

OVERRIDE

The only way to break free of a controlling force is to first recognize exactly what that force is

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Dusk was settling softly over the High Lakes as Kabaraijian and his crew made their way home from the caves. It was a calm, quiet dusk; a twilight blended of green waters and mellow night winds and the slow fading of Grotto's gentle sun. From the rear of his launch, Kabaraijian watched it fall, and listened to the sounds of twilight over the purring of the engine.

Grotto was a quiet world, but the sounds were there, if you knew how to listen. Kabaraijian knew. He sat erect in the back of the boat, a slight figure with swarthy skin and long black hair and brown eyes that drifted dreamy. One thin hand rested on his knee, the other, forgotten, on the motor. And his ears listened; to the bubbling of the water in the wake of the launch, and the swish-splash of the lakeleapers breaking surface, and the wind moving the trailing green branches of the trees along the near shore. In time, he'd hear the nightflyers, too, but they were not yet up.

There were four in the boat, but only Kabaraijian listened or heard. The others, bigger men with pasty faces and vacant eyes, were long past hearing. They wore the dull gray coveralls of dead men, and there was a steel plate in the back of each man's skull. Sometimes, when his corpse controller was on, Kabaraijian could listen with their ears, and see with their eyes. But that was work, hard work, and not worth it. The sights and sounds a corpse handler felt through his crew were pale echoes of real sensation, seldom useful and never pleasurable.

And now, Grotto's cooling dusk, was an off-time. So Kabaraijian's corpse controller was off, and his mind, disengaged from the dead men, rested easy in its own body. The launch moved purposefully along the lake shore, but Kabaraijian's thoughts wandered lazily, when he thought at all. Mostly he just sat, and watched the water and the trees, and listened. He'd worked the corpse crew hard that day, and now he was drained and empty. Thought—thought especially—was more effort than he was prepared to give. Better to just linger with the evening.

It was a long, quiet voyage, across two big lakes and one small one, through a cave, and finally up a narrow and swift-running river. Kabaraijian turned up the power then, and the trip grew noisier as the launch sliced a path through the river's flow. Night had settled before he reached the station, a rambling structure of blue-black stone set by the river's edge. But the office windows still glowed with a cheery yellow light.

A long dock of native silverwood fronted the river, and a dozen launches identical to Kabaraijian's were already tied up for the night. But there were still empty berths. Kabaraijian took one of them, and guided the boat into it.

When the launch was secure, he slung his collection box under one arm, and hopped out onto the dock. His free hand went to his belt, and thumbed the corpse controller. Vague sense blurs drifted into his mind, but Kabaraijian shunted them aside, and shook the dead men alive with an unheard shout. The corpses rose, one by one, and stepped out of the launch. Then they followed Kabaraijian to the station.

Munson was waiting inside the office—a fat, scruffy man with gray hair and wrinkles around his eyes and a fatherly manner. He had his feet up on his desk, and was reading a novel. When Kabaraijian entered, he smiled and sat up and put down the book, inserting his leather placemark carefully. "Lo, Matt," he said. "Why are you always the last one in?"

"Because I'm usually the last one out," Kabaraijian said, smiling. It was his newest line. Munson asked the same question every night, and always expected Kabaraijian to come up with a fresh answer. He seemed only moderately pleased by this one.

Kabaraijian set the collection box down on Munson's desk and opened it. "Not a bad day," he said.

"Four good stones, and twelve smaller ones."

Munson scooped a handful of small, grayish rocks from inside the padded metal box and studied them. Right now they weren't much to look at. But cut and polished they'd be something else again: swirlstones. They were gems without fire, but they had their own beauty. Good ones looked like crystals of moving fog, full of soft colors and softer mysteries and dreams.

Munson nodded, and dropped the stones back into the box. "Not bad," he said. "You always do good, Matt. You know where to look."

"The rewards of coming back slow and easy," Kabaraijian said. "I look around me."

Munson put the box under his desk, and turned to his computer console, a white plastic intruder in the wood-paneled room. He entered the swirlstones into the records, and looked back up. "You want to wash down your corpses?"

Kabaraijian shook his head. "Not tonight. I'm tired. I'll just flop them for now."

"Sure," said Munson. He rose, and opened the door behind his desk. Kabaraijian followed him, and the three dead men followed Kabaraijian. Behind the office were barracks, long and low-roofed, with row on row of simple wooden bunks. Most of them were full. Kabaraijian guided his dead men to three empty ones and maneuvered them in. Then he thumbed his controller off. The echoes in his head blinked out, and the corpses sagged heavily into the bunks.

Afterwards, he chatted with Munson for a few minutes back in the office. Finally the old man went back to his novel, and Kabaraijian back to the cool night.

A row of company scooters sat in back of the station, but Kabaraijian left them alone, preferring the ten-minute walk from the river to the settlement. He covered the forest road with an easy, measured pace, pausing here and there to brush aside vines and low branches. It was always a pleasant walk. The nights were calm, the breezes fragrant with the fruity scent of local trees and heavy with the songs of the nightfliers.

The settlement was bigger and brighter and louder than the river station; a thick clot of houses and bars and shops built alongside the spaceport. There were a few structures of wood and stone, but most of the settlers were still content with the plastic prefabs the company had given them free.

Kabaraijian drifted through the new-paved streets, to one of the outnumbered wooden buildings. There was a heavy wooden sign over the tavern door, but no lights. Inside he found candles and heavy, stuffed chairs, and a real log fire. It was a cozy place; the oldest bar on Grotto, and still the favorite watering hole for corpse handlers and hunters and other river station personnel.

A loud shout greeted him when he entered. "Hey! Matt! Over here!"

Kabaraijian found the voice, and followed it to a table in the corner, where Ed Cochran was nursing a mug of beer. Cochran, like Kabaraijian, wore the blue-and-white tunic of a corpse handler. He was tall and lean, with a thin face that grinned a lot and a mass of tangled red-blond hair.

Kabaraijian sank gratefully into the chair opposite him. Cochran grinned. "Beer?" he asked. "We could split a pitcher."

"No thanks. I feel like wine tonight. Something rich and mellow and slow."

"How'd it go?" said Cochran.

Kabaraijian shrugged. "O.K.," he said. "Four nice stones, a dozen little ones. Munson gave me a good estimate. Tomorrow should be better. I found a nice new place." He turned toward the bar briefly, and gestured. The bartender nodded, and the wine and glasses arrived a few minutes later.

