

## Shipbreaker

by Paul Di Filippo

"If this was what death was, somebody ought to care."

—*Earthblood*, by Keith Laumer and Rosel George Brown

A craggy, jagged mountain fell slowly through the sky.

Attended by a flock of Class D Hagfish pilot ships, their coruscant supportive fields overlapping the larger vessel, the dead hulk of another retired starliner descended toward the Shipbreakers' Yard on Asperna. Possessing no discernible symmetry, the machicolated and turreted starcraft was a conglomeration of protuberances and ports, pods and pavilions, so ugly it forced the viewer to concede new notions of beauty. Its space-pitted, many-textured surfaces bespoke millennia of interstellar service.

Occulting Asperna's Least Sun, the dropping starliner robbed each individual in the crowd below of a single shadow. Mainly composed of ragged workers, the crowd featured an isolated knot of the Yard's management personnel. Apart from their finer clothing and lack of visible craft, these overseers could also be recognized by their attendant swarms of majestatics.

The workers and executives had arrayed themselves randomly along a wide sloping beach of firm-packed sand, facing the water. On either extreme of the gathering lay vast hard-surfaced staging areas for the upcoming deconstruction, dotted with tools and agravitic lifters and cradles which would soon receive components gutted from the newest salvage prize. The shoreline was stained with exotic industrial fluids that had killed off all vegetation and tinted in oily chromatics the waters themselves. At several docks bobbed scores of dirty utilitarian slab-sided watercraft used to ferry workers out to the ship-corpse, their lifting units deactivated.

Behind the onlookers stretched inland the nameless collection of hovels and shanties, shacks and huts, warehouses and refectories, barrooms and brothels, laced together by muddy paths, all of which the shipbreakers simply called home. At the very edge of the water and wading into the shallows, a vast system of tall baffles and shunts—a diamond labyrinth—stood poised to deal with the imminent surge that would accompany the ponderous settling of the starliner into the sea.

Now the descent of the falling mountain and its host of attendants slowed even more dramatically. The liner that had once cruised like a queen among the worlds of the Indrajal seemed to hover unmoving in the atmosphere. But ever so timidly the Least Sun emerged crescentwise from behind its upper rim, indicating a slight actual progress toward berthing.

The lower edge of the liner lipped the waves. The Hagfishes pulled their fields steadily upward from contact with the rising water, not wishing to dissipate power by lifting cubic meters of sea needlessly. As their fields shifted off the center of the big ship's mass, the little craft had to strain to maintain the equilibrium of their prize. Soon, judging by the strobing moiré patterns, they would have to let their capture go.

When the ocean had swallowed the bottom third of the liner, a dark architectonic iceberg, the pilot ships cut their fields entirely.

The resulting tidal surge whooshed shoreward, smashed the baffles, then dissipated in a chaos of foam and spume and a noise like the manifestation of a deva.

From the crowd ascended a lusty cheer. Here was work aplenty for the next several months. Fat profits, to be sure, for the Shipyard's owner—the enigmatic and seldom-glimpsed Horseface known as Bright Tide Rising—but enough scraps, at least, to sustain the meager lives of the breakers themselves.

And, as always, the dream—

Perhaps one of the breakers would even strike it rich, finding something onboard that earned its discoverer a bonus. Hefty by comparison with the regular day rates, these incentive payments represented the smallest fraction of what Bright Tide Rising would resell the prizes for.

But the breakers were in no position to bargain or complain.

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Klom turned to the woman at his side. Sorrel's marigold face was sheened with salty spray blown back from the collision of tide and baffles, and her auburn hair was damp. A smear of neglected grease grimed one hinge of her jaw; scavenged O-rings served her as bracelets, and a unredeemable chunk of fused gold circuitry spotwelded to a clasp hung from one small earlobe.

Klom lifted a blunt-fingered hand big enough to palm Sorrel's head like a gameball. The back of his hand was tessellated with the latest cruft, a mica-like substance that evolved out of Klom's epidermal cells and flaked off regularly. The cruft had come in on the Snuffler ship they had dismantled some months ago, and as yet the Yard's curanderos had no remedy for the exogenous affliction. With a forefinger large as

the nozzle of a watercutter, Klom swiped moisture from the skin underneath Sorrel's green, horizontally slitted left eye and down over her sharp cheekbone.

"You got wet."

Sorrel glared up at Klom, who towered above her much as the floating ship now towered over the crowd, even at the remove of a kilometer. Her throaty voice registered exasperation. "Big news, you dumb two-strand! We all did."

"Oh." Klom raised the hem of his tattered coarse shirt, revealing a midriff packed with muscle and striated with more cruft. He dried his own rugged face. "I didn't even feel the spray. I was busy thinking about my mother."

Sorrel snorted. "Your mother! You haven't even seen the woman in ten years. I'm sure she would have forgotten that you even exist, if it weren't for the money you send."

"Maybe this ship will make us rich, Sorrel. Enough for you and me and my mother too. We could go back to my village and all three of us could live together. You'd like living in Chaulk, I know it. There's a lake there—"

"Oh, my deva! I've heard about Lake Zawinul so often I'm starting to develop gills! And what makes you think I'd go with you to your stinking little home village even if you were rich? I used to be a city girl, you know, before I had the misfortune to end up here. Can Chaulk compete with the Whispering Gardens of Lustron?"

Utter incomprehension transformed Klom's massive features into a mask of hurt confusion. "But Sorrel, we love each other."

"So you keep telling me."

Klom shook himself as if dispelling a cloud of the gnats that arose in the springtime from the stagnant marshes bordering the Yard. Then, forsaking words, he enwrapped Sorrel with one arm and hugged her to him. Her olive-drab shift bunched up on one hip. Klom's smile was holed here and there by missing teeth.

"Ow! Let me go, you big idiot!"

"Hey now, what's this? Assault on a lady? Shall I be forced to give you a good thrashing, you monster?"

Weaving through the throng came a lean man with coppery skin and sandy hair, dressed in what passed for finery among the breakers: clean, albeit ragged white blouse and trows. A wispy mustache draped his upper lip. Taller than Sorrel, he still

seemed small in comparison with Klom. Closing with Klom and Sorrel, the newcomer began darting and feinting, tossing mild jabs at the giant.

Klom released Sorrel, and laughed in such a titanic manner that the nearest bystanders winced. "Airey! Where were you? You missed the landing!"

Airey ceased his shadowboxing and shook Klom's hand. "Deva bless you, Klom, that cruft's hideous! Don't you have any gloves?"

Klom examined his hands as if seeing them for the first time. "No gloves fit me."

"Nonsense! I'll get you a pair that fits somehow." Airey turned to Sorrel and briefly embraced her, bestowing a kiss on her forehead. "Any damage to the fleshy goods? No? Very well, but let me know if your reputation needs avenging." Sorrel laughed, her bell-like tones generating more pleasant notice from those nearby than Klom's robust guffaws.

"Airey, you make everyone laugh," Klom said.

"Too bad I can't convince old Right Tight Raisin to pay me for such services. Yard comedian, that's a role I could enjoy! Instead, I have to labor in the drainage pits like some unskilled kilobase. And if beauty were money, Sorrel wouldn't have to slave on the sorting line. Oh well, that's life."

Sorrel playfully kicked Airey's ankle in response, eliciting an "ouch."

Klom scratched his head through a thick mat of black hair. "Maybe this new ship will bring us all good luck."

"Ah, that's the very reason I sought you out, Klom. I did not miss the landing at all. I was standing as close to the overseers as I could get, while the ship came down. Those lousy terabases and four-strands are damnably suspicious of eavesdroppers, though! It was all I could do to avoid rousing their majestatics."

"You didn't take any chances, did you?" asked Sorrel, looking alarmed.

Airey patted her hand. "Not at all. I have no desire to be drilled through the heart by an angry busybee, believe me! But I was able to overhear the high and mighty ones discussing the origin of this ship. It's a Vixen craft. Most recently made the circuit among Bastiaan, Meuse, and Greengage for centuries. But it's much older than that. Parts of it were decommissioned over a thousand years ago. That's where I'd head first if I were you, Klom. Deva knows what goodies you'll find there!"

Klom considered the information, ruminating over it in his slow, stolid fashion. Any idea introduced into Klom's brain met with a laborious reception, but frequently he

ground a notion to a finer intellectual dust than the more quick-witted Airey ever could, with surprising results.

"I'll do that, Airey. Anything special I should look for?"

"Oh, I don't know ... What about the Book of Forgetting?"

