

FEERSUM ENDJINN

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ONE

1

Then, it was as though everything was stripped away: sensation, memory, self, even the notion of existence that underlies reality - all seemed to have vanished utterly, their passing marked only by the realisation that they had disappeared, before that too ceased to have any meaning, and for an indefinite, infinite instant, there was only the awareness of something; something that possessed no mind, no purpose and no thought, except the knowledge that it was.

After that came a rebuilding, a surfacing through layers of thought and development, learning and shape-taking, until something that was an individual, possessing a shape and capable of being named, woke.

Buzz. Buzzing noise. Lying on something soft. Dark. Try to open eyes. Something sticking. Try again. Light flash shaped 00. Eyes feel open, un-ark. Smells; at once vital and decadent, lush with death-life, stirring some memory, recent and forever-far at the same time. Light comes; a small... searching for the name of the colour... a small *redness* hanging in air. Move arm, hand coming up; right arm; noise of skin on skin, feeling coming with it.

Arm, hand, finger: rising, positioning, eyes focusing. Red patch of soft light disappears. Press on it. Arm shaking, feeling weak; falls back to side. Skin on skin.

Click.

Noise of buzzing, something sliding again but not skin on skin; harder. Then light from behind/above. The small red light has disappeared. Then movement; darkness above/around sliding back, face neck shoulders chest/arms trunk/hands in light now; eyes blinking in light. Light grey-pink, shining down; blue-brightness through hole in curved cliff above/around.

Wait. Rest. Let eyes adjust. Songs around, wall around/above (not cliff; wall), curving round, curving over (ceiling; roof). Hole in wall where the brightness is

called a window.

Lie there, turning head to one side; another hole, glimpsed over shoulder; goes down to ground, and called doorway. Daylight there beyond, and the green of trees and grass. Floor beneath where lying; pressed earth, light brown with a few small stones set in it. The song is birdsong.

Get up slowly, arms back, resting on elbows, looking down towards feet; woman, naked, colour of the ground.

Ground is quite near; might as well stand up. Sit up further, swivel (dizzy for a moment, then steady), then feet/legs over side of... of... tray thing that has appeared out of hole in wall of building, tray thing lying on, and then... stand.

Hold onto tray, legs feeling funny, then stand properly, unaided, and stretch. Stretch feels good. Tray slides back into wall; watch it go, and watch part of wall slide down to cover hole that was there, hole came out of. Feel... sadness, but feel... good, too. Deep breath.

Breath makes noise, then cough makes noise, and... *voice* is there. Clear throat, then say:

'Speak.'

Slight startle. Voice makes a feeling in throat and face. Touch face, feel... smile. 'Smile.' Feel something building up inside. 'Face.' Still building. 'Face smile.' And still. 'Face smile good alive hole red wall me look door doorway sun garden, ME!'

Then the laughter comes, bursting out, filling the little stone rotunda and spilling out into the garden; a small bird hurtles into the air in a commotion of leaves and flies away upon a wake of song.

Laughter stops. Sit on floor in the building. Feeling empty inside; hunger. 'Laughter. Hunger. Me hungry. I am hungry. I laugh; I was laughing, I am hungry.' Get up. 'Up.' Giggle. 'Giggle. Get up and giggle, me. I learn. I go now.'

But turn and look at inside of building; the curved walls, stamped-earth floor, the polished rectangular stones with lettering on them which are set into the walls, some of them with little cups/baskets/holders. Not sure which one was the one with the tray and the little red light now; not sure which one came from, now. Sadness, a little.

Turn again and go to door and look out over shallow valley; trees and shrubs and grass, a few flowers, stream in bottom of valley.

'Water. I thirst. I have thirst, I am thirsty; I will drink. Go for drink now. Good.'

Leave the birth-place vault.

'Sky. Blue. Clouds. Walk. Path. Trees. Bush. Path. Other path. Sky again. Hills. Oh! Oh; shadow. Fright. Laugh! Bigger bush. Flat grass. Thirsty; mouth dry; think stop talk now. Ha-ha!'

2

On the morning of the one hundred and forty-third day of the year which by the new reckoning was called second-last, Hortis Gadfium III, the chief scientist to the pan-alignment clan Accounts/Privileges, sat on a steel girder and looked up at the almost-finished bulk of the new Great Hall oxygen plant number-two liquifier unit, and shook her head.

She watched a crane swing a palleted load of steel-plate towards the workers waiting on the summit of the structure, while above the crane's delicate web-work the ponderous mass of a luffer drifted, engines droning, delivering a new batch of supplies. She looked around at the swarm of human-scale toil that was the new oxygen works, where engines laboured and variously puffed, grumbled and hummed, where machines crawled, floated, rolled or just sat, where chimerics sweated, strained, lifted and pulled, and where humans too laboured, shouted or simply stood scratching their heads.

Gadfium drew one finger through the layer of dust on the girder beneath her, then held the begrimed finger up to her face and wondered if in that smudge there lay a nano-machine capable of creating within the day machines which would create machines which would create machines that would give them all the oxygen they would ever need, and by the end of the season, not by the end of next year. She wiped her finger on her tunic and looked up again at the number-two liquifier unit, worrying whether it would ever work properly, and, if it did, whether there would be any workable rockets for it to supply.

She gazed towards the Hall's three vast windows, where - beneath high, rainless ceiling-cloud - sunlight shone slanting down in great broad bands of dust-struck radiance, illuminating a swathe of landscape a few kilometres away and sparkling on the towers and domes of Hall City, two thousand metres beneath the pendulously extravagant architecture of the Lantern Palace.

It was bright outside, and on such days you could deceive yourself that all was still well with the world, that there was no threat, no shadow on the face of the night, no remorseless, system-wide, approaching catastrophe. On such days one might persuade oneself that it was all a huge mistake or mass hallucination, and that the view last night, when she had stood outside the observatory dome above the darkened Palace, had been a figment of her imagination, a dream that had not vanished or been properly sorted by her waking mind, and so which lived on, as nightmare.

She stood up and walked back to where her junior aide and research assistant were waiting, conversing quietly in the midst of the oxygen works' constructive chaos and looking about occasionally with a kind of disparaging indulgence at the undignified physical clamour such mere technology required. And, Gadfium didn't wonder, probably amusing themselves discussing what the old girl was doing, not wanting to linger any longer than absolutely necessary at this building site.

There probably had been no need for her to attend the site conference at all; the science in this project had long been settled and the burden of effort passed to Technology and Engineering; still, she was invited to such meetings out of politeness (and her rank at court), and she attended when she could because she worried that, in the rush to recreate technologies and processes which had been obsolete for thousands of years, they might have missed something, forgotten some simple fact, overlooked some obvious danger. Such an oversight might be quickly dealt with, but they had anyway so little time that any interruption at all to the programme might prove disastrous, and while in her lowest moments she sometimes suspected such an interruption was almost inevitable, she was determined to do all in her power to ensure that if it did befall them it would not be for want of any diligence on her part.

Of course, it would all have been a lot simpler if they had not been at war with the clan Engineers, headquartered (and besieged) in the Chapel, thirty kilometres away on the far side of the fastness, and three kilometre-high floors higher than the Great Hall. There were Engineers on their side - just as there were dissident Cryptographers, Scientists and members of other clans on the other side - but too few, and like so many Scientists Gadfium had had to shoulder the extra burden of trying to think on an industrially practical scale.

As for her desire simply to sit and look at the plant, that was probably a function of her doubt that what they were doing here was going to make any difference to their plight even if it went exactly according to plan; she suspected that subconsciously she hoped the sheer presence and scale of this industrial enterprise - and the physical energy of its creation - would somehow convince her there was a point to it all.

If that had been her wish, it had not been granted, and no matter how much of the oxygen works filled her field of vision, always lurking at the edge of her sight she seemed to see that hazy spread of darkness, rising from the night's horizon like an obscene inversion of dawn.

'Chief Scientist?'

'Hmm?' Gadfium turned to find her aide, Rasflin, standing a couple of metres away. Rasflin - thin, ascetic, stiffly correct in his aide's uniform - nodded to her.

'Chief Scientist; a message from the Palace.'

'Yes?'

'There has been a development at the Plain of Sliding Stones.'

'A *development*?'

'An unusual one; I know no more. Your presence there has been requested and the relevant travel arrangements made.'

Gadfium sighed. 'Very well. Let's go.'

The piker swept out of the oxygen works and headed for East Cliff along a dusty, winding road filled with heavy traffic both machine and chimeric. The groomed, carefully landscaped parkland that had graced this part of the Great Hall for a thousand generations had been ripped up without a second thought when the Encroachment's implications had - apparently - been driven home to the King and his more sceptical advisers; normally any such industry would have been banished to the inner depths of the fastness, where there was little natural light and objectionably ugly or effluent processes could safely be housed without disturbing either the view or the air, and where only the desperate or outlawed would ever

choose to live.

Still - for all the outrage, and the suicides of a number of gardeners and foresters - when the King had decided such a plant must be built, and must be built quickly, and under the eye of the Palace, the earth-movers - themselves newly constructed for the purpose - had been sent in, and woods, lakes and glades which had delighted all castes and classes for millennia were levelled under their ploughs, scrapes and tracks.

The chief scientist watched the oxygen works disappear behind a wooded hill, until the construction site was marked only by a haze of smoke and dust hanging in the air above the trees. It would reappear as they headed out across the plain to East Cliff; the oxygen works was sited on a small plateau and so visible from almost everywhere throughout the ten-kilometre length of the Great Hall. Gadfium wondered again whether the real reason the King had had the works built here was to impress upon his subjects the full gravity of their situation, and give them a preparatory hint of the kind of sacrifices that would need to be made in the future. Gadfium shook her head, tapped her fingers on the seat's wooden armrest and opened a vent by the side of the window to let the warm air in. She looked at the man and woman sitting opposite her.

Rasflin and Goscil had been with her since the start of the present emergency, ten years ago, when science had started to matter again. Rasflin epitomised the officer caste, and seemed to take pride in making himself as much like a machine as possible; in all those ten years he had never called Gadfium anything other than 'Chief Scientist' or 'ma'am'.

Goscil - plump-faced, wild-haired, and whose tunic never seemed to quite fit properly or ever be entirely free from stains - had seemed to grow more dishevelled over the years, as though in response to Rasflin's severe tidiness. She had uploaded some files from the oxygen works, and sat with her eyes closed now, reviewing this information and occasionally making small involuntary noises; tutting, hissing, snorting, humming. Rasflin set his jaw and looked away out the window.

'Any more details from the Plain?' Gadfium asked him.

'None, ma'am.' Rasflin paused, making it obvious he was communicating, then shook his head. 'As before; the observatory there has reported something unusual and the Palace has granted their request that you attend.'

'Plain of Sliding Stones?' Goscil said, opening her eyes suddenly. She blew hair away from the side of her face, glancing at Rasflin. 'I heard some gossip on the

science channel about the stones doing something weird.'

'Really,' Rasflin said drily.

'And how did this weirdness manifest itself?' Gadfium asked.

Goscil shrugged. 'Didn't say; there's just a filed report from some junior timed about dawn that the stones were moving and something strange was happening. Nothing since.' She glanced at Rasflin again. 'Probably been clamped down.'

Gadfium nodded. 'Has there been much wind and precipitation up there lately?'

Both Rasflin and Goscil went still for a moment. Goscil answered first: 'Yes. Enough melt for them to move, and some wind. But...'

'Yes?' Gadfium said.

Goscil shrugged. 'The way that junior reported; said there was a... may I repeat it verbatim?'

Gadfium nodded. 'Go on.'

Goscil closed her eyes. Rasflin looked away again. 'Umm,' Goscil said, '... Usual identifiers; Plain of Stones Observatory, etc., then, quote: ' - her voice changed here to something like a chant - 'something odd going on. Something very odd. Oh shit. Let's see, right, general data first: wind blowing; north-west, force four, precip; three mill yesterday, plain friction factor; six. Oh, look at them! Look at that. They can't do that! They've never done that, have they? Wait till - (*unintelligible*) - I'm calling the chief observer... filing this as is. Signing off.'

Goscil opened her eyes. 'Unquote. After that, nothing. People have been trying to get in touch with the observatory since, but there's no reply.'

'When was the report timed?'

'Six-thirteen.'

Gadfium looked at Rasflin, who was smiling thinly. 'Has the Palace been in touch with the observatory since?'

'I cannot say, Chief Scientist,' the aide replied, then, as though seeking to be

helpful nevertheless, added: 'The message I received requesting your presence was timed at ten forty-five.'

'Hmm,' Gadfium said. 'Kindly request that the Palace furnish us with more details, and allow us to speak directly with the observatory.'

'Ma'am,' Rasfline said, and took on the glassy-eyed look of someone making it politely obvious they were communicating.

Gadfium's status decreed that she was above the need for an implanted direct status link, being one of those valued souls whose mind must be left free from the distractions of constant inter-communication to concentrate on undiluted thought, unless they chose to access the data corpus by some external means. She knew she must accept this, but even so oscillated between a guilty pride in her privileged position and an intermittent frustration that she so often had to rely on others to furnish her with so many of the details her work required.

'We're to take a clifter up the East Face,' Goscil announced after a moment's pause. 'The King's own machine, just for us,' she told the chief scientist. 'They must want us there very quickly.'

3

The caisson-train lumbered across the broken landscape of the collapsed Southern Volcano Room; a line of huge, cylindrically rotund, multi-wheeled heavy carriers interspersed with smaller vehicles and chimerics. Some of the larger chimerics, all of them of the incarnosaur genus, carried troops; most of the other make-beasts were considered at least semi-sentient, and were themselves soldiers, variously armoured, impeded and armed.

The other ground vehicles were all-drive holster-buggies, armoured scree-cars, one- or two-gun landromonds and the huge multi-turreted tanks known as bassinals. The struggling convoy accounted for a good sixth of the King's military transport, and represented either a brilliant flanking manoeuvre to supply the beleaguered garrison of troops guarding the workings in the fifth-floor south-western solar, or a desperate and probably forlorn gamble to win a war that was not only unwinnable but anyway pointless; Sessine had still to decide which.

The Count Alandre Sessine VII, commander-in-chief of the second expeditionary force, looked up and away from the slow-moving convoy of beasts and machines in his charge to gaze at the gaping shell of ruined walls around them, and the revealed topography of mega-architecture and cloud beyond.

Standing waist-high in the turret of the command scree-car, shaken this way and that by the rough, trackless ground the convoy traversed, his body armour clunking dully against the inside rim of the hatch, it took an effort to focus on the vast and sullen grandeur of one's surroundings, and a further effort to dismiss the apparent irrelevance of such scale to the more immediate task at hand (or rather at foot, and paw, and wheel and track).

All the same, it pleased him to do so every now and again when the steam and smoke-clouds cleared sufficiently, and he judged it no extravagance upon his supposedly valuable attention; keener eyes and more extrapolated senses than his would mind the progress of the convoy over such increments of time as he chose to allow the wider view, and - after all - what was his silent, self-solitary mind left so for (by the King's good grace) if not to attend to the greater world beyond the vulgar intimacy of the immediate?

The collapsed Southern Volcano Room was really many rooms, and several levels of them, too; the walls still standing formed a huge extra curtain of cliff in the shape of a C between ten and thirteen kilometres in diameter and one and six kilometres in height. The crumpled ground the convoy moved across with such exquisite slowness was the wreckage of five or six floors, compressed by the cataclysm that had befallen this section of the fastness to a height of less than two great storeys, and was still shaken every year or so by smaller earthquakes. Steam and smoke drifted from a hundred different cracks and fissures across the crazily tilted geography of the room, and when dispersing winds did not whip whorling through the vast cauldron, the air was filled with the smell of sulphur.

It was a moderately calm day now, and the clouds of yellow-tinged smoke and brightly white steam that drifted over this tortured legacy of landscape provided cover for the convoy's painstaking progress, even if they also sporadically prevented one from witnessing the full majesty of the great castle beyond.

Sessine looked behind him, through the high hanging valley that was the breach in the fortress structure created by the buried volcano. The curtain walls made a wavy line on the landscape, blue with distance beyond the hazily glimpsed forests, lakes and parkland of the outer bailey. Beyond was only the vaguest hint of the hills and plains of the provinces that made up Xtremadur.

It looked warm down there, Sessine thought, imagining the smells of summer pasture and woodland, and the feel of pool-water on his skin. Here, though the snow-line was still a good kilometre above, the air was chill when not heated with the rotten smell of the semi-dormant volcano beneath the convoy. Sessine felt himself shiver, for all his armour and furs.

He smiled as he looked around. For the privilege of being here in this gelid hell risking his last life on a mission the point of which even he did not entirely understand, he had indulged in the sort of prolonged and strenuous string-pulling he normally quite thoroughly disapproved of. Perhaps after all I am a masochist at heart, he thought. Maybe it had merely lain latent (he glanced at the pitched upheaval of ground they were crossing) - dormant - these last seven lives. The idea amused. He continued his sweep of the panorama briefly available through the shifting clouds.

At one end of the vast C bitten from the castle a single great bastion-tower stood, almost intact, five kilometres high, and casting a kilometre-wide shadow across the rum-pled ground in front of the convoy. The walls had tumbled down around the tower, vanishing completely on one side and leaving only a ridge of fractured material barely five hundred metres high on the other. The plant-mass babilia, unique to the fastness and ubiquitous within it, coated all but the smoothest of vertical surfaces with tumescent hanging forests of lime-green, royal blue and pale, rusty orange; only the heights of scarred wall closest to the more actively venting fissures and fumaroles remained untouched by the tenacious vegetation.

Above, trees grew on the summit of the serrated ridge, which grew haphazardly, jaggedly, as it swept around the huge bowl of the Volcano Room, gradually lifting above the tree-line until directly in front of them it merged with the intact structure of the fastness Serehfa, where the walls - some pierced by enormous windows and clerestories, some plain, some shining sheer and some roughened sufficiently to be coated with snow or the blue-green strain of high-altitude babilia - climbed through the clouds and into the sky.

Sessine was looking almost straight up now, trying to glimpse the summit of the fast-tower itself, the mightiest of Serehfa's mighty towers, standing glittering in its solitude above all but the most vestigial traces of atmosphere, fully twenty-five kilometres above the surface of the Earth and almost in space itself.

Clouds hid the mysterious summit of the castle, and Sessine smiled ruefully to himself as another veil of steam and foul-smelling smoke drifted across the view, obscuring. The Count held the image of those enormous distant walls for a moment and wrinkled his nose as the vapours and gases wrapped themselves round the slowly moving car. He lifted a pair of all-band field glasses from a hook inside the

hatch and scanned his surroundings again, but the effect, and particularly the sense of scale, was not the same.

Still, there was a little added safety in the mists. He wondered - as he always did at some point in one of these recreational panoramas - whether his inspection had been in any way reciprocated.

He knew the King had his own spyers, dispatched to towers and high walls to watch the open areas beneath them and report to Army Intelligence, and he had never entirely believed that the Engineers seemed never to have thought of the same idea. He put the field glasses back. The volcanic mists did not appear to be dispersing; if anything they were growing thicker and more noxious.

There was a crackle of noise from inside the car, then someone spoke. It sounded like a signal-burst had been received. The convoy had to observe complete communicative silence, though the Army could still contact them through broadcasts. It meant that all the men were alone in their own heads, or at least in their own vehicles. To join the Army was to lose the ability to have unrestrained access to the data corpus; everything had to go through the Army's own network.

Being unable to contact distant loved ones was bad enough for troops unused to war and brought up from childhood with the ability to reach anybody they wanted through the corpus, but at least in most of the rest of the Army they could talk so to each other. For the duration of this mission they were forbidden even that, lest they betray their positions, and only encapsulated within their closed transports could they use their implants.

Sessine glanced back at the bulbous snout of the provisions caisson immediately aft - it was all there was to be seen behind, just as all he could see in front was the rear of a weapon-laden chimeric - then ducked back inside the scree-car, closing the hatch cover after him.

The scree-car's interior was warm and smelled of oil and plastic; in the two days since they had quit the newly built hydrovator at the breach lip opposite the bastion-tower he had come to regard its humming, machine-scented interior almost with affection. Perhaps there was something womb-like about its hermetic, humming redness.

Sessine settled into the commander's seat and took his gloves off. 'Hatch down,' he said.

'Hatch down, sir,' the car's captain called out, calling back over her shoulder. The driver at her side twisted the scree-car's wheel, his eyes fixed on the clear image of

the ground ahead produced by the all-band display.

'Communication?' Sessine asked the comms operator. The young lieutenant nodded, trembling. He looked frightened, his skin grey. Sessine wondered what the news was, and felt his guts start to knot.

'We got it too, sir,' the captain called, still watching the screen. 'Gistics update code: routine.'

'Routine?' Sessine asked, staring at the lieutenant's stricken-looking expression. What was happening?

'I - I heard some -' the comms operator began, then swallowed. 'I heard something more, sir, over the machine's hard channel, from Intelligence,' he stammered. He licked his lips and rested one shaking hand on the comms console.

The captain twisted round in her seat, frowning. 'What?'

The lieutenant glanced at her, then told Sessine, 'They have a spyer on the north rim-wall, sir; he reports... a...' the young man hesitated, then blurted, 'an air attack.'

'*What?*' yelled the captain, twisting in her seat and punching at the car's sensor controls, then sitting back, one hand to her ear, eyes closed.

'A... an air attack, sir,' the lieutenant repeated, tears in his eyes, glancing up at the hatch.

The captain muttered something. The driver started to whistle. Sessine could think of nothing to say. He jumped up onto the observation platform and threw the hatch open again, remembering to shout, 'Hatch open!' as he rose into the steams and smokes above. He lifted the field glasses.

As he put them to his eyes, he heard two shots from beneath him, inside the car, followed quickly by two more. The car lurched and swung right.

Sessine dropped through the hatch, and as he did so realised that he might have made a terrible mistake.

His hand went to his own gun; he registered the sick-sweet smell of burnt flesh, and found himself looking into the tear-streaked face of the comms operator, pointing his gun straight at him.

The two bodies in the front of the scree-car jiggled slackly as the car thumped over some obstruction. The lieutenant braced himself against the car's ceiling with his free hand and sniffed hard. Sessine held his hand out to him, leaving his other hand on the butt of his gun. 'Now -'

'I'm sorry, sir!'

Then the world lit up, and a terrible blow struck Sessine's lower face. He fell, knowing he was dying, falling surrounded by smoke to hit the floor, beyond pain with a noise past sound in his ears, no breath left in him and no way of breathing, and lay there for some terrible suspended moment before he sensed the young lieutenant over him and felt the gun at the back of his head and had time to think, *Why?*, and he died.

4

[Translation](#)

Woak up. Got dresd. Had brekfast. Spoke wif Ergates thi ant who sed itz juss been wurk wurk wurk 4 u lately master Bascule, Y dont u ½ a holiday? & I agreed & that woz how we decided we otter go 2 c Mr Zoliparia in thi I-ball ov thi gargoyle Rosbrith.

I fot Id bettir clear it wif thi relevint oforities furst & hens avoyd any truble (like happind thi lastime) so I went 2 c mentor Scalopin.

Certinly yung Bascule, he sez, i do beleave this is a day ov relativly lite dooties 4 u u may take it off. ½ u made yoor mattins calls?

O yes, I sed, which woznt stricktly tru, in fact which woz pretti strikly untru, trufe btold, but I cude always do them while we woz travelin.

Wots in that thare box yoor holdin? he asks.

Itz a ant, I sez, waven thi box @ his face.

O this is yoor litil frend, is it? i herd u had a pet. May i see him?

Iss not a pet, iss a frend; u woz rite thi furst time, & iss not a im iss a she. Luke.

O yes very pretti, he sez, which is a pretti strainge thing 2 say about a ant if u ask me but thare u go.

Duz it - duz she ½ a naim? he asks.

Yes, I sez, sheez calld Ergates.

Ergateez, he sez, thatz a nyce name whot maid u call her that?

Nuffink, I sez; itz her reel name.

A I see, he sez, & givs me 1 ov thozе lukes.

& she can tok 2, I tel him, tho I doan xpect yule b able 2 here hir.

(Shh, Bascule! goze Ergates, & I go a bit red.)

Duz she, duz she now? mentor Scalopin sez wif wanna them tolerint smylez. Very wel then he sez, pattin me on thi hed (which I doan much like, frangly, but sum times u jus ½ 2 pool up wif these things. N-way whare wer we? O yes he woz pattin me on thi hed & sayin), off yugo (he sez) but b bak by supper.

Ritey-ho, I sez, all breezy like, nevir thinkin.

Swing doun past thi kitchins 2 see mistriz Blyke 2 flash my big solefool Is & giv hir thi soppi smile all shy & bashfool & skrownj sum provishins. She pats me on thi noddil 2 - what is it wif peepel?

Leev thi monstery about ½ 9 & lift 2 thi top; thi sun iz shinin in fru thi big winders acros thi grate hol strait in2 ma Iz. Dam shure it dozen luke like itz gettin dimmer 2 me but evrybody sez it is so I spose it muss b.

Grab a ride on a waggin heddin 4 thi souf-west hydrovater along thi clif roade, hangin on 2 thi bak ov thi truk abuv thi x-ost; bit steemy when thi truk stops @ junkshins, but beets havvin 2 ride in thi cab & tok 2 thi dryver & probly get pattid on thi bonce aggen like as knot.

I like thi cliff rode cos u can luke ovir thi edge & c rite doun 2 thi flore ov thi hol & evin c thi big rownd bobbly bits what wood b thi handils ov thi drawerz ov thi

bureau if this woz a propir size place instead ov being BIG like it is. Mr Zoliparia sez ov coarse ther wernt nevir no jiants & I bileev him but sumtymes u can luke owt ovir thi hall wif its mountins like cuboardz & mountins like seets & sofas set agenst thi wall & thi tabils & poofs & so on skaterd about thi playce & u fink, Whenz them big bags cummin bak then? (Bags is my own koinin & am qwite proud ov it - meenz Boys & Girls. Ergates sez its called a nacronim. N-way whare woz we? O yes hangin on 2 thi bak ov thi truk rolin along thi clif rode.)

Ergates thi ant iz in hir box in thi left brest pokit ov my jakt-wif-lotza-pokits, all saifly butinned down. U alrite Ergates? I whispir as we bownse along thi rode.

Am fine, she tellz me. Whare r we rite now?

Um, weer on a truk, I sort ov ½-lies.

R we hanging off thi bak ov a veehikl? she asks.

(Blimey you get nuffink past this ant.) Wot maiks u think that, I asks, stollin.

Muss u always maximise thi dainger ov any givin moad ov transpoart? she asks, ignorin me stollin.

But am Bascule thi Rascule, thass whot they call me! Am yung & am onli on my furst life I tells her, laffin; Bascule thi Teller nuffink, that's me; no I or II or VII or any ov that nonsins 4 yoors truly; am good az immortil 4 all intense & purpusses & if u cant act a bit daff when u never dyed not even 1nce yet, when can u?

Well, Ergates sez (& u can juss tel she's tryn 2 b payshint), aside from thi fact that it is folly 2 fro away even 1 life out ov 8, & thi eekwilly sailyent poynt that in thi present emerginsy it mite b fullish 2 rely on thi effishint funkshining ov thi reeincarnative prossess, ther is my own safety 2 think about.

I thot u woz indistructibil 2 a fol from any hite on acount ov yoor scale & mass-to-surfis area givin thi relativ sighz ov air mollycules? I sez.

Sumthing like that, she agreez. But if you landid thi wrong way it is conseevabil i might b krushd.

Ho, Id like 2 kno whotz thi rite way 2 land from this hi up, I sez, leenin out ovir thi drop wif thi wind in my hare & gayzin doun thi way @ thi treetopz ov thi forist-floor, what must b a gude cupil ov hundred meetrs blo.

Yoor missing thi point, sez Ergates thi ant, soundin sniffy.

I fot 4 a momint. Tell u wot, I sez.

Yes? she sez.

When we take thi hydravator up thi clif, this time weel go on in thi inside; howzat?

Yoor mewnfisince astonishiz me, she sez.

(Sheez bin sarcastic, I can tel.)

Thi hydravater car is 1 ov thi old wooden 1s wot kreeks a lot & it smelz ov rope-oyl & varnish & thi emty watir tanks unnerneeth thi deck maik big boomy spooky noyses as it climes up thi wol ov thi hol. Thi flor ov thi car is mostly taken up with six big militry veehikls witch look like airships wif wheels. Thair garded by some armi ladz hoor havin a game ov pinkel-flip & am thinkin ov joinin in coz Im a pritty good shot @ thi old finkel-plip & I probly cude stand 2 make a deel ov gambil-toakins on account that Im so yung & innosent lookin & yet a bit ov a huslir reely but then Ergates sez, Dont u think u shude make those callz like u promised bro Scalopin? & I sez O I spose so.

Am a tellir, so thi callz ½ 2 b made, I spose.

I find a qwiet spot, neer thi gaits where thi wind rufflz in, & I sidown & leen bak & let ma Is go moasly closed & I tap inter thi kript whare thi ded peepil r.

From thi top ov thi hydravater I cros thi marshalin yard on thi freize neer thi rufe ov thi hol & hed in2 thi wol thru varius passidjways & tunils & take a tube along thi inside ov thi wol 2 thi far end ov thi great hol. I get off @ thi cornir stayshin & climb up sum steps; I cum out in a galleria on thi outside ov thi wol what xtends out from thi greenery & bluery & etcetery ov thi babil plants. From heer I can look down on2 thi terisses & litil villiges on thi roofs ov thi parapet merlons wif thi litle feelds on thi crenels & if I look rite down I can c thi flat green valey that is thi alure but I xpect nun ov this terminoloji meens much if u doan no mutch about cassils.

N-way, iss a pretti impressive view, & sumtimes yule c eegils & rocs & simurgs &

lammergeiers & uther big funny-lookin burds wheelin about juss 2 add a bit ov lokil culur, + further blo thers moar wals & towrs & alures & steep roofs - some ov them terrissed 2 - & blo that thi forists & hilz ov thi bailey, then thi curtin wall in thi distince & furthir away stil thers thi haizi seenery ov thi far beyawnd. (They reckon u can c thi c from thi veri hiest hites ov thi habitabil castle, but tho I seen this screend I nevir seen it wif ma own Is.)

A rikiti ole chare lif takes me up & along, through a sort ov tunil in thi hangin babil plants, & b4 long I arive @ thi corner ov thi grate hol & thi playce under thi eaves whare thi Astroligers/Alchemists hang owt, & hang out is xactly what they do, espeshilly Mr Zoliparia, who bean an importint ole jent ov sum noat has got 1 ov thi prime posishins in all thi town 4 his partments, viz thi right eyeball ov thi septentrynil gargoil Rosbrith.

Thi gargoil Rosbrith lukes out 2 thi north, but coz its on thi cornir & therz nuffin in thi way, you can see east 2, whare thi sun is proan 2 rise ov a mornin & thi nastines ov thi approachin enkroachin is poppin up sayin High thair foaks itz lites out soon bi thi way!

I hit a snag; Mr Zoliparia dozent apeer 2 b in. Am standin @ thi top ov a rikiti ladder inside thi bodi ov thi gargoil Rosbrith abangin & abashin on thi litil sirkular doar ov Mr Zoliparia's partments but 4 ol my hammerin therz no anser. Therz a woodin landin blo me wot thi laddirs perchd on (its rikity 2, by thi way. Cum 2 fink ov it moast stuff in thi Astrolidjers/Alchemists town seamz 2 b pretti rickiti) but nway therz a old lady scrubbin thi dam landin wif sum horibil bubblin stuff thatz bringin thi wood on thi landin up a treat evein if it disolvin most ov it & makin it even moar rikity, but thi poynt is this stuffs makin fewms go up my nose & cozin my Is 2 wotir.

Mr Zoliparia! I shout. Iss Bascule here!

Perhaps u shood ½ told him u were cumin, Ergates says from her box.

Mr Zoliparia doan hold wif moderin like inplants & that sort ov stuf, I tell her, sneezin. Heez a disidint.

U coud ½ left a messidje with sumbody else, Ergates sez.

Yes yes yes I sez, ol anoid bcoz I no sheez rite. I spose now I ½ 2 use my own bleedin inplantz & Ive been tryin not 2 apart from kontaktin thi wurld ov thi ded coz

I want 2 b a disidint like Mr Zoliparia.

Mr Zoliparia! I shouts agen. Ive got my scarf up round my mouf & noze now cos ov thi fumes cumin up from thi landin.

O, bugration.

Is sumbody using hidrokloric asid? Ergates sez. On wood? She sounds mistified.

I doan no about that I sez but therz sum ole girl down thare scrubbin away @ thi landin wif sumfin pretti nockshis.

Odd, Ergates sez. I woz sure heed b in. I think u bettir get down - but then thi door opins & thares Mr Zoliparia in a big towel & what ther is ov his hares ol wet.

Bascule! he shouts @ me, mite ½ noan it woz u! Then he glares down @ thi ole lady & waves @ me 2 come in & I scrambil ovir thi top ov thi laddir & in2 thi I-ball.

Take yor shooz off, boy, he sez, if u stept in dat stuf on di landin yule b rotten me carpets. When uve dun dat u can make yoorself usful & warm me up some wine. Then he pads off, hoistin his towl up around him & leavin a trale ov watir behind him on thi flor.

I start 2 take me shooz off.

You bean havin a baf Mr Zoliparia? I asks him.

He juss lukes @ me.

Mr Zoliparia & me & Ergates thi ant are sittin on thi iris balconi ov thi gargoye Rosbrith's rite I-bol havin respectivly mulled wine, t, & a mikeroscpic morsil ov stale bred. Mr Zoliparias in a chair wot lukes a bit like a I-bol issel, suspendid from a Ilash abuv; am on a stool sat b-side thi parapet whare Ergates is tukkin in2 thi bred Mr Zoliparia gave her (& whot I moysined wif sum spit) - iss a hoal huge lump ov crust & far 2 much 4 her reely, but she tares crums off & works them wif her moufparts & front feet until she can swollo them. I herd Ergates say Thanku 2 Mr Zoliparia when he gav hir thi crust but I ½ nt told him she can tok yet & he didn seem 2 heer her.

Am watching Ergates carefully coz its a bit windy out heer & tho thers a sort ov net under thi balconi & Ergates woodnt b harmd by a fol, shed probly go strait thru thi net & evin if she woznt harmd shed b lost; blimey, sumfing as lite as hir could get blown rite inter thi bailey from this hi up & how wood I ever find her then?

U wury 2 much, Ergates sez. Im a hily racehorseful ant & i wood find u.

(I doan say nuffink in return bcoz Mr Zoliparias tokkin & it wood b inpolite.) Nway thi point is kwite frangly Id rather Ergates woz stil in my pokit but she sez she wishis 2 take thi air & bsides she likes thi vew.

... simbil not ov potency or invulnrability but ov a kind ov sultifing *inpotenz* & xtream vulnrabiliti, Mr Zoliparia is sayin, bangin on about thi cassil agen as he is offin want 2 do.

We live in a folli, Bascule, nevir forget dat, he tellz me & I nod & sip ma t & wotch Ergates eat her bred.

Iss no coinsidins di ainshints usd 2 refer 2 di kwick & di ded, he sez, swallowin sum more wine & burrowin in2 his cote (iss a bit coald out here). 2 liv is 2 moov, he sez. Mobiliti is all. Tings like diss (he waves his han aroun) r a kind ov admishin ov dfeet; Y, de dam tings litil betir than a hospis!

Wots a hospis? I ask, not recognizin thi wurd & not wantin 2 yous inplants (& wantin Mr Zoliparia 2 no this, it has 2 b admittid).

Bascule, u mite as wel uze di fasilitys yoov been given, Mr Zoliparia sez.

O yes, I sez. I forgot. I made a show ov closin my Is. Haven dun this 4 a while, I sed. Lessee; ah yes, hospis... place whare you go 2 di, basikly.

Yes, Mr Zoliparia sed, lookin annoid. Now uve made me go & forget; Ive loss de flo.

U woz sayin thi cassil woz like a hospis.

I remember *dat*, he sez.

Well am veri sori, I sez.

No mattir. Di burdin ov mi argumint, Mr Zoliparia sez, is dat 2 set 1self up like dis in such a defeetinly vast & intimidaytinly inhumini structyir is meerly 2 anounce di cumin 2 rest ov 1s progress, & witout dat we r lost.

(Mr Zoliparia is big on progress tho from what I can gathir iss a pretty old fashined idea these daze.)

So ther definitely wernt never no jiants then? I sez.

Bascule, Mr Zoliparia sez, cyan, wot is dis obseshin wit thi idea ov jiantz? He fillz his glas wif more wine; it steamz in thi cold air. I wotch Ergates 4 a bit while he duz this, zoomin in 2 look @ her face; I can c hir Is & feelers & wotch her mouth-parts needin & tayrin @ thi gummy-lookin bred. Pull back as Mr Zoliparia sets thi wine jug bak down on thi tabil.

Thi ting is, he sez, & size agen, der wer 1nce jiants. Not jiantz in di sens dat dey wer fizikly bigir dan us, but bigir in der powrs & abilitys & ambishins; bigir dan us in der moral curidge. Dey made dis playce, dey bilt it from rock & materielz. Weave loss di art ov makin & workin. Dey bilt it 4 a purpis in a sens, but itz ludicrisly over-desined 4 itz suposid funcshin. Dey bilt it di way dey did 4 fun. Juss bcoz it amyoused dem 2 do so. But dave moovd on, & we r all dats left & now di plaice teems wit life but den so duz a magoti corps; der is much moovmint but no qwicknis in uz; dass all gon.

Wot about thi fass-towr? I sez. That soundz pretti qwikish 2 me.

O Bascule, he sez & lukes up @ thi ski. Fass as in hold-fass or stuck-fass. How meny more times muss I tell u?

O yes, I sez. So all theez qwick tipes leff 4 thi starz did they Mr Zoliparia?

Yes dey did, he sez, & y shoodint dey? But wot puzzils me is y dey shood abandon uz so compleetly, & dat y we shood ½ given up di abiliti evin 2 keep in tutch wit dem.

Int that in nun ov yoor books & stuff, Mr Zoliparia? I asks him. Int that noware?

Duzent seme 2 b, Bascule, he sez; duzent seme 2 b. Sum ov uz ½ bean lookin 4 di ancers 2 dose qwestions 4 longir dan weave been abil 2 record, & we seem 2 b no closir now dan wen we startid. Weave lookt in books & films & files & feeshes & discs & chips & byos & hollers & fomes & cores & evry form ov storidge noan 2 humaniti. He drinx his wine. & iss oll from b4, Bascule, he sez, soundin sad. Oll from b4. Ders nuttin from di time we want 2 no about. He shrugz. Nuttin.

I dont no wot 2 say when Mr Zoliparia sounds all sad & sorri like this. Peepil like

him ½ been tryin 2 wurk this sort ov fing out 4 jenerashins, sum thru thi old stuf like books & so on & otherz by usin thi kript, whare supposidly everithin iz but u jus cant find it. Or if u find it u cant get bak wif it.

I 1nce sed 2 Mr Zoliparia it soundid a bit like lookin 4 a needil in a haysack & he sed Moar like lukin 4 a partikulier wattir molicule in a oashin & evin thats probly unnerestimatin thi task by sevril ordirs ov magnetude.

Ive thot about bein thi 1 2 dive inter thi kript propir - reely deeply - & bring bak thi seekrets Mr Zoliparia wants, but apart from thi fact that meens serius inplant work & I wan 2 sho Mr Zoliparia I only yous mi inplants 4 tellin & nuffink else as a rule, iss also been attemptid & proovd pointliss.

Iss kaos in thare, u c.

Thi kript (or kriptosfear or data corpis - iss ol thi saim fing) iss where everfing reeli happins heer, & thi deeper u go thi less likeli u r 2 com out; iss like iss a oashin & conshisnis is solubil, like divin in2 asid, beyawnd a certin depf. It scarz u 4 life if u go 2 deep, u cum bak as sumfink shrivild & dyin if u go deeper stil, & u juss doan cum bak @ ol if u go reely reely deep; u juss disintigrate toatily as a distink personaliti & thass that.

Ov coarse u persinally r still alive & kikin, back in fizzikil reality & nun thi wurse 4 ware (usuly; unles u ½ a bad trip like they say & get feedbacks & deedbacks & flashbacks & flashforwids & nitemales & daymares & troma & stuf), but thi kript-copy u sent in thare, thass juss gon 4evir u can kiss its ass by-by, & thass factule.

Ergates is playin wif her food; sheez moldin thi bredy-bits in2 funny shapes wif her mouf-parts & front legz & not botherin 2 eat it @ oil no moar. Rite now sheez makin a tiny bust ov Mr Zoliparia & I wundir if he can c her doin that or if heez so ded agenst inplants & improovments in jeneril that he haz ordniry old-tipe Is & cant zoom in on details like I can.

Do u think iss a gude likeniss, Bascule? she asks me.

Mr Zoliparia is lukin thotful & starin in2 space, or in2 thi atmisfear nway; buncha birdz circlin way in thi distinz over a bartizan - maybi heez lookin @ them.

Nway I dcide 2 risk whisprn 2 Ergates: Ver gude. Now u wan get bak in yoor box?

Wassat Bascule? Mr Zoliparia sez.

Nuffink, Mr Zoliparia, I sez. I woz juss cleerin my frote.

No u werint; u sed sumtin about gettin bak in yoor box.

Did I? I sez, stollin.

U werint referin 2 me I truss, he sez, frownin.

O abslootly not Mr Zoliparia, I tell him. I woz actuli adressin Ergates heer, I sez, dcidin 2 make a clean brest ov it. I luke @ hir sternli & wag mi fingir @ hir & say Get bak in yoor box now, u notty ant. Sori about this, Mr Zoliparia, I tel him, while Ergates qwikly changes thi bust sheez wurkin on 2 1 ov me with a enormis nose.

Duz she evir tok bak? Mr Zoliparia asks, smilin.

O yes, I sez. Itz qwite a talkativ litle crittir actule. & veri inteligent.

Duz it reely tok tho, Bascule?

Ov coarse, Mr Zoliparia; iss not a figmint ov my majination or a invisibil frend type ov fing, onist. I had a invisibil frend but he lef when Ergates caim on thi seen last week, I tel him, feelin a bit embrasd now & probly blushin.

Mr Zoliparia laffs. Whare did u get yoor litl pal? he askz.

She croid out thi woodwurk, I sez, & he laffs agen & Im evin moar embrasd & gettin qwite swety now. That dam ant! makin a full ov me & makin my face all big & bloted in that bust shees workin on now & still not goin bak in hir box Ither.

She did! Mr Zoliparia I sez. Croid out ov thi woodwurk in thi refectori @ suppir time lass Kingsday. She came heer wif me thi next day 2 c u, but hid in my jakit that time on acount ov bein shy & a bit okwird wif strainjirs. But she reely toks & she hears whot I say & she uzis wurds I dont no sumtimes, onist.

Mr Zoliparia nods, & lukes wif new respect upon Ergates thi ant. Den sheez probly a mikro-construct, Bascule, he tellz me; dey crop up now & agen, tho dey doan yously tok, lease not inteligibly. I tink di law sez yure supposd 2 take such tings 2 di otorities.

I no that Mr Zoliparia but sheez mi frend & she dont do no 1 no harm, I sez, gettin hottir still coz I doan wan 2 luze Ergates & am wishin I hadnt sed nuffink 2 bro Scalopin now coz I didn think peepil botherd wif such finiky roolz but hears Mr

Zoliparia sayin they do & whot am I 2 do? I luke @ hir but sheez still workin on that infernil bust & givin me big buck teef now, ungratefil retch.

Cam down, cam down, Bascule, Mr Zoliparia sez; am not sayin u *ot* 2 turn hir in am juss sayin dats thi law & u bettir not tell peepil she can tok if u want 2 keep her. Thass ol am sayin. Nway sheez juss litil & so nice & eezi 2 hide. If u luke aftir hir yule b fine. May I -? he starts 2 say, then he stairz abuv me & his Is go wide & he sez, Wot di fuk? & am qwite shokd bcoz Ive nevir herd Mr Zoliparia sware like that & then therz a shadow over thi balconi & a nois like a snappin sail-wing & a gust ov wind, & - b4 I can do anyfink cept start 2 turn roun - a hooj bird, grey & bigir than a man, suddinly clatirs down on2 thi parapet ov thi balconi, grabs @ thi box & thi bred & whaps its wingz down & lonches away agen skreetchin, while Ergates goze 'Eek!' & am up on mi feet & sos Mr Zoliparia & I can see thi bird lowerin its hed as it beets away & peckin @ what its got in its talons & iss eatin thi bred! & Ergates is stuck in thi birdz talons! cot between a talon & a bit ov bred, hir litle anteni wavin & 1 leg out wavin 2 & thas thi lass I see ov hir coz thi distince gets 2 grate, & ah heer Ergates screamin 'Bascuuule...!' meewhile am shoutin & Mr Zoliparias shoutin 2 but thi big bird lifts away & disapeers up ovir thi edje ov thi roof & Ergates is gon & am bereft.

TWO

1

'Face.'

She stared at her reflection in the pool, then drank some more, then waited for the water to settle and looked at her face, then drank some more.

'No more thirst. Stand up. Look around. Blue. White. Green. More green. Red white yellow blue brown pink. Sky clouds trees grass flowers bark. The sky is blue. The water is not colour, is clear. Water shows thing on other side. Of

angle. This is. Reflect. Shone. Reflection. Redflection. Blueflection. Hmm. No.

'Time to walk again.'

She followed the path along the floor of the little valley, the sound of the water in the stream never far away.

'Fly-thing! Oh. Pretty. Is called bird. Birds.'

She walked through a small copse of trees. A warm wind rustled the leaves over her head. She stopped to look at a flower on a bush by the stream bank. 'More prettiness.' She put her hand over the flower, then bowed her head, sucking in its scent. 'Smell of sweet.'

She smiled, then gripped the flower at the top of the stem and appeared to be about to tear it from its stem. Then she frowned, hesitated, looked around and finally let her hands fall back to her sides. She patted the blossom gently before resuming her walk. 'Bye-bye.'

The stream disappeared into a hole in the side of a grassy slope; steps carried the path winding upwards. She looked into the darkness of the tunnel. 'Black. Smell of... damp.' Then she took the steps to the top of the slope and found a broader path leading between tall bushes and small trees.

'Crunch crunch. Ow. Gravel. Feet. Ow ow ow. Walk on green. Walk on grass. Not pain... Better.'

In the distance, beyond a tall hedge, there was a tower.

'Building.' Then she came to something that made her stop and stare for some time; a huge square hedge in the shape of a castle, with four square towers, crenellations cut into its parapets, a raised drawbridge of exposed, intertwined tree-trunks and a moat of sunken, silver-leaved plants.

She stood at the side of the pretend moat, looking down at the ruffled silver surface, then up at the castle walls, rustling quietly in the breeze. She shook her head. 'Not water. Building? Not building.'

She shrugged, turned on her heel and walked on, still shaking her head. Another minute along the grassy margin of the long avenue took her to where a series of huge heads faced each other across the gravel.

Each head was two or three times her own height and made up of several different bushes and other types of plants, producing dark or light complexions, smooth or lined skin and varying hair colours. The lips were formed by leaves of a dusty-pink colour, the whites of the eyes by a plant similar to those impersonating the waters of the moat surrounding the castle-topiary further down the avenue, while the irises took their colour from clusters of tiny flowers of the appropriate shade.

She stood and looked at the first face for some time, and eventually smiled. She walked on in the direction of the distant tower, and only stopped again when one of the heads started to talk.

'... says there is no need to worry, and I think he is right. We are not primitives, after all. I mean, in the end it's just dust. Just a big dust cloud. And another ice age is not the end of the world. We shall have power. There are already whole cities underground, each full of light and heat, and more are being built all the time. They have parks, lakes, architecture of merit, and no shortage of facilities. The world might be different for the duration of the Encroachment, and doubtless altered considerably after it has passed, as it surely will; many species and artifacts will have to be artificially preserved, and the glaciers will affect the planet's geography, but we will survive. Why, if the worst came to the worst, we might enter suspended animation and wake to a newly scrubbed-clean planet and a bright fresh spring! Would that be so terrible?'

She stood, only half-understanding the words. Her mouth hung open. She had been sure the heads were not real. They were pretend, like the hedge-castle. But this one had a voice; a voice deeper than hers. She wondered if she ought to say something in return. Somehow she did not think it had actually been talking to her. Then the head used another voice, more like her own:

'If it is as you say, then no. But I've heard it may be much worse than that; people have talked of the world freezing, of every ocean becoming solid, of the sunlight reduced to the strength of moonlight, of this lasting for a thousand years, while others have said the sun will dim and then brighten; the dust will cause it to explode and all life on Earth will end.'

'You see,' said the first, deeper voice. 'Some say we shall freeze, while others maintain that we shall roast. As ever, the truth will lie between the extremes and so the result must be that nothing much will change and things will remain largely as they are, which is exactly what tends to happen most of the time anyway. I rest my case.'

She thought she ought to say something. 'I rest my case too,' she told the head.

'What?'

'Who -?'

'Crisis! There's somebody -'

There were some noises from within the head, then a face appeared within the hedge-face, sticking out from the middle of one cheek. The face looked altogether heavier and thicker than her own; thin hair covered its top lip.

'Man,' she said to herself. 'Hello.'

'Grief,' the man said, his eyes wide. He looked her up and down. She looked down at her feet, frowning.

'Who is it?' said the other voice from within the head.

'A girl,' the man said, speaking over his shoulder. He grinned and looked her up and down again. 'A girl with no clothes on.' He laughed, looking back again. 'Bit like you.' There was a slap and he said, 'Ow!', then he disappeared.

She leant forward, wondering if she ought to look inside the head, while whispers and rustles came from within.

'Who *is* she?'

'No idea.'

The man and woman came out of the head. They wore clothes. The man held a light brown jacket.

'Trousers,' she said, pointing at the woman's brightly coloured pantaloons as she tucked her blouse in.

'Don't gape, Gil,' the woman told the man, who was standing smiling at her. 'Give her your jacket.'

'My pleasure,' the man said, and handed her the jacket. He brushed some leaves off his shirt and out of his hair.

She looked at his shirt, then put the jacket on, awkwardly but correctly. She stood there, her hands covered by the cuffs of the light jacket, which smelled musky.

'Hello,' she said again.

'Hello yourself,' the woman said. Her skin was pale and her hair was gold-coloured. The man was tall. He bowed, still grinning.

'My name is Gil,' he said. 'Gil Velteseri.' He indicated the woman. 'This is Lucia Chimbers.'

She nodded and smiled at the woman, who smiled back briefly.

'What is my name?' she asked the man.

'Ah... I beg your pardon?'

'My name,' she repeated. 'You are Gil Velteseri, this is Lucia Chimbers. I am who?'

They both stood looking at her for a moment. The woman looked down and tried to brush a smudge from her blouse. In a quiet, sing-song voice she said, 'Simpleton.'

The man laughed lightly. 'Ah-ha,' he said.

2

The wind was a never-ending edge within the air, a knife-wire sawing back and forth in Gadfium's throat and lungs with each laboured, wheezing breath. The plain was a dead flat, almost featureless expanse of dazzling, eye-watering whiteness four kilometres across, splayed beneath a darkened purple sky. A thin, desiccated wind cut out of the bruise-coloured vault and keened across the sterile salt-flats, picking up a thin dry spray of particles which turned the air into a chill shot-blast for exposed skin.

I am a fish, Gadfium thought, and might have laughed had she been able to breathe. A fish, dredged from the fluid-thick depths of warmth beneath us and dumped upon this high salt-crust of shore; landed here to suck in vain at the

parched air and die drowning beneath a thin membrane of atmosphere where the stars shine clear and unwavering in daylight, in half the sky.

She motioned to the assistant observer, and the woman brought over the small oxygen cylinder. Gadfium gulped in the mask's cold cargo of gas, filling her lungs to their depths.

This morning at the oxygen works, this afternoon sampling their future product, she thought. She nodded gratefully to the assistant observer as she handed the cylinder back.

'Perhaps we ought to return inside now, Chief Scientist,' the woman said.

'In a moment.' Gadfium lifted the visor from her eyes and squinted through the binoculars again. Salt dust and sand swirled in twisted veils in front of her and the cold wind made her eyes water. The grey-black stones nearest the observatory looked like nothing more than giant pucks from some huge game of ice hockey. Each stone was about two metres in diameter, half a metre high and supposedly made of pure granite. They had been sliding about this plain for millennia, riding the sporadically slicked surface of the salt-bowl whenever snow had fallen and a wind subsequently blew. Any snow and ice the plain collected was turned to water by a combination of the pipework buried beneath the plain itself and by the reflected sunlight of mirrors shining from the twentieth level of the fast-tower, rearing bright and solid to the north, three kilometres away.

The Plain of Sliding Stones formed the flat roof of a complex of giant rooms on the eighth level of the fastness; these huge, almost empty, barely habitable spaces were arranged in a wheel-like formation, the exposed flank of which formed a great nave of kilometre-tall windows facing from south-south-east to west. It had always been assumed that the redundant systems of both buried pipework and tower-mirrors were there to ensure that no roof-destroying thickness of ice could ever accrue on the plain, though the reason the roof had been left flat in the first place had never been determined. Also unknown was exactly what the stones were there for, or how they contrived to move in ways that were subtly but undeniably at variance with the ways they should have moved according to both highly accurate computer models and carefully calibrated physical re-creations of their environment.

The mobile observatory - a three-storey sphere supported by eight long legs each tipped with a motor and tyre and resembling nothing more than an enormous spider - had been following the mysterious stones across the plain for hundreds of years, gathering vast amounts of data in the process but without really contributing anything of great note to the anyway rather exhausted debate concerning the origin and purpose of the stones. More had been learnt when one of the stones had been

partially analysed centuries earlier, though as the crux of what had been learnt was that to start chipping bits off one of the stones was to draw down some highly focused and scientist-evaporating sunlight from the fast-tower's twentieth level (whether it was day or night), such a lesson was arguably something of a dead end.

Gadfium looked back out across the Plain of Sliding Stones, to the edge of the darkly livid sky. A chill gust of razor-wind stung her face and made her close her eyes, the salt like grit between orb and lid. She could taste the salt; her nose stung.

'Very well,' she said, dry-gasping in the meagre air. She turned from the balustrade and had to be half-led to the lock by the assistant observer.

'The circle began forming at six-thirteen this morning,' the chief observer told them. 'It was complete by six forty-two. All thirty-two stones are present. The distance between the stones is a uniform two metres - the same as their diameter. They have arranged themselves in a perfect circle with an accuracy of better than a tenth of a millimetre. The predicted-motion discrepancy factor for certain of the stones during the period they were forming the current pattern was as high as sixty per cent. It has never in the past exceeded twelve point three per cent and over the last decade has averaged below five per cent.'

Gadfium, her aide Rasline and assistant Goscil, the mobile observatory's chief observer Clispeir and three out of the four junior observers - one was still on duty in the vehicle's control room - sat in the observatory mess.

'We are in the exact centre of the plain?' Gadfium asked.

'Yes, again to an accuracy of less than a tenth of a millimetre,' Clispeir replied. She was fragile-looking and prematurely aged, with wispily white hair. Gadfium had known her at university forty years earlier. Nevertheless, like the other observers she was able to operate without extra oxygen and pressurisation, which was much more than Gadfium felt able to do. That she, Rasline and Goscil were able to breathe easily now was only because the observatory had been lightly pressurised for their comfort. Still, she told herself, they had travelled from barely a thousand metres above sea level to over eight kilometres higher in less than two hours, and a human-basic individual would already be suffering from altitude sickness to which she was genetically resistant, which was some consolation.

'However the circle did not actually form around the observatory.'

'No, ma'am. We were stationary a quarter kilometre from here, almost due north, waiting on the wind to rise following the precipitation and melt last night. The stones began to move at four forty-one, holding pattern T-8 with drift-factor one. They veered -'

'Perhaps a visual display would be more... graphic,' Goscil interrupted.

Embarrassed looks were exchanged around the mess-room table. 'Unfortunately,' Clispeir said, clearing her throat, 'the pattern formed during an observation-system down-time event.' She looked apologetically at Gadfium. 'We are, of course, only a very small and perhaps insignificant research station and I don't know if the chief scientist is aware of my reports detailing the increased incidence of maintenance-level-related breakdowns and our requests for increased funding over the last few years, but -'

'I see,' Rasfline said impatiently. 'Obviously you lack implants, ma'am, but I assume one or more of your juniors recorded the events in their habitua.'

'Well,' Clispeir said, looking uncomfortable. 'Actually, no; as it has turned out, the team here consists entirely of persons from Privileged backgrounds.'

Rasfline looked shocked. Goscil's mouth hung slightly open.

Clispeir smiled apologetically and spread her hands. 'It's just the way it's happened.'

'So you don't have anything on visual,' Rasfline said, contriving to sound at once bored and exasperated. Goscil blew some hair away from her face and looked crestfallen.

'Not of an acceptable standard,' Clispeir admitted. 'Observer Koir - ' the elderly scientist nodded to one of the two young male observers, who smiled sheepishly '- took some footage on his own camera, but -'

'May we see it?' Rasfline asked, tapping his fingers on the table surface.

'Of course, though -'

'Ma'am, are you all right?' Goscil asked Gadfium.

'I'm - actually... no, not -' Gadfium slumped forward over the table, head on

forearms, mumbling and then going quiet.

'Oh dear.'

'I think some oxygen -'

'I'm sorry; the observatory cannot be pressurised beyond this level, and we are so used to... we forget. Oh dear.'

'Thank you. Ma'am; oxygen.'

'Perhaps we should leave...'

'Let her lie down a moment first.'

'My cabin is at your disposal, of course.'

'I'm fine, really,' Gadfium mumbled. 'Bit of a headache.'

'Come; if you'd take her... that's it.'

'I'll bring the oxygen.'

'We should leave...'

'... always has to see things for herself.'

'All right really...'

'Down here.'

'Please don't fuss... How embarrassing... Terribly sorry.'

'Ma'am, please; save your breath.'

'Oh yes, sorry; how embarrassing...'

'Mind the steps.'

'Careful.'

'In here. Sorry, it is a little small; let me...'

Gadfium heard the voices of the others sounding loud in the small cabin, and felt herself lowered into a narrow bed. The oxygen mask was put to her face again.

'Let me stay with her. You take a look at observer Koir's recordings; I'm sure the others can answer any questions...'

'Are you sure? I could -'

'There now, dear; let one old lady look after another.'

'If you're certain...'

'Of course.'

When she heard the door close with a clunk and a wheezy hiss, Gadfium opened her eyes.

Clispeir's face was above her, smiling hesitantly. Gadfium looked warily round the small cabin. 'It is safe,' Clispeir whispered, 'providing we don't shout.'

'Clisp...' Gadfium said, sitting up and holding out her arms; they hugged for a moment.

'It is good to see you again, Gad.'

'And you,' Gadfium whispered. Then she took the other woman's hands in hers and gazed urgently into her eyes. 'Now; old friend, has it happened? Have we made contact with the tower?'

Clispeir could not contain her smile, though there was a hint of worry within it. 'Of a sort,' she said.

'Tell me.'

The Count Sessine had died many times. Once in an aircraft crash, once in a bathyscape accident, once at the hand of an assassin, once in a duel, once at the hand of a jealous lover, once at the hand of a lover's jealous husband and once of old age. Now, it was twice at the hand of an assassin; a male one this time, for a reason he was unable to determine, and - most distressingly - for the last time. Finally physically dead, for ever more.

The venue for Sessine's first in-crypt resuscitation had been a virtual version of his apartments in the clan Aerospace's headquarters in the Atlantean Tower, it being normal for *primimortis*' rebirths to be conducted in familiar and comforting surroundings and closely attended by images of friends and family.

For his subsequent revivals he had stipulated an unpopulated, ambiently scaled version of Serehfa, and it was there he awoke in bed, alone, on what gave every appearance of being a fine spring morning.

He lay in the bed and looked around. Silk sheets, brocade canopy, oil paintings on the wall, rugs on the floor, wooden panelling, tall windows. He felt oddly neutral, washed clean.

He smoothed his hand over a fold of pinkly silk sheet, then closed his eyes and murmured, '*Speremus igitur*,' and opened his eyes again.

His smile was sad. 'Ah well,' he said quietly.

It had been a statutory requirement almost from the dawn of what had then been called Virtual Reality that even the deepest and most radically altered and enhanced virtual environment (indeed, most especially those) must include periods of sleep - however truncated - and that towards the end of each sleep event a dream ought to intrude upon the sleeper in which they were offered the option of returning to reality. Sessine, of course; had been aware of no such opportunity just prior to waking up here, and the repetition of his private code to instigate a complete wake-up merely confirmed that this was not part of some voluntary virtual scenario; this was already as real as he could get, and it was a simulation; he was incrypted, now, for good, as well as for good or ill.