Kabaraijian poured and sipped while Cochran discussed his day. It hadn't gone well; only six stones, none of them very big.

"You've got to range farther," Kabaraijian told him. "The caves around here have been pretty well worked out. But the High Lakes go on and on. Find someplace new."

"Why bother?" Cochran said, frowning. "Don't get to keep them anyway. What's the percentage in knocking yourself out?"

Kabaraijian twirled the wine glass slowly in a thin, dark hand, and watched the dream-red depths. "Poor Ed," he said, in a voice half-sadness and half-mockery. "All you see is the work. Grotto is a pretty planet. I don't *mind* the extra miles, Ed, I enjoy them. I'd probably travel in my off-time if they didn't pay

me to do it. The fact that I get bigger swirlstones and my estimates go up—well, that's extra gravy."

Cochran smiled and shook his head. "You're crazy, Matt," he said affectionately. "Only corpse handler in the universe who'd be happy if they paid him off with scenery."

Kabaraïjian smiled too, a slight lifting at the corners of his mouth. "Philistine," he said accusingly.

Cochran ordered another beer. "Look, Matt, you've got to be practical. Sure, Grotto is O.K., but you're not gonna be here all your life." He set down his beer, and pulled up the sleeve of his tunic, to flash his heavy wristlet. The gold shone softly in the candlelight, and the sapphires danced with dark blue flame. "Junk like this was valuable once," Cochran said, "before they learned how to synthesize it. They'll crack swirlstones, too, Matt. You know they will. They already have people working on it.

So maybe you've got two years left, or three. But what then? Then they won't need corpse handlers anymore. So you'll move on, no better off than when you first landed."

"Not really," said Kabaraïjian. "The station pays pretty good, and my estimates haven't been bad. I've got some money put away. Besides, maybe I won't move on. I like Grotto. Maybe I'll stay, and join the colonists, or something."

"Doing what? Farming? Working **in** an office? Don't give me that crap, Matt. You're a corpse handler, always will be. And in a couple years Grotto won't need corpses."

Kabaraïjian sighed. "So?" he said. "So?"

Cochran leaned forward. "So have you thought about what I told you?"

"Yes," Kabaraïjian said. "But I don't like **it**. I don't think it would work, first of all. Spaceport security is tight **to** keep people from smuggling out swirlstones, and you want to do just that. And even if it would work, I don't want any part of **it**. I'm sorry, Ed."

"I think it *would* work," Cochran said stubbornly. "The spaceport people are human. They can be tempted. Why should the company get all the swirlstones when we do all the work?"

"They've got the concession," Kabaraïjian said.

Cochran waved him silent. "Yeah, sure. So what? By what right? We *deserve* some, for ourselves, while the damn things are still valuable."

Kabaraïjian sighed again, and poured himself another glass of wine. "Look," he said, lifting the glass to his lips, "I don't quarrel with that. Maybe they should pay us more, or give us an interest in the swirlstones. But it's not worth the risk. We'll lose our crews if they catch us. *And* we'll get expelled.

"I don't want that, Ed, and I won't risk it. Grotto is too good to me, and I'm not going to throw it away. You know, some people would say we're pretty lucky. Most corpse handlers never get to work a place like Grotto. They wind up on the assembly lines of Skrakky, or in the mines of New Pittsburg. I've seen those places. No thanks. I'm not going to risk returning to *that* sort of life."

Cochran threw imploring eyes up to the ceiling, and spread his hands helplessly. "Hopeless," he said, shaking his head. "Hopeless." Then he returned to his beer. Kabaraïjian was smiling.

But his amusement died short minutes later, when Cochran suddenly stiffened and grimaced across the table. "Damn," he said. "Bartling. What the hell does *he* want here?"

Kabaraïjian turned toward the door, where the newcomer was standing and waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. He was a big man, with an athletic frame that had gone to pot over the years and now sported a considerable paunch. He had dark hair streaked with white and a bristling black beard, and he was wearing a fashionable multicolored tunic.

Four others had entered behind him, and now stood flanking him on either side. They were younger men than he was, and bigger, with hard faces and impressive builds. The bodyguards made sense. Lowell Bartling was widely known for his dislike of corpse handlers, and the tavern was full of them.

Bartling crossed his arms, and looked around the room slowly. He was smirking. He started to speak.

Almost before he got the first word out of his mouth, he was interrupted. One of the men along the bar emitted a loud, rude noise, and laughed. "Hiya, Bartling," he said. "What are you doing down here? Thought you didn't associate with us low-lives?"

Bartling's face tightened, but his smirk was untouched. "Normally I don't, but I wanted the pleasure of making this announcement personally."

"You're leaving Grotto!" someone shouted. There was laughter all along the bar. "I'll drink to that," another voice added.

"No," said Bartling. "No, friend, *you* are." He looked around, savoring the moment. "Bartling Associates has just acquired the swirlstone concession, I'm happy to tell you. I take over management of the river station at the end of the month. And, of course, my first act will be to terminate the employment of all the corpse handlers currently under contract."

Suddenly the room was very silent, as the implications of that sank in. In the corner in the back of the room, Cochran rose slowly to his feet. Kabaraijian remained seated, stunned.

"You can't do that," Cochran said belligerently. "We've got contracts."

Bartling turned to face him. "Those contracts can be broken," he said, "and they will be."

"You son of a bitch," someone said.

The bodyguard tensed. "Watch who you call names, meatmind," one of them answered. All around the room, men started getting to their feet.

Cochran was livid with anger. "Damn you, Bartling," he said. "Who the hell do you think you are? You've got no right to run us off the planet."

"I have every right," Bartling said. "Grotto is a good, clean, beautiful planet. There's no place here for your kind. It was a mistake to bring you in, and I've said so all along. Those *things* you work with contaminate the air. And you're even worse. You work with those things, those corpses, *voluntarily*, for money. You disgust me. You don't belong on Grotto. And now I'm in a position to see that you leave." He paused, then smiled. "Meatmind," he added, spitting out the word.

"Bartling, I'm going to knock your head off," one of the handlers bellowed. There was a roar of agreement. Several men started forward at once.

And jerked to a sudden stop when Kabaraijian interjected a soft, "No, wait," over the general hubbub. He hardly raised his voice at all, but it still commanded attention in the room of shouting men.

He walked through the crowd and faced Bartling, looking much calmer than he felt. "You realize that without corpse labor your costs will go way up," he said in a steady, reasonable voice, "and your profits down."

Bartling nodded. "Of course I realize it. I'm willing to take the loss. We'll use *men* to mine the swirl-stones. They're too beautiful for corpses, anyway."

"You'll be losing money for nothing," Kabaraijian said.

"Hardly. I'll get rid of your stinking corpses."

Kabaraijian cracked a thin smile. "Maybe some. But not all of us, Mr. Bartling. You can take away our jobs, perhaps, but you can't throw us off Grotto. I for one refuse to go."

"Then you'll starve."

"Don't be so melodramatic. I'll find something else to do. You don't own all of Grotto. And I'll keep my corpses. Dead men can be used for a lot of things. It's just that we haven't thought of them all yet."

Bartling's smirk had vanished suddenly. "If you stay," he said, fixing Kabaraijian with a hard stare, "I promise to make you very, very sorry."

Kabaraijian laughed. "Really? Well, personally, I promise to send one of my dead men by your house every night after you go to bed, to make hideous faces at the window and moan." He laughed again, louder. Cochran joined him, then others. Soon the whole tavern was laughing.

Bartling turned red and began a slow burn. He came here to taunt his enemies, to crow his triumph, and now they were laughing at him. Laughing in the face of victory, cheating him. He seethed a long minute, then turned and walked furiously out the door. His bodyguards followed.

The laughter lingered a while after his exit, and several of the other handlers slapped Kabaraijian on the back as he made his way back to his seat. Cochran was happy about it, too. "You really took the old man apart," he said when they reached the corner table.

But Kabaraijian wasn't smiling anymore. He slumped down into his seat heavily, and reached almost immediately for the wine. "I sure did," he said slowly, between sips. "I sure did."

Cochran looked at him curiously. "You don't seem too happy."

"No," said Kabaraijian. He studied his wine. "I'm having second thoughts. That insufferable bigot riled

me, made me want to get to him. Only I wonder if I can pull it off. What *can* corpses do on Grotto?"

His eyes wandered around the tavern, which had suddenly become very somber. "It's sinking in," he told Cochran. "I'll bet they're all talking about leaving . . ."

Cochran had stopped grinning. "Some of us will stay," he said uncertainly. "We can farm with the corpses, or something."

Kabaraijian looked at him. "Uhuh. Machinery is more efficient for farming. And dead men are too clumsy for anything but the crudest kind of labor, much too slow for hunting." He poured more wine, and mused aloud. "They're O.K. for cheap factory labor, or running an automole in a mine. But Grotto doesn't have any of that. They can hack out swirlstones with a vibrodrill, only Bartling is taking that away from us." He shook his head.

"I don't know, Ed," he continued. "It's not going to be easy. And maybe it'll be impossible. With the swirlstone concession under his belt, Bartling is bigger than the settlement company now."

"That was the idea. The company sets us up, and we buy it out as we grow."

"True. But Bartling grew a little too fast. He can really start throwing his weight around now. It wouldn't surprise me if he amended the charter, to keep corpses off-planet. That *would* force us out."

"Can he get away with that?" Cochran was getting angry again, and his voice rose slightly.

"Maybe," Kabaraijian said, "if we let him. I wonder . . ." He sloshed his wine thoughtfully. "You think this deal of his is final?"

Cochran looked puzzled. "He said he had it."

"Yes. I don't suppose he'd crow about it if it wasn't in his pocket. Still, I'm curious what the company would do if someone made them a better offer."

"Who?"

"Us, maybe?" Kabaraijian sipped his wine and considered that. "Get all the handlers together, everybody puts in whatever they have. That should give us a fair sum. Maybe we could buy out the river station ourselves. Or something else, if Bartling has the swirlstones all locked up. It's an idea."

"Nah, it'd never work," Cochran said. "Maybe you've got some money, Matt, but I sure as hell don't. Spent most of it here. Besides, even the guys that have money, you'd never be able to get them together."

"Maybe not," Kabaraijian said. "But it's worth trying. Organizing against Bartling is the only way we're going to be able to keep ourselves on Grotto in the long run."

Cochran drained his beer, and signaled for another. "Nah," he said. "Bartling's too big. He'll slap you down hard if you bother him too much. I got a better idea."

"Swirlstone smuggling," Kabaraijian said, smiling.

"Yeah," Cochran said with a nod. "Maybe now you'll reconsider. If Bartling's gonna throw us off-planet, at least we can take some of his swirlstones with us. That'd set us up good wherever we go."

"You're incorrigible," Kabaraijian said. "But I'll bet half the handlers on Grotto will try the same thing now. Bartling will expect that. He'll have the spaceport screwed up tight when we start leaving. He'll catch you, Ed. And you'll lose your crew, or worse. Bartling might even try to force through dead-man laws, and start exporting corpses."

Cochran looked uneasy at that. Corpse handlers saw 'too much of dead men to relish the idea of becoming one. They tended to cluster on planets without dead-man laws, where capital crimes still drew prison terms or "clean" executions. Grotto was a clean planet now, but laws can change.

"I might lose my crew anyway, Matt," Cochran said. "If Bartling throws us out, I'll have to sell some of my corpses for passage money."

Kabaraijian smiled. "You still have a month, even with the worst. And there are plenty of swirlstones *Override* out there for the finding." He raised his glass. "Come. To Grotto. It's a lovely planet, and we may stay here yet."

Cochran shrugged and lifted his beer. "Yeah," he said. But his grin didn't hide his worry.

Kabaraijian reported to the station early the next morning, when Grotto's sun was fighting to dispel the river mists. The row of empty launches was still tied to the dock, bobbing up and down in the rapidly-thinning fog.

Munson was inside the office, as always. So, surprisingly, was Cochran. Both of them looked up when Kabaraijian entered.

"Morning, Matt," Munson said gravely. "Ed's been telling me about last night." Today, for some reason, he looked his age. "I'm sorry, Matt. I didn't know anything about it."

Kabaraijian smiled. "I never thought you did. If you *do* hear anything, though, let me know. We're not going to go without a fight." He looked at Cochran. "What are you doing here so early? Usually you're not up until the crack of noon."

Cochran grinned. "Yeah. Well, I figured I'd start early. I'm going to need good estimates this month, if I want to save my crew."

Munson had dug two collection boxes out from under his desk. He handed them to the two corpse handlers, and nodded. "Back room's open," he said. "You can pick up your dead men whenever you like."

Kabaraijian started to circle the desk, but Cochran grabbed his arm. "I think I'll try way east," he said. "Some caves there that haven't really been hit yet. Where you going?"

"West," said Kabaraijian. "I found a good new place, like I told you."

Cochran nodded. They went to the back room together, and thumbed their controllers. Five dead men stumbled from their bunks and followed them, shuffling, from the office. Kabaraijian thanked Munson before he left. The old man had washed down his corpses anyway, and fed them.

The mists were just about gone when they reached the dock. Kabaraijian marched his crew into the boat and got set to cast off. But Cochran stopped him, looking troubled.

"Uh—Matt," he said, standing on the dock and staring down into the launch. "This new place—you say it's real good?"

Kabaraijian nodded, squinting. The sun was just clearing the treetops, and framing Cochran's head.

"Can I talk you into splitting?" Cochran said, with difficulty. It was an unusual request. The practice was for each handler to range alone, to find and mine his own swirlstone cave. "I mean, with only a month left, you probably won't have time to get everything, not if the place is as good as you say. And I need good estimates, I really do."

Kabaraijian could see that it wasn't an easy favor to ask. He smiled. "Sure," he said. "There's plenty there. Get your launch and follow me."

Cochran nodded and forced a grin. He walked down the dock to his launch, his dead men trailing behind.

Going downriver was easier than going up, and faster. Kabaraijian hit the lake in short order, and sent his launch surging across the sparkling green surface in a spray of foam. It was an exhilarating morning, with a bright sun, and a brisk wind that whipped the water into tiny waves. Kabaraijian felt good, despite the events of the previous night. Grotto did that to him. Out on the High Lakes, somehow, he felt that he could beat Bartling.

He'd run into similar problems before, on other worlds. Bartling wasn't alone in his hatred. Ever since the first time they'd ripped a man's brain from his skull and replaced it with a dead man's synthabrain, there had been people screaming that the practice was a perversion, and the handlers tainted and unclean. He'd gotten used to the prejudice; it was part of corpse handling. And he'd beaten it before. He could beat Bartling now.

The first part of the voyage was the quickest. The two launches streaked over two big local lakes, past shores lined thickly with silverwood trees and vine-heavy dangles. But then they began to slow, as the lakes grew smaller and choked with life, and the country wilder. Along the banks, the stately silverwoods and curious dangles began to give way to the dense red-and-black chaos of firebriar brambles, and a species of low, gnarled tree that never had received a proper name. The vegetation grew on ground increasingly hilly and rocky, and finally mountainous.

Then they began to pass through the caves.

There were hundreds of them, literally, and they honeycombed the mountains that circled the settlement on all sides. The caves had never been mapped thoroughly. There were far too many of them, and they all seemed to connect with each other, forming a natural maze of incredible complexity. Most of

them were still half-full of water; they'd been carved from the soft mountain rock by the streams and rivers that still ran through them.

A stranger could easily get lost in the caves, but strangers never came there. And the corpse handlers never got lost. This was their country. This was where the swirlstones waited, cloaked in rock and darkness.

The launches were all equipped with lights. Kabaraijian switched his on as soon as they hit the first cave, and slowed. Cochran, following close behind, did likewise. The channels that ran through the nearer caves were well-known, but shallow, and it didn't pay to risk tearing out the bottom of your boat.

The channel was narrow at first, and the glistening, damp walls of soft greenish stone seemed to press in on them from either side. But gradually the walls moved farther and farther back, finally peeling away entirely as the stream carried the two launches into a great vaulted underground chamber. The cavern was as big as a spaceport, its ceiling lost in the gloom overhead. Before long the walls vanished into the dark too, and the launches traveled in two small bubbles of light across the gently-stirring surface of a cold black lake.

Then, ahead of them, the walls took form again. But this time, instead of one passage, there were many. The stream had carved one entrance, but a good half-dozen exits.

Kabaraijian knew the cave, however. Without hesitating, he guided his boat into the widest passage, on the extreme right. Cochran followed in his wake. Here the waters flowed down an incline, and the boats began to pick up speed again. "Be careful," Kabaraijian warned Cochran at one point. "The ceiling comes down here." Cochran acknowledged the shout with a wave of his hand.

The warning came barely in time. While the walls were increasingly farther apart, the stone roof above them was moving steadily closer, giving the illusion that the waters were rising. Kabaraijian remembered the way he'd sweated the first time he'd taken this passage; the boat had been going too fast, and he'd feared getting pinched in by the ceiling, and overwhelmed by the climbing waters.

But it was an idle fear. The roof sank close enough to scrape their heads, but no closer. And then it began to rise again to a decent height. Meanwhile, the channel widened still more, and soft sand shelves appeared along either wall.

Finally there was a branching in the passage, and this time Kabaraijian chose the left-hand way. It was small and dark and narrow, with barely enough room for the launch to squeeze through. But it was also short, and after a brief journey, it released them to a second great cavern.

They moved across the chamber quickly, and entered its twin under a grotesque stone arch. Then came yet another twisting passage, and more forks and turns. Kabaraijian led them calmly, hardly thinking, hardly *having* to think. These were his caves; this particular section of undermountain was his domain, where he'd worked and mined for months. He knew where he was going. And finally he got there. The chamber was big, and haunting. Far above the shallow waters, the roof had been eaten through by erosion, and light poured in from three great gashes in the rock. It gave the cavern a dim greenish glow, as it bounced off the pale green walls and the wide, shallow pool.

The launches spilled from a thin crack in the cave wall, carried by rushes of cold black water. The water turned green when it hit the light, and tumbled and warmed and slowed. The boats slowed, too, and moved leisurely across the huge chamber toward the white sand beaches that lined the sides.

Kabaraijian pulled up by one such beach, and hopped out into the shallow water, dragging his launch up onto the sand. Cochran followed his example, and they stood side by side when both boats were safely beached.

"Yeah," said Cochran, looking around. "It's nice. And it figures. Leave it to you to find a pretty place to work, while the rest of us are up to our ankles in water, clutching lights."

Kabaraijian smiled. "I found it yesterday," he said. "Completely unworked. Look." He pointed at the wall. "I barely started." There was a pile of loose stones in a rough semicircle around the area he'd been working, and a large bite missing from the rock. But most of the wall was untouched, stretching away from them in sheets of shimmering green.

"You sure no one else knows about this place?" Cochran asked. "Reasonably. Why?"

Cochran shrugged. "When we were coming through the caves, I could have sworn I heard another

launch behind us somewhere."

"Probably echoes," Kabaraijian said. He looked toward his launch. "Anyway, we better get going." He hit his corpse controller, and the three still figures in the boat began to move.

He stood stock-still on the sand, watching them. And as he watched, somewhere in the back of his head, he was also watching himself with their eyes. They rose stiffly, and two of them climbed out onto the sand. The third walked to the chest in the front of the launch, and began unloading the equipment; vibrodrills and picks and shovels. Then, his arms full, he climbed down and joined the others.

None of them were really moving, of course. It was all Kabaraijian. It was Kabaraijian who moved their legs, and made their hands clasp and their arms reach. It was Kabaraijian, his commands picked up by controller and magnified by synthabrain, who put life into the bodies of the dead men. The synthabrain keeps the automatic functions going, but it was the corpse handler who gave the corpse its will.

It wasn't easy, and it was far from perfect. The sense impressions thrown back to the handler were seldom useful; mostly he had to watch his corpses to know what they were doing. The manipulation was seldom graceful; corpses moved slowly and clumsily, and fine work was beyond them. A corpse could swing a mallet, but even the best handler couldn't make a dead man thread a needle, or speak.

With a bad handler, a corpse could hardly move at all. It took coordination to run even one dead man, if the handler was doing anything himself. He had to keep the commands to the corpse separate from the commands to his own muscles. That was easy enough for most, but the task grew increasingly complex as the crew grew larger. The record for one handler was twenty-six corpses; but all *he'd* done was march them, in step. When the dead men weren't all doing the same thing, the corpse handler's work became much more challenging.

Kabaraijian had a three-crew; all top meat, corpses in good condition. They'd been big men, and they still were; Kabaraijian paid premiums for food to keep his property in good condition. One had dark hair and a scar along a cheek, another was blond and young and freckled, the third had mousy brown locks. Other than that, they were interchangeable; all about the same height and weight and build. Corpses don't have personality. They lose that with their minds.

Cochran's crew, climbing out onto the sand in compliance with his work orders, was less impressive. There were only two of them, and neither was a grade-one specimen. The first corpse was brawny enough, with wide shoulders and rippling muscles. But his legs were twisted matchsticks, and he stumbled often and walked more slowly than even the average corpse. The second dead man was reedy and middle-aged, bald and under-muscled. Both were grimy. Cochran didn't believe in taking care of his crew the way Kabaraijian did. It was a bad habit. Cochran had started as a paid handler working somebody else's corpses; upkeep hadn't been his concern.

Each of Kabaraijian's crew bent and picked up a vibrodrill from the stack of equipment on the sand. Then, parallel to each other, they advanced on the cave wall. The drills sank humming holes into the porous rock, and from each drill bite a network of thin cracks branched and grew.

The corpses drilled in unison until each drill was sunk nearly to its hilt, and the cracks had grown finger-wide. Then, almost as one, they withdrew the drills and discarded them in favor of picks. Work slowed. Crack by crack, the corpses attacked the wall, laboriously peeling off a whole layer of greenish stone. They swung the picks carefully, but with bone-jarring force, untiring, relentless. Incapable of pain, their bones could scarce feel the jars.

The dead men did all the work. Kabaraijian stood behind, a slight, dark statue in the sand, with hands on hips and eyes hooded. He did nothing but watch. Yet he did all. Kabaraijian *was* the corpses; the corpses were Kabaraijian. He was one man in four bodies, and it was his hand that guided each blow, though he did not touch a tool.

Forty feet down the cave, Cochran and his crew had unpacked and set to work. But Kabaraijian was barely conscious of them, though he could hear the hum of their vibrodrills and the hammering of their picks. His mind was with his corpses, chipping at his wall, alert for the telltale grayish glitter of a swirlstone node. It was draining work; demanding work; tense and nervous. It was a labor only corpse crews could do with real efficiency.

They'd tried other methods a few short years before, when men had first found Grotto and its caves. The early settlers went after swirl-stones with automoles, tractor-like rockeaters that could chew up mountains. Problem was, they also chewed up the fragile, deep-buried swirlstones, which often went unrecognized until too late. The company discovered that careful hand labor was the only way to keep from chipping or shattering an excessive number of stones. And corpse hands were the cheapest hands you could buy.

Those hands were busy now, tense and sweating as the crew peeled whole sections of rock off the broken wall. The natural cleavage of the stone was vertical, which sped the work. Find a crack—force in a pick—lean back and pull—and, with a snap, a flat chunk of rock came with you. Then find a new crack, and begin again.

Kabaraïjian watched unmoving as the wall came down, and the pile of green stone accumulated around the feet of his dead men. Only his eyes moved; flicking back and forth over the rock restlessly, alert for swirlstones but finding nothing. Finally he pulled the corpses back, and approached the wall himself. He touched it, stroked the stone, and frowned. The crew had ripped down an entire layer of rock, and had come up empty.

But that was hardly unusual, even in the best of caves. Kabaraïjian walked back to the sand's edge, and sent his crew back to work. They picked up vibrodrills and attacked the wall again.

Abruptly he was conscious of Cochran standing beside him, saying something. He could hardly make it out. It isn't easy to pay close attention when you're running three dead men. Part of his mind detached itself and began to listen.

Cochran was repeating himself. He knew that a handler at work wasn't likely to hear what he said the first time. "Matt," he was saying, "listen. I think I heard something. Faintly, but I heard it. It sounded like another launch."

That was serious. Kabaraïjian wrenched his mind loose from the dead men, and turned to give Cochran his full attention. The three vibrodrills died, one by one, and suddenly the soft slap of water against sand echoed loudly around them.

"A launch?"

Cochran nodded.

"You sure?" Kabaraïjian said.

"Uh—no," said Cochran. "But I *think* I heard something. Same thing as before, when we were moving through the caves."

"I don't know," Kabaraïjian said, shaking his head. "Don't think it's likely, Ed. Why would anyone follow us? The swirlstones are everywhere, if you bother to look."

"Yeah," Cochran said. "But I heard something, and I thought I should tell you."

Kabaraïjian nodded. "All right," he said. "Consider me told. If anyone shows up, I'll point out a section of wall and let him work it."

"Yeah," Cochran said again. But somehow he didn't look satisfied. His eyes kept jumping back and forth, agitated. He wheeled and walked back down the sand, to the section of wall where his own corpses stood frozen.

Kabaraïjian turned back toward the rock, and his crew came alive again. The drills started humming, and once more the cracks spread out. Then, when the cracks were big enough, picks replaced drills, and another layer of stone started coming down.

But this time, something was behind it.

The corpses were ankle-deep in splinters of stone when Kabaraïjian saw it; a fist-sized chunk of gray nestled in the green. He stiffened at the sight of it, and the corpses froze in mid-swing. Kabaraïjian walked around them, and studied the swirlstone node.

It was a beauty; twice the size of the largest stone he'd ever brought in. Even damaged, it would be worth a fortune. But if he could pry it loose intact, his estimate would set a record. He was certain of

that. They'd cut it as one stone. He could almost see it. An egg of crystalline fog, smoky and mysterious, where drifting veils of mist shrouded half-seen colors.

Kabaraian thought about it, and smiled. He touched the node lightly, and turned to call to Cochran. That saved his life.

The pick sliced through the air where his head had been and smashed against the wall with awful impact, barely missing the swirlstone node. Sparks and rock chips flew together. Kabaraian stood frozen. The corpse drew the pick back over its head for another swing.

Within, Kabaraian reeled, staggered. The pick swung down. Not at the wall; at him.

Then he moved, barely in time, throwing himself to one side. The blow missed by inches, and Kabaraian landed in the sand and scrambled quickly to his feet. Crouched and wary, he began to back away.

The corpse advanced on him, the pick held over his head. Kabaraian could hardly think. He didn't understand. The corpse that moved on him was dark-haired and scarred; *his* corpse. *HIS* corpse. *HIS CORPSE!?*

The corpse moved slowly. Kabaraian kept a safe distance. Then he looked behind him. His other two dead men were advancing from other directions. One held a pick. The other had a vibrodrill.

Kabaraian swallowed nervously, and stopped dead. The ring of corpses tightened around him. He screamed.

Down the beach, Cochran was looking at the tableau. He took one step toward Kabaraian. From behind him, there was a blur of something being swung, and a dull thud. Cochran spun with the blow, and landed face down in the sand. He did not get up. His barrel-chested, gimp corpse stood over him, pick in hand, swinging again and again. His other corpse was moving down the cave, toward Kabaraian.

The scream was still echoing in the cave, but now Kabaraian was silent. He watched Cochran go down, and suddenly he moved, throwing himself at the dark-haired dead man. The pick descended, vicious but clumsy. Kabaraian dodged it. He bowled into the corpse, and both of them went down. The corpse was much slower getting up. By the time he did rise, Kabaraian was beyond him.

The corpse-handler moved back, step by slow step. His own crew was in front of him now, stumbling toward him with weapons raised. It was a chilling sight. Their arms moved, and they walked. But their eyes were blank and their faces were dead—DEAD! For the first time, Kabaraian understood the horror some people felt near dead men.

He looked over his shoulder. Both of Cochran's corpses were heading his way, armed. Cochran still had not risen. He lay with his face in the sand and the waters lapping at his boots.

His mind began to work again, in the short breather he was granted. His hand went to his belt. The controller was still on, still warm and humming. He tested it. He reached out, to his corpses, into them. He told them to stand still, to drop their tools, to freeze.

They continued to advance.

Kabaraian shivered. The controller was still working; he could still feel the echoes in his head. But somehow, the corpses weren't responding. He felt very cold.

And colder when it finally hit him, like ice water. Cochran's corpses hadn't responded either. Both crews had turned on their handlers.

Override!

He'd heard of such things. But he'd never seen one, or dreamt of seeing one. Override boxes were very expensive and even more illegal, contraband on any planet where corpse handling was allowed.

But now he was seeing one in action. Someone wanted to kill him. Someone was trying to do just that. Someone was using his own corpses against him, by means of an override box.

He threw himself at his corpses mentally, fighting for control, grappling for whatever had taken them over. But there was no struggle, nothing to come to grips with. The dead men simply failed to respond.

Kabaraian bent and picked up a vibrodrill.

He straightened quickly, spinning around to face Cochran's two corpses. The big one with the matchstick legs moved in, swinging its pick. Kabaraian checked the blow with the vibrodrill, holding it above him as a shield. The dead man brought the pick back again. Kabaraian activated the drill and

drove it into the corpse's gut. There was an awful second of spurting blood and tearing flesh. There should have been a scream too, and agony. But there wasn't.

And the pick came down anyway.

Kabaraijian's thrust had thrown the corpse's aim off, and the blow was a glancing one, but it still ripped his tunic half off his chest and clawed a bloody path from shoulder to stomach. Reeling, he staggered back against the wall, empty-handed.

The corpse came on, pick swinging up again, eyes blank. The vibrodrill transfixed it, still humming, and the blood came in wet red spurts. But the corpse came on.

No pain, Kabaraijian thought, with the small part of his mind not frozen with terror. The blow wasn't immediately fatal, and the corpse can't feel it. It's bleeding to death, but it doesn't know it, doesn't care. It won't stop till it's dead. *There's no pain!*

The corpse was nearly on top of him. He dropped to the sand, grabbed a hunk of rock, and rolled.

Dead men are slow, woefully slow; their reflexes are long-distance ones. The blow was late and off-target. Kabaraijian rolled into the corpse and knocked it down. Then he was on top of it, the rock clutched in his fist, hammering at the thing's skull, smashing it again and again, breaking through to the synthabrain.

Finally, the corpse stopped moving. But the others had reached him. Two picks swung almost simultaneously. One missed entirely. The other took a chunk out of his shoulder.

He grabbed the second pick, and twisted, fighting to stop it, losing. The corpses were stronger than he was, much stronger. The dead man wrenched the pick free and brought it back for another try.

Kabaraijian got to his feet, smashing into the corpse and sending it flailing. The others swung at him, grabbed at him. He didn't stay to fight. He ran. They pursued, slow and clumsy but somehow terrifying.

He reached the launch, seized it with both hands, and shoved. It slid reluctantly across the sand. He shoved again, and this time it moved more easily. He was drenched in blood and sweat, and his breath came in short gasps, but he kept shoving. His shoulder shrieked agony. He let it shriek, putting it to the side of the launch and finally getting the boat clear of the sand.

Then the corpses were on him again, swinging at him even as he climbed into the launch. He started the motor and flipped it to top speed. The boat responded. It took off in a sudden explosion of foam, slicing across the green waters toward the dark slit of safety in the far cavern wall. Kabaraijian sighed . . . and the corpse grabbed him.

It was in the boat. Its pick was buried uselessly in the wood, but it still had its hands, and those were enough. It wrapped those hands around his neck, and squeezed. He swung at it madly, smashing at its calm, empty face. It made no effort to ward off the blows. It ignored them. Kabaraijian hit it again and again, poked at the vacant eyes, hammered at its mouth until its teeth shattered.

But the fingers on his neck grew tighter and tighter, and not all his struggling could pry one loose. Choking, he stopped kicking the corpse, and kicked the rudder control.

The launch veered wildly, leaning from side to side. The cave rushed past in a blur, and the walls moved in on them. Then came sudden impact, the shriek of tearing wood, and the short tumble from launch to water. Kabaraijian landed on top, but they both went under. The corpse held its grip through everything, dragging Kabaraijian down with it, still choking the life from his throat.

But Kabaraijian took a deep breath before the green closed over him. The corpse tried to breathe underwater. Kabaraijian helped it. He stuck both hands into its mouth and kept it open, making sure it got a good lungful of water.

The dead man died first. And its fingers weakened.

Finally, his lungs near bursting, Kabaraijian forced his way free, and kicked to the surface. The water was only chest high. He stood on the unmoving corpse, keeping it under while he sucked in great drafts of air.

The launch had impaled itself on a crest of jagged rocks that rose from the water off to one side of the exit. The passage from the cave was still at hand, outlined in shadow a few short feet away. But now, was it safety? Without a launch? Kabaraijian considered making his way out on foot, and gave up the idea instantly. There were too many miles to go before he reached simple daylight, let alone the safety of

the river station. It would mean being hunted in the darkness by whatever remained of his corpse crew. The prospect sent a chill down his back. No, better to stay and face his attacker.

He kicked free of the corpse, and moved to the debris of his launch, still hung up on the rocks that had caught it. Shielded by the wreck, he'd be difficult to find, or at least to see. And if his enemy couldn't see him, it would be hard to send the corpses against him.

Meanwhile, maybe he could find his enemy.

His enemy. Who? Bartling, of course. It had to be Bartling, or one of his hirelings. Who else?

But *where*? They had to be close, within sight of the beach. You can't run a corpse by remote control; the sense feedback isn't good enough. The only senses you get are vision and hearing, and them dimly. You have to *see* the corpse, see what it's doing, and what you want it to do. So Bartling's man was around here somewhere. In the cave. But where?

And how? Kabaraijian considered that. It must be the other launch that Cochran had heard. Someone must have been following them, someone with an override box. Maybe Bartling had a tracer put on his launch during the night.

Only how'd he know *which* launch to trace?

Kabaraijian bent slightly so only his head showed above the water, and looked out around the end of the ruined launch. The beach was a white sand smear across the dim green length of the huge cavern. There was no noise but the water slapping the side of the boat. But there was motion. The second launch had been pulled free of the sand, and one of the corpses was climbing on board. The others, moving slowly, were wading out into the underground pool. Their picks rested on their shoulders.

They were coming for him. The enemy suspected he was still here. The enemy was hunting for him. Again, he was tempted to dive toward the exit, to run and swim back toward daylight, out of this awful dimness where his own corpses stalked him with cold faces and colder hands.

He squelched the impulse. He might get a head start while they searched the cavern. But, with the launch, they'd make it up in no time. He could try to lose them in the intricacies of the caves. But if they got ahead of him, they could just wait at caves' end. No, no. He had to stay here, and find his enemy.

But *where*? He scanned the cave, and saw nothing. It was a great expanse of murky green; stone and water and beaches. The pool was dotted by a few large rocks rising from the water. A man might be hiding behind them. But not a launch. There was nothing big enough to hide a launch. Maybe the enemy wore aquagear? But Cochran had heard a launch ...

The corpse boat was halfway across the cavern, heading for the exit. It was his dead-man seated at the controls, the brown-haired one. The other two corpses trailed, as they walked slowly across the shallow pool in the wake of the launch.

Three dead men; stalking. But somewhere their handler was hiding. The man with the override box. Their mind and their will. But where?

The launch was coming closer. Was it leaving? Maybe they thought he'd run for it? Or . . . no, probably the enemy was going to blockade the exit, and *then* search the cave.

Did they see him? Did they know where he was?

Suddenly he remembered his corpse controller, and his hand fumbled under water to make sure it was still intact. It was. And working; controllers were watertight. It no longer controlled. But it still might be useful ...

Kabaraijian closed his eyes, and tried to shut off his ears. He deliberately blotted his senses, and concentrated on the distant sensory echoes that still murmured in his mind. They were there. Even vaguer than usual, but less confused; there were only two sets of images now. His third corpse floated a few feet from him, and it wasn't sending anything.

He twisted his mind tight, and listened, and tried to see. The blurs began to define themselves. Two pictures, both wavering, took form, superimposed over each other. A sense tangle, but Kabaraijian pulled at the threads. The pictures resolved.

One corpse was waist-deep in green water, moving slowly, holding a pick. It could see the shaft of the tool, and the hand wrapped around it, and the gradually-deepening water. But it wasn't even looking in Kabaraijian's direction.

The second dead man was in the launch, one hand resting on the controls. It wasn't looking either. It was staring down, at the instruments. It took a lot of concentration for a corpse to run any sort of machine. So the handler was having it keep a firm eye on the engine.

Only it could see more than just the engine. It had a very good view of the entire launch.

And suddenly everything fell into place. Certain now that the wrecked launch hid him from view, Kabaraijian moved farther back into its shadow, then threw a hand over the side and pulled himself on board, crouching so he wouldn't be found. The rocks had torn a hole in the bottom of the boat. But the tool chest was intact. He crawled to it, and flipped it open. The corpses had unpacked most of the mining equipment, but there was still a repair kit. Kabaraijian took out a heavy wrench and a screwdriver. He shoved the screwdriver into his belt, and gripped the wrench tightly. And waited.

The other launch was nearly on top of him, and he could hear the purr of its motor and the water moving around it. He waited until it was next to his boat. Then he stood up suddenly, and jumped.

He landed smack in the middle of the other boat, and the launch rocked under the impact. Kabaraijian didn't give the enemy time to react—at least not the time it takes a corpse. He took a single short step, and brought the wrench around in a vicious backhanded blow to the dead man's head. The corpse slumped back. Kabaraijian bent, grabbed its legs, and lifted.

And suddenly the dead man was no longer in the launch.

And Kabaraijian, wheeling, was looking down at the stunned face of Ed Cochran. He hefted the wrench with one hand even as his other reached for the controls, and upped the speed. The boat accelerated, and dove toward the exit. Cave and corpses vanished behind, and darkness closed in with the rocky walls. Kabaraijian switched on the lights.

"Hello, Ed," he said, hefting the wrench again. His voice was very steady and very cold.

Cochran breathed a noisy sigh of relief. "Matt," he said. "Thank God, I just came to. My corpses—they—"

Kabaraijian shook his head. "No, Ed, it won't wash. Don't bother me with that, please. Just give me the override box."

Cochran looked scared. Then, fighting, he flashed his grin. "Heh. You gotta be kiddin', right? I don't have no override box. I told you I heard another launch."

"There was no other launch. That was a set-up, in case you failed. So was that blow you took on the beach. I'll bet that was tricky—having your corpse swing the pick so you got hit with the side instead of the point. But it was very well done. My compliments, Ed. That was good corpse handling. As was the rest. It isn't easy to coordinate a five-crew doing different things simultaneously. Very nice, Ed. I underestimated you. Never thought you were that good a handler."

Cochran stared at him from the floor of the launch, his grin gone. Then his gaze broke, and his eyes went back and forth between the walls that pressed around them.

Kabaraijian waved the wrench again, his palm sweaty where he gripped it. His other hand touched his shoulder briefly. The bleeding had stopped. He sat slowly, and rested his hand on the motor.

"Aren't you going to ask me how I knew, Ed?" Kabaraijian said. Cochran, sullen, said nothing. "I'll tell you anyway," Kabaraijian continued. "I saw you. I looked through the eyes of my corpse, and I saw you huddled here in the boat, lying on the floor and peeking over the side to try and spot me. You didn't look dead at all, but you looked very guilty. And suddenly I got it. *You* were the only one with a clear view of that stuff on the beach. *You* were the only one in the cave."

He paused, awkward. His voice broke a little, and softened. "Only—why? *Why*, Ed?"

Cochran looked up at him again. He shrugged. "Money," he said. "Only money, Matt. What else?" He smiled; not his usual grin, but a strained, tight smile. "I like you, Matt."

"You've got a peculiar way of showing it," Kabaraijian told him.

He couldn't help smiling as he said it. "Whose money?"

"Bartling's," said Cochran. "I needed money real bad. My estimates were low, I didn't have anything saved. If I had to leave Grotto, that would've meant selling my crew just for passage money. Then I'd be a hired handler again. I didn't want that. I needed money fast."

He shrugged. "I was going to try smuggling some swirlstones, but you didn't make that sound good."

And last night I got another idea. I didn't think that crap about organizing us and outbidding Bartling would work, but I figured he'd be interested. So I went to see him after I left the tavern. Thought he might pay a little for the information, and maybe even make an exception, let me stay."

He shook his head dourly. Kabaraijian stayed silent. Finally Cochran resumed. "I got to see him, him with three bodyguards. When I told him, he got hysterical. You'd humiliated him already, and now he thought you were on to something. He—he made me an offer. A lot of money, Matt. A *lot* of money."

"I'm glad I didn't come cheap." Cochran smiled. "Nah," he said. "Bartling really wanted you, and I made him pay. He gave me the override box. Wouldn't touch it himself. He said he'd had it made in case the `meatminds' and their `zombies' ever attacked him."

Cochran reached into the pocket of his tunic, and took out a small, flat cartridge. It looked like a twin for the controller on his belt. He flipped it lightly through the air at Kabaraijian.

But Kabaraijian made no effort to catch it. The box sailed past his shoulder, and hit the water with a splash.

"Hey," said Cochran. "You shoulda got that. Your corpses won't respond till you turn it off."

"My shoulder's stiff," Kabaraijian started. He stopped abruptly.

Cochran stood up. He looked at Kabaraijian as if he were seeing him for the first time. "Yeah," he said. His fists clenched. "Yeah." He was a full head taller than Kabaraijian, and much heavier. And suddenly he seemed to notice the extent of the other's injuries.

The wrench seemed to grow heavier in Kabaraijian's hand. "Don't," he warned.

"I'm sorry," Cochran said. And he dove forward.

Kabaraijian brought the wrench around at his head, but Cochran caught the blow before it connected. His other hand reached up and wrapped itself around Kabaraijian's wrist, and twisted. He felt his fingers going numb.

There was no thought of fair play, or mercy. He was fighting for his life. His free hand went to his waist and grabbed the screwdriver. He pulled it out, and stabbed. Cochran gasped, and his grip suddenly loosened. Kabaraijian stabbed again, and twisted up and out, ripping a gash in tunic and flesh.

Cochran reeled back, clutching at his stomach. Kabaraijian followed him and stabbed a third time, savagely. Cochran fell.

He tried to rise once, and gave it up, falling heavily back to the floor of the launch. Then he lay there, bleeding.

Kabaraijian went back to the motor, and kept the boat clear of the walls. He guided them down the passages smoothly, through the caves and the tunnels and the deep green pools. And in the harsh boat light, he watched Cochran.

Cochran never moved again, and he spoke only once. Just after they had left the caves and come out into the early afternoon sun of Grotto, he looked up briefly. His hands were wet with blood. And his eyes were wet too. "I'm sorry, Matt," he said. "I'm damn sorry."

"Oh, *God!*" Kabaraijian said, his voice thick. And suddenly he stopped the boat dead in the water, and bent to the supply cache. Then he went to Cochran and dressed and bandaged his injuries.

When he reached the controls again, he flipped the speed up to maximum. The launch streaked across the glittering green lakes.

But Cochran died before they reached the river.

Kabaraijian stopped the boat then, and let it float dead in the water. He listened to the sounds of Grotto around him; the rush of river water pouring into the great lake, the songbirds and the day-wings, the ever-active lakeleapers arcing through the air. He sat there until dusk fell, staring upriver, and thinking.

He thought of tomorrow and the day after. Tomorrow he must return to the swirlstone caves. His corpses should have frozen when he moved out of range; they should be salvageable. And one of Cochran's crew was still there, too. Maybe he could still piece together a three-crew, if the corpse he'd pushed overboard hadn't drowned.

And there were swirlstones there, big ones. He'd get that egg of dancing fog, and turn it in, and get a good estimate. Money. He had to have money, all he could scrape together. Then he could start talking

to the others. And then . . . and then Bartling would have a fight on his hands. Cochran was one casualty, the first. But not the last. He'd tell the others that Bartling had sent a man out with an override box, and that Cochran had been killed because of it. It was true. It was all true.

That night Kabarajian returned with only one corpse in his launch, a corpse that was strangely still and unmoving. Always his corpses had walked behind him into the office. That night the corpse rode on his shoulder.