Sorrel laughed, but sourly this time. "Why not hope to find a globe of Mazarine isinglass, or a Ledan swanrobe or a map to the treasures of Mount Sumeru while you're at it?" Here she broke mockingly into a snatch of song: "'The fields of pleasure, the seas of love/Heavenly eyes that peer from above....' And how would anyone even recognize the mythical Book of Forgetting?"

"Oh, if half of what's said about it is true, I suspect the finder would quickly realize what he'd found. The legends are evocative, though not precise. The Book is nothing less than the universal anodyne for all our mortal suffering—"

Suddenly the crowd surged forward en masse, breaking around Klom's immovable bulk, which protected his companions as well.

"What's happening?" asked Klom.

"I assume the marabouts are about to invoke a deva to bless the proceedings," said Airey.

"Lift me up," Sorrel said, and I'll tell you what I can see."

Klom's hands encircled Sorrel's torso just as her O-ring bracelets encircled her wrist. His fingers and thumbs met across her span. In half a second she stood on his shoulders, her sandaled feet finding plenty of purchase on Klom's broad frame, while he braced her behind her thighs. Canopying her hands, Sorrel shielded her eyes against the triple sunlight.

"Yes, I see it all now. Several marabouts are riding a lifter out to the ship. Oh, how beautiful their robes are, billowing in the wind! Oops, one's lost his miter! They've stopped now, not far from the ship. They're making the sacrifice. I think they're using a Redskull ox." A tremulous bellow cut short drifted across the waters. "Now they're feeding power to the prayer wheels. Get ready for the boomtube—"

Airey covered his ears, as did Sorrel. Klom seemed unconcerned, but in any case did not cease supporting Sorrel.

If the might of the tidal surge hitting the baffles had produced a noise akin to the collapse of a small house, then the manifestation of the deva's boomtube generated a soundwave resembling the demolition of one of Voyule's cloudscraper towers. The

whole crowd staggered backward, with some losing their footing. Klom barely rocked, while he kept Sorrel anchored.

Now above the floating ship hung the deva: a silvery distortion in the air, in which the minds of lesser beings discerned varying images, depending on both physiology and cultural conditioning.

The majority of sapients in the galaxy—Humans, Foambones, Weepers, Hyenas, Gadabouts, Crickets, Leatherheads, Cygnets, as well as a thousand others and all their miscegenational offspring—encoded their genomes in some variation of DNA: two helical strands of nucleotides on the order of three billion basepairs. But there were higher orders of natural beings as well, those whose longer evolutionary histories had achieved more. Their genomes consisted of four, six, or even eight strands, featuring trillions of basepairs. These terabase beings exhibited emergent properties, sophistications of mind and body unattainable by the two-strands and gigabases.

The devas were sentients who had bootstrapped themselves entirely out of conventional spacetime thanks to their cellular complexity: decastranders, yotta- and zettabases. The subtle cosmic fields that supported life simply kicked the devas up to a different quantum level of existence.

Sorrel shivered atop Klom. "I see a Trundler Demon. This is a bad omen."

"Nonsense," said Airey. "I can plainly discern the smiling face of a Hovaness Lamb. Nothing could be a better sign. Klom, what do you see?"

Klom did not speak immediately. "I—I don't know the name for what I'm seeing."

"Can you describe it?"

"It's—it forgives everything."

Airey made a dismissive noise. "Oh, that's helpful, all right."

A bolt of silver energy lanced out from the deva and splattered across the ship: a token of beneficence. A joyous shout went up from the crowd at this blessing. Then the deva silently snapped out of their ontological plane.

"Okay, Klom, you can put me down now."

Klom complied effortlessly. Airey tugged straight his best white tunic, which had been disarranged by the boomtube's blast, and said, "Well, I think this event calls for a drink. Shall we go to Thrash's for a flagon of toadchunder?"

"Who's paying?" asked Sorrel.

Airey clapped Klom on the shoulder. "Why, Klom of course. He's the one who saw the unknowable face of the deva. He's the one who's going to get rich!"

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The gangboss for Klom's shift was a Quetzal from Muntjac, named Rapaille. The amputation of Rapaille's wings necessitated by a clumsy curandero after a barroom brawl had long ago left the avianoform ill-tempered and unforgiving. As meager compensation for his lost wings, Rapaille spent every last spare taka and paisa to adorn his priapic cockscomb with a variety of gaudy baubles. Today, setting out for their first foray to the Vixen hulk, Rapaille wore several sparkling garnets and a lozenge of nightmare amber piercing his fleshy ruff.

Aboard one of the wallowing, unroofed ocean transports, still docked, Rapaille marshaled his workers, a motley pack of hard-limbed bruisers representing a dozen heterogeneous races. Mounting one of the grimy seats to command more attention, Rapaille commenced a small speech. His beak clacked between syllables, and his narrow orange tongue stabbed the air.

"Listen closely, you scuzz-buckets! This ship has already been partially stripped by its former owners. They've taken most of the furnishings and fixtures. You won't find any old nesting materials to sniff, nor any dainty female undergarments to hug to your bosom."

An anonymous voice called out, "How about wings? Any chance of glomming a pair of those onboard?"

Rapaille scrunched his beady eyes and gurgled wordlessly, before regaining his self-control. "Quiet! The next wisecrack will earn someone a lost shift! Pay attention! It is equally unlikely you'll discover any valuable personal trinkets or artwork, although I don't rule out a few overlooked nanosculptures or parasite jewelry. So you might as well just forget about such easy booty. Any individual performance rewards will come from the neat and speedy accumulation of well-known structures. We're after control ganglia, matter-modems and entertainment nodes, for instance. Nexial splitters pay well too. Several teams have already been dispatched to handle the disentanglers and decoherers. Other groups have been assigned the bridge. But aside from those areas, we have free access to the rest of the ship. Our goal is to finish over the next few months at the same time as the others, so that we can all

move on to breaking up the hull itself. Do you all have your downloaded ship schematics?"

Several breakers held aloft their industrial-grade readers, battered boxes good for little more than displaying pre-formatted audiovisual files. No ensouled devices were to be found on Asperna, at least among the lower castes.

"All right, then! Take your seats, and we'll be off!"

Before Rapaille could step off his own bench, Klom pushed forward through his fellows to confront the gangboss. Strapped across Klom's massive torso were various prybars, clamps, spreaders, holdfasts, desiccant packs and other tools. Slung in a holster at one hip was his bulky watercutter.

Even atop his seat, Rapaille found himself staring at Klom's chest rather than his face, until he raised his scale-rimmed eyes. "Yes, our big empty-headed man-ape from Chaulk. What do you want?"

"Are we allowed to go into the decommissioned areas?"

Rapaille let out a tweet of amazement. "The decommissioned areas? What are you interested in? Dust and bones? Faded signage and outmoded tech? Slaving senescent slop? That's all you'll find there!"

Klom blinked once, then said, "Are we allowed to go into the decommissioned areas?"

The Quetzal screeched in frustration, his wing stubs twitching beneath his embroidered shirt. "Go anyplace you want, you unreasoning curdled egg! But you'll never earn more than base pay if you persist in this foolish strategy. And my own bonuses will fall accordingly!"

Klom said, "I will be going into the decommissioned areas then." He sat down, occupying two seats.

Muttering, Rapaille signaled liftoff to the transport's pilot—a diminutive Melungeon with one tendril wrapped around a joystick and five others free for the separate controls. The transport lost mass until it floated half a meter above the waves. Surging forward through a channel opened in the baffles, the craft headed toward the Vixen ship. The Great Sun and the Lesser Sun raised the temperature of the air to a comfortable, shirtsleeve level. By the time the Least Sun arose, rendering the muggy atmosphere tropical, the breakers would be taking their lunch deep within the hulk.



The crossing of the kilometer of open water by Klom's craft and its mates resembled the engulfment of a school of minnows by a leviathan. The minor-city-sized disabled starcruiser—with the waterline halfway up its height, and its lower portions resting on the seabed—thrust out artificial peninsulas and lesser promontories. Once into its shadow and embrace, the transports assumed the insignificance of ticks on the hide of a Dominikono widestrider. Additionally, the ancient interstellar vessel seemed to be reradiating all the immeasurable chill it had accumulated over its millennia of high vacuum service.

It would take the gangs nearly a year to finish stripping the interior of the craft, and another six months to disassemble its hull. Of course, the whole process could have been accomplished in a fraction of that time by employing sufficient swarms of self-replicating majestatics. But such technologies—along with ensouled machines—were forbidden to anyone not at least a four-strand. And the four-strands and other galactic elites were both relatively small in number and disdainful of performing any such "labor," even distanced by layers of autonomic supervisors. With the fecund and subservient two-strands so handy, it only made sense to keep them profitably occupied.