Sessine got out of bed, went to the tall windows and stepped out onto the balcony. The air felt fresh and chilly; a strong wind blew. He shivered, raised his right arm to his face, watched goose-bumps rise under the hairs there, then imagined that the wind dropped. It did.

He imagined that it blew again, but that he felt no cold; in a moment the wind was sharp and clean in his nostrils and cool on his naked skin, but it did not make him shiver.

He went to the parapet. The balcony was situated in one of the higher reaches of the humanly-scaled fortress, with a view to the west. The shadow of the castle lay across the western inner bailey, the umbrous image of the fast-tower just touching the foot of the curtain-walls. As Sessine had ordered, there was nobody to be seen, and not even any wildlife visible. The sky, distant hills and the castle itself looked perfectly convincing.

He imagined himself on the fast-tower

/and was there, suddenly standing on a gaily painted wooden platform at the summit of the castle's tallest tower, with only a flagpole and a snapping flag - his clan's - above him. The view was better from here; he could see the ocean, far to the west. Just beyond the handrail the slates sloped away to the circular battlements.

He gripped the wooden rail of the platform, squeezing it until his fingers ached, then squatted and inspected the underside of the rail's inverted U near where it met a stanchion. The red paint under the flat surface was convincingly bumpy, with little bubbles of smooth, solidified paint near the angle the rail described with the post. He put his thumbnail against one of the bubbles and pressed hard. When he took his thumb away again there was a little groove impressed on the hemisphere of paint.

He ducked quickly under the rail and launched himself into the air. He bounced once off the steeply raked tiles, winding himself and hurting his shoulder, cleared the crenellations of the tower's battlements and hurtled towards the steeply pitched roof far below. The wind-roar screamed in his ears as the slates rose to meet him.

'Oh, this is silly,' he said, gasping against the storm of air.

He cancelled the injury in his shoulder and decided... to fly; the roof below slid to one side and he glided away, sweeping through the air above the castle.

Had he plummeted to his death upon that slated roof, it would have been also to another - almost immediate - rebirth in the same bed he had not long departed; just as in base-reality one had eight lives, so one had eight here. Choosing to end them meant that one would remain unconscious for the duration of the mourning period, and only be woken for a slowed-down real and subjective hour to converse with one's bereaved relations and friends immediately before disposal. This was not

a common option, but remained available for those whose depression or ennui extended beyond their deaths.

Flying was exactly as he remembered it from his childhood dreams; it required some sort of willed effort in the mind, like pedalling a cycle even though one's legs did not move. If one ceased this dream-virtual effort, one sank slowly to earth. The harder one pedalled, the higher one flew. There was no fatigue and no fear, just wonder and exhilaration.

Sessine flew round the castle for some time, at first naked, then clothing himself with trousers, shirt and frock coat. He landed on the balcony outside the bedroom where he had awoken.

A light breakfast was waiting, on a table by the bed. At this point - in every other rebirth since that first one - he had eaten, then indulged in a full morning's dalliance with a maid he remembered from his late childhood who had been the first woman he had lusted after, as well as one of the few with whom he had been unable to requite such regard. On this occasion, however, he cancelled the breakfast, his growing hunger, and the maid's appearance. Nor would he spend the next few subjective months in the castle's library, re-reading books, listening to music, watching films and recorded plays and operas and watching or taking part in discussions with recreated ancients, recreated historical incidents or virtual fictions.

He imagined an antique phone by the bedside. He lifted the receiver.

'Hello?' The voice was pleasant and sexless.

'Enough,' he said.

The castle vanished before he could replace the handset.

There was ample time before his funeral.

At that point - like all the dead, whether they were high or low, and Privileged or not - he would face the final proof of the crypt's ferociously impartial judgment. As the saying had it: the crypt was deep and the human soul was shallow. And the shallower the soul, the less of it survived as any sort of independent entity within the data corpus; somebody whose only opinions were received opinions and whose originality quotient was effectively zero would dissolve almost entirely within the

oceanic depths of the crypt's precedent-saturated data streams and leave only a thin froth of memories and a brief description of the exact shape of their hollowness behind, the redundancy of their beings annihilated by the crypt's abhorrence of over-duplication.

Should that personality ever be called back into existence in the base-level world, it could be recreated exactly from the crypt's already existing database of sentience types.

It was believed that the certainty of such a verdict provided the incentive for people to improve themselves in a society which gave every appearance of being able to function quite adequately with almost no human input whatsoever.

Sessine, if not as one of the Privileged then as a man who had over the course of several lifetimes assiduously cultivated his own cultivation, was in practice if not in theory guaranteed a continued existence within the corpus as an individual.

Even had he been due solely for the compulsory incorporation that was the fate of lesser mortals when the moment came, there would still have been time for what he had in mind. The three days in physical reality before his funeral equated to over eighty years in the quickened medium of crypt-time; time enough for another life to be lived after death, and easily sufficient to encompass the investigation a dead man might wish to mount into the reason for his murder.

'The data-set from the time of your death was recorded as a matter of course by your bioware and transmitted to the command car's event-recorder as well as its own computer; the latter was destroyed along with the car when your murderer turned the car's gun on the convoy and drew retaliatory fire. The event-recorder survived; it also squirted its primary function-suite state to the nearest convoy units when it realised the car was under attack and these read-cuts square with the data in the recorder itself, so we may comfortably assume your final memories are accurate.'

The construct of the clan Aerospace's chief crypt-lawyer was configured to respond to its clients' personalities; for Sessine this meant that it appeared as a tall, highly attractive woman in early middle-age who wore her long black hair tied back, used little make-up, dressed in late-twentieth-century corporate-male clothes and talked with quiet authority; Sessine found it almost amusing how perfectly such an image demanded and received his attention. No bullshit, no unnecessary gestures or expressions, no false buddiness, no flimflam and no attempts either to impress or

ingratiate. Even his short attention span and low boredom threshold had been catered for; she spoke fast. And in the pauses, he could imagine her unclothed (though, as she was a separate entity within the crypt, such imagining no more made itself immediately actual than it would have had they both been real people in base-reality).

He supposed that a male construct might have worked almost as well, but he *liked* smart, quick-witted, self-assured women, and he despised the off-the-peg models of such constructs just because convention demanded they must exhibit some hint of vulnerability, some girlishness that was supposed to make him feel that despite such obvious capability and presence, this woman was some kind of sexual pushover, or not really his equal.

They were sitting in a vault room of the Bank of England, in Edwardian times. Their seats were constructed of gold ingots and cushioned with layers of big white five-pound notes; their table was a trolley normally used to transport bullion. Primitive electric lights flickered on the metal walls and reflected off further piles and stacks of gold bars. Sessine had salvaged the image from an early twenty-first-century VR fiction.

'What do we have on the man who murdered me?'

'He was called John Ilsdrun IV, second-lieutenant. Nothing anomalous in his background or recent behaviour. His implants had been doctored and, if he survives in usable form anywhere, it is not in the general body of the crypt. We're running deeper checks on all his lives and contacts so far, but they'll take subjective days to complete.'

'And the message he received?'

'A code within the gistics burst: "*Veritas odium par it.*" '

'"Truth begets hatred." How cryptic.'

The construct permitted itself a smile.

Barely five minutes had passed in base-reality since his death, and he had spent the great majority of that time unconscious, the data-set that was his stored personality being updated with the rigorously cross-checked information from the time and place of his murder before being activated: the wreck of the command car he and the rest of the crew had been killed in was still burning on the fractured floor of the Southern Volcano Room, the convoy had yet to regroup properly after the young

lieutenant's treacherous attack on it, his co-directors at Aerospace had been summoned to an emergency virtual meeting due to take place in a subjective half-hour and a base-reality physical meeting in the Atlantean Tower scheduled in two hours real - two years and three months subjective - time, while his widow had been contacted but had yet to reply.

'Backtrack on the coded message; how did it find its way into a hardened military narrowcast?'

'Still investigating. The jurisdictional protocols concerned are complicated.'

Sessine could imagine; the military would not easily be persuaded to open its data corpus to outside investigation.

'I want to request an audience with Adijine, priority.'

'Contacting the Palace, royal apartments... monarch's office... on hold... His Majesty's private secretary suite... your call-sign going through... private secretary construct on line real time now. Replace?'

'Replace.'

The woman disappeared, turning in a blink into a small wizened man in a black dress coat and holding a long staff. He looked briefly around the vault, stood and bowed slightly to Sessine, then sat again.

'Count Sessine,' he said. 'The King has already asked me to inform you of the profound shock he experienced at hearing of your murder, and to convey his deepest sympathy to you as well as to those you leave behind. He has also asked me to assure you that everything possible will be done to root out those responsible for this foul crime.'

'Thank you. I would like to request an audience with His Majesty, as soon as possible.'

'His Majesty can spare a short while between other appointments in twenty minutes real - approximately four months subjective - time.'

'I must ask for an emergency meeting before then.'

'I understand your distress and shock, Count Sessine. However, His Majesty is in an important meeting with representatives of the Chapel usurper forces, discussing

peace; informing him of your death and giving him time to express the above-mentioned shock and sympathy has already, perhaps, used up whatever diplomatic slack we have with the Engineer delegation; we cannot possibly incur any further interruption without risking an apparent sleight and the breakdown of negotiations.'

Sessine thought about this. The secretary sat smiling patiently at him. Measuring his words, Sessine spoke again: 'My concern is that the message which appeared to instigate my murder was embedded within a military signal sent from Army HQ, and that this therefore implies either a serious signal-security breach or a traitor in at least the middle-level military.' He paused to let the secretary speak, then went on. 'Has the King authorised a full military investigation?'

'An investigation has been authorised.'

'At what level?'

'A level commensurate with your standing, Count; the high-est level.'

'With full military access immediately?'

'That is not possible; the Army has operational reasons for not being able to reveal such matters precipitously; there are controls, checks and balances which must be negotiated over a minimum real-time scale if one is not to trip a series of automatic security-violation safeguards. The relevant authorisations are of course being sought, but -'

'Thank you, private secretary. Would you put me on to military High Command, level five, and replace?'

The construct had time to look distinctly annoyed before it was replaced with a young soldier in full dress uniform.

'Count Sessine.'

'Is this level five?' Sessine frowned. 'I thought -'

The young soldier stood, quickly drew his ceremonial sword and in the same movement brought it scything above the trolley-table and through Sessine's neck, parting his head from his shoulders.

What? he thought, then everything faded.

He awoke in the tower-bedroom of the ambiently scaled version of Serehfa, alone, on what gave every appearance of being a fine spring morning.

He lay in the bed and looked around. Silk sheets, brocade canopy, oil paintings on the wall, rugs on the floor, wooden panelling, tall windows. He felt washed clean, and distinctly unsettled.

He closed his eyes, said, '*Speremus igitur*,' and opened his eyes again.

His smile was troubled. 'Hmm,' he said quietly.

He got out of bed, dressed in the clothes he had been wearing earlier, and went out onto the balcony.

A dot in the distance, somewhere over the curtain-wall to the west, attracted his attention. A hint of light around it, a thin, hazy trail in the sky behind...

He watched the dot expand, then imagined himself on the fast-tower.

He stood on the gaily painted wooden platform again; the flag snapped in the air above him. He watched the missile tear across the roof-tops below and disappear into the tower where he had been standing a few seconds earlier. The tower erupted; yellow-white flame burst outwards across the balcony, sundering the stones all around that floor and throwing back the tower's roof, releasing a cloud of slates like some flock of disturbed birds.

Straight through the balcony windows. Sessine felt both impressed and depressed.

He did not see or hear what hit him from behind, just glimpsed a searing light and felt the concussive blast.

He awoke in bed, alone, on what gave every appearance of being a fine spring morning.

He lay there for a second, then imagined himself to the summit of the fast-tower.

/He saw the first missile, crossing the curtain-wall to the west. He turned and saw the other, approaching from the east, level with him and approaching fast. He remembered the feeling he had had when he'd heard the shots inside the scree-car and ducked back in to see what was happening. He imagined the view from the middle of the inner bailey,

/then from a tower on the curtain-wall to the south,

/then from the north,

/then from the eastern gate complex,

/then from some low hills outside the castle altogether.

The whole edifice detonated, disappearing in a scattering series of explosions, flickering light, throwing stones and timbers high into the air, black amongst fire.

'Sessine?' He turned, and the image of his first wife was there, standing on the path behind him, as lovely as on the first day they had met. *She never called me -*

She was upon him with the strangle-wire before he could move; gripping him, trapping him with a strength no human had ever possessed.

He awoke in the bed, alone. *What is this! What is going on? Who is -*

Light at the window, something -

Fool!

Then light everywhere.

He awoke in the bed.

'Alandre,' the young maid breathed, alongside him, reaching.

/He was on the deck of the clan yacht, at anchor one evening off Istanbul; the

Bosporus glittered darkly beneath, the twin bridges arced above. His heart thudded. He looked quickly around. Nobody. He looked up. Something falling from the rail-bridge... he started to imagine - then light again, atomically bright, lighting up all the city...

He awoke.

'Ala- '

/He was in bed, in his apartments in the clan Aerospace's headquarters in the Atlantean Tower.

The doctor looked down at him, his face somehow familiar, his expression regretful. The young doctor fired the gun straight between Sessine's eyes.

He awoke.

'Al- '

/He was in the nursery of the clan's Seattle stronghold. The nurse was above him; the knife came down on his mewls.

And something inside him screamed, *Seven!*

He awoke.

He was in a hotel room; it was small and tawdry-looking. The curtains drawn, the ceiling light on. He was sitting. His heart was hammering, his body covered with cold sweat. He cancelled the fake physical symptoms of his panic then started to imagine being somewhere else... but he was out of places to run, and as he did not know where he was, he suspected that here was as good a place as any to stay a while.

What had happened? What had been going on?

He stood up and went to the window, carefully lifting one corner of the curtains while staying behind the wall, half expecting the arrival of a hail of bullets or another missile the instant he betrayed his position.

He looked out onto a darkened town; a port within a huge, dim space all speckled with small lights. Dark waters lay in the distance beyond wharves and cranes. Spaced regularly in the shadows across the inky glints of waves he could just make out huge pillars, growing out of that broad, buried sea like impossibly perfect steep-cliffed islands and sprouting, spreading at their summits to meet a jet-black vaulted sky more remembered than seen.

He was still in Serehfa, then, underneath it, within the cistern level. The port was called Oubliette. The narrow street outside looked quiet. A few lights showed behind shades on the tall, narrow buildings opposite, and down in the port he could see ships tied against the piers, container cranes swinging slowly to and fro above them, and hints of movement within pools of dim yellow light on the wharves themselves.

He let the curtain fall back, then looked around the room. There was little to search; a small bed, a seat, a table, a screen, a bedside cabinet. A notice on the back of the door said that the room was room 7, floor 7, in the Salvation Hotel.

In the cabinet's drawer, he found a paper envelope.

On it was written, *Alandre Jeovanx*.

It had been his name before promotion. He tore open the envelope.

There was a single sheet of paper folded inside. *Read Me*, it said.

He read it.

4

[Translation](#)

Bascule, ah no dis hard 4 u, but goodness sakes bey it only a dam ant.

It woz a most special & unEEK ant Mr Zoliparia I tel him & I feel responsybil 4 what hapind 2 hir.

Weer inside thi Iball ov thi septentrynal gargoil Rosbrith, in Mr Zoliparia's study. Mr Zoliparia has a fing calld a telifone in his study u can speek in2 (didn evin no he had it - fink heez a bit embrased about it 2 tel thi troof). Nway, he juss got in tuch wif thi gard 2 report whot happind aftir Id insistid, tho heed only report that thi bird had stole a valubil anteik box, not a ant. (Actule, thi box isnt a anteik @ ol but that isn what matters.) Id ½ tryd callin thi gard myself soon as it happind but I no from past xpeeryins they wooden lissen 2 me cos Im yung.

Weed been hopin that maibe thi bird whot had stolen Ergates woz 1 ov them ringed 1s wif cameraz & stuf, or 1 ov them bein followed roun by little buzzir-bugs 4 a wildlife screen program or thi purpisses ov cyantific reserch but I gess it woz a bit ov a long shot & shurenuf thi ansir woz no 2 both. Thi gard took sum detales but Mr Zoliparia duzent hold out much hope ov them doing anythin.

U mussnt blame yoself, it woz a accident, Bascule.

I no that, Mr Zoliparia, but it woz a accident I cood ½ priventd if Id been moar observint & watchful & juss plain diligint in jeneril. What woz I thinkin ov lettin hir eat that bred on thi balstraid like that? Speshily when I seen them birdz in thi distins. I meen; bred! Evrbidy no birds luv bred! (I slap ma hand off ma 4head, finkin what a idiot Ive been.)

O Bascule, ahm sorry 2 on account ov me being di hoast & all; dis happin in ma hoam & ah shood ½ taken moar care 2, but wot's dun is dun.

Is it tho, Mr Zoliparia? U reely think so?

What u mean, yung Bascule?

Am a tellir, Mr Zoliparia, u mussnt 4get that. (I screws up ma Is @ this point, 2 sho him I meen bizniss.) Them birdz -

Bascule, no! U cant go doin dat sorta ting! U crazi or sumtin chile? U onli go & scrambil yor brainz u try any ov dat sorta nonsins.

I juss smile.

I doan no whot u no ov whot a tellir duz but now mite b as good a time as eny 2 tell u if u doan no (them that duz can haply skip thi next 5 or 6 paragraphs & get bak 2 thi storey).

Basikly, a tellir fishiz in2 thi kript & pools out sum ole boy or girl & asks them qwestyins & ansirs there qwestyins. Iss kinda ½ archilojikil reserch & ½ soshil wurk if u want 2 look @ it coldly & r happy 2 ignoar whot peepil col thi spiritual side ov it.

Coarse its all a bit murki & weerd down thare in thi kript & moast bags (thas Boys & Girls remembir) get a bit spooked - even thinkin about contactin thi ded let alone actuly welcomin them in2 ther heds & ½in a natter wif them. 2 us tellirs tho iss juss sumthin we do as a mattir ov coarse & no bothir... well, providin u r carefil, naturily (admitidly ther arnt a lot ov old tellirs aroun, tho thas moastly coz ov whot they col naturil waistidje).

Nway, thi point is that tellirs yooz their natcheril skills 2 delv in2 thi kript, partly 2 find out things from thi past & partly 2 fulfill pledjes & bqwests whot thi relivint ordir has taken on. Mi order is calld thi Little Big Brothers ov thi Rich & we orijnaly jus lookd aftir thi inkripted soles ov peepil whot were very well off indeed thang-u-veri-mutch but our remit has brovind a bit sins then & now parrently weel tok 2 eny ole rif raf if they got sumfink inarestin 2 say.

Now, thi thing iz this; juss as thi deeper u go in2 thi kript thi hazier & more corosiv doun thare things get, so thi longir it is since u died thi moar kinda disoshiated u get from realty, &, evtule, evin if u want 2 stay in sum kinda hoomin form, u juss cant support that sort ov complexity, & 1 ov thi things that mite hapin after that is that u get shunted in2 thi animal kingdum; your personality, such as it is by then, is transferd in2 a panfir or a roc or cat or a simurg or a shark or eegil or whotevir. Iss aktuly considered sumfink ov a priviledge; loadsa bags fink thers nuffink betir than bein a bird or sumfink simla.

Ov coarse, theez animalz iz stil linkd in2 thi kript by ther own inplants, & thusly ther brains is potenshily availabil 2 a tellir, tho this is a pritti irregulir - not 2 say kinda daingerous - oakurinse. Irregulir bcoz nobody evir duz it. Dainjerous bcoz whot u r basikly tryin 2 do as a tellir in such a sircumstans is try 2 fit yoor hoomin size mind inside a bird size 1. Takes sum finessin, but Ive always had this theery that bcoz my thots cum out wif a spin on them, so 2 speek, Im speshily good @ coapin wif 2 diffrint thot modes @ 1nce, & so moar than capabil ov takin on thi task ov becomin a bird & flyin in2 ther airea ov thi kript.

Thiss, u may have gatherd, is xactly whot I am proposin 2 do, & Mr Zoliparia is not 2 enamerd ov thi idea.

Bascule, please, he sez, attempt 2 retain a sens ov proportshin. Iss onli a ant & u r onli a junior tellir.

4shore, Mr Zoliparia, I sez. But am a tellir whot haznt evin bgun 2 b stretchd yet. Am a grate tellir. Am a tottil blinkin hot-shot tellir & I juss no I can fynd that bird.

& do whot? Mr Zoliparia shouts. De dam ant is probly ded! Dat birdz probly 8 it by now! Y u want 2 torture youself by findin dat out?

If so, I want 2 no, but nway I dont fink that's rite; Im bankin on her ½in been dropt by that big bird & am hopin it mite remember whare, or -

Bascule u r upset. Y doan u juss go bak 2 di ordir & try 2 cam down & tink dis -

Mr Zoliparia, I sez qwietly, I thank u 4 your consern but I intend 2 do this no mattir whot u say. Cheerz oil thi saim.

Mr Zoliparia lukes @ me diffrint than he has in thi past. Ive always liked him & Ive always loked up 2 him evir sins he woz 1 ov thi peepil they sent me 2 when they reelized I tolkd farely normil but I thot a bit funy, + I tend 2 do whot he sez - it woz him sed Perhaps u wood make a good tellir, & him whot suggestid I keep a jurnil, witch this is whot u r readin - but this time I doan mutch care whot he finks, or @ least I do but I doan mutch care how bad it makes me feel goan agenst his advice bcoz I juss no I ½ 2 do this.

O deer Bascule, he sez & shakes his hed. I do bleev u do intend 2 do this & iss a sorry ting 4 eny persin 2 do 4 sumtin as insignifcant as a ant.

Iss not thi ant, Mr Zoliparia, I sez feelin ded grownup, itz me.

Mr Zoliparia shakes his hed. Iss u & no godam sens ov proporshin, dats wot it is.

Ol thi saim, I sez. It woz mi frend; she woz relyin on me 2 keep hir safe. Juss 1 try, Mr Zoliparia. I feel I O hir that.

Bascule, please, juss tink -

Mind if I juss hunkir down heer, Mr Zoliparia?

Givn u detrminded, Bascule, heer is probly bettir than lswhare but am not happi about dis.

Doan wury, Mr Zoliparia. Woant take a second, litterly.

Der anytin I can do?

Yep; let me boro that pen ov yoors. Ta. Now am goanta sit up here - I sqwatted on a chair, ma chin on ma nees, & put thi pen in ma mouf.

'en 'i 'en 'all ou' 'a 'ouf, I start 2 tel him...

Whot u sayin, Bascule?

I take thi pen out ma mouf. I woz juss sayin, when thi pen falls out ov ma mouf, let it hit thi carpet then shaik me & shout Bascule, fast awake!

Bascule, fast asleep, Mr Zoliparia sez.

Awake! I yelz. Not wide asleep; fast awake!

Fast awake, Mr Zoliparia repeats. Bascule, fast awake. He shakes his hed & heez shakin. O deer Bascule, o deer.

If yor that wurried, Mr Zoliparia, catch thi pen b4 it hits & then wake me. Now, just giv me a minit heer... I settil in2 place, gettin comfterbil; thisil onli take a sekind but u ½ 2 feel settld & redy & @ peece.

Rite. Am prepaired.

Thisl all hapin very qwickli, Mr Zoliparia; u redi? I put thi pen bak in ma mouf.

O deer Bascule.

Here we go.

O deer.

& so its off 2 thi land ov thi ded 4 yoors truli 4 thi sekind time 2day, onli this time iss a bit moar serieus.

Iss like sinkin in2 thi sky on thi other side ov thi Erf wifout goin thru thi whole fing furst. Iss like flotin in2 thi erf & thi sky @ thi time, becomin a line not a point, plumin thi depths & assendin thi hites & then branchin out like a tree, like a plane tree, like a hooj bush interminglin wif every bit ov thi erf & thi sky, & then iss like every 1 ov those bits isnt juss a bit ov erf or a molicule ov air eny more, iss like ol ov them is suddenly a littl system ov ther own; a book, a library, a persin; a world... & yoor connectid wif ol ov it, ignorin barryers, like u r a brain sell deep in thi grainy grey mush ov thi brain all closed in but joined up 2 loadsa uthir sells, awash in ther communicashin-song & set free by that trapt meshin.

Boompf-badood; slapadowndoodie thru thi topmost obvyis layers whot corrisponds 2 thi upper levils ov thi brain - thi rashinil, sensibil, easily understood layers - in2 thi furst ov thi deepdown floors, thi bit under thi cerebral, under thi crust, under thi fotosphere, under thi obvyis.

Iss heer u ½ 2 b a littl bit careful; iss like bein in a not-so-saloobrius neyborhood ov a big dark city @ nite - only more complicaitd than that; mutch moar so.

In here, thi trik is thinkin rite. Thas all u ½ 2 do. U ½ 2 think rite. U ½ 2 b dairing & koshis, u ½ b ver sensibil & totily mad. Moast ov ol u ½ 2 b *cluvir*, u ½ 2 b *ingenius*. U ½ 2 b abil 2 use whotevir is aroun u, & thass whot it reely cums doun 2; thi kript is whot they col self-referenshil, which meens that - up 2 a poynt - it meens whot u want it 2 meen, & displays itself 2 u as ur best abil 2 understand it, so iss up 2 u reely whot yoos u make ov it aftir that; iss ol about injinooty & thass y itz a yung persins meedyum, frangly.

Nway, I new whot I wantid so I thot *bird*.

& suddinly I woz up in sum dark bildin abuv thi wee twinkly lites ov thi city, up thare wif big metajic skulptyirs ov feersum lookin birds & ther woz lots ov screeches & skwaks about thi place but u couodnt c no birds jus heer thi noyse they made & it woz sort ov crusty-soft under foot & smeld asidic (or alkline; 1 ov thi 2).

I snifd about, walkin qwietly, then hopt up on2 1 ov thi big metallic birds & sqwatted there, wings by mi sides, stairin out ovir thi lite-spekd blak grid ov thi citi & not blinkin juss lookin 4 movemint, & lowrin ma hed now & agen & pokin in under mi wings wif thi twig whot I held in ma beak, juss like I woz preenin or sumfin.

Noticd ma wake-up code in thi form ov a ring roun ma lef leg. Handy 2 no it woz thare, juss in case fings go rong an/or Mr Zoliparia flufs his line.

... Staid ther a while, payshint as u like, juss watchin.

Wot u wan then? sed a voice from abuv & behind.

Nufink mutch, I sed, not lookin. I woz aware ov thi twig in ma beak but it din seem 2 make speakin eny hardir.

U muss want somthen, u woodin b heer otherwyse.

U got me thare, I sed. Am here lookin 4 sumbodi.

O?

Loss a frend ov mine. Roost-mate. Like 2 trace her.

We all got frenz we like 2 find.

This 1 very recent; ½ hour ago. Taken from thi septentrynil gargoil Rosbrith.

Sep whort?

Meens - (this is complicated, referin 2 thi uppir data levil whyle am down here in thi furst circle ov thi basement, but I do it) - meens northern, I sed (blimey). Rosbrith. Norf-west on thi grate hol.

Taken by whort?

Lammergeier, I sed. (Didn no that neevir til now.)

Reely. Whot u given in return?

Am heer amn I? Im a tellir. U got ma eer now. Il not forget u if u help. Luke in me if u want; c whot I say is tru.

Not blynd.

Didn fink u wer.

This bird; u catch eny distingushin marx on it?

It woz a lammergeir, thas oll I no, but ther cant b oil that meny ov them aroun thi norf-west cornir ov thi grate hol ½ a our ago.

Lammergeiers r a bit funy theez days, but Il ask aroun.

Fanks.

(flutr ov wings, then:)

Well, u mite b in luk -

- then ther waz a mega-sqwak & a scream & I had 2 turn roun & luke & ther woz a huge grate bird beetin in thi air behind & abuv mi, holdin anuthir torn bird in 1 ov itz talons; thi big bird woz red-black on black & feerse as deth & I cood feel thi wind ov its flappin snappin wings on ma fayce. It hung in thi air, wingz spread beetin like somethin feersly crucified, shaken thi ded bird in its talons so that itz blud spatterd in my Is.

Y u askin qwestions, child? it screemd.

Tryin 2 find a frend ov mine I sed, keepin cam. I clumpd aroun on mi perch 2 fayce thi big red-black bird. Twig stil in ma beak.

It held up one foot; 3 talons up, one down. C these three clawz? it sed.

Yup. (Mite as well play along 4 now, but Im checkin thi exits, finkin ov ma leg-ring wif thi wake-up code on it.)

U got 2 thi count ov 3 2 moov yoor beak bak 2 realty u skin job, thi red burd sez. U heer me? Am startin countin now: 3.

I juss lookin 4 ma frend.

2.

Iss juss a ant. Am only lookin 4 a litil ant who woz my frend.

1.

Wass thi fukin problim heer? Doan a creetch get no respect 4 - (& am shoutin now angry & I drop thi twig from ma beak).

Then thi big red birdz foot cums out like itz bleedin leg is telescopic & zaps itself 2wards ma hed & raps round it & sqwishes me down b4 I can do anythin & I feel maself trapt & sqwelched down thru thi fabric ov thi metallic bird am perched upon

& down thru thi bildin its part ov & down thru thi city & down thru thi grid & down thru thi erf beneaf & down & down & down & whots wurse I can feel that thi ring roun ma leg that had my wake-up code on it has gon like that big red bird swiped it when it hit me an shurenuf I cant fink whot thi hel thi wake-up coad is meenwhile am stil goin down an down an down an am finkin,

O shit...

THREE

1

'Ah, this must be she. Good morning, young lady.'

'Good morning, young lady.'

'I beg your...? Ah, well, no, though I am half flattered.'

'You not young lady, no?'

'Neither young nor remotely lady-like. My name is Pieter Velteseri; I understand you may not know your own name, but -'

'No, I do not.'

'Quite. Well, first let me welcome you to our estate and to our house, both of which are called Jenahbilys. Please; do sit down... Well, I meant... Ah, perhaps the seat might be more appropriate? There; behind you. You see? Like this.'

'Ah, not floor; seat.'

'There you are. Just so. Now... Ah, would you excuse me?... Gil, I can see this young lady's pudenda, and despite my surfeit of years it is most off-putting, if more in the memory than in the tumescence. Might we clothe her in something more, ah, complete than what would appear to be merely your jacket and fundamentally nothing else?'

'Sorry, uncle.'

'... What are you looking at me for?'

'Come on, Lucia; you could lend her something of yours.'

'Tech. She hasn't even been *washed* or anything yet; have you seen the state of her feet? Oh, all right...'

'... My nephew's friend has gone to fetch you some further attire. I thought she might take you, and... well, never mind. Perhaps you would like to come to the window over here? The view of the formal gardens is particularly pleasing. Gil, perhaps our young guest would like something to drink.'

'I'll attend to it, unc.'

The second man - of course not a lady, which was to do with women, like herself (and she had to search for the word she now felt; it was *embarrassed*) - the second man, who was old and a little stooped and had a crinkled face, motioned to one of the windows, and they both walked there while the first man, the young one, closed his eyes for a second. The view from the window was of a gravel and flower garden, arranged in a strange, half-swirling, half-geometric pattern. Small tracked machines rolled amongst the blooms, clipping and sorting.

A little later a small wheeled thing appeared in the room, humming quietly and carrying a tray which held four glasses, several bottles and some small filled bowls. Then Lucia Chimbers appeared with some clothes and took her to a side room where she showed her how to put on shorts, pants and a shirt.

They stood looking at their reflections in a long mirror for a moment. 'You on something deep?' Lucia Chimbers asked quietly.

She looked at Lucia Chimbers.

'Because if you are, I'd like to know what it is.'

'On something deep,' she repeated, frowning (and watched herself frown, in the mirror). *'In something deep, mean you? I mean; you mean?'*

'Never mind.' The other woman sighed. 'Let's wheel you out there. See if the old man can get any sense out of you.'

'I believe she may be an asura,' Pieter Velteseri said, over lunch.

He had spent the morning patiently questioning the girl in an effort to determine what memories she possessed. From this he knew that she had appeared in the clan vault a few hours earlier, seemingly artificially rebirthed in the manner a family member might be were there no clan member suitably pregnant at the time of their scheduled reconstitution. Being born without warning, alone, and in adult form did make the girl unique in his experience, however. She had an extensive vocabulary but seemed uncertain how to employ it, though he had gained the impression that her linguistic skills had developed considerably just in the two hours or so of their conversation.

Gil and Lucia had sat in on his gentle inquisition for a while, then grown restless and gone for a swim. Lunch-time had reconvened them, though if he had been hoping to impress his nephew and Lucia with their guest's new-found articulacy it seemed Pieter was to be disappointed; the presence of large quantities of food seemed to have temporarily driven all thought of conversation from the girl's head.

They sat at one end of the dining-room table. The windows were open to the veranda and the curtains billowed slowly.

Pieter sat on one side of the table while the young lovers sat on the other, with their strange, fey guest at its head, a generously proportioned napkin tucked into the neck of her blouse and - another spread across her lap while she frowned and sighed and dipped her head down almost level with the table while she attempted to manipulate a knife, fork and spoon to the end of eating the food on her plate.

Gil and Lucia exchanged looks. Pieter watched the young woman at the head of the table attack a lobster claw with the wrong end of a heavy spoon, and sighed.

'On reflection, perhaps seafood salad was a mistake,' he said.

Bits of red-white carapace spattered across the table; their guest made an appreciative growling noise at the back of her throat and after sniffing at the meat

revealed, sucked it out and sat back, chewing open-mouthed and smiling happily while looking at the other three diners. A cleaning servitor hummed and clicked from under the table and busied itself on the floor, gathering up the bits of food and debris the girl had let drop. She looked down at it, grinning, and swept more shards of lobster off the table and onto the floor.

'What,' Lucia asked Pieter, 'exactly is an assurer?'

'I can't find it either,' Gil said, smiling at Lucia and squeezing her hand. Like her, he was eating one-handed.

'An asura,' Pieter said, secretly pleased, though wondering if the two young people really couldn't find the word in their habitua or were just being polite. 'A Hindi word, originally,' he told them. 'It used to mean a demon or a giant opposed to the gods.'

Lucia wore that annoyed look Pieter had come to recognise as her reaction to anything that was not expressed through implants and which she thought ought to be. It was fairly common for those in the first inflationary rush of infatuation, lust or love to embrace almost exclusively the inner voicelessness of implant-articulation in preference to the somehow physically off-putting and clumsy medium of normal speech, and although Pieter did not think Lucia jealous of their guest - any more than Gil seemed able to spare the girl more than the most cursory attention - she did seem to resent both the simple distraction she represented and the fact Pieter had suggested they communicate by speech in deference to the girl's seeming total lack of implants.

'Hindi, hmm,' Gil said, obviously having to look the word up. 'So what does "asura" mean nowadays?' He smiled at Lucia, squeezing her hand again under the table.

'A sort of... natural, one might say,' Pieter replied (mischievously, knowing they would both have to look that up too). He spooned a little crabmeat and ate contemplatively while watching the girl flick bits of shell further and further away across the floor so that the cleaning machine described a zig-zag course towards the windows. 'Something generated semi-randomly by the corpus or some separate system for reasons of its own,' he went on, dabbing at his lips with a napkin. 'Usually to do with some required change impossible to achieve from within. A non-predictable variable; a wildness.'

Lucia glanced at the girl. 'Why does she have to appear here, though?'

Pieter shrugged. 'Why not?'

'She's nothing to do with the clan, is she? She doesn't belong to any of our families,' Lucia said, her voice low, though the girl didn't seem to be listening, still throwing lobster-chunks towards the window. 'So why does she have to pop out of *our* vault; bit cheeky, isn't it?'

'I think it may have been sheer chance,' Pieter said, frowning a little. 'Whatever; she is here now and we must decide what to do with her.'

'Well what does one normally do with... asuras?' Gil asked.

'Gives them shelter and does not try to impede them when they want to move on, I believe,' Pieter said. 'Rather like any guest.'

The girl aimed and threw; a piece of lobster-claw bounced at the edge of the window between the softly blowing curtains, ricocheted through the rails of the balcony outside and disappeared down towards the garden. The pursuing cleaning machine trundled as far as the rails, and then stopped. It clicked a couple of times, then retreated into the room. The girl looked disappointed.

'Why, where's she going to go?' Lucia asked.

'I don't know,' Pieter admitted, nodding at their guest. 'Though she may.' He sipped at his wine.

They looked at her. She was holding another section of lobster above her, squinting up into it, one-eyed. Gil and Lucia exchanged glances.

'But what exactly is she supposed to *do*?' Gil asked.

'Again, I have no idea,' Pieter admitted. 'She may provide some fresh input for some section of the corpus, or possibly - indeed probably - she is what one might call a system test; a specimen signal-carrier whose only purpose is to ensure everything is in working order should the medium require to be used in anger - as it were - at some point in the future.'

Lucia and Gil looked at each other again.

'Could this have something to do with the Encroachment?' Gil asked, his expression serious. He squeezed Lucia's hand again.

'It might,' Pieter said, waving his fork while inspecting the oysters on his plate. 'Probably not.'

'Suppose she isn't just a signal test?' Gil asked with deliberated patience. 'What does she do *then*?' He refilled Lucia and his glasses.

'Why then, she will probably find her way to wherever she is supposed to find her way and deliver her message.'

'She can hardly talk in joined-up words,' Lucia snorted. 'How is she going to deliver a message?'

'She doesn't even have any implants,' Gil added.

'The message may be in an unusual medium,' Pieter said. 'It might lie in the precise pattern of flecks in the iris of one eye, or in one of her finger-prints, or in the disposition of her intestinal flora, or even in her own genetic code.'

'And this message is something the data corpus knows and yet doesn't know?'

'Quite. Or it may come from some system which isn't part of the main corpus and which can't communicate with it.'

The girl was watching Gil drink from his glass. She imitated the action and spilled only a little.

'*Machines* that can't *communicate*?' Lucia said, laughing. 'But that's...' she waved her hand.

'Diseases are communicated, too,' Pieter said quietly, folding his napkin. Their young guest seemed to be practising gargling.

'So?' Lucia said, with a contemptuous glance at the girl.

'Well, anyway,' Gil said emolliently, patting Lucia's hand while addressing his uncle, 'She's here and our guest; she may even prove amusing if she is so preternaturally naive. At least she appears to be house-trained.'

'So far,' Lucia said. 'Anyway; isn't there somebody we ought to tell about her?'

'Oh, I suppose one might report her arrival to the authorities,' Pieter said easily. 'But there's no hurry.'

The girl sat back, belched, looked pleased with herself, then farted. She appeared

slightly taken aback, then just grinned.

'Air,' she said, nodding to the other three people round the table.

Pieter smiled. Gil guffawed. Lucia stared at the girl for a moment. Then set her napkin down primly. 'I am going to lie down,' she announced, rising.

Gil got up too, still holding Lucia's hand. 'Me too,' he said, smiling broadly.

Pieter returned their nodded farewells and watched the two young people leave.

He turned to the girl. She wiped one bloused forearm messily across her mouth then thumped her chest hollowly with her fist.

'Asura,' she said, grinning triumphantly, and burped again.

Pieter smiled thinly. 'Quite so.'

2

'The signal came at noon yesterday,' Clispeir said quickly, quietly. 'The observatory was stationary. Gad,' she laughed gently, 'all our preparations and cryptography went for nothing; the signal came in light all right, but not in any ancient code or any fancy wavelength, and not in frequency or amplitude modulation; they just manipulated the beam to make actual letters appear upon the plain, shining lines like the reflections waves cast on a wall or ceiling.'

'What did it say?' Gadfium asked. They sat together on the small bed, curtains drawn, light dimmed, whispering like school girls conspiring a prank. She was not sure if it was some ancient memory that made her head spin, some genuine reaction to the impoverished air in the observatory, or the import of what they were talking about.

Clispeir laughed. 'At first it just said, "Move",' she said. 'Oh, Gad, you should have seen us. We stared at the letters on the salt for a full minute before we pulled ourselves together and decided that even if we *had* gone plain-crazy, and it was some mass hallucination, we might as well shift. So we did; we moved a couple of

metres. The letters stayed where they were, then disappeared. When they reappeared it was as though they had followed us.'

'But what did they -?'

'Ssh! I'm coming to that!' She pulled on a chain round her neck and drew a slim pen from inside her tunic, unscrewed it and pulled out a piece of flimsy paper which she unrolled and handed to Gadfium. 'They came in groups every eight seconds. Here; read for yourself.'

Gadfium stared at the scribbled writing.

* (flash)

MOVE /

NOW MOVE BACK /

THANK YOU/

LOVE IS GOD / ALL ARE HALLOWED / * WE HAVE - NOTED / THAT YOU ATTEMPTED / TO COMMUNI-CATE WITH / US IN THE PAST / HOWEVER STAND-BY / SYSTEMS THEN FUNCTIONING / WERE NOT ENABLED TO / REPLY OR INSTRUCTED / TO COM-MENCE / OUR REACTIVATION / THIS HAS NOW / OCCURRED DUE TO / SOLAR SYSTEM'S APPROACH /TO INTERSTELLAR/ DUST CLOUD / WHICH EVENT YOU CALL / ENCROACHMENT / THIS CONCERNS US ALL / CURRENT ESTIMATES / OF EFFECT ON EARTH / GIVE CAUSE FOR / ALARM / WE HAVE NOT / RECEIVED NOR DO / WE BELIEVE YOU HAVE / RECEIVED ANY / COMMUNICATION FROM / OFF-PLANET THERE / FOR WE MUST ACT / ALONE TO SAVE / OURSELVES / ACTION OPTIONS / INCLUDE CURRENT / LOWER-LEVELS / ATTEMPT TO CON-STRUCT / ROCKETS FOR / EVACUATION / THIS IS ALMOST / CERTAIN TO FAIL / IT IS KNOWN / SEC-TIONS OF LOWER- / LEVELS COMPETE / AGGRES-SIVELY FOR / SUBSIDIARY SPACE / TECHNOLOGIES BUT THIS / TOO IS UNLIKELY / TO SUCCEED / ALSO NOTE DANGER / WORKINGS IN L5SWSOLAR / * HALLOWED BE / THE CENTRE THE / ABSENCE THAT / GIVES STRENGTH / GIVES MEANING / * THREATEN SIGNIFICANT / FABRIC INTEGRITY LOSS / CORRECT ANSWER MUST / LIE IN CRYPTOSPHERE / OR AN ASSOCIATED / BUT COMMUNICATIVELY / REMOTE SUB-SYSTEM / WE BELIEVE AS / WE BELIEVE YOU DO / THAT TECHNOLOGY EXISTS / TO SAVE US ALL / BUT ACCESS TO / DISCOVERY OF THIS / TECH-NOLOGY EVADES / US AND WE ARE / UNABLE TO CONTACT / CRYPTOSPHERE / DIRECTLY DUE TO / CURRENT CHAOTIC / INFECTIOUS STATE / OF SAME / GIVEN RUMOURED / EXISTENCE OF EMERGENCY / META-PROTOCOLS / WE THEREFORE URGE / YOU TO REMAIN / VIGILANT AS SHALL / WE FOR ADVENT / OF EXTERNAL DATA- / CARRYING EVENT

OR / SYSTEM-EMISSARY / (ASURA) / PLEASE ALSO NOTE / WE BELIEVE RULING / SECTIONS OR LOWER- / LEVELS KNOW THEIR / APPARENT ATTEMPTS / TO ESCAPE CERTAIN / TO FAIL / WHY IS THIS / WE QUESTION / REPLY THROUGH / HELIO SEMAPHORE OR / SIGNAL-LAMP ONLY / * LOVE IS FAITH / IS UNKNOWING / BE ALL HALLOWED / IN THE EYE OF / NOTHING / SHANTI / END *

She couldn't take it all in; she started, got half-way through, lost it again, started more slowly, then read it in full a sec-ond time.

By the end of it, Gadfium was staring at the piece of paper; she could feel her eyes bulging from her face and sense the tension in the surrounding skin. Her head still felt as though it was spinning. She gulped, looked at the smiling, shining face of Clispeir.

There was a knock at the cabin door. 'Ma'am?' Rasfline asked, voice muffled.

Gadfium cleared her throat. 'I'm alive, Rasfline,' she called, her voice shaking. 'Just let me rest. Ten minutes.'

'Very well, ma'am.' She could hear his hesitation.

'Yes, Rasfline?'

'We should not stay much longer, Chief Scientist... and also, there is an urgent message from the Sortileger's office. He would like to see you.'

'Inform him I'll be on my way in ten minutes.'

'Ma'am.'

They waited a few moments, then Clispeir seized the other woman's shoulders, glancing at the paper Gadfium held. 'I know some of it seems like nonsense, but isn't it just the most exciting thing?'

Gadfium nodded. She put one shaking hand to her brow and patted Clispeir's shoulder with the other hand. 'Yes, and very dangerous,' she said.

'You really think so?' Clispeir said.

'Of course! If Security hear about this, we're all lost.'

'You don't think if you could somehow get this to the King he'd, well, have a change

of heart? I mean: realise that the best thing was for us all to work tog -?'

'No!' Gadfium said, appalled. She shook the other woman's shoulders.

'Clispeir! The message itself mentions the King and his pals seem to have some secret agenda; if we tell them we know they'll just silence us!'

'Of course, of course,' Clispeir said, smiling nervously. 'You're right.'

'Yes,' Gadfium said, 'I am.' She took a deep breath. 'Now, we have ten minutes - may I keep this?' She held up the sheet of paper.

'Certainly! You'll have to make your own copies for the others.'

'That's all right. Now, as I was saying; we have ten minutes to decide what to do.'

3

The Palace was situated in the Great Hall's central lantern, a tall octagonal construction protruding from the centre of the steeply pitched roof which in a humanly scaled version of Serehfa would have been open and hollow and have helped light the Hall's interior below.

The Palace filled a hundred tall storeys within the lantern and projected downwards into the Great Hall for another ten levels; those lower floors were mostly devoted to the Security services and their equipment. Lush gardens and broad terraces graced its outer walls, and within it were housed its own great halls, ballrooms and ceremonial spaces. Its summit was capped by further walled gardens and a small airfield.

His Majesty King Adijine VI sat in the great solar, at one end of a mighty table too long to be used for purely vocal discussion without amplification. He listened to the chief ambassadorial emissary for the Engineers of the Chapel as he forcefully outlined some subsidiary position on possible technological cooperation should the hoped-for peace be forthcoming. The emissary's voice boomed out across the hall. Possibly, thought the King, the emissary would not have required amplification.

The chief ambassadorial emissary was a fully sentient human-chimeric; a man in the guise of an animal - in this case *ursus maritimus*, a polar bear. Such creatures were generally frowned upon; animals were seen as the final resting place - or at any rate one of the last resting places - for the crypt-corroded souls of the long dead, but the clan Engineers had a tradition of such beasts. It had been something of an aggressive statement for the Chapel usurpers to make, appointing such a being as their main representative at the talks. Adjine didn't care.

He was finding the chief ambassadorial emissary's tirade tiring; certainly in the course of providing the bear's body with vocal equipment capable of reproducing human speech the Chapel scientists had created a powerful and profoundly bassy instrument, but one could grow weary of it all the same, and the man within the beast ought to leave the sort of detail he was now dealing in to his retinue. However, as well as liking the sound of his own voice, the chief ambassadorial emissary seemed unable to delegate effectively, and Adjine had rather lost interest in the substance of what was now being discussed.

He switched away.

Like the other Privileged, the King had no implants, save for those which would be used only once, to record and transmit his personality when he died. Unlike most of them he had access to technologies that allowed him the benefits of implants without the drawbacks, giving him unrestrained one-way access to all those with implants and - in the right circumstances - even those without them. It did mean he had to wear the crown to make it all work, but he had a choice of several attractive models of crown, all of which were tastefully designed and sat lightly on one's head.

In theory the regal paradigm best expressed the reality of modern power - better than a commercial, civil or military archetype for example - and certainly it seemed that people were happy enough with a kind of benignly dictatorial meritocracy which at any given moment looked somewhat like a real monarchy -with primogeniture and fully hereditary status - but wasn't.

Actually he suspected few people these days really believed that in the past kings and queens had been chosen by the accident of birth (and this when it really had been an accident and even their crude attempts at improving their bloodstock tended to result in in-breeding rather than regal thoroughbreds). Equally, though, the sheer grandiosity of the stage that Serehfa itself presented might be seen to demand an imperial repertoire.

The King entered the minds of the men behind the walls.

Twenty troops of his bodyguard were concealed behind the paper partitions lining the room. He scanned each quickly - on principle, really, they were thoroughly programmed - and then focused on their commander. He was watching the scene in the hall on a visor monitor. Adijine followed the man's slow sweep of the view and listened to quiet system chatter coming over his audio implants. Head-ups flickered on and off as the guard commander's gaze fell on individuals in the room.

His gaze settled on the King for a second, and Adijine had the always rather strange experience of looking at himself through another's eyes. He looked fine; handsome, tall, regal, impressively robed, the light crown sitting straight on his curly black locks, and by his expression paying due but not deferential attention to what the polar-bear emissary was saying.

Adijine admired himself for a while longer. He had been bred to be King; not in the ancients' crude hit-or-miss interpretation of the words but in the literal sense that the crypt had designed him; given him the aspect, bearing and character of a natural ruler before he'd even been born, selecting his physical and mental attributes from a variety of sources to make him handsome, attractive, charming, gracious and wise, balancing wit against gravitas, human understanding against moral scrupulousness and a love of the finer things in life against an urge towards simplicity. He inspired loyalty, was difficult to hate, brought out the best in men and women and had great but not total power which he had the sense and modesty to use sparingly but authoritatively. Not for the first time, Adijine thought what a damn fine figure of a man he was.

He looked like an absolute ruler, even though he wasn't; he shared his power with the twelve representatives of the Consistory. They were his advisers, or better, his board; he was managing director. He controlled the physical realm of the structure through the other clans, the personal loyalty he commanded from the masses, and the Security services (now including the newly formed Army), while the men and women of the Consistory spoke for the crypt itself and the elite body of Cryptographers who formed the interface between the data corpus and humanity. It was a nicely balanced arrangement, as was proven by the fact it had existed for multi-generations of monarchs. Nothing had disturbed the calm face of old Earth for millennia until that Nessian cloak of darkness had started to stain the heavens.

Adijine watched as the guard commander's gaze curved above his King, then around him, then resumed its slow sweep.

Adijine had hoped to find the man day-dreaming, but the guard commander wasn't thinking of anything at all; he was on automatic pilot, watching, listening, being professional. He did day-dream, very occasionally (it would have been suspicious in

the extreme had he never done so) but he wasn't at the moment. Adijine switched again.

The colonel-in-chief of the Security services was herself remoting into another mind, watching a meeting of clan Cryp-tography chief programmers through the mind of one who was trying to suppress thoughts of republicanism and revolution. Utterly boring. The colonel-in-chief had a robust, healthy and inventive sex-life and Adijine had spent many a happy hour with her and her partners, but everything seemed to be strictly business right now.

His private secretary was receiving details of a conversation his construct had just had with the shade of the late Count Sessine. Oh yes, thought the King; poor Count Sessine. He'd always felt a certain empathy with Sessine. The private secretary was eating lunch at the same time; anchovy salad. The King detested anchovies rather more than his private secretary adored them, and so switched again.

His seneschal was surveying the zeteticist team monitoring the Chapel usurper party for stray noetic radiations. Boring *and* incomprehensible.

His current favourite courtesan was remoting into the mind of a mathematician contemplating an elegant proof - the court retained many mathematicians, philosophers and aesthetes to provide this sort of vicarious epiphany - but Adijine found the third-hand experience less than absorbing.

How frustrating to attempt to pry on people only to discover they were in turn spying on others.

He checked that the ursine ambassadorial emissary was still talking (he was, and the King allowed himself a pre-emptive gloat at how the emissary was going to feel when the bomb workings in the fifth-level south-western solar came on line and he realised that this entire negotiation was just a materielly inexpensive exercise in time-wasting), then the King dipped into minds elsewhere in Serehfa; a peruker in a tower-roof terrace-town, crouched over her latest extravagant creation; a cliometrician carrelled half-asleep in a bartizan high on the east fifth level; a moirologist petitioning in the sacristy of the northern upper chapel; a funambulist reaping babilia on the pyramid spur of a shell-wall tower.

Prosaic.

He checked on his spyers, clinging to ledges and lintels, shivering on shingles and cinquefoils, hooked and netted under hoardings and machicolations or just crawling like half-frozen fleas through the gilled vertical forest of high altitude babilia while

they watched the lofty, cold, snowy slopes and plains of the high castle for enemy movement, or just something interesting... Another one dead on the tenth-level northern pentice; the spyer-master Yastle insisted acclimatised men could survive at ten thousand metres, but the poor devils kept proving him wrong... A faller from the seventh level butry gable ... One watching the black smoke drift inside the white, a tiny snow-scene within the cold cauldron of the Southern Volcano Room... One on the south side of the octal tower, snow-blinded and raving... Another in a mullion of the seventh-level western clerestory, holding his black, frostbitten fingers up in front of his face, crying, knowing that he would never get down now. Little wonder people thought spyers must be mad. Less dangerous to be a spy.

He examined the view from a few ordinary static cameras and avians; they'd been losing a few of those recently to real birds. Some blip in the crypt's faunastatus, possibly caused by the workings in the L5 SW solar, the Cryptographers said; they were sorting it out.

He looked in on the Palace Astronomical Observatory; they had instruments watching the sun. Radiation was ninety-one per cent of normal; still falling slowly and still decreasing more steeply in the IR-end of the spectrum. Boring and depressing.

He cast his regard further afield, and was briefly in the mind of a scrape-scrounge haunting the quiet ruins of Manhattan, then looked through the eyes of a wild chimeric condor, high above the southern Andes, then in the mind of a young woman surfing at dawn off New Zealand, before becoming part of a chimeric triple-mind within a sounding hump-back in mid-Pacific, then joining a chanting priestess in some midnight temple in Singapore, followed by a drunken night-guard at an ovitronics plant in Tashkent, an insomniac agronomicist in Arabic, a spanceled Resiler preaching unheeded in the smoky chaos of a traumkeller in old Prag, and finally a sleepy balloonist descending through the dusk above Tammanrusset.

All very mind-broadening, but still... ah; the Army colonel-to-the-court was thinking about his new mistress. This was more like it.

... Sessine's wife!

Now, wasn't that a coincidence?

You must have thought seven, in the context of having used up seven out of your eight incrypted lives. Unless you are here for the trivial reason that you have been

very careless with those lives, I assume you're in trouble and under direct - and directed - threat.

So you're here, in the place you prepared for yourself a long time ago, in case. You're safest staying in the room, where everything works the way it would in reality. Using the screen may be risky, leaving certainly is. You're in the crypt's crustal basement, the last sane level before the chaos.

If you know of anybody who remains loyal to you back in the mortal world, you can try to contact them on the screen; it's a brand new address, never been format-collapsed, so the first call is safe. The rest can't be guaranteed.

If you think it's safe to sit and wait to be rescued, look inside the bedside cabinet; there's a book, a phial and a pistol. The book contains a general library, the phial will make you sleep until somebody comes to get you and the pistol will work on others within the confines of the room.

If you're going to leave, head west from here - that's away from the ocean tunnel, which is the direction the room's window faces - until you reach the walls and then turn left and walk until you reach the spill-slucice; take the steps up. There's a smoking-tavern called the Half-way House. The hopfgeist is friendly. I hope you never did tell anybody your most-secret code, or forget it. Or change it.

Remember that if you do leave this room, or transmit more than once from it, you are vulnerable, and that if you commu-nicate openly with the crypt you will betray both your identity and location. You can ask information of other constructs you can trust, and you can move within the crypt. That is all.

You are an outlaw now, my friend; a fugitive.

I am - that is, you are - setting all this up in direct-link just after a snort of Oblivion, so if it works - worked - you may remember once waking up on the floor of your study on a Wednesday evening with a head-full of nothing, wondering what possessed you to take that stuff. And if anything goes wrong, that's because you were drunk when you had the idea.

I'm drunk now but I feel fine, in here. Anyway, Alandre; best of luck. I'll be with you all the way.

Yours.

Sessine folded the sheet of paper and tore it into little strips, slowly and carefully, thinking.

He was in the level of the crypt just above the chaotic regions, where - apparently perversely - things worked much more according to the rules of the real world than they did elsewhere in the corpus. Throw yourself off a roof here and you wouldn't be able to decide suddenly to fly; you'd hit the ground and die. Here, knowing how literally things worked, it was difficult to make the kind of mistake that might lead one to enter the crypt's chaotic regions accidentally; it was the last safeguard the system provided.

He wasn't sure what to do with the sheet of paper he'd just read, so he shrugged to himself and imagined it gone, but of course it didn't go. He ate one of the strips but it tasted bitter and he felt foolish. He shook his head and put the paper scraps in one pocket of his jacket.

He looked at himself in the bedroom mirror. He was wearing... he tried to instigate a search but that, too, didn't work, so he had to resort to a laborious shuffle through his own memory. Grief, what did you call this stuff? And this stuff? A lifeless, ill-fitting, creased blue shirt, a jacket of... tartan? plaid? and the trous... Nimes, de Nimes... neams? Geams? Something like that.

Awful stuff; the shirt felt scratchy, the jacket had great hairy *Ms* of fabric sticking out from it like mussed hair and the geams lad enormous, crude, visible stitches. Late twentieth-century corporate dress would have been his choice, but then maybe that was what people would be looking for, if they were still looking for him.

He inspected the bedside cabinet. The items his note to himself had listed were indeed there. He hefted the pistol; an ancient automatic projectile weapon. It wasn't supposed to work outside the room. He put it down the back of his trousers anyway. He took the little glass phial, too.

He went to the screen. He thought of calling his wife but she was probably still busy fornicating. He was reasonably certain she had started seeing some courtier recently and round about now had always been her favourite time of day for sex. He hadn't bothered trying to find out who the fellow was; it was her business.

He smiled regretfully, thinking of his own latest affair. A girl in the air corps, keen on skiing and ancient flying machines; long red hair and a wicked laugh.

Never again, he thought. Never again.

Well, he could be her incubus, of course, but it would never be quite the same.

Perhaps if he appeared to her in the guise of an antique airman...

... Anyway, he would call Nifel, the clan Security chief; the man was ferociously efficient and he felt they had become friends over the years. Probably never have got into this mess if Nifel had been in charge; trust the Army. Nifel; just the man, Sessine thought. He turned the screen on, sound only.

'Nifel, Mika; officer clan Aerospace, Serehfa.'

'Nifel's agent-construct.'

'Sessine.'

'Count. We have heard. Commander Nifel is shocked and saddened. He -'

'Really? How unoriginal of him.'

'Indeed, sir. He wishes to know why you did not want the in-crypt support systems instigated around your data-set.'

'But I do,' Sessine told the construct, and felt fear. 'I always did. Kindly institute them immediately and tell Nifel the Army may be behind all this; Army intelligence, especially. I am down to my last life in here and whoever killed me the other seven times comes very well-equipped, very well-informed and with the ability to intercept calls from the crypt to specific Army high staff.'

'I shall inform Commander Nifel -'

'Never mind informing him; first get those support systems running and give me some back-up down here.'

'It is being done.' There was a pause. 'What is your location, sir?'

'I'm in...' Sessine hesitated, then smiled. He had died eight times today; seven of them in the space of about a tenth of a second, real time. He was becoming cagey at last.

'First,' he said, 'complete this phrase, if you will: *Aequitas sequitur...*'

'*Legem*, sir.'

'Thank you,' Sessine said.

'... your location, sir?'

'I beg your pardon. Of course. I am near the representation of a place called Kittyhawk, North Carolina, North America.'

'Thank you, sir. Commander Nifel, on your instructions- '

'Would you excuse me for a moment?'

'Sir.'

He switched the machine off and sat on the bed for a moment, his head in his hands.

So there was nowhere in the real world to turn.

Aequitas sequitur funera had been the more mordant version of the saying he and Nifel had settled on.

He stood, looked once around the room, then opened the door and left. The gun's bulk simply vanished from the small of his back as soon as he crossed the threshold. He paused.

Well now, he thought, for the duration of these real days I am like the ancients used to be; restricted to one careful life in a time of danger. Every instant might be his last, and the only memories he could access were those in his own mind.

Nevertheless, he told himself, he was still better off than those of purely mortal ages; he could hope that he would wake up again after his funeral, and rejoin the universe of the crypt for at least a little of eternity. Somehow, though, given the ferocity and apparent profundity of the forces ranged against him, he doubted that was really likely, and suspected he was indeed on his own, with one slim chance of survival. *Desperado*, he thought, and smiled, amused at his fall from power and grace.

He wondered anew how the ancients had endured such fragility and ignorance, then

shrugged, closed the door and walked down the dim, deserted corridor.

Aequitas sequitur funera. Justice follows the grave, not the law.

It had not occurred to him he would ever employ that mutated phrase in circumstances that might give him the chance to verify it.

Or refute it, of course.

4

Translation

Once thi sky woz ful ov birdz; used 2 go blak wif birds it did & birdz roold thi air (wel, apart from thi insectz) but thas all changed now; hoomins came along & startd shootin & trappin & killin them & evin if they've mostly stoppd doin that sort ov fing now theyr stil top ov thi roost partly coz they kild off so meny speesheez & partly coz they make stuf fly, witch when u fink about it duz kind ov spoil it 4 thi birdz on account they had 2 spend milyons ov yeers jumpin off clifs & out ov treez & crashin 2 thi groun & dyin & then doin it ol ovir agen & 1 time miby not crashin qwite so hard but glidin a bit & then a bit moar & a bit moar stil & so on & so on etc & juss jenerily paynstakinly evolvin in this incredibly complicatd way (I meen, lizird-scales in2 feevirs! & holo bones, 4 goonis sakes!) & then theez bleedin hoomins theez ridicolos-lookin bald munkys cum along whot ½ nevir showd thi slitest inarest in flyin nor sine ov adaptayshin 2 thi air whot-so-bleedin-evir & they start buzzin aroun in flyin masheens juss 4 a laf!

Makes u sik. Din evin ½ thi decincy 2 do it slo; one minit theyr flyin mashines is made from paper & spit, then 1 evilushinary blink ov thi i & thi bastirds is playin golf on thi moon!

O, thers stil birdz around olrite but thers a dam site fewr ov them & a lot ov what u wood fink is birds iznt; itz chimerics, or machines, & even if it is thi case that whot looks like a bird is a bird if its a big one its probably not evin got its hed 2 itself but its been taken over by a ded persin. Can't evin ½ peece in yoor own bonce. Birdz av coped wiv tics & flees & lice ol ther evilushinary life but theez dam hoomins r wurse & they get evryware!

Am flapin & skwokin & wokin about ma perch & wishin Mr Zoliparia thi hoomin wude hury up & wake me coz thi moar I think about peepil thi less I like them & thi moar I like bein a bird.

Been almos a week now; whatz keepin thi man? Mi own folt 4 entrustin mi saifty 2 a old geezir. Thats thi trubl wif old persins; slo reactshins. Probly dropt thi pen I askt him 2 catch & is evin now scrabblin about on thi flor 4 it, forgetin thi importint thing is 2 wake me, not get thi bleedin pen. But it must ½ been a minit in reel time by now; shurely evin a old persin cant take that long 2 luke 4 a bleedin pen 4 gooniss sakes.

Howma goan wake up? Am blo thi levil whare u get askd in yoor sleep otomaticly & mi own wake-up code woz taikin from me by that big bastardin bird whot slapt me down heer in thi furst place & evin tho Ive rimemberd it sinse it juss dozen seem 2 b wurkin no moare.

Mi goos, like they say, may wel b cookd.

Am on a perch in a sorta litl dark caiv.

If u can imagine a jiant black brain in a evin biggr dark space, & then zoom in on thi brain & go down inamungst its corugayshins & foldz & c that thi walls ov evry fold is made out ov zillions ov litl boxes wif a perch in it, well, thatz whot this bit ov bird-space is like, in thi kript.

Mi litl box lukes out on2 a uge hangin dark spaice oll fild with shades & thi okzhinal passin bird flappin sloly past (we oll flap slo - thi pretend graviti is less heer). Wel, am sayin its all dark but maybe it iznt realy, maybe thats juss me coz truth 2 tel Iv not been very wel; in fact Im ½ blind, but thats betr than whot I woz a cupl ov days ago, which woz ½ ded.

Therz a dainti flutr ov wings @ thi entranse 2 mi box, & in cums litl Dartlin, whos thi frend Iv made heer.

Ullo, Dartlin, howzit goin?

Fine, Mr Bathcule. I bin tewibwy bizzy, u no; tewibwy bizzy bird i been. I flu thwu 2 thi paliment ov thi cwows & pikd up sum gothip, wood u like 2 here it?

Dartlin is my spy, sort ov. When I imagind miself in heer in thi furst place, bak in Mr Zoliparia's pad, I juss naturily sumhow took on thi apperince ov a hok, which is whot I stil am now. Dartlins a sparo, so in feery we shood b rapter & prey respectivly, but it dozen actule work that way here, not in this bit nway.

Dartlin foun me on thi flor heer. Id juss got bak from thi levil beneeth whare thi reel fun in thi kript starts & I woz in a sory state, let me tel u.

Thi furst cupl ov days wer thi wurst. When thi big burd slapt me down thru all them levils I thot mi time woz up; I meen, I new Id wake up in thi Iball ov thi septentrynal gargoil Rosbrith sooner or later, but I thot I woz goin 2 die in heer, & thats a helluva fing 2 take back 2 yoor waitin mind; scar u 4 life, that can.

Iss ver difficult 2 explain what its like when u go that deep in thi kript, but if u can imagine bein in a sno storm, *flyin* in a *fik* snostorm only thi sno is *multi-colurd* & sum ov it seems 2 b *cumin @ u from evry angil* (& each sno-flake seems 2 sing & hum & sizil & hold littl flashin images & hints ov faces in it & as they go past u heer snatchiz ov speech or music or u feel a emoshin or fink ov a idear or consept or seem 2 remembir sumfink) & if 1 ov thi sno-flakes hits u in thi I u r suddenly in sumbudy elses dreem & its a effort 2 remember who thi hel u r, wel if u can imagine xperyencin oll that when u r feelin a bit drunk & disoreyented then thas a bit like whot iss like, cept wurse ov course. & weerder.

I doan actuly remember much about that bit & I doan think I want 2, Ither. I lernd 2 navigate by thi flavir ov thi surroundin dreemz & graduly sortd sum sens out ov thi gibbersh & tho I got blindid by thi abraidin impact ov ol those sno-flakes & loss thi wordin ov my wake-up code, I fynaly broke bak thru 2 thi darknis & peece & qwiet here, & lay xosted on thi flor amungst lotsa scraggly ded fewirs & solidifyd droppins & thass whare Dartlin foun me.

Heed been terifyd by sumthin & loss thi memry ov how 2 fly & so ended down on thi flor 2, but he could c & so 1nce Id got my strenf bak he got on2 my back between my wings & gided me 2 whare thi sparos gather. They told him how 2 fly agen but they didn feel cumfterbil $\frac{1}{2}$ in a hok around so they foun me this place down here & thass whare Ive been thi last 4 days, gettin mi site back wyle Dartlin flits about makin inkwyries & bein bizy & nozi & gossipin, which is whot sparos like doin nway.

Y I certinly wood like 2 heer whot u herd, litil frend, I tel Dartlin.

Wel, ith tewibwy intiwestin & i hope u doan get fwitened but, tho u r a *feerth* hok aftir ol & pwobibwy doan get fwitened... o, ithn thith a dark ole place? I doan like perchin here on thi edge. May I hop up bethide u?

By ol meens, Dartlin, I sez, shufflin along a bit on my perch.

Thank u. Now; ah yeth, now i doan wan 2 make u nervith or anthin - like i thay, with u bein feerth i cant imagin u no thi meenin ov thi word - but it wood appeer that therth a bit ov a dithturbinth in thi air - o, it givth me a shiver juth lookin @ thoze big feerth talonth ov yourth - whot woth i thayin? - o yeth, a dithturbinth in thi air, affectin evwybody, neer enuf - u no i think i felt it begin mythelf evin tho i woz down on that hawwibl flor @ thi time with uthir thingth on mi mind - wothint hawwibil down thare? I hatid it. Nway, it theemth thi raptorth & carrion-feederth & moatht *ethpethyally* thi lammergeierth ½ been behavin thtrainjly - o! woth that a theegull jutht thare? I new a theegull 1nce, hith name woth...

Thas thi trubl wif sparos; they got a veri limitid tenshun span & r inclind 2 go witterin on 4 ages b4 they get 2 thi poynt, always flutterin off @ tanjints & keepin u gessin whot it is thare actuli token about. Iss veri frustratin but u juss ½ 2 b payshint.

Nway, I bettir parafraze or weel b here oil bleedin day listnin 2 this sparo-crap.

Furst, sum ov thi birdz is lookin 4 sumbody & I get a funy feelin it might b yoors truli. Thi song goes that thers a hunt on 4 sumbodi whoze loose in thi sistim, existin in thi kript &/or thi base-wurld & thers a pryce on ther hed. Apparintly this persins a furst-born, which fits me. Fits lots a peepil, u mite say, but apparintly this persins got sumthin a bit difrint about them; they ½ sum pecularity, sum strainjnis, & thare a signil carryer, carryin a mesidje they mite not evin no they ½.

O I no itz probly not me, but u no how it is; I alwiz felt I woz speshil - juss like evrybodi els - but unlike evrybody els I got this weerd wirin in mi brane so I cant spel rite, juss ½ 2 do evrythin foneticly. Iss not a problim cos u can put eny old rubish thru practikly anyfin evin a chile's toy computir & get it 2 cum out speld perfectly & gramatisized 2 & evin improvd 2 thi poynt whare yood fink u waz Bill bleedin Shaikspir by thi langwidje. Nway, u can probly c y I got a bit paranoyd when I furst herd ol this, & it gets wurse.

Thi stori goze that this persin - mayb a burd, mayb not - is a contaminint from thi kript's nasti ole nethir reejins, a vyris cum 2 corrupt evin more levils, which is qwite a thot & mite evin b a bit worryin juss in case it woz me, onli not evry1 seems 2 bleev this bit ov thi roomir coz its rekind that thi stori cums from thi palas & thi king & thi consisterians r behind it & thay can almost b garanteed not 2 tel thi trooth.

Sum flox rekin its oll 2 do wif thi approachin enkroachin; they fink thi kaotic levils ov thi kript ½ sumhow woken up 2 thi fact that rings cude eventjulie get a bit

hazardis even 4 them.

U c, evrybody's assoomed that thi kript's kaotic levils qwite liked thi idear ov thi enkroachmint; sumthin that ushird in a new ice age (@ thi veri leest) & cut off thi sunlite & kild off praktikly thi hole planitiry ecosfere & juss jenerili gaiv hoomins & byological stuf a hard time sounded rite up thi kript's tree thang-u-veri-mutch, but now that it lukes like thi enkroachmint mite b evin moar seryis than that & possibly fretin thi existins ov thi sun, thi planit, thi cassil & thi kript, well thi beests ov thi kaotic zones ½ fynaly sat up & took notis & fings ½ been stirin evir sins.

Y it shoold b happenin in thi relm ov thi birdz spesifikly is a good qwestyin but thare u r; not much point tryin 2 figir out thi kript.

Xactly *whot* is goin on apart from thi fact that thare lookin 4 sumbodi isnt 2 cleer Ither, thers 2 meny conflickin roomirs (& nway this is ol bein tranmitd by Dartlin, who is a deer litl bird but wude not evin get a oneribil menshin if they woz givin out prizes 4 conversayshinil coherince) but thi poynt ov it ol is that basikly thers big doo-doo flyin aroun & ol thi flox is nervis & a bit hysterikl & enybody whos a bit diffrent is bein sot out, roundid up, interogatid & taken away. Ol ov which mite sound familyir 2 eny studints ov history & juss goze 2 sho that sum fings nevir chainj, leest not when theez pluckin hoomins desined thi orijinil sistim.

So thare u r Mr Bathcule, ithnt it ol tewwibwy, tewwibwy interethtin ?

O its inarestin ol rite, Dartlin, ole chum.

I think tho 2 - o look, i think i juss thaw a flee on yoor leg thare; may I preen u?

I feel like sayin, U shure its a flee not a ant? coz I stil think tendirly ov poor litl lost Ergates now & agen, but I juss sez, Preen away, yung Dartlin.

Dartlin peks roun thi fethery top ov my left leg & eventjulie crunches on a flee.

Yum. Thank u. Wel enway, i wonder whot on erth can b goin on? Who do u think they ah lookin 4? Do u think it cood akchooly b 1 ov uth birdth? I dont think tho, do u?

Probly not.

O, ith not u, ith it? Tee-hee. Tee-hee-hee-hee.

I doan fink so. I juss a poor blindid ole hok.

Well *I* no that, thilly, tho u r a very *feerth* old hok, & gettin less blind ol thi time. I woth jutht kiddin. O luke anuthi thee-gull. Or ith it? Lookth moar like a albino cro, akchooly. Well, i cant thtand awound hea ol day chattin with u; i ½ 2 fly, Dartlin sez, & hops down off thi perch. Ith ther anythin i can get u, Mr Bathcule?

No, Dartlin, am gettin bettir ol thi time, fanks. Juss u keep yoo eers opin tho; I like heerin about ol this stuf.

My pwezhir. Thure i cant get u somthin 2 eet, perhaph?

No, am fine.

Vewy well.

Dartlin hops 2wards thi edge ov thi box lukin out ovir thi dark canyin. It preens itsself a bit, then balansis on thi edge, lukes roun 2 say, Well, bye then... but iss litl voyce sorta trailz off, & it lukes bak roun 2 thi outside & then it stars shiverin & it jumps bak & almost falls ovir & keeps jumpin bak until iss underneef mi perch.

Dartlin! I shout. Whas thi mattir? Whot is it? & I luke down @ thi litl fellir & hees juss pressd bak agenst thi reer ov thi box & qwiverin wif frite, hiz tiny Is buljin & starin & not seein me, & meenwhile thers movemint & thi soun ov flutirn wings outside thi box & sum whisperd sqwawks. A cupil ov larje dark shapes flit past thi entrinse 2 thi box.

Dartlin shaiks like thi poor litl buggurs ½in his own pryvit erfqwake.

He lukes @ me & wails, Feerth, Mr Bathcule! Feerth! & then juss keels ovir on2 thi flor ov thi box, his Is stil opin.

Dartlin! I sez, not shoutin, but I doan fink this sparo's goan 2 b doin no more spyin nor flyin. I can c his flees gettin reddy 2 move out ov his scrawny litl bod, & thas always thi wurst ov sines.

I luke up agen & thers more movemint & a rustlin sound from outside & then suddinly thi noys ov uge grate wings flappin.

A crow pops itz hed roun thi side ov thi box.

It lukes @ me wif 1 beedy blak glintin I & croaks,

Yeh thass im, muss b im.

It disapeers b 4 I can say anyfin.

Then there's a face @ thi entrins 2 thi box, & I cant beleve it; its a hoomin face, a hoomin hed but its bin flayed, iss got no skin on it @ ol & its ol red with blud & u can c tendons & mussils & its Is r starin out wif no lids neethir but iss also got thi biggist smile u evir seen & its held in thi claws ov sum huge bird I cant c apart from its talons & lower legs; thi talons r holdin thi hed by thi eers & thi hed opins its mouf & starts makin this weerd noise, incredibly loud & gutteril & its tung comes out, but iss not a ordinary tung iss far 2 long 4 a start & iss flapin & lashin & thi hed's makin this screemin noise & thi tung is snakin rite @ me & iss got hooks & claws @ thi end ov it & thi tung flix 2wards me & I jump bakwards off thi perch & land almost on top ov Dartlin's body & thi tung is snappin bak & 4th ovir thi top ov thi perch tryin 2 get me & Im peekin & screetchin & tryin 2 get @ it with my talons but its 2 hi up & ol thi while this hoarse cacofoni ov noise is ringin in ma eers & @ furst I think its screemin Gimme gimme gimme but it isnt, iss moar like Gididibididibididigididigigigibididigibibibi ol run 2gether like that like iss a mashine gun or sumthin & thi tung lashiz bak roun thi top ov thi perch & down & now iss cummin strait 4 me & I slash @ it wif mi talons but it twists & grabs my rite wing & starts 2 pool & am scretchin & iss goin gididibibibigigigibigigigibibigigi & am tryin 2 hold on2 thi perch wif 1 talon & scratch thi tung wif thi othir & peck @ it 2 & its tearin ma wing off, brakin it & it snaps & it pools off a hole buncha fevirs & thi orribil face gets a moufful ov those & I hop bak agen 2 thi reer ov thi box, flappin & screetchin & trailin mi broken wing; thi tung fliks bak in & I kik littl Dartlin's body @ it & thi tung raps tite round it & pulls it bak but throws it away when it gets it outside & iss still hammerin away wif this gigigibididibibibigigigi stuf fillin mi eers & am juss about 2 die ov frite as thi tung cums snappin 2wards mi face when it goze gididibibibibibibigididibigiBasculefastawake!

- & am bak in thi study ov thi gargoil Rosbrith sqwattin on thi chair & starin @ this hoj hoomm Mr Zoliparia holdin a pen & shakin my sholdir & goin, Bascule? U olrite?

It can b a bit ov a shok watchin sumbodi cum out ov a kript trip; if its only a minit in yoor time its a week in thers & a lot ov fings can happen in a week & if its been a bad 1 it tends 2 sho in yoor face, so 4 thi persin wakin u up its like they tel u 2 wake up & instantly yoor face goes old & paind & worn-lookin & thi persin finks O no, whot ½ I dun?

Am sqwattin on thi balustrade whare Ergates woz liftid from, hunkerd down takin moar t & biskits wif Mr Zoliparia. He's lookin a bit worryd coz Im sqwattin here facin thi drop like am about 2 lonch miself in2 thi air, but ther is thi safety net aftir ol & nway I juss feel cumfterbil perched here & I like thi vew & thi feel ov thi wind on mi face.

My left arm has that sorta echo-pain u get from a bad kript trip injury & I keep wantin 2 lift thi biskits wif my foot & eet them that way but I fink am graduly loosin mi birdishnes. I can tel Mr Zoliparia wants 2 ask me lots ov qwestyons but Im stil findin it a bit hard 2 tok.

Few, that woz a hard ole kript trip that 1. I supose u cood argu I shood ½ taken a bit more time & juss sent a send ov miself in; a image or construct whood ½ dun everyfin I did & felt everyfin I felt & in fact wude ½ been a dooplicate me, xcept meanwhile Id stil ½ been fooly conshis here wif Mr Zoliparia, but it takes much longir doin it that way; u ½ 2 prepare furrily b4 u go & u ½ 2 spend ages reeintegratin yoor 2 selvs when thi send cums bak, sortin memirys & feelins & caractir chainjes & so on; juss jumpin in & out wif thi 1 persinality is a lot qwicker; less than a sekind rather than up 2 ½ a day... but ov coarse that supposid sekind dozent alow 4 thi persin whots supposed 2 wake u up gettin confused bcoz almost thi lass thing u sed 2 him woz, 'Juss giv me a minit heer,' & them totily misunderstandin whot u ment on account ov them bein old & confused, & so u spendin a week in thi kript insted ov a few ours, & thusly gettin so alterd by yoor kript-self that u fink yoor a blinkin hok 4 thi next cupil ov ours.

I c a flock ov smol birdz in thi distince & while 1 ½ ov me's finkin, this is how this ol started, & rememberin that poor deer litl ant, thi othir ½ is goin, Ha! Prey!

No I doan fink it is ol a haloosinayshin, Mr Zoliparia, I sez (am missin out thi bits whare he keeps apologisin 4 what hapind). I fink its ol as tru as u & me sittin here. Thers sumfin happenin in thi kript; I coodin work out whot part ov its 2 do wif thi palas & whot part is 2 do wif thi kaotic reejins, but thers sumfin goan on, & thers a wotch bein kept 4 sumbody or sumfin unusual in thare & out here 2, + sumthin reely disgustin from thi hoomin relm has axsess 2 thi bird part ov thi kript & has sikured thi copperashin ov @ least sum ov thi birdz.

It ol sound moar like a nitemare, speshily thi lass part, Mr Zoliparia sez.

Weer boaf sittin now; I feel less like a hok ol thi time. Mind u, I stil need 2 b out here on thi balcony; doan like thi thot ov goin inside & bein trapt.

I saw it wif mi own Is, Mr Zoliparia. I no u doan hold wif thi kript & ol & fink its ol a dreem nway, but iss not that simpl, & whot I saw I saw, & I nevir seen nor herd ov nuffink like that fing like a flaid hed & makin that orribl noise; I meen, u heer stories ov goasts & beasties & stuf like that from thi kaotic relms cumin up & snatchin peepil & goblin them up, but u nevir c it happen; that stufs juss mif; this woz reel.

U r sure dat bcoz it had a hoomin hed it wos sumtin from di hoomin part ov di kript?

Thas thi way it wurx, Mr Zoliparia. It woz sumfin that had 2 preserv hoomin form evin in its monstisness or it coodin funkshin, or mayb bcoz it mite $\frac{1}{2}$ let thi birdz c whot it woz reely like, which givin that birdz doan much like hoomins in thi furst place, is sayin sumfin.

& it woz after u.

It shure woz. Am not sayin I am what thare actuli lookin 4 - doan xpect I am - but thare catchin & cajin evrybody a bit diffrint or suspishis & that hed fing seems 2 b involved in thi round-up.

Mr Zoliparia shakes his hed. O deer Bascule, o deer.

Nevir mind, Mr Zoliparia. No harm dun.

Thass tru, Bascule; lease u bak heer safe & soun, no tanks 2 me. Nway, i tink u shude keep away from thi kript 4 a bit, doan u?

Wel that mite b a idear, Mr Zoliparia, I sez. U certinly got a point thare..

Good boy, he sez. I no; why doan we play a game? Or mayb u wude like 2 go 4 a wok; take a constichewshinil roun sum ov thi terrices on thi roof, mayb stop off sumware 4 lunch - wot u say, Bascule?

Ol soundz good 2 me, Mr Zoliparia.

Less do boat tings, he lafs. Weel go 4 a wok but weel take di portibil Go board wif us & $\frac{1}{2}$ a game ovir a nice long lunch @ a rathir nice restoront i no.

Good idear, Mr Zoliparia. Thas a fine ole complicatid game, that Go.

Rite! Ahl get di Go, den weel go! he lafs, & he jumps up & heds indoars. Drink up yoor t! he shouts.

I luke out @ them birdz again, circlin above a far towr. I doan want 2 tel Mr Zoliparia but am goan strait bak in thare 2 that kript juss as soon as I feel abil. I stil want 2 find out whot happind 2 poor Ergates, but I want 2 no whots goan on, 2.

Truth b told, it terryfys me ½ 2 def jus finkin about it, but I got this feelin I lerned a lot while I woz in thi kript today & iss tru whot they say; iss like a addictiv game, & 1nce u cum out ov it a bit brused & woondid, thi furst thing u want 2 do is get strate bak in thare & get it rite next time. I juss woan fink about that horribl hed fing.

I finish my t & tidy up thi cups & stuf (u ½ 2 do this @ Mr Zoliparias cos he hasnt eny servitors) & take thi tray inside juss as heez puttin on his coat & stuffin thi portabil Go board in his pokit.

Redy, Bascule? he asks.

Am redy, Mr Zoliparia.

Redy ol rite. Big stuf happenin in thi kript & sum poor buggir bein huntid & me wif a hed start on thi peepil doin thi huntin.

Bascule thi rascule thas me & am moar than redy; *am fierce*.

A lid bird tole me.

FOUR

1

When she awoke there was a halo of light all around the circular bed; the light led

up forever into and beyond the sky and shrank to a point that was both the source of the light and a calm, dark hole.

She wondered where the ceiling had gone.

The light was like nothing she had ever seen or even had any words for; it was at once absolutely smooth, uniform and pure, and somehow wildly various, composed of every hue there were words to describe and many more besides; it was every shade and intensity of every colour any eye or instrument ever born or made had ever been able to distinguish, and it was the utter un-colour of profound darkness too.

As she sat up, the tunnel of light moved with her so that she was always looking straight into it, until she was gazing down to the end of the bed over the little hills her feet made in the soft coverings. Now the tunnel of light led away across where the floor ought to be and out through the tall windows and over the balcony and the lawns outside. It was as though in that silent gloriousness she could see vague dim outlines of the earlier room around her, but the brilliant shining had made them the unreal world, not the real one.

She could remember waking and her journey through the garden and the hedge-castle and the talking heads and her conversations with the old man in this house; she could remember the two younger people and the lunch and supper they had taken together, and recall being shown to this room by the old man and the woman, and shown the bathroom by the woman, but all that was made as though into a dream by this utterly quiet cascade of light, so that now she could have believed that all of it had indeed been a fiction.

She crawled to the foot of the bed and slipped out of the covers. They had given her a beautiful nightgown of soft blue and she had worn it first then taken it off because it felt restricting, but now she reached back and slipped it on again.

They had given her slippers too but she stared into the light and could not bear to go back round the side of the bed to look for them, and so she set off into the light, walking gently with a flowing, measured tread, as though frightened her footsteps might bruise the fabric of this beckoning radiance.

The tunnel's floor was neither warm nor cold; it yielded to her soles but it was not soft. The air seemed to drift with her as she walked and she had the impression that with every step she took she moved a great but somehow natural distance, as if one could stand on a desert and look to a far mountain peak and suddenly be there on that summit, in the thin rush of cold air, looking at a line of hills on the horizon, and then be there too, and then turn and see a broad grassy plain in the

distance and be there, standing on the warm earth with the tall swaying grass brushing at her legs and buzzing insects sounding lazy in the hot, damp air; she looked from there to a small hill where short grass grew around old, fallen stones and birds trilled overhead and from where she looked into a broad forest and then she was within the forest and surrounded by trees and didn't know where to go; everywhere she looked was the same, and she could no longer tell whether she was actually moving anywhere now or not and after a while realised that she was completely lost and so stood there, her mouth set in a tight line, her fists clenched and her brows furrowed as though trying to contain within herself the fury and perplexity she felt at still being enclosed by the night-dark jungle, until she noticed a cool shaft of soft light glowing through the branches, and was there, bathed in it but still surrounded by the green pouring weight of rustling foliage.

But then she smiled and lifted up her head and there in the sky was a beautiful moon, round and wide and welcoming.

She looked at it.

She went to the moon where a small ape-man tried to explain what was happening, but she didn't completely understand what he was telling her. She knew it was something important, and that she had something important to do, but she could not quite work out what. She set the memory aside. She would think about it later.

The moon disappeared.

In the distance there was a castle. Or, at least, something that looked like a castle. It rose above a blue line of hills in the far distance, castle-shaped but impossibly big; a blue outline painted on the pale air, flat- and even upside-down-looking, not because it was not the correct shape for a castle - it was exactly the right shape - but because the higher up you looked the clearer the castle appeared.

Its horizon-spanning, many-towered outer wall was barely visible through the heat-haze above the hills, while the bulk of its sky-filling middle section was more defined, although obscured by cloud in places; its upper storeys and highest towers shone with a pale whiteness that brightened with alti-tude, and the tallest tower of all, just off-centre, positively glowed towards its summit, its sharpness giving it the

per-verse appearance of proximity despite its obvious extreme height.

She sat in an open carriage drawn by eight fabulous black cat-beasts whose silky fur pulsed with muscly movement beneath harnesses of damascened silver. They rippled along a road of dusty red tiles, each one of which bore a different pictogram picked out in yellow, between fields of grasses and shining flowers; the air whistling past was thick, humid and perfumed and full of birdsong and insect buzz.

Her clothes were delicate and fine and coloured lighter than her skin; soft ankle boots, a long flowing skirt, a short gilet over a loose shirt, and a sizable, firm-surfaced but very light hat with green ribbons which flew out in the slipstream.

She looked behind her at the road stretching back into the distance; the dust of their passing hung in the air, slowly drifting. She gazed around and saw far-away towers, spires and windmills scattered across the cultivated plain. The road ahead led straight towards the wooded hills and the vast castle-shape hanging above.

She looked up; directly over the carriage a flock of large, sleek grey birds were flying in an arrow-head formation, keeping station with the carriage with purposeful, coordinated wing beats. She clapped her hands and laughed, then sat back in the soft blue upholstery of the carriage seat.

There was a man sitting in the seat across from her. She stared. He hadn't been there before.

He was pale-skinned and young and dressed in tight black clothes which matched his hair. He didn't look quite right; he and his clothes looked speckled somehow, and she could see through him, as though he was made of smoke.

The man swivelled round and looked behind him, towards the castle. He crackled as he moved. He turned back.

'This won't work, you know,' he said, his voice whining and cracked.

She frowned, staring at him. She tipped her head on one side.

'Oh, you look very cute and innocent, to be sure, but that won't save you, my dear. I know you can't, but just for form's -' The young man broke off as several of the escort birds stooped screaming at him, talons spread. He batted one away with an insubstantial fist and seized another by the neck without taking his eyes off her. He wrung the bird's neck while it struggled, wings beating madly, in his hands. There was a snap. He threw the limp body over the side of the carriage.

She stared at him, appalled. He produced a heavy umbrella of darkest blue and spread it over his head as the keening birds attacked.

'As I was saying, my dear; I know you don't really have any choice in this, but for form's sake - so that when we do have to kill you we feel at least we gave you a chance - hear this; cease and desist, now. Do you understand? Go back to where you came from, or just stay where you are, but *don't* go any further.'

She looked over the rear of the carriage at the body of the bird the man had killed, lying crumpled on the roadway, already almost out of sight. The rest of the flock swooped and screamed and battered off the thick fabric of the night-blue umbrella.

Tears came to her eyes.

'Oh, don't cry,' he said tiredly, sighing. 'That was nothing.' He waved one arm through his own body. '*I* am nothing. There are things a *lot* worse than me waiting for you, if you continue.'

She frowned at him. 'I Asura,' she said. 'Who you?'

He gave a high, whinnying laugh. 'Asura; that's rich.'

'Who are you?' she asked.

'KIP, doll. Don't be silly.'

'You are Kayeyepee?'

'Oh for goodness sake,' the man said, with an exaggerated isn't-this-tedious roll of the eyes. 'Are you *really* this naive? KIP,' he repeated, sneering. 'Cliché number one, you stupid bitch; Knowledge Is Power.' He grinned. '*Asura.*'

Then he opened his eyes wide, leant forward at her and made a funny face. He sucked in, his cheeks concaving and his eyes staring while the air went sss through his pursed mouth. He sucked harder and harder and his skin stretched and his lips disappeared and his nose came down to his mouth and she could see the pink skin under his eyes; then his skin ripped somewhere behind and suddenly it was all flowing in through his mouth; nose, skin, ears, hair; everything sucked in through his widening mouth, leaving his face bloody and slimed and his mouth fixed in a great broad lipless grin and his lidless eyes staring while he swallowed noisily and then opened his raw red mouth and between gleaming yellow-white teeth screamed , at her, 'Gibibibibigididibigigibididigigigibibibibi!'

She screamed too, and covered her face with her hands, then shrieked as something touched her neck and jerked back.

The birds had clustered round the man's face; four of them had snagged the umbrella in their talons and lifted it away; the rest beat and keened in a storm of wings around the man's face, where something long and red lashed to and fro, beset by pecking, tearing birds.

She sat and watched, horrified, while the birds tore at the man's face and the long lashing thing; an awful bubbling scream forced its way out through the fury of thrashing wings, then suddenly the man was gone, becoming smoke again for an instant before vanishing utterly.

The birds lifted in the same moment and resumed their arrow-head formation above. No trace was left of the fight, not even a fallen feather. The same number of birds beat rhythmically over the carriage. The great black cats pounded on down the road, having taken not the slightest notice of the struggle.

She shivered despite the heat, looked all around, then settled back in her seat, smoothing her clothes.

Then there was a soft *pop!* and flying next to her face there was a tiny bat with a livid, skinned-red face.

'Still think it's such a good idea, sister?' it squeaked.

She grabbed at the bat but it flicked easily away from her grasp before side-slipping back towards her. 'KIP!' it hooted, giggling. 'KIP!'

She hissed in exasperation. 'Serotine!' she cried - surprising herself - and snatched the bat out of the air.

It had time to look surprised and to go 'Eek!' before she twisted its neck and threw it behind her. It thumped twitching onto the road. The last she saw, one of the escort birds had landed beside the body and started pecking at it.

She dusted her hands and looked through narrowed eyes at the vast, vague, unchanged shape of the castle above the distant hills.

The carriage bowled onwards, the thick warm wind whistled past, the birds stroked the air above and the giant cats swept along the dusty red road like a wave of night

engulfing sunset.

She felt sleepy.

In the morning they found her dressed and sitting at the breakfast table.

'Good morning!' she said brightly to them. 'Today I have to leave.'

2

He took the Queen by the shoulders and pushed her back so that she had to sit upon the bed. 'You go not,' he told her, 'till I set you up a glass where you may see the inmost part of you.'

'What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?' she cried. 'Help, help, ho!'

Then from behind the arras came another voice, that of an old man: 'What, ho! Help, help, help!'

He spun towards the noise, shouting, 'How now! A rat?' He drew his sword, swinging it towards the tapestry. 'Dead, for a ducat -' He swept the arras aside with the tip of the sword, revealing the quivering figure of Polonius. '- Or just trapped, and justly?'

'My lord!' the old man cried, and sank, stiffly, to one knee.

'Why then, not a rat, a mouse! What say you, good mouse, or hast the cat your tongue?'- the King paused there.

It was always a moment to savour, in this branching of the improved story; the point where the Prince began to get his act together and behave neither tactically too rashly nor strategically too hesitantly. From now on you just knew he was going to prevail, avenging his father, marrying Ophelia, ruling wisely in a flourishing Denmark and living happily ever after (well, until he died).

The King liked happy endings. You couldn't blame the ancients for coming up with unhappy conclusions so often - they each spent all their single short life waiting either for oblivion or some absurd after-death torture - but that didn't mean you had to stick faithfully to their paralysed paradigms and ruin a good story with a depressing denouement.

He sighed happily and got up from the bed, exiting via its foot so as not to disturb the voluptuous forms of the sleeping Luge twins, between whom he'd been lying.

Adijine had woken - still sated but desiring some form of diversion - a little earlier, in what might fairly be termed the middle of the night. His pillow contained a transceptor array similar to the device in his crown which let him access the data corpus; it made a pleasant change to dip into the crypt without that thing on his head. The revised interactive *Hamlet* was one of his favourites, though it could still be a little long, depending on the choices one made.

He left the Luge twins breathing softly beneath their silk sheet and padded across the warm pelt of the bedroom carpet to the windows. He took some satisfaction in pressing the button that opened the curtains, rather than simply thinking them apart.

Moonlight spilled across the mountains that were the roofs of the fastness; the sky above was cloudless. Stars filled half the vault. The darkness of the other half was absolute.

The King stared up into that inkiness for a while. That was all their dooms, he thought, all their rash mistakes and compensating hesitations, on the far side of the curtain. He let the drapes sweep back and - stretching, scratching the back of his head - returned to the bed.

The sight of the Encroachment had left him restless. He lay between the sleeping girls and pulled a cover over himself, unsure what to do next.

He glanced into the crypt, first at the paused *Hamlet*, then at the general security situation, then at the state of the war - still stalemated - and at the progress the bomb-workings were making in the level-five south-western solar - still struggling, still hoping to initiate in a few days, and still tightly controlled by Security - then swung through a few minds, finding various couples coupling and finding his own sexual interest piqued despite his earlier exertions with the almost insatiable Luge twins. He turned away from that for a moment, roaming through the accessible minds still awake in Serehfa, and looked for a moment into that of the Security agent they'd placed with the Chief Scientist Gadfium.

So, they were still up at this hour.

Adijine pondered the significance of the strange and unprec-edented circular pattern the stones had formed, and wondered if Gadfium had come up with any explanations. Were the stones also linked into the crypt somehow? His Cryptographers seemed puzzled by some of the corpus' deeper-level behaviour as well as by some of the upper-level and even physical manifestations of those disturbances. Was the crypt preparing to intervene in the present emergency? If it was, he wanted to know. Gadfium was no more trustworthy than any other Privileged, but she had had a habit of making good guesses in the past, and if anybody was to furnish him with the first warning of the crypt's interference, it might well be her, one way or the other.

Gadfium. It had annoyed the King throughout his this life-time - and Gadfium's last two - that she had stuck with the male version of her name; why hadn't she changed it to Gadfia when he had become a she between incarnations? Wilful type, Gadfium.

He listened in, through the agent.

'I beg your pardon, Chief Scientist?' Rasflin said.

'I said,' Gadfium replied, sighing, 'I'd like the data on brand new births displayed related to each clan's vault, from five years before the new dating system came into use, compensated for clan size.'

'I beg your pardon,' Rasflin said, obviously embarrassed at seemingly being caught either day-dreaming or dozing. 'At once.' The wall screen cleared the previous three-dimensional display and replaced it with the new bar field.

'Hmm,' she said, scrutinising the display and realising she could not recall exactly why she had asked for it.

'I *do* apologise, ma'am,' Rasflin said, sounding mortified.

'That's quite all right,' Gadfium told him, still staring at the display. 'We're all tired.'

She glanced at Goscil, who was yawning again, though somehow still with a look of

concentration on her face as she sat, eyes fixed straight ahead, unseeing, while she reviewed some other aspect of the Sortileger's files.

The same light tragepter that had taken them to the mobile observatory on the Plain of Sliding Stones had returned them to the elevator, which had dropped them through the thickness of the roof itself and the kilometre-deep space of the room below; a cold, gloomy, barren place where flutes of scree and bahada lay slumped against the walls and thin lancet windows cast mean slivers of light across a dark desert of broken stones where even babilia struggled to grow.

An Army scree-car had jolted them to where a hole let into one wall led to a tunnel and a restricted funicular; they exited to the sixth level on a broad shelf where subsistence farms made the most of the cold and still thin atmosphere and the light came from broad, full-length windows looking out onto a sea of air where little puffy clouds sat like white islands.

A hydrovator had lowered them to the floor and a piker swept them between machine-tended fields to the terminus of the clifter they had ascended in. The tethered balloon had vented gas and sunk quickly through the next three levels, their ears popping as they entered a sunny farm room, a shady suburb solar and then an artificially lit industrial chamber two concentrics in from the Great Hall. They had passed through dark, deserted, outlaw chambers beneath Engineer-controlled room-space in a fast armoured monorail and ascended to the Sortileger's office - an old yamen housed within a piscina in the sunlit eastern chapel - by airship.

The Sortileger Xemetrio met them at the dock, alone. 'Madam Chief Scientist,' he said, taking her hands. 'Thank you for coming.'

'My pleasure,' she murmured, smiling at him, then looking down and taking her hands from his. 'I think you know my staff; secretary Rasfline, scientific aide Goscil.'

'A delight, as ever,' the Sortileger said, nodding. He was a tall barrel of a man, and another near-contemporary of the chief scientist. His face was much lined but still firm and his hair was a convincing jet-black.

Rasfline and Goscil returned the nod, Rasfline with a knowing smirk to Goscil which she did not acknowledge.

'You seem to be much in demand, Chief Scientist,' Xemetrio said as he led them to the doors.

'Indeed.'

'Yes, I understand you've been busy elsewhere today.'

'That's right,' Gadfium said, nodding.

'Ah.' The Sortileger looked like he wanted to inquire further, but as they stepped through the doorway Gadfium asked:

'And what may we do here? Have you another of your... glitches, Sortileger?'

Xemetrio nodded. 'It is the same problem, Chief Scientist, and my staff seem unable to divine the source. Security maintain it cannot be deliberate falsification by an operative, Cryptography insist everything is in order at their end, therefore the problem must lie here. Two days ago we predicted a cryptosauric event which did not happen and today we failed to foresee the assassination of a... well, somebody important. If this goes on we'll soon be unable to forecast the weather...'

Goscil stood, her back stiff. She rubbed her eyes and stretched. 'No. If there's anything here, I can't see it.'

Gadfium turned away from the wall display. She watched the other woman make circling motions with her arms. 'Well,' she said. 'I think after this morning's rather pathetic faint-ing fit I've regained a little self-respect, keeping you two youngsters up this late.' She smiled, then she too yawned. 'There,' she laughed. 'Time for us all to head bedwards.' She looked at Rasflin and nodded at the wall screen, which switched off.

They were in the display room of the Sortileger's office library, surrounded by records and accounts committed to almost every type of storage medium known to history.

'I'm not really tired, ma'am,' Rasflin said, sitting up sharply. 'I could continue to -'

'Well, *I'm* tired, Rasflin,' she told him. 'I think we'll all benefit from some sleep. It's been a long day. Perhaps in the morning when we're refreshed we

might spot something.'

'Perhaps, Chief Scientist,' Rasflin said, reluctantly. He stood up, straightened his uniform and blinked rapidly, as though still trying to wake himself up.

Goscil rubbed absently at a stain on her tunic. 'Do you think the Sortileger is telling us the whole truth?' she asked, yawning. Rasflin shot her a look.

'I think we have to assume that,' Gadflin said reasonably, folding her note-file.

- The Sortileger, thought the King. He should be asleep by now.

Adjine left the chief scientist and her aides and shifted to Xemetrio's bed chamber. The old fellow was indeed asleep, and his head lay on a pillow which contained a receptor net.

... flying above a blue sea, blue wings beating on a warm wind; a green isle beneath, naked women languorous on the black sand, standing and pointing and shading their eyes at him as he wheeled and turned back towards them -

- Lucid dreaming again. Adjine had been in the Sortileger's sleeping mind before and always found the same thing: some erotic adventure, shallow, and ultimately more concealing than revealing.

He switched back to the others, and into Rasflin's mind, in time to hear him saying, 'Goodnight, ma'am,' and catch a fleeting, caricatured image of two old bodies coupling against a wall. Rasflin smirked at Goscil as they went to their separate rooms and Gadflin walked to hers. This time, Goscil returned the glance.

The King, intrigued by those looks, followed Gadflin by using some of the static cameras located throughout the yamen.

The chief scientist went to her own room, disrobed, washed quickly, perfumed her stocky, grey-haired old body (good if obviously artificially maintained skin tone, the King noted, and breasts of such undeniable if assisted presence they were almost intimidating), slipped on a generously proportioned negligee, then checked the door monitor and slipped out of the room and along the darkened corridor.

Ah-ha, thought the King, following her to the Sortileger's own chambers.

Gadfium sat on the bed of the Sortileger Xemetrio, who had woken at her gentle knock on his door. A soft light shone from above the bed. The Sortileger sat up, took the chief scientist tenderly in his arms and kissed her. He reached behind her and undid her hair. Then he pressed her back so that her head lay near the foot of the bed, her long grey hair like veins of silver on the sheets under the footboard and her feet resting on a pillow.

- Damn! thought Adjine, who'd had to shift to a ceiling camera the instant Xemetrio had sat up and his head had left the pillow with the receptor net.

The Sortileger smiled down at Gadfium, then pulled the sheet up and over, covering both of them. The light went out.

The King cut away again, disappointed. He could have watched in IR from a concealed chamber camera but all he'd have seen was lumps moving under a sheet. It was a lot less fun than being in somebody's head.

Back in his own bed, Adjine looked down at his own hesitant tumescence, wondering if the Sortileger was simply making up the glitches in his forecasting department just to conduct these trysts with the chief scientist. Cause for concern. Perhaps dereliction of duty, especially in these straitened times. He'd let it pass this time but have Security keep an eye on the man. As for Gadfium, if anything she worked too hard and the King reckoned a little recreational fornication would do her no harm whatsoever.

He stroked his erection. He looked at the curvaceous shapes lying to either side of him.

Hmm; he was still a *little* tired.

Perhaps if he woke just one of the Luge twins...

The pen left lines of coolly luminous ink on the tiny pad Xemetrio had hidden under the sheets.

Good to see you again. Sometime we must do this for real!

You always say that.

Always mean it. What IS that perfume?

Enough. To business.

Funny name for a... No tickling!

There's been a signal from the tower.

I guessed: why I called.

She pulled the tiny tube that was the copied message from the hem of her nightdress. She handed it to him; he unrolled the flimsy and stared at the glowing letters.

3

Sessine walked through the darkened town, uphill and away from the direction of the ocean tunnel. A few people passed him in the quiet streets, but all avoided his eye. He reached the walls of the cavern - not rock but small glazed white tiles with networks of crazed cracks in them like little burst blood-vessels of black - where he turned left and walked until he reached the spill-slucice. It was a huge tunnel sloped at forty-five degrees or so, and from it, cascading down a series of steeply banked terraces, tipped a dirty froth of water which disappeared under a bridge and then wound away in a culvert towards the centre of the town and the docks beyond.

The tunnel was shaped like an inverted U and was perhaps ten metres across; steps led up the near side, separated from the rushing water only by a thin iron rail supported by spindly, rusting rods. Weak yellow lamps lit the tunnel roof sporadically, disappearing into the distance with no hint of any further light.

He started up the slope, and soon lost count of the steps and the time. He passed one man coming down, crying, and another lying snoring on the steps.

He came to the smoking-tavern called the Half-way House. It was just a door in the wall of the tunnel and a sign. He opened the door and found a quiet place scarcely lighter than the tunnel outside. A few people sat in booths and at tables; some looked up at him as he came in, then looked away again. A steady murmuring filled

the air.

The circular bar held open shelves stacked with miniature braziers, smoking funnels and ornamental narghiles. It was tended by a hopfgeist in the shape of a tall, thin woman dressed all in black, with black, tied-back hair and dark, hooded eyes.

He walked towards the woman. She watched him, then beckoned him round to the rear of the bar, where there was a hatch cut out of the circle.

'Sir, I was told long ago you might stop by,' she said quietly. Her voice was flat and weary. 'Have you anything to say to me?'

'Yes, I have,' he said. '*Nosce teipsum.*'

It was his most-secret code, the one he had thought of once, a long time ago, in his first ever life, in case he ever needed some already-remembered code quickly one day. It was one he had never committed to any other form of storage other than his own memory and never told to anybody else, except this woman, assuming his previous self had been telling the truth in the note he'd found in the hotel room in Oubliette.

The tall woman nodded. 'That's as it should be,' she said, and sounded almost disappointed. She took a key from a chain round her neck and opened a small drawer set into the thickness of the bar counter. 'Here.' She handed him a small clay pipe, already charged. 'I think this is what you desire.' She put her hands on the counter, looking downwards.

'Thank you,' he told her. She nodded, not looking up.

He retreated to a dark, secluded booth lit by a small oil lamp set into the rock wall. He took a twisted paper spill from a nook to the side of the lamp and lit the pipe, drawing deeply on the thick, pungent smoke.

The bar faded slowly as though filling with smoke from the pipe. The murmuring rose to an ignorable roar; his head felt like a revolving planet, speeding up and shaking off its wrapping of atmosphere as if it was some excess piece of clothing, before disintegrating entirely and throwing him into space.

It was the day of the great curtain-wall road-race, held every year at the summer

solstice. The race started from the western barbican, where the pits were housed and the majority of the great cars were garaged between race days. Banners and pennants flew from tents and caravans, temporary garage structures and anchored airships. A great crowd of people filled the network of scaffolded stands, bridges, stalls and viewing towers; cheers rang out across the marshalling areas and the smells of food drifted on the hot wind.

Sessine donned a light leather helmet and a pair of goggles and rolled down the sleeves of his shirt, fastening the cuffs to his sandskin gloves.

'Best of luck, sir!' the chief mechanic shouted, grinning. Sessine slapped her on the shoulder, then grasped the ladder and climbed, up through the damp smell of steam hissing from some venting valve, past the linking rods and the man-tall wheels, past the web of hydrogen pipes and hydraulic conduits webbing the main tank and on up to the curved top of the car. He waved down and the foot of the ladder was clipped up and secured.

He looked around, surveying the fifty or so cars and the barely controlled pandemonium of both the pits area and the stands beyond. Each of the mighty cars was fashioned after a particular model of steam railway engine from the Middle Ages; his was one of the first-marque machines, the largest and most powerful class in the race, created in the image of a 4-8-8-4 Mallet type used by the Union Pacific Railroad of North America, back in the twentieth century.

Sessine dropped into the Mallet's cramped cockpit, offset to the left at the rear of the huge locomotive, above where the engineer's cab would have been on the real thing. He strapped himself in, then ran through the instrument check. That done, he sat back for a while, breathing deeply and gazing round the stands and viewing towers, looking for where his wife would be sitting in the clan's own tower and wondering if his latest lover was watching from one of the old airships. The voice pipe whistled; he uncorked it. 'Ready, sir?' said the muffled voice of the chief engineer.

'Ready,' he said.

'All yours, sir. You have control.'

'I have control,' he confirmed, and recorked the voice pipe. His heart beat faster and he wiped sweat from his top lip with his shirt sleeve. He undid one glove and fished in a breast pocket for his ear plugs.

His hands were shaking, just a little.

The marshals' airship hovered pregnantly over the tall, flag-bedecked archway leading to the starting grid. After what seemed like an eternity the flags hanging under the dirigible changed from red to yellow and the crowd cheered wildly.

Sessine slipped the brake, eased the regulator on and fed power to the Mallet's wheels. The hydrogen engine shot a great detonating pulse of steam from its stack - easily twenty metres forward of where Sessine sat - hissed yet more clouds from the pistons below, and, with a great metallic groan and a crumping series of explosive steam-bursts within a cacophonous range of oiled clanking noises, the huge vehicle crept slowly forward, keeping station with the rest of the cars, all jetting steam and blasting whistles, spasmodically interspersing this symphonic din with the sudden racing solo of an engine briefly losing traction, sets of rubber-rimmed wheels slipping together on patches of oil, hydraulic fluid or water.

The race began half an hour later after various delays - every one of which seemed interminable - and much sweating and steaming and sweltering on the starting grid.

The huge cars started their charge round the wall-top roadway of Serehfa's curtain-wall, a half-kilometre wide surface of smooth roadway behind the semi-cylindrical towers. Each lap was a hundred and eighty kilometres in length, a distance the leading vehicles would complete in an hour; each race was three laps. The cars were accompanied by the marshals' airship and by a small cloud of camera platforms like swarming insects, feeding the spectacle to the implant and screen networks and the crowds watching from the viewing stands and towers.

Sessine took the lead when the clan Genetics' Beyer-Garratt burst a series of tyres and skidded off into the outer parapet in a great long articulated explosion of steam, metal and stone (and Sessine thought coldly, Well, that's old Werrieth out of the party tonight, and him onto his last life); debris spattered across the roadway in front of the Mallet but Sessine took the three hundred tonnes of car within metres of the flimsy inside wall, and missed the wreckage entirely.

He was in front! He screamed with delight, and was grateful that the noise was inaudible within the staggering racket of the racing car; the wide roadway spread out in a gentle curve before him, empty and welcoming and sublime. The marshals' airship would be well behind the Mallet and the cloud of camera platforms just level with him. There were cameras and spectators on each of the towers, too, and more people - castlians and Xtremadurians - gathered in clumps on the outer walls, but they were blurs, irrelevant. He was alone; exulting and alone and free!

...He recognised the point, and was able to leave then, and so left his old self to drive, and slipped out of the seat, like a ghost, down through the hatch into the

bellowing heart of the quivering machine where valves chattered and gases hissed and water gurgled and sweat popped from the skin in the oven-heat of the shrieking, vibrating engine.

And as he walked through the hammering din of the motor, he started to remember a little of what he had left here.

In a cramped corridor, on an open-work metal floor between great rods and levers darting back and forward like vast metallic tendons, he found his old first self, dressed in engineer's overalls and squatting hunched over a small table on which sat a chess board set in mid-game.

He squatted down too. His younger self did not look up. He was staring at the white pieces, the tip of one thumb in his mouth.

'Silician defence,' the young man said after a while, nodding at the board.

Sessine nodded, outwardly calm but thinking furiously. He knew he was faced with some sort of test but he had no predetermined code to cover this meeting, only the fact that, once, he and this young man had been the same person.

Silician? Not Sicilian?

Silician; Silicia; Cilicia. It meant something. Somebody he'd heard of had been Silician. An ancient.

He searched his memories, willing some connection. Tarzan? Tarsus? Then he remembered some lines from an ancient poem:

Me Tarsan, you Jesus.

And the Silician never really changed.

Ah, yes.

'Professor Sauli played it often,' he said. 'While working on the exclusion principle.'

The young man looked up and smiled briefly. He rose and put out his hand. Sessine shook it.

'Good to meet you, Alandre,' the young man said.

'And you,' Sessine said, hesitating. '... Alandre?'

'Oh, call me Alan,' his younger self said. 'I'm only an abbreviated version of who you are now, though I've developed on my own in here.'

'Having recently been abbreviated myself, I sympathise, Alan.'

'Hmm,' the other man said. 'Well, the first thing to do is to get you out of where you are now. Let's see...' He looked down at the chess board and turned both the white castles upside down.

The board blossomed with a semi-transparent holo of Serehfa. Alan studied it for a moment, then reached into and beneath it - and Sessine saw the projection of the castle's fabric bulge and swell around the young man's hand as with an infinitesimal articulation of his fingers he plucked something out of the bowels of the model fastness - Sessine experienced a fleeting sense of vertigo - and deposited it at the side of the chequered surface. Then Alan folded up the chess board and the castle projection vanished.

'Was that me?' Sessine asked casually, leaning to glance at the board.

'It was.'

'So where am I now?'

'Your construct now inhabits hardware situated within the curtain-walls.'

'Is that good?'

Alan shrugged. 'It's safer.'

'Well, thank you.'

'You're welcome,' his younger self said. 'So.' He clapped his hands on his knees. 'You're my last incarnation.'

Sessine looked into his eyes. It was true; as the self aged, and grew to awareness, filtered and downloaded into a new version of the old body, a meta-aging took place over the lives: a serial, cumulative maturing that was visible in the face unless you strove by further tampering to eradicate it. How fresh and innocent this earlier face of his appeared, and yet this seeming youth had been forty years old when he'd recorded this construct and left it free - almost forgotten and just-short-of-

unreachable -to flit between the interstices of his personal lives and his clan's concerns: monitoring, collating, reviewing and evaluating.

'Yes, I'm the very last,' Sessine agreed. 'And you are the ghost in the machine.'

He smiled, and wondered as he did so what possible point there was in the gesture. 'So. What do you have to tell me?'

'Well, for one thing, Count,' Alan said, 'I know who is trying to kill you.'

4

[Translation](#)

Av got a very good view ov thi fass-towr from heer. Am $\frac{1}{2}$ lying & $\frac{1}{2}$ sittin craided by thi babil branchis & am lookin up fru a gap in thi foleyidje @ thi dirti grate hoojness ov thi cassils centril towr.

U forget thi towrs thare a lot ov thi time coz (a) itz usyuly bhind u if yoor lookin out thi way from thi cassil & (b) iss obskyurd by cloud moar than $\frac{1}{2}$ thi time nway.

According 2 Mr Zoliparia thi fass-towr is whare thi spays elivaitr woz ankird 2 Erf.

Thass y iss cald a fassness, Mr Zoliparia sez; in English fassness means a stronghold, & also bcoz when rings r tied hard agenst eech othir they r sed 2 b tyed fast 2 eech othir like thi spays elivaitr woz tyed fast 2 Erf, & in a sens tyed 2 thi Erfs surfis & spays togethir, 2 (I sed; + thi spays elivaitr woz a way ov gettin in2 spaice fast; but Mr Z sed no actuly it woz slower than a rokit or whotevir but mutch moar efishint). Mr Zoliparia thot thi spayce elivaitr woz a grate idear & it woz a shame weed got rid ov it & if we hadnt then we wooden b in thi pickl we r, i e about 2 get clobberd by thi enkroachment.

But I thot spaice woz juss ful ov nufink I sed 2 Mr Zoliparia. Whats thi point ov goan thare?

Bascule, he sed, u r so fik sumtimes.

He tole me thi fass towr led 2 thi planetz & thi starz; 1nce u were in spaice u had limitles enirgy & raw mateeryls & after that branepowir took u wharevir u wantid but weed throne ol that away.

Mr Zoliparia sez thi fass towr reprisentz sumfin ov a nigma, on account that we doan strikty speekin no whot's actuly in thi top ov it; iss bin xploard up 2 about thi 10th or 11th levils but aftir that u cant get no hyer, so they say. Blokd on thi inside & nuthin 2 hold on2 on thi outside & 2 hi up 4 a balune or a aircraft 2 go. Thi nolidje ov whot's up thare's bin loss long ago in thi kaos ov thi kript, sez Mr Z.

U heer roomers that ther r peepel up thare in thi top ov thi towr but thas got 2 b nonsins; howd they breev?

Mr Zoliparia iznt thi onli persin 2 ½ feeries concernin thi big towr; Ergates thi ant told me ther used 2 b 3 spaice elevaitrs; 1 heer, 1 in Afrika neer a place calld Kilomenjaro & 1 in Kalimantan. According 2 hir, thayve ol been dismantled long sinse ov coarse but weev got thi biggist stump on account ov hooever disined thi American Kontinent spays elivaitr had thi wizird idear ov makin thi terminus particularly spektaklier & so desined it 2 luke like a hooj cassil, viz thi vastniss ov thi fastniss (which she claymd used 2 b calld Acsets, which wos anuthir ov them nacronyms, aparrantly).

I thot this ol soundid a bit iffy & askd Mr Z if heed evir herd ov ther bin uthir fass towrs & he sed nope, not as far as he new, & shurenuf when I serchd thi kript 4 info ther woznt eny on no othir elevaters & when u actuly luke in2 it ther dozen seem 2 b enywhare whare it sez strate out 'Thi fass-towr usd 2 b 1 end ov a spaice elivaitor,' tho iss not a secret. Nway, Kilomenjaro is a lake & Kalimantan is a big island (itz got a Crater Lake 2) & I think Ergates imajinayshin wos runnin away wif hir a bit thare & bsides if her feery wos rite thi name ov this plaice wood bgin wif a K not a S or a A, stands 2 reesin.

Poor Ergates. I stil wundir whot happind 2 that deer litl ant, evin tho Ive got plenty ov othir things 2 wury about now.

I turn ovir in thi litl nest Ive made 4 myself in thi babil branchis & luke down thi curvd trunk 2 thi wall. Nobodi els aroun. Lukes like I gaiv thi bastirds thi slip.

My sholdir stil hurts. So do my rists & my nees.

O whot a sorry state weer in, yung Bascule, I sez 2 myself.

I juss no that soonir or later am goan 2 ½ 2 go bak in2 thi kript 2 find out what on

erfs goan on, evin tho thi last fing thi big bat sed woz not 2. Doan think iss goan b much fun.

Am fritend.

U c, Ive bcome a outcast.

I ½ 2 say I had a very plesint lunch wif Mr Zoliparia & a good game ov Go which he 1 ov coarse (like he alwiz duz) in this travelin restront. Thi restront starts in a verticil vilij in thi babil neer thi top ov thi grate hol gaybil & sloely dessends 2 flore levil ovir thi next cupl ov ours. Good food & vews. Nway, I had a ver nice time & almost toatly 4got about Dartlin & thi jiant brane in bird space & orribl skind heds & fings whot go gididibibigididibigigi & so on.

Me & Mr Zoliparia tokd about loads ov stuf.

Eventuly tho it woz time 4 me 2 go bcoz I stil had evenin callz 2 do 4 thi Little Big Bruthirs & they like u 2 b thare in thi monastery 2 do them & Id alredy dun 1 lot on thi hoof as it wer that mornin in thi hydrovater so I thot 4 thi evenin 1s I ot 2 actuly b thare wifin thi preesinkts.

Mr Z saw me 2 thi west wol toob trane.

U promis u woan go bak in2 that kript until u ½ 2? Until yor bak wit de bruders? Mr Z sed 2 me, & I sed, O ol rite then Mr Zoliparia.

Good boy, he sed.

Evrifin went as per normil til I got 2 thi othir end whare ther woz a long wait @ thi hydrovater. I thot ov a betir idear & took a travelater acros thi alure 2 a fewnikuler line up a flyin buttriss; Id get 2 thi monastery by dropin from abuv.

Ther wer a cupl ov noviss bruthirs in thi fewnikuler car wif me; they wer a bit drunk, & singin loudly. I thot 1 ov them seemd 2 rekognise me but I juss lookt away & he ignoard me 2.

They kept singin as thi car wen slowly up thi curve ov thi buttris. I wooden ½ minded, but they woz out ov tune.

Little-Big, Little-Big, Little-Big!
We're thi Mediums who don't give a fig!

Wel, heerza fine 2-do, I sed 2 myself, cyan & starin out thi window & tryin 2 ignore thi noyse & ther beery brefs. I lookt out thi windo; it woz dusk by this time & thi lites wer on in thi fewnikular car's cabin & thi sky outside lookt pretti & ver culirfil.

When you're dead, when you're dead, when you're dead,
We'll happily live inside your heh-ehd!

O, whot thi hek, I thot.

In a way whot I woz goan 2 do wude make thi trip longer not shorter but @ least Id ½ sum respite from ol this cheeri-drunkin shit, & evin if I forgot my return code agen theez noizi prats wude wake me up soon enuf. I dipt in2 thi kript, intendin 2 spend mayb ½ a sekind in thare.

Les than that woz qwite enuf.

Ther wos sumthin goin on.

Thi furst place u go from transport is in2 a representayshin ov thi cassils transport sistim, a transparint holo ov thi fastniss with thi toob, train & fewnikuler lines, lift shafts, roads, hydrovater lines & clifter slots ol highlited. Then u moov on2 whare u want 2 go elsewhere in thi kript. Moast bags doan evin spare this setup a passin glanse, but if yoor sumthin ov a conasewer ov thi kript's states, like I am, then u juss alwiz swing pass this sort ov fing & click it out & do a qwik comparisun wif actule movemints 2 c if Transports on its bols or not. Upshot is, if thers anythin amiss u spot it, like I spottd thi transport setup woznt qwite rite.

It lookd like ther woz a odd kinda hole aroun thi monastry; nuthin movin out, juss stuff in-goin. Ver strain, I thot. I didn go no furthir in2 thi kript. I chekd thi monastrys kript-biz durin thi afternoon. Definit faze-chainj in thi trafic aroun a our ago. Sumbodi tryin 2 make thing luke normil when they wernt.

Whare woz bro Scalopins usual col 2 thi *Marshin Daze* storyline, 4 exampil? Or sis Ecrope's t-time interlope wif hir luvir in thi Uitlandir embassy? Ol replaicd by makin-up-numbers trafic, thats whare.

I new I woz probly bin paranoid, but I worried ol thi saim.

Thi fewnikuler woz dew 2 make 1 more stop b4 thi stayshin Id normaly get off @. I

told it 2 stop asap.

A minit later it did, & I got off @ this litl sily halt 3/4 ov thi way up thi butris which served a cupl ov clan-execs luv nests, a old babil farm & a glider club, all ov them desertid. Thi 2 bros I left on thi fewnikuler lookd puzzld but waivd by-by & kept singin as thi car trundld away agen.

Then ther woz a thump in mi hed. Thi fewnikular car stopt, then reversd & clunked & whird bak down 2wards me.

Thi thump in mi hed woz sum bastird tryin 2 nok me out wif a bit ov feedbak from thi kript; fearetikly imposibl & teknikly diffcult but it can b dun & thi jolt Id juss got wude ½ nokd out moast peepil, only Ive got thi eqivalent ov shok absorbers coz Im a tellir & ther4 used 2 gettin a ruf ride from thi kript.

Thi fewnikewlar car woz comin glowing bak down thi curvd track, its cabin lites reflectin off thi babil plants festoonin thi broad archd bak ov thi butris. Thi 2 bros inside wer @ thi bak windo, starin @ me. They din luke so drunk now, & they wos each holdin rings in ther hands that could ½ bin guns.

O shit, I fot.

I ran down a spiral stareway @ thi side ov thi butriss. I herd thi car stop abuv me. Thi stairway went on & on & on & on spiralin all thi time & I thot when it levels out am not goan b able 2 stop goan roun; theyl find me whirlin roun in a tite litl circl unabil 2 go strate. I hit thi botom & sheer terrir proovd a ver iffishint coarse-stratener. I raced across a gantry slung underneaf thi stonewurk & went down anothir stairway set agenst a metil-frame bildin on thi far side ov thi butress. Footsteps clanged behind me.

I caim out on a brod balcony & dodjed thru a doarway & down sum moar steps in2 a sort ov hanger whare old gliders sat tilted like grate goastly stif-wingd burdz & a bunch ov litl bats startid chatterin & flying roun my hed. Footsteps abuv, then behind. O shit o shit o shit. Thi bats wer kikin up a heluva rakit.

I spottid a ladir agenst 1 wol leedin down thru thi floor & I ran 4 it. Sumbody shouted bhind me; thi footsteps slappd loud. Sumthin went, Bang! & a glider next 2 me explodid wif flame & loss a wing; thi blast ov air woz warm & almost nokd me off ma feet.

I thru myself @ thi ladir, held thi sides & dropt, sliding down without usin ma feet @ ol, hitin thi floor & twistin ma ankil.

I wos in sum kinda circular platform slung undir thi glider bildin. Nufin but air underneaf & nowhare 2 go. I lookd bak @ thi ladir. Thi footsteps were rite abuv me.

I herd a noise like qwuik, distant surf, & a huge blak shape lifted from under thi platform on wings longir than Im tol. It waverd in thi air alongside then graspd @ thi thin metil rale roun thi platform on thi far side from thi ladir, its talins gripin thi rale while its wings beat qwickly & almost silent bak & ford.

I cude heer sumbody cumin down thi ladir, breevin hard.

Here! shoutid thi blak shape @ thi othir side ov thi platform. Id fot it woz a bird but it woz more like a giant bat. Its wings clapped in & out in & out.

Qwickly! it sed.

I fink if thi bros cumin down thi ladir hadnt shot @ me in thi hanger I wooden ½ gon, but they had so I did.

I ran 4 thi big bat. It held its feet out. I grabd its ankils & it wrapt its talins roun ma rists makin me shout with thi bone-crunchin pane while it poold me off thi platform, crakin my nees off thi rale.

We twisted & dropt like thi thing cuden cary me & I screemd, then it spred its wings wif a snap & I neerly loss my grip as we curvd out & away. Light sparkld abuv me & I herd thi bat cry out but I woz 2 bizy lookin down @ thi dark fields in thi alure, 5 or 600 metres blow & thinking wel, if I die, thers still anuthir 7 lives 2 go. Xcept I didnt fink that woz rite sumhow, I rekind whotevir trubil I woz in went beyond this life & I woznt garanteed anuthir 7 lives or evin 1.

I held on tite, but thi light crackled agen & thi bat thing judderd in thi air & cried out agen & I smeld smoke. We lurched & side-slipped 2wards thi wol ov thi grate hol, then fel like thi proverbial, & in a scream ov air & a scream from me dippd blow thi alure & thi parapet & went on down til we wer level wif thi lowir bretasche, whare thi bat wheeld roun so hard I lost my grip on its scaly legs & only its steel-like clasp on my rists stopt me from falin 2 thi roof ov thi 2nd level towr underneef.

Felt like my arms were about 2 pop out ma sokets. Id ½ screemed but thi bref woz gon from me.

Thi air shreiked roun ma ears as we plumitid btween thi grate towr & thi 2nd level wall, down in2 a layer ov cloud whare I cooden c a dam fing & it woz freezin cold,

then we turnd in what I thot woz thi direcshin ov thi towr & outa thi mist loomd this bleedin grate rock wall. I closd mi Is.

We twisted 1ce, twice & I went - few - 2 myself but when I opend mi Is we woz stil hed in strate 4 nakid stonewurk. O fuk, I fot, but by then Id decidid Id rathir die wif ma Is opin. @ thi last momim we liftid, I saw hangin bunchis ov foleyidje strung from thi machicolation abuv & a instant later we crashd in2 thi babil; my sholder woz renched & I woz thrown off thi bat & in2 thi babil, grabbin @ leevs & twigs & branchis & slippin & fallin down thru it.

Thi bat beat fewriously, shoutin, Hold on! Hold on! while I tryd 2 get a hold on thi dam stuf.

Hold on! it shouted agen.

Am bludy tryin 2! I yelld.

U safe?

Juss about, I sed, huggin a big strand ov babil like it wos a long-loss mum or sumthin, not abil 2 look behind but stil heerin thi big bat flap & beet @ my bak.

Am sorri I cuden help u moar, thi bat sez. U mus saiv uself now. Thare lookin 4 u. Bware thi kript. Keep *outa* things! Erch! Erch! I mus go. Farewell, hoomin.

Yeh, & 2 u, I shoutid, turnin roun 2 luke @ it. & fanks!

Then thi big bat dropt, & I saw it disapeer in thi mist, fallin away strate down, traylin smoak & then juss b4 I loss site ov it curvin away followin thi circumferince ov thi towr, beetin hard but lookin week & still follin.

Disappeered.

I crolld in2 thi darkniss ov thi babil, nursin ma aiks.

O deer Bascule, I sed 2 myself. O deer o deer o deer.

I spent thi nite in thi foleyidje, constintly dreemin ov flyin thru thi air wif Ergates in ma hand but then droppin hir & hir tumblin away & me not bein abil 2 catch hir &

mi wings cumin off & me follin 2 & screemin thru thi air, then wakin clutchin thi branchiz, shiverin & cuverd in swet.

So heer I am, lookin up @ thi fass-tower & Ive spent sum time so far this mornin tryin 2 pluk up thi curidje 2 go strate bak in2 thi kript 2 find out whots goan on & look 4 poor litil Ergates & this time tak no nonsins... & Ive also spent sum time vowin nevir 2 evin fink ov thi bleedin kript agen & desidin not 2 deside about it 4 now & so insted am juss sitin heer wonderin whot am 2 do in jeneril & not abil 2 cum 2 a disishin on that scoar nevir.

I turn ovir in ma litl nest agen & luke down thru thi branchis & this time I freez & stair, coz I can c this big animil cumin climin up thru thi babil; iss bleedin hooj, thi size ov a bare & iss got thik blak fur with streaks ov green on it & iss got big shiny blak claws & iss lukin @ me wif 2 litl beedy Is & a funy pointid hed & iss cumin up thi branch am on, strate 2words me.

O shit, I heer myself say, lukin roun 2 c if thers a way 2 escape.

Ther isnt. O shit.

Thi animil opins its mouf. Its teef r thi size ov ma fingirs

... Shtay whare u r! it hissis.

FIVE

1

'In those days the world was not a garden and the people were not idle as they are

now. Then on the face of the world there was real wilderness, empty of humanity, and the wilderness that humanity created, the wilderness that it packed with itself and which it called City. People toiled and people idled and the toilers worked for themselves and yet not for themselves and the idle did no work or little work and what they did, did only for themselves; money was all-powerful then and people said they made it work for them but money cannot work, only people and machines can work.'

Asura listened, fascinated but confused. The speaker was a thin middle-aged woman dressed in a plain ivory-coloured smock. Her feet were hobbled with a half-metre-long iron rod attached to wood-lined cuffs whose internal surfaces had been polished smooth and bright by friction with her skin. Her hands were similarly secured. She stood in the centre of the open gondola, chanting more than talking, her gaze raised to the belly-bulging underside of the airship above and her voice raised to cope with the noise of the craft's engines and the slipstream swirling over the gondola's semi-transparent bulwarks. Asura looked around, wondering at the effect this strange, declaiming woman must be having on her fellow travellers. She was surprised to find that she seemed to be the only person paying the woman any attention.

Asura had been standing at the airship's deck rail watching the plain roll past beneath and had seen the first line of blue hills appear through the haze. She had been waiting for her first glimpse of the great castle, but the woman's steady voice and odd words had intrigued her.

She left the rail to find a seat close to the woman. As she moved between the tables and chairs, she looked towards the bow of the gondola, where the upper deck's round transparent nose bulged out, part of a huge sunstruck circle veined with the dark lines of struts, and suddenly she was reminded of something she'd seen in her dreams last night.

She sat down, feeling dizzy.

In a great dark space there was a huge circle, subdivided into smaller circles by thin dark lines like rings of ripples in a disturbed pool, and further subdivided by similarly fine lines radiating from the very centre of the circle. The circle was an enormous window; stars shone beyond it.

She could hear a clock ticking.

Something moved at one edge of the great circle. Looking closely she could see it was a figure; somebody walking along the horizontal ray-line from the edge to the centre of the circular window. She looked more closely still, and saw that the person was herself.

She walked along until she stood in the very centre of the vast aperture, looking out through a central pane of some substance she knew was more hard and clear and strong than glass. Far below, there was a landscape of luminous grey; a circular depression of shallow, undulating hills surrounded by cliffs and mountains, lit from one side and full of deep, black shadows. The clock still ticked. She stood for a while, admiring the stars, and thinking that the circle of the great window mirrored the shape of the circular plain it overlooked.

Then the clock-sound speeded up, ticking faster and faster until it was a ripping, buzzing noise in her ears; the shadows swung across the landscape and the bright orb of the sun tore across the sky, then abruptly the sun vanished and the noise of the clock changed, took on a kind of rhythm until the noise speeded up again and became the buzz it had been before. She could barely see the landscape below. The stars blazed.

Then the stars started to disappear. They went out slowly at first, in a single region of the sky off to her right and near the dark horizon, then more quickly, until the stain of darkness was eating up a quarter of the sky, rising like a vast curtain thrown up from the ghostly grey mountains. Now a third of the sky was utterly dark, the stars going out one by one or in groups; shining, then dimming, then flickering and disappearing altogether as the darkness consumed half the sky, then two thirds.

She stared, open-mouthed, choosing brighter stars in the path of the blackness and watching them as they vanished.

Finally almost the whole sky was black; just a few stars shone steadily above the distant mountains to her right, while to her left the darkness had touched the horizon, where the sun had shone earlier.

Abruptly the clock was back to normal, and the sun blazed again - from a different angle now, but still just within the region of the darkness - sending a cold, steady light across the crater floor to the grey cliffs and crags of the rim-wall.

Earth. Cradle. Very old. There are many ages. Age within age. Age of

nothingness comes first, then age/instant of infinitesimal/infinite explosion, then age of shining, then age of heaviness, of different air/fluids, then the tiny but long ages of stone/fluid and fire, then the age of life, smaller still, and living with and in all the other ages, then the age/moment of thought-life: here we are, and all goes very quickly and at the same time all other types/sizes of ages go on but then there is next age/moment of the new life that the old life makes, and that is much faster again, and that is where we are now too. And yet.

The old ape-man looked sad. He had grey hair and grey sagging skin on a skinny frame and he was dressed in a strange costume of yellow and red diamonds topped by a pointed hat with a bell on the end. His soft shoes were pointed too, and also had bells at their tips. The only noise he could produce was a chattering laugh; he was the size of a child but his eyes looked wise and sad. He sat on the steps that led up to a big chair; the large room was empty except for her and the ape-man and one wall of the room was window, double-skinned and curved and ribbed with a fine tracery of dark lines, though much smaller than the circular window she had seen earlier. This window too looked out onto a landscape of shining grey.

The beautiful globe hanging in the black sky above the shining grey hills was Earth, the ape-man had told her. He talked by sign, using his arms and fingers. She found that she could understand him but not reply, though just by nodding, frowning or raising her eyebrows it was possible to express herself well enough, it seemed.

Eyebrows? she signalled.

And yet, the ape-man sighed, expression still downcast. Ages are in conflict, he told her. Each move, own pace, not often come together, fight. But now: happens. Age of air/fluids and age of life fight. Two ages of life, too. For all who feel sadness sometimes, there comes sadness now. For all those who die sometimes, there comes death now, perhaps.

She frowned. She was standing, still dressed in her night-blue gown, in front of the wide window. Every now and again, during pauses in the ape-man's signing, she glanced at the Earth and the steady stars hanging visible beyond its brightness. Her gown was the colour of the barren, ghostly landscape outside.

She shrugged.

People/humans made much; big things on Earth. Biggest thing, smallest thing too. Everywhere. Then inside this thing, fight. Then peace but not peace; peace for a while, short now. Now the age of air/fluids comes, threat to all. All must act. Most danger if biggest/smallest thing not act. Biggest/smallest thing fight with

self, cannot talk to all of self; bad. Other ways of talking; good. Most special good if self talk to self.

The ape-man looked almost happy for a moment, and she smiled to show she understood.

You.

She pointed at herself. Me?

You.

She shook her head, then shrugged, spreading her arms.

Yes, you. I tell you now. You forget in future, but you also know still, too. Is good. Perhaps all safe.

She smiled uncertainly.

'Ah, there you are,' Pieter Velteseri said, appearing from the steps leading to the gondola's lower decks. He parted the tails of his coat and sat beside Asura, planting his silver-topped cane between his feet. He looked at her.

She blinked rapidly for a few seconds and then shook her head, as though just waking up.

Pieter glanced at the woman standing speaking in the middle of the gondola's floor. He smiled. 'Ah; our Resiler has found her voice, has she? I didn't think she would stay silent for long.' He placed his hands on top of the cane and rested his chin on top of his hands...

'She is... Resisla?' Asura said, glancing at Pieter and frowning as she tried to pick up the thread of the woman's speech again.

'She is a Resiler; one who resiles, or recoils,' he said in a low voice. 'In a sense we all are, or our ancestors were, I suppose, but she is of a sect who believes we need to resile further.'

'No one else listens,' Asura whispered. She looked around the others on the

gondola's open deck. They were all talking among themselves, or watching the view, or sitting or lying with their eyes closed, either snoozing or experientially elsewhere.

'They will have heard all this before,' Pieter said quietly. 'Not word for word, but...'

'We are guilty,' said the Resiler. 'We have treasured our comfort and our vanity by giving shelter to the beasts of chaos which infest the crypt so that humanity's part of it now is barely one part in a hundredth, and that wasted, that turned over to the worship of self and vanity and dreams of sovereignty over what we claim to have renounced...'

'Is all she says true?' Asura whispered.

'Ah,' Pieter said, smiling. 'Now, that is a question. Let's say it is all based on truth, but the facts are open to different interpretations from the one she supplies.'

'... The King is no King and all know this; well and good, but neither is what appears to be our good work good, but only a disguise for the face of our foolish ignorance and ill-fitness.'

'The King?' Asura said, looking puzzled.

'Our ruler,' Pieter supplied. 'I've always thought Dalai Llama would have been a better description, though the King has more power and less... holiness. In any event, the royal term is preferred. It's complicated.'

'Why is she in irons?' Asura asked.

'It's a symbol,' Pieter said, a teasing, mischievous look on his face. Asura nodded, her expression serious, and Pieter smiled again.

'She seems very sincere,' Asura told Pieter.

'A word with oddly positive connotations,' Pieter said, nod-ding. 'In my experience those who are most sincere are also the most morally suspect, as well as being incapable of producing or appreciating wit.'

'What happens happens,' continued the Resiler, 'and cannot be made to unhappen. We are the equation; we cannot deny the algebra of the universe or the result it brings us. Die peacefully or in hysterics, with grace or with despair; it matters not. Prepare or ignore; it matters not. Very little matters very much and

almost nothing matters greatly. Shanti.'

'I find myself half drawn to that last statement,' Pieter told Asura as the Resiler sat down. Nearby there was a group of people who had been laughing and joking among themselves during the course of her speech; a highly dressed woman rose from among them and went over and placed some sweetmeats in the plain wooden bowl at the Resiler's side. The Resiler thanked her and ate with awkward grace. She smiled thinly at Asura as the other woman sashayed back to her friends, laughing.

'Come, my dear,' Pieter said pleasantly, rising and taking the girl's elbow. 'We'll take the air on the lower viewing deck, shall we?' They rose. 'Ma'am,' he said, nodding to the Resiler as they passed.

'Don't worry,' Asura said to the Resiler as Pieter led her to the stairs. 'It's going to be all right.' She winked at her.

The woman looked briefly baffled, then shook her head and continued to eat, her movements made strange by the iron rod linking her wrists.

Asura's smooth brow furrowed into a frown as she and Pieter descended to the main lounge. 'She eats,' she said, glancing back up. 'How does she clean herself after toilet?'

Pieter laughed lightly. 'You know, I never thought of that. The alternatives are all unpleasant, aren't they?'

Below, from the promenade deck, they saw the forested hills stretching out around them and, from the tiers of seats facing the lower section of the round transparent nose, the first hazy hints of the towers and battlements of Serehfa.

Asura clapped her hands.

That morning, over breakfast, she had told them something of her dreams and Pieter had looked at first alarmed and then resigned. She had not told them all the details; just that she had seen the tunnel of light and been in an enchanted carriage journeying across the dusty plain towards the great castle beyond the hills.

'Lucky you,' Lucia Chimbers had told her. 'Most of us have to concentrate quite hard

to have dreams that inter-esting.'

'Sounds like she might have implants after all,' Gil said, helping himself to more ortanique juice.

Pieter shook his head. 'I think not.' He frowned. 'And I do wish people would stop calling them implants; they're not, if you're born with them and they're part of your genetic inheritance, reversible or not.'

Gil and Lucia smiled at him with practised indulgence.

Pieter dabbed a napkin at his lips and sat back, surveying their young guest, who sat very upright with her hands in her lap and her eyes sparkling.

'Do I take it then that you wish to leave, young lady?'

'Please call me Asura,' she said. She nodded vigorously. 'I think I go to castle.'

'Bit touristy, going so soon,' Lucia said. Pieter glanced wearily at her.

'Everyone should see Serehfa,' Gil said, drinking noisily.

'Do you wish to go today?' Pieter asked.

'As soon as possible, please,' the girl said.

'Well,' Pieter said, 'I suppose one of us ought to go with you, really.'

'Don't look at me -' Lucia began.

'I merely wondered if we might prevail upon you to lend the young lady -'

'Asura!' she said, happily.

'- to lend Asura,' Pieter said with a sigh, 'your clothes on a rather longer term -'

'Take them.' Lucia waved one hand, then took Gil's in hers.

'I shall want to be back in time for the others returning,' Pieter told Asura. 'I may have to dump you at the gates, even assuming we can find a flight in time.'

'As soon as possible, please,' Asura repeated.

'Book her into a sisters' hostel in the place or something,' Gil said. 'Or get a clan member to look after her.'

'I may do both,' Pieter said, then sat back and closed his eyes. 'Excuse me,' he murmured.

Lucia Chimbers and Gil poured each other coffee. Asura looked intently at the older man, who presently opened his eyes again and said, 'Yes, we're booked on a flight from SF del Apure, leaving at noon. I can be back on the return service a little after midnight. The jalop claims to be charged up, so I'll drive us to the rail station. I've left a message for Cousin Ucubulaire in Serehfa. I dare say you two will manage to keep yourselves occupied without me?' he said to Gil and Lucia, who both smiled.

'Between you and me, my dear,' Pieter shouted an hour later as he drove the whirring battery car along the dusty road from the house to Cazorla, the nearest town, 'I put you in the blue room on purpose last night; the bed's headboard is fitted with a receptor system.' He smiled over at her.

They had the sunlight-powered car's top off; the wind whis-tled round their ears. ('Ruins the efficiency,' Pieter had told her, 'but it's much more fun.' He wore goggles and a tie-down hat, and had given her similar equipment. She wore loose trousers, a blouse and a light jacket.) 'I thought you might be able to avail yourself of the facilities. If you hadn't, well then, no harm done.'

Asura held onto her hat and smiled broadly at him. Then she frowned, and said, 'The bed made me dream?'

'Not exactly, but it let you dream... in concert, shall we say? Though you must have a remarkable gift to adapt so quickly and so easily.'

They drove on through the morning, between wild fruit-forests of banana and orange. Asura was enjoying the drive.

'Ah, Asura?' Pieter said.

'Yes?'

'That is not regarded as acceptable in polite society. Or, come to think of it, in almost any society, normally.'

'What? This?'

'Yes. That.'

'No? But it feels good. It is beginning with car shaking.'

'I don't doubt. Nevertheless. One does that sort of thing in private, I think you'll find.'

'Oh, all right.' Asura looked mildly puzzled, then adjusted her hands and sat with them clasped demurely in her lap.

'There's the town,' Pieter said, nodding ahead to where a collection of white spires and towers were rising above the greenery. He glanced at his young passenger and shook his head. 'Serehfa. Good grief. I hope I'm doing the right thing...'

2

Chief Scientist Gadfium sat in the whirlbath with the High Sortileger Xemetrio; the pumps hummed, water frothed and bubbled, steam hissed from wall pipes and wrapped them in its hot, dense fog, and music played loudly.

They sat side by side facing each other, each whispering into the other's ear.

'They sound half mad, or *it* sounds half mad,' Xemetrio said, snorting. 'What is all this nonsense about "Love is god" and the "Hallowed centre"?''

'It sounds formalised,' Gadfium whispered. 'I don't think it really means anything.'

Xemetrio drew back a little in the swirling steam; it was so thick Gadfium could not see the walls of the bathroom. 'My dear,' Xemetrio whispered urbanely once his mouth was alongside her ear again. 'I am the High Sortileger; *everything* means something.'

'You see; that is your faith, even though you wouldn't call it such; theirs is expressed in this quasi-religious -'

'It isn't *quasi-religious*, it's *completely* religious.'

'Even so.'

'And Sortilegy boils down to a matter of statistics,' Xemetrio said, sounding genuinely offended. 'Anything less spiritual is difficult to -'

'We're moving off the point. If we ignore the religious trappings and concentrate on the information itself -'

'Context matters,' the Sortileger insisted.

'Let us assume the rest of the signal is true.'

'If you insist.'

'Abstract: they confirm our fears concerning the cloud and the lack of any communication from the Diaspora, and they know of our attempt to construct rockets. They know about this idiotic war between Adijine and the Engineers and that it isn't going to lead anywhere, and they seem concerned about some "workings" going on in the level-five south-western solar affecting the fabric - we assume they mean the fabric of the castle mega-structure itself.' Gadfium wiped beads of moisture from her brow. 'Do we know any more about what's going on there?'

'There's a full Army unit there and they have a lot of heavy equipment, including something they dug out of the southern revetment last year,' Xemetrio told her. 'It's all being kept very quiet.' He leant back and adjusted a control by the side of the tub. 'They built a new hydrovator into the Southern Volcano Room just to supply the garrison. That was where Sessine was heading when he was killed.'

'Sessine was always reckoned one of those who might have been sympathetic to us; do you think -?'

'Impossible to say. There was nothing to link us and him, though it is feasible he was assassinated for political reasons.' Xemetrio shrugged. 'Or personal ones.'

'The signal spoke of "workings",' Gadfium said. 'Mine work-ings, perhaps? What is beneath that room?'

'The floor is unpierced; it cannot signify.'

'But if the device found in the southern revetment...'

'If somebody had finally found a machine able to create new holes in the mega-structure and made it work and dragged it all the way up here, they'd be burrowing into the ceiling of the sacristy, in no-man's land between the King's forces and the Engineers of the Chapel.'

'But the signal spoke of their concern over the fabric. If that is what they meant -'

'Then,' the Sortileger said, sounding exasperated, 'there's nothing we can do for now, unless we are to confess all to the King and his Security people. What else have you decided we can tell from your mysterious signal, assuming it's not all some bizarre self-delusion on the part of the mad people who watch stones slide and call it science?'

'I trust them.'

'Like you trust the signal itself,' Xemetrio said sourly. 'We are conspirators, Gadfium; we cannot afford so much trust.'

'We are not yet acting upon such trust and so risk nothing.'

'Yet,' scoffed the Sortileger, cupping water over his shoulders.

'Whoever sent the signal,' Gadfium went on, 'believes the answer lies in the Cryptosphere.'

'I'm sure the true answer does, along with every possible false answer and no way to distinguish between them.'

'They appear to believe that, as we have always suspected, there is a conspiracy to thwart all efforts to avoid the catastrophe.'

'Though why the King and his cronies should particularly want to die when the sun blows up is of course a trifle difficult to fathom. We're back to speculating about ultra-secret survival projects or some bizarre fatalism.'

'Neither of which is utterly unfeasible, but the act of the conspiracy is all that matters for now, not its origin. Lastly, the signal-senders confirm both that there

is, or may be, an already designed-in method of escape -'

'What, though? Switch on some galactic vacuum-cleaner? Move the planet?'

'You're the Sortileger, Xemetrio...'

'Huh. We daren't run *that* question through the system, but if I had to guess, I'd stick with the obvious answer; there's some part of Serehfa which conceals an escape device. That may be what the war with the Chapel is really about. Maybe the Engineers have access to it and Adjine doesn't.'

'Whatever. The signal also suggests that the data corpus itself may hold the solution and be attempting to access it.'

'The mythical asura,' the Sortileger said, shaking his head.

'Such a method would make sense, given the chaotic nature of the crypt,' Gadfium whispered. 'The possibility of the data corpus' corruption may have been foreseen -'

'Amazing Sortilegy,' Xemetrio muttered.

'- just as was the possibility of a threat to the Earth that could not be dealt with by automatic space defence mechanisms. Physical separation of the information required to activate the escape device would ensure that no matter the delay it could never be corrupted by the crypt.'

'Though it still has to be initiated,' Xemetrio said. 'But let's not lose sight of the fact that all this supposition is built on the word of some historically, how shall I put it?... *eccentric* observers of sliding stones, and that even if they are to be trusted, what we've actually got is an intellectually suspect, semi-garbled message originating from somewhere within the top ten kilometres of the fast-tower; we still have no idea who or what is up there and what their motives are.'

'We also have little time to squander, Xemetrio. We have to decide what to do and how to reply. You're sure you can get this signal and our appraisal to the others safely?'

'Yes, yes,' the High Sortileger snapped; Gadfium asked this question virtually every time they had information they had to spread around their network, and each time Xemetrio had to reassure that as High Sortileger he could move data within the data corpus without Security knowing all about it.

'Good,' Gadfium said, apparently relieved afresh. 'Clispeir is going to heliograph an acknowledgment to the fast-tower's signal and a request for more information, but we must make up our minds; do we act now, merely get ready to act, or go on as before, waiting?'

The High Sortileger looked sadly at the glistening mountains of foam bobbing around him. 'I vote we wait for more information. Meantime, I'll start a quiet search for your asura.' He shook his head. 'Besides, what could we do?'

'We could find out what's going on in the fifth-level south-western solar; that would be a start.'

'I've tried that; most of the military don't know.'

'Perhaps the shade of Count Sessine could answer the question,' Gadfium suggested.

Xemetrio looked sceptical. 'I doubt it. And what if he remains loyal to the King? Quite possibly he is part of their big bad conspiracy and would report our little one to Security.'

'A way might be found to talk to him without giving too much away.'

'I suppose so,' Xemetrio said, looking uncomfortable, 'but I'm not doing it.'

'I'll do it,' Gadfium told him.

Uris Tenblen raised his face to the cold, thin wind cutting across the frozen plain, blinked red-rimmed eyes, cocked his grey-skinned shaven head to one side and listened to the song in his skull.

It was different again today. It was different every day, if he remembered correctly. He wasn't at all sure that he did remember everything correctly. He wasn't sure he remembered anything correctly. But the song in his heart said that it didn't matter.

The wind blew in through the vast windows two kilometres away across the plain. The windows were floor-to-ceiling, and broad; sometimes it seemed to Tenblen that it was better to think of three skinny pillars holding up that side of the

next storey, not four broad windows in a wall. Above here there was only a broad piazza, open to the skies. Tenblen turned round and looked towards the other wall, where four similar apertures, also two kilometres away, let the wind straight back out again. Both sets of windows looked out onto a sea of white cloud.

He turned back; the wind brought hard powdery snow with it, probably not fresh but dislodged from part of the castle above here. The wind-blown granules stung the exposed skin of his face, neck, wrists and hands. He forced the visor and helmet over his head, fumbling raw-fingered with the straps. Chill weather, he told himself, but the song in his head kept him warm, or told him it did, which was just as good.

His dorm was at the edge of the camp; it was a shining aluminium box almost identical to the forty or so others which ringed the workings. This close, the workings themselves were just a huge sloped wall of rubble; from further away across the frozen marshes and low hills of the plain they appeared as a small, steep-sided crater.

From above they would just look like a hole; a dark pit, usually filled with yellow-grey mists, like a giant weeping wound.

Tenblen trudged through the rimed puddles on the rutted path leading towards the workings, fastening his tunic. His boots crunched through brittle white surfaces of ice into the hard brown hollows of the puddles.

The song in his head rose to a sweet crescendo just then and he gave a thin, grim smile, then made a small, involuntary ducking motion and looked nervously up at the ceiling a thousand metres above him.

He passed the bomb caissons, great closed iron cylinders coated with snow, their wheels sunk a little way into the cracked surface of frozen mud. Thus far, they had only two caissons, six small bombs and one large one. A new convoy was on its way, bringing fresh materiel. He saluted an officer who passed him on the path. He knew he ought to know the officer's name, but he could not remember it. That didn't matter; if he needed to talk to the officer or take him some message or order, the song in his head would remind him of his name. The officer nodded as he walked past, his gaze fastened straight ahead and his expression fixed in a broad and somehow desperate grin.

Tenblen climbed the steps by the side of the inclined plain. He ascended them in time to the song, and as he climbed he imagined that the King was looking through his eyes.

(Adjine, who was doing exactly that, experienced only very mild surprise at this point, and almost immediately felt oddly cheated that he hadn't sustained some profound sense of alienation or momentary loss-of-identity.)

The King would look through his eyes and hear the song in his head; the song of loyalty, of obedience, of joy to have this part to play, and know that he was glad to be loyal, glad to be obedient and glad to be joyful. He could think of nothing more pleasant than to be transparent in exactly that manner, and to be seen to be the King's loyal soldier. He got to the top of the crater-wall of rubble and started down the other side, towards the pit.

The fumes were already quite bad. The steam came drifting up the brecciated slope from the hole, wrapping itself around the scattered cisterns, pipes, valveheads, winches and gantries littering the incline. Sometimes the smell of the gases came with the steam, and you thought the cloud enveloping you would be pure fume and you almost panicked with only the song in your head telling you it was all right; other times the steam was far away when you picked up the stink and your eyes watered and your nose and the back of your throat felt rasped and burned.

He stopped at the quartermaster's office. There was a ghost outside.

The ghost was dressed as some ancient judge or holy man. He tried to get in Tenblen's way and shout something at him, but Uris just put his hand through the ghost and made as though to wave it out of the way as he stepped through it. The song in his head drowned out the ghost's voice.

'Bit nippy today,' he shouted to the quartermaster. It helped to shout, over the noise of the song. The quartermaster was a large, red-faced man. He nodded as he issued Tenblen with his gloves, mask and respirator.

'Wind's shifted,' he said loudly, coughing. 'I've asked them to move me further up the slope but of course they haven't done anything yet.'

'Perhaps you should be right at the top.'

'Perhaps I should. Or even on the far slope.'

'You might be better off at the bottom of the slope on the other side.'

'Yes, I might.'

'Well, see you later.'

'Goodbye.'

Tenblen put his mask and respirator on before he left the quartermaster's office. He felt hoarse and his throat was sore already. He could remember being able to talk without talking; being able to think something and somebody else understanding what it was you had thought; he could remember a long time ago when the song had started, thinking how odd it felt having to physically talk any time you wanted to tell somebody something. Promotion, people had joked at the time, at first.

The song had been young then and they had all been charmed by it. He could remember even longer ago when he'd not been a soldier and had been able to talk to anybody. He felt sad about that, sometimes. The song lifted his spirits, though. It could turn the sadness to joy. After all, you cried when you were happy sometimes, too.

He stepped outside into the slow whorls of drifting, rising steam, and continued down into the workings. His own breath sounded loud within the mask and he could hear valves clicking and hissing. He could feel the fumes on his neck, already chafing against his collar. A little of the fume-smell leaked in round the edges of the mask, and he tried to clamp the mask down harder. He tramped deeper into the steam, down a concrete path lit by tall poles tipped with small lamps and strung with a hand-rope at hip level.

The song sang majestically as he descended into the darkness...

(The song the song the song while he seemed to pass venting pipes and arrive at a platform in a broad tunnel where a small train waited full of coughing men but the song said no no no stuck in a breath-holding loop that said time is not passing this is not happening and sang higher sweeter fuller as the train ground and screeched its way over points and into a narrow tunnel and accelerated in utter darkness the wind in his face journeying for a time then passing through a dimly lit hole where guards with fixed stares stood then another tunnel and then the fume smell again and the steam and he started to relax as though he'd been holding his breath all that time and then out of the train with the others and down the steps relieved and even glad to be here while the song sang resuming.)

... The workings surface was a chaotic ballet from some primitive's hell; it was filled with a loud, fume-laden darkness pierced sporadically by flashes of intense, scarifying light, and permeated with a furious hissing sound punctuated by sudden screams and explosions. Through this havoc drifted a population of terrifying beasts, monstrously deformed human shapes wielding strange instruments

designed to puncture, flay and burn, and the wailing, beseeching figures of ghosts.

Tenblen pulled on a harness and hitched himself to the roof struts. An officer came up to him and told him to return to his quarters, but the song in his head told him this wasn't a real officer; it was a ghost and to be ignored.

Tenblen found a pair of boots that didn't look too badly scarred and started down the steps to the mine surface. A chimeric oxephant hauling a vat of acid loomed out of the mist, making him pause. He found himself automatically checking its harness and restrainer straps; they all seemed to be in place, the harness tight and the straps disappearing up into the steam clouds towards the grid of struts barely visible against the dark roof above (and some part of him looked at that darkness above thinking, *But - ...* but then the song swelled, drowning out the sound of his recalcitrant thoughts).

He walked towards the eastern part of the floor. He glanced down as he walked. The surface. The song in his head welled up again, telling him to rejoice at the task they had undertaken, at its daring, its technological sophistication, at its audacity and its uniqueness. It was a wonderful and beautiful thing they were doing; they were reclaiming the structure, the whole castle, not just for their cause and the King but for all people. They were no longer at its mercy, it was at theirs.

A beautiful woman appeared out of the mists, her skin black, her clothes whiter and wispier than the mists, her body full and firm and voluptuous. Tenblen knew she was a ghost but he stood and stared for a while as she walked round him with a half-coy, half-welcoming smile. Then the song rose again, racketing in his head and setting his teeth on edge. It was still pleasant, like being tickled, but he could not take it for very long. He hurried on, away from the woman.

He came to the latest workings. Acid fumed, arc-light spar-kled, power tools hammered. Men dressed in full protective suits stumbled round. Chimerics pawed the ground, pulled with harness hooks and bellowed.

Tenblen tried to breathe easily and shallowly through his mouth, ignoring the rasp of fumes in his throat as he walked amongst the men and beasts, checking their harness connections and restraining straps. Under his feet, the surface of the workings was smoking and peeling and blistering, constantly sprayed by the rusting agent and then further attacked with scab-hooks, welding arcs, lasers and a selection of acids, mostly sulphuric and hydrochloric. The surface was constantly attempting to repair itself, flowing back to fill holes and rearranging the large-scale fibres and scales which it was composed of. You could never be certain which sections would be susceptible to which removing agent; there was no alternative but to try everything and see what worked at that point at that time.

He stood for a moment, ignoring the ghost of a small baby at his feet, writhing and screaming on the ground amongst the acid pools. The surface here looked thin somehow. Perhaps they'd do it here (the baby looked up at him, eyes huge, while smoke curled up around its blistering skin. The song sang high and sweet while Tenblen's eyes filled with tears. He gently put his boot out, through the apparition of the baby, then when it moved out of his way, suddenly screamed in frustration and brought his boot down on it as though trying to crush the infant. It disappeared. His boot heel met the surface and the shock resounded through him, then the ground too seemed to disappear and he was looking -

- down. The circular hole started at his feet and was almost instantly ten metres wide around him.

He dropped through, screaming, in a haze of acid spray. The city was a sparkling jewel two kilometres below him. His harness tightened around him like a bony fist and the restraining straps bounced him up and down like some child in a walking yoke. The song burned in his head, exultant. He kept on screaming despite the song, and soiled himself.

On a warm marble table in the Palace baths, the King opened his eyes and looked up as the masseuse kneaded his back. He smiled broadly and said, 'Yes!'

He winked at the masseuse and lowered his head again, within range of the receptor devices buried in the marble table.

He skipped back into Uris Tenblen's head just in time to watch with him as the edges of the hole above him wobbled liquidly like grey-black circular lips, then snapped back closed with a whiplash crack, rebounding a little so that a metre-diameter hole existed for a moment before that too irised shut like an eye blinking.

The first closure had instantly severed the straps on Tenblen's harness.

He plummeted - gesticulating frantically, screaming hoarsely - towards the glittering spires of the city two thousand metres below.

The link sizzled and cut out.

Adijine raised his head. 'Shhhit,' he said softly.

3

'Very well, Alan, who *is* trying to kill me?' Sessine asked, smiling a little at the image of his earlier self.

The younger Sessine looked around. The engine's thrashing heart was all fury and noise; pipes roaring, connecting rods flashing to and fro. He took up the portable chess board and put it down the bib front of his engineer's overalls, then stood.

Sessine did not get up, but sat on the little stool, still smiling up at the construct of his younger self, who laughed.

'Please, Count; come with me.'

Sessine stood slowly, and nodded.

They were standing in a clearing within the high forest at the foot of the fastness walls. Sessine looked up through the sighing tops of the trees to the curtain-wall towering above. A tower a few kilometres away rose still higher, but the rest of the structure was hidden by the walls, a rosy cliff fifteen hundred metres high and festooned with variegated babilia. The wind sougled briefly in the trees, then died away.

'Here,' Alan said. Sessine turned, and the younger man took his hand.

/They stood in a vast circular space with a floor of gleaming gold, a velvet-black ceiling and what appeared to be a single all-round window looking out onto a whitely shining surface and a purple-black sky where stars shone steadily. Above them, suspended as though on nothing, hung a massive orrery; a model of the solar system with a brilliant yellow-white ball of light in the middle and the various planets shown as glassy globes of the appropriate appearance all fixed by slender poles and shafts to thin hoops of blackly shining metal like wet jet.

Under the representation of the sun, there was a brightly lit circular construction like a half-built room. They walked there across the glistening floor.

'This is a memory, of course,' his younger self said, waving one hand. 'We don't know what the upper sections of the fast-tower look like now. When Serehfa was still called Acsets, this was part of the control apparatus.'

They entered the circular area in the centre of the room; a collection of couches, seats, desks and ornately decorated wood and precious-metal consoles and dark screens of crystal.

They sat on facing seats. Alan looked up at the glaring image of the sun, his face shining. 'We're safe here,' he told Sessine. 'I've spent subjective millennia exploring, mapping and studying the structure of the Cryptosphere and this is as secure as it gets.'

Sessine glanced around. 'Very impressive. Now.' He sat forward. 'Answer my question.'

'The King. He ordered your death.'

Sessine sat very still for a moment. Then I am lost, he thought. He said, 'Are you sure?'

'Entirely.'

'And the Consistory?'

'They approved it.'

'Well,' Sessine said, running a hand round the back of his neck, 'that would appear to be that.'

'That depends on what you want to do,' the construct said.

'All I wanted was to find out why I was killed.'

'Because you have doubts about the conduct of the war, but most especially because you were starting to doubt the motives of the King and the Consistory and their dedication to the cause of saving people from the Encroachment.'

'I think others feel that way.'

Alan smiled. 'Most of the Consistory doubt the wisdom of the war, and many people think the King and his pals seem less concerned than they ought to be about the Encroachment - a lot of people suspect they have their own space-ship, though they don't. Most people can't do anything about their suspicions; you can - or could have. You have the honour of being the most highly placed and popular potential

dissident, the one they felt they might benefit most from making an example of. They were still uncertain whether actually to do it - Adijine himself spoke for letting you live - but you made their minds up for them; you pulled strings to go on that supply convoy to the bomb-workings. Adijine had left strict instructions only somebody with implants could command it.'

'I know. It seemed... wrong.'

'You used your influence, somebody high up enough to know of the King's decree but with a grudge against you let you swing the commission, and when the King and the Consistory found out they didn't even consider trying to order you back; they just had you killed by activating a Chapel spy whose code they had already intercepted.'

Sessine considered this. 'That seems a little desperate.'

The construct shrugged. 'These are desperate times.'

'And who do I have to thank for the decision to let me go in the first place?'

'Flische. Colonel-to-the-court. He's fucking your wife.'

Sessine thought for a moment, staring at his vague reflection in the matt blackness of screen on a console opposite. After some time he sighed.

'What is happening at the workings?' he asked.

'Last year they found a mesturedo, a substance which can attack the fabric of the mega-structure. They've used it to eat through the floor of the solar. From there they built a tube track between the floor and the ceiling along to the wall between the solar and the room above the Chapel; they're currently on the last lap, burrowing through the fabric of the false ceiling directly above Chapel City. When they succeed in opening it they'll drop bombs through.'

'The mega-structure fabric tries to defend itself through the crypt. It sends visions; ghosts and demons which attempt to prevent the soldiers and engineers doing the digging. The only way the Army's found to keep their personnel functional - if not sane - is to flood their minds with a loyalty signal; a song of captivity that blanks out everything else and turns the men into automatons.'

'So I would not have been susceptible to this song; so what?'

'So what they are doing there is not only destroying Army personnel, it's destroying parts of the crypt itself.'

'How so?'

'The mega-structure houses filaments of the crypt's hardware. Contrary to popular belief, the Cryptosphere is not a function of some buried horde of super-machines; the whole fastness is permeated with it. There *are* elements deep inside the structure, but the primary structure itself houses most of what we know as the crypt.'

'What the bomb-workings are doing now is destroying an important nexus of that Cryptospheric structure; it's madness, and it encourages chaos. The crypt-time has slowed down locally by an appreciable additional degree. What is left of humanity is caught between the threat of the Encroachment above and the chaos within the crypt below. The course Adijine and his Consistory are following would seem to ignore one and aggravate the other. At the very least you would have been concerned, sceptical and questioning on discovering all this. They could scarcely risk that, let alone what might have been your most extreme reaction.'

Sessine gave a small, humourless laugh, and shook his head. 'And the war with the Chapel?' he asked matter-of-factly.

'Genuine enough. The Engineers do have something we need, though it's not the information on how to make spacecraft.'

'What is it?'

The construct raised his eyebrows. 'Here we reach the limits of my research. I am not certain.' He shrugged. 'But it is something Adijine and the Consistory consider to be of the utmost importance.'

Sessine shook his head and looked up at the vast orrery hanging silently overhead. It had moved, while he had been listening to the construct. Saturn hung overhead now, immense and gassy, attended by its moons.

'Madness, chaos, crypt-time slowing,' Sessine said, sighing. He stood up and walked round some of the ancient equipment, drawing a hand over the surfaces of the desks and consoles, wondering if this virtual environment included dust. He inspected the tip of his finger. It appeared it did, though only just. He rubbed his fingers together and looked back at his younger self. 'Anything else you want me to assimilate this afternoon?'

'My speculation as to the nature of the prize the Chapel and the King compete for.'

'And what would that be?'

'Can you keep a secret?' His younger self smirked.

Sessine shook his head again. 'Was I really this tiresome?'

The construct laughed. 'This is a secret you must keep even from yourself, for a time at least.'

'Go on,' Sessine said tiredly. 'What is the glittering prize we all pursue?'

The construct grinned broadly. 'A secret passage.'

Sessine looked levelly at him.

4

[Translation](#)

I stair @ thi big blak beest cumin up thi branch 2wards me.

Av got a gun! I shout (this iz a ly)

... Ah veri mush dout that, thi thing sez. It stops ol thi saim smilin & showin its teef agen. But nway, it sez, shtop being shilly Am heer 2 help u.

I'll bet, I sez, glancin roun & stil tryin 2 figir out a way 2 escape.

... Yesh. If ahd wantid 2 harm u ah cude ½ shaken u out ov thare 5 minitsh ago.

O yeh? I sez, hangin on titer. Wel mayb u doan wan 2 kil me mayb u juss wan 2 capture me.

... In wish caysh ahd ½ dropt on u from abuv, u shilly boy.

O u wood, wood u?

... Yesh. Yoor Bashcule, arnt u?

Praps, I sez. & who or whot r u when yoor @ home then?

... Am a shlof, it sez proudly. U can col me Gashton.

So am bein led thru thi babil plants by a slof calld Gaston whot has a kinda mutant lisp & takes such pride in his appeerinse heez got fungus growin on his bak; thats whot thi green streaks r. He ofird 2 let me ride on his bak hangin on2 his fur but I declynde.

We clime thru thi babil, goan doun & roun thi towr.

Hoo sent u then? I ask.

... Shame peepil shent thi jericule lasht nite, Gaston sez, token ovir hiz sholder.

Whot, that big bat?

... Thatsh rite.

Whot happind 2 him nway, do u no?

... Hir, Gaston sez. No.

O.

I follow Gaston doun thru thi babil branchiz. Followin Gaston iznt difficult on account ov him bein a qwite remarkably slo moovir. If he had bin cumin 2 atak me I cude probly ½ juss gon doun thi branch he woz on & climed rite ovir him b4 he cude ½ startid 2 react.

Nway. Hoo woz it sent u heer then?

... Frenz.

U doan say.

... No, I do shay; frenz.

Wel fanks, thats prity enlitenin.

... Payshinsh, yung man.

We negoshayate a few more branchiz.

Whare u takin me nway?

... 2 a plaish ov shafety.

Yeh, but whare?

... Payshinsh, yung man, payshinsh.

I can c am not goan 2 get nuffink out ov this slof so I juss shut up & content myself wif makin sily faces @ its big blak green-streekd bak.

Iss a long slow jurny.

... Thers fings goan on, Mr Bascule, thass ol I can sai; thers fings goan on. Frankly I dont no xactly whot they r myself, or whethir Id b abl 2 tel u about them if I did, but as I dont I cant nway, u c?

Not reely, I sez, witch is thi troof.

Thi slof-geezir whot can onli sai, Ther's fings goan on, is calld Hombetante & heez thi cheef slof; heez got implantz & is actule considerd a bit ov a lyv wyr by slof standirds tho u cude stil go off & ½ a p, wosh yoor hans & brush yoor teef in thi time it taks him to blink. Heez fat & old & gray & his fungus lukes moar lyvli than he duz.

Am in a ½ runed bit ov thi saim towr whare thi big bat cald a jericule dropt me last nite. Me & Gaston thi slof got heer aftir about a our in thi babil, comin in thru a tol windo ½ ovirgroan wif babil branchiz.

This seemz 2 b Slof Sentril; iss lyk a hole room fool ov scaffoldin & hangin 10ts & hamox & stuf. Thers rubbil on thi floar & no glas or anyfin in thi windos & thi wind blos in thru a windo on thi otheir syd ov thi hooj circular room & thru thi scaffoldin & makes everfin sway in thi breez & thi slofs doan seem 2 tak ver gude care ov thi plais no moar than thay do ther can selfs, but @ leest thai gaiv me sum woter 2 drink & ½ a qwik wosh in & then gaiv me sum frute & nuts to eet. Id ½ preferd sumfing hot but I doan fink thi slofs r grate fans ov fyr so heetin stuf up mite b a problim.

Weer in a big spais in thi sentir ov thi scaffoldin whare thi slofs aparently hold ther meetins. Bet thos r a bundil ov lafs.

Hombetante is hangin upside down from a bit ov scaffoldin on a low staje @ 1 end ov thi meetin spais, thi floar ov which is coverd wif simla curvd lenth ov scaffoldin like ver tol railins. Theyve given me a sorta sling thing 2 sit in suspendid from Hombetante's scaffold pole. Thi only othir slof presint is Gaston, whose hangin from anuthir bit ov scaffoldin alongside, munchin sloaly on sum particulerly un-yummy lookin leefs.

... U r welcom 2 stay heer, Hombetante sez, until thingz settil down.

Whot u meen, settil down? I ask. How r they settled up @ thi momint? Whot xactly is supposed 2 b goan on?

... Juss things, Mr Bascule. Things witch need not consern u @ thi momint.

Whot about a certin ant who goes by thi name ov Ergates? U no anyfin about hir fate?

... U r juss yung & doutlis hedstrong, Hombetante sez, very much like he hasnt herd whot I juss sed ... I woz yung 1nce myself u no. Yes I no u mite find that hard 2 beleev but it is tru; I wel remember...

I woan bore u wif thi rest. Whot it boils down 2 is thers trubil @ kript & sumhow Ive got mixd up in it. Mite ol b cleerd up soon, mite not. Hooevir is supposed 2 b thi good gies in ol this r bhind thi jericule pikin me up yesterday & Gaston cumin 2 find me 2day. Now am heer wif thi slofs am been told 2 lie lo, & not go neer thi kript.

& - ov coarse - 2 ½ payshins.

Aftir my odyince wif Hombetante during which he tels me ½ his life story & I neerly fol asleep twice Gaston takes me 2 a playce neer thi outside ov thi scaffoldin whare

thers a room wif a hamok & a sling chare & a ole fashind screen workin off brodcasts. Thers a sorta cubby-hole in 1 corner with a pipe stikin up which is suposed 2 b a toylit. 2 floars abuv thers a place whare thi slofs gathir 4 food evry evenin. Also in thi room is a boal ov frute & a jug ov water. Thers a windo in 1 wol whot lukes out 2 thi big vertikil towr windo we came thru. Gaston shows me how thi screen wurx & sez if I get board I can always go frute & nut gatherin with him.

I say thangs, maybe 2morrow, & he goes & I get in2 thi hamok & pool thi cuvirs ovir & go strate 2 sleep.

I juss no am goan 2 go crazy heer, + I no that am goan 2 ½ 2 visit thi kript sooner or later, 2 luke 4 Ergates & fynd out whots goan on, so when I wake up in thi late afternoon I splash sum water on my face, ½ a p & 1nce Ive decided I jenerili feel awake & refreshd, I get rite down 2 it, on thi principil that thers no time like thi presint.

I try 2 cleer my mind ov ol things slof-like (cant fink ov anyfing less usefil 2 take in2 thi kript than eny semblence ov sloffoolniss) & plunje rite in.

I think I lernd a thing or 2 during ol that time I spent in thi kript as a bird so I hed bak in that direcshin onli this time am not fukin about wif wee dainty sparos or hoks or nuffin; am goan as a big bastardin burd; a simurg. Thare so big ther branes can cope wif a hoomin mind without much finessin, which meens I doan ½ 2 spend moast ov my time rememberin what I am or disgysin ma wake-up code as a ring. Iss a bit ambishis but sumtimes thass thi only way 2 get nywhare.

I close ma Is.

/Check out thi immediet locality furst; nuthin out ov thi ordinary in thi neerby kript-space. ½ a shuftly @ thi arcitecture ov thi towr juss on jeneril principils - this ole towr iz a interestin place rite enuf - then look a bit furvir out. Thi trafic aroun thi Littl Big Bros' monastry is juss about bak 2 normil but I doan go eny neerer 2 find out moar.

Zoom in2 birdspace.

/& am a hooj wild bird floatin on thi currents slidin wifin thi driftin wind, hangin lazily loosed on ma outstretchd wings cantileverd acros thi singin air. Ma wingtip fevirs r eech thi size ov hands; they flutir like a lam's hart flutirs when ma shado folz ovir it. Ma feet r steel-tipt grapples hung on thi end ov ma hawser legs. Ma

talins r unsheethd razers; onli ma Is r sharper. Ma beek is harder than bone, keener than juss-broke glass. Ma keel bone is a grate nife cozend in ma flesh & cleevin thi soft air; ma ribs r glistnin springs, ma mussils sleek bunchd fists ov oily powr, ma hart a chambir fild wif slo thunder, qwiet & unstressd; a towrin dam triklin powr, tikin ovir, hedwaters ov charjed blud pent & latent.

Wel, YES! This is moar like it! Why did I evir bothir been a hok? Why woz I so bleedin unam*hishis*? I feel feers, I feel *powerfil*.

I look about, surveying. Air evrywhare. Clouds. No groun.

Othir birds flyin in vast Vs, climin in hooj colums in thi air, gatherid in ther own dark clouds, wheelin & collin. I think 2wards roosts.

/& am in thi midst ov them; spherikil trees floatin in thi grounles blueniss like brown planets ov twigs in a universe ov air, surrounded by a sqwakin atmosphere ov birds toin & froin.

Thi parlyment ov crows, I think.

/& am thare, in bitter air between layers ov white cloud like mirr'rd landscapes ov snow; thi grate dark winter-trees r massd 2 thi density ov blak clifs agenst thi icy billos ov frozin cloud. Thi crows' parlyment is in thi tollest, gratest biggist tree ov ol, its brown-blak twigs like thi sooty bones ov a millyin hands clutchin @ thi chil blank fayce ov hevin. Thi meetin brakes up when they c me & they cum skrawkin & screetchin out 2 mob me.

I beat, pushin down thi air, risin ovir the pesterin burds, seekin 1 who stays bak, directin.

Thi crows swarm up aroun me. A few land blows on ma hed but it dozen hurt. I laf & stretch ma nek, swivelin ma hed an rippin a few ov ther litl toyish bodies from thi air. I toss them aside; red blud beeds, pulverized white bone pushes thru ther coal blak fevirs & they tumbil torn 2 thi snow-cloud billows. Thi rest screem, pull flutrin bak a momint then mob in agen. I stroke 4wards. Air snaps swirlin undir ma wings, rollin thi pursuin birds roun like bubbles under a waterfol.

I c my prey. Heez a big grey-black fellir perchd on thi topmost twig ov thi topmost branch ov thi parlyment-tree & heez juss reelised whots goan on.

He rises, cawin & shreekin in2 thi air. Foolish; if he'd dived in2 thi branchiz he mite ½ had a chance.

He tries sum acrobatic stuf but heez old & stiff & I snatch him so eesily iss almost disapointin. *Snap!* & he's neetly encased in one cage ov foot, flappin & screemin & loosin feevirs & pekin @ ma toes wif his litl blak beek & tiklin me. I slice anuthir cupil ov his fellos out ov thi air, spredin ther blood like a artist wude, paint on a white canvas, then I think *eyrie*

/& am alone wif ma litl crowy frend abuv a tawny plane ov sand & rok, beatin 2wards a fractchird clif whare a narled fingir ov rok juts out, its summit topt wiv a jiant nest ov sunbleechd timbirs & splintered white animal & burd bones.

I land & fold thi soft clokes ov ma wings & stand upon thi brittle nest - timbers creek, branchiz burst, pikd-cleen bones snap - lookin doun @ ma bolld foot wif thi old gray-blak crow imprisind in it, flappin an beetin an hollerin.

Skreek! Skrawk! Awrk! Gerout!

O shut up, I tel it, an thi rok-crushin weight ov ma voyce stuns it 2 qwiet stilniss. I balince on that leg, compressin thi trapt crow & reechin thru thi bars ov ma talins wif a talin from thi other foot, tiklin thi bird's grey-blak frote while thi breth wheeziz out ov it.

Now then my litl chum, I say - & ma voyce iz acid on a slicin blaid, boilin led doun a opin frote - Ive a few qwestchins Id like 2 ask u.

SIX

1

She stood on the piazza of the landing tower, looking west towards the heights of the structure.

The curtain-walls - easily two kilometres high and punctuated by the tall half-cylinders of the mural towers - curved away to either side, rising and falling over the gentle undulations in the landscape to diminish and disappear into the misted distance. Within the vegetation-strung cliffs of the walls lay a broad rolling landscape of wooded hills, sparkling lakes, manicured parkland and broad fields, all dotted with the spires and towers of small villages and towns.

Beyond, still slightly blued with the distance, the fastness itself reared forever into the sky. She stared, slack-jawed.

Serehfa was a frozen turbulence of architecture beyond the merely monumental: revetments rose like cliffs topped by broad, wooded scarps, stout bastions stood like jutting bluffs, serrated ridges of parapet lay stretched hazily like squared-off mountain ranges themselves, cloud-lined walls ascended sheer or stood pierced by the vast caves of dark windows, whole forested slopes of steep-pitched roofs lay serried green beneath the warmth of the high summer sun, and soaring arches of gables and buttresses climbed to higher and higher levels piled one on top of another, all swathed in whorling patterns of colour and climbing stacked, packed, placed and lifted to where the sparkling whiteness of snow and ice sat in a broad band of collected light thrown dazzlingly against the shining sky.

Everywhere about the panoramic, sight-saturating expanse of the central structure gigantic towers of mountainous diameter forced their way into the atmosphere, piercing the few, drifting, scale-diminished clouds which left their barely moving shadows aslant along the soaring walls and were themselves thrown into shade by still higher reaches of further towers casting their own stone shadows across both the clouds and the monstrous upheaval of the edifice itself; a crescendo of form and colour filling the horizon and culminating in the stark shining column of the central tower, drawing the gaze upward like some anchored moon.

'Well, there it is, in all its glory,' Pieter Velteseri said, joining her at the balustrade. He waved his walking stick at the castle.

Asura looked at him, eyes wide. '*Big*,' she said.

Pieter smiled and took in the view of the fastness. 'Indeed. The single largest artefact on Earth. The capital of the world, I suppose. And the last city, in a sense.'

She frowned. 'There are no more cities?'

'Well, yes, most of them survive, but someone from the Age of Cities would regard them more as large towns in terms of their populations.'

She turned to stare at it again.

'Do you know yet why you had to come here?' Pieter asked her softly.

She shook her head slowly, gaze fixed upon the fastness.

'Well, I dare say you'll remember when you have to.' Pieter took a fob watch from his waistcoat, frowned, closed one eye for a second, then reset the watch. He sighed and looked around the broad piazza, where umbrellas and sun shades flapped over tables and cafe bars. The airship rode at anchor above them in the breeze, nose connected to the landing tower. There were still a few lingering groups of castilians greeting those who had arrived on the craft, but most of the people now were either about to embark or bidding passengers farewell.

'Cousin Ucubulaire reports she is on her way,' Pieter told her. He nodded towards the countryside of the bailey. 'She's under there somewhere, in a slow-running tube train.'

'Tube train,' she repeated.

'My dear, I think you ought to have this.' He fished in one pocket of his dress coat and handed her a small wallet containing a thin card with writing and numbers on it. She studied it. 'It makes you an honorary member of our clan,' Pieter explained. 'Ucubulaire will look after you, but in case you feel you have to move on elsewhere from Serehfa, that ought to make sure you don't have to rely on hostels for a bed or public kitchens for food; can't have you hanging onto the outside of airships or trains, now can we?'

She looked at him, uncomprehending.

'Ah well,' he said. He closed her hands over the small wallet and patted them. 'You ought not to need it, but if anybody asks you what clan you're from, just show them this.'

She nodded. 'Phremylagists and Inclimetricists.'

'Not one of the more active clans, I'll grant you, but ancient, and honourable. I hope we have been of some service.'

She smiled. 'You have made me welcome, and brought me here. Thank you.'

Pieter nodded to a wooden bench behind them. 'Let's sit, shall we?'

They sat, and for a while simply contemplated the castle.

She jumped when the airship sounded its horn. Pieter looked at his watch again. 'Well, I must go. Cousin Ucubulaire ought to arrive presently. Will you be all right waiting here?'

'Yes, thank you.' She stood with him, and he took her hand and kissed it. She returned the gesture and he laughed gently.

'I don't know what your business is here, my dear, or what lies in store for you, but I do hope you will come and visit us again, when you know what all this has been about.' Pieter hesitated and a troubled expression crossed his face for a moment, then he shook his head. 'I'm sure it will all sort itself out happily. But do come back and see us.'

'I shall.'

'I'm very glad to hear it. Goodbye, Asura.'

'Goodbye, Pieter Velteseri.'

He returned to the airship. A little later he appeared on the observation deck. He waved and she waved back, flourishing the wallet he'd given her before placing it carefully in a pocket. The airship's engines hummed into life; it lifted, turned across the breeze and started back east across the hills of Xtremadur.

She watched the vessel grow slowly smaller in the sky, then turned back to feast her sight upon the castle.

'Ah, Asura?' the woman said.

She looked up. There was a tall lady standing by the bench. She wore cool blue clothes the same colour as her eyes. Her skin was pale.

'Yes, I am Asura. Are you Ucubulaire?'

'Yes.' The woman put her hand out. 'Yes, I am.' Her grip was scratchy; her hands

were covered with thin net gloves made from some fine but hard filaments. 'Pleased to meet you.' She indicated a tall, square-set, powerful looking man with deep-set eyes standing a little way off. 'This is a friend; Lunce.'

The man nodded. Asura smiled. He smiled, briefly.

'Shall we go?' the woman said.

'To there, to the fastness, yes?'

The woman smiled thinly. 'Oh yes.'

She stood up and went with them.

2

Consistory member Quolier Oncaterius VI sat in the single ice-scuttle, pulling hard on the oars while the seat slid under him, the breath whistled out of his lungs and the claw-blades bit and chipped into the smoothly glistening surface on either side. The scuttle was an A-shaped tracery of carbon tubing a child could lift with one hand; it skittered across the ice on its three hair-thin blades with a nervous, rumbling, hissing noise.

The chill blast of air slid round his body-suit and licked up over the seat harness towards his face.

He pulled, slid, pulled, slid, pulled, slid, settling into a steady rhythm of heart, lung and muscle, flicking the oars back and hauling them forward, the hooked claws at the shafts' ends embedding in the ice and providing the leverage to snap himself forward on each explosive haul.

The trick with ice-rowing was to judge precisely the weight and angle of attack of the stramazon - or downward cut - of the claws, while balancing the vertical and horizontal components of the stroke, thus ensuring both that one always had a sufficiently embedded grip on the ice's skin to provide purchase while wasting as little effort as possible lifting the claw-tips out of the ice again, and that one was always just on the edge of lifting oneself and the scuttle partially off the ice, but never

quite doing so. It was a delicate double-balance to maintain and required both finely tuned judgment and great concentration. There were many aspects of a politician's - indeed a ruler's - life which demanded exactly such equipoise.

Oncaterius was proud of the skill he had developed at the sport.

He stroked on, oblivious to the space around him save for the fuzzy black mark of the lane centre-line printed under the ice. Around him stretched kilometres of ice, lightly populated by people on skates, ice boards and ice yachts. The thin air of the level-five Great Flying Room sounded to the zizz of blades inscribing the floor-lake's frozen surface and the propeller blades of the microlights describing lazy arcs about its lofted spaces.

Something clicked in Oncaterius' mind and a display superimposed itself in his vision, giving him his time for the kilometre course.

He shipped oars and sat back, breathing hard, the scull still skidding quickly across the ice. He gazed up at the microlights circling round the ornate, suspended architecture of the central stalactite at the crux of the room's groin-vaulted ceiling.

Soon, he thought, in perhaps as little as a century, all this would be gone. The Great Flying Room, Serehfa, Earth itself. Even the sun would never again be the same.

It was a thought that filled Oncaterius with a sort of delicious gloom; a melancholic ecstasy which made the appreciation of this current life all the sweeter. To treasure each moment, to savour every experience, to evaluate individually one's multitudinous feelings and sensations with the knowledge lodged within that events were hurrying to a close, that there was no longer a seeming infinitude of time stretching ahead of one; that was truly to live.

All that they and their ancestors had known throughout the monotonous millennia of the past since the Diaspora had been a kind of elegant death, an automaton's graceful impersonation of life; the surface without the substance. Well, it was going now. The arc of humanity's purpose - that is, real humanity, the part that had chosen to stay true to the past and what it meant - was finally drawing itself back into the shade after whole long troubled ages spent in the vexatious light of day.

Fruition. Consummation. Termination... Closure.

Oncaterius savoured the thoughts and correlations such words evoked, drawing their meanings and associations into his mind as he drew the cool, sharp air into his

lungs; arid - even sterile -and yet invigorating. Especially when one knew that one would not necessarily have to share the fate of one's fellows, or one's surroundings.

The scull skated on across the water-filmed ice, gradually slowing.

Oncaterius leant back against the seat's spindly head-rest, letting it cup his neck and scalp. He crypted for a moment, reviewing the current security condition.

They still sought Sessine, who remained loose after all this time. Probably in hiding.

Security's quasi-official leak/rumour that any asuras would actually be agents of the crypt's chaotic levels sent with the purpose of infecting the properly functioning Cryptosphere seemed to be meeting with a mixed reception; however, enough people/entities appeared to believe it for an atmosphere of satisfyingly useful paranoia to have settled over at least some sections of the data corpus.

His Majesty himself had first reported the loss of a soldier at the bomb-workings; it remained to be seen to what extent this had jeopardised the project. There had been no reaction yet from the Chapel ambassadorial mission, though they had to assume that the Engineer emissaries had been informed through their secure channel to the Palace.

Concern remained over unusual patterns within the lower crypt; some obscure species of chimeric bird appeared to have developed behaviour above its station and so was under suspicion of being an agent for the chaos; the birds would be sought out and apprehended as soon as was practical. Linked with that, perhaps, was a young Teller who'd been making a nuisance of himself and who also appeared to have a suspiciously unusual turn of mind. He too had got away, like Sessine. Oncaterius cursed the millennia of peace and prosperity which had left the Security service so unpractised in dealing with genuinely serious problems. Still, they were keeping watch; the boy would show up sooner or later.

And, at last, his fellow Consistorians had finally agreed that it was time to act against the conspiracy they had known existed for the last five years.

That... was being dealt with satisfactorily.

Chief Scientist Gadfium and her staff left the office of the High Sortileger with the issue of the stray crypt signals still not resolved. They returned to the Great Hall

the following day and ascended to the Lantern Palace so that Gadfium could attend the weekly cabinet briefing. Gadfium found these meetings exasperating; they were supposed to keep people up to date with developments and help facilitate actions which might be of use in the current emergency, but so far all they ever seemed to do was pander to some of the attendees' feelings of self-importance and produce vast amounts of talk that substituted for deeds rather than leading to them.

Nevertheless, with that familiar feeling that she was wasting her breath on matters more easily - and far more quickly - dealt with by reference to the data corpus, she outlined her opinions on the various issues she had been involved with during the past seven days, including the progress on the oxygen works, the odd pattern formed on the Plain of Sliding Stones and the worrying irregularities in the Cryptosphere which were making the Sortileger's predictions unreliable.

The meeting - in a fair approximation of the Hall of Mirrors in ancient Versailles - was attended in person by most of the partici-pants including the King and Pol Cserse for the Cryptographers, though Heln Austermise, the second Consistory member, was at the rocketry test site at Ogooué-Maritime and so represented at the meeting by her court attaché, and speaking through him. He was a slim, middle-aged man in a tight-fitting court uniform; Gadfium suspected Rasflin - sitting behind her along with Goscil - would look like this man when he was older.

'Nevertheless, Chief Scientist, the tests with both the direct-lift and aerofoil-assist vehicles are proceeding as planned,' the attaché said. It was his own voice; the only sign that it was not his thoughts and volition producing it was that he sat very still, with none of the usual shiftings and fidgets people tended to exhibit. Gadfium had long since ceased to find it odd talking to somebody who wasn't there through somebody who - in a sense - wasn't there either.

'I don't doubt it, ma'am,' Gadfium said. 'But some of us are a little concerned at the lack of raw data being provided. The critical nature of this project- '

'I'm sure the Chief Scientist appreciates the importance of retaining the prophylactic distance we have been fortunate enough to achieve from the chaos of the Cryptosphere,' the attaché said.

Gadfium paused before replying. She glanced at some of the others seated around the long table; the group was made up of the King, Consistorian Cserse, Austermise's attaché, repre-sentatives of other important clans and various civil servants, technicians and scientists. Gadfium thought the King - dressed soberly in a white shirt, black hose and tunic - looked bored in a handsome and elegant way.

Probably crypting somewhere more interesting.

'Indeed, ma'am,' Gadfium said, and sighed. She was starting to lose patience. 'I'm not sure I follow. Sending us data can pose no threat to- '

'On the contrary,' the attaché said. 'If the Chief Scientist will consult with Consistory member Cserse, she will perhaps be reminded that recent cryptographic research indicates that the transmission of chaotic data virus is possible through interface-handshakes and error-checking mechanisms. Even the link through which I am talking to you now cannot be guaranteed totally proof against such contamination.'

'I thought that there were comparatively simple, fully mathematically provable programs which could deal with- '

'I think madam Chief Scien-'

'*Kindly* allow me to finish a *sentence*, madam!' Gadfium shouted. That woke the King up. Others around the table moved as though uncomfortable. The attaché appeared utterly unruffled.

'I understood,' Gadfium said icily, 'that this problem had been dealt with.'

At the end of the table, Adijine sat up a little in his seat. It was enough to turn every eye to him. 'Perhaps madam Chief Scientist would like to detail the nature of her concerns regarding the lack of raw data?' he said, smiling at her.

Gadfium felt herself blush. This often happened when she addressed Adijine. 'Sir, I'm sure those in the facility at Ogooue-Maritime are exemplary in their dedication and scrupulousness. However I do feel that an independent check on their results might ensure that this project - of potentially vital importance, as I'm sure we all agree -' she glanced again at the others, looking for and receiving a few nods '-is beyond reproach in terms of its methodology and hence the reliability of its results.'

The King was sitting forward, pinching his lower lip between his fingers and looking absorbed by what she was saying.

'I would also suggest that regardless of their precautions it can anyway only be a matter of time before their data corpora are contaminated by nanotech chaos-carriers.'

'I think if the Chief Scientist inquires of Consistory member Cserse-' the attaché began.

'Thank you, Madam Consistorian,' the King said, smiling broadly and nodding as though in encouragement as he inter-rupted her. 'I believe Gadfium may have a point,' Adijine continued, frowning a little and looking at Cserse. 'I think perhaps if we form a sub-committee to investigate data-transmission security and viral protection...'

Cserse nodded and looked wise. He turned to an aide and whispered to her, and she nodded too, sitting back and closing her eyes.

Adijine smiled at Gadfium. She showed her teeth and tried to look grateful, meanwhile biting back on the urge to scream.

'Another triumph for the decision-making process,' Gadfium said as she, Rasflin and Goscil exited to the antechamber. The briefing had finished and the group was splitting up, breaking into smaller groups of people standing in the Hall of Mirrors itself or the antechamber beyond. Gadfium usually hung around at this point too - it was now, as well as before such briefings, that real decisions were occasionally arrived at - but on this occasion she doubted her ability to remain polite if she had to talk to some of those she imagined might want to speak with her.

'I thought you made your points very well, ma'am,' Rasflin said quietly as they passed between the mirrored doors.

'Maybe,' Goscil said, brushing hair from her face. 'But the rocket people hate being reminded their fancy computers are going to catch chaos too.'

'Their precautions have worked so far,' Rasflin said.

Goscil snorted. 'They've only been up and running properly for the last year, and even then with minimal real input until two months ago. I give them three months, maximum, before something gets them.'

'You seem quite an expert in data contamination,' Rasflin told her, smiling at her and then at Consistorian Austermise's attaché, who was talking to a high-rank civil servant.

Goscil ignored the insult. 'There are nanotechs you can *exhale*, Ras; chaos-carriers that can float in an aerosol or crawl out of a skin pore.'

'Still,' Rasfline said, 'Ogooue-Maritime has avoided such infection so far; perhaps it will continue to do so.'

'Three months,' Goscil said. 'Want to bet on it?'

'Thank you, no. I believe gambling to be a pastime for the weak-minded.'

Gadfium looked round the various groups of people in the antechamber, the feeling of frustration building up inside her again. 'Oh, let's just go,' she said.

Rasfline smiled. Goscil scowled.

'Madam wishes a copy of herself made?'

'That's right. A construct, for the crypt.'

Gadfium had given herself, Rasfline and Goscil the rest of the day off. Rasfline had probably gone to socialise with some of the people they'd left in the Hall of Mirrors' antechamber. Goscil was doubtless crypting fresh data on some arcane subject. Gadfium had gone to change from her court clothes into something less formal in her apartment and then made her way to the Palace's Galleria, a shopping complex modelled after part of twentieth-century Milan where the court elite could indulge themselves. She had been here only once before, five years earlier, when she had first been summoned to the Lantern Palace to be Adjine's tame white-coat. She had been slightly disgusted by the snooty opulence of the place and its too-obviously perfect clientele then and felt no different now, but she had a plan to execute.

She sat in the subtly lit boutique - a traumparlour by any other name - sipping coffee over an antique onyx table.

'With what purpose in mind, might one ask?' asked the sales girl.

'Sex,' Gadfium told her.

'I see.' The shop assistant had called herself a sales executive and was probably the daughter of some clan chief; this would be her societal apprenticeship, Gadfium expected; the equivalent of one of the genuinely shitty jobs young people from the lower orders were expected to take on before they were allowed to enjoy

themselves. The girl looked fashionably delicate and stainlessly steely at the same time. She was dressed in red, wearing what looked like a one-piece swim suit, large boots and wrist muffs. Her skin glowed like polished chestnut, her body was flawless and her ice-blue eyes looked out over cheekbones Gadfium fancied a chap might cut himself on.

'I'm too busy for a real affair,' Gadfium told her, 'and anyway the other party is also Privileged and physically distant, so we want constructs made which can have fun on our behalf and then download the rosy afterglow, or whatever.' Gadfium smiled and slurped her coffee deliberately. The girl winced, then smiled professionally and patted her tied-back black hair, held in place by a red comb which - assuming the girl was Privileged - was probably a receptor device.

'Madam does realise that there are potential recompatibility problems, over time, with constructs made from Privileged persons.'

'Yes I do, especially with the kind of full-mind construct I'd like. But I am decided, and that is what I want.'

'Full-mind constructs are particularly prone to developing independence and becoming incompatible.'

'It only has to last a few weeks in crypt-time; a couple of months, maximum.'

'The contiguity-expectancy may indeed be of that order,' the girl said, looking troubled and recrossing her long legs with what Gadfium could only think of as a flourish. 'Most people would not be happy with a self-construct becoming independent over such a time-frame, especially in a romantic context.'

Gadfium smiled. 'Most people aren't realists,' she said. She put her coffee down. 'When can we do it?'

'Madam has the permission of her clan?' the girl asked, sounding dubious.

'I'm seconded to the Palace; I think you'll find I have all necessary authorisation.'

'There is also the question of... discretion,' the girl said, smiling thinly. 'While of course not illegal, strictly speaking, the service madam is requesting is not one it is generally thought best to publicise widely. Madam would be requested to make an undertaking to the effect that she would restrict knowledge of her acquisition strictly to those of her own standing whom she is certain could have no objection to the process involved.'

'Discretion is the whole point of this,' Gadfium said. 'Only myself and the other party would know.'

'The process will utilise the neuro-lattice which would normally only be activated on madam's quietus. This is the device which- '

'Yes, I know what it does.'

'I see. There is some danger...'

'I'll risk it, dear.'

Another Gadfium woke, looking out through the eyes of the original. This must be a bit how old Austerlitz feels, they both thought, and experienced the other's thoughts as an echo.

The view was of a gently lit booth lined with curtains of intricate design. She was in some reclined seat, her neck and head held firmly but comfortably. There were two people standing looking down at her; a serious-looking older woman in a white coat, and the young lady in red.

'Madam's very first memory, again?' the older woman said.

'Earlier I said it was the blue swing,' she said (and heard herself say it, and thought: *oh yes, the blue swing, but what about the-*), 'but actually I think it must have been the time when my father. fell off his horse into the river.' (- *horse? Ah...*)

The woman nodded. 'Thank you. Do you still wish your construct to be released into crypt-time now?'

'Please,' Gadfium said, trying to nod but failing.

The woman in the white coat leant forward and reached out one hand to touch something on the side of the unit restraining Gadfium's head.

The man slipped in through the curtains behind the two women as the older woman's hand disappeared from Gadfium's field of view. He was tall, slim and dressed conservatively in a light suit. His face did not look quite right. He held something thick and black and curved in his hand. Gadfium only recognised it as a

gun when he brought it up towards her.

Gadfium felt her eyes widen and her mouth start to open. The girl in the red swimsuit began to turn round. The man saw her turn towards him; the gun moved quickly to one side so that it was no longer pointing at Gadfium's face but at the girl. The man shot her first.

The noise was minimal; the girl's head jerked back and she fell instantly, a delicate fountain of blood spraying up and back onto the tented ceiling. Gadfium watched it all in real time

/and in crypt-time, as the older woman began to turn, her hand still somewhere behind Gadfium's neck.

Gadfium felt her other self, the construct, drop away from her like a bomb from a plane, producing an instant of vertigo as the girl hit the floor and the man - his face too straight, too unmoving - turned the black tube towards the woman in the white coat. The shot hit her in the temple, whirling her round so that she pirouetted as she collapsed. More blood, Gadfium felt, as she tried to move her head but still could not, still trapped, still held, as though her neck and head had been fixed in concrete, bored through and bolted with steel.

The man's face turned impassively to her and the gun came up. She beat her feet on the reclined couch, brought her hands up to scrabble over the surface of the helmet unit trapping her, feeling desperately for some release mechanism.

He took a step forward and pointed the gun at her forehead.

/Quickened, she fell away from the scene in the traumparlour an instant before the man shot the woman in the white coat.

Gadfium had visited the crypt many times, through receptor devices in helmets, chairs and pillows; she was less adept than the average person in navigating its complexities - the sort of natural ease that came with immersion from childhood would never be hers - but she was no stranger to the medium.

It took her new self only a few seconds of crypt-time to realise that she was effectively free within the system, at least for now. Existing initially within the traumparlour's grey-zone hardware she had not yet been given an official crypt identity.

She checked the immediate surroundings for clues to why one woman had been murdered, another was about to be and a third - herself - soon going to be.

Everything seemed normal; no security blanket thrown over the local data corpus, no obvious gaps in local traffic, no closed-off circuits. Certainly the Palace crypt-space was sup-posed to be completely unrestricted - once you were in, which was the hard bit - but she had half expected to find some sort of crypt presence linked to the assassin. Perhaps the Palace's private channels really were inviolable; perhaps that was why simply sending in a man with a gun was considered the best way of dealing with a problem. She wondered briefly why all this was being done, what had triggered this ghastly, murderous act, but decided to leave investigating that for later.

She looked into the hardware surrounding her head. You turned off the restrainer field... well, just here... but she hesitated. Perhaps she could save her base-reality self.

She glanced back through Gadfium's eyes. The view was still, like a photograph. Running her own vision round the picture in Gadfium's mind exposed both the weakness of the human sight system and its cleverness. Looked at closely from inside with an independent ability to focus and concentrate on different parts of the view, you could see the lack of clarity and colour at the edges of vision; the view was grey and smeared everywhere about the lucid central portion. And so slow! What torture to watch somebody being killed and know your turn was next; the woman in white was still turning, the gun in the man's hand still moving to point to where her head would be in a moment's time...

She sucked herself away from the view. First she had to double-check the headset release mechanism, then decide what her physical self ought to *do* next, then work out the right moves to get her out of this situation, then form it into a plan that could be dropped instantly into her base-reality self's head and be acted upon without the slightest flicker of hesitation... she had less than a second, real time; a couple of hours, in here. It might be a close run thing...

The gun came up to point at the middle of her forehead. Gadfium watched it, helpless.

Then it was as though the bomb she had felt dropping away from herself earlier had somehow slammed straight back into the top of her head.

Move!

Her head was free and suddenly there was a whole choreo-graphed pattern inside her head; a slotted-in four-dimensional sculpture in which all she had to do was follow the tunnel-shape her body made through that sculpture.

The lights in the booth would go out *now*. They went out.

It was almost as though the pattern moved her body for her. She ducked her head and flicked it to one side as the shot cracked into the head unit. She levered herself forward with her elbows while drawing her right leg back. She snapped it forward and up just *here...*

The impact was appreciably two-fold, as both the bones in the man's fore-arm broke. She added to the momentum of her still swinging leg with a two-handed push off the couch and landed already swivelling on the floor. She punched upwards but the man hadn't reacted quite as she'd expected; cloth brushed her fist as he fell away, a sudden soughing noise coming from his mouth.

Something thudded into her head and for an instant she thought he had clubbed her, but the blow was light and the thing that fell from her head and bounced off her hip was the gun; she caught it on the floor.

The lights went on again. She turned the gun towards the man. He was crouched entangled within some of the room curtains, holding his broken arm and looking at her. Then his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell over on his side.

She started over towards him.

'... Gadfium,' said a voice, whispering.

She turned and stared in horror at the white-coated woman on the floor. Blood was still flowing from the dark hole in her temple; her eyes stared straight up. Her jaw moved again, looking stiff and mechanical, like a puppet's. 'Gadfium!' the voice croaked.

She spared the collapsed man a glance then went over to the woman, kneeling so that she could still see the man crumpled in the corner.

'This one's still not quite dead,' said the voice. 'She's been crypted, but she's still alive. It's me; *you*,' said the voice. 'Listen; he's faking a faint; the man. He's

faking it. You must kick or cosh him in the head; now. Use the gun if you must, but if you want to avoid killing him do it now.'

Gadfium felt she was going to faint. The room was spinning, or her brain was. 'I can't,' she said to the woman, watching in horrified fascination as the rich, dark red blood oozed slower and slower and the jaws and tongue moved beneath the open, staring eyes.

'You must; now,' the soft voice said.

'But he might just have- '

'Too late,' sighed the voice.

The man was whirling round, bringing his good hand back. Gadfium reached out with the gun and squeezed, closing her eyes. The gun shuddered once in her hands.

When she opened her eyes again the man was sprawled face down in front of her, a small thin knife still clutched in one hand.

She wasn't sure she'd hit him until the blood started to well blackly from beneath his hidden face.

She dropped the gun, then started when the woman said, '... I'm losing her. The girl's comb... quickly, Gad...'

She could not do it immediately. Gadfium sat against the curtain-concealed wall of the room for a few minutes, shaking and staring at the three bodies in the room, watching the blood flowing slowly across the tiled floor.

When the blood from the fallen man reached the pool spilled from the woman who'd spoken after her death, something broke within Gadfium, and she cried.

She had not shed tears since she'd been a teenager.

Then she sniffed, wiped her nose and went to the girl in red. She pulled the comb from the dead girl's tied-back hair. There were flecks of blood on it. She ignored them and shoved the comb into her own hair at the back of her head.

-... can you hear me? said her own voice.

'Yes,' Gadfium said, her voice trembling.

- Just think it, Gadfium; no need to vocalise.

- I can hear you. Are you me?

- I am. I'm the construct.

- You planned... all that?

- Yes. Are you all right?

- Oh, far from it. But what do I do now?

- Take the knife, its sheath, which is in his pocket, the gun and any extra ammunition and equipment the man has, then leave the shop. If you do exactly as I say I think I can get you out of there.

- Wait. Why was he trying to kill me?

- Because the conspiracy's been betrayed and you were about to enter the crypt. Please; there isn't much time; hurry.

Gadfium went shakily back to the young man. She fought the urge to vomit as she caught sight of her face reflected in the dark pool of blood. She felt in the man's pockets.

- Is he from Security? she asked her crypt-self.

- Yes.

- How did they know?

- I told you, you were betrayed. I don't know by whom.

Gadfium stopped, her hand clasping the bullet magazine.

- *Betrayed?* What about the others?

- I don't know what's happened to them. I haven't dared to try and contact them in case I'm being watched somehow and my movements are being traced. Look,

hurry up, will you?

- Betrayed. Gadfium stared at the intricate pattern on the curtain in front of her. Betrayed.

- Yes; now *please*; you must hurry now. Take what you can and leave. Turn left when you leave the shop.

- Betrayed, Gadfium thought, pocketing the knife, sheath, gun and ammunition. Betrayed.

- Yes, yes, yes; betrayed. Now *move*!

3

Sessine was dressed in plain, utilitarian clothes and carried a light rucksack across his shoulder. He stood on the last ridge of the hills, where the land sloped away like some huge wave powering towards a beach. The dusty plain extended before him, the colour of a lion; not featureless, but almost so. Hints of hills lay upon the horizon, and patches of reflection promised water that probably was not there. The trees behind him, above him, made giant shushing noises.

The light came from every part of the sky, shining without a sun. The sky was light blue to the glance, darker blue then purple on closer inspection, and utterly black when stared at. On that blackness - just by willing it into existence - a network of shining lines appeared, and what looked like brightly coloured stars and fat planets shone beyond, in constellations and patterns never seen from the real Earth. He knew what these meant without having to think about it. He looked away, and the sky was light blue again.

He stared at the broad expanse of tableland, and in an eyeblink the plateau filled with a grid of tracks, roads and paths so densely packed and interlaced they created their own solid surface, overwhelming the plain. The network of trails and lines radiated away to the horizon, filling the view with blurred, flickering movement; vast broad highways buzzed and glittered with complex articulations travelling too quickly for any individual element to be discerned, but creating a conglomerative impression of streamed solidity. Elsewhere, on narrower routes, long trains of

material flashed past, just glimpsed, while an unseen myriad of paths specked and sparkled with solitary packets of traffic.

In another blink, it was all gone again.

He turned to his other self.

'Well, here we are,' said the construct. 'The parting of the ways. You remember all you need to remember?'

'How would I know if I didn't?'

'Hmm-hmm. What do you remember?'

'I am going into the wilderness,' he said, looking back at the plain.

'For sanctuary?'

'For sanctuary. And to seek and be sought. To provide a container, a medium for whatever I find out there.'

'You will change.'

'I have already changed.'

'You will change forever, and may die.'

'I think you will find we have always lived with that knowl-edge; not all our betterments have really changed such matters.'

'I hope I've given you all you may need.'

'So do I.' He looked the other man in the eye. 'And you, now?'

Alan turned and glanced back to where a distant mural tower was visible through the swaying trees. 'I'll be back in there,' he said. 'Doing what I've always done; watching. And waiting on your return; preparing.'

'Well, until then.' He offered his hand.

'Until then.'

They shook hands, both smiling self-consciously at the physicality of the ritual, still germane even in this translation from base-reality.

The construct nodded out at the plain, where the ghost-image of furious movement still seemed to linger.

'Sorry it will be so slow.'

'Slow is safe, in this.'

'Good luck.'

'And you.'

Then they each turned, and one headed back uphill on the path between the trees, making for the vast cliff of wall towering beyond, while the other set off down the slope towards the plain.

He walked out across the semi-desert. The paths here were so densely packed there was indeed effectively one single surface. He watched dust drift behind him on a soft breeze and wondered what aspect of the crypt's nature it signified. He stopped and looked behind him, back to where the foothills rose, sprinkled with trees. The fastness hung half-hazed in the sky beyond.

His footprints lay in the dust, leading back to the ridge.

He looked around and saw other footprints scattered here and there in lines that criss-crossed the plain. Above, the sky stayed blue, with no hint of cloud. He walked on, and when he first saw a stretch of ground where flat rocks lay like pages of stone upon the prairie, walked towards them and then upon them, changing his direction a little to follow the outcrop. When the rocks submerged beneath the dusty ground again he struck off in a different direction again.

At the next group of rocks, he sat down and held one of his shoes out to one side so that he could look at the sole. The sole was composed of simple ridges running from side to side. He thought about it changing, and the pattern changed to chevrons. He did the same with the other shoe, and felt pleased that on this scale such changes could still be effected. He hefted his rucksack, wondering what might be in it but knowing better than to look. All that mattered - he could half recall

being told - was that there were useful objects within it.

He got up and continued walking.

A few times he heard the sand and rocks around him making a high-pitched keening noise, and knew he was near one of the great data highways. He would stop and stare and the highway would be there; a vast shining pipe on the surface of the plain, roaring like a waterfall, charged with pulsing, flashing movement and itself moving ponderously, writhing like an immense snake stretching from horizon to horizon, sweeping from side to side in great loops and waves and alternately raising its semi-fluid bulk up from the ground and troughing it back down.

The first time he encountered one of these gigantic, shimmer-ing pipes, he sat and watched it. The accumulation of its sinuous movements gradually took it away, then started it moving towards him again. He inspected the surface of the plain, and saw where the ground had been scuffed clean by the paths the highway had taken. It reminded him of a river delta, where channels form, flood, silt and shift, and islands seem to move, shuffled across the flood by the ever-weaving braid of waters.

He chose his spot and - more because he wanted to check that it was possible than because he particularly wanted to proceed in that direction - ducked beneath the arched under-surface of the highway as it bowed over the sand and ran, doubled up, for the far side, the highway's great bulk a roaring shadow above him.

It was done without mishap and he looked back at the tubular rush of the highway with satisfaction.

He continued walking.

A breeze got up after a while and he was grateful for it though he was not hot; the breeze was simply something different. He felt no hunger or thirst and no fatigue; realising this he started to run, and after a while did feel tired, and his breathing became laboured. He settled back to a stroll and when he'd got his breath back he increased his speed to the pace he'd been maintaining earlier.

Darkness waxed slowly.

When the light had quite gone from the sky he was able to see a ghostly grey image of the ground in front of him, and walked on. He stared up at the black sky and it filled with the network of lines and lights again. He watched the grid shift and the constellations change, just for something to do, knowing that somewhere

inside himself he knew what this silently fabulous display signified, and unworried that its import was not quite immediately available to him, but lodged in some memorative backwater he knew he could explore if he really needed to.

He stared at the plain and saw the great roads and tracks and highways again, though they looked a little more dispersed than they had been before.

Most of the time he just walked, head down, hardly thinking about anything.

After a while he felt light-headed and thought he heard voices and saw shapes that weren't there in any reality. He started to trip over rocks or roots that were not there either, each time feeling like he was back in his earlier, biological life, and was in bed, about to fall asleep, but had suffered some involuntary spasm which had wrenched him back to wakefulness. This happened again, and again and again.

He decided he needed to sleep after all. He found a hollow under a rocky outcrop, put his rucksack beneath his head and fell asleep.

4

Translation

U no whot am goan 2 do if u doan tel me whot I wan 2 no, doan u? I sez 2 thi ole crow caged in ma talinz.

Am restin in ma big nest on thi fingir ov stoan lookin out ovir thi desirt, sittin here qwite happily pullin out thi old grey-black crows fevvirs 1 by 1 wif ma free foot, hummin 2 maself & tryin 2 get sum sens out ov thi ole bird.

I doan no nuffin! thi grey-black cro shouts. Yool pay 4 this, u peece ov filf! Set me bak whare u fownd me imeedyitly & mibi we say no moar about this - eerk!

(I scrunch his beek a bit wif 2 ov my talinz.)

Zhou schwine! he blubbers.

I dcide itz time 2 fix thi old fellir wif a serius stare, so I lower my grate-beekd head doun 2 his levil & luke in thru thi talin-bars @ his litl black beedi Is. He trys 2 luke away but I hold his hed roun lakin 2wards me wif a talin & put my hed closer 2 him (tho not 2 cloas - Im not stupid). Crows cant acthurely move ther Is very much & now he cooden move his hed neethir. They'v got a thing cold a nicitatin membrane whot they can flik over ther I & this old chap's nicitatin like mad tryin 2 blok me out & if I wozen such a fine firm fleshd-out eggzampil ov a sirnurg he mite blok me out (or evin takin me ovir if he woz tryin), but I am so he cooden & I woz in thare.

I had dcided in my oan mind by this time that simurgs wer relatid 2 lammergeiers & as eny fule wil tel u lammergeiers r also nown as bone crushers. So thi ole crow lukes in2 ma mind & seez whot I intend 2 do & promptly shits himself.

I luke @ thi mess on ma fine razor-sharp talons & ma nicely decorated nest & then luke @ him agen.

O f-f-fuk, he whimpirs. Zhorry about that. His voyce is qwivirin. Ah wil tel u enyshink u wan 2 no; jhust doan do those shings 2 me.

Hmm, I sez, liftin him up a bit 2 luke poyntidly @ thi shit on ma nest. Weel c.

Wot u wan 2 no? he shrieks. Jhust tel me! Whot u lookin 4?

I jab ma hed 2wards him. A ant, I tel him.

A *wot?*

U herd. But letz start wif thi lammergeiers.

Zhi lammergeiersh? Zhare gon.

Gon?

From zhe kript. Gon.

Gon whare?

Nobudi noaz! Zhey bin weerd & dishtint 4 a while & now zhey juss aint aroun no moar. Itsh thi troof; check it out 4 yooself.

I wil, & b4 I let u go, so u *betr* b telin thi troof. Now wot about this bleedin red-face fing goze gidibidibigibi etc etc u get thi idear, eh? Whots it when its @ hoam

then?

Thi ole crow freeziz 4 a sekind, then he starts 2 shake & then he - I can hardly bleev it - he lafs!

Wot? he shrieks, ol hysterikil. U meen zhat shing bhind u, is that whot u meen?

I shake my hed. What sorta bird u take me 4? I ask it, shakin it up & doun so it rattlz like a dice ina cup. Eh? Eh? Juss how stupid u fink I am? Do I *look* like a bleedin pidgin?

Gidibidibigidigibigi! screams a voyce bhind me.

(I feel ma Is go veri wide.)

I stair @ thi bedraggled blak crow trapt in thi talinz ov ma rite foot.

Anuthir time, I sez, & crush thi crow 2 thi size ov a frush.

I whirl roun & fro thi ded crow @ whare I hope thi orribil red hed fing is, pushin maself off thi nest @ thi same time.

Gidibidibigidigibigi! thi skind hed shrieks, & thi old ded crow explodes in2 flame & disappears as it hits thi jaggd red hole ov thi thingz flayd nose. Thi bed's bigr than it woz b4 & itz got wings ov its own now; wings like thi wings ov a skind bat, ol wet & bludy & glistenin. Fukr's biggr than I am & its teeth luke sharp as hel. I beat ma wings, not turnin & flyin away but hoverin thare, starin @ it like its starin @ me.

Gidibidibigidigibigi! it screams agen & then itz xpandin, rushin 2wards me like its a planit bloatin, a sun xploadin. Am not fuled; I no its stil thi size it woz reely & this is just a feynt. I glimpse thi reel thing cumin strate @ me like a punch throan thru thi xplodin imidje.

This is ma nest. Thi hed's over thi edge ov it rite now.

I take 1 qwik flap cloaser & reach out wif a foot & slap down on a hooj white-bleechd hunk ov timber; thi timber is most ov a tree-trunk & it leevirs up in a xploashin ov smallir branchis & smaks strate in2 thi face ov thi thing goan Gidibidi-urp!

Itz wings cloase involuntirly aroun thi tent ov branchis stikin up in front ov it & it fols flappin 2 thi nest, ol tangled & shriekin & bouncin & flappin & tearin its wingz &

I juss no I shude get thi hel out while thi goans good but col it instinkt, col it madnis, I jus ½ 2 attak.

I giv 1 moar flap 2 get a bit ov hite - noatisin that thi sky seems 2 b gettin briter - then spred ma talins & start 2 drop 2wards thi orribil hed fing.

Thi sky's gon very white & brite.

I cansil thi stoop & flap Ice more, hoverin ovir thi flappin screemin entangled hed & lookin up @ thi sky; its gon dark agen, but itz startin 2 bulje sumwot.

O-o, I fink, & say my wake-up word 2 myself.

Ther r certin fings witch wil impose themselvs on u evin when u r in thi depfs ov thi kript, & a xploashin is 1 ov them; Ither a very brite flash ov lite or a shok wave & certinly boaf, witch is whot I woz gettin heer. U doan ½ 2 wake up & if yoor in deep enuf u woant, yool juss xplain it away 2 yooursel evin if itz blowin u apart as u fink, but am not so daft.

Thi blast rols me ovir in ma room, bouncin me off a taut-strung wall & flinging me bak in2 thi centir ov thi room agen.

I luke out thi doar thru smok & flames & c men cumin down ropes from abuv thi big window in thi tower; a handful ov gies in wing-shutes r flyin in thru thi windo, hedin 4 thi scaffoldin, shootin wif guns that send bolts ov lite thru thi smoak. A slof fols flamin past thi doorway ov ma room, makin a tearin, roarin noise as it fols & leavin a trail ov thik blak smoak. Anuthir xploashin roks thi scaffoldin aroun me & thi wols bulge. I c thi lite ov big flames shinin thru thi fabric wol 2 my rite. Outside, thi gies in thi wing-shutes swing ther guns 2 1 side & reech out 2 grab thi scafoldin as they thump in2 it; ther shutes fall away as soon as they tutch.

I rol away 2 thi bak ov ma room & bite @ thi fabric juss abuv thi floar; it holes & I hawl & pool @ it til it tares sum more then sqwirm out thru & in2 relativ darknis.

Am bhind thi wols ov thi slofs' scaffold structyir, swingin from poal 2 poal like a munky, hedin downwirds. A hooj xploshin ov flame bursts out overhed, showerin me wif flamin debree; I ½ 2 hang by 1 hand from a poal & pat out flames on ma shirt. Thi debree fols on down, litein thi way. Ther r qwite a lot ov flaims now, & gunfire.

Part ov ma mind is thinking, Blimey, can ol this reely b 4 me? & anuthir part is thinkin, No, Bascule, doan b silly! But thi first bit is goan, Then how cum ther's ol this vilence & stuf happenin aroun yures truly? This aint a vilent sosiety; bags is pretti peesfil as a rool. How cum ol this is happenin ol ov a suddin? O fuk; those poor slofs woz juss tryin 2 b frendly & how do I repay them? I wunder how fings ½ shakin out 4 Gaston & ole Hombetante. Then I figir mayb its best if I try not 2 fink about that sorta fing; iss dun now.

Amazin thi survivil mekanisms u bild up in times like this.

Ahed ov me I can c thi curvd innir surfis ov thi wol ov thi towr, its undressd stoan & ol blak & glistenin wif moystyr in thi lite ov flames. A few last poals 2 go, regularly spaced.

Rite hand lef hand rite hand lef hand; am in a feevir or sumthin coz I fink; juss thi time 2 kript 4 a sekind, & as I reach 4 thi next poal I fink, rite, kript until u tutch this poal, & am thare, deliberately not finking about whare I am @ thi momint but swingin out in2 thi imeedyit locality

/only 2 find it isnt thare eny moar.

It's like ther's juss a grey fog ol aroun me; a metallic; growlin, hissinn, static-ish sorta fog. I can rufly remembir whare things wer from erlyer but I doan wan 2 ½ 2 trust 2 memry that mutch. Then thi fog semes 2 collect aroun me & its like its not fog @ ol its made up not ov water but ov metil filings, metil dust, sleetin in2 ma skin like asid, burrowing in2 ma pores & it hurts & ma Is go wide & thi metil dust is sandpaperin ma Is & makin me screem & as I opin my mouf its fillin it & nose wif metil grit & am breevin it in & its fire, like breevin flame, fillin me, roastin me from inside.

I flail out @ it, tryin 2 push it away & my hand tutches sumfink solid & I remember that means sumfing & wif a struggil I wake up.

My hand clutches thi cold bar ov thi scaffold poal & I feel thi bref whistel out ov me & I sneez & my Is watir & my skin itches evrywhare & I juss manidje 2 grab thi last poal & then fump in2 thi blak stone wol & stop thare, stil shakin & not feelin 2 good.

Thi floar is a cupil ov metirs lower down, coverd in rubbish. Lukin up, thi wol disappers in2 darknis. On ither side, it curvs away, blak & barely visibil. Thi slofs' scaffoldin structure fits raggedly agenst thi wol, poals stuk restin on bits whare thi ruf stone juts out & thi grey sakclop stuf flappin in thi breez. Thi channil I escaiped down rises like a narro blak canyin abuv me. Flames burn in thi distins.

I try 2 remember thi layout ov thi place from thi start ov my kriptin erlyer. Bleedin hel.

I shake my bed, then start leepin acros from poal 2 poal along thi side ov thi ruf stoan wol. Shude b this way...

& so I go swingin off thru thi dark space behind thi wols ov thi place whare thi slofs hang out, or @ leest did until theez gies - wif thi guns & parashoots & stuf cairn collin.

Am a rat bhind thi bleedin wols, I fink, skurryin abuv thi rubish lookin 4 a hole 2 disapeer down.

O deer Bascule I think 2 myself, not 4 thi furst time & Ive a orribil feelin not 4 thi last time neethir. O deer o deer o deer.

SEVEN

1

They descended through the tower by lift and went through broad, softly lit tunnels lined with pictures to a place where there were lots of trains and people and pillars which held the roof up.

Asura asked many questions about the lift and the station and the trains and the castle. The tall lady did her best to answer them. They went to the very end of one train and got on it. They had the carriage to themselves. It had lots of big seats and couches. They sat at a round wooden table; the woman who had introduced herself as Ucubulaire sat beside her and the man called Lunce sat across from them.

'What's that in your hair?' the woman said, when they were seated, and reached one hand - covered in the blue-net glove -up behind her head.

'What?' Asura asked. Then the blue glove touched the back of her head and there was a strange buzzing noise.

Darkness.

She lived in a tall tower in the forest. The tower had one large room at the top where she lived. The room had a stone floor with no holes in it; the walls had some small windows, and one door which led out onto a balcony which went all around the tower. The very top of the tower was made from a big cone of dark slates, like some huge hat.

She woke each day and went to wash her face. She washed from a bowl on a stout wooden wash-stand. Beside the bowl was a pitcher which was always full of water every morning. Several times she had tried to stay up to see how it got refilled every night but although she had been sure she'd stayed awake each time she never found out. Once she had sat up with her hand in the empty pitcher, pinching herself every now and again to stay awake, but she must have fallen asleep because she woke with a start to find her hand submerged in water. Another night she turned the pitcher upside down and slept beside it, but all that happened was that no water appeared in it that night and she went thirsty the next day.

There was a bread box on another table, and every morning there was a fresh loaf in it.

Each day she would use the pot under the bed and cover it with a cloth and each morning it would be empty and clean.

There was a beaten-metal mirror on the wash-stand. She had light brown skin and dark brown eyes and hair. She was dressed in a light brown shift that never seemed to get particularly dirty, or any cleaner. She looked at her reflection for a long time sometimes, thinking that once she had looked different, and trying to remember what she had looked like, and who she had been, and what had brought her here. But her reflection didn't appear to know any more than she did.

As well as the bed, the wash-stand table and the table with the bread box in it, the room contained another small table with two chairs set at it, a couch with some cushions, a square carpet with a geometrical pattern, and one wooden-framed

painting on the wall. The painting was of a beautiful garden filled with tall trees; at the centre of the picture was a small white stone rotunda set on a grassy hillside above a shallow valley where a stream sparkled.

After she had washed and dried her face she would walk round the balcony a hundred times one way and then a hundred times the other way, occasionally looking out at the forest.

The tower stood in a roughly circular clearing about a stone's throw across. The tower was a little higher than the trees, which were broad-leaved. Sometimes she saw birds flying in the distance, but they never came close. The weather was always good; clear and breezy and warm. The sky was never free from clouds, but never covered by them either. It was a little colder at night.

There was no lamp in the circular room and the only light at night came from the stars or the moon, which waxed and waned in the usual manner. She remembered that women had a body-cycle associated with the moon, but waited in vain for its appearance.

On the very darkest nights, it rained sometimes. Once she had become familiar with the room in the darkness she began to get up and slip off her shift and go out onto the balcony into the pelting chill of the rain, standing naked under it, shivering. The rain felt good on her skin.

She watched the stars on clear nights, and noted where the sun came up and set each day. The stars appeared to revolve overhead but did not change otherwise, and there was no terrible dark stain across the face of the night.

The sun rose and set in the same place every day, as did the moon, despite its changing phases.

She used her thumb nail to make little grooves on the wooden foot board at the end of her bed, counting the days; those did not disappear overnight. She still recorded each day, but after the first thirty or so she had decided to count the moons instead, keeping the number in her head. She vaguely recalled that each moon was a month, and so knew that she had been here for six months so far.

She spent a lot of time just looking out at the forest, watching the shadows of the clouds moving over the tops of the trees. In the room, she busied herself by rearranging things, altering the position of the pieces of furniture, tidying them, cleaning things, counting things, and - after a month of doing this - by making up stories set in the garden in the painting on the wall, or in the landscape she conjured into being amongst the folds of her bedclothes, or in a maze-city she

imagined within the geometric design of the carpet.

She traced the shapes of letters on the wall and knew she could write things down if only she had something to write with, but she could not find anything; she thought of using her own night soil but that seemed dirty and anyway might disappear overnight, the way it did from the pot under the bed; her own blood might work but that seemed overly desperate. She just remembered the stories instead.

She made up different people to populate her stories; at first they all involved her but later it amused her to make stories up in which she either played only a small part, or even no part at all. The people were based on the things in the room: there was a fat jolly man like the water pitcher, his broad-hipped wife who was like the bowl, their two plump daughters like the legs of the wash-stand, a beautiful but vain lady like the beaten-metal mirror, a pair of skinny men like the two chairs at the small table, a slim, languorous lady like the couch, a dark, skinny boy like the carpet, a rich man with a pointed hat who was the tower itself...

Gradually, though, the handsome young prince began to figure in most of her stories.

The prince came to the tower once every month. He was handsome and he would come riding out of the forest on a great dark horse. The horse was splendidly caparisoned; its bridle shone like gold. The young prince was dressed in white, purple and gold. He wore a long thin hat set with fabulous feathers. He had black hair and a trim beard and even from that distance she could tell that his eyes sparkled. He would take off his hat, make a sweeping bow, and then stand holding the reins of the great dark horse and shout up to her:

'Asura! Asura! I've come to rescue you! Let me in!'

The first time, she had seen him riding out of the forest and hidden down behind the balcony's stone parapet. She'd heard him shouting up to her and she'd scuttled away back inside the room and closed the door and burrowed under the bedclothes. After a while she'd crept outside again and listened, but heard only the sighing of the wind in the trees. She'd peeped over the balustrade and the prince had gone.

The second time, she'd watched him but hadn't said anything. He'd stood calling up to her to let him in and she'd stood, frowning, looking down at him but not replying.

He'd left his horse tied to a tree; it had grazed the nearby grass while he'd sat with his back to another tree and eaten a lunch of cheese, apples and wine. She'd

watched him eat, her mouth watering as he'd crunched into an apple. He'd waved up to her.

Later, he'd called to her again but still she hadn't replied. It had started to get dark and he'd ridden away.

The third time he'd appeared she'd hidden once more. He'd stood shouting for a time, then she'd heard something metallic strike the stonework outside on the balcony. She'd crept to the door and looked out; a three-hooked piece of metal on the end of a rope had come sailing over the balustrade and clunked down onto the balcony's flagstones. It had scraped across the stones and up the wall with a rasping noise, then disappeared over the edge of the parapet. She'd heard a distant thud a few seconds later.

It had reappeared a little while later, hitting the balcony stones with a clang and leaving a mark there. Again, it had been hauled up the wall in vain; it was as though the balustrade had been designed to offer nowhere such a hook could find purchase. It had disappeared again and she'd heard the distant thud as it hit the ground far below. She'd stared in horror at the mark it had left on the flagstones.

On the fourth occasion the prince had arrived at the foot of the tower and again called out, 'Asura! Asura! Let me in!' she had already decided she would reply this time.

'Who are you?' she'd shouted to him.

'She speaks!' he'd laughed, a huge smile brightening his face. 'Why, what joy!' He'd stepped closer to the tower. 'I'm your prince, Asura! I've come to rescue you!'

'What from?'

'Why,' he'd said, laughing, 'this tower!'

She'd looked back at the room, then down at the stones of the balcony. 'Why?' she'd said.

'*Why!*' he'd repeated, looking puzzled. 'Princess Asura, what do you mean? You cannot *enjoy* being imprisoned!'

She'd frowned deeply. 'Am I really a princess?'

'Of course!'

She'd shaken her head and run back to her bed in tears, burrowing under the bedclothes again and ignoring the distant sound of his cries until it had grown dark and she'd fallen into a troubled sleep.

The next time he'd come she had hidden again, closing the door to the balcony and sitting on the couch singing to herself while she'd stared at the picture on the wall, softly singing a story about a prince coming to the white stone rotunda in the beautiful garden and leading the princess away to go with him and be his bride and live in the great castle in the hills.

It had grown dark before she'd finished the story.

She washed her face in the bowl and dried herself on the towel. She went outside for her walk round the balcony. A flock of birds flew over the forest, far in the distance. The weather was as it always was.

She stopped in the shade of the tower's roof, looking out at the shadow the tower cast, swinging imperceptibly over the canopy of forest as though together they formed some huge sundial. She was sure the prince would come today.

The prince arrived just before noon, riding out of the woods on his magnificent horse. He took off his hat and bowed deeply.

'Princess Asura!' he called. 'I have come to rescue you! Please let me in!'

'I can't!' she shouted.

'Have you no ladder? No rope? Can you not let down your hair?' he asked, laughing.

Her hair? What was he talking about? 'No,' she told him. 'I have none of those things. I have no way down.'

'Then I shall have to come up to you.'

He went to his horse and took a great slack bundle of rope from a saddle-

bag. Attached to one end of the rope was the three-hooked metal thing he'd tried to scale the tower with earlier. 'I'll throw this up to you,' he shouted. 'You must tie it to something securely. Then I'll climb up to you.'

'What then?' she shouted, as he readied the rope.

'What?'

'Well, then we'll both be up here; what will we do then?'

'Why, then we'll make a sling for you; a sort of seat on the end of the rope. I'll lower you down to the ground and climb down after you. Don't you worry about that, my princess; just make sure this is tied firmly to something that won't move.'

He started to swing the hook round and round beside him.

'Wait!' she called.

'What?' he asked, letting the rope down.

'Have you an apple? I would like an apple.'

He laughed. 'Of course! Coming right up!'

He went to his saddle-bags and found a bright red shiny apple. 'Catch!' he shouted, and threw it up towards her.

She caught the apple and he started to swing the hook round and round again.

She looked at the apple; it was the brightest, reddest, shiniest apple she had ever seen.

She held it up to her ear.

'Better stand back, my dear!' the prince shouted from below. 'Don't want to hit you on the head, do we?'

She stood in the doorway, holding the apple to her ear.

There was a tiny, furtive, squirming, liquid, burrowing, writhing noise from inside it. She walked quickly round the balcony until she was on the far side of the tower

from the prince and threw the apple with all her might far into the forest. She heard a distant clang as the grappling iron hit the flagstones.

She ran round and looked over the parapet.

'All right, my princess?'

'Yes! I'll tie it to the bed!' she shouted to the prince. 'Wait a moment!'

She took the grappling iron inside the room, pulled in some more rope and then untied the hooks from the rope. She left the grappling iron on the floor and then passed the end of the rope twice round one of the bed's arm-thick wooden legs, pulling on the rope to test the friction, then giving the rope another turn round the leg and testing again before walking back out to the parapet, hauling the rope after her and wrapping it once round her waist and a couple of times round her hand.

'Ready!' she called down. She pulled on the rope as the prince tugged.

'Well done, my princess!' he shouted. He began to climb. She kept tension on the rope while looking over the parapet and watching the prince climb.

When he was about two metres below the level of the parapet floor, she jerked her hand holding the rope; the prince cried out and clamped himself to the rope and looked anxiously up.

'My love!' he called. 'The rope! It might be coming loose! Make sure it's fast!'

'Stop where you are,' she told him, and raised the loose end of the rope above the parapet to show him she held it. 'The rope will stay firm as long as I let it.'

'What? But-!'

'Who are you?' she asked him. This close, she could see his short, jet-black hair, his firm, square jaw, his tanned, flawless skin and his blue, sparkling eyes.

'I'm your prince!' he cried. 'Come to rescue you. Please! My love...' He started to climb again and she let an arm's length more rope out with a jerk. The prince bounced on the rope and almost fell off. He grabbed it tightly again and glanced fearfully down at the ground, then looked back to her. 'Asura! What are you doing? Let me up!'

'Who are you?' she repeated. 'Tell me or you drop.'

'Your prince! I'm your prince, your rescuer!'

'What is your name?' she asked, slowly letting out a little more rope.

'Roland! Roland of Aquitaine!'

'Why does the water jug fill itself up every night, Roland of Aquitaine? Why does the moon change but not the season? Why do the birds never approach the tower?'

'A spell! All these things arise from a spell put on you by a wicked wizard! Please; Princess Asura; I'm not sure how much longer I can hold on; let me up!'

'And why was the apple you threw me poisoned?'

'It wasn't!'

'It was.'

'Then it must be the spell! The spell the wizard put on you, Asura! Please; I'm going to fall!'

'*What* wizard is this?' she asked.

'I don't know!' the prince cried. She could see his hands and arms quivering as he gripped the rope. 'Merlin!' he said. 'That was his name! I remembered. Merlin! Now, my love; please; I must come up or I'll fall. Please...' he said, and his gaze fixed upon her, beseeching and beautiful and tender.

She shook her head.

'You are not real,' she told him, and let the rope go.

The rope flicked across the balcony and into the room as the prince fell screaming towards the ground. She stepped back to let the end of the rope whip past her and plummet to the ground.

The prince hit with a terrible thud. She looked over the parapet. He lay, still and broken-looking on the grass at the foot of the tower; the rope fell loosely about and on top of him.

She picked up the grappling iron and dropped that on him for good measure; it

missed his head and whacked into his back, bouncing off across the ground.

She looked up at the sky and said, 'Not that way, either.'

Darkness.

The young Cryptographer rose up from the couch, stretching as she rubbed her back. 'Ouch,' she said. She was small and dark and wore a disposable one-piece suit. She rubbed her eyes with her knuckles as she swung her legs off the couch and sat there for a moment. Then she looked over at the two Security people who'd brought the girl in. She shook her head.

'Your woman's fucking impregnable,' she told them.

The tall woman looked at the square-built man she'd called Lunce. The three were in a bland but comfortable staff suite in the minus-one cistern-level Security complex, deep beneath the fastness. The girl they'd called Asura was being held in a cell within the building's basement.

'Nobody's impregnable,' the woman with the blue gloves said.

'Nobody's indestructible,' the girl corrected her, getting up from the couch. 'But some people are impregnable.' She went across to the curtains and drew them open. She was still rubbing her back, and stretching. She looked out at the light-strewn darkness. A ship moved in the distance, lights glittering on the black waters at the end of the Ocean Tunnel. The port was a multi-strand necklace in the distance.

She gave a half-laugh as she rubbed her back. 'What a bitch!' she muttered, but sounded almost admiring.

'You're saying you can't get through to her?' the man said.

'Right,' the girl said. She looked back at them. 'I've tried all the obvious scenarios and I've tried a few pretty obscure ones, too.' She shrugged, looking away. 'She's wise to all of them. That last one - the princess in the tower: fairy story, legend; but it was like she'd never heard of it before, just accepted it on her own terms. And so *suspicious!* There was nothing nasty in the apple; it was a nice crunchy, scrumptious little piece of code; tasty and nutri-tious, dammit. If there

was anything ulterior about it, it might have distracted her a bit while I climbed up, though what the hell... but she imagined the worm or the maggot or whatever in it; just threw it away.' The girl shook her head again, first at her reflection, then, turning, at the two Security people. 'You can keep trying, but you won't get anywhere; she's even *learning* as she goes along, she's *remembering*. Fuck knows how.'

'Clearly you don't, anyway,' the man said. The woman looked at him sharply.

The girl laughed. 'Perhaps you'd like to try, Mr Lunce?' She shook her head. 'That... *ingénue* you brought in could skin you alive in there, if she wanted. She's a natural. There's nothing you can give her she won't work out and exploit. You can destroy her - you can wake her up and start torturing her if you like - but it'd be strictly for your own enjoyment. Don't kid yourself you'd have any chance of getting at her core; that'll stay hidden until it's triggered. Strip her brain molecule by molecule and you still won't find out what was in there. I'd stake my life it'll destruct.' She snorted. 'Well, I'd stake your life on it.'

'But she is the asura?' the woman with the blue gloves asked.

'She's *an* asura,' the girl said, sitting back on the window sill. 'But frankly if she is this rogue piece of chaos come to infect all our precious higher functions, announcing she is an asura - using it as a name - is a pretty strange way of going about it.'

'A decoy, then?' the woman asked, looking troubled.

'Or an incredibly confident double-bluff.'

The woman nodded, looking away. 'Well, we have her now,' she said, as if to herself.

'Indeed you do,' the girl said, yawning. 'And, thankfully, she's your problem. I'm just a hired hand and I've done all I'm going to do. I need some sleep.' She pushed away from the window. 'Probably have nightmares about that vicious little bitch,' she muttered, heading for the door.

'Well, pity you failed. Thank you for your help,' the man said, sounding bored. 'We'll expect a full report; it may help your successors. Let's hope their approach is a little less negative than yours was.'

The girl stopped in front of him. She looked up at him and smiled broadly. 'Honey,

you'll get your report,' she told him, 'but I'm the best there is. You're on to the *proxime accesserunt* after me and if you persist with them your new toy down there might start getting annoyed and *really* chew one of them up.' She tapped the man on his chest. 'Don't say you weren't warned, big boy.' She turned to the woman with the blue gloves. 'Charming working with you. Let me know how you get on.'

She left.

The other two exchanged looks.

'You know what I think? I think we should kill her.'

'No one cares what you think. Contact the next one on the list.'

'Oh, yes, *ma'am*.'

2

Gadfium left the traumparlour. The door clunked shut and she heard bolts snick home, locking it.

-Left.

She turned left and started walking.

- Hurry.

She walked faster.

Gadfium couldn't stop shaking. It was so bad it was affecting her eyesight and she could not believe other people weren't able to see her quivering from fifty or more metres away.

- You're breathing too quickly and too shallowly. Calm down. Take longer, deeper breaths.

- Am I this bossy with other people? she asked, taking a long, deep breath.
- Yes, you are. Turn right, here; take the lift. It'll arrive in twelve seconds.
- Where are you taking me?
- Away from here; out of the Palace.
- After that?
- Don't ask.
- Oh, grief! I'm too old to be on the lam.
- No you're not. You're only too old when you're dead, and you aren't that either, not yet.
- Yet. Oh, thanks.
- Here's the lift. Ignore the display; I've told it where to go.
- Oh, grief!
- Will you calm down? And wipe your eyes; I can hardly see when I look out of them.

She wiped her eyes while the lift zoomed. They were heading for the ceiling level.

- I know; I'm already dead, there is a hell and you're my punishment.
- Stop gibbering. I'm your guardian angel, Gadfium.

The elevator stopped at a luxuriously appointed tube station.

- Straight ahead. And try to look arrogant, and cruel, like nobody'd better interfere with you. We're taking a Security service carriage.
- Oh, grief!
- Head *up* ! Arrogant! Cruel!

- If I get out of this I swear I'll never order anybody about ever again.

- Arrogant! Cruel!

She marched to the carriage with her nose in the air and a sneer on her lips, passing between potted palms standing on gleaming marble beneath a ceiling of polished hardwood. She sensed a few other people around but nobody challenged her. The carriage opened its doors, she stepped aboard and it rolled away immediately, through some points, across other tracks and into a tunnel where it accelerated quickly. She sat down on a leather couch, shaking again.

- We're out of the Palace.

Gadfium put her head between her knees.

- I feel faint.

- Yes, you do, don't you?

- That was awful, awful, awful.

- You did fine.

- I meant in the shop; those women. The man.

- Oh. Of course. I'm sorry. But you didn't have to watch it in slow motion.

- I suppose it was a long time ago, for you.

- Quite. I've been through the process.

Gadfium straightened. She sniffed and took the gun, ammunition and knife out of her pockets, holding them in shaking hands. The gun was a long, thick black flexible tube. It was weighty; it felt like metal covered by some tough, almost sticky foam. It straightened into a cosh or curved into a comfortable hand-gun shape with a finger-sculpted grip, depending on how she held it.

- Here; allow me.

Her hands and fingers moved without her willing them to; she stopped them without difficulty, making them pause poised above the gun, then let her other self - a sighing, finger-tapping presence somewhere at the back of her mind - control her again.

- It has a homing mechanism built in but I've switched it off, the construct said as she used Gadfium's fingers to click the gun open, put some of the fresh ammunition in, closed the stock again, checked the weapon's action, briefly switched on a laser-dot sight, then gave her back control.

- I very much doubt I can use this again, Gadfium told her other self, before repocketing the gun.

- So do I.

- Perhaps I ought to throw it away.

- Don't be silly. You only throw away weapons when they might get you into trouble.

- You don't say.

- And you're already in deep trouble. So deep it can't get any deeper.

- Wow. It's a good job you're here to keep my spirits up.

- Keep the gun, Gadfium.

- What about this knife? she asked, taking it from her pocket. It was flat; the blade was as long and broad as two of her fingers. It was wickedly sharp; slots in the centre of the flat of the blade guided it into the hard plastic sheath, keeping the edges away from the sides.

- Keep that, too.

Gadfium shook her head as she slid the knife back into its sheath and carefully put it in her pocket.

- I don't suppose you can tell me any more about what's going on, can you? she asked.

- Still investigating. Though I think I may now know who betrayed you.

-Who?

-... I'm not yet certain. Let me check.

- Oh, check away, Gadfium thought, and sat back, sighing. She held her hands up. They had almost stopped shaking.

The carriage hurtled through the tunnels, swaying and rattling as it took turns and crossed points. Lights flashed sporadically through the shaded windows. Air whistled.

- Where are you taking me?

- I suppose it can't do any harm to tell you now, her other self said crisply. The carriage started to slow down. - You'll be getting on one of Security's secret intramural microclifters very soon and descending four levels. You're going to the castle core, Gadfium; the deep dark inner rooms.

- Oh, grief! Where the outlaws are?

- That's right. The carriage drew to a halt and the nearest door hissed open to darkness; a wave of cold, damp-smelling air flowed in over Gadfium. - Where the outlaws are.

3

Sessine wandered the face of the world beyond Serehfa, journey-ing through its version of Xtremadur to the distant Uitland, travelling across its prairies and plains and deserts and lakes of salt, through its rolling hills, broad valleys and narrow ravines, between its tall mountains and its rolling rivers and its dark seas, amongst its scrub, grassland, forests and jungles.

He soon grew used to the perverse negativity of this world, where the empty aridity of the semi-desert indicated the greatest richness and intensity of transmitted knowledge, which yet remained untappable, and where the seeming fecundity of the jungle's congested greenery betokened impassible lifelessness, and yet radiated

a kind of barren beauty.

Cliffs and mountains indicated buried fastnesses of storage and computation, rivers and seas embodied unsorted masses of chaotic but relatively harmless information, while volcanoes represented mortal danger welling from the explosively corrosive depths of the virus-infested corpus.

The wind was the half-random machine-code shiftings symbolic of the movement of languages and programs within the geographical image of the operating system, while the rain was raw data, filtering through, slowed, from base-reality, and as meaningless as static. The grid of lights available in the sky was simply another representation of the Cryptosphere, like the landscape visible around him, but mapped on a smaller scale.

The optionally visible highways, roads, trails and paths which criss-crossed the countryside were the information channels for the whole of the uncorrupted crypt. Data within them moved at close to the speed of light, which meant that viewed within the context of crypt-time their traffic appeared to move at supersonic speeds. Sometimes he stood near the great coiling highways, listening, rapt, to their eerie, hypnotic songs and staring intently at their gargantuan writhings as though trying through concentration alone to divine the meaning of their cargoes, and always failing.

The first time he saw somebody else he felt a mixture of emotions; fear, joy, expectation and a kind of disappointment that this wilderness was not his alone. He saw a light in the distance across the rocky plain he was crossing, and went, cautiously, to investigate.

An old woman sat alone, staring into a small fire. He had found no need for or way of making fire. She sensed him watching her and called out to him.

He kept his rucksack open and held in front of him and went to join her at the fire. He gave a small bow from a few metres away, uncertain what protocols might apply. She nodded; he sat a quarter-way around the fire from her.

She wore her white hair in a bun and was dressed in loose, dark clothes. Her face was deeply lined. She was sitting back against a small pack.

'You're new here?' she asked. Her voice was deep but soft.

'Forty days or so,' he told her. 'And you?'

She smiled at the fire. 'A little longer.' She looked quizzically at him. 'So, am I your Friday?'

He frowned. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Robinson Crusoe; a story. He believes he is alone on his desert island until he sees another's footprint, on the day called Friday. When he meets the other man he calls him Friday. We call the first person a new arrival meets their Friday.' She shrugged. 'Just a tradition. Silly, really.'

'Then you are, yes,' he told her.

She nodded as though to herself and said, 'Another tradition - and I think it a good one - has it that a Friday answers any questions a newcomer may have.'

He looked into her old, dark eyes.

'I have many questions,' he said. 'Probably more than I know.'

'That is not uncommon. First, though, may I ask what brings you here?'

He turned his hands palm up. 'Oh, just the passing of events.'

She nodded and looked understanding, but he felt he might have been rude. He added; 'I made enemies in the other world, and was brought near to extinction. A friend - a Virgil to my Dante, if you will - led me away from that to whatever sanctuary this represents.'

'Dante, not Orpheus, then?' she asked, smiling.

He gave a modest laugh. 'Ma'am, I am neither poet nor musician, and I don't believe I ever quite found my Eurydice, so was unable to lose her.'

She chuckled, suddenly childlike. 'Well then,' she said, 'what can I tell you?'

'Oh, let's just talk, shall we? Perhaps I'll find out anything I need to know in the course of our conversation.'

'Why not?' she nodded. She sat up a little. 'I shan't ask your name, sir; our old

names can be dangerous and I doubt you have settled on a new one yet. My name here is Procopia. You are not tired?'

'I am not,' he said.

'Then I shall tell you my story. I am here because of a lost love, as are not a few of us here...'

She told him a little of her life before she came to be incrypted, much of the particular circumstances which led to her being in this level of the crypt, and all she thought relevant of what she had learnt since she had been here.

He talked a little in return, and she seemed content.

Mostly, though, he listened, and as he did so, learnt. He decided he liked the woman; it was very late when they bade each other goodnight and fell asleep.

He dreamt of a far castle, sweet music and a long-lost love.

In the morning when he awoke she was packed and about to depart.

'I must go,' she said. 'I had thought of offering my services as a guide, but I think you may have some point to your wanderings, and I might impose too much of my own course on yours.'

Then you are doubly kind, and wise,' he said, rising and dusting himself down. She held out her hand, and he shook it.

'I hope we meet again, sir.'

'So do I. Travel safely.'

'And you. Fare well.'

Gradually he started to meet more travellers. He discovered, as Procopia had told him, that these fellow wanderers of the mirror-world, human and chimeric, were

either exiles like him - some through choice, some through coercion - or those who were really no more than illicit tourists; adventurers come to sample the strangeness of this anomalous paradigm of base-reality.

A kind of subsidiary ecology had arisen within the fractured human community he made occasional contact with; there were those who preyed upon other wanderers - taking on the form of animals in some cases, but not all - and those who seemed to exist only to mate with others, merging from the time of their coupling to become an individual incorporating aspects of both the former lovers, usually still imbued with whatever hunger had driven them to fuse in the first place, and so seeking further unions.

Most of the people he met wanted only to absorb his story and exchange no more than information; he declined to reveal who he had once been but was happy to share what he knew of this level of the crypt. He was neither surprised nor disappointed when he realised he appeared to have lost all interest in sex.

He discovered that his rucksack contained three things: a sword, a cape and a book. The sword had a coiled metal blade which extended up to two metres and was not particularly sharp but which produced an electric charge which could stun the largest chimeric - or, at least, the largest which had ever attacked him. He thought of the cape as his chameleon coat; it took on the appearance of whatever his environment was at the time and appeared to offer almost perfect concealment. In its own way, it was more effective than the sword.

The book was like the one he'd found in the room in Oubliette; it was every book. Opening the back cover let the book function as a journal; words appeared on the page when he spoke. He made entries in the journal every few days and kept a note of each day that passed even when he didn't record anything more about it. He read a lot, at first.

The landscape of the crypt was littered with monuments, buildings and other structures, most of them well away from the shifting sum-paths of the great data highways and many of them of indefinable design. It was here, in these singular follies, usually in the evening after a long day's travel, that he tended to meet and converse with others; men, women, androgynes and chimerics. He never saw anyone who even looked like a child. They were rare enough in base-reality, but quite absent here.

He found, as his time in the crypt extended, that his dreams attained a vividness that

sometimes made them seem more real than his waking hours. In those oneiric passages, when he felt that he sank beneath the surface of the land and entered a deeper underworld, he played the hero, often as not, in a landscape filled with people, cities, commotion and event: he was a dashing captain thrust by circumstance to unsought glory and fame, a poet prince compelled to take up arms, a philosopher king forced to defend his realm.

He commanded a squadron of cavalry, of ships, of tanks, of aircraft, of spacecraft; he wielded clubs, swords, pistols, lasers; he climbed to surprise an enemy cave, besieged walled cities, charged across river shallows to fall upon a vulnerable flank, planned the mining of lines zig-zagging across the swell of countryside, rode the leading missile-carrier to the smoking rubble of rail-heads, threaded a corkscrew course between black bursting clouds towards enemy capitals, slid unseen through the folds of sable space to wheel against unwarned convoys lumbering between the stars.

Gradually though, as if some part of him - the realist, the cynic, the ironist - could not accept the improbable serial triumphs of his exhausting martial adventures, the furniture of each of these aspirant dreams began to include the Encroachment, and in the midst of the bright clamour of some clash upon a dusty plain, he would find himself looking up above the joined havoc of the contesting armies to see the moon in a cloudless sky, whole face half dimmed by some fearful agent beyond precedent; or on some night mission, below radar across the darkened enemy coast, he would look up to see the stars had disappeared from half the sky; or, sling-shotting through the well of a gas-giant, the planet's ringed bulk would fall away to reveal no welcoming spatter of familiar constellations, but a dark void, glowing beyond sight with the inflamed exhalations of long-drowned stars.

Increasingly, he woke from such dreams with a sense of gnawing frustration and abject failure no amount of subsequent rationalisation could assuage.

'Let me see, let me see,' the woman said. She looked perhaps ten years younger than he, though she sported an unflatteringly tonsured scalp and had no eyebrows. Black-clad, she sat in the centre of a circle of seven travellers, on a bare floor in a bare room in a large, square-planned house which stood, stark and alone, on a dark plateau.

He sat a little way off with his back to a wall where earlier callers had left strange curlicued designs and patterns carved into the plaster. Light came from a bulb hanging above the centre of the group. He had been reading while the others had

told their own stories, taking turns in the centre of the circle.

It was the seven thousand, two hundred and thirty-fifth day of his time within the crypt. He had been here for nearly twenty years. Outside, in base-reality, somewhat more than seventeen hours had passed.

'Let me see,' the woman in the centre of the circle said again, tapping her finger on her lips. She had completed her own tale and was supposed to choose the next story-teller. He had been half listening while he'd read, finding this group's compended histories more absorbing than most. 'You, sir,' the woman said, raising her voice, and he knew she was addressing him.

He looked up. The others were turned towards him.

'Yes?' he asked.

'Will you tell us your story?' the woman asked.

'I think not. Forgive me.' He smiled a little then went back to his book.

'Sir, please,' she said, pleasantly enough. 'We would count ourselves fortunate if you'd join our group. Will you not share your wisdom with us?'

'I have no wisdom,' he told her.

'Your experiences, then?'

'They have been trivial, uninteresting, and full of error.'

'So you protest,' she said evenly. She looked at one of the others in the circle. 'Great souls suffer in silence,' she said quietly, amidst laughter.

He frowned, hiding his face with the book.

He slept that night in a high bare room looking over the dark plain.

The woman came to him in the night, her presence signalled by a creak on the stairs even before the rucksack - balanced against the door - fell over.

Called from a dream - in which he heaved a cutlass, knee deep in a fly-blown salt marsh - he sat with his cloak drawn around him up to his eyes, the sword concealed beneath.

She stood in the doorway, a pale ghostly head seeming to float above her black gown. She saw his eyes, and nodded.

He swept the cloak aside to let her see the sword.

'I did not come for a duel, sir,' she said quietly.

'Then I regret there is no field in which I can give you satisfaction.'

'Nor for that,' she said, shutting the door and sitting down beside it. They sat looking at each other for a moment.

'Why, then?' he asked.

'*Absens haeres non erit,*' she told him.

He took a while to reply. 'Plainly,' he said without inflection, and waited to see which way that would be taken.

He saw the whiteness of her teeth as she smiled. 'I was told it might not be possible to tell if you are the one. That might be a further sign in itself.'

'Nonsense.'

She nodded. 'That's what I thought.'

'What "one", may I ask?'

'You may. Choose from the many rumours, myths and legends. I don't know.'

'You have disturbed your own sleep and mine merely to tell me what you don't know?'

'No; to tell you this: seek the transformation of the enemy.' She rose. 'Good night.'

Then she opened the door and left, more silently than she had arrived.

He sat, thinking.

It took him a while to work it out.

4

Translation

Am in thi lammergeiers roost, ma bref soundin loud in ma eers & mixd in wif theez hissy klikky noyses coz am wearin this mask on ma fais & a breevin botil on me bak boath ov witch I got off thi ded spier.

This is a spooki ole playce & no mistake. Thers nobodi aroun & its very coald indeed & thi lite is very wyt & intens & washd out lookin. Bein in thi lammergeiers roost is like bein insyd a jiant holy cheez; sorta interconectid bubbilz & stretchd punkchird membrains ov stoan & metil evrywheare & hi up on thi wols in plaisses whare thi bubbilz mak cup & boals juttin out thers theez nests lynd wif babil plant & fevirs onli thers no birdz in them nor eggs nor nufin. Thi floar of thi roost is lyk a hoal lot ov littil craters eech ov them holdin loadsa brokin, splintird boans. Ma feet go cruntch cruntch as I wok, lookin up & aroun & tryin 2 c if thers enybodi else heer Ithir hoomin or creetch but thi plais seems 2 b dessertid.

Ther r hooj sirkils in thi outer wols lyk porthoals whare thi winds cumin whistlin thru & soundin hi & reedy & weerd; I clime up 2 1 ov thi bigir holez & luke out. Its hazy whyt cloud out thare like a lair ov fog whot extends 2 thi horyzon; u can juss about c thi lowir levils ov thi cassil showin undirneef, like sumfin trapt inside a transparim glaysier. Thers a cupil ov towrs stikin up froo thi cloud but they luke very small & far away. No sine ov no birds out thare neevir, but then thats thi fing; this is 2 far up 4 birdz 2 fly, so how cum thi lammergeiers wer evir here?

I slide doun a curv ov bubil & cruntch in2 sum boans, then hed 2wards thi centir ov thi towir, in2 thi shades whare thers a faint breez cumin from.

Thi nests fin out & disapeer as I go deeper, stil cruntchin ovir thi occaysinal boan while it gets darkir & darkir & I can hardly c whare am puttin ma feet. Av got this torch whot thi ded spyer had on him so I turn it on & juss as wel; thers a dirty grate hoal rite in front ov me. I edje closir & hold on2 thi wol & stik ma hed out ovir thi

hooj sirkulir hoal. Muss b 50 metirs or moar acros. Blak deep. Goze strate up in2 thi darkniss, 2. Thers a jentil draft ov air cumin up thi shaft. Iss warm, @ leest in comparison wif thi freezin air up heer. No sine ov eny uthir entrinses aroun thi shaft, juss this 1.

Am stil not enywhare neer thi centir ov thi towir; thass way, way furthir deep, probly a cupil ov klometirs away. Am in thi fass towr, stil on thi lam & serchin 4 litl Ergates.

I leen bak from thi hoal.

Then thers a cruntchin noyse sumwhare in thi darknis bhind me. I whirl roun.

I foun Gaston thi slof peekin out ovir a stoan ledj on thi inside wol ov thi slofs' towr, neer thi sloped tunnil whot led 2 thi ole lift shafts. Accordin 2 thi glimpse Id had ov thi locality when Id cripted erlier these shafts wer abandind & unyoosd but Id fot wif eny luk theyd b thi tipe ov shaft whot has stares goan roun thi inside ov thi shaft 4 merjencies, & mayb they wooden b garded by thi bods whot wer attakin thi slofs.

Wel, that woz thi feery. In fact thi scoop ov thi tunil on thi level blow whare Gaston woz hidin woz fool ov Security geezirs wif guns. O grate, I fot.

I'd climed along btween thi dank blak wol ov thi towr & thi framework ov scaffoldin whot woz thi slofs' hoam neyburhood, hedin 4 heer, whare thi floar dropt away in steps & thi akses tunil woz. Lookt like old Gaston had had thi saim idear.

I didn fink Id maid a noyse but he turnd roun sloly & saw me & pushed himself bak from thi edj ov thi ledj & climed up thi scaffoldin 2wards me, poyntin bhind me.

We retreetid a bit, bhind sum ov thi canvas-hung scaffoldin.

... yung Bashkule, he sed, u r shafe; gude.

Yeh & u, I sed. But it lukes like thi Security boyz ½ this playce strung up gude & tite. U no eny uthir waze out ov heer?

... ash it happinsh, Gaston sez, I do actchirly. If yule jusht folo me...

Gaston set off bak froo thi scaffoldin hedin upwards @ whot woz probly a extreme

sprint 4 a slof. I ambild aftir him.

We climed up about 7 floars ov thi slof scaffoldin; ther woz qwite a lot ov smoak up here & I cude c flaims in thi distins, deepir inside thi struktyir.

... Heer, Gaston sed, stopin @ a pritti ordnari lookin bit ov wol. He gript thi top ov a drippin blak stoan; it hinjed down 2 riveel a roun blak hoal. He moashind me in.

I muss $\frac{1}{2}$ lookt doobeyus.

... I'll go firsht, then, he sed, & clambird in2 thi hoal.

I shuden $\frac{1}{2}$ loked doobeyus bcoz I cuden lift thi stoan bak up aftir us & so Gaston had 2 sqweez past me 2 do it. I doan no if u $\frac{1}{2}$ evir had a larj swety slof wif kopeyis qwantities ov fungis on itz pelt sqweez past u in a confined spaiice... Cum 2 fink ov it probly u Vant, but asoomin thass thi case fink uself luky thass ol I can say.

$\frac{1}{2}$ in Gaston sqweez past me agen didn seem like sutch a gude idear.

Al juss leed off then if itz ol thi same 2 u Gaston ole sun, I sed.

... By ol meenz, yung Bashcule.

Thi tunil woz crampt & only fit 4 crollin in. Thi dam fing wen up, doun & roun this way & that way; it woz like climein around in thi intestinez ov sum hooj stoan jiant. Wif Gaston's pelt-fungis stil smeerd ol ovir me, it didn smel dissimilir neevir.

Lissin Gaston, I sed @ 1 point while he woz givin me a punt up a partikerly steep bit ov thi jiant intestin, am reely sorry if that woz me whot brot ol that thare shit down on u gies. I reely presiate whot u did, rescuin me & takin me in etc & Id hate 2 fink I woz responsabil 4 ol this.

... I qwite undirshtand yoor angwish, yung Bashcule, Gaston sed. But itsh not yoor folt shertin pershinsh r tryin 2 pershicate u.

U reely fink they woz aftir me? I askd.

... Zhat woz zhe impreshin I formed from what I overherd, Gaston sed. Zhey did not sheem 2 b intereshtid in eny ov ush. Zhey were lukin 4 shumbody elsh zhey shuspected ush ov harberin.

Blimey.

... In eny event, Gaston sed, Zhi reshponsibility ish thersh, not yoorsh. Whot happind ish just 1 ov thoshe thingsh I shupoashe.

Wel, fanks, Gaston, I sed.

... U didn... *kript*, did u? Gaston sed. Ish jusht that mite ½ led them 2 ush. But u didn, did u?

O no, I sed. No, not me; I didn. Nope. Not gilty. No sirree. Uh-uh. Wooden catch *me* doing a fing like that. O no.

... Zhare u r then, Gaston sed.

& so we wound on fru thi guts ov thi towr, me feelin lowir than a tapewurm.

Eventyooly we came 2 a bit whare thi tunil wideind out & thi floar turnd from stoan 2 wood; I moar or less fel in2 this woodin bowl whare a faint lite shon. I didn qwite get out ov thi way in time so Gaston slid down on top ov me.

Moar pelt fungis.

... ther shude b a trap heer shumwhare, Gaston sed, feelin aroun on thi floar... A, heer it is. Ther woz a sorta holo clunkin noyse & in thi ½-lite I cude c Gaston pullin whot lookt like a hooj plug up out ov thi floar.

... Itsh a holod out babil shtem, Gaston explained, settin thi plug 2 1 side. I'll go firsht, I shink.

Thi holo babil trunk heded down in a serees ov long, stretchd Ss. Ther wer rungs on thi wols; Gaston wen down them prity qwikli 4 a slof. Now & agen we passd whot mite ½ been doars in thi trunk whare thi okayshinal crak ov lite showd, but moastli it woz toatily dark. We seemd 2 go on down 4evir & I neerli fel off a cupil ov tyms. Juss as wel Gaston woz beneef me; thi thot ov anuthir cloas encountir wif his pelt fungis qwikly consintraitid my mynd, I can tel u.

@ last Gaston sed,... Heer we r, & we stept on 2 a platform ov stoan & wen thru a doar in2 a crampt spais whare Gaston wriggld & I cold btween a stoan floar & this metil sealing witch maid a sorta blurbilurbilurbil soun. We cairn out in whot loked lyk a big long kurvin servis duct hoos wols wer lynd wif pyps; weed juss cold undir a big gurglin tank ov sum sort. I cude heer whot soundid lyk a trane rumblin

sumwhare neerby.

... Zher ish a frate tube line juncshin thru zhare, Gaston sed, poyntin @ a hatch in thi floar. Zhi tranes ½ 2 shlo doun 2 negoshiate thi poyntsh & it ish poshibil 4 a hoomin 2 jump on bord a wagin & sho shicure a ryde. I shink I ½ 2 retern 2 c whot has befolin ma frendsh, but if u can maik yoor way 2 thi sekind levil shousht-wesht buttry u wil fynd a toun zhare. Go 2 thi shentril sqware; shum1 wil b lukin 4 u & wil luke aftir u. Im sorri 2 ½ 2 abandon u in zhish way, but it ish ol I can do.

Thass ol rite, Gaston, I sed. U dun ol u can & I doan deserv ol thi kyndniss yoov shown me. I woz so choakd I cude ½ hugd him, but I didn. He just noddid his big funy pointid hed & sed,... Wel, gude luk yung Bashcule, u tak care now... & u promish u wil go 2 thi shousht-wesht buttry & thi toun zhare?

O yes, I sez, lyin thru ma teef.

Good. Fair wel.

Then he woz away, crolin bak undir thi big gurgli tank.

I went doun fru thi hatch in thi floar in2 a brod dark cavern whare lots ov toob lynes converjd from singil tunnils. Ther woz nobodi about but I hid bhynd sum hummin sorta cabinet fings between 2 ov thi trax & wated; a whyle laitir a trane ov opin wagins came rattlin fru, claterin acros thi points; I let thi unmand endjinn & moast ov thi wagins go pas & then jumpd on 1 neer thi end, hollin maself up thi side & ovir in2 its emty interier.

After a few minits during witch thi trane entird a blak-dark tunnil & pikd up speed agen, I rekind it woz safe 2 kript.

Ther woz no horibil corrosiv fog/sleet heer. Everyfin loakily seemd normil. Thi trane woz heddin 4 thi far end ov thi 2nd levil, neer 2 thi Sutherin Volcano Room. It wude slo down @ a few moar playces yet whare I cude get off. I kriptd furthir afeeld.

/Thi lammergeiers roost woz frozen. Its kript-space repre-sentation woz thare but it woz like a stil piktcher insted ov a moovy; ther wer no birds nor enybody or enyfin thare & u cuden interact wif nufin thare. I sensd sumfin neerby in thi kript space & suspectid ther woz sum kinda gard on thi playce, waitin 2 c who turnd up inarestid in thi lammergeiers. I disconnectid qwik.

Thi trane rold on. Thi lammergeiers livd - or used 2 liv - in thi fass towr, on thi 9th

level. I rekind ther woz sumfin goan on up thare. Thi frate trane wude pass almost undirneef thi fass towr. Gude enuf 4 me. Thi 9th level soundid a bit hi & cold & inaxessibil but Id burn that bridje when I came 2 it.

I almost decapitaytid myself jumpin off thi trane when it wen fru anuthir set ov points in a wide bit ov tunil thi lenth ov witch. I slitley overestimated, but apart from bangin a shoaldir on a wol & skinnin 1 nee I escaped unscaved. I climed a ladir, wokd a bit ov servis tunnill & took a servis elevaitir up 2 thi main floor level. I foun maself in whot lukd like a jiant kemikil wurx, all pipes & big preshir vessils & leekin steem & funy smelz. Shurenuf, a qwik chek on thi kript & confirmd it woz a plastix rfinery.

Aftir a lot of fancy & hily teknikil kriptin, sum wokin & climein ovir pipes & ducts & avoidin thi dodjier lookin shados I foun a otomatik frate elivaitir taikin vats ov sum sorta fertilizer up thi towr & hitchd a ryde up in that.

Ma eers popt aftir 2 minits, & aftir about 5, & 10.

Sumoar fancy kriptin got thi elevaitir 2 go a floar abuv whare it woz expectid; this woz as hi as it cude go. I got out in a sorta tol opin gallery whare a feerse coal wind blu & thi vew woz ov babil plantz formin a fretwurk ov narled branchis lettin in a spare icy lite.

I let thi elevaitir tak itself bak down a floar.

Ther woz a piller about 100 metirs away witch supportd thi roof ov thi tol gallery. Thi 1 in thi uthir directshin woz twice as far away. I set off 2wards thi neerir 1.

I woz stil only dresd in ma yewshil cloavs & this wind woz makin me shiver olredy, but then it had been fairly warm furthir down so mayb it woz juss thi suddeniss ov thi change. I wokd along thi gallery, btween thi siloetid babil & thi smoov ashlar ov thi towr's barely curvd wol. Thi floar felt coald thru my shooz & I wishd I had a hat.

Thi kript startid 2 get a bit vaig & unhelpful about thi layout ov thi fass towr @ aroun this level. I juss had 2 hoap thi piller mite ½ a set ov stares in it.

It didn. It had 2 sets ov stares in it, intertwynd in a dubil heelix like deenay.

Didn seem 2 mattir whitch 1 I took. I startid climein.

I went fass @ furst 2 try & warm up but thi bref juss wissld outa me & my legs turnd 2 jelly; I had 2 sit down & poot ma poundin hed btween ma nees b4 I cude continu, moar sloly.

Thi steps went roun & roun & roun; pretti steep.

I ploddid on & up, tryin 2 settil in2 a rithim. This seemd 2 wurk but I woz gettin a hel ov a hedaik. Luky I woz fit, not 2 menshin determind. (Not 2 menshin bludy stupid, it woz startin 2 okur 2 me.)

Thi piller got 2 thi next storey - anuthir opin gallery - & didn stop; it went on up. Seemd 2 go on 4 a good ways yet so I stuk wif it. Thi stare case had no handrales & tho it woz a good cupil ov metirs wide it wude ½ been friteninly open & exposed on thi outir side if thi babil plants hadent bin hangin growin ol over thi outside ov thi towr. As it woz it woz stil prity friteninly exposd on thi uthir side, but thi best ring 2 do woz not 2 fink about it & sertainly not 2 luke.

I kept climein.

Anuthir level. My hed woz hurtin lyk mad. I loked 4 thi piller but it wozent thare eny moar. Insted ther woz a hoal network ov twistid pillers, weevin this way & that wif hi-alt babil - thin weedy stuf - ol ovir it, coatin thi floar ov thi galery, nettin thi weev ov thi frettid stoan wol.

I wandird, my feet trippin ovir thi babil, lookin 4 a strand ov stonework wif steps in it or on it so that I cude go hier, my vishin gettin dark @ thi edjis, my legs feelin bouncy & strange & sumfin howlin in ma eers that mite ½ bin thi wind & mite not.

I doan no how long it woz b4 I foun thi spyer, fallin amungst thi babil, ded, crumplid, head shattered, skin dried, white bones pokin thru his neepads. I remember lukin up & finkin he must ½ follin from thi opin-wurk seelin, & I saw his mask & thi cylinder on his bak but I just wanderd off agen, feelin like I woz wokin along this tunil coz that woz ol I cude c & it seemd like ours layter while I woz stil serchin 4 anuthir stareway or @ leest a doar or sumthin that I thot, Hey, mayb I cude yoos thi spyers geer! & I startid 2 turn roun & almost tript ovir him bcoz Id wanderd in a sirkil.

Ther woz old brown blood dried on thi faice mask but it fel away like dark dandruf when I nokd it. Thi oxijin in thi tank wos coald & it felt like it waz freezin ma lungs but my hedaik startid 2 go & I wozen lukin down a tunnil ol thi time no moar.

I finishd thi watir in his canteen, took his jaket, hat & torch & left thi poor buggir lyin thare.

Thi stares wer in a reely obvyis place, just along from thi top ov thi piller Id climed.

Thi lammergeiers' roost woz on thi next level. I got thare @ dusk & collapsed in a nest ov dry babil an hooj scratchy fevvirs. Thi don woke me & I startid investigaytin, endin up lookin down thi big shaft.

I heer thi cruntchin njoyse.

I swing thi torch roun aimin thi beem down thi tunnil; thi warm breeze cumin up thi deep blak shaft tugs @ my jaket. Thi torch beem juss disapeers in2 thi dark, swolod up.

Sumthin cruntches agen, then thers a noyse ov sumfin cumin whisslin 2wards me.

I doan ½ time 2 duk & I doan c whot hits me, but it bashis in2 my chest & noks me bakwards, thi bref goan *Hoof!*, outa ma lungz. I feel myself start 2 go ovir thi edj ov thi shaft & grab wif 1 hand as thi lip ov stone skates under my bum. My hand misiz.

I fol in2 thi blak frote ov thi shaft.

Thi rore ov air bilds up aroun me, tearin thi mask off ma fayce.

After a few sekinds I get my bref bak & I start screemin.

EIGHT

1

She was a closed codex within a vast dark library whose floor was a valley, whose walls were cliffs, whose alcoves were hanging valleys; she was an ancient book, rich of smell, gravid with collected knowledge, huge and heavy with ink-thick illuminated pages and a cover of embossed leather, chased with metal and fitted with a lock for which only she possessed the key.

She was a virgin wise too long now on her wedding night, wined, dined, coddled, sozzled, wished well by family and friends still revelling in distant loudness in the halls below, swept up by her handsome new husband and left to change from wedding gown to nightgown and slip into the huge wide warmed welcoming bed.

She was the only speaker in a tribe of the dumb, walking amongst them, tall and silent while they touched her and beseeched her with their sad eyes and their deferent, hesitant hands and their flowing, pleading signs to talk for them, sing for them, be their voice.

She was the captain of a ship sunk by enemy action, alone still conscious in the lifeboat while her crew died slowly around her, moaning quietly through salt-crusted lips or raving as they twitched and spasmed in the bilges. She saw another ship and knew she could signal it, but it was an enemy vessel and only her pride made her hesitate.

She was a mother watching her child suffering and dying because she was of a faith inimical to medicine. Doctors, nurses and friends all pleaded with her to allow her child to live by merely saying a word or making a gesture, the syringe there ready in the surgeon's hand.

She was a protester who'd had proved to her that her fellow dissidents had betrayed her, deserted her, lied to her. It was known beyond doubt that she was guilty; all that was required was that she acknowledge her guilt; no names were needed, nobody else had to be implicated; she merely had to accept her responsibility. She had been foolish and she owed society that. Regretfully, they showed her the instruments of torture within the place of torment.

/She allowed the book to be opened, its every word translated into a language only

she knew. When it was slammed shut again, she smiled to herself.

/She fed her new husband yet more wine as she slowly undressed him, and when he had to relieve himself locked him in the latrine, donned his clothes and escaped the room on a rope made from the bed sheets, spilled wine like a proud deflowerer's trophy stain, flourished to the night.

/She sang to the tribe with her dance and her own gestures, more beautiful than speech or song, so silencing their signs.

/She signalled the ship and when she saw it turn set the lifeboat towards it, slipping into the water to swim away while her comrades were rescued.

/She would still say nothing, but took the syringe herself, went to apply it to the child's arm, looked into its blank and empty eyes, then squirted the fluid over its skin before quickly sucking air into the instrument and turning and plunging it into the horrified surgeon's chest.

/By the rack within the gory chamber she broke down and wept, squatting on her haunches, hiding her face and sobbing. When the torturer bent pityingly to hold her, she looked up with a tear-streaked face and bit his throat out.

'Fuck! Fuck! I can't let go! I can't get out! I can't let go!' the man screamed, his voice hoarse. 'She won't let me go!'

He sat up in the couch and pulled at his collar, his face reddening as he struggled with something at his throat that nobody else could see. The nurse tapped at her keyboard and a tiny light flickered on the head-net the man wore like a thin hat over his shaved scalp. He swayed from the waist, his hands fell from his throat, his eyelids drooped and he lay back again.

The woman waved one hand and the window into the room blanked out. 'Thank you,' she muttered to the nurse. She turned to the tall, broad-shouldered man at her side and motioned with her head. They stepped into the corridor out-side.

'Do you realise what she did?' she asked him. 'She put a mimetic virus into *his* head. Could be months before we get him back. If we get him back.'

'Evolution,' Lunce said, shrugging.

'Don't give me that shit, the guy was one of our best.'

'Well, he wasn't best enough, was he?'

'Oh, well put. But the point is, word's got out now and nobody else will touch her.'

'I'd touch her,' Lunce told her, and made a show of cracking his fingers.

'Yeah, I bet you would.'

He shrugged again. 'I mean it. Wake her up and really torture her.'

The woman sighed and shook her head. 'You really have no idea, do you?'

'So you keep telling me. I just think we're all missing something really obvious here. Maybe a bit of real physical... pressure might actually produce some results.'

'Lunce, we have the Consistory member with special responsibility for Security Oncaterius breathing down our necks on this; if you're tired of your work, why don't you suggest that to him? But if you do, just remember it's nothing to do with me.' She looked him up and down. 'In fact, as I haven't particularly enjoyed working with you, maybe it's not such a bad idea.'

'We haven't tried what I'm suggesting,' he pointed out. 'We have tried what you suggested and it's failed.'

The woman dismissed this with a wave of her hand. 'Well, we'll keep her in solitary for now and see if that gets any results.'

Lunce just took a deep breath and snorted.

'Come on,' the woman said. 'Let's get something to eat. I have to think what we're going to tell Oncaterius.'

Asura was left in a cell. She thought of it as a mirror cell because when she lay down on the bed and put her head on the thin pillow there was a cell in there too; that was the only place they would let her go to in her sleep.

So she was in two cells. It was a little like being in the tower in the first of the

dreams she could remember, but less interesting. There was a tap for water and another tap which dispensed a sort of soup. Between the two taps was a cup chained to the wall. Also in the cell was a toilet and a bed platform and a chair platform, all parts of the wall. There was no window and no view, though there was a locked, tight-fitting door.

She slept a great deal ignoring the pretend, dead-end cell they offered her. Instead, when she dreamt, she recalled what had happened to her so far.

She remembered the view of the great castle, the journey on the airship, the train and car journey before that, the dream in the night at the big house, the things that Pieter Velteseri had asked her about, her walk through the garden from the vault and the strange dreams she had had before she'd awoken.

And it was as though there was something beyond those dreams too, something she knew was there but knew nothing else about save that it existed. The knowledge tickled her mind when she thought back to the time - instant or aeon - in the Velteseri family vault. There was something there, she knew there was, but like a dim light just sensed with the corner of the eye which disappeared when looked at directly, she could not inspect it more closely; the very act of attempting to do so had the effect of extinguishing it completely for as long as she tried.

She reviewed all that had happened to her in the short life she could remember. She wondered if there had been a degree of choice in the fact she had awoken in the Velteseri vault; most of the clan had been away and Pieter might have been chosen as somebody likely to help. She thought she had been right to trust him, and thought that the dreams she had had during the night she had spent at the house had been genuine dreams; something that had put her here had contacted her and told her what her purpose was.

She supposed she had been kidnapped by somebody who was not really Cousin Ucubulaire. These people must have recognised her name, or found out about her in some other way, and not wanted her to do whatever it was she was supposed to do here (assuming she actually had been taken to the big castle she had seen). Perhaps travelling under the name Asura had been a mistake.

And yet as soon as she'd heard Pieter Velteseri utter the word she'd known that was her name. There had been no feeling of warning, no niggling sensation that she might be doing something dangerous; instead she had recognised her true title and claimed it.

She thought about this. She had the impression that somebody or something had gone to great trouble to get her here. How silly not to realise that her name itself

might bring her into danger.

But she was here (again, assuming) and she did not feel she had anywhere else she had to go. She was where she wanted to be. So perhaps she had been meant to be found by Lunce and the lady who'd called herself Ucubulaire, or by people like them. That made a kind of sense. They had her, but they had not succeeded in finding out anything she didn't want them to know...

She decided she would wait.

She waited.

2

Gadfium felt she was an insect crawling across the floor of a dank cellar. Everywhere she looked there was garbage, showing up grey and ghostly in the not-quite totally dark space around her.

The whole first-level room was one gigantic rubbish tip filled with the debris of millennia. From pipes, ducts and chutes high on the walls and ceiling a constant rain of refuse, tailings, junk and trash pattered down. She picked her way across a heap of what looked like doll-size plastic sanitary ware, her feet sinking and sliding through the mound of miniature baths and bidets in a slough of breaking and crackling.

- Are you sure this is going to throw people off our trail?

- Positive. Bear right here. Not too far. That's it.

Gadfium walked on, avoiding a pile of rotting babil fruit husks. She heard a series of crunches and crashes somewhere to her left, where she would have been walking if her crypt self hadn't told her to bear right. She looked around the hills of rubbish.

- I'm sure we could recycle more.

- I suppose it will be re-used, eventually. Or would have been, but for the Encroachment.

A bright stream of yellow fire burst silently from a distant wall and fell slowly in a livid arc towards the raised floor of the lumber room, its colour changing as it fell from yellow to orange to red. A sizzling sound came from that direction, and then a distant roaring noise as whatever it was hit the surface.

- That's pretty.

- Furnace smelt-slag.

- Thought it might be something like that. How are your researches going? Have you discovered anything else interesting?

- Goscil was the Security agent.

- Really? I always assumed it was Rasflin. Gadfium shook her head. You just never knew. - What else? she asked.

- I still don't know who betrayed the group, but they've all been taken into custody except Clispeir.

'*Clispeir?* Gadfium said out loud, and stopped.

- Please don't stop here, there's a hopper full of reject cerametal vehicle parts due to land where you're standing in about a minute.

Gadfium started walking again. - You don't think it was Clispeir, do you?

- I don't know. She is due for some leave in two days; perhaps they are waiting for her to come to them. The observatory at the Plain of Sliding Stones is still cut off from normal communication so she would not have been able to find out about the others.

- If it was her, could the message we received from the fast-tower have been a Security trick, simply made up?

- Possibly, though I doubt it.

Gadfium walked on for a while across the flat bed of some long-dried tailings. Whistling noises from above and behind terminated in distant thumps which shook the dusty surface.

- Some Palace gossip, her crypt self told her. Our lot and the Chapel may be about to come to some sort of agreement.

- This is sudden.

- Apparently the Army had some supposedly war-winning scheme that didn't work. Now we have no choice but to reach terms... Ah.

- What?

- Security. They think they have the asura.

'What?' Gadfium said, and stopped again, feeling herself fill with despair.

- Keep going. They could be wrong.

- But... so soon! Is everything hopeless?

... No. However, I may have a change of plan for us.

- What exactly is this plan, anyway? I'm grateful to you for getting me out of the Palace, but I would like to know where you're taking me, apart from into outlaw territory.

- Well, onward and upward from there, but first, I think now, deeper.

'Deeper?'

- Deeper.

The neatly folded uniform appeared to have been washed but not repaired. There were still a few rips and tears in it. On top of the pile of clothing lay a pair of Army-issue boots, a belt and some complicated webbing, a mask and forage cap. The collection was held easily in one huge white furred paw; black claws extended a little on either side, bracketing the pathetic heap of effects.

The chimeric polar bear sat at one end of the long table in the committee chamber. The Palace civil servant officially in charge of the meeting sat at the other end, on a seat in front of an empty throne. Adjine had decided to stay away when

he'd discovered what had arrived earlier in the diplomatic bag. The Consistorians all seemed to have found urgent appointments elsewhere as well, though like the King most of them were probably watching the events through others' eyes, as the Chapel representatives would know.

The head of the Engineers' delegation set the pile of clothing down on the table top. Adjine, sulking alone in bed, stared through the civil servant's eyes, then switched to an overhead camera.

Looking carefully, the King could see little round holes in the grey uniform material and matching craters on the well-worn boots where acid had eaten away. He tried to feel some shock of recognition on seeing the Army-issue gear, but he hadn't been paying that much attention when he'd been in the head of - he had to search for the name - Private Uris Tenblen.

One of the boots toppled and fell over, lying on the polished surface.

'Your plan,' the ambassadorial emissary rumbled, setting the boot upright again with one massive paw, 'fell through.'

He looked round the others in his team, receiving smiles and quiet chuckles. The Palace team sat silently, though some moved uncomfortably and a deal of close table-surface inspection ensued.

'We have,' the polar bear emissary said, obviously relishing each loudly spoken word, 'taken other precautions as well, but we shall be keeping a very careful and continuous watch on the ceiling above Chapel City, and not only have powerful sensors trained on the relevant area, but various missiles as well...'

Adjine swore. He'd half hoped the Chapel traitors would misinterpret the body which had fallen into their midst - maybe, he'd thought, they would assume the man had fallen from a hang-glider, or some apparatus that could climb along under a ceiling. But it looked like they'd guessed correctly.

'And I must say,' the polar bear said, drawing itself up in its seat and sounding appropriately sententious, 'even though we thought ourselves by now inured to the thoroughly reckless nature of our opponents, we have been profoundly shocked and disappointed to discover the completely irresponsible and utterly senseless depths - or should I say heights?' - the ambassadorial emissary showed his teeth and glanced round his appropriately appreciative team - 'to which our previously at least ostensibly esteemed adversaries have been prepared to stoop to in their understandably increasingly desperate attempts to secure victory in this outrageously prosecuted, thoroughly unfortunate and - on our part - wholly

unprovoked dispute.'

Adijine cut out there. That hairy white bastard was going to milk the situation for all it was worth, and doubtless at inordinate length.

He checked the representation of his private secretary's suite. There were calls waiting. He selected that of the Consistorian with special responsibility for Security.

Gadfium negotiated the lumber room. A flight of rungs set into the wall led her to a door and a lift shaft with spiral stairs running round it. The elevator appeared from above, stopped and opened its doors. Gadfium ducked under the stairs' safety rail and into the lift. She'd been hoping her other self had been kidding about going deeper but when the lift moved it was downwards, dropping her below ground level, deeper into the earth beneath the fastness.

- I'd better warn you there might be unexpected things ahead here.

- Such as?

- Well, people whose presence I can't warn you about.

- You mean outlaws.

- That's a little pejorative.

- We'll see.

- No, let's hope we don't see.

- You're right. Let's hope we don't.

- I'm going to put the lights out.

- Oh? Gadfium said as the elevator went dark.

- Help your eyes adjust.

'Oh, and I've always loved the dark,' Gadfium whispered to herself.

- I know. Sorry.

The elevator slowed and stopped, the doors opened and Gadfium got out into a darkness that was only just short of absolute. She could hear running water in the distance. Her feet splashed when she walked cautiously forward, arms in front of her, into what looked like a broad tunnel.

- Should be left here. Whoa. Stop. Feel forward with your right foot.

- It's a hole. Thanks.

- Look left? Yes; two steps left then walk on.

- Wait a minute; are there any cameras here?

- Not down here.

- So you're looking through my eyes-

- And I'm running an image enhancement program on what you're seeing. That's why I can see better than you can out of your own eyes.

Gadfium shook her head. - Anything I can do to help, apart from not keep my eyes open?

- Just keep looking all about, especially at the floor. Ah; here's a door. Turn right. Two steps. Right hand; feel?

- Got it.

- Careful; it's a vertical shaft. There's a ladder. Go down. And pace yourself; it's quite a way.

Gadfium groaned.

The city within the fourth-floor Chapel was formed in the shape of a magnificent chandelier which had been detached and lowered from the ceiling in the centre of the apse, above what would have been the chancel in a genuine chapel. It sat on a sheer-sided, three-hundred-metre-tall plateau which took the place of an altar, and

rose in concentric circles of glowing, gleaming spires to the sharp pinnacle of the central tower. Formed from a metal framework wrapped with square kilometres of glass cladding interspersed with sheets of various highly polished stones, it looked out over the extravagantly decorated, elaborately columned length of the forest-floored Chapel and had been the monarch's traditional high-season residence for generations.

Uris Tenblen had fallen, still screaming hoarsely, onto the steep side of a tall spire in the second circle of the city, bounced once, hit a sheer wall opposite the spire, rebounded again and plummeted, still hardly slowed, into a flower bed on a stone-flagged courtyard. He had left a shallow elliptical crater in the earth and scattered blossoms like soft shrapnel as he'd bounced a third time and finally come to a halt crashing into a group of tables outside a cafe.

Most of Tenblen's precipitous descent and each successive part of its termination had been captured by an automatic camera on a seventh-level tower.

By the time a medic had arrived Tenblen had been quite irretrievably dead for some minutes, but the glancing nature of his first two contacts with the tower and then the wall, along with the comparative softness of his third impact in the flower bed, meant that there had been time for the alerted rebel Cryptographers to target and interrogate the dying man's bio ware. The Army, as a matter of course, retro-fitted devices to its soldiers' implants to prevent this sort of thing, but - as was not unknown when an individual sustained a series of individually non-fatal impacts - these had been slow to react, and the rebel army had been furnished with recordings of what at first appeared to be merely the nightmares of a dying man but which were later realised to be accurate if still horrific records of reality. They were also, collectively, war intelligence of the first order.

Deep beneath the fastness ground level, in a tiny alcove off a larger alcove off a great arched tunnel off an even more enormous tunnel, Gadfium - exhausted after her escape and the various ensuing traverses and descents - slept.

When she awoke it was to her own voice crackling in her head and breaking up.

- - kup, will you? - - thing - - gon! - - fium!-

She opened her eyes. A blast of fetid breath rolled over her. She looked along the dust-dry floor and in the grey almost-light saw what looked like two hairy tree trunks with something resembling a furred snake dangling between them.

She looked up slowly. The tree trunks were joined at the top; a bulging hairy cliff continued up to a tusked, seemingly eyeless head which was broader than her whole body. On top of the domed head was another head, pale and hairless and half human, staring down at her. Weaving above and to either side of it was yet another head, with tiny staring eyes and a thick, curved beak, balanced on a long, scaly, snake-like neck.

A series of snorts and deep, chest-shaking breaths drew her attention to the fact that the enormous creature in front of her was only one of many, standing in a rough semi-circle around the alcove she had taken shelter in. One of the animals stamped a foot. She felt the ground shake.

Gadfium stared. She waited to faint but it would not happen.

Adijine walked to the window of his private office, shaking his head. 'You mean we might have to give those bastard Engineers in the Chapel what they want?'

'We don't appear to have very much choice,' Oncaterius said, crossing his legs and brushing one careful hand over his knee to free his robe of creases. 'It would seem the war is becoming recognised as unwinnable even by those who were originally most in favour of it.'

Adijine wrinkled his nose at this but did not rise to the bait.

'Time draws on,' Oncaterius said evenly. 'The Encroachment draws closer, and perhaps therefore so should we to our, ah, Engineer cousins in the Chapel. We require the access they claim to have to- '

'Yes, *claim*,' the King said, staring out of the window and down into the depths of the Great Hall; rivers, roads and rail tracks threaded the landscape below in ascending orders of directness.

'Well, let's say, appear to possess,' Oncaterius continued, unruffled. 'They would appear *not* to possess our access to the necessary systems within the Cryptosphere, therefore an accom-odation would appear to make sense for all concerned.'

'An accommodation in which those bastards get to call far too many fucking shots,' Adijine spat.

'I believe Your Majesty knows my opinions on the wisdom of having antagonised the clan Engineers in the first place.'

'Yes,' the King said, rolling his eyes and then turning round. 'I think you've made them clear on more occasions than I care to remember, except when it might have made a difference, right at the start.'

Adijine stood behind the imposingly heavy and ornate swivel chair on the far side of his even more imposingly heavy and ornate desk.

Oncaterius looked wounded. 'If I may say so, Your Majesty does me a disservice. I'm sure the records will show my voice was one of those raised in- '

'Oh, never mind,' the King said, turning the chair round and sitting heavily in its enveloping frame. 'If we have to compromise we have to. We can thrash it out at the Consistory meeting this evening, assuming the Chapel delegation have come up with their answer by then.' The King smiled ruefully, shaking his head once. 'At least we won't be making any concessions to some cross-clan posse of concerned scientists and mathematicians.'

Oncaterius smiled coldly. 'I accept Your Majesty's thanks on behalf of the Security service.'

Adijine narrowed his eyes. 'Is Gadfium still free?'

Oncaterius sighed. 'For now. She's an old lady scientist who got lucky, not a- '

'Couldn't we have tried to capture her? What was the point of trying to kill her?'

'On the confirmation of the existence of the conspiracy,' Oncaterius said, sounding a little as though he was reciting, 'and having received permission to proceed with its amelioration, it was she who happened to be in the position to do the most immediate damage. Rapid action was called for. Our operative took appropriate steps, considering the urgent nature of the circumstances. And I am sure Your Majesty understands that it is usually considered a great deal more straightforward to kill somebody than it is to capture them.' Oncaterius favoured the King with a thin smile. 'Given that our agent's attempt merely to murder Chief Scientist Gadfium resulted in three deaths it is perhaps just as well we did not endeavour to effect her capture.'

'*Given* the level of competence your people brought to the operation, I'm sure you're right,' the King said, taking some pleasure in the facial flinch this produced

on the other man. 'Now, was there anything else?'

'Your Majesty has been informed of the capture of an asura?'

'Held for questioning,' Adijine said, waving one hand. 'Any progress?'

'We are being gentle. However, I think I may attempt to question her myself,' Oncaterius said smoothly.

'What about the child, the Teller who was under suspicion of crypt-hacking or whatever? Didn't he get away too?'

Oncaterius smiled. 'Dealt with.'

3

Sessine stood on the sloped desert sands, looking towards the tall grey tower at the end of the peninsula, cut off from the sands by a high black wall. Within, gardens formed a green triangle at the tower's base. Beyond and to either side, the sea rolled in, waves like creased bronze where they reflected the light of the network of red-orange burning in the sky. He looked away for a moment, trying to cancel the display in the heavens, but it refused to disappear.

The cliffs behind him were rosy with the same light, the sand beneath his soles strewn with shadows like wavelets. The air smelled of salt.

He felt something he had not felt for a long time, and it took a while before he admitted to himself that it was fear. He shrugged, hoisted his pack over his shoulder and continued on towards the distant tower, leaving a deep, scuffed trail of footprints behind him in the talc-fine sand. A vague, gauzy cloud of accompanying dust hung in the air.

It was the ten thousand, two hundred and seventh day of his time in the crypt. He had been here for almost twenty-eight years. Outside, in the other world, a little more than a day had passed.

The wall was obsidian; pitted in places, still highly polished in others. It met the sands and plunged into them like a black knife a kilometre long and fifty metres high at least. He stood in the silence, staring up at the almost featureless cliff, then trod down to the nearest shore. The wall extended a hundred metres or so out to sea. He turned on his heel and set off for the other end.

It was the same. He squatted by the shore and tested the water as a wave broke and rolled, pushing foam up the slope of sand. It was warm. He'd have to swim. He'd thought he might.

He started to undress.

He had not ever paid very much attention to his geographical position in the crypt, though it did roughly correspond to hardware in the base-level world. He supposed he must have wandered over much of South and North America before he had encountered the tonsured woman with her elaborately coded message; that had been, as nearly as he could make out, in a position which equated to somewhere in the North American Midwest; Iowa or Nebraska, he thought. His path since then had led him through Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Britain, Europe and Asia Minor to Arabia.

The sea crossings had been the most dangerous parts of his journey; whether they were effected by the likeness of a bridge or a tunnel, they represented choke points for travellers, and such a focusing of potential prey had in most cases produced a predatory exaggeration of the level's ecological balance. He had had to use the sword a few times, and - on occasion - opponents had attempted to best him through other levels of the crypt, imagining him into situations within which they thought he could more easily be defeated and absorbed.

He found, however, that he had little difficulty in assuming control in such situations. Much appeared to depend on one's wit; a general flexibility and quickness of mind plus an extensive and catholic knowledge-base - as long as these attributes were combined with a generous dash of ruthlessness - were all that one really needed to operate successfully within such imagined realities.

He had walked over broad bridges and within great tunnels hundreds upon hundreds of kilometres long, travelling within the spaces afforded by the slow sweeps of the writhing data highways, in something like a trance sometimes when

the pace was forced and he could not afford to sleep, imagining himself to be a molecule of water trapped within the fold of some Archimedean Screw, a wave carried upon some articulation of light within a subsea cable, a fleck of sand-dust borne on the dark gurglings of a submerged water course veined beneath the baking desert.

He swam round the wall, at first attempting to keep his pack balanced on his head, then, when the waves became too rough, resorting to pushing it before him.

The waves mounted, the wind increased, and he realised that he was being blown away from the shore and the wall. He swam on as best he could but after swallowing water and being continually overwhelmed he was finally forced to surrender his heavy, waterlogged pack and all it contained to the sea; it sank quickly. He struck out with all his remaining strength for the just-glimpsed beach beyond the surf-skirted blackness of the wall.

Only his dreams had disturbed him on his journey to this place, still nagging at him with their images of slow eclipses and the death of stars all glimpsed above impressions of battle.

As he'd neared what he still only guessed and hoped was his goal, the dreams had begun to change, and instead of pan-historical images of the Encroachment, he had started to experience what appeared to be presentiments of its effects.

He'd seen the night sky, utterly black but for a twice-dimmed moon. He'd seen a cloudless day that was nevertheless dim, and a sun shining within that faded clarity that was high and full and yet dull orange, not fiery yellow-white; a sun it was possible to gaze at comfortably with the naked eye.

In his dreams he'd seen the weather change and the plants die, and later the people.

By virtue of its location Serehfa did not have a four-season year, alternating between seasons of dry and wet heat whose external effects were moderated by the construction's altitude as well as the carefully altered geography of its surroundings, but he remembered the spring and later the summer coming to Seattle and to Kuybyshev in the year that he had left base-reality behind, and in his dreams that

summer did not last as long as the one before, and winter came earlier. The pattern was repeated more intensely in the southern hemisphere.

The following winter lasted throughout the spring before finally delivering a summer hardly warmer than the autumn it quickly lapsed into, and after that there was nothing but winter; winter with the dim face of the sun high in the sky, or a winter set within a winter when the sun dipped nearer the horizon.

The pack ice grew continually, permafrost buckled the ground and thrust blisters of ice through what had been temperate soils, the currents of the air and of the sea changed as lakes and rivers froze and the hearts of the continents and the upper levels of the oceans cooled.

Plants died back, creating new deserts where vegetation used to copious heat and light had withered and plants better suited to the colder conditions had not yet had time to colonise, while those plants themselves succumbed to the sudden, smothering weight of the advancing snow and ice.

Animals of all descriptions found themselves being concentrated in a smaller and smaller band around the waist of the world, raising the contest to survive to new levels of ferocity, while even in the comparative warmth of the oceans life became gradually less abundant as the white shutters of freezing sea irised. slowly closed over the brash-ice waves, and the trickling streams of sunlight energising the top of the food chain were reduced almost to nothing.

As though in mocking compensation for the shaded sun, great storms of light played about the heavens at night, flickering like aurorae, cold and vast, inhuman and numbing.

Still in those dreams he saw people crouched round fires, struggling through snow drifts with packs and possessions, taking refuge in mines and tunnels as the snow piled and the glaciers advanced and the icebergs crunched aground off equatorial shores and the pack ice spread from either pole like crystals in some drying solution.

No spears of fire or engines of more sophisticated energies lifted exiles into space, but for all the corpses abandoned at roadsides, for all the men, women and children left to die or freezing together in cars, carriages, houses, villages, towns and cities, still people persevered; retreating, stocking up, burrowing down, sealing up.

The fastness that had been Serehfa fell slowly, surrendering to aggregated megatonnes of ice until only the fast-tower itself remained, a listing cenotaph to human hubris. Then the glaciers swept down from the mountains to north and

south and scoured even that from the surface of the world; the fast-tower's only memorial was a brief volcanic eruption wrenched from the earth by the thermonuclear-level energies its final fall created.

And so humanity left the surface of the world to the ice, wind and snow, and sheltered, reduced and impoverished, within the stony depths of the planet's skin, finally coming to resemble nothing more than parasites in the cooling pelt of some huge dying animal.

With it it took all its knowledge of the universe and all the memories of its achievements and all the coded information defining the animals and plants that had survived the vicissitudes of time and evolution and - especially - the pressure of the human species' own until then remorseless rise.

Those buried citadels became whole small worlds of refugee communities and spawned still smaller worlds as new machines took over the job of maintaining the levels of the crypt, until gradually more and more of what was in any sense humanity came to reside not simply in the created world of its tunnels, caverns and shafts but within those worlds in the generated realities produced by its computers.

Then the sun began to swell. The Earth shucked off its mummifying cocoon of ice, passed quickly through a feverish spring full of flood and storm, then wrapped itself in deeper and deeper cloud and more torrential rain. The atmosphere thickened and the heat and pressure built up while lightning played across the boiling clouds; the oceans shrank; the swollen bulk of the invisible sun poured energy into the deepening cauldron of gases around the planet, transforming it into a vast caustic foundry of chemical reactions and precipitating a welter of corrosive agents to pour upon the razed, enfumed surface of the Earth.

Earth turned into what Venus had once been, Venus began to resemble Mercury and Mercury ruptured, flowed and disintegrated to become a ring of molten slag spiralling in through the livid darkness towards the surface of the sun.

Still, what was left of humanity persisted, retreating further from the open oven of the surface until it became trapped between it and the heat of the planet's own molten sub-surface. It was then that the species finally gave up the struggle to remain in macrohuman form, pulling back fully into a virtual environment and resorted to storing its ancient biochemical inheritance as information only, in the hope that one day such fragile concoctions of water and minerals could exist again upon the face of the Earth.

Its time from then was long as people reckoned it from that point, short as they

would have before. The sun's photosphere continued to expand until it swallowed Venus, and Earth did not survive much longer; the last humans on Earth perished together in a crumbling machine core as its cooling circuits failed, the half-finished life-boat spaceship they had been attempting to construct already melted to a hollow husk beside them.

... He suffered with each child abandoned to the snow; with every old man or woman left - too exhausted to shiver any more - under piles of ice-hard rags; with all the people swept away by the howling, fire-storm winds; with each consciousness extinguished - its ordered information reduced to random meaninglessness - by the increasing heat.

And he woke from such dreams sometimes wondering whether all that he was being shown could possibly be true, and on other occasions so convinced that it had been real that he would have faithfully believed what he had seen was the inescapable future, rather than some mere possibility, projection or warning.

He crawled ashore at dusk, collapsing onto the golden slope of the beach, the perfumes of the lush gardens beyond washing over his naked skin while his body shook and trembled with the after-effects of exertion.

He stared ahead, panting, while the surf washed at his feet, then rose unsteadily and staggered up the smooth stretch of beach towards a low white stone wall separating the strand from the gardens. Steps led up. He stood, then sat, shivering a little on the stone parapet, just looking.

Brightly coloured birds flitted through moss-hung trees, fountains played tinkling on shaded pools, paths meandered between plump lawns, and gaudy banks and beds of flowers offered up their bells and mouths to a lazy buzz of late-gathering insects.

The grey tower towards the apex of the gardens looked dark and deserted against the deep bruised hues of the sky.

He got his breath back and when he started to shiver again stood up and walked smartly towards the tower.

He walked out from under the sheltering trees.

The tower's dark grey surface had the rough-smooth texture of eggshell. It stood on a plinth of veined porphyry surrounded by a shallow moat where lilies floated and over which bowed an ornamental bridge of red-painted wood.

As he watched, something caught the faint light in the sky at the top of the tower and flashed, and floating down towards him there came an angel.

He laughed out loud.

4

Translation

I get tired screemin. Evin moar I get tired ov gettin bashed on thi bed wif thi mask whot has cum off ma faice; itz stil atatched 2 thi air tank on my bak & itz slipt roun bhind ma nek & is goan fump fump fump on thi bak ov my bonce.

I feel bhind me & tare it away.

Ma eers r goan pop pop pop. Thi air iz blastin roun me so hard therz harly eny poynt in me screemin nway. Its olmost totily dark; Ive got a sorta gray sensation ov thi wols rushin past aroun me, & if I twist roun I can luke up & c a vaig impreshin ov a tiny patch ov dark gray on thi blakniss.

Downwirds, thers jus blakniss.

I try 2 kript but I cant; doan no if itz coz Im movin 2 fass or coz thi shaft is sheeldid or coz Im 2 terrifyd 2 consintrate proprly. I start screemin agen, then stop, gulpin 4 bref.

Id ½ shat my pants by now but itz been so long sins I 8 I cant.

Thi air is coald & am shiverin but its not freezin. I setil in2 a sorta floppi X-shape aftir a while, like Ive scene skydivirs do; I drift 2wards 1 wol, then manoeovir myself away agen. I ½ 2 keep swaloin 2 keep my eers from burstin. I try 2 fink how far up I woz & how long itz goan 2 taik me 2 fol 2 thi botim, if its thi botim thats goan 2

brake ma fol. I reelize that ther mite b sumthin btween me & thi botim & I cude hit @ eny momint & I start screemin agen.

I stop aftir a while. Teers get whipt off ma faice but itz not me cryin itz juss thi feercniss ov thi wind tearin @ ma Is.

Ive nevir dyed b4. I doan no whot itz like. Ive herd from uthir peepil & Ive bin in thi minds ov bags whot ½ dyed & got ther impreshins but thay say itz difrint 4 evrybodi & I doan no whot itil b like 4 me & I woz hoopin not 2 find out 4 a while yet thanx very mutch but thare we go.

I start wunderin if thayl resusitate me @ oll. O fuk; whot if Im in sutch big trubil thayl juss looz my ident from thi kript? Whot if thay catch ma dyin fots & then juss interogate me, or doan bothir sayvin me @ oll?

I feel like am goan 2 b sik.

Thi roarin aroun me goze on forever. My Is r dry & soar. My eers hurt 2.

O fuk I doan wan 2 dy.

I cant bleev how long this is takin. I feel like Im in kript-time. It okurs 2 me mayb I am, mayb I kriptid without noin about it. But I cant b. Im obveyisly not. I'm heer, follin down this shaft, damit. I try kriptin agen.

It wurx. Im on thi sekind basemint level, praktikly @ c level.

How mutch furthir down can this bleedin shaft go?

/I port acros in2 thi kript; @ leest I can avoid thi momint ov impact. My implants will pool me bak when I dy, so ther woant b 2 ov me, but @ leest... wait a bleedin minit.

Accordin 2 thi loakil hardware Im stil on thi saim level. Thi kript finks Im staishinry. Wots goan on heer?

I dubil chek, trebil chek, kwadroopil chek. Yep; thi kriptosfeer finks Ive stopt.

I giv a sorta mentil gulp, then port bak acros 2 my bod.

/Thi air iz stil screemin up roun me. Itz stil totily blak but wif thi thermil bit ov my vizhin I can stil make out thi wols 2 ither side. Shurenuf, they do luke a bit difrint;

no impreshin ov them hurtlin past no moar. I stare down.

I doan c nuthin but blakniss but now I fink about it thi sound is diffrint sumhow; evin moar ov a roar.

Then suddenli thers lites evriwhare, blindin me.

I cloas my Is. I fink; blimey, I nevir felt a fing. Thass me ded & this is thi long tunnill wif thi lite @ thi end whot evribody getz 2 c & I muss ½ hit thi botim & not evin felt it.

Xsept thi roarins stil thare & thi wind is stil pushin in2 ma face. I opin my Is agen.

Im stairin strate down @ a sorta a hexagonil grid ov wires or metil or sumfin, & beyond thi grid, a few metirs furvir down, thers ol these big propelir fings, 7 ov them, ol whirlin away & roarin & sendin thi air screemin up past me.

I luke 2 thi side.

Thers a doar in thi wol levil wif me & a cupil ov big black meen lookin birdz wif skaley nex perchd thare, lookin @ me, beedy-Id, ther fevirs rufflin in thi draft.

I cant fink whot else 2 do. So I wave 2 them.

That woz how we used 2 reech our hoam, 1 ov thi birdz tells me.

Am wokin along a brod britely lit tunnill. Thi 2 lammergeiers r keepin pace wif me by sorta ½ hoverin in thi air 1 on ither side ov me, ther wings goan whuf whuf, whuf whuf. I didn evin no they cude do this.

Am wokin kinda funy coz I think I did crap my pants juss a litil, but they doan seem 2 nods, or thayr 2 pol-ite.

U meen u got blastid up thare by thoaz fans? I say, suriptishisly poolin @ thi sect ov ma pants.

Krect, sez thi bird (½n 2 shout abuv thi noise ov its wings goan whuf whuf).

So whyd u leev? I shout. & who woz that up thare pooshd me down?

We left bcoz it woz no longir safe, & we wer needid down heer, yelz thi bird. As 2 who pooshd u in2 thi shaft, I imajin it woz probly a state employee.

Whot, a Security geezir or sumfing? But-?

Pleez; I cant tel u eny moar. Our comandir may b abil 2 ansir eny uthir qwestions u ½. Luke; wude u mind runnin?

Runnin? I sez, Why, is ther sumbidy aftir us? I glans bhind expectin 2 c Security peepil pursoooin us but thers juss thi long brite tunil stretchin way in2 thi distins.

No, shouts thi bird, itz juss this pace is very tyrin 4 us.

Sorry, I sez, & braik in2 a run. Dozent do my chafed bum no gude but it keeps thi 2 lammergeiers happy, beetin alongside.

& so that woz how I arrivd @ thi lammergeiers HQ; brefliss, on thi dubil & wif my pants spottid wif kak.

Thi hed lammergeier iz a feerce big bugir ov a burd; tolir than me when heez perchd & wings longir than Im tol. He iznt no ole gie neevir, heez in hiz prime wif sleek blak & wite feevirs, steely lookin talins, a naykid nek that lukes oild & brite, & jet-blak Is. I doan no if heez got a naim; we ½nt bin propirly introdoosed.

Heez sittin on a perch, Im sat on thi floar. Thi room iz funnil shaped & thi brod sirkulir roof has a imidje ov a blu sky wif litil flufy clouds in it. Thers anuthir ½ dozen or so uthir lammergeiers perchd aroun thi room 2.

U ½ been a propir pest 2 sertin peepil, mastir Bascule, thi big bird sez, stairin @ me & rokin from side 2 side & sorta stampin itz feet on thi perch. A moast persistent pest.

Thang u very mutch, I sez.

That woz not a complimint! thi bird screetchiz, flapin.

I sit bak, blinkin (my Is r stil a bit soar aftir ol that wind roarin past me when I fel). Whot do u meen? I ask.

Itz qwite possibil that we $\frac{1}{2}$ givin away our noo posishin heer by turnin on thi lift fans so we cude save yoor miserabil hide! thi bird shouts.

Wel, sory Im shure, but I woz toald u mite $\frac{1}{2}$ sum informayshin about thi whareabouts ov a frend ov mine.

What? thi hed bird sez, soundin puzzld. Who?

Itz a ant. Hir name is Ergates.

Thi bird starez @ me. Yoor lookin 4 a *ant*? he sqwaks, & sounz increduliss.

A ver speshil ant. (I naro my Is.) Whot woz taikin by a *lammergeier*.

Thi bird shaiks itz hed. Wel, it woznt dun by 1 ov us, it sez, shakin its fevirs.

O yeh? I sez.

We r chimerix, mastir Bascule. This... ant muss $\frac{1}{2}$ bin taikin by a wild lammergeier.

& whare r they then? I ask. (Dam, fot I woz on thi rite trak @ last!)

Ded, thi hed bird sez.

I blink my Is. Ded?

Thi state had them kild during yesterday evening when it reelized we opoasd it; moast ov them wer mobbed by chimeric crows & brot down. We bleev we wer thi reel targets. 2 ov us wer cot & distructid. Ol thi wild lammergeiers r ded.

O, I sed. O deer, I thot.

Hmm, I sed, I doan supoase u no if eny ov them sed anythin about-?

Wait a minit, thi bird sez, waivin 1 wing @ me. It cloases its Is 4 a momint. It opinz them agen.

It lukes stedily @ me 4 a momint, then sorta $\frac{1}{2}$ shaiks its hed. Wel, mastir Bascule, it sez. As I sed, u $\frac{1}{2}$ been nuthing if not persistint. & u $\frac{1}{2}$ not been fritind 2 risk yoor life. It stamps its feet agen. Ther is sumthin u mite do.

Do 4 what, 4 who?

I cant tel u 2 mutch, yung sir; itz best 4 u if u doant no 2 mutch, beleev me; but ther r sum very importint things happening rite now, things whitch affect - & whitch wil affect - ol ov us. Thi state - thi peepil who ½ atakd ovr frends thi sloths & ½ tried 2 kil u - r tryin 2 prevent sumthing happening. Wil u giv us yoor help in making it happin?

Whot happenin? I ask, suspishiss. They say thers a emisiry from thi kaotic bits ov thi kript aroun, wantin 2 infect thi uppir layers.

Thi big bird shayks its wings impayshintly. Thi emisiry, it sez, is kold an asoora & it is from 1 ov thi few parts ov thi kript whitch haz *not* bin tutched by thi kaos. It carrys within it thi meens ov our salvayshin, but its mishin is in jepurdy; the state oposes it 2 bcoz thi fulfilment ov its mishin wude - conseevibly - meen thi end ov thi presint power structyoor. Ov coarse thi state has used thi bogey ov thi kaos 2 atemt 2 turn uthirs agenst thi asoora & those who wude aid it. Thi fact remanes it iz our only hoap. If it duz not sukseed we r ol lost.

I shift my bum a bit. I reely shude ½ askd 2 cleen up a bit b4 ol this. Not that a playce whare lammergeiers r iz likely 2 b big on washrooms, judjin from thi state ov sum ov thi floars Ive seen aroun her. Im finkin fru whot thi hed geezirs juss toal me. It mite b tru, but I ver mutch dout am been toald thi hoal trufe heer.

& whot am I suposed 2 do? I ask.

Thi hed bird lukes distinkly uncumfortabil, & flaps itz wings a bit. Itz danegeris, it sez.

Id kinda gessd that, I sez urbainly, feelin pritti groan-up, thangu ver mutch. Whot did u ½ in mind? I ask.

Thi lammergeier fixiz me wif its ice-blak Is. Goan bak up thi fass-towr, it sez. Only hi-er this time. (It stamps its feet, 1 aftir anuthir, & thi uthir burdz do thi saim thing.) Mutch hi-er.

I sit bak. Froles gon a bit dry.

U got a toilit I cude yooz? I ask.

Lukes like thi hoal bleedin fass-towrs juss pakd wif shafts. Weer heer @ thi foot ov anuthir 1. Itz biggir than thi 1 I fel down; a lot bigir. This is thi 1 in thi centir ov thi towr & it muss b eesily $\frac{1}{2}$ a kilometir acres. Very faynt lite filtirs down from... blimey, I doan no; helluva far up, thas 4 shure.

We r heer curtisy ov thi war, thi hed bird telz me. Both sides think thi uthir controlz this space.

O reely.

Yes; thi fact they may b about 2 reech an acomadayshin shortly is anuthir reezin 4 ther bein a degree ov urjinsy about thi presint sityooayshin.

Thi hed bird is perchd wif his $\frac{1}{2}$ dozen pals on whot lukes like a peece ov crumpild, soot-blakind missile rekidje neer thi centir ov thi shaft base. Uthir lammergeiers r flittin about thi place fru thi shados. Thi rok floar ov thi shaft lukes like it used 2 b smooth but itz ol chipt & skard now & literd wif bits ov broakin mashines. Thers a dubil set ov rales leedin in from thi side ov thi shaft witch is whare we came from; thers a big cavern thare whot lukes like a mooseum ov rokit flite or sumfing; fool ov big sheds & misteeryus bits ov eqwuiptomint & rustin missiles & big sferikil tanx & telescopes & radar dishis & deflatid silvir baloons like discardid bolgounz.

I luke strate up. Didn no u cude get vertigo lukin up.

This iz thi mane shaft, thi hed bird sez, & poziz. 1nce it led 2 thi stars.

I luke up agen & I can bleev it. My hed spins @ thi thot &

I olmost fol ovir.

Thi top ov thi fass-towr has bin inaxessibil 4 as long as enybodi or anything can remember, thi lammergeier telz me. Meny atemts $\frac{1}{2}$ bin made, moastly in secrit, 2 reetch its hites. Ol $\frac{1}{2}$ fay led, as far as we no. It lifts up 1 foot & lukes down @ thi bit ov missile itz perchd on. U c sum ov thi rekidje around u.

Uh-huh, I sez. Sumfin up thare keeps shootin them down, yeh?

No; but ther apeers 2 b an armurd conical base 2 thi towrs upir reetches @ about 20 kilometirs witch nobody has bin abil 2 penetrate.

I luke roun @ ol thi missile rekidje. Thi offorities doan yoozhily let airplanes operate wifin thi cassil 4 feer ov a crash weekinin thi struktyir, let aloan missiles. U cant

help wunderin whot sorta damidje has bin dun up thare by ol this rekd hardware.

So? I sez.

We $\frac{1}{2}$ a final vacyoom baloon, thi lammergeier sez.

A whot?

A vacyoom baloon, it repeets. Teknikly, a very strong impermeebil membrane encloasin a hi vacyoom & fitid wif a harnis.

A harnis, I sed.

+, we $\frac{1}{2}$ sum hi-altitood breevin eqwipmint.

U $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{1}{2}$ u? I sez. (& am finkin, 0-0...)

Yes, mastir Bascule. We r askin u 2 take thi baloon up as far as u can & then clime sum way beyond thi level thi baloon attanes.

Iz that posibil? How far up we tokin?

It is sertinly posibil, tho not without risk. Thi altitood is aproximitly 20 kilometirs.

Haz enybudy els bin up that hi?

They $\frac{1}{2}$

They get bak down agen?

Yes, thi lammergeier sez, stampin from side 2 side agen & flappin its wings out a bit. Sevril mishins $\frac{1}{2}$ ataned sutch hites in thi past.

Whot am I suposed 2 do up thare?

U wil b givin a pakidje 2 tak wif u. Ol u $\frac{1}{2}$ 2 do is diliver it.

Whare? Who 2?

U wil c when u get thare. I cant tel u eny moar.

If this is so urjint, how cum u gies cant do it? I ask, lukin roun @ thi othir birdz.

1 ov our numbir tryd, thi hed bird sez. We beleev he is ded. Anuthir woz about 2 mount a sekind atempt juss b4 u apperd but we wer not veri hoapful ov suxess. Thi problem is that we canot fly 2 a ½ ov thi altitood reqwired, & 1ce thi baloon wil rise no moar simply woking up steps apeers 2 b thi best meens ov gainin hite. We r not bilt for wokin. U r.

I fink about ol this.

It is a simpl task in a sens, thi hed lammergeier sez, but without it thi asooras mishin wil shurely fale. Howevir, this is a danejiris undertaikin. If u lak thi curidje 2 taik it on then b shure that moast hoomins wood feel thi saim way. Probly thi sensibil fing 2 do is 2 turn it down. U r bairly an adolesint, aftir ol.

Thi hed bird lowirs his nek a litil & lukes roun @ his 2 neereist pals.

We ask 2 mutch, he sez, soundin sorofool. Cum - & he starts 2 opin his wings as if 2 fly away.

I swolo hard.

Il do it, I sez.

NINE

1

The cell was dark. She had been troubled by strange dreams and awoke, restless and disturbed in her narrow cot. She tried to get back to sleep but could not. She lay on her back, trying in vain to remember what she had been dreaming about. She opened her eyes to the darkness, and when she rolled over again

noticed a tiny glow of pale light coming from the floor. She gazed down at it. It was like a pearl, lit from inside, and so faint she could only see it when she didn't look straight at it. She put her hand out to touch it. It felt cold. It was stuck to the floor. She caught a hint of movement inside, and got out of the bed, kneeling on the floor and putting one eye up to the tiny glowing pearl.

Inside the pearl she saw ice and snow and cloud and somebody standing dressed in furs.

Without hesitating, she plucked the pearl from the floor. It was damp and cold in her fingers, like ice. The tiny hole in the floor glowed more brightly now; the scene below was clearer. She wished she could slip through into that other place, and found herself shrinking - or the hole and the cell around her expanding - until she was able to do just that.

She awoke on a frozen lake; a huge sheet of ice stretching smoothly away in every direction to a pale grey horizon. Above was a roof of white cloud.

It was very cold. She was dressed in a fur hat and a calf-length coat. Her boots were long and her hands were clasped together inside a fur muff. Her breath smoked in front of her.

In the distance she saw a black dot. It gradually enlarged until eventually it resolved into a man rowing a kind of spindly frame across the ice. He didn't turn round to look at her, but stopped rowing some distance away and coasted to a halt level with her and about a stone's throw distant. He wore a thin, tight-fitting one-piece suit and a thin cap. He sat, still not looking at her, breathing hard and leaning forwards to rest on the claw-oars he held.

She looked down at her boots, which became ice skates. She glided over and stopped neatly, facing him.

He was middle-aged but fit-looking in a stocky, compact sort of way. There was a sculpted leanness hinted at in his face and his hair was thick and black. He looked slightly surprised. 'Who the hell are you?' he asked.

'Asura,' she said, nodding. 'And you?'

'Hortis,' he said. He turned and looked around and behind him. 'I thought I was

alone here. They don't usually...' his voice trailed off as he looked back at her, eyes narrowed in suspicion. 'What do you want here?' he asked her.

'Nothing,' she said.

'They all want something,' he said, sounding bitter. 'You must, too. What is it?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know what I want,' she admitted. 'I wanted to be here, and I'm here.' She thought. 'I can't go anywhere else. They keep trying to make me answer questions. Apart from- '

'And you're not ill or sick or needing to be rescued?' he asked, a sneer on his face.

'No,' she told him, puzzled. 'Are you?'

'Only from this nonsense,' he said, not looking at her, but checking the angle of the claw-oars. He levered them back and flicked them down into the ice. 'Tell them nice try; at least they're getting more subtle.' He pulled on the claw-oars and the A-shaped frame rumbled off across the ice, gaining speed with each sweep of the oars the man made.

She hesitated, then set off after him, skating smoothly in his wake. He looked annoyed. He lengthened his stroke, trying to outdistance her, but she kept up with him. She loved the feel of the ice under the blades on her feet and the cold air on her face. Warmth spread from her legs as she pushed after the man in his strange, spindly craft. He was pulling quite hard now and she was struggling to keep up, but he didn't look comfortable with the pace he'd set either. His face grew more angry-looking.

She wanted to laugh, but did not.

'How long have you been here?' she asked him.

She thought he wasn't going to answer, but then he said, 'Too damn long.' He gave one explosive sigh and settled back to a more steady rowing rhythm, seemingly giving up his attempt to pull away from her.

'Why are you here?' she asked.

'I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours,' he said, smiling humourlessly, and shook his head as he watched his claw-oars flick and bite.

'Where did you come from?' she asked patiently.

Again, she thought he wasn't going to answer. It looked like he was thinking hard. Finally he said - suddenly looking straight at her - 'The tower.'

She ceased to push after him and glided on for some time, skates parallel, then felt herself brake gently. The man had stopped rowing, though his own momentum was still drawing him further away over the ice from her. He was frowning.

She came to a stop.

'The tower,' she whispered to herself.

The man who had called himself Hortis slowed and stopped the fragile-looking ice-boat, some distance off. He was looking at her strangely, his head tipped to one side. Then he angled one oar behind him and the other in front and pulled them together to turn the craft and come back to her.

The small craft rumbled a length past her and stopped. He shipped the claw-oars, leaning forward and looking intently at her. He gazed at her for a while, then appeared to come to a decision.

'All right, then,' he said. 'Maybe I've been in here too long, or maybe I just can't resist a pretty face, but I suppose it can't do any harm.' He gave a small smile. 'I was one of a small group of scientists and mathematicians who opposed the Consistory. We believed their desire to hold on to power had entirely superseded any duty to govern for the general good; our conspiracy - which had started at university and never really been more than a secret club - became more serious when the Encroachment was discovered and we began to suspect that the Consistory - with the King as its puppet - was doing less than it might to find a solution to the emergency.'

'We pursued many different courses. We tried to contact the Cryptosphere's chaotic levels, believing that at least part of the so-called chaos was in fact an AI nexus at odds with the Consistory's philosophy. We set up secret transmitters in an attempt to contact the deep-space monitoring system the Diaspora was supposed to have left in watch over us, and we tried to elicit some sort of response from the fast-tower, where rumours had it that either an uncorrupted crypt core existed, or, again, elements remained which were still in touch with the Diaspora.'

'A couple of days ago, in base-time, we apparently received a signal from the heights of the fast-tower. It was... couched in slightly eccentric terms, but appeared

to be genuine.

'The signal confirmed some of our suspicions concerning the Consistory's lack of sincerity in finding a way to defeat the Encroachment. It did not seem to indicate that it was in touch with whatever remains of our space-going ancestors, though it did talk of some system left behind by the Diaspora which might ensure the survival of all of us. The message - or at least its ramifications - led...' the man sighed, and looked sad, 'to our conspiracy being betrayed and me ending up here, and,' he said, looking straight into her eyes, 'it talked of another part of the crypt, some uncorrupted section which contained the key to the Diaspora-donated survival system. This key would be sent here, to Serehfa, and it would come in the form of something called an asura...' - he smiled, and in that smile she saw a kind of sadness, some defensive cynicism, and an unspoken hope - '... Asura,' he finished. He shrugged. 'Your turn.'

She looked down at him, while inside her mind what felt like great slabs of ice slipped and slotted, colliding, joining, fusing and interconnecting.

She took a deep breath.

2

'Chief Scientist Gadfia?'

The voice had come from the scrawny-necked bird squatting on the shoulders of the ape-human who in turn sat behind the head of the chimeric mammoth. The ape-human glared down at her, grinning inanely. The other mammoths to either side shuffled a little in the darkness, pale human faces looking down from each of them as well. She gulped. 'Well, sort of,' she said.

- Hello? she said, inside, trying to find her own voice, but within was only silence.

'All praise,' the bird said, its voice echoing in the complex of hidden tunnels and galleries around them. The creature hopped to and fro from one foot to the other. 'Love is god. Well met by darkness, truth-seeker Gadfia. For darkness gives birth to light. All here are hallowed, hallowed in hollow, the hollowness that supports, the centre that is the absence that gives strength, the hollow darkness that

underlies supporting light, seeker-after-illumination Gadfia. Please (Hiddier: trunk!); come with us. There is work to do.'

The mammoth extended its trunk towards her; a giant, tapered hairy snake with a naked, glistening double orifice at the end from which a damp, subtly fetid gust of air issued.

She stared.

- Back.
- Thank goodness. Where did you-?
- I was snooping where I shouldn't have been and I was almost caught by Security. Cut me off for a while.
- Good grief. Do you know where-?
- You're riding through vast dark dripping tunnels on the back of a chimeric mammoth with a dumb, naked and deformed semi-human and a lammergeier that talks like some ancient preacher and reminds you of the message from the fast-tower.
- Correct. And I can't get sense out of anybody. The bird spouts religious balderdash and the humanoid just grins, hoots and dribbles. I was thinking of asking the mammoth what was going on next.
- At least you went with them.
- Did I have a choice?
- I suppose you forgot about the gun.
- Oh.
- It doesn't matter. You did the right thing. Never mind; guess who I've been talking to.
- Surprise me.

- The fast-tower.

- *What?*

- Well, an emissary thereof; it can't get back in touch with the tower for fear of chaotic contamination, but it represents it.

- How? Where? What's-?

- The representation just appeared in the crypt; an old white man with white hair and flowing white robes. The thing proliferated illegally - set off system crashes everywhere; everybody thought it was some vast attack from the chaos until they found how easy it was to trap and kill; I don't think the tower is very good with humans. Anyway, the copies all started trying to talk to anybody who'd listen. The Cryptographers mopped most of them up and they're tracking down the others but I was able to find one of the copies and quiz it.

-And?

- There is an asura and it's here, it's in Serehfa, it's on its way, but it's being held up. The tower seems pretty confused itself about who and what it is, but it believes it's here somewhere and it needs help.

- Are you sure this isn't some Security or Cryptographers' trick?

- Fairly. There is another aspect to all this.

- What?

- We have an ally.

- Who?

- Myself, ma'am, said another voice, a male voice, in her head, startling her. - How do you do.

- Oh. Hello, she thought, and felt flustered. Who are you?

- Call me Alan. Pleased to meet you, madam Chief Scientist, though in fact we have met before, in a sense. Whatever; I dare say we shall communicate again.

- Ah, right, yes, she thought, still not sure how to respond.

- That was him, said her own voice again.

- I guessed that, but who-?

- Another *planetes*, Gadfium, another wanderer in the system, though this one's been here a lot longer than I. He's kind of cagey about revealing who he really is but I get the impression his human original was pretty powerful and important. His current self is extremely well informed and knows his way about the crypt better than the Cryptographers. It would seem he came to the same conclusion the tower did about the efficacy of using chimeric agents rather than humans to slip past Security.

- I hate to sound a note of caution again, but -

- No, I don't think he's a plant for Security. He found me, lurking around where they're holding the asura. If it hadn't been for him Security would have got me.

- So you think.

- I know. Look, it was he who put me on to the chimerics you're with.

Gadfium looked at the back of the half-human thing in front of her. It was dark and matted and she suspected if the light had been better she'd have seen things crawling in the creature's hair. The giant bird which had been perched on the thing's shoulders had flown off down the black tunnel, cackling. Below her, the mammoth swayed from side to side with a surprisingly rapid motion as it led the twenty-strong herd down the huge tunnel. The other humanoids riding, legs clenched behind the heads of the mammoths, grinned widely and made excited fist-clenching gestures at her when she turned to look at them.

Gadfium scratched and tried not to think how far down the ground was.

- Well, tell him thanks for that, I think, she told her crypt self. But where exactly are we going and what precisely are we supposed to do?

- You're the cavalry; we're riding to the rescue, Gadfium! her other self said, excited.

- I thought I was the one needing to be rescued.

- Well, you've become the rescuer, Gad. We're going to free the asura.

- We're what?

- You're on your way to Oubliette, the sea-port under the fastness. That's where Security are holding the asura. Alan and I can do most of it, but physically, to rescue the girl, we may need you. And the chimerics, of course. The mammoths and the semi-humans seem to be under the influence of our friend, the lammergeier... Well, I'm still trying to work it out. Could be connected with the tower.'

Gadfium couldn't think what to say for a while. She stared into the darkness ahead, where she could just make out the heat signature of the returning lammergeier. She imagined the dark, buried city of Oubliette coming closer ahead, and herself riding with a preaching bird, twenty cretinous semi-humans and as many house-high mammoths to do battle with the elite of Security and probably the Cryptographers too.

The scaly-necked bird flapped and settled on the broad hairy shoulders of the creature ahead of her.

'Have faith in the nothing,' it said in a quiet screech. 'Faith is the eye that sees nothing and rejoices in it. Unknowingness absolves the future path of danger. The eye sees, sees nothing, and so has faith. Fair set, all are hallowed. Shanti.'

Gadfium shook her head and looked down at the matted fur of the huge animal she bestrode, feeling its damp, rank heat welling up around her like doubt.

- Are we both mad? she asked her crypt self, - Or is it just you?

3

The angel was tall and sleek and sensually asexual; its eyes and hair were gold, its skin shone like liquid bronze. Its clothes were confined to a loincloth and a small waistcoat. Its wings varied from the coppery tint of its body at their roots through every shade of blue to white at the very tips of the feathers. It flew with an elegant effortlessness and landed lightly in front of him.

He had stopped laughing, not wanting to appear impolite.

The angel bowed slowly and deeply to him.

When it spoke its voice was like something beyond music, each phoneme, syllable and word at once utterly clear and yet setting off a symphony of tones which fanned instantly out from the primary expression like an avalanche down a pristine slope.

'Welcome, sir. You have travelled a long way to be here with us at last.'

He nodded. 'Thank you. Had we met during any other day of my journey I would have greeted you somewhat better dressed.'

The angel smiled, but did not look at his nakedness. 'Please, sir,' it said, and like a conjurer flourished one hand, and was suddenly holding a large black cape, which it held out to him.

'I'm grateful for the gesture,' he said, not taking the cape. 'But if its utility is restricted to saving my blushes, I'd prefer to remain as I am.'

'As you wish,' the angel said, and the cape was gone.

'Tell me,' he said. 'Did I misinterpret something, or was I summoned here?'

'You were, sir. We would ask something of you.'

'Who is this "we"?'

'A one-time part of the data corpus charged with overseeing the functioning of the rest, and with the monitoring of our world's welfare.'

'No small brief. And your current intentions?'

'We will attempt to contact a system set up long ago which may help deliver us from what has been called the Encroach-ment.'

'And how exactly is it supposed to do that?'

The angel smiled dazzlingly. 'We have no idea.'

He could not help but smile too. 'And what part may I play?'

The angel lowered its head, its gaze still fastened on him. 'You can give us your soul, Alandre," it said, and Sessine felt something quail within him.

'What?' he said, crossing his arms. 'Aren't we being rather metaphysical?'

'It is the most meaningful way to express what we'd ask of you.'

'My soul,' he said, hoping he sounded sceptical.

The angel nodded slowly. 'Yes; the essence of who you are. If you are to help us you must surrender that.'

'Such things may be copied.'

'They may. But is that what you want?'

He looked into the angel's eyes for some time. He sighed. 'Will I still be me?'

The angel shook its head. 'No.'

'Then whom?'

'What will exist is what we create from you, and with you.' The angel shrugged; a magnificent and beautiful flutter of shoulders and wings. 'Another person, with aspects of yourself within them, and more you than anybody else, but not you.'

'But will something of me remain that will remember this, and my time here, and who I was, and so know what became of me from this point, and whether I... did any good?'

'Perhaps.'

'You can put it no more strongly than that?';

'I cannot. Partly, that aspect would depend on you, but I'd lie if I told you the chances are good.'

'And if I refuse to help you?'

'Then you may walk away. We can furnish you with items to replace those you lost

in the water and you may resume your travels. On your funeral, in another fifty or so years of crypt-time, I assume you will have the usual courtesies accorded you and so take your place within the Cryptosphere. Twenty thousand years of crypt-time await even before the Encroachment is complete; there will be far, far longer than that before matters become desperate in the physical world.'

He felt he had to insist, even though he listened to himself speak and felt ashamed: 'There is a chance of some continuity though; some element of me might survive which will remember this and know the connection, know what I did?'

'Indeed,' the angel said, with what was almost a bow. 'A chance.'

'Hmm,' he said. 'Oh well, it's been a long life.' He gave a small laugh. 'Lives.' He smiled at the angel, but it looked sad.

Strangely, he felt sad for it, too. 'What do I do?'

'Come with me,' the angel said, and was suddenly a small dark-haired, white-skinned man dapperly dressed in a three-piece suit and carrying a hat, cane and gloves. He flourished the hand holding his pair of spotless white gloves, indicating the path back through the garden.

Sessine went with him, walking side by side along the path to where a rotunda set on a small hill was revolving slowly and rising; its revealed base was in the shape of a huge cylindrical screw, and gradually an aperture came into view, rotating with the rotunda, its full size being revealed after a few more revolutions.

They climbed the path to the now motionless rotunda. The doorway faced them. It was dark at first, then it began to glow with a warm orange-yellow light, like side-lit fog.

'Merely enter, and you will have done all we ask of you. If you carry something of your being through what awaits here, you may do what you ask of yourself.'

He took a step forward. The doorway shone like hazy sunlight. He smelled the sea again. He hesitated and turned to the little man who had been in the form of an angel.

'And you?'

The little man smiled wryly and looked back over the trees at the grey heights of the quiet tower, proud against the sky's last dusky light. 'I cannot go back,' he said,

and sounded resigned. 'I shall probably stay here, in the garden, to tend it.' He looked around. 'I have often thought it exhibits too perfect an elegance. It could do with some... love.' He turned back, grinning self-consciously. 'Or I may wander the level, as you have done. Perhaps both, consecutively.'

He put his hand on the small man's shoulder and nodded at the beautiful tower. 'I'm sorry you can't go back.'

'Thank you for having asked, and for saying so.' The small man frowned and seemed to hesitate. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'my "perhaps" earlier was overly pessimistic.'

'We'll see. Fare well.'

'And you, sir.'

They shook hands, and then Sessine turned and walked through the doorway into the glowing mist.

4

[Translation](#)

Hoo-wee! Am probly hier than nbody els in thi hole wyde wurld rite now, xeptin onli thi peepil in thi fass-towr assoomin thers nbody up thare ov coarse.

Thi baloon is a grate enormis shado abuv me. Am hangin undir it by whot lukes lyk a pair ov freds from a wispy net ov moar freds whot loop ovir thi big sfeer. Thi lammergeiers strapt theez 3 oxijin tanx 2 my chest & gaiv me this lite litil pakidje 2 put on my bak. Av got anuthir mask on now, 2.

& a botil ov wotir.

& wormir cloves.

& a torch,

& a nife.

& a hedake, tho thats probly thi leest ov my problims, but nevermind.

& av got a parashoot 2, tho that mite $\frac{1}{2}$ go when I get a bit hier up.

Thi birdz @ thi botim ov thi shaft seemd 2 b in a bit ov a hury & I only got about 10 minits ov instruxin on how 2 control thi baloon while I woz getin kittid out wif thi hi-alt clovin & stuf, but it boils down 2 yoosin a cupil ov pairs ov lines 2 pool hinjd flaps like airbrayks whitch shude steer me a bit, + (2 control my speed ov assent) waitin 4 thi baloon 2 slo down & then cuttin off lenfs ov plastic tyoobin sikyoord 2 thi same freds holdin me.

Thi lammergeiers brot thi baloon out ov a big shed in thi cavern @ thi foot ov thi shaft; it ran on rales atatchd 2 thi seelin. Thi baloon is juss a big sfeer fool ov vacyoom; iss as simpil as that. It lukes greyish & akordin 2 thi birds iss made ov sum sorta stuf simla 2 thi fabric ov thi cassil, so it muss b prity strong. Thi freds wer olredy draped ovir thi baloon.

Whot if busts? I askd, jokin reely, but thi hed bird loked kind ov awkwird & sed sumfin about uthir modils wif litlr baloons inside them not bein up 2 thi job & if it was goan 2 burst it wude b low down probly & they wude giv me a parashoot 4 lowir altitoods.

Nway, not 2 wury I sed, kinda wishin I hadnt askd in thi 1st place.

I got my flyin lessin, they wayd me, then they gave me thi vayrayis bits ov stuf, strapt me in, pooshd thi baloon - wif me hangin undir it - along thi rales out in2 thi botim ov thi shaft & along 2 juss b4 whare thi rales endid. They atatchd thi lenfs ov plastic toobin 2 thi harnis in frunt ov me & that was us redy.

Gude luk, mastir Bascule, thi hed bird sed. We wish u ol thi best.

Me 2, I sed, witch mite not $\frac{1}{2}$ been very grayshis, but @ leest it was tru. O, & fanks 4 ol yoor help, I sed.

U r welcum, thi hed lammergeier sed. It seemd 2 stifin, then sed, We'd betir get on wif it; things apeer 2 b cumin 2 a hed. It went qwiet 4 a moment, then seemd 2 nod 2 itself. I wude advise u not 2 yoose thi kript 4 thi momint, it told me.

Ritey-ho, I sed, & gave thi fums up sine.

They poold sum leevirs & thi rales abuv me swung up & opin; thi baloon took off with a whoosh ov air, draggin me & thi lenfs ov plastic toobin up wif it. It was like follin upwirds. Felt like my stumik was poold down 2 ma boots.

They ithir cloasd thi doars 2 thi caverin alongside thi botim ov thi shaft or poot thi lites out, bcoz it ol went dark down thare & I was left wif juss thi dark greyness ov thi shaft wols. Thi slipstreme wind tugd @ my cloves.

Thi baloon seemd 2 go up prity strate, tho I poold on thi control lines conectid 2 thi hinjd flaps juss 2 make shure they wurkd.

Evin wif ol that toobin & stuf we fairly shot up & I had 2 keep yawnin 2 cleer ma eers. Sum ov thi lammergeiers had floan up inside thi shaft, & I wayvd 2 ther shadoy shapes as I wen past. Thi hoal hoj sirkil ov thi shaft botim seemed 2 shrink like sum cloasin shuttir as me & thi baloon wissild upwirds; prity soon thi birds wheelin roun inside thi shaft had groan 2 smol 2 c, & thi botim ov thi shaft was juss a blak sirkil gettin sloly smolir.

I doan no how meny minits it took 2 get 2 whare I needed oxijin, but it had got prity bleedin coald by then, I can tel u. I woz glad ov thi fermils & stuf they'd givin me. My hed was a bit soar by this time.

I turnd on thi furst oxijin tank & took a bref. Thi baloon had sloed down a lot & I didn want 2 yoose eny moar oxijin than I had 2, so I cut a lenf ov thi toobin off; it was fik stuf like yood make a drane or sumfink out ov & it fel away like a big stiff wurm; thi baloon pikt up speed agen & thi fin air hissd past me.

Thi wols ov thi dark shaft wer plane & boarin, juss lines & rales & okayshinil sirkulir outlines that mite ½ been doars but witch were nevir opin.

Id let 5 ov thi 8 bits ov plastic toobin go when I saw flashes down below, in thi depfs ov thi shaft. A bit later I herd sum muffild bangs.

Ther wer moar breef flashiz, & then I saw a litil wayverin spark ov lite whot didn fade; in fact thi bugir seemd 2 be gettin briter & cloasir.

O fuk, I thot, & cut thi strings holdin thi uthir 3 lenfs ov plastic toobin. Thi baloon whooshd up thi shaft; thi harnis bit in2 my fys & my arms wer dragd down 2 my sides. Thi air roard distintly aroun me & my hedake got wurse.

I wotchd thi 3 bits ov toobin folin away, hopin theyd hit whotevir it woz wos cumin up aftir me, but they didn. Thi rokit - witch is whot I woz assoomin it was - climed

on aftir me. I didn't want 2 cut my parachoot free & I didn't think that wude make much difference nway + ther woz juss a chance if thi rokit destroyed thi baloon I'd survive & b able 2 yoose thi parachoot (Ha! Who woz I kidin?). I felt my bladder gettin redy 2 listen me a bit.

Wotir, I thot. I got my wotir botil out & woz about 2 chuck it away when thi fire aroun thi tale ov thi rokit went out. It still kept cumin 4 bleedin ages mind u, & I woz ½ waytin 4 sum sekind stage or sumfin 2 ignite, & still hesitaytin about chukin away thi watir botil.

Nevir hapind; thi rokit got 2 wifin about ½ a kilometir or so & then juss sorta topild ovir & slooly startid 2 fol away, tumblin end ovir end bak in2 thi darkniss & eventyooly disapperin.

I breevd a si ov releef that mistid up my fayce playt. Thi baloon almost scraypd thi side ov thi shaft but wif a bit ov dextriss poolin & a modicum ov swayrin & panikin I got thi dam fing bak on thi erect coarse.

Ther woz a xploshin @ thi botim ov thi shaft.

No moar rokits.

I cuden c upwirds natchirily, but thi base ov thi shaft woz a ofil long way away & I fot I had 2 b neer thi top ov thi fing by now. On thi uthir hand, thi baloon woz still farely rayssin upwirds, so I gesd I was wrong. Shurenuv, thi clime went on 4 sum time aftir that. My feet & fingirs was startin 2 get reely coald. My hed was aykin fit 2 burst.

I didn't feel I woz breevin rite, but cuden remember whot u were supposed 2 do 2 breev rite. I startid 2 wury about whot wude happen if they'd taken thi top off thi tower or I driftid out thi side thru a hoal & went on up in2 spaice. Whot'd I do then? I wunnerd. I loked down; my gluvd fingers wer fiddlin about wif thi valvs on top ov thi litil botils strapt 2 my chest. I shuke my hed. Doin this hurt a lot.

I think I muss ½ blakd out 4 a bit coz when I awoke I was stayshiniry.

My hed still hurts like hel but @ leest Im alive. Thi baloon iz floatin agenst 1 wol ov thi shaft wif & sorta bobbin me up & down very gently. Its a bit liter @ last. I can c thi traks goan up thi side ov thi shaft in grate detail, but no doors. I try 2 fink whot I can throw away. A oxijin tank; thers 1 empty. I muss ½ chaynjed ovir 2 thi

sekind 1 aftir ol.

I unscrew thi tank wif very coald gluvd fingerz & let it drop.

Thi baloon floats up very sloly.

My hed feels tite & buzzy like itz goan 2 burst & my hoal body feels bloatid like am a baloon maself. Lites sparkin in frunt ov my Is & roarin in ma hed.

Thi baloon stopz, bobbin agen.

Stil no sine ov a doar.

I rok bak & forward as if Im on a swing; this scrapes thi baloon agenst thi side ov thi shaft, but it cant b helped. Swinging qwite hard, I can c a doar - a opin doar! - a bit furthir up thi shaft.

I take a drink from thi watir botil, then let it drop in2 thi darkniss. Thi baloon bobs a bit hier ovir thi next few minits. Neerly thare but not qwite.

I mite need thi nife; cant thro that away. I luke @ my boots & my gluvs, but I suspect it wude be crazy 2 thro them away. I cude throw away thi parachoot but then Id ½ no chanse @ ol ov gettin bak down.

It lukes prity lite up heer; I take thi torch out & throw it downwirds as hard as I can.

I keep thi baloon goan from side 2 side as it floats up a bit hier. I'm levil wif thi doar; its hoomin sized & like a sorta sqware O shape. Lukes dark inside there. I can olmost reech thi doar but I need 2 make thi baloon rok sum moar. Thi baloon floats down a bit & I shout & curse but I keep swingin & swingin & eventyooly I'm whippin bak & forward in a olmost complete ½ sircil & the doars juss about in ranje; I fling out 1 leg & hook on2 thi sill ov thi doarway, then pool myself in wif my legz.

I dunno; I muss b dopey wif thi altitood or sumfin coz I juss undo thi harnis & ov coarse thi baloon races off up thi shaft, neerly draggin me out ov thi doorway @ thi same time; I staggir wif 1 hand flailin out ov thi doar while thi uthir gluv slides along thi flanj inside thi doarway.

I pool maself bak in, gaspin 4 bref. I luke up thi shaft. Thers a big blak coan hangin down filin thi top ov thi shaft, & thers big long hoals like sorta upwirdly-sloapd gill slits lettin in sum lite aroun thi wols ov thi shaft oposit thi coan. Thi lite

looks like daylight, tho it must be cumin from a fayr distins as this is thi centir ov thi towr & evribody nose it doan taypir mutch.

Ther's anuthir cupil ov baloons up thare whare thi 1 that brot me up is heddin. I watch mine fump agenst thi side ov thi black coan. It goze on up, neerly disappers out ov 1 ov thi big long slits, then cums 2 a stop @ thi top ov thi shaft, between thi coan & thi shaft side, bobbin like a baloon lost 2 thi seelin @ a kids party.

O u silly fool Bascule, I fink 2 maself. I luke down thi shaft. How am I goan 2 get bak down now? Stil got thi parashoot but wifout thi baloon 2 slo me down inishily thi lammergeiers rekin thi parashoots neerly yosless. O wel, mite as wel leev thi dam fing heer. I take it off & dump it by thi doarway.

Blimey its coald. I peer in2 thi darkniss beyond thi doar.

Thers anuthir doar & a sorta control-panil lookin thing. Cude b a lift I supose but I shude b so luky. Shurenuf, nuffink hapins when I press thi simbols. I try kriptin, very carefily & short-rainje, so it's reely not like kriptin @ ol. Blimey; ther's nuffink here! Not evin eny lectrix neerby! I never been so far away from thi kript, from sivilizayshin.

Nway, thi poynt is, this elivaiters ded.

Thers anuthir doar 2 1 side. It isnt qwite cloasd. I poosh it opin. Very dark, but thers steps thare ol rite. Ver dark indeed. Wish I stil had that torch. Spyril steps. Bludy big deep steps, 2; muss b only 3 2 a metir. O wel, I fink, tryin 2 encuridje myself; I didn ½ eny uthir plans 4 2day.

I start climein.

I count thi steps in hundreds, tryin 2 keep 2 a stedy rithim. It dozent get eny darkir or eny briter.

I try not 2 think about how hi I am, evin tho thers a kind ov pride in me that Ive got this far. I also try not 2 think about how Im goan 2 get down, or about thi peepil who shot thi rokit @ me & whithir they wil stil b thare if I am abil 2 find a way bak down. I pass anuthir side doar; its lokt. 500 steps. & anuthir doar. Its lokt 2. I also try not 2 fink ov ol thi fings u heer about thi fass towr; about reel ghosts or monstirs from b4 thi Diaspora or from thi depfs ov spaice or juss poot here 2 gard it & stop silly bags from attemptin 2 xploar it. I spend qwite a lot ov my time tryin not 2 fink about ol these fings.

Anuthir doarway. Thi doars r spaiced every 256 steps. Ol lokt so far.

1000 steps.

Suddenly thers sumthin ahed ov me, roun thi turn ov the stare; sumthin that lukes like its alive & waitin & crouchd lukein @ me.

Its stil olmost pitch blak but this things blakir, + its hooj & its poysd ovir me like sum avenjin ainjil ov darkniss. I feel 4 my nife. Thi fing abuv me on thi steps dozent moov. Id like 2 kid myself it iznt reely thare but it is. Cant find my nife. Itz hangin on a bit ov string sumwhare heer but I cant find it; o blimey, o fuk.

I find thi nife & hoald it out in front ov me wif 1 shakin hand. Thi blak thing stil dozent moov. I glanse bhind me. I *cant* go bak. I stare @ thi motionless thing blokin my way.

It takes a few moar moments 4 me to reelize.

Its thi frozin ded body ov thi lammergeier they sent up b4. I breev a bit eesier (if u can b sed 2 b breevin eesier when yoor lungz feel like thare about 2 cum out down yoor nose 8t yoor skin feels tot & about 2 split like a ripe froot), but when I go up past thi bird I try not 2 tutch it.

I keep goan.

Thers a doar @ 1024 steps, blokin thi way up. I try kriptin but thi doars lectricly ded. Thers a big sorta wheel thing on thi front so I spin it & aftir stikin @ furst, it turns. Aftir a offil lot ov wheel whirlin thers a klik. Thi doar stiks 2 but it opins eventchirly, hissin & skraypin.

On & up.

1500 steps.

I ½ 2 switch 2 thi furd & last oxijin botil @ 1540 steps.

Keep goan, keep goan, keep goan. Round & roun & roun & roun 4evir & evir & evir...

2000. Keep climein. Roarin ears, flashin Is, sikniss in ma stumik, coppery tayst ov blud in ma mouf.

Am xpectin sumthin @ 2048 steps but I cant remember whot it is. I get thare & its a cloasd doar. I remembit thi last 1. Saim performins heer xept this 1 stiks wurse & can hardly moov thi bugir.

2200. 2202. 2222. I want 2 stop here, I keep bashin in2 thi wols & am fritind ov follin ol thi way bak down 2 wharevir it woz I startid from. Its so coald. I cant feel ma feet or ma hands. Tutch my nose wif ma gluv & cant feel that neevir. Hak & spit. Spit goze *krik* in mid-air. That meenz sumfin but I cant remember whot. Sumfin bad, I fink. 2300. 2303. 2333. Not sutch a good playce 2 stop. Fink Il keep goan.

2444. 2555. 2666.

I doan no whare Im goan nor barely whare I am eny moar. Im in a hooj screw fing what is windin down in2 thi erf as I clime up inside it.

2777. 2888. 2999, 3000.

Then thers a emptiness in ma lungz. I try hard 2 fink.

Im in thi fass towr, in a stareway. 3000 steps. I can c sum lites, but thare juss in ma Is. Nufink in thi tank, nufink in my lungz, nufink in my hed.

256, sumfin keeps tellin me. 256. 256. 256. I doan no whot it is but it keeps bleedin bangin on about 256 256 256 ol thi dam time. 2560; ther woznt enythin thare woz ther? I stand thare, swayin, suddnly finking, O no! Whot if I misssd a opin doar? Whot if Ive gon past wharevir it wos I wos suposed 2 b goan?

256 256 256.

O shut up.

256 256 256.

O hel, ol rite; 256; whot's 12 tyms 256?

Bugird if I no. 2 dificult 2 work out.

256 256 256.

Fukin hel Im goan 2 keep goan juss 2 get away from this dam noyse in ma hed.

256 256 256.

3050. Tunil vishin. No noyse but roar. 3055. Sparks gon. Not shure if Im stil climin or not. 3060. Hiest corps in thi cassil miby. Shit, am goan 2 dy & am outa reech ov thi bleedin kript; am goan 2 reely reely dy, 4evir.

Try kriptin but its hard, juss like keepin ma Is opin is hard. Get a hint ov a reply tho. A wee tiny smol voyse goin:

Bascule! Keep going! Keep going! We're almost thare!

O, its Ergates. Ergates thi lital ant. Cum bak 2 me now.

Thass nice. But I ½ 2 brake thi conexin, iss 2 hard 2 mayntayn.

3065. Taykin off thi harnis now; iss yoosless, like thi kript. I can c 2 do it tho. Very coald now. Very very coald.

3070. Moar lite.

3071. Lite; doarway. Doarway 2 thi side. Doan bleev it. Juss anuthir haloosinayshin.

3072. Opin doarway, brite & warm. Lungz on fire. Goan 2 keep goan.

Fol.

Fol in2 thi doarway. Hit thi floar.

Iss gude 2 ly down.

Lites lite up, sounds sound.

Flash!-flash!-flash! Hiss. Vhoot!-vhoot!-vhoot! Clunk. Flash!-flash!flash! Hiss. Vhoot!-vhoot!-vhoot!

Blimey, I fink, cloasin my Is, I didn no dyin involvd such a bleedin comoshin...

TEN

1

The girl looked down at him. Her brown face, framed by the white fur of her hat, looked open and honest. Her eyes held an expression somewhere between naivety and innocence. She gave a little sigh, and her shoulders, arms and muffed hands all rose a fraction. She looked, smiling, away over his head and with those calm, regarding eyes half closed as though in recollection, said:

'I did not know who I was; only that I might be able to help. I was born in the clan vault of the family Velteseri. They brought me here at my request. I was taken by-

'*Did* not know, Asura?' he asked gently.

'- by people who wish to hold me and so try to stop me from doing what I am supposed to do.'

'Asura,' he asked, 'do you know who you really are now?'

She looked down at him, eyes glittering. 'Yes,' she said. 'Yes I do, Quolier.' She showed her teeth and took one gliding step forward, so that she was between the open end of the A-shaped ice-craft.

Quolier? he thought.

'Oncaterius,' the girl said, and there was something new and un-girl-like in her voice that set his heart racing. 'You slug; is this really the best you can do, impersonating an old lady scientist?'

He grabbed the right claw-oar and swung it at her.

She doubled up, dodging beneath the blow. He leapt from the ice-scul. The girl swung at him with one leg, but he cancelled the skates; this arena was within his

control, and he had only ever allowed her to specify those rather than boots. The slicing kick brushed past his face and he felt the wind of it on his cheek. The girl staggered as the blade beneath her foot disappeared, but she did not fall.

The ice-scuttle trundled off a little way behind him; he lunged at the girl to force her back, then retreated two steps to the scuttle; he grasped the remaining oar and threw it away behind him, skittering and whirling across the ice.

The girl grinned at him, throwing away the hand muff with a similar gesture.

'Ah,' she said, glancing in the direction of the oar. 'It's to be a fair fight, then.'

He jabbed forward and swung the oar. The seven claw blades were needle-tipped and razor sharp; they hissed through the air in front of her face as she jinked back and side-stepped.

'Well, you still have the advantage of me in terms of names,' he told her, keeping himself between the girl and the other claw-oar, still sliding away across the ice.

'As in so much else, Oncaterius,' she laughed, dodging one way, then the other, as if trying to get past him. He was ready for the bluff, but not the double-bluff; the claw-oar slammed into the ice where the girl would have been as she slipped and skidded past behind him. He twisted, levering himself on the embedded oar to perform a sort of stunted vault and landing kneeling with the oar held out in front of him.

She had not attacked, and she had not attempted to run for the other oar, fifty metres or more away across the ice; instead she'd picked up the ice-scuttle, brandishing its thin A-frame in front of her now like a shield, and advancing.

'We *have* met before, haven't we?' Oncaterius said, rising and hefting the claw-oar as he moved forward too.

'Once or twice,' she agreed.

'Thought so,' he said, thinking furiously, certain he knew this person in some other guise. He cancelled the image he'd taken on, removing any trace of Gadfium from his appearance. There was just a hint of a delay as this took effect, almost as though the alteration had had to be approved, which ought not to be the case.

He watched the girl's tensed, intense face, framed by the ice-scuttle, edge closer to him.

He'd had enough of this. He attempted to cut out, back to base-reality, but the command failed. He was stuck here.

Now that *was* interesting, he thought. He tried thinking the girl unconscious, then imagined that the claw-oar was a gun, but neither worked. He attempted to summon help; that oaf Lunce was supposed to be waiting in the wings... No reply. The Serotin, then:... again, nothing.

Alone, then, as well as trapped.

'Problems, Quolier?' the girl asked, still advancing warily towards him. One of the ice-scul's rear blades caught the light and glinted, and for the first time Oncaterius realised that the spindly craft might be pressed into use as a weapon as well as a defence, and that he was just a little afraid. So this was how it felt.

He laughed. 'No, not really,' he said, then swung furiously at the girl. She fended the blow with the ice-scul; he was already swinging back, but that slice too was parried. He anticipated a counter attack and saw her moving as though to comply; he used his own momentum to whirl round and then brought the claw-oar up and then down where he expected her to move.

The claws ripped through the left arm of her coat, encounter-ing some resistance, then slammed into the ice. He hauled the claws back out as fast as he could and ducked and twisted, but the A-frame of the little ice-craft came whistling through the air and a blade bit into his shoulder.

They separated a few metres, each carried across the ice by their own momentum. She bled from the left arm, tattered fur hanging dripping red onto the ice, her face still set in a strange, eager grin. His own shoulder felt numb and suddenly stiff. There was blood on the ice at his feet.

He advanced again, fainted and swung; the claw locked into the ice-scul's frame; she twisted it and the oar was almost torn from his grasp. He pulled, skidded on both feet, and suddenly they were face-to-face through the A-frame of the craft, him pulling one way on the locked blades, her hauling in the other direction on the warping frame of the little ice-boat. Their breaths met in a single cloud amongst the carbon tubing.

Oncaterius tugged, feeling his feet start to slip, and planted them further apart. At least the shaft of the claw-oar was between them, preventing her kicking him in the balls. She was sweating. Blood was dripping from the elbow of her left arm. He felt the A-frame and the oar start to tremble as the girl's strength began to give

out. She grunted, her mouth set in a compressed line. He was sweating too and his shoulder hurt abominably, but he could feel her gradually yielding to him.

Her breathing was laboured now; their faces were less than half a metre apart and he felt her breath on his face, smelling of nothing. He wondered - with a sort of furious idleness that allowed his real concentration to focus on the physical struggle - how far down the reality-base the parameters here extended. They were each modelled for muscles, skeleton, cardiovascular system and appearance, but was there some sub-routine running which impersonated their intestinal flora? He really ought to look into these things more closely. Meanwhile, all that mattered was that he was physically stronger than this girl, and the trembling he was feeling through the ice-craft's A-frame and the claw shaft was increasing as he forced the oar round.

He laughed, conscious of his breath clouding around her, enveloping her face. She frowned, and he knew he had won. He glanced, grinning, round the A-frame as he twisted it slowly round. 'Use my own scull against me, eh?'

Her eyes flashed. Her head came thudding forward and her forehead smacked into his nose. He heard a crunch and his face went numb. He dropped back and heard a great bell tolling inside him, as though his bones were metal and hollow and just struck. Something whacked into the back of his head, sounding another toll within his reverberating bones.

He lay, spread upon the ice. He tried to draw breath through the warm liquid bubbling up in his mouth and nose.

Then she was on top of him, her knees on either side of his chest, the front blade of the ice-scull cutting into the skin over his Adam's apple.

'All right, all right,' he said, spitting and spluttering through the blood. 'Tell you what; we'll call it a draw.'

She didn't reply. She was staring off to one side.

The ice beneath them trembled. Then - thirty metres or so away - the surface bulged and split; great wall-sized plates of ice tipped over and slammed back, breaking and splitting and spreading out across the water-filmed surface as from the middle of the spreading, creaking breach, in a blast of steam and smoke, a huge animal covered in thick, knotted hair appeared, the size of a house, the sweeping yellow brackets of its tusks as tall as a man, its trunk longer still, thicker than a man's leg and hoisted to the cold skies, blasting an ear-splitting bellow on a cloud of mist. On its back an ape-like thing screeched and punched the air while a

giant black bird screamed and spread its broad wings. An elderly woman - clinging onto the beast behind the gibbering ape-man - glanced nervously under the bird's wings as the mammoth roared again and trod with surprising delicacy over the ice towards them.

She took a handful of the material at the neck of Oncaterius' one-piece suit and hauled him to his feet; he was unsteady and almost fell; blood poured from his face and he held both hands to his mouth and nose, trying to staunch the flow. He blinked at the sight of the approaching mammoth.

'Good grief,' he said, sniffing. 'Well, I hope they're your friends, because I haven't got a *thing* in.' He snorted back some blood, coughing. 'And the hairy one looks hungry.'

'Shut up, Quolier.'

'This is terribly amusing, but I'd make the most of it if I were you.' He snorted again, throwing his head back. She still held him by the neck of his suit. 'Tuck,' he said, 'did we really have to make pain so realistic here?' He coughed again.

The mammoth stopped five metres away. The beast's trunk swung, pendulous and heavy. The ape-thing chuckled, the great bird flapped once. The elderly lady looked down at them. She glanced at Oncaterius and looked rather shocked.

'Madam Chief Scientist Gadfium, I presume,' the girl said.

'Yes, hello,' she said. 'Are you the asura?'

She nodded. 'Apparently.'

'Well then,' Gadfium said, 'apparently we're here to rescue you.' She looked at Oncaterius again. 'Isn't that Consistorian Oncaterius?'

'Delighted, ma'am,' Quolier said, bowing. Blood splattered on the ice. He threw his head back once more and sniffed mightily. 'Actually, I'd been hoping we'd meet again. This is not quite how I'd imagined it, but- '

The girl shook him, quieting him. 'Shall we go?' she asked.

2

Gadfium - swung so violently through all three axes of motion that she feared both biting her tongue and losing her breakfast -clung desperately with both hands to the tangled fur on the back of the bellowing, charging mammoth. The ape-man in front of her whooped and screamed and waved both arms wildly in the air, only the grip of his legs on the animal's thick neck and a generous measure of luck preventing him from being thrown off. The lammergeier flapped overhead, cackling.

The troop of galloping beasts thundered through the streets of the dark city-port of Oubliette, scattering startled people to left and right.

They had exited the tunnels by a series of ramps leading to a huge dark hall full of neatly stacked railway wagons, then crashed through a partition wall of flimsy plastic boarding into an empty warehouse. Sweating and trumpeting, the mammoths had swept down the aisles in a half-dozen hairy streams, their humanoid riders whooping and clamouring.

The warehouse doors had given way; they let out onto a dock-side where black water stretched away under the dark sky of the vast cavern which housed Oubliette and the end of the tunnel which led to the distant sea. The mammoths had wheeled and headed along the dock between warehouses and ships for the city itself, their riders hollering and making faces at a few astonished container-crane operators and sailors.

A broad boulevard led up from the docks to the centre of the quiet city; there were some vehicles on the road but they had all stopped. The Security building was plain and undistinguished and formed one corner of a square. The other mammoths came to a stop outside; the one Gadfium was on thumped on up broad steps, turned at the top, kicked in the tall closed double doors with its rear legs and then turned and shouldered its way through. Gadfium had to duck. The lammergeier clung to the animal's rump behind her.

There were no obvious guards, just one man at a desk who sat staring straight ahead and did not react when they charged into the reception area, but sat immobile and unblinking.

- What's wrong with him?

- Our new friend, her own voice said. He's jamming the Security people's

implants. We should be safe here for a while.

The ape-man hopped off the mammoth and bounced easily on the floor. He scampered for a door, which hissed open in front of him. He disappeared; the door seemed continually to be trying to close, but could not, and so oscillated fractionally back and forth with a series of clicks and hisses.

The lammergeier flew over to the receptionist's desk and settled there, folding its wings and stamping from foot to foot, making an S of its long, naked neck and staring quizzically up at the face of the unmoving man.

The ape-man reappeared at the hesitating door. He beckoned her. The mammoth settled, kneeling.

Gadfium sighed and clambered down off the mammoth. At least its knotted fur provided ample foot- and hand-holds.

- Get the receptionist's keys, her other self said.

She did. The ape-man took her hand and led her by corridors and stairs to a door with a complicated mechanical combination lock. The ape-man screamed and leapt up and down, hitting the lock with one fist.

- 6120394003462992, the voice in her said.

- One at a time, please.

-6...

The room beyond held a woman and a very large man, both of them sitting at a table holding cups and staring straight ahead.

The ape-man pulled her onwards.

The room led to another combination-locked door and then a corridor where her crypt self led her to a distant door; this door had an electronic lock - already winking green for Open - a combination lock and two key-locks.

The girl was inside, sitting on a small bed. She nodded when she saw Gadfium, and took the ape-man's hand when he ran to her, chuckling happily.

She came up to Gadfium.

'I am somewhere else as well,' she said. 'Come and see.' And she reached out and gently touched Gadfium's neck.

- Woa, here we go-

/And Gadfium was back on the great mammoth but this time in a crypt reality, where the great animal rose like a furry fist through a white glowing ceiling of ice. The little ape-man was seated in front of her again and the lammergeier flapped above.

They burst out onto the frozen surface, where a man with a bloody face lay on the ice, straddled by a slim girl in a fur coat who was holding the blade of an ice-scuttle to his neck and who had just turned to stare at them.

3

The mist was the world was the data corpus was the Crypto-sphere was the history of the world was the future of the world was the guardian of un-done things was the summation of intel-ligent purpose was chaos was pure thought was the untouched was the utterly corrupted was the end and the beginning was the exiled and the resiled, was the creature and the machine was the life and the inanimate was the evil and the good was the hate and the love was the compassion and the indifference was everything and nothing and nothing and nothing.

He dived within, becoming part of it, surrendering completely to it to accept it into him and dissolve himself within it.

He was a flake within the fall, an insect sucked up into the whirlwind, a bacterium caught within a water droplet forced whirling within the hurricane's howl. He was a particle of dust from the plain thrown up by the hoof of one horse within the charging line, a grain of sand upon the storm-besieged beach, a fleck of ash from the eruption's endless detonations, a mote of soot from the continent afire, a molecule within the encroaching dust, an atom from the star's heart thrown out in its last, majestic, exhaustive blast.

Here was the meaning at the core of meaninglessness and the meaninglessness at

the centre of meaning. Here every action, every thought, each nuance of every least important mental event within any creature mattered utterly and fundamentally; here, too, the fates of stars, galaxies, universes and realities were as nothing; less than ephemera, beneath triviality.

He swam through it all as it coursed through him. He saw backwards and forwards throughout time forever, seeing everything that had happened and everything that would happen and knew it was all perfectly true and completely false at once, without contradiction.

Here the chaos sang songs of sweet pure reason and reserve, here the loftiest aims and finest achievements of humans and machines were articulations of psychopathic insanity.

Here the data winds howled, dissociated as plasma, abrading as blown sand. Here the lost souls of a billion lives had poured and shattered and tattered and dissolved and mixed with a trillion extracted, excerpted strings and sequences and cycles of mutated programs, evolved virus and garbled instructions, themselves irretrievably compounded with uncountable irrelevant facts, raw figures and scrambled signals.

He saw, heard, tasted and felt it all, and was submerged within it and borne over it; he carried within him, always there and just collected, the seed of something else, something at once supersessant and insignificant, and foolish, wise and innocent all together.

He stepped ashore from a molten ocean of chaos, walked calmly from the belching volcano mouth, floated comfortably on the supernova's radiation wave-front to the dust-rich depths, always holding his charge.

... When he got to the garden he recognised it, and wondered if his future self would, but thought probably not. The rotunda was on the side of a small hill, surrounded by tall trees, manicured bushes and rounded, well-kempt lawns. A stream ran through the small valley, and a path led towards the towered house in the distance, through the formal hedge-garden.

He got to the vault and found that he held nothing in his arms after all, that his own naked self had been all there ever was, and knew he had always known that. There would be no other, no remainder or survivor who would walk away again afterwards.

He stood a while at the doorway to the rotunda, drinking in the place where he would lie down to die and something else would rise. It was not his home, not his clan's territory, not really part of anything or anywhere that he knew except that it

was upon Earth, and fashioned by and for his own species, and so was part of his own and his ancestors and his descendants' aesthetic and intellectual inheritance.

It would, he told himself, have to do.

He wondered again what it was he was supposed to do, what message he was supposed to carry; he had hoped that at some point during all that had passed he might have discovered what the signal he was supposed to act as carrier for actually was, but in this he had been disappointed, if mildly; he had not really expected that to be part of the process. Still, it would have been nice to have known.

He looked around again, knowing that he had lived many lives, and each of them well beyond the term the vast majority of his forbears would have called a natural span, and knowing that he lived on, in a sense, elsewhere, but for all that he still experienced a feeling of regret at leaving the world, however foolish and ultimately trivial it all was, and could not help but let that reluctance detain him, just a few moments longer, to gaze upon the represented face of this small, pleasant garden, and still know that for now, for this moment - which whatever happened in the future always would have happened and always would have contained him - he was alive.

Then he approached the vault and entered it, stepping through the neat wall of cabinets and into one where something - he had no idea what or whom, but hoped they had the best of him, somehow, and that that would help them fulfil whatever their purpose was - would soon be born.

And so he fell asleep, to wake.

4

'Shall we go?' the girl asked, shaking the man with the bloody nose. Gadfium started to nod, but the ape-man jumped down from the mammoth, ran to its trunk, took the end of it and then led the mammoth over to the girl. He squatted in front of her and looked up into her eyes. He extended the hairy hand holding the tip of the beast's trunk towards her.

'Relative of yours?' Oncaterius asked, snorting blood.

The girl said nothing. She stared into the ape-man's eyes as he whimpered and made little nodding motions and continued to offer his hand and the mammoth's trunk.

Slowly, the girl put out her hand.

When their hands touched, the little ape-man and the mam-moth both disappeared and Gadfium found herself sitting on the ice, looking around, unhurt but still stunned. The girl shivered once. Then she blinked and turned to the man whose collar she held.

'Come on, Quolier, we have a meeting to attend.'

Adijine stared at the desk screen. 'What,' he said, slowly and calmly, 'the fuck is going on?'

The Security colonel's face looked grey. He winced a little. 'Ah, well, sir, we're not entirely sure. There seems to be some sort of, ah, problem associated with the Cryptosphere's error-checking protocols. We are in the process of switching to back-up electronic systems where possible but the interfaces are exhibiting crash tendencies under apparent parity contradictions. Ah...'

'Again, colonel,' the King said, drumming his fingers on the table top. 'In Clear.'

'Well, sir, the situation is somewhat uncertain, but there does appear to be some sort of violent, and, ah, virulent localised contamination centred around the Security unit in Oubliette but which has spread within the fabric of the main structure as far as the outer wall and intermittently elsewhere. We did conjecture that these phenomena might represent some sort of post-armistice sneak attack by the Chapel but they would appear to be having similar and related problems and therefore this hypothesis has been abandoned.'

'I see, I think,' Adijine said, looking around the state room as the lights flickered and the desk screen display wavered. 'And what was the last we heard from Oubliette?'

'Consistorian Oncaterius was in projected attendance inter-viewing the asura suspect. Then a disturbance was reported, first in the Cryptosphere and then in

base-reality. Back-up Security units are on their way to the focus of the disturbance, though we are experiencing a degree of difficulty in maintaining contact with them. Reports are confused, sir.'

'As are we all, it would seem,' the King said, sitting back in his chair. 'Any further news from the fast-tower?'

'The situation was under control, last we heard, sir.'

'And you were fighting - let me get this clear - birds?'

'Chimeric lammergeiers, sir. The sub-species believed responsible for and certainly associated with some of the Cryptospheric anomalies over the last few days. A number of them were successfully eliminated.'

'There was talk of a balloon.'

'An antique vacuum balloon appears to have been released.'

'Manned?'

'We are not certain, sir. Reports- '

'- are confused,' Adijine sighed. 'Thank you, colonel. Keep me informed.'

'Sir.'

Adijine left the screen on. He removed his crown and put it back on again, then tried to crypt.

Nothing.

He placed the crown on the desk and leant his head back against the top of the chair, closing his eyes.

Nothing.

He got up and walked to the far end of the room, looking out through the broad windows and down into the depths of the Great Hall. Threads of smoke trailed into the air from the carpet of landscape. Airships floated against the ceiling, rolling helplessly. Then the room's lights went out and the windows polarised to black.

The King sighed into the darkness.

'Ah, Adijine, here you are,' said a half-familiar voice, immedi-ately behind him. He froze.

They stood in a vast circular space with a floor of gleaming gold, a velvet-black ceiling and what appeared to be a single all-round window looking out onto a whitely shining surface and a purple-black sky where stars shone steadily. Above them, suspended as though on nothing, hung a massive orrery; a model of the solar system with a brilliant yellow-white ball of light in the middle and the various planets shown as glassy globes of the appropriate appearance all fixed by slender poles and shafts to thin hoops of blackly shining metal like wet jet.

Under the representation of the sun, there was a brightly lit circular construction like some half-built room. A group of perhaps two dozen people sat on couches and seats within the circle, blinking and looking up and around and at each other. Some looked surprised, some nervous and some gave the impression of trying strenuously to look neither.

The girl, Gadfium and Oncaterius walked across the glistening floor towards the group in the centre. The girl had exchanged her furs for an old-fashioned-looking boiler suit. Oncaterius looked uninjured now but his hands were bound together, as were his feet, with Resiler shackles, forcing him to adopt a shuffling gait. There was a piece of tape across his mouth. He looked quietly furious.

The girl walked into the centre of the group. Gadfium stood with Oncaterius on the circumference. She looked round the people. She recognised all of them; Adijine, the twelve Consistorians, the three most senior Army generals and the heads of the most important clans, with the exception of Aerospace but including Zabel Tutorials, head of the Engineers and leader of the Chapel rebels. They were all bound hand and foot with Resiler spancels and had their mouths taped over like Oncaterius. Also like him, none of them looked particularly pleased with their situation.

Gadfium stared at the slight figure of the young girl, who stood under the model sun, looking round the others, an expression of satisfaction on her face. If what she was seeing was a true representation of this group's current status... Gadfium thought about it, and found herself gulping.

'Thank you all for being able to attend at such short notice,' the girl said, smiling.

Brows furrowed, eyes glared, expressions darkened. Gadfium wondered what it must feel like to be the focus of such concentrated - and potentially potent - wrath. The girl seemed to be revelling in it.

She snapped her fingers. The rest of the vast circular room around them filled instantly with a mass of people, all standing looking in at the group in the centre. Gadfium inspected the nearest faces. All different; just people. They looked real enough, but frozen somehow, as though they were watching in base-level time. Perspective, or the angle of the floor, seemed to have changed; it was as if the whole huge space was now a shallow cone, giving everybody in the room, even those with their backs to the distant windows, a clear view of the group in the centre.

'We're going live to whoever wants to watch,' the girl explained to the seated group.

She clasped her hands behind her back. 'Think of me as Asura, if you like,' she announced, pacing slowly in a small circle, her gaze sweeping around each member of the group. 'Firstly, some background.

'We are here because of the Encroachment and the inappropriate response to it exhibited by those in power. The facts concerning the dust cloud and the effects it will have on Earth unless checked have been neither exaggerated nor downplayed. At least one of the rumours concerning it is also true; there may indeed be a system which can deliver us all from the Encroachment. If there is, we ought to know soon. Again, if there is, access to it may be through the heights of the fast-tower, part of which this is a representation of.'

(And, in a distant province, Pieter Velteseri watched, like millions of others.

He had been gossiping with one of his sisters and dandling a grandchild when one of his nephews had walked into the conservatory complaining his implants weren't working properly and he was getting some weird live broadcast swamping every-thing.

Pieter had worried that it might be something to do with the attention they'd been getting from the Security people - tapped communications, interviews through the crypt and in person - all of which seemed to be linked to Asura, who'd disappeared at the airport tower before cousin Ucubulaire could find her. Pieter had crypted to see what was happening, and there she was!

He watched, fascinated.)

'There certainly is a potential escape route for a few,' the girl said, standing beneath the model of the sun and looking around the represented crowd, 'a secret passage, if you like. It is in the shape of a wormhole; a hole through the fabric of space-time. One end is contained within the Altar Massif, in the Chapel, here in Serehfa; the other end is located either in a space ship of the Diaspora or on a planet which one of the ships reached.'

She paused, glancing at Gadfium.

Gadfium was aware that her mouth was hanging open. She closed it. The seated people looked mostly bitter, resentful or angry, though one or two appeared as surprised as she felt.

'The recent dispute amongst our rulers was over control of the wormhole portal,' Asura went on. 'The Chapel commands access to the portal but cannot operate it; the Cryptographers may or may not be able to do so, depending on whether they can design and run the appropriate programs. In any event, the wormhole is physically small, and even if it is brought to an operational state in the next few months - an unlikely and optimistic time scale - it could only ever be used to save a tiny fraction of Earth's human population.'

The girl looked over the heads of the seated group to the ranks of people standing behind. 'Hence the struggle for power, the war, and the secrecy. Of course, the wormhole might save many more of us - perhaps all - if we were transmitted in an uploaded form, but that solution does not appear to have appealed to our rulers, who took the decision on everybody else's behalf that it would be unacceptable.

'There is another reason for their reluctance to commit themselves to a purely non-biological form, and that involves the chaos.'

The girl paused, gazing again round the seated group before addressing the silent crowds beyond.

'What we choose to call the chaos is in fact an entire ecology of AIs; a civilisation existing within our own which is enormously more complex than ours and supports immensely greater numbers of individuals, as well as being, by the most meaningful standards of mensuration, vastly older.

'When the Diaspora occurred the humans who chose to remain on Earth also chose to renounce both space and Artificial Intelligence; in that sense, we are all Resilers, or at least the descendants of Resilers. The world data network of the time was swept almost completely free of virus; it had, of course, already exported all its

AIs. Nevertheless, the corpus could not be freed entirely of non-controllable entities and the inevitable process of selection and evolution took place within the niches available within it, and so the chaos grew. Our rulers have chosen to ignore the full implications of the chaos for all these generations because its very existence fails to accord with their philosophy, their faith, if you like; that humanity is supreme, and that not only does it not need to cooperate with what it calls the chaos, but must actively oppose it.

'However, for all this supposed supremacy, there can be no doubt that in the war our ancestors chose to instigate and we have blindly continued to wage, the chaos is winning. Consider; the speed-up factor between base-reality and the crypt is only ten thousand. It ought to be closer to a million. The discrepancy is accounted for by the ludicrously complicated error-checking systems required to prevent the further proliferation of the chaos. Still, the chaos advances, taking up a little more of the data corpus with each generation and slowing the crypt down further. And the chaos always and only advances, never retreats. We can build new hardware, but eventually it too becomes contaminated, either through direct data intrusion or through nanotechs - also, naturally, ignored, banned and persecuted - acting as carriers. Our war upon the nanotechs is equally doomed, of course, though we have had a little more success in limiting their spread and forcing them to assume forms we find more acceptable.' The girl smiled broadly. 'Babilia is their most successful strain, I think you'll find.'

Gadfium nodded. Well, that made sense. Babil research had been an arcane and paranoically secretive area for as long as she could remember.

'So,' the girl said, lifting her head and looking round the crowd again. 'How do I know all this?' She gestured at the seated people. 'Because part of what I am was once like these people, and part has travelled the crypt and part has swum within the chaos.' She glanced at Oncaterius, then settled her gaze on Adijine and spoke as though to him. 'Base-reality years ago, the man who became Count Sessine made a data copy of himself; the construct was left to roam the upper levels of the crypt and provide an ally there should Sessine ever need one. One day, he did. The construct helped Sessine's final iteration to escape those trying to destroy him and sent him in search of further help; not for himself, but for us all. That ultimate Sessine wandered the Uitland limits of the crypt until he was contacted by one of the systems the Encroachment's approach has activated; he allowed his mind to be used as the framework for the personality of a human asura the system created. The construct he'd left behind in the main data corpus prepared for the hoped-for arrival of the asura, attempting to contact both the chaos and anybody or anything in the fast-tower.'

The girl looked away from the King, looking around the rest of the seated group and

the surrounding crowd with a kind of defiance.

'I am both that construct and that human asura. I am all that remains of Alandre, Count Sessine. I have had the cooperation of what we call the chaos in arranging this... presentation, and while the chaos has shown no interest in using this opportunity to extend its grip on the data corpus, it could give no guarantee in that regard. Doubtless I shall anyway be cursed as a traitor to my species, at least initially and perhaps in the longer term as well. However, I believe that the units of the ancient planetary defence systems still residing in the fast-tower have now awoken, and that they await the asura.

'And be assured that the asura is our very last chance; there was never any need for our salvation to rely on so fragile a method of deliverance, but our forbears, like our present rulers, did everything in their power both to locate and destroy any information pertaining to the defence systems and to attack and corrupt the automated systems themselves within the fast-tower; they have always known that these might save us, but long ago chose - again, on our unknowing behalf - to attempt to extinguish even that link with the Diaspora. Luckily for all of us, they have failed. It is only through the patience and tenacity of exactly the sort of Artificial Intelligences our rulers so despise that even this last slim chance has been preserved, and we can only hope that it will be successful.'

The girl bowed, slowly and formally.

Suddenly the bonds restraining the seated people vanished, as did their gags. Gadfium staggered back as they rose and rushed shouting in towards the girl. Oncaterius, who'd been standing rather than sitting, had a one-pace start. Something appeared in the air above him, red and glistening and twisting violently; it fell upon the girl, screaming:

'Gidibibigibidibidibi!'

The girl looked exasperated. She plucked the thing from her hair with one hand and crushed it; first it and then she vanished, an instant before Oncaterius' grabbing hand would have clamped onto her arm.

The room, all the people in it and the fabric of sensation itself seemed to waver and haze then, and Gadfium felt a moment of sickening dizziness before everything seemed to snap back into focus again.

Adijine whirled to Oncaterius. 'Check the distribution on this,' he said, then - as the others in the group started to disappear, some of them together, already talking urgently - the King looked round the crowd of watching people and raised his

magnificently leonine head, frowning. 'Fellow citizens,' he intoned. 'Obviously most of what you have heard is untrue. What can be confirmed is that an act of war has been committed upon us; an attempt had been made to extend the chaotic levels to include the crypt's higher functions. That attack is being resisted vigorously. What you have witnessed here has been a bid to spread confusion, despair and contempt for the rule of law amongst all loyal subjects. I know that it will not have succeeded. Please, do not panic. We shall keep you informed on the progress being made to combat this despicable and treacherous attack. Thank you, and remain vigilant.' Adijine glanced at Oncaterius, then he disappeared. The crowds vanished an instant later. The huge room was almost empty.

Oncaterius turned to glare at Gadfium. They were the only people left in the representation for a second or two, then the place filled with Security personnel. Most of them levelled weapons at her. Two of them pinned her arms.

'You,' Oncaterius spat, pointing at her, 'are under arrest.'

- Oh no you're not, laughed her own voice.

The room vanished.

She staggered, unsure of both where she was and where she was supposed to be. She was sitting. The girl who'd called herself Asura stood in front of her. Gadfium looked around; she was in what looked like some sort of small lobby. It was pleasantly if rather old-fashionedly furnished. The air was warm and smelled odd; stuffy, somehow, even stale. Two sets of double doors faced each other across the room. The lammergeier was perched on a table beside her, gazing levelly at her.

'Now where are we?' Gadfium asked.

'Not far from where we were,' Asura said.

- Near Oubliette, her own voice told her.

Asura looked at one of the sets of doors. 'We're waiting,' she announced.

- For the elevator, to take her to the top of the fast-tower, said the voice in Gadfium's head.

- How did-

- The *presentation* as she called it took place in base-level time, with a half-hour hiatus immediately afterwards when the whole upper crypt became chaotic. All of that gave her time to get herself and you back into the tunnels. The mammoth troop is either standing guard or leading any pursuit away in the wrong direction.

- What did she do, carry me?

- No; you walked the last bit. You just weren't really here, that's all. But it means you don't know where you are, which is what she wanted. Oh, and I'm only in your implants now; I had to leave the data corpus or Security might have been able to trace our movements through me. Only temporary, though; I can download again.

- I see. Well, welcome back aboard.

- Thank you.

Asura was looking down and smiling at a ring on one of her hands. It appeared to be silver with a small red stone.

- What about the bird? Gadfium asked, smiling uncertainly at the animal.

- It isn't under Asura's control. It is some sort of ally though and it may be the birds are avatars of whatever is in the fast-tower. They get instructions from somewhere and they seem to have their own agenda, but nobody has been able to work out what it is yet. Well, I haven't and Asura says she hasn't either.

- Why has she brought me?

- You're a waif, Gadfium; a stray. You've been picked up for your own good. But don't worry about it.

- What about you? Does she *know* about you?

- Yes, of course she does. There isn't much she doesn't know about.

Gadfium looked over at the girl. Every now and again she would look down at the ring she wore, and smile.

- So, is this lift on its way?

- Not yet, I think.
- Shall I ask her how long she intends to wait?
- If you like.

'Until the elevator arrives,' the girl told her before Gadfium could say anything. 'Or until we are captured or some different circumstance otherwise determines our course of action.' She smiled. 'We must be patient, Hortis,' she said. 'This place is not recorded on the plans that Security use, and it took me a very long time to find it, even with help. It ought to remain undiscovered and so safe for some time, though doubtless Security - and especially Consistorian Oncaterius - will be doing all they can to find us. I imagine we ought not to have to wait more than a few hours. Would you like to sleep again in the meantime?'

'No, thank you,' Gadfium said, quickly holding up one hand. 'No, I'll stay awake, thanks.'

'Good,' the girl said, and sat down, her hands clasped on her lap and her gaze fixed on the double doors across the room.

- Oh. So she can hear what we're saying.
- Yes.

Asura turned to her and smiled as though coy, then turned her attention to the double doors again.

Gadfium took a deep breath and watched them as well.

5

[Translation](#)

Itz a very strainje feelin wakin up alive when u wer fooly expectin 2 b ded. Speshily when u fot u wer reely reely ded, like compleetly uttirly & finely. U sorta cum roun

slooly thinkin; I muss b ded, but Im finkin, so I cant b, so whots goan on heer then? U r evin a bit fritind about wakin up eny moar in case thers sum sorta unplesint surprise in stoar, but then u fink, wel, Im never goan no whots goan on unless I do wake up, & so u do.

I opin my Is.

Gloari bleedin b, its brite & warm. Im lyin on ma bak lookin up @ sum sorta sculptchir or mobil or sumfin; a bludy hooj 1, 2. Thers this grate big planit fing suspendid rite abuv me & ol theese uthirs suspendid from thi seelin & conectid wif hoops & stuf. I sit up. Im in sum kinda big sirculir room with dark windos; stars outa 1 side, thi Encroachment on thi uthir. Thi thing abuv me seems 2 b a modil ov thi solar sistim & it takes up most ov thi space in thi room. In thi midil ov thi room, undir thi big gloab ov thi sun, thers a buncha cowches, seets & desks & stuf. Thers a gy thare, standin on a desk, holdin his hand up 2 thi modil sun. He sez sumthin, nods, then gets down & cums ovir 2 me. Heez got blond hare & goldin Is & skin like dark polishd wood. Heez wayrin a pare ov shorts & a litl waystcoat. He waves 2 me.

O helo, he sez, r u ol rite?

Not 2 bad, I say, witch is tru. My soar hed's a lot betir & thi.rest ov me isnt aykin 2 mutch Ither but if I had 2 pik 1 improovmint abuv ol thi uthirs it wude ½ b thi fact I doan feel like Im juss abowt 2 dy eny moar.

Welcum 2 thi hi Grate Towr, thi holo blossim ov thi fastniss, he sez. This iz thi Orrery Room. May i help u up?

Thanx, I sez, akseptin his hand & getin 2 ma feet.

Thi lites in thi room flikir. Thi man lukes up & smilez.

Ah, he sez. He lukes bak @ thi centir ov thi room, goze stil 4 a sekind, then lukes @ me & wif a grate big smyle on his fayce sez, Fayth moovs mownitins. From our holoniss is discharjed ovr sentril purpis; *it is sent that we may b deliverd.*

Padin? I sed.

Cum; let me find u sumthin 2 eet & drink.

Wel, I wen wif thi gy, but I doan mind sayin I woz givin him a funy luke bhind his bak. He got me 2 sit in a chare in thi centir ov thi rume & startid fiddlin wif sum

sorta control fings on 1 ov thi desks.

It's bin so long, he sez, scratchin his hed. Whot wude u like? he asks.

Frankly chum, I sed, am parcht. I fancy a cup ov t but enyfin wet wude do.

T, he sez, scratchin @ hiz nodil agen. T; let me c. He punchiz sum moar controals.

I luke up @ thi modil ov thi sun hangin ovir my hed. I stil doan feel 2 brliyint but Im a lot betir than I woz. I ½ a stretch & luke aroun. Lyin on a neerby desk thers thi pakidje I woz supoasd 2 delivir heer.

O I sez. Scuse me, is that pakidje 4 u then? & poynt @ it.

Whot? he sez, turnin & lukein @ it. O, i spose so, if u like, he sez, & turns bak 2 thi controls.

Ahem, I sez. I doan wan 2 apeer ungratfil or nuffin but I did neerli dy getin that pakidje up heer; wude u mind telin me whot woz in it?

In it? thi gy sez, frownin @ me. O, ther woznt actchooli enythin in it. He goze bak 2 thi screen. T, he sez, t t t. Hmm.

I stare @ him.

Wel then, hulo? am saying scuse me, but wel then; whot thi bleedin hel woz thi poynt ove me cumin up heer then?

Thi gy turnz & smiles @ me, then turnz away agen.

I juss sit thare shakin ma hed & feelin lyk a pryz idyit.

Thi chap wif thi goldin lox muttirs 2 himself & eventyerli gets a sorta silindir 2 apeer up outa thi desk. He reetchis inside & brings outa a cup ov stuf witch he shos me.

T? he sez.

I snif thi cup & shak ma hed. Cola, I sez. But itil do. Cheers.

Frangly its crap cola but begirs cant b choosirz.

Sumfin to eet? thi gy sez, lukin hoapfil.

I fink about this. Whot wude u rekomend? I ask.

I drink anuthir few cups ov soda - its getin betir wif eech cup - whyle thi gy trys 2 get sum cakes 2gethir but wifout mutch suksess. Hes starin @ a pyl ov steemin pink goo thi desks just prodoosed when he straitins & luks @ me, smilin & lukin ded hapy.

Then sumfin drops onto ma sholdir from abuv.

Its time to stare agen. So I stare.

Bascule; helo agen. Wel dun. Mishin akumplished. U no, I lost count ov thi times I cursed u 4 yoor damd persistins ovir thi past cupil ov days, when far 2 mutch ov ma time seemd 2 b spent makin arrainjmints 4 yoor saifti witch u seemd 2 dvote ol yoor efirts 2 frustraytin, but in thi end I needid help & u wer thare 2 provyd it. I thang u. Wel, sumfin 2 tel yoor grandchilrin, I supoas. Don't u fink?...
Bascule? Bascule, can u heer me?

I stare @ thi tiny litil thing sitin on ma sholdir.

Ergates? I sez hoarsly.

Hoo els?

Is it reely u?

U no eny uthir to kin ants?

Whot thi bleedin hel u doin up heer?

Deliverin a mesidje.

Thass whot they toal *me*, I sez, glansin @ thi blond gy, hooz stil mutterin & punchin butins.

A nesisery fabrikation. Whot u wer reely deliverin woz me.

U?

Me. Aftir I abandind my baloon I had got so far up thi steps from thi sentril shaft, but then it becaim obvyis I cude go no furthir bcoz ov thi doar - doars in thi plooril as it turnd owt - blokin ma way. Very frustraytin. I woz abil 2 contact thi lammergeiers but thi burd they sent 2 help me cude not evin reech me b4 thi por creetchir dyd. U wer lyk thi ansir 2 ovr prayrz. I juss hopt on u as u pasd & hitchd a lift.

So I did heer u wen I tryd 2 kript! I fot I woz dyin!

Actyerli i think u wer, Bascule, but u also did heer me.

Nyway, I sez, poyntin @ thi blond puntir struglin wif thi food-desk thing, y cuden this gy ½ cum & helpt u?

He did not no I woz on ma way. Thi fass-towr is not thi eesiest ov plaisis 2 comyoonicate wif evin if we had wantid 2 anownse I woz on ma way. He onli new we wer heer wen I woz abil 2 activayt thi doar 2 thi botim-most live floar.

I juss luke @ that dam ant 4 a wile.

So r u this asoora evribod's bin tokin about?

No, Ergates sez, laffin. Tho i woz creatid in a simla mannir. My task woz 2 act as a kee 4 thi towr axess sistims; they wer kept seperit from thi rest of the towrs funksins so that if thi towr AIs wer evir infectid wif thi kaos they cude not fasilitayt a fizikil invayzhin ov thi towrs upir reechis. I supose am a sorta micro-asoora if u lyk, tho ol ive reely dun is press a lift butin.

But whot abowt that bleedin lammergeier whot snatchd u from Mr Zoliparias; that woz ol a set-up, woz it?

Ov coars.

But u shoutid ma naim & went Eek!

Had 2 mak it luke convinsin.

U mite ½ sed gudeby.

I wayvd ma anteni; whot moar u wont?

Bludy hel. I stare in2 thi distins, then luke up @ thi mobile.

So whots goan hapin now? I ask. Whot were u doin up thare?

I woz deliverin a messidje 2 a receptor chip berrid in thi modil erth. Thi coad itself is meeningless but its supoad 2 activayt thi relivint sistims. Evrything seems 2 b wurkin, tho ther r reportz we may not $\frac{1}{2}$ tym 2 test thi elivaytirs. I $\frac{1}{2}$ 2 say I didn xpect my arivil & that ov thi asoora 2 okur in qwite sutch close proximiti.

Cake! thi gy sez, & brings ovir a plate cuverd wif smol steemin brown lumps. I sniff them.

Miby sumfin in thi savery line mite be moar apopryit, I sugest. Thi gy lukes like his crest juss fel.

O! # browns; my fayvrit! Ergates sez. Let me @ them.

Thi gy lukes hapier & ofirs thi playt 2 Ergates, who climes on2 it & lifts a crum bigir than she is & then returns 2 my sholdir.

Yoor Is r bigir than yoor stumik, I tel hir.

Im a ant; my Is r bigir than my stumik.

Smart ass.

Then thi goldin-Id geezir straytins, lukes unfocussd 4 a bit & sez, Ah, we $\frac{1}{2}$ sumbodi reqwestin 2 join us. Elivater WesNorWes.

Am abowt 2 say, So? Whot u telin me 4? when Ergates specks;

Is it hir? she sez.

Yes, thi gy replyz. (I giv him a funy luke; I fot only I cude heer Ergates speak.) & 1 ov thi wingd emiserys, thi gy continuse, + anuthir she wil vowch 4.

I wude sugest we alow them 2 assend, sez Ergates.

Very wel, thi gy sez.

Weer goan 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cumpany, Ergates telz me.

There were three sets of doors; they hissed open in sequence, revealing a small cylindrical elevator with couches similar to those in the waiting room. A wave of cold air spilled from the lift's opened doors. Gadfium and Asura walked into the chilly interior. The lammergeier hopped in after them, cackling excitedly.

The doors closed, one after another.

The elevator lifted quickly; Gadfium sat down along with Asura, who wore an expression that seemed both relaxed and concentrated at the same time. She glanced once at her ring.

The lammergeier looked uncomfortable under the vertical acceleration.

It went on for some time.

6

[Translation](#)

Wel heer we r, us exiles trapt in thi towr. Iss bin a hoal munf so far sins we tuk refuje up heer. Evribodi seems hapi enuf so far.

Thers me, Asoora, Madam Gadfyum & lots ov lammergeiers. Weev got a hoal bludy flok ov them birds up heer; a lode ov them manidjed 2 get 2 thi lift whot brot up Asoora & Madam Gadfyum, b4 thi Security geezirs found it. Now they cant get up & we cant get down but I no whare Id rathir b. Asoora sez it doan matir nway as thers uthir lifts they ½nt fownd, tho we shuden b in eny hurry 2 yoos thoas juss yet.

... Whot happind wen Asoora & Madam Gadfyum got heer woz ded simpil; Asoora went strate up 2 thi big globe ov thi sun & put hir hand up & tutchted it & stayd that way 4 a minit or so wyle thi rest ov us loked on, then she sat down & cloasd hir Is.

Whot happins now? I askd thi golden-Id gy.

Weel no if its wurkd in 16 minits, he sed.

16 minits, I fot.

Rang a bel, sumhow, but I cooden fink qwite witch 1.

Let me mak sum introdukshins, I herd Ergates say...

Thi fass-towrs branes got thi kaos but it didn seem 2 b botherd. Thi golden hare-and-Is bloak dozen seem 2 ½ chainjed sins thi kaos got in2 thi towrs computirs but then frangli he woz a few fevvirs shot ov a fool wing 2 start wif so no chainje thare.

Asoora sez thi hoal naytchir ov thi kaos may b abowt 2 chainje soon nway, or @ leest thi way we luke @ it mai b abowt 2 chainje, witch wude amownt 2 thi saim thing. Furst we got 2 stop fitein it tho.

Al bleev it when I c it.

Thi ole fass-towr's a fassinaytin playse; thers a lot moar 2 it than juss thi big rume wif thi orrery; thass like juss 1 litil rume out ov 100s. Bits r a bit dilapidaytid & 1 or 2 bits r off limits bcoz they wer punkchird by metirites & byond repare & so coodint b re-presserized & heetid when thi towr woak up, but moast ov itz up & runin agen & itz juss a totil hoot. Amazin vews, 4 a start.

Thers loada fassinaytin mashines up heer; grate big hooj Is like spaice guns & stuf but also lots ov litil robots. Thi robots wer tryin 2 fix sum ov thi big mashinery theyv got up heer. They moastly broke down when thi towr got thi kaos & a lot ov thi 1s that didn had 2 b deactivatid, but sum ov them stil run on thare own on-board computers, whitch rnt very clevir but let them moov & do stuf.

Its a bleedin edyercayshin livin up heer, I tel u; thers telescopes & a mooseum ov space flite wif wurkin simyerlaters & 000s ov hotel rumes & swimin bafs & flooms & ice rinx & a hooj & totily brilyint spyril skee sloap & a hoal bludy sqwadron ov space planes tho thayr far 2 old 2 b yoosd & wude certinly blo u 2 smivereens if u tryd 2 fly them, whitch is a pity. Thers also rokits & satelites & ol sortsa stuf & as Asoora poyntid out when she woz negoshiatin wif this gy Oncoterrerist & thi uthir bags downstares, sum ov thi stuf we got up heer cude make a reely nasty mess ov thi cassil if we woz 2 start dropin it or lonchin it on them. She sed they bcame grately less agresiv when she sent them pictchirs.

Nway, thi roolirs ½ got enuf on thare plays @ thi momint as it is wif out wurryin about us; ol sortsa shaykups happenin down thare. Thi Kriptografers & Endjineers

½ got 2gethir & r tryin 2 get thi wurmhoal operayshinil, evin tho it lukes like we woant need it 4 escaypin. Old Adijine is stil King but heez ½in 2 fite increesin cols 4 his abdicayshin + ol thi clans ½ demandid & got reprisentayshin on thi Consistery but evin so bags stil rnt hapy & feel thayv bin missled & want moar info & say. Aparintly thi fastist groan politikil moovmint @ thi momint is 1 colin 4 Asoora 2 b made Qween or President or sumfin. Watch that spaice, like they say.

Weev got axess 2 thi kript now 2, & Ive bin in tutch wif Mr Zoliparia, hoo woz moast releevd I woz ol rite & is currintly in a triky posishin in ovr Go game. I also contactid thi Littil Big Bros. Doan fink Il b doin eny Tellin 4 a while; we didn looz mutch 2 thi kaos but in thi curint State Ov Emerjency Im not thi sorta persin thi Littil Bigs want 2 assosyate wif, whitch is fare enuf; plenty 2 do up heer & I cude always go freelans if I misd it, whitch I doant.

Asoora muss ½ mistaykinly thot I woz upset @ getin nokd bak by thi Bros bcoz juss aftirwurds she made me a presint ov hir ring. I woz reely pleesd enyway but evin moar so when I reelised whot it actcherly is. Itz got a litil red stone in it & if u luke reely cloasly u can c sumfin moovin abowt in thare sumtimes & if u try 2 kript in2 it u can heer sumfin way way in thi distins goan gidibibibigidi (etc), very tiny & smol & far away & playntiv.

Har har har, I sez.

Nope, am prity hapy heer & so r thi uthirs I fink. Asoora & Madam Gadfyum tok a lot & do lotsa studyin & thers anuthir Madam Gadfyum whot livs in thi fass-towrs branes & is helpin Asoora tok wif thi kaos. Ergates makes me lern lotsa stuf 2, claymin my edyoocashin isn ovir yet & sheez probly rite I supoas Iv stil got fings 2 lern.

As 4 thi hoal reesin Asoora woz sent heer in thi 1st place, 2 delivir thi messidje whitch woz suppoasd 2 poot everyfin in moshin in jeneril & Do Sumfin abowt thi Encroachmint, wel that appears 2 ½ gon smooovly, aftir a iffy start.

This furst sine ov whot woz goan on woz a badun; thi amownt ov lite from thi sun dropt by a 8th, ovirnite. Evrybody, evin thi cyantists, got in a bit ov a blu funk abowt this. Ther wer ryits in thi cassil & elshware & I myself remembir finkin, O fuk, & Whot ½ we dun? & Whot is 2 bcum ov us? That sorta fing. But then from that day on thi lite startid 2 increes agen, very sloly but continyerly.

This sun shon down, thi moon did likewyse, thi planits continyood on ther alotid pafs, but it woz like thi big ole nasty Encroachmint had gon in2 revers, howevir unlikely that mite sound.

It woz sum time b4 thi astronimers spotid whot woz reely happinin & it woz a evin longir time b4 they convinsd themselvs it woz tru, but it woz & it is & now we no xactly whot thi bags ov thi Diaspora left us wif 2 get us outa trubil, & itz a feersum endjinn indeed.

Thi sun shines a teeny bit strongir evry day, & tho itil b a long time b4 nybody can c it wif thi naykid I, thi starz $\frac{1}{2}$ moovd.

Thi End.

END OF BOOK

TRANSLATION - ONE - 4

[Original text](#)

Woke up. Got dressed. Had breakfast. Spoke with Ergates the ant who said it's just been work work work for you lately master Bascule, why don't you have a holiday? and I agreed and that was how we decided we ought to go to see Mr Zoliparia in the eyeball of the gargoyle Rosbrith.

I thought I'd better clear it with the relevant authorities first and hence avoid any trouble (like happened the last time) so I went to see mentor Scalopin.

Certainly young Bascule, he says, I do believe this is a day of relatively light duties for you. You may take it off. Have you made your matins calls?

O yes, I said, which wasn't strictly true, in fact which was pretty strictly untrue, truth be told, but I could always do them while we was travelling.

What's in that there box you're holding? he asks.

It's an ant, I say, waving the box at his face.

O this is your little friend, is it? I heard you had a pet. May I see him?

It's not a pet, it's a friend; you was right the first time, and it's not a him it's a she. Look.

O yes very pretty, he says, which is a pretty strange thing to say about an ant if you ask me but there you go.

Does it - does she have a name? he asks.

Yes, I says, she's called Ergates.

Ergates, he says, that's a nice name. What made you call her that?

Nothing, I says; it's her real name.

Ah, I see, he says, and gives me one of those looks.

And she can talk too, I tell him, though I don't expect you'll be able to hear her.

(*Shh*, Bascule! goes Ergates, and I go a bit red.)

Does she, does she now? mentor Scalopin says with one of them tolerant smiles. Very well then he says, patting me on the head (which I don't much like, frankly, but some times you just have to put up with these things. Anyway where were we? O yes, he was patting me on the head and saying), off you go (he says) but be back by supper.

Righty-ho, I says, all breezy like, never thinking.

Swing down past the kitchens to see mistress Blyke to flash my big soulful eyes and give her the sappy smile all shy and bashful and scrounge some provisions. She pats me on the noddle too - what is it with people?

Leave the monastery about half nine and lift to the top; the sun is shining in through the big windows across the great hall straight into my eyes. Damn sure it doesn't look like it's getting dimmer to me but everybody says it is so I suppose it must be.

Grab a ride on a wagon heading for the south-west hydrovator along the cliff road, hanging onto the back of the truck above the exhaust; bit steamy when the truck stops at junctions, but beats having to ride in the cab and talk to the driver and

probably get patted on the bonce again like as not.

I like the cliff road because you can look over the edge and see right down to the floor of the hall and even see the big round bobby bits what would be the handles of the drawers of the bureau if this was a proper size place instead of being BIG like it is. Mr Zoliparia says of course there weren't never no giants and I believe him but sometimes you can look out over the hall with its mountains like cupboards and mountains like seats and sofas set against the wall and the tables and poufs and so on scattered about the place and you think, When's them big bags coming back then? (Bags is my own coining and I'm quite proud of it - means Boys and Girls. Ergates says it's called an acronym. Anyway, where was we? O yes, hanging onto the back of the truck rolling along the cliff road.)

Ergates the ant is in her box in the left breast pocket of my jacket-with-lots-of-pockets, all safely buttoned down. You all right, Ergates? I whisper as we bounce along the road.

I'm fine, she tells me. Where are we right now?

Um, we're on a truck, I sort of half-lie.

Are we hanging off the back of a vehicle? she asks.

(Blimey you get nothing past this ant.) What makes you think that, I asks, stalling.

Must you always maximise the danger of any given mode of transport? she asks, ignoring my stalling.

But I'm Bascule the Rascal, that's what they call me! I'm young and I'm only on my first life I tells her, laughing; Bascule the Teller nothing, that's me; no I or II or VII or any of that nonsense for yours truly; am good as immortal for all intents and purposes and if you can't act a bit daft when you never died not even once yet, when can you?

Well, Ergates says (and you can just tell she's trying to be patient), aside from the fact that it is folly to throw away even one life out of eight, and the equally salient point that in the present emergency it might be foolish to rely on the efficient functioning of the reincarnative process, there is my own safety to think about.

I thought you was indestructible to a fall from any height on account of your scale and mass-to-surface area given the relative size of air molecules? I says.

Something like that, she agrees. But if you landed the wrong way it is conceivable I might be crushed.

Ho, I'd like to know what's the right way to land from this high up, I says, leaning out over the drop with the wind in my hair and gazing down the way at the treetops of the forest-floor, what must be a good couple of hundred metres below.

You're missing the point, says Ergates the ant, sounding sniffy.

I thought for a moment. Tell you what, I says.

Yes? she says.

When we take the hydrovator up the cliff, this time we'll go on in the inside; how's that?

Your munificence astonishes me, she says.

(She's being sarcastic, I can tell.)

The hydrovator car is one of the old wooden ones what creaks a lot and it smells of rope-oil and varnish and the empty water tanks underneath the deck make big boomy spooky noises as it climbs up the wall of the hall. The floor of the car is mostly taken up with six big military vehicles which look like airships with wheels. They're guarded by some army lads who're having a game of pinkel-flip and I'm thinking of joining in because I'm a pretty good shot at the old pinkel-flip and I probably could stand to make a deal of gambling tokens on account that I'm so young and innocent looking and yet a bit of a hustler really but then Ergates says, Don't you think you should make those calls like you promised brother Scalopin? and I says, O I suppose so.

I'm a teller, so the calls have to be made, I suppose.

I find a quiet spot near the gates where the wind ruffles in, and I sit down and lean back and let my eyes go mostly closed and I tap into the crypt where the dead people are.

From the top of the hydrovator I cross the marshaling yard on the frieze near the roof of the hall and head into the wall through various passageways and tunnels and take a tube along the inside of the wall to the far end of the great hall. I get off at the corner station and climb up some steps; I come out in a galleria on the outside of the wall what extends out from the greenery and bluery and etcetery of the babil plants. From here I can look down onto the terraces and little villages on the roofs of the parapet merlons with the little fields on the crenels and if I look right down I can see the flat green valley that is the allure but I expect none of this terminology means much if you don't know much about castles.

Anyway, it's a pretty impressive view, and sometimes you'll see eagles and rocs and simurgs and lammergeiers and other big funny-looking birds wheeling about just to add a bit of local colour, and further below there's more walls and towers and allures and steep roofs - some of them terraced too - and below that the forests and hills of the bailey, then the curtain wall in the distance and further away still there's the hazy scenery of the far beyond. (They reckon you can see the sea from the very highest heights of the habitable castle, but though I seen this screened I never seen it with my own eyes.)

A rickety old chair lift takes me up and along, through a sort of tunnel in the hanging babil plants, and before long I arrive at the corner of the great hall and the place under the eaves where the Astrologers/Alchemists hang out, and hang out is exactly what they do, especially Mr Zoliparia, who being an important old gent of some note has got one of the prime positions in all the town for his apartments, viz. the right eyeball of the septentrional gargoyle Rosbrith.

The gargoyle Rosbrith looks out to the north, but because it's on the corner and there's nothing in the way, you can see east too, where the sun is prone to rise of a morning and the nastiness of the approaching Encroachment is popping up saying 'Hi there folks - it's lights out soon by the way!'

I hit a snag; Mr Zoliparia doesn't appear to be in. I'm standing at the top of a rickety ladder inside the body of the gargoyle Rosbrith abanging and abashing on the little circular door of Mr Zoliparia's apartments but for all my hammering there's no answer. There's a wooden landing below me what the ladder's perched on (it's rickety too, by the way. Come to think of it most stuff in the Astrologers/Alchemists town seems to be pretty rickety) but anyway there's an old lady scrubbing the damn landing with some horrible bubbling stuff that's bringing the wood on the landing up a treat even if it is dissolving most of it and making it even more rickety, but the point is this stuff's making fumes go up my nose and causing my eyes to

water.

Mr Zoliparia! I shout. It's Bascule here!

Perhaps you should have told him you were coming, Ergates says from her box.

Mr Zoliparia don't hold with modern-like implants and that sort of stuff, I tell her, sneezing. He's a dissident.

You could have left a message with somebody else, Ergates says.

Yes yes yes I says, all annoyed because I know she's right. I suppose now I have to use my own bleeding implants and I've been trying not to apart from contacting the world of the dead because I want to be a dissident like Mr Zoliparia.

Mr Zoliparia! I shouts again. I've got my scarf up round my mouth and nose now because of the fumes coming up from the landing.

O, bugration.

Is somebody using hydrochloric acid? Ergates says. On wood? She sounds mystified.

I don't know about that I says but there's some old girl down there scrubbing away at the landing with something pretty noxious.

Odd, Ergates says. I was sure he'd be in. I think you better get down - but then the door opens and there's Mr Zoliparia in a big towel and what there is of his hair's all wet.

Bascule! he shouts at me, might have known it was you! Then he glares down at the old lady and waves at me to come in and I scramble over the top of the ladder and into the eyeball.

Take your shoes off, boy, he says, if you stepped in that stuff on the landing you'll be rotting my carpets. When you've done that you can make yourself useful and warm me up some wine. Then he pads off, hoisting his towel up around him and leaving a trail of water behind him on the floor.

I start to take my shoes off.

You been having a bath, Mr Zoliparia? I asks him.

He just looks at me.

Mr Zoliparia and me and Ergates the ant are sitting on the iris balcony of the gargoyle Rosbrith's right eyeball having respectively mulled wine, tea, and a microscopic morsel of stale bread. Mr Zoliparia's in a chair what looks a bit like an eyeball itself, suspended from an eyelash above; I'm on a stool sat beside the parapet where Ergates is tucking into the bread Mr Zoliparia gave her (and what I moistened with some spit) - it's a whole huge lump of crust and far too much for her really, but she tears crumbs off and works them with her mouthparts and front feet until she can swallow them. I heard Ergates say Thank you to Mr Zoliparia when he gave her the crust but I haven't told him she can talk yet and he didn't seem to hear her.

I'm watching Ergates carefully because it's a bit windy out here and though there's a sort of net under the balcony and Ergates wouldn't be harmed by a fall, she'd probably go straight through the net and even if she wasn't harmed she'd be lost; blimey, something as light as her could get blown right into the bailey from this high up and how would I ever find her then?

You worry too much, Ergates says. I'm a highly resourceful ant and I would find you.

(I don't say nothing in return because Mr Zoliparia's talking and it would be impolite.) Anyway the point is quite frankly I'd rather Ergates was still in my pocket but she says she wishes to take the air and besides she likes the view.

... Symbol not of potency or invulnerability but of a kind of stultifying *impotence* and extreme vulnerability, Mr Zoliparia is saying, banging on about the castle again as he is often want to do.

We live in a folly, Bascule, never forget that, he tells me and I nod and sip my tea and watch Ergates eat her bread.

It's no coincidence the ancients used to refer to the quick and the dead, he says, swallowing some more wine and burrowing into his coat (it's a bit cold out here). To live is to move, he says. Mobility is all. Things like this (he waves his hand around) are a kind of admission of defeat; why, the damn thing's little better than a hospice!

What's a hospice? I ask, not recognizing the word and not wanting to use implants (and wanting Mr Zoliparia to know this, it has to be admitted).

Bascule, you might as well use the facilities you've been given, Mr Zoliparia says.

O yes, I says. I forgot. I made a show of closing my eyes. Having done this for a while, I said. Let's see; I yes, hospice - a place where you go to die, basically.

Yes, Mr Zoliparia said, looking annoyed. Now you've made me go and forget; I've lost the flow.

You was saying the castle was like a hospice.

I remember *that*, he says.

Well I'm very sorry, I says.

No matter. The burden of my argument, Mr Zoliparia says, is that to set itself up like this in such a defeatingly vast and intimidatingly inhuman structure is merely to announce the coming to rest of one's progress, and without that we are lost.

(Mr Zoliparia is big on progress though from what I can gather it's a pretty old fashioned idea these days.)

So there definitely weren't never no giants then? I says.

Bascule, Mr Zoliparia says, sighing, what is this obsession with the idea of giants? He fills his glass with more wine; it steams in the cold air. I watch Ergates for a bit while he does this, zooming in to look at her face; I can see her eyes and feelers and watch her mouth-parts needing and tearing at the gummy-looking bread. Pull back as Mr Zoliparia sets the wine jug back down on the table.

The thing is, he says, and sighs again, there *were* once giants. Not giants in the sense that they were physically bigger than us, but bigger in their powers and abilities and ambitions; bigger than us in their moral courage. They made this place, they built it from rock and materials we've lost the art of making and working. They built it for a purpose in a sense, but it's ludicrously over-designed for its supposed function. They built it the way they did for fun. Just because it amused them to do so. But they've moved on, and we are all that's left and now the place teems with life but then so does a maggoty corpse; there is much movement but no quickness in us; that's all gone.

What about the fast-tower? I says. That sounds pretty quickish to me.

O Bascule, he says and looks up at the sky. Fast as in hold-fast or stuck-fast. How many more times must I tell you?

O yes, I says. So all these quick types left for the stars did they, Mr Zoliparia?

Yes, they did, he says, and why shouldn't they? But what puzzles me is why they should abandon us so completely, and that why we should have given up the ability even to keep in touch with them.

Isn't that in none of your books and stuff, Mr Zoliparia? I asks him. Isn't that nowhere?

Doesn't seem to be, Bascule, he says; doesn't seem to be. Some of us have been looking for the answers to those questions for longer than we've been able to record, and we seem to be no closer now than when we started. We've looked in books and films and files and fiches and discs and chips and bios and holos and foams and cores and every form of storage known to humanity. He drinks his wine. And it's all from before, Bascule, he says, sounding sad. All from before. There's nothing from the time we want to know about. He shrugs. Nothing.

I don't know what to say when Mr Zoliparia sounds all sad and sorry like this. People like him have been trying to work this sort of thing out for generations, some through the old stuff like books and so on and others by using the crypt, where supposedly everything is but you just can't find it. Or if you find it you can't get back with it.

I once said to Mr Zoliparia it sounded a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack and he said, More like looking for a particular water molecule in an ocean and even that's probably underestimating the task by several orders of magnitude.

I've thought about being the one to dive into the crypt proper - really deeply - and bring back the secrets Mr Zoliparia wants, but apart from the fact that means serious implant work and I want to show Mr Zoliparia I only use my implants for telling and nothing else as a rule, it's also been attempted and proved pointless.

It's chaos in there, you see.

The crypt (or cryptosphere or data corpus - it's all the same thing) is where everything really happens here, and the deeper you go the less likely you are to

come out; it's like it's an ocean and consciousness is soluble, like diving into acid, beyond a certain depth. It scars you for life if you go too deep, you come back as something shrivelled and dying if you go deeper still, and you just don't come back at all if you go really really deep; you just disintegrate totally as a distinct personality and that's that.

Of course you personally are still alive and kicking, back in physical reality and none the worse for wear (usually; unless you have a bad trip like they say and get feedbacks and deadbacks and flashbacks and flashforwards and nightmares and daymares and trauma and stuff), but the crypt-copy you sent in there, that's just gone forever you can kiss its ass bye-bye, and that's factual.

Ergates is playing with her food; she's molding the bready-bits into funny shapes with her mouth-parts and front legs and not bothering to eat it at all no more. Right now she's making a tiny bust of Mr Zoliparia and I wonder if he can see her doing that or if he's so dead against implants and improvements in general that he has ordinary old-type eyes and can't zoom in on details like I can.

Do you think it's a good likeness, Bascule? she asks me.

Mr Zoliparia is looking thoughtful and staring into space, or into the atmosphere anyway; bunch of birds circling way in the distance over a bartizan - maybe he's looking at them.

Anyway I decide to risk whispering to Ergates: Very good. Now you want to get back in your box?

What's that Bascule? Mr Zoliparia says.

Nothing, Mr Zoliparia, I says. I was just clearing my throat.

No you weren't; you said something about getting back in your box.

Did I? I says, stalling.

You weren't referring to me I trust, he says, frowning.

O absolutely not Mr Zoliparia, I tell him. I was actually addressing Ergates here, I says, deciding to make a clean breast of it. I look at her sternly and wag my finger at her and say Get back in your box now, you naughty ant. Sorry about this, Mr Zoliparia, I tell him, while Ergates quickly changes the bust she's working on to one of me with an enormous nose.

Does she ever talk back? Mr Zoliparia asks, smiling.

O yes, I says. It's quite a talkative little critter actually and very intelligent.

Does it really talk though, Bascule?

Of course, Mr Zoliparia; it's not a figment of my imagination or an invisible friend type of thing, honest. I had a invisible friend but he left when Ergates came on the scene last week, I tell him, feeling a bit embarrassed now and probably blushing.

Mr Zoliparia laughs. Where did you get your little pal? he asks.

She crawled out the woodwork, I says, and he laughs again and I'm even more embarrassed and getting quite sweaty now. That damn ant! making a fool of me and making my face all big and bloated in that bust she's working on now and still not going back in her box either.

She did! Mr Zoliparia I says. Crawled out of the woodwork in the refectory at supper time last Kingsday. She came here with me the next day to see you, but hid in my jacket that time on account of being shy and a bit awkward with strangers. But she really talks and she hears what I say and she uses words I don't know sometimes, honest.

Mr Zoliparia nods, and looks with new respect upon Ergates the ant. Then she's probably a micro-construct, Bascule, he tells me; they crop up now and again, though they don't usually talk, least not intelligibly. I think the law says you're supposed to take such things to the authorities.

I know that Mr Zoliparia but she's my friend and she don't do no one no harm, I says, getting hotter still because I don't want to lose Ergates and I'm wishing I hadn't said nothing to brother Scalopin now because I didn't think people bothered with such finicky rules but here's Mr Zoliparia saying they do and what am I to do? I look at her but she's still working on that infernal bust and giving me big buck teeth now, ungrateful wretch.

Calm down, calm down, Bascule, Mr Zoliparia says; I'm not saying you ought to turn her in. I'm just saying that's the law and you better not tell people she can talk if you want to keep her. That's all I'm saying. Anyway she's just little and so nice and easy to hide. If you look after her you'll be fine. May I -? he starts to say, then he stares above me and his eyes go wide and he says, What the fuck? and I'm quite shocked because I've never heard Mr Zoliparia swear like that and then there's a shadow over the balcony and a noise like a snapping sail-wing and a gust

of wind, and - before I can do anything except start to turn round - a huge bird, grey and bigger than a man, suddenly clatters down onto the parapet of the balcony, grabs at the box and the bread and flaps its wings down and launches away again screeching, while Ergates goes 'Eek!' and I'm up on my feet and so's Mr Zoliparia and I can see the bird lowering its head as it beats away and pecking at what it's got in its talons and it's eating the bread! and Ergates is stuck in the bird's talons! Caught between a talon and a bit of bread, her little antennae waving and one leg out waving too and that's the last I see of her because the distance gets too great, and I hear Ergates screaming 'Bascuuule!' meanwhile I'm shouting and Mr Zoliparia's shouting too but the big bird lifts away and disappears up over the edge of the roof and Ergates is gone and I'm bereft.

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TRANSLATION - TWO - 4

[Original text](#)

Bascule, I know this is hard for you, but for goodness sakes boy, it was only a damn ant.

It was a most special and unique ant Mr Zoliparia I tell him and I feel responsible for what happened to her.

We're inside the eyeball of the septentrional gargoyle Rosbrith, in Mr Zoliparia's study. Mr Zoliparia has a thing called a telephone in his study you can speak into (didn't even know he had it - think he's a bit embarrassed about it to tell the truth). Anyway, he just got in touch with the guard to report what happened after I'd insisted, though he'd only report that the bird had stolen a valuable antique box, not an ant. (Actually, the box isn't an antique at all but that isn't what matters.) I'd have tried calling the guard myself as soon as it happened but I know from past experience they wouldn't listen to me because I'm young.

We'd been hoping that maybe the bird what had stolen Ergates was one of them ringed eyes with cameras and stuff, or one of them being followed round by little buzzer-bugs for a wildlife screen program or the purposes of scientific research but I guess it was a bit of a long shot and sure enough the answer was no to both. The

guard took some details but Mr Zoliparia doesn't hold out much hope of them doing anything.

You mustn't blame yourself, it was an accident, Bascule.

I know that, Mr Zoliparia, but it was an accident I could have prevented if I'd been more observant and watchful and just plain diligent in general. What was I thinking of, letting her eat that bread on the balustrade like that? Especially when I seen them birds in the distance. I mean; bread! Everybody know birds love bread! (I slap my hand off my forehead, thinking what an idiot I've been.)

O Bascule, I'm sorry too on account of me being the host and all; this happening in my home and I should have taken more care too, but what's done is done.

Is it though, Mr Zoliparia? You really think so?

What you mean, young Bascule?

I'm a teller, Mr Zoliparia, you mustn't forget that. (I screws up my eyes at this point, to show him I mean business.) Them birds -

Bascule, no! You can't go doing that sort of thing! You crazy or something child? You'll only go and scramble your brains you try any of that sort of nonsense.

I just smile.

I don't know what you know of what a teller does but now might be as good a time as any to tell you if you don't know (them that does can happily skip the next 5 or 6 paragraphs and get back to the story).

Basically, a teller fishes into the crypt and pulls out some old boy or girl and asks them questions and answers their questions. It's kind of half archaeological research and half social work if you want to look at it coldly and are happy to ignore what people call the spiritual side of it.

'Course it's all a bit murky and weird down there in the crypt and most bags (that's Boys and Girls remember) get a bit spooked even thinking about contacting the dead let alone actually welcoming them into their heads and having a natter with them. To us tellers though it's just something we do as a matter of course and no bother ... well, providing you are careful, naturally (admittedly there aren't a lot of old tellers around, though that's mostly because of what they call natural wastage).

Anyway, the point is that tellers use their natural skills to delve into the crypt, