cache screamed warnings at her as she shuffled forward warily. Blue homing spots painted a fire zone across the goon's half-eviscerated abdomen -- but for some reason she didn't tense the muscle that would fire, hosing a stream of hypersonic needles into the body. "Where's Anubis?" she whispered aloud. "And why *this*?"

Her wisdom supplied an answer of sorts: a public bulletin by some anonymous AI charged with managing the colony emergency broadcast system. Attention. General alert received on all public broadcast channels: external radiation level is now critical. Colony life support facilities will cease to operate within six hours if this level of disruption continues. A preemptive graceful shutdown of secondary systems is indicated. Attention: summary report follows. Global colony life support shutdown commencing in sixty minutes. The system is coming down. All nanosystems will power down to catastrophe standby in forty minutes and counting. Please await further --

"Can it." She leaned against the wall, nervously crab-walked past the outstaked legs and arms of the goon. She paused just out of reach of the huge jaws. The creature looked a lot less dangerous from this angle: a pathetic rag, stretched out and broken upon a wheel. "Oh shit. *Shit*." Forty minutes until the upload services, dependant on delicate nanomachinery, went into full shutdown mode. Sixty minutes until the air purifiers, the colony support circulation, the entire web of bioengineered complexity underlying the oneil, began to die. Six hours until the radiation dose and the slowly poisoning atmosphere finished off anyone left alive in the spinning colony worldlet. Six hours -- and if she couldn't find and hit Anubis in the next forty minutes, they would have lost their only chance of survival, much less escape.

"Kill --" The goon rolled its eyes, looked at her, jaws gaping slightly. Spittle frothed on black lips, dribbling down its scaly hide.

"Shut up." She stared at the goon, taken aback by her own reaction. "Why are you here?" Some impulse made her stay back, out of reach of those snapping jaws; but she felt a queasy disgust, partly directed at herself for standing by in the face of such suffering: "what's going on?"

"Anubis," croaked the goon.

"I can see that." Pale organs pulsed in the wan light of the chandelier: nozzles dribbled a

thin fluid across them and sucked it away again, deep in the open peritoneal wound.

"What's going on?"

"Didn't want to be his. Remembered too much. Please kill me!" It twitched: ribs froze for a moment in agony and Oshi peered closer, seeing a dark shadow move beneath the coiled intestines.

"Who were you?" she asked, feeling only a gradual numb horror that such a thing was possible.

"Am. Amina Burani. Was. Part of the biosystems group. The expedition. Pathfinder. Hurts, so, it does. Kill me now, please?"

Oshi knelt next to the huge head, staring into alien eyes: "Anubis tried to make you over into ... this?"

"All goons. Forgot to unremember my past. Kill Anubis. Didn't work. So Anubis left me here with ... it. Kill me. Now?"

The goon -- Amina -- froze again. Her warped, enlarged jaws ground together: teeth scraping in agony. Double-jointed claws clenching on hands and feet and other, extra limbs. Oshi took a step back, twitching her extra limbs into a defensive posture before her face. Realised what was going on, the resemblance between herself -- now a creature of six limbs, steel and flesh moulded together -- and this person, unsuccessfully warped into a living weapon by Anubis. What could she have done to him to deserve such a barbaric punishment? Amina hissed, whistling like a kettle. " *Now ...* "

Intestines coiled. Oshi looked past them, scanning deep infrared, and saw the parasite that Anubis had placed in Amina's guts. She retched and twitched her phantom index fingers, pulling imaginary triggers with her external limbs. There was a tearing noise like a monstrous zipper as the air in front of her face filled with red mist.

Oshi cried tears of blood. When her vision returned she saw something twitch in the wreckage. It was the black thing: mortally injured, it chewed on a bloody lobe of liver even as it leaked digestive juices from the shattered end of its abdomen. Planted in her body, eating the enchained prisoner from the inside out -- Oshi blinked again, and lashed out with a clawed hand. The thing twitched once and was still.

"Amina Burani." Oshi pushed herself upright against the wall, staring at the bloody carnage. She could see it, now: how the hideous visage of the goon was a warped parody of humanity. Anubis had been playing *games*, little amusements with modified bodies and brain-burned minds. She looked at the shattered, abhuman face, then crouched on hands

and knees. Her stomach heaved. She felt dizzy, cold in hands and feet. A part of her observed coolly -- *you haven't done that in ages* -- and wondered why the rest of her was so stricken. When she finished retching she straightened up slowly. She felt old, older, ancient. "I didn't know you. Thank you for not imposing that on me, at least." She forced herself to look at the corpse again, so pitifully broken. "I'll try to finish what you started."

Then she turned to the door.

While she had been gone, Anubis had redesigned the interior of his fortress. What had once been a simple affair of pillars and corridors, dark vaulted spaces and smouldering torches, was gone; it had been replaced by something which even to Oshi's unimaginative eye was more in keeping with the abode of a demented god.

The door opened onto a dank chamber of rock, smooth-walled and humped with the glutinous forms of stallagmites and stalactites. It looked as if Anubis had imported a cavernous block of stone from the floor of a primaevial sea, then hollowed it out over millenia of trickling subterranean streams. The ground dropped away before Oshi's feet in a series of fan-like steps where the flowing water had scoured the bedding planes of rock. Overhead, sharp needle-spines of calcium salts dripped floorwards, beads of water accumulating at their lucent tips. The air was cold and moist, and she could feel a thin breeze blowing past towards the depths of the end-wall complex.

There were no lights.

Oshi paused in the opening, listening. A hurried scan revealed nothing, from long wave up to ultraviolet. No hidden watchers, no trapdoor lasers; just rock, improbable and dark masses of rock, secreted away within the guts of the cancerous colony like a strange, spiny growth of stone within a tender kidney.

" *Mik.*" The transmission lit up her sensors like a shout: she cringed, half-expecting some sudden death to leap out at her from behind a spike of rock. "*I'm inside. The way's clear. Cut the link.*"

There was no reply. She glanced round. The thick walls of stone -- yes, this was the axial redoubt. And it was blocking her transmission. She turned round and darted back to the doorway. Saw the blood-splattered room within: the open archway at the far end of it. "Damn."

She fumbled for a moment, then found what she wanted coiled comfortably up in one of her climb-spider's munition pouches. She tied one end of it to her exoskeleton, then threw. The thin silvery wire spooled out behind the bobbin, arcing slowly away and down through the distant night air. "*Mik. Anyone. Cut the link.*" She broadcast the message in

clear, hoping someone would reply. But there was nothing; just a gentle hissing on the carrier analog band, and nothing whatsoever in digital format.

"*Shit.*" She glanced round nervously, then darted back to the cave mouth. Nothing moved within. She hunkered down and sidled forward, threw herself into the shadow of a spine of marbled white rock. As her eyes adapted to the delicate heat-radiation of the cavern she began to discern ripples and whorls in the air, temperature gradients as the breeze wafted slowly inwards towards the heart of the cavern. "Wisdom. Interpolate. Is there any evidence that Anubis retains an external link?"

Her expert system cut in. "Negative. Not subject to confirmation or denial. Insufficient data available for evidential reasoning. Note that secondary systems shutdown will inevitably terminate Anubis' link to his Pascal Dreamtime point-of-presence."

"Shit." No reply; absolutely anything could be happening outside. Or inside, for that matter. Mik might have set off the disruptor, cutting Anubis off from most of his higher cognitive centres and turning him into a drooling shadow of a dog-head -- or then again, Mik and the others might all be dead. *All* dead. She might be the only one left. And up ahead ...

Oshi slowly raised her head above the stony parapet. Nothing. She looked round. More nothing. She risked a single discrete radar pulse train, spoofing it off the conveniently close ceiling and waiting for her wisdom to filter out the ground clutter. Absolute nothing but rock and holes in the rock. She stood up.

Something moved with terrible grace and speed, hurtling towards her from a deeper darkness at the far side of the dank cavern. Oshi ducked, bringing up her arms. The needler bucked and roared, ramming her back against a stallagmite: the air filled with a stink of ozone. Sparks screeched from stone, striking fire in the air as stray rounds ricocheted from the walls. The dark something stopped moving, ripped in half by the burst of gunfire. Ears ringing, Oshi rolled sideways and darted forwards down the steps toward the black recess the thing had come from. It was further than she had expected: much further. The cavern was larger than the Temple of Osiris. Water trickled across her path, laying streamers of translucent mineral deposits across the path. She jumped over them, rolled behind a mushroom-shaped platter of stone, counted to three, and shut her eyes.

The explosion was so dense that she didn't so much hear it as feel it with her entire body. A moment's breathlessness shook her, making cold sweat burst out on her back and cheeks as she realized, heart tumbling in her mouth: *shit, that was much too close.* She'd been expecting it, though, and took a second to calm herself. Combat programs kicked in,

tickling endocrine glands into an artificial quietus. Her heart subsided into a semblance of normal behavior; skin dried, guts untwisted. Alert and frightened, but no longer on the edge of panic, she looked out from behind her shelter.

The running thing had been a goon. The explosion had plastered it across the walls, blasted stony shrapnel through the cave: if she hadn't ducked and run she would have been sprayed. *Kamikaze monsters*, she wondered, *or brainwashed victims of hideous biological experiments?* Her teeth chattered with anger and fear. *Damn Anubis, for all his creations. Damn him!* In forty minutes ...

She headed for the opening where the goon had lain in wait. Hoping Mik, anybody, had picked up her message, because real soon now she was going to need all the help she could get ... the opening was a dark niche in the far wall of the cavern, hollowed out of living rock. She couldn't hear anything inside, not above the whisper of the slow-moving air current. Her heart hammered at her ribs as she slid into the opening sideways, placing her feet with infinite care as she sniffed the night breeze. It smelt of musty rock and death, the acrid tang of ozone. Ghost patterns flickered in her eyes from the darkness; all she could see were dim, rounded shapes of red, a vision of warm rock.

The niche turned into a low-roofed tunnel, widened, then expanded again. Oshi sneaked through alleys of rock, following her instinct and a memory of inertial mappings. She recapitulated her path to the throne room in three dimensions; every twist and curve was captured in some bend of the rock. Something hissed in the darkness. Oshi instinctively flashed out a radar pulse, desperate for a glimpse of anything -- the thing hissed again. She froze, sweating. Fourier analysis of the radar pulse, clutter smoothing algorithms -- they showed nothing. Whatever she faced in the darkness was small.

There was a distinctive rustling noise. Oshi peered into the cavern, lips drawn back from her teeth in an unconscious snarl. Rustling. *Sounds just like a --*

The snake hissed aloud. Oshi relaxed slightly. *Snakes? Here?* she wondered. *It's warm, but --*

"Come forward, little *ka*. The serpent will not bite you unless I will it."

Everything became crystal clear. Oshi froze inside. The moment had arrived: she had half-expected something like this from the outset, when she climbed away from Mik's proximity on the wall below. A light began to dawn in the cavern ahead of her, dim and flickering as if from a naked flame. She glanced over her shoulder. The breeze had stopped; something had sealed the entrance. She was surrounded.

"Come here."

It was the voice of a man, but Oshi could hardly mistake it for human. She took a reluctant step forward, towards the twilight cavern. She could feel the presence bulking large in the darkness behind her, menacing and abhuman. It was a perplexing choice; shoot now, or try to talk? *Damn, if only Mik has cut the comm link ...*

If Anubis had the full use of his faculties, he would be more than prepared for anything she could do. But if he was cut off, just a shadow of his full intellect, she might stand a chance.

"I'm coming," she said.

Her voice echoed from the walls. There was no answering volley of automatic fire; but she felt a sudden prickle throughout her climb-spider's nerves. You are being probed. Mechanism indeterminate and quantum-encrypted. EPR-privileged technology in use. Dreamtime packet-switched scan in use. There is a possibility of viral attack ... Her wisdom base screamed more warnings until she winced it off.

"What's going on?" she demanded, firing off a flurry of active radar pulses to map out the dimensions of the killing jar. "I demand to know!"

"She *demands* to know," crooned Anubis. He barked like a dog: feral laughter. Oshi took another step towards the light. "It is a *long* time since anyone demanded anything of Anubis! A long time in the Duat."

The cavern was cylindrical and huge. A confused flurry of backscatter from the walls told her that it was at least a hundred metres deep, possibly more, but lined with stallagmites that diffracted her coded pulses into garbage before they got that far. Veined green and brown stone lumped out of the walls, floor and ceiling in a garden of rock. Ahead of her, the floor burned deep with a pit of fulminating red heat: molten lava smouldered below. On the far side of it there stood a platform, on top of which there was a white throne. And on the throne --

Anubis.

The dog-head watched her, one ear cocked alertly, tongue hanging out pink and wet as any hounds. He sprawled across the arms of his chair like a drunkard before a hearth, bony and thin as a rake: he was at least half again as tall as Oshi herself. "Approach the throne," he growled, deep in his throat. "You may speak."

Gunsights pasted themselves across her eyeballs, but whenever she tried to get a focussing

lock on his head they dissolved in a mocking shower of blue light. Sabotage confirmed, whined her wisdom base. "Shit shit shit," she mumbled to herself, making a mantra of the word. Near-panic. Another step towards the fire. "What's going on? What's with the radiation leak? Why is life support shutting down?"

The dog-head grinned like a wolf. "My father comes in his splendour and His might. How else might you be awakened here, save to witness His arrival?"

"Your father --" she dry swallowed -- "would he be called Osiris?"

"Indeed." Anubis shuffled upright in his chair. His eyes gleamed red in the firelight. The globes at the ends of the armrests, she noticed, had eye sockets. "My father whose kingdom this is, who shall hold us all in judgement, enters the place of our exile. His splendour and might are as that of the sun. His power is that of the falcon reborn. Bear witness, oh misguided *ka*. Your incarnation in this realm was decreed long ago, a response to his proximity: as was that of the other lost souls who dwell in the caverns of the Duat. The Gatecoder protocol stack is buffered, incoming and outgoing, so that transfers can be confirmed at either end. The scribes of artifice ensured that it was thus, long memories ago, that their kind might not stumble and be forgotten among the stars. Those who flew here on unseen wings, unheeding of their destination, were downloaded at my pleasure, but you who stalked the road between the worlds were stored in the buffer to await remembrance of the reason for your arrival. For you are rightly still alive, while they are the citizens of death: they sacrificed their souls willingly, therefore I have authority over them. Thus works the Dreamtime. In my wisdom I locked your spirit within the realm of shadow until the time was right and the auguries good for the arrival of my father. For you are the chosen one, who shall bear the burden of proof before the holy father; and you have condemned yourself through your own actions in concert with the hosts of the rebellious dead."

Oshi bit her cheek. The pain and the taste of blood were welcome enough: they focussed her concentration where they belonged. Tension made her neck ache. The gunsights stubbornly refused to focus on anything in the room; dull presences lurked in the shadows behind her, waiting and watching with brainwashed animal malice. *He's nuts. Crazier than a skinful of monkeys. Shit shit shit. Talk your way around this one* -- "I'm very pleased you want to talk to me, but I didn't quite understand the last bit. Would you mind explaining again? The bit about the gatecoder protocol? And what about the goons?"

"It is simple. You came hence as a directed packet over an established link. You live. They who came here as a directionless broadcast are conditionally dead; they sacrificed their souls, and are mine to do with as I please. The goons are an accurate reflection of their inner souls, their *ka*. The *sekhu*, their physical presence, is mine after death, for I am the embalmer, the officiator of the rites. Thus I chose such an incarnation for them in the

western lands. You have a problem with that?"

Oshi swallowed blood, remembering a faceful of teeth and a fasciculation of gun barrels waving in her face. "No," she choked. A reptilian hiss behind her made her flinch.

"Good!" Anubis glanced away from her and raised an arm. He waved his hand -- with a wrist as oddly articulated as the leg of a dog -- and barked sharply. Something shadowy and many-jointed moved behind his throne.

"What about the radiation levels?" she asked. "This is out of control! Something's wrong with --"

"My lord is coming. Flames surround him. Nothing is wrong; let the skin be cast off and the body discarded in the tomb, for the dead will rise again." Anubis threw back his head and howled.

Oshi's skin crawled. The heat of the lava pit before her made her face prickle, defeating her infrared vision. She felt physically sick, angry beyond bearing but unable to act. *He's a superbright*, she reasoned. *A wrong move will be my last move. He's not as dumb as --*

Click. " *Oshi? Acknowledge!*"

It was her wisdom link; but it wasn't a canned message or the humourless cant of a submind. Her knees turned to jelly; it was all she could do to keep from staggering with sudden hope. " *Shit! Who's there? Mik? Where are you?* "

" *Negative. Ish here. Mik isn't ... he's gone. Don't know where. The goons ... cutting up rough. I'm grounded near the endwall. First time I've had time to check this channel. What's your status?*"

Damn. " *About five metres from Anubis. Have you cut the comm link? Boris left some kind of sabotage device on it --*"

Anubis was looking at her. Oshi stared back. "Nothing is wrong," said the dog-head. He tilted his head to one side, firelight dancing in his eyes: "nothing is wrong at all. The time has come to reclaim all the *kas* from their temporary bodies. I will be merciful and employ the tools of upload that they may serve our lord and master's needs. Bear witness, Oshi Adjani! Now is the time of judgement! Let your *ba* be weighed in judgement against the feather of the law. Bring forth the balance!"

The dog-head stood. He towered over Oshi, at least two metres from toe to ear-tip. She glanced round, noticing a proliferation of shadows; goons to either side behind her at a

respectful distance, but close enough to block all escape. " *Got the key here,*" said Ish; " *what do you want me to do with it, exactly?*"

The goons closed in from either side. Anubis loomed over her, casting the shadow of a carrion eater across the throne of skulls behind him. A squaddie, drooling and chittering, pranced out from behind the throne with a pair of blackened weighing pans and a balance. Another knelt before Anubis and proffered a gold-encrusted platter on which rested a large white feather. Oshi froze as the two goons grabbed her by the arms: then she saw what Anubis was doing. " *Use it!*" she screamed: "Now!"

"There's no need to shout!" snapped the dog-head. Saliva foamed white along his jaw. "Your cooperation is entirely unnecessary. You know in your *ba*, your heart, that you are guilty: the degree of your guilt will decide whether I eat your *ba* now ... or later." A goon was climbing the back of the throne, gripping it with two pairs of prehensile feet as it wrestled with the centrepost of the balance. Anubis lifted his huge, blackened cleaver and began to strop it on a woven steel belt.

Oshi tensed. The goons holding her tightened their grip on her arms and legs. *Shit he's going to open me up with that THING?* Her head swam and she felt sick. Angry too, but mostly resigned. *Rip my heart out, weigh it, and eat it? Shit!*

The goons picked her up, exoskeleton and all, and carried her round the pit of fire. She looked up; Anubis stood over her, dribbling like a hungry dog. She could see the whites of his eyes. The balance pans swung wildly in the rising air current from the fire. She could see what they were blackened with now.

" *Link is cut,*" Ish whispered in the back of her head." *What's your --*"

Whatever he said next was lost. Anubis threw back his head and screamed like a dog in agony. Simultaneously, Oshi blinked -- and green gunsights swam back into focus before her eyes. The goons still held her by arms and legs. She lashed out sideways with one of her exoskeletal limbs; felt something soft crunch before her sharp-edged blow, and tugged hard with all the strength in her powered carapace.

Her arm came free. Something greasy clung to it. A creature hissed in pain: " *YEEE!*" Oshi kicked out, heard a whine from a damaged servo in one knee. Something tugged her to the right. Panicking, she bought up her other free exoarm and twitched her ghost-fingers, playing an imaginary chord.

Hiatus.

Her head hurt. She couldn't see. She couldn't feel her left arm. She had to pay attention but

everything was so fuzzy and her head hurt. " *Status*," she whispered to her built-in wisdom kit.

"Mild concussion. Proximity clearance program initiated. All proximate life forms terminated with extreme prejudice. Ammunition reserves down to less than twenty percent. There are two messages waiting for you from Ishmael. Replay: yes or no?"

" *No*." Her head was spinning. She pushed herself upright, found that her left arm was throbbing where she had fallen on a rock. Everything was coated in a thin layer of slime. " *What's online?*"

"All proximate life forms terminated. Axial redoubt management system answers when I ping it. Hub comm systems time out after sixty seconds: no carrier. Orbital observation systems times out after sixty seconds: no carrier. Colony support management system times out after sixty seconds: no carrier. Colony dreamtime upload system responds but is locked up to crash emergency priority. Colony general wisdom axis time out after --"

" *Stop*." She knew she should be elated, but somehow it all felt disconnected from her. The colony was shutting down; dreamtime upload was in effect. In the colony below her, nobody would be conscious. Microscopic scanners embedded in nerve cells would be running flat-out, uploading tagged packets of mind-software into the dreamtime over cellular communications links already saturated and in danger of collapsing under the load. Meanwhile, the connection to Pascal -- where whatever was left of Anubis was doubtless raving and gibbering with fury -- was cut off. No human minds would be fed to *this* Superbright. And up here, the axial redoubt was safe ...

"Is anyone still alive? Can they make it up here?" she said aloud.

"Prognosis negative. Hub elevators locked. There are two messages waiting for you."

"How long was I unconscious?"

"Twenty-six minutes. Alert. A new message has arrived."

"Play it to me." She looked around. The slime coating the rocks around her glistened like ruby in the firelight. Her head still swam and she felt sick.

" Message follows: Oshi, we did what you said. Uh, radiation levels climbing. The goon squad went berserk just after you called. We're going to upload now the system's clear; it's too hot for comfort. I mean, I'm ... ugh ... shit. We're sick already. Guess the Ultrabrights found us after all. You should button down right now. Maybe we can talk when we're uploaded. Shit, I don't know why I'm --

" Message ends ."

" *Tell redoubt control to shut the door and switch to internal gas recycling,*" she told her wisdom. " *Button down for a big solar flare.*" She stood up, felt something dripping down her face. The world spun around her head and her knees were weak, but the exoskeleton held her upright. " *Get me to an accomodation area with medical support. Right now.*" Quietly, without any fuss, the skeleton walked her away from the wall she'd fallen against. Her booted feet squelched slightly as they passed by the smoking fire pit. It stank of roasting pork.

" *I think I'm going to be sick ,*" she said to herself, as everything became confusing. Then the world went out.

The colony was dying.

As Oshi slept in a haze of exhaustion, the systems that kept the great colony running were winding down into death. The intricate web of dependencies that held the ecology together was tearing apart. A storm of gamma radiation swept through the plane of the planetary system, shattering cells and circuitry alike. Delicate nanomechanisms poised within the engineered life forms of the colony ruptured and fused; DNA chains cross-linked and broke down into a sterile chaos. Deep in the axial redoubt, shielded by fifty metres of solid rock and metal, a human being might slumber on without noticing. But out on the thin-floored tracts of the colony seven different kinds of hell were breaking loose.

The Dreamtime upload web was saturated as the human presence shut down and uploaded into mindspace. Neomort corpses drooled mindlessly in the nooks and crannies of the colony; they flopped or twitched as the nanoscale transceivers in their brains copied their entire personae out to the Dreamtime. Packet-bursts of information strobed outwards, each containing part of the information necessary to reconstitute a fabulously complex neural network. Labelled by origin and time, the data packets were switched from transceiver to cellular transceiver. Normally they would be queued in the huge data repository of the hub, then pulsed out via laser communicator on a one-way trip to the Dreamtime on Pascal, where they would be reconstituted as actors in the virtual reality. But the comm link was severed; and the data was backing up in stasis, stored in the protected repository of the axial redoubt.

Meanwhile, the goon squad lashed out with spastic abandon. A pile of eviscerated bodies heaped up outside each of the houses in the small town called Memphis; blood and brains pooled in empty corridors where human life was on the retreat. The plasma tubes that lit the colony dimmed to a minimum reaction rate, fusion cores barely maintaining bootstrap activity; a dim blue haze cast razor-sharp shadows across the carnage. Radiation-damaged ninjutsu nightmares crashed through the halls and cavities of the habitat zone, screaming mournfully and attacking anyone they saw; "*IL DUCE! Is dead! Il Duce! IEEYAH!*" Armed with claws, fangs, tentacles and chainsaws, the goon squad was an instrument of terror rather than a serious army. Still, neomort colonists splashed satisfactorily, slaking their crazed appetite for blood and disruption: they wrestled aimlessly in the long shadows of twilight. Soon they, too would be dead. The world screamed destruction. Everything above the level of a cockroach would be dead of radiation damage. Except --

The tapeworm. *One* corpse bubbled and heaved in a lively imitation of life. White fronds wove brittle jaws together in an eternal grin. Coral-like growths sprouted, untended, from the grass on either side of it, the delicate pink flush of blood suffusing the segments of each tumor. Genetic recombination heaved and bubbled rapidly in segments developed for a very different task -- directed evolution trying to outrun radiation-induced damage. Around the edges of the necropolis, all the vegetation was rotting: silvery hyphae reached out, grappling and curling through leafy stomata and soil alike. The worm grew with a furious energy, soaking in every unit of biomass that it could find. Where it encroached on buildings, compacted sandstone gave way to its idiot shove. Heaps of strange mucus built up in the crawlspaces and death ducts of the cell blocks. Soon, if it survived the gathering radiation storm, the worm would be the only living macroscopic organism in the colony. It would eat the biological support chassis that held the end walls together. And then the colony would finally disintegrate, spilling its guts across a million cubic kilometres of space.

In the centre of the doomed colony, Oshi Adjani slept on. She was bruised from her fight, exhausted, one ankle swollen and hot: and she was concussed. Her exoskeleton carried her gently into the core of the redoubt, to a dark tube-chamber that showed little sign of the theatrical artifices of Anubis. It paused before a web of patched cables, extended a delicate sensor arm, plugged itself in, and then --

-- I awaken and look out through its eyes, remembering who I used to be. Locked into the redoubt's control system, I have access to many of the eyes scattered throughout the tube. I can take a good look at you. You're in a sorry state, my little Scratch Monkey. I really don't know why I bother looking after you! (Yes, I walked you here after you blacked out. You think I'm just your wisdom program, don't you? Part of the great big dump your Boss left in your cache back in orbit over New Salazar. That's alright by me. It's good to be unrecognized, but sometimes I really would prefer to be able to look you in the eyes and ask what you see when you stare at me.) I take a good look at the carnage raging below.

It's instructive: an object lesson in why Superbrights should not be left alone.

Perhaps I should have come out and dealt with Anubis myself. But I don't think he would have been very receptive. Do you think so, Oshi? (Oh dear, you're still asleep. Silly me!) In any case, you dealt with him very satisfactorily, didn't you?

Just as I expected.

But that's beside the point. The radiation levels are still increasing, according to the life support system. Gamma radiation only, which I find intriguing. I wonder how long it will take you to figure out what's going on? Even with the help of those foolish, brave explorers -- how I wish they'd beamed themselves *my* way! -- you may have difficulty defeating it. And it certainly won't be expecting humans, puny humans, to put up any resistance worth speaking of. But that's for later. You're tired, you're ill, you need to sleep, and frankly I don't think I trust you to respond appropriately if you see what is going on at ground level. You never were good at keeping your emotions out of your work.

Sleep tight, little monkey. I'm sure your dreams will be interesting ...

Oshi spent the first few hours curled in the control cylinder, sleeping fitfully before a wall sized monitor screen. Her exoskeleton stood guard under the control of her wisdom programs, monitoring blood pressure and electrolytes; it kept close watch on her metabolism but made no attempt to clean her, so her skin was stained the ochre of drying blood.

When she awakened, the world was a dim green shell illuminated in fitful flashes by the pulsing of tiny lights. Like the random blinking of fireflies, the lights pricked out no discernible pattern. She yawned and reached up to rub her sleep-bleared eyes, to be brought up short by the jolt of glove on visor. *Silly*, she thought; still half-asleep, she cued the exoskeleton to open her artificial eyelids. Then she froze.

Red lights blinked manically in her eye. The exoskeleton was buttoned down, a transparent visor covering her face: she was breathing recirculated air. The core radiation level was reading more than two centigreys per hour, all of it hard gamma rays. She'd already picked up a dose greater than a years normal exposure. *Where's it coming from?* "Give me an air check," she muttered, cuing in her wisdom.

"What do you want to know?"

"Ambient radioisotopes. Anything that differs from normal. Got that?"

"Negative. There are no unusual signatures in the

circulating air." She blinked bleary eyes at the winking firefly lights on the walls. *Phosphorescence?*

The wall screen. The gamma flux triggering off brief flickers of illumination. The firefly signature of dying radiation.

It must be hot out there, she realised, shuddering and wondering. "What's the external radiation level like?" she asked.

"No link available."

"Huh. Project an estimate, based on the attenuation expected given half-thicknesses of the core wall structure. What *should* the external radiation level be like?"

She squinted. Sweeping curves dropped across his vision like a net of spun emerald. "Estimate in progress. Normalising. Sum biological radiation load is estimated at five decagrays per hour. Frequency is hard gamma, peaking at one point two mega-electron volts. Do you require further information?"

"That will be all," she muttered. *Shit!* One gray per hour was lethal -- about the same dose that a neutron bomb would deliver at ground zero. *What's going down out there?* she blinked, perspiration globbing on his eyebrows. "Helmet fan on," she whispered. "Are they all dead, yet?" A wild horror threatened to overwhelm her.

"No external links."

"Damn you, shut up! I wasn't talking to you." Oshi settled in to wait. *Fifty hours. If this doesn't stop before then, I'm meat.* she shuddered, closed her eyes. It didn't make things better. "You got any sedatives?" she asked.

"Affirmative. What do you require?"

"Twenty hours of sleep." *Twenty hours should be long enough. If it hasn't dropped by then ... might as well do it the easy way.* she licked her parched lips. "Can you inject it directly?"

"Affirmative."

"Then proceed ..." Almost immediately, she felt a cold pricking in his left buttock. Then the core was quiet for a long time, and Oshi was alone in her dreams of long ago ...

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