The Yards at Asperna not only saw ships come in, but also go out, as salable constituent pieces. Brokers arrived and departed continuously, both from offplanet and from other parts of Asperna, leaving with cargoes for a hundred thousand destinations. Workers in the warehouse and sales end of the Yards felt their positions to be superior to the gritty, effortful tasks of the breakers and sorters, and a rough caste system existed, further fragmented into various levels according to the perceived crudity of assignments.

Klom's boat arrived at a sloping paw of the inorganic leviathan. Far, far above them, a different portion of the starliner formed a concave roof. A shoulder of the starliner constituted a distant wall running roughly parallel to the arm. A chaotic illumination came into this partial gallery as sunlight refracted from the bouncing sea.

The Melungeon shut down the lifting units, then secured the transport by a cable to a handy U-bar on the Vixen vessel. The breakers utilized the fractally porous surface of the starcraft's skin as handholds and toeholds to climb up several gently sloping meters of wall, their tools racketing against each other. Once aboard this small leg of the starliner—broad enough to host a ballgame—they waited for Rapaille's commands.

"Follow me, you wittolds! The nearest port is just a few minutes' walk in this direction."

The paw sloped upward, the roof sloped down, and the shoulder angled in, rendering the passage more tunnel-like the further the breakers progressed.

Klom marched at the head of the line, looking about with a kind of patient curiosity. He had taken apart a dozen ships so far in his career at the Yards, and he fully expected to take apart a few dozen more, before he got too old for the work. Each ship possessed its own personality. Klom assumed that by the time he was done breaking down this vessel, he would know good-sized portions of it as intimately as he knew his mother's house in Chaulk. Paradoxically, the ship would no longer then exist to be known. Such conundrums did not bother Klom.

Faded Vixen script, each character tall as a man, ran across this segment of the deck. Klom turned to the breaker next to him, a blue-haired, ice-skinned fellow named Nyerephar, a mixed-breed Human and Pinemarten from Frostholm. Nyerephar had a reputation as an intellectual, given his predilection for offshift downloading into his reader of novels of interspecies romance, many of which originated with the Vixens.

"What do these words say, 'Phar?"

Nyerephar smoothed his long jutting whiskers before replying. "It could be the ship's name. Yes, that's it, I'm sure. This is the ship's name."

"And what is the ship's name, 'Phar?"

"Caution Discharge Zone"

"Thank you for telling me this."

Soon the breakers arrived at the port. Standing outside in front of the entrance was an enormous matter-modem: a cube with one mirrored face.

Delivered earlier from the Yards, the teleportation device stood ready to receive any unliving object carved from the ship. Its mates, tunable at will, stood ashore, near the sorting lines. Very useful devices, integral to the functioning of most economies of the Indrajal, the matter-modems were subject to two major inconvenient limitations. They only operated over planetary distances, and they were death to anything living that attempted transit.

Now the matter-modem, sensing their presence, activated itself. Fed from the other end, a fleet of lifting sledges came thru the mirror face. Each breaker stepped up to take a floating sledge for carrying booty.

Rapaille triggered a Vixen wall control marked by a new slash of red spray paint, and the port hobermanned open. The black interior of the powerless ship beckoned like the afterlife. The breakers lowered their miners' lamps onto their foreheads and switched them on, flooding the scene with actinic light.

"Rendezvous back here at twenty-nine hundred hours. And remember! This was a luxury vessel intended to pamper its patrons, not a Scryer dreadnought bristling with weaponry. Nonetheless, you can die just as swiftly from a falling girder as you can from an antipersonnel wasp!"

One by one, with Klom leading the way, the breakers stepped inside.

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Klom grunted hoarsely as he completed his climb. Sweat rivuleted his skin, and a musty odor compounded of stale lubricants and malnourished organic units pumping out ketones made every breath an exercise in disgust.

The ship schematics on his reader had informed him that the ladder he had just topped ran for a kilometer and a half in a narrow shaft slicing through innumerable decks. The swiftest way to the closest decommissioned area, the ladder had seemed a gift when Klom stood at its base. But now, as Klom labored to catch his breath on a platform above fifteen hundred meters of nothingness, the ladder appeared more like a poisoned fruit. Even Klom's work-hardened muscles quivered from the grueling ascent. Had his lifter fit into the narrow shaft, the ascent would have been trivial. Now, though, Klom was fatigued before he even began whatever labors awaited him.

Klom broke out his water bottle and a beancake. The water, sterilized by passage through a matter-modem, still retained the distasteful taints of decay and the metallic flavors of the marshes from which it was drawn. But this was the only drinking water available to the bustee-dwellers of Klom's caste. After so many years in the Yard, Klom was inured to the taste. But he still recalled the pure waters of Lake Zawinul with each sip.

After consuming the last crumb of beancake, Klom stood and faced away from the shaft. The door at the end of the platform presented itself as his next challenge. Klom looked for some control similar to the one Rapaille had used outside, but no such mechanism showed. It did not take Klom long to decide to cut his way through.

The watercutter hanging from Klom's belt was a simple pistol-shaped device with a second grip up front for two-handed use. Klom had wrapped tape around the butts for firmer purchase. He fitted a pair of scratched plastic goggles over his eyes, braced himself against a convenient strut, then triggered the cutter.

Out of its nozzle leaped a needle-thin jet of water possessing the destructive power of any stream of collimated subatomic particles, without any inconvenient radiation.

The closed end of the watercutter's barrel was a tiny matter-modem synced to another resting in a deep-sea trench where the water was at several dozen atmospheres of pressure. Only breakers of Klom's raw strength could handle this device, whose light weight and inexhaustibility were unmatched by any other cutting tool—yet whose powered state delivered immense reactive force requiring Klom's brawn.

Klom inscribed a crude circle in the wall just big enough for him to crawl through. A salty mist enveloped him, making his footing and handholds tenuous. Practically at his elbow, the echoing drop into space awaited his first slip. But Klom coolly persisted. Finally finished, he kicked the circle of metal inward. Gaily colored fluids from severed conduits dribbled into the opening, where once, when the ship was under power, they might well have gushed. Klom squirmed through this mild dribble without concern.

On the far side, he found himself in a giant auditorium or ballroom or refectory, whose vast confines his headlamp barely illuminated. This room had been in active use right up until the end, but the decommissioned area lurked just beyond its remote wall.

Klom crossed the wide floorspace, the beam of his lamp picking out various columns and stubs of fixtures and some discarded artifacts which to a less ambitious breaker would have represented adequate salvage. But with Airey's tactics fixed firmly in his mind, Klom zeroed in on the mysteries of the long-sealed chambers.

A little searching revealed a door concealed behind a sagging arras that depicted the hunting of some spiny beast by a party of Vixens, the bushy tails of the hunters plaited with colorful streamers. The door—sealed with a blobby gasket of silicone—boasted a still-active glo-sign, but not in Vixen script. Half the letters in the independently powered message were dead with age, while the rest exhibited only a marginal brightness. But Klom could not have read the warning or advice even if active, so ancient and foreign was the script. So without any hesitation, he simply cut his way past it.

The space on the far side of the door, a corridor, was proportioned for creatures somewhat smaller than Klom. The big man had to hunch as he advanced. Dust lay thickly underfoot, and the air smelled of the slow disintegration of unnatural materials. The walls of the corridor were etched with shallow glyphs, as if the beings who had once traversed it had relied on tactile clues more than visual ones.

Some years ago, Klom had helped disassemble a Pingpank ship that featured similar carven icons, although much cruder. But the Pingpank had been extinct for five hundred years, and at the time of their disappearance had represented the degenerate offspring of a much more sophisticated race, the Marchwardens. If this were Marchwarden text, then the decommissioned segment of the ship had last been occupied over a millennium ago. Without any exo-inputs, even generations of invisible repair majestatics would be reaching the end of their preservation efforts.

Open arched doorways began to appear. Klom cautiously poked his head through each one. Most of the chambers were of moderate size, and easily scannable for booty. In one such, Klom found several crystal eggs harboring strange animated scenes flickering wispily in their centers. These he placed in a carrying pouch. But the majority of the chambers were utterly bare. Klom began to suspect that Rapaille's harsh words held more accuracy than Airey's optimistic encouragements. Nonetheless, he continued his search.

The corridor dead-ended at another door. Klom saltily sliced through it, the runoff from his cutter turning the dust at his feet to a thin river of mud.

Pushing the cut circle of metal clangingly inward, Klom was met by a gust of pungent atmosphere. He stepped warily inside.

Instantly Klom knew he had found a vivarium.

From the walls of the tall, extensive chamber hung a variety of suspensor-sacs, all of them, sadly enough, in various stages of decomposition. Klom walked over to the nearest such: the withered reticulated vesicle ripped apart easily under his big hands with a noise like shredding a few dozen thicknesses of paper, and a shower of skeletal fragments fell out, clattering noisily on the floor.

Klom kicked the bones in frustration. So far he had wasted nearly half a shift and discovered nothing to justify his efforts. At this rate, retirement with Sorrel to Chaulk seemed destined never to be more than a dream.

Wearily, Klom sat down and took out another beancake.

The majestic that appeared hovering over his beancake resembled a thumb-sized golden bee. Klom jerked back, dropping the food. The majestic levitated the cake and flew ponderously off with it.

Klom jumped up and followed.

Clinging to the far side of a massive pillar, a live suspensor-sac served as the focus of a thick swarm of shining majestatics. The agravitic attendants ranged in size from dust particles to hummingbirds. They wreathed the sac in a life-supporting cloud. Already Klom's lunch was being disassembled into its constituent nutrients to benefit the sac.

Why this one vesicle had survived, Klom did not know. Perhaps it had sent taps into the pillar supporting it, finding its necessary sustenance elsewhere, in the active portions of the *Caution Discharge Zone*. But whatever anomaly was responsible for extending its life beyond its mates, the sac represented a potential treasure.

Inside, a living mature being awaited rebirthing. For some unknown period, the metabolism of the concealed creature had been stepped down to nearly flatline levels, with interior majestatics tending to various cellular repairs as necessary. Given adequate resources, the upper time limit on sac containment had never been established.

Klom advanced on the sac, then stopped. He could not simply rip it open, he realized. How was he to get the vesicle to awaken and safely discharge its patient?

Filled with a fierce wanting, Klom hung his head and cudgeled his thoughts for a solution.

Suddenly his vision was obscured by a shifting haze. A portion of the turbulent majestic swarm had englobed his head.

"Please," said Klom aloud, "deliver your burden to me. This ship is dead. We are going to chop it up. Your charge will die."

Spinning in arcane patterns, the majestatics seemed to consider Klom's request, before rejoining the parent cloud.

Instantly, the vesicle began to undergo changes. Veins throbbed athwart its surface, swaths of livid color flowed across it like storms across a gas-giant planet, and a musky, urinous odor arose off it.

A split developed along the bottom ridge of the vesicle, widening quickly. The next instant clotted crimson and purple fluids gushed out, splashing Klom's workboots, followed by the plopping thud of a body hitting the floor.

Klom hastened over and squatted down beside the form, roughly one third as big as Klom himself. It resembled no sapient race he had ever seen.

The creature's head was an oblate boulder pebbled over with muffin-sized mounds. It had two eyes, their lids lowered, a blunt snout with flaring nostrils, and jowl-concealed jaws. A kind of skin-covered cartilaginous tuning-fork arrangement projected from its forehead. No ears were visible. Its keg-like body boasted four chunky legs, the paws showing blunt claws. Its hide was brown velvety skin wrinkled like a cerebral cortex. A pair of vestigial hands stuck out at its shoulders. No tail interrupted its hindquarters.

The being was struggling to draw a breath. Klom gripped it by the scruff of its neck with one hand, lifting its weighty head, then levered open its unresisting jaws with the other. He swabbed out a jellylike mass from its throat, then put his face to the creature's wet face and began exchanging breaths with it.

After a minute, the beast could breathe on its own. It opened its eyes, limpid gray pools. Klom fell into the creature's gaze, losing all sense of himself for a moment. When he had recovered, he asked, "Can you speak? Are you all right?" The creature said nothing, but tried to stand. Its legs gave way beneath it, however, and it collapsed back into its afterbirth.

Klom picked up the creature and set out to retrace his steps.

At the platform where the ladder began, he lashed the beast to his chest with a net of bungee cords, so that its head rested below Klom's chin.

Klom commenced the descent.

Halfway down, his muscles spasming, Klom thought he might not be able to complete the climb.

A giant tongue stropped his face.

Klom found the strength to go on.

. . . . .

The interior of Thrash's shabeen was illuminated only by a few worthless lighting fixtures scavenged from a variety of ships, and powered off a rack of biomass fuel

cells. The patchy, sputtering radiance formed many shadowy nooks where drinkers could sit and conspire, consummating the mingy deals that constituted the primitive economy of the bustee-dwellers in the Yard. The furniture of the dirt-floored barroom was similarly ill-sorted, a collection of spraddle-legged chairs and tables, and the occasional stained, bedraggled lounge for those customers whose anatomy precluded chairs. At the bar, the best-lit area, a row of stools with fragments of flooring still attached rested hard by the stacked packing crates separating Thrash from his customers.

Thrash's heritage included Slow Loris and Peluche genes, rendering him a shaggy ursinoid with huge eyes. All the tap-handles and liquor jugs had been customized for his broad paws. The mugs all sported wide grips as well.

Sorrel needed both hands to lift her glass. She raised her drink and sipped, then made a face before plonking the mug back on the rickety table.

"What sour piss this is! How I wish I had a glass of Tancredi nectar."

Klom drained his own dark brew with evident satisfaction, then wiped his mouth with the back of his crufty hand.

Sorrel winced. "Deva, Klom! I have to kiss those lips once in a while!"

Looking down at his flaking hand, Klom said, "But Sorrel, we know this cruft's not contagious. The curandero said so. Once it finds a host, it stops looking for others. It's worked its way right into me, though, adopting lots of my genes into itself. That's what makes it so hard to get rid of."

"That's no matter. I still prefer not to have those patches rubbed all over me, or to come in contact with certain parts of you. You're just lucky the cruft stopped at your waist."

Klom smiled dreamily. "Tonight we'll doublecheck its progress."

Sorrel stuck out her vividly pink tongue. "If you can spare a minute for me, now that you've got a new friend. Or if there's a centimeter of space left in your crib."

Klom looked down at his feet.

The creature from the *Caution Discharge Zone* lay peacefully sleeping, one forepaw folded over the other beneath its chin. Drool snailed down the side of its face to darken the dirt. Its unlabored breathing gently rasped the stale air within the shabeen.



Reaching down, Klom fondly skritchd the beast's scalp around its fleshy forklike appendage. The rhythm of the creature's breathing deepened in a contented fashion. "Use his name, Sorrel, please. You know I gave him a name. Call him Tugger, please."

"Tugger! Ridiculous! Why 'Tugger' anyhow?"

"I found out he likes to play that way. You should see him pull on a rope. He can put up a real tussle."

"And why 'he'?" I certainly didn't see any ballocks on him when you trotted him around for everyone to admire."

"I don't know. I just feel Tugger's male."

Sorrel waved her arms about in frustration. "I give up! You get first crack at a potential treasure trove, and all you come away with is an ugly pet! This is so typical for you, Klom. You're just too dumb to grab the main chance, even when it's right under your nose."

Klom looked hurt. "There was nothing valuable in that decommissioned area, Sorrel. At least as far as I looked. But I stopped when I found Tugger. I had to get him out of there. The atmosphere was bad for him. And he perked up right away once we were outside in the fresh air. But I shared the money from the crystal eggs with you, didn't I? Ten taka and sixty pasia. That's something, isn't it?"

"Birdscratch! Someone with your experience should be hauling in much more. Tomorrow, I expect you to pick another decommissioned area and make a big strike!"

"But I already found something very valuable, Sorrel. Tugger! Just look at him. What a character! He makes me smile, just like Airey does. Who could ask for anything more? Anyway, I figure if I concentrate on ripping out the old Vixen equipment like everyone else, I can make a steadier pay. No, I'm not going back to any of the decommissioned areas. The odds are too slim."

"What's this, what's this? Abandoning my advice! I'm hurt! Truly I am!"

Airey dropped down onto an empty ladderback chair. He wore a shirt that proclaimed with glowing threads support for his favorite ballteam, the Alavoine Tumblers. His bronze face was slicked with sweat, rendering his mustache a limp strip of furze. Even hours after Final Sunset, the air retained a surplus of enervating heat.

Signaling to Thrash for a drink, Airey resumed his chiding. "So, you're letting one little setback discourage you, Klom? I had thought much higher of you."

"Setback? What setback?"

Airey dug a toe of his sandal into Tugger's side, provoking a mild grunt and a shifting away by the beast. "This worthless thing! Now you have another mouth to feed. Have you considered that?"

Klom remained positive. "I can't get Tugger to eat anything yet. All he does is drink a little water. And he seems to do that just to please me. He just doesn't seem to be hungry. And even when he does decide to eat, I'm sure I can get plenty of scraps from Kirsh, over in Kitchen Number Twelve."

Thrash lumbered over, carrying Airey's mug and a plate of fried salicornia and quorn nuggets. "Snack's on the house," growled Thrash. "Your pet's brought in extra trade tonight."

"Thank you, Thrash."

Klom picked up a nugget and held it under Tugger's nose. Sniffing without opening his eyes, Tugger made a polite refusal by lifting his paws to cover his face.

"See? He's not greedy or any trouble at all. Tugger only brings happiness and good luck."

Exasperated, Airey blew air rudely past his fluttering lips. "I give up. Sorrel, can you convince him to abandon this worthless foundling and get back to some fruitful exploration of—what did you say the ship's name was?"

*"Caution Discharge Zone."*

"Hmm, a queer appellation. Well, Sorrel, go ahead. Lay your best arguments on our mighty yet stubborn friend."

Sorrel popped a nugget into her mouth. "Forget it, Airey. I'm sick of cajoling this idiot. It's like trying to teach a Tonshuan warthog to sing."

Airey pinched the corner of his mouth and rubbed a finger across his mustache. "Are we entirely certain this beast isn't valuable? After all, someone went to all the trouble of placing him in a suspensor-sac, however long ago. Klom, exactly what did our mighty overlord say when he inspected, ah, Tugger? And are you sure it was really Bright Tide Rising issuing the verdict?"

Klom thought back to the day he discovered Tugger. At the foot of the ladder, Klom had exited the shaft and retrieved his sledge. He loaded Tugger onto it. The creature was alert, but still obviously weak and unsure from its long estivation. Klom had rested for a few minutes, refreshing himself with more water and cake, before setting out for the main port.

Out in the fresh air, Tugger visibly quickened. Rapaille, busy processing materials through the matter-modem, did not at first notice Klom and his living find. When he became aware of the rare discovery, Rapaille squawked with excitement and summoned one of his supervisors over his communicator. Harshly, the Quetzal pushed Klom aside and bent over Tugger.

"Please forgive the rude treatment you've received at the hands of this worthless drone, kindly sapient. You will soon be in touch with others of your kind, who will doubtlessly be overjoyed to know of your continued existence, and ready with a handsome reward."

In reply, Tugger laved Rapaille's face with his broad tongue.

"I don't think this one places so high on the sapient scale, Rapaille."

"Nonsense! Plainly an advanced being." Yet for all his blustering certainty, Rapaille regarded Tugger with a veneer of suspicion.

A personal lifter arrowed toward them in response to Rapaille's summoning. When it reached them, both Rapaille and Klom stared in disbelief.

The vessel held not a mere supervisor, but Bright Tide Rising himself. A six-strand, the lanky Horseface was attended by a shimmering corona of majestatics that nearly concealed his head, yet remained recognizable by his strangely articulated build and various family sigils worn as a gorget. Rapaille dropped to his knees and bowed. Klom remained standing.

Without consulting either Rapaille or Klom, Bright Tide Rising directed a portion of his swarm to engulf Tugger. After a swift examination, the units reunited with their peers. Pausing an unnaturally long time, the owner of the Asperna Yard finally delivered his verdict in a rumbling voice.

"Minimal sentience. Germline not on record. No talents, no adjuncts, no discernible worth. Dispose of the creature as you see fit."

As soon as Bright Tide Rising left, Rapaille berated Klom for twenty minutes for wasting the time of both himself and their ultimate patron. Klom absorbed the tirade placidly, then announced he was ending his shift early and returning to shore

on the next transport. This news elicited further incoherent screeches from the Quetzal.

Now Klom repeated the Yard owner's assessment to Airey. The words seemed to deflate the slight, capricious fellow, but he soon regained his usual jovial air.

"Oh, well, there are months of salvage ahead. You'll hit the mother lode yet, Klom, I'm sure."

"Thank you, Airey."

The trio passed a few more hours drinking and chatting, eating and joking. Numerous individuals came over to examine Tugger. Klom felt proud.

At last, in the face of another workday, their beds beckoned.

Once outside, Sorrel stumbled in the near-lightless mucky path leading away from Thrash's, but Klom caught her before she could land in a patch of redolent luminous vomit, seething with intestinal symbionts. Tugger trotted along fastidiously behind. The dank air weighed like a blanket.

"Sorrel?"

"Uh, what—?"

"When did you ever taste Tancredi nectar?"

"One night, Jess—Jess Badura—he and me—you were sleeping—"

"Oh."

Sorrel stopped and hung with both hands from Klom's bicep. "You're not mad, are you, Klom?"

"No. I just like to learn things."

. . . . .

Three months into its disassembly, the *Caution Discharge Zone* appeared, from the outside, relatively unscathed. Here and there across its convoluted carcass, new holes gaped, broken open to facilitate the removal of the ship's guts when the nearest port was inconveniently distant and a matter-modem could not be maneuvered inside. Cormorants and kingfishers wheeled above the Vixen starliner,

colonies roosting in selected niches and staining the slopes with their guano. A line of goose-barnacles had formed just below the high-water mark; at low tide, the exposed barnacles craned their mouthparts around on long necks, questing for the gnats that swarmed above the waters, the gnats in their turn attracted by the floating mats of seaweed that now trailed outward from the hull.

At a definite point in the near future, the *Caution Discharge Zone* would be reduced to an empty shell no taller than the line of barnacles, all its superstructure dismantled. At this point breakers skilled in underwater work would cut up the remaining shell and float the pieces away. The ship that had sailed the starwinds for an eon would be no more.

But right now, much still remained to be taken from inside.

Klom and Tugger arrived with the rest of their crew and marshaled outside the assigned entryway. Rapaille paid no notice to the oddball pair: a marked contrast to the first day Klom had shown up for work with his pet.

Fixing his hard eyes on Tugger, Rapaille had demanded, "Klom! What's the meaning of this pointless complication of your duties? Why is this worthless mass of protoplasm not already ground up into raw chuck for Kitchen Twelve?"

Klom did not exhibit any anger. But something in his voice made Rapaille flinch. "Tugger is my friend. No one hurts my friends."

Rapaille retreated. "All right then. But why not leave the beast in your crib?"

"There are too many bad people in the bustee. Someone might break into my crib and try to steal Tugger. Maybe even harm him. He doesn't know when people plan to do him harm. And he's too gentle to defend himself. I need to keep him by me all the time."

Realizing when he was beaten, Rapaille angrily said, "Let the consequences of your soft-hearted stupidity be on your own head then! Tending to this monster will slow you down, and you'll soon be lying in a ditch with the Dungbeetles, begging paisa off the smart and sensible breakers who go about their work with vim and efficiency."

Klom made no reply, but simply marched inside the ship. Before they separated, Nyerephar and several other fellows congratulated him for standing up to Rapaille. Tugger came in for his share of the good will as well, accepting much petting and rib-thumping and shaking of his vestigial shoulder-hands.

Today, Klom and Tugger received no extra attention from anyone, so standard a part of the scene were they.

Half an hour's trudge through ravaged corridors and chambers, naves and apses, full of dangling cables and wires and sliced-open sheathing brought Klom and Tugger alone to the room where the breaker had left off work yesterday. The room was empty of furnishings, and only a scatter of devalued triptix littered the floor. The small personal data-palettes which had once carried routing instructions, dietary requirements, letters of introduction, shipboard credit-debit records, medical histories and other information needed by interstellar travelers now constituted nothing more significant than a drift of dead leaves.

One entire wall of this room presented a matrix of small doors inset with clear panels. Each door opened onto a long slim padded capsule plainly intended as a sleeping tube for members of some vaguely serpentine species. Each tube had to be disengaged from the matrix and stacked on the sledge. In one corner of the room squatted a large matter-modem. This deactivated cube, part of the intraship goods-transport system, presented no mirror face.

Klom fell to work, his head lamp casting all the illumination he needed. Tugger lay down peacefully on the hard floor and fell asleep. The puddle of drool spreading from his jowls caught glimmers from Klom's headlamp now and again.

In the three months Klom had owned his new pet, the man and beast had become inseparable, even off-duty. Sorrel had come grudgingly to accept the new arrangement, while Airey simply disdained to pay any more attention to Tugger than he would have given to a familiar rug or table.

Several hours of hard work with spanner and snipper and prybar resulted in a sledge piled high with tubes. Klom must run these back to an active matter-modem before he could continue. But first he paused to refresh himself.

He took out his water bottle. Stretching sore muscles, he braced himself with his left hand against the dead matter-modem. He tilted back his head to glug a liter of warm musty liquid.

Ceiling lights flared improbably to life. So did the matter-modem.

Off-balance, Klom plunged in the mirror face up to his shoulder.

The lights snapped off. As did the matter-modem.

Klom howled. His arm had been sheared off clean at the shoulder. Vast quantities of blood sprayed the room. He fumbled frantically for a bungee, thinking to tie off his arteries. But there remained no flesh stub to bind.

Klom crashed to the floor like an uprooted Salembier sequoia. Consciousness slipped away from him like a school of fish from a disintegrating net.

"Tugger—"

. . . . .

Rapaille awaited the first of his crew to emerge with that day's salvage. He would key descriptions of the items into his reader, contributing to the vast inventory of parts being taken from the ship, then dispatch the parts through the matter-modem to the relevant disassembly stations and sorting lines. Meanwhile, he had nothing to do but wait and ponder the many injustices of his life. Standing in a shadow to escape the growing heat, he idly scanned the skies. A small Mlotmroz ship undoubtedly bearing buyers soared across his field of vision. Very good, the more customers the better for the Yard's business. All fortune to Bright Tide Rising! Rapaille's phantom wings itched, and he rubbed his wing stubs against the bulkhead. But the itching persisted. Life was unfair.

Someone burst crazily out of the port, jolting Rapaille out of his philosophical contemplation. That dumb man-ape, Klom, followed by his galloping worthless pet—

Klom bellowed. "Rapaille! Is there a crew mucking about with the ship's power generators?"

Rapaille boosted his haughty demeanor. "This is no business of yours! Get back to your wor—*urk!*"

Klom had gripped Rapaille's shirt with both his hands and lifted the avianoform off his feet, incidentally choking the Quetzal with a knot of fabric at his throat. Klom thrust his face within centimeters of Rapaille and spoke with calm precision.

"You will call the crew working with the generators. You will tell them to be extra careful not to turn them on by accident. Or someone might get hurt. Do you understand?"

Rapaille understood that the person most likely to immediately get hurt was himself. So made a squawk he hoped Klom would interpret positively.

The huge breaker set his supervisor down and released him. After massaging his bruised throat, Rapaille placed the call Klom had ordered. Once Klom was satisfied, he turned away and climbed into a ship-to-shore barge, Tugger heeling behind his master.

"Take me back in," Klom told the bored Melungeon pilot.

As the barge pulled away, Rapaille sought to reassert his dignity and status. "Don't bother coming back for three weeks! Not till after Festival! You're on probation. Do you hear me, you addled eggsucker?"

But Klom never even looked back.

He seemed too busy stroking his left arm.

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The long hot shed (its sides open for whatever chance breeze might arise) that housed Sorting Line Number Thirty-eight featured the following arrangement: ten parallel conveyor belts ran from one end of the shed to the other. The belts contributed a certain varying level of noise to the shed, depending on how dutifully a small army of oilers—mostly children—tended to them. At the head of each belt stood a matter-modem delivering the smaller pieces harvested from the ship under deconstruction. (Larger pieces not saved and sold as integral units went to disassembly stations first, then to the Sorting Lines.) Along both sides of each conveyor sat the sorters, staggered on three-legged stools at intervals of a meter or so. By the elbow of each sorter, mirror-face upward, was a smaller matter-modem with a keypad that allowed a choice of destinations.

Each sorter had his or her or its special range of components to watch for. When spotted, the component would be snatched off the belt and dropped into the matter-modem. Simultaneous with the grab, the sorter would key in the relevant warehouse station to receive the transmission.

At the end of the belt awaited a final matter-modem, to catch all the unclaimed pieces for further examination and categorization.

The sorters were entitled to only as many lavatory breaks as minimally consistent with the most basic needs of their species. Lunches ran for half an hour, in shifts. Payment was based on speed and accuracy of performance, with debits taken for



any missed pieces. So long as standards were maintained, conversation was permitted.

Sorrel was speaking to Aurinka, a Triffid who sat diagonally across from her. They were discussing jewelry. The Triffid waved several stalks decorated with hammered brass bracelets for Sorrel's admiration, while handling her duties competently with two other limbs.

Suddenly both Aurinka and Sorrel took notice of a distant commotion near one of the shed's entrances. They strained to ascertain what was going on without slackening production. The commotion seemed to be moving through the shed, getting closer to them. At last Sorrel saw the source of the upset.

Klom and Tugger bulled their way toward her, trailing protesting supervisors. When Klom spotted Sorrel, he bellowed out her name. Then he was upon her.

Grabbing Sorrel off her stool, Klom strong-armed her out of the shed, heedless of either her protests or her struggles to escape.

Once outside, Klom released her. They stood in the lee afforded by a mud-brick pissoir, while all around them surged unemployable or underage or offshift bustee-dwellers, a motley mass of scaled and chitinous, furred and slick-skinned beings, oblate or attenuated, faces like intricate masks or nearly featureless.

Sorrel faced Klom, full of fury. "You moron! What's the matter with you? I'm going to lose half a day's wages now!"

Klom's single-minded urgency seemed to evaporate. He faced Sorrel with a look that mixed contrition and confusion.

"Sorrel, I need your help. I died today."

This last sentence, delivered matter-of-factly yet with a detectable tremor, catalyzed Sorrel's reaction from anger to a curious concern.

"What are you talking about? You're standing there as healthy as a Redskull ox."

"No, you don't understand. Here's what happened—" Klom recounted losing his arm in the matter-modem. "The last thing I remember is calling out for Tugger." The beast looked up at the sound of his name, offering a lopsided, slavering grin. "Then I blacked out. Not much time seemed to pass. Or maybe a lot. Anyway, I woke up whole."

Leerily, Sorrel regarded Tugger. "You're saying this creature was somehow responsible for regenerating your arm?"

"No, not exactly. You see, there was no blood anywhere anymore. And my sledge was empty. I had filled it with tubes, but now it was empty. Then I looked at my reader, and it said the wrong time. I was in the past."

"That makes no sense at all."

Klom whirled savagely around and punched the wall of the lavatory, sending up a puff of mortar and pulverized soil. "I know, I know! But there's something else besides. Look at my skin!"

Sorrel examined Klom's outstretched hand, bloody-knuckled from impact with the wall. "Your craft is gone!"

"All gone! That's right! But how?"

Sorrel shook her head in bewilderment. "I—I can't explain. Maybe Airey—"

"Airey! Of course! Let's go!"

Without waiting for her agreement, Klom hustled Sorrel away.

Tugger trotted blithely along behind them.

. . . . .

The fluids giving life to a typical starliner ranged from viscous hydrocarbon derivatives to thin plant-based extracts to exotically tinged protein-hormone-enzyme sera. These various liquids—some of which could be captured and sold, others of which went straight to crude disposal in the polluted swamps—invigorated a variety of mechanisms, all of which had to be drained before storage or disassembly. This task fell to the crews of the drainage pits.

Airey was right down in one of the pits, ankle deep in rainbow-sheened stenchy sludge. Unlike his downtime finery, his work uniform consisted of scarred boots and a patched brown coverall, its waterproofing peeling away in places. Employing a big spanner, he was struggling with the balky petcock of a suspended engine and cursing furiously.

"Motherless shit! Is this my reward for daring to aspire to elegance? May all the ancestors of all the mechanics who ever worked on this abomination freeze in the lowest levels of the Dimmig hells! Die, you bastard screwcap, die!"

Ranked at the edge of the pit, Airey's co-workers were enjoying his eloquent frustration. A Foraminifer was laughing so hard it kept dislocating its multiple jaws, resetting them each time with a grisly clacking of bone.

An instant cessation of the laughter caused Airey to crane his neck upward. Before he could react to the unexpected sight of Klom, he was lifted bodily from the pit.

"Come with me, Airey," Klom demanded. Airey caught Sorrel's eyes and read there the wisdom of complying. As the trio moved off for privacy, the drainman grabbed a rag to wipe his hands. Finished, he tucked it into a back pocket.

In the shadow of a belching, stinking cracking tower, Klom rehearsed his morning to Airey. Airey listened thoughtfully, his glance bouncing back and forth between Klom and Tugger. When Klom finished his account, Airey remained silent for half a minute before speaking.

"I see only one answer. Your pet can manipulate time in some fashion."

Klom's brow creased. "What? How could that be? I've never heard of such a thing being possible."

"Regardless of what we know, it's the only solution. Tugger responded to your distress by shuttling you back to the past. That explains your empty sledge and the timecheck on your reader."

"But how would that have fixed my arm? A dying time-traveler is still a dying man."

Airey stroked his negligible mustache. "This is true. The answer must be more complex than. I'll need to cogitate on this a while. But meanwhile, I think you should give Tugger anything he wants as a reward. Without him, apparently, you wouldn't be here right now. He's your guardian raksha."

"I'd gladly give him the finest meal or the thickest bed in the world. But all he seems to want is to be by my side!"

Airey hunkered down beside Tugger. He took the rag from his pocket and wiped away a line of saliva from Tugger's jowls. "There, there, good boy. What you want depends on what you are. And I guess we'll never know that. Unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Klom.

Airey straightened up, holding the rag bearing Tugger's drool before all their eyes as if it were a holy relic. "Let's send this sample to the laboratories at Radius Seven and get a genomic readout for Tugger. It will cost Klom a pretty paisa, but perhaps we'll learn more about our friend's constitution."

Sorrel said, "What could a simple lab analysis reveal that Bright Tide Rising and his majestatics overlooked?"

"I suspect that Tugger deliberately concealed his true nature from the Raisin, so that he would not be separated from Klom. Can we put anything beyond a being who can do what Tugger appears to have done for Klom?"

All three friends studied the innocuous animal with new respect. Tugger simply grinned dopily upward, then scratched behind his jaw with a rear paw, making a noise like a broom on sand.

Klom said, "Please see to it, Airey. We need to know what Tugger is so we can make sure he gets the proper treatment for his kind."

"Consider it done! And now, although *you* are suspended till after the Festival, Klom, Sorrel and I need to get back to work. Which brings me round to asking you for a small favor—"

Disdaining the spanner, Klom opened the stuck petcock with the force of his fingers alone. A torrent of purple, iron-smelling hematic coolant gouted out, splashing Klom to his knees, but he only laughed.

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Klom's crib was luxurious by bustee standards. Scabbed together out of rusty sheet metal, driftwood posts and rafters, broad swaths of cured hides from Asperna's reptilian partchumpfs and the odd bits of scratched plastic and warped pressboard, the shack leaked only minimally during the monsoon season and retained the heat from a seacoal fire well during the mild winters. Its interior held a hammock layered with rags and a teetering set of shelves hosting Klom's few possessions, including a photo of an old woman standing in front of a hut on a lakeshore. (The unframed photo was surrounded by deva medals distributed by the marabouts during various holy days, as if it were a small shrine.) A gamecube with a fuzzed-out display and half its functions deleted by age rested on a wicker hassock. Sorrel often spent the night in Klom's crib, whether she and Klom had sex or not, preferring it to the crowded quarters she officially shared with a family of kitchen workers. The rancid oily smells her fellow tenants brought back in their clothing and hair from their shifts in the kitchen nauseated her.

This night, with Klom still unwontedly preoccupied by his earlier "death," Sorrel elected to keep company with her lover after her shift ended. Their supper, taken

amidst the crowded refectory attached to Kitchen Number Twelve, had been a silent affair.

They lay quietly together now in the hammock. The Great Sun had gone down just an hour ago, and, even without any exertion, their naked bodies—one sleek and golden, one hairy and pale—were bedewed with sweat. Estuarial breezes feathered their skins.

Strung from the two biggest, most solidly anchored posts, the hammock and its ropes nonetheless creaked as Sorrel shifted her position to clamber atop Klom. She began to kiss and tease him. "Where's the nasty old cruft then, sweetling? Nothing to stop me from rubbing my boobs here now, is there?"

Most unusually, Klom did not at first respond. Sorrel persisted however, and soon the shipbreaker began to react enthusiastically. One massive hand encompassed both her breasts, while the other cupped her whole ass. Straddling Klom's hips, Sorrel looked back over her shoulder to grab his penis and guide it home. But suddenly she stopped.

"Sorrel, what's wrong?"

"I—that thing is *watching* us!"

"What thing?" Klom raised himself up on one elbow. "Oh, Tugger?" The beast sat up on its back haunches attentively, legs askew toward one side and its bifurcate horn aimed straight at the couple. If interpreted anthropomorphically, its face expressed goofy bemusement. "But he's watched us every night since I found him."

"I know! But it's different now. We don't know what he is, or what he can do, or what he wants. It shivers my bones!"

"Tugger? Never! He's just my happy little friend. Like you and Airey."

Sorrel looked incensed, and she bounced off Klom to stand on the dirt floor. "So that's all I am to you? Some kind of pet? Where's my dress?"

Klom swung his legs around to sit upright. "No, Sorrel, you're not a pet. That's not what I meant to say. Don't twist my words around. You know I can't always say things just right. I love you. Come back, please."

Standing dressed by the plank door with a hand on the latchstring, Sorrel said, "Forget it, Klom. You seem to love this—this monster more than you do me. So why don't I just leave you two to whatever obscene pleasures you can contrive!"

Klom scowled. "Now, Sorrel, you know that's not—"

"And Airey deserves more respect from you too!" she yelled, then was gone.

Klom swore. He kicked his gamecube off the hassock and banged the door open. But Sorrel was already out of sight.

Tugger continued to beam beneficently, however, and eventually Klom calmed down. Before too long, both man and beast were snoring peacefully.

. . . . .

Klom's three weeks of probation were nearly over. He had spent the time increasingly frustrated by the realization that the dismantling of the *Caution Discharge Zone* was proceeding swiftly without him. For one thing, he was losing taka and paisa every day he sat idle. His dreams of quitting the Yard and retiring to Chaulk seemed to recede further each day. To conserve his meager savings — depleted drastically by the advance charges from the Radius Seven lab—Klom had taken to eating the very scraps from Kitchen Number Twelve which he had once foreseen as supplying Tugger's needs. (Luckily, that amiable companion continued, however improbably, to flourish on nothing more than air and water.) Soliciting the leftovers from the friendly but sardonic Bergamot cook named Kirsh was a chore that grew more odious to Klom each day. Kirsh's face, a pockmarked, damascene blue, would crack in a sarcastic snaggle-toothed smile as he handed over the leaky package of orts, always accompanied by some such jest as, "Here's fare fit for a four-strand, Klom—a starving, poverty-stricken, imbecilic four-strand, that is."

But the loss of pay and the humiliating survival tactics represented the lesser of Klom's irritations. He found himself angrier over being excluded from the more intangible aspects of dismantling the starliner, the conversion of something useless into something useful. His earlier work on the ship had begun to foster an intimate bond with the vessel, an emotional linkage he had come to relish on previous jobs. And this particular bond had been sanctified in his blood (however inexplicably counterfactual that spillage had since become). It felt as if Klom had abandoned a responsibility to tend to the corpse of a loved one, leaving the job to strangers.

Few of these feelings were cast in words, either internally or to Sorrel or Airey. Nonetheless Klom experienced deep disquiet and irritability over this exclusion.

Each day he would spend hours on the shore, gazing out at the starliner, Tugger lying patiently in the sand at his master's feet. Tugger carried about a chewed hank of rope with him, and, from time to time, by obvious gestures, would try to interest Klom in a pulling game. Klom played with his pet once in a while, but more often

Tugger was ignored, left to sleep or to fret at the frayed ends of the rope with his exiguous shoulder hands.

The mountainous ship just offshore exhibited few exterior changes, and Klom was left to fantasize about the altered conditions of the interior. When the ship-to-shore ferry returned each night full of weary workers, Klom would be present at the dock to glower at Rapaille, who made certain to shelter himself amidst a knot of the brawniest breakers. But Klom never made a move on the overseer, knowing that the surest way to extend his probation would be another physical assault.

When Klom grew weary of staring out to sea, he retreated to one of the scrap heaps with his watercutter. There he would refine his already masterful carving skills by cutting up worthless old pods and wall fragments and contorted rebar with his illimitable tool, until the filthy dirt became a sea of mud. The fastidious Tugger chose to remain out of the way of the splattering, but always within easy hail.

It was at just such mindless pursuits that Sorrel found Klom this late afternoon.

"Klom! Are you mad? It's Festival Eve! The celebrations will start soon!"

The Festival of the Triple Sunset was an annual rite celebrating the conjoined westering of Great, Lesser and Least Suns. On the first night the three suns would set within several minutes of each other. On the final night the descent of the orbs would occur simultaneously, resulting in an incredible celestial display inspiring much reverence from the more devout citizens of the Yard and greater Asperna.

Klom holstered his watercutter. "I don't care about any stupid Festival."

"Oh, shut up and get over here. You've been moping for three weeks now, and enough is enough. You're going to have a good time tonight if I have to carry you on my shoulders!"

This ridiculous image amused Klom so much he laughed heartily for the first time in days. Squelching through the mud, he embraced Sorrel, causing her to squeal.

"You're filthy! Put me down!"

Klom complied. Tugger, excited, raced over and jumped up to lick Klom's face.

"Okay, let's go get drunk. Soon I'll be earning my wages again, so I'll treat tonight."

"Don't you want to change up first?"

"The hell with it. If I get drunk enough to fall down, my clothes will be dirty already."

. . . . .

The twilight, odoriferous streets and alleys of the bustee already swarmed with representatives of two dozen races. Chattering, clicking, cachinnating or cawing, the impoverished breakers and sorters, stockers and drainers, matter-modem techs and vegetable slicers all seemed determined to forget their cares and woes. Interspecies camaraderie reigned. Finery of a rudimentary sort had emerged from cheap chests and cardboard closets to adorn bodies spanning the spectrum from elongated to stubby, rugose to seamless, writhing to dignified.

Vendors with small braziers sold pungent kebabs of partchrumpf flesh. Bottles of liquor circulated freely from hand to tentacle to paw. Shadowy niches half-concealed the carnal explorations of chance-met lovers.

Klom moved through the exuberant chaos easily, the crowds parting before his mass. Sorrel and Tugger slipstreamed behind him. Klom gripped a half-empty flagon of toadchunder by its neck. A smear of partchrumpf grease ringed Sorrel's mouth. Tugger's tongue hung out.

At a cross-street, the crowd refused to give way for Klom and party, and he soon saw why. They had intersected a procession of marabouts and flagellants. Spinning their prayer wheels, swinging thuribles that wafted spicy fumes, the holybeings led an elaborately carved juggernaut pulled by a score of Sphinx. Hideous and benign wooden faces of devas gazed down implacably on the onlookers.

Sorrel shouted above the banging of drums, the keening of pandits, the crack of cattails threaded with bloody metal beads, and the blowing of horns. "Airey asked us to meet him later! He's got the results from Radius Seven!"

"Where?"

"He claims we need to keep the news secret. No eavesdroppers. So he said to meet at three A.M. by the stockpens. No one will be in such an unlikely place at that hour."

By two-thirty in the morning, Sorrel was growing weary. Klom's vigor, unfettered from any brooding, ran unabated. Tugger dragged along gamely.

"Let's find Airey so we can get to bed, Klom."



"All right."

The stockpens housed various softly lowing food beasts for the kitchens, behind shimmering, sizzling lines of force running from stanchion to stanchion. The noisome atmosphere insured that celebrants avoided the acreage.

"Airey!" yelled Klom semi-drunkenly into the luminance-crosshatched blackness. "Here we are! Show yourself, man! Or are you too busy sucking the ten teats of a Milchmaid!"

Airey stepped from the shadows, hissing. "Quiet, you big 'rumpf! Do you want every bravo in the vicinity to come investigate your bellowings? I saw a pair of Grimjacks just a few alleys over! We're here to discuss something extremely vital."

Klom sobered up. "What have you learned about Tugger? What makes him so important?"

Airey flourished a data-palette, while Sorrel gripped Klom's arm and leaned in closer. "Your foundling is a *twelve-strand*, Klom! An incredibly powerful deva, despite his seeming lack of sapience! Perhaps the only one of his kind. But unlike all other devas, he's metastable on our ontological plane! And he might very well be the Book of Forgetting as well!"

"The Book of Forgetting? But—"

Airey gestured dismissively. "I know, I know, everyone has assumed for millennia that the Book was an artifact of some sort. But I've been doing research into the legend, and nothing in the fragments of lore is really inconsistent with the Book being a living creature. And after a little cogitation, I realized how your pet saved your life. He doesn't travel *back* in time, but *crosswise*! He forgets one universe while remembering another. And somehow he shunted the essence of your consciousness onto an alternate timetrack along with him. A timetrack that lagged just a little beyond our moment, where your accident never happened. If you wish to quibble, this universe is not the one you were born in."

The hesitant tone of Klom's speech conveyed a slowly dawning understanding. "But then, that means— I guess Tugger is really valuable." Klom looked down at his pet. The being whose inherently recomplcated cellular structure allowed him to transcend limitations of space and time and leap across the multiverse was busy nibbling at his own hide for pests.

Airey laughed cynically. "That's understating the case a million times worse than a Neftali trader misrepresents his wares! With Tugger by your side, you can lay claim to all the riches in the Indrajai."

"I don't want so much though," said Klom. He gathered his friends to his side. "Just enough for the four of us to leave this hard place and retire to Chaulk—"

The next voice, a basso rumble, shocked them all, although only Klom recognized it. "I am afraid no one is going anywhere."

Bright Tide Rising floated above them, clouded by his majestatics. The six-strand owner of the Asperna Yards stayed silent for a long moment—possibly regarding the quartet curiously through his mutable veil, although Klom could not say for sure—before speaking at last.

"A metastable creature with twice my own information density. No wonder I was unable to read it properly. It is hard to credit such a miracle, although I have never known the scientists at Radius Seven to be mistaken before. You will now give me that data-palette."

Airey braced his spine. "Klom paid for these tests, so they belong to him. And so does Tugger."

"Absolutely incorrect. The creature is salvage from a ship owned by me. It is mine by terms of your employment. Your co-worker will be compensated for his find. Perhaps I will give him as much as ten thousand taka."

Sorrel chimed in. "That's an insult! This animal is invaluable!"

"And you three are all too stupid and primitive to properly exploit such a treasure. But I am done arguing. With the creature's entire genome on a palette, it will be simple to rebirth him, this time without any misplaced allegiances. I have no further need of any of you."

Klom felt mentally yanked in a dozen different directions. How had this horrible situation come about, from such simple and innocent impulses? But before he could speak or act, the telecosmic corona of majestatics around Bright Tide Rising seemed to squirt four solid streams of particles, distributed along four vectors.

Klom's watercutter practically leaped into his right hand, even as he hurled himself to one side. He felt a piercing pain in his left shoulder. But the pain did not disturb his aim.

The noise that Bright Tide Rising's legs made in falling to the ground was followed nearly instantaneously by the accompanying mucky splash of his separate upper half.

Klom turned to his companions. All three were stretched out unmoving on the filthy ground. One by one, he searched their corpses for wounds. But the lancelike majestatics had pierced so cleanly, yet so fatally, that Klom could detect nothing. At least their deaths had been swift. There was very little blood, and in fact his own shoulder wound was invisible and unleaking.

Klom lifted first Sorrel's head from the muck, and kissed her dirty cheek. He did the same for Tugger and Airey, before turning to their killer.

Bright Tide Rising's myrmidons were attempting to put their master back together. They had already gathered up his spilled entrails and dragged his two halves into contact and were stitching golden sutures inside and out.

Klom carved the six-strand into pieces so small that all the majestatics in the Indrajal would not suffice to repair the Horseface. Then he kicked shitty, hay-speckled mud atop the carrion.

. . . . .

The long, harsh night was waning, with dawn a distant rumor. Klom stood, half-bewildered, in his twilit shack. In his hand he held the data-palette bearing Tugger's genome. What good was it to him? The money to reincarnate Tugger was a sum far beyond his means. And even if somehow miraculously given the fee, Klom could engineer the conception only of Tugger's mere doppelgänger, a blank slate with no familiar consciousness shared with the original who had once saved Klom's life.

And now Klom was in danger of losing his own life once more. His murder of Bright Tide Rising, even in self-defense, would earn him death, under the laws of the Indrajal, which were biased against two-strands.

He knew that he must run. But where?

Klom gathered up a couple of possessions: the picture of his mother, a few deva medals handed out at religious ceremonies. But then he was overwhelmed by fatigue and despair. The lack of a certain destination left him feeling hopeless. With near-suicidal unselfconcern, he dropped into his hammock and fell asleep among his rags.

Sometime in the earliest hours of morning he awoke to a wet tongue rasping his face. He flailed his arms about, confused and slow to emerge from dreams, and encountered a familiar boulder of a head bearing a fleshy protuberance.

"Tugger?"

Something hard was spat out onto his chest, bouncing off into the hammock.

By the time Klom got his eyes ungummed and open, he was alone again.

A data-palette slimed with saliva shared the hammock with him. He dried it off on his shirt and jacked it into his reader.

The palette was a triptix in Klom's name. It registered a spendable value above the ticket price of several million taka, and listed as the bearer's ultimate destination the fabled world of Mount Sumeru.

Mount Sumeru. What would Klom's mother say, when he made his brief farewell to her, moving quickly before he could be connected to Bright Tide Rising's death? Never had anyone from Chaulk ventured to so fabled a place.

Klom gazed around him at the familiar shabby interior of his crib.

Already it looked distant and remote. The picture of his mother on the banks of Lake Zawinul seemed to represent a stranger. Klom knew that he would never return to Chaulk.

A sense of mystery enveloped him. Was Tugger somehow alive? What awaited him on Mount Sumeru?

Only travel out among the worlds of the Indrajal held hope of answers.

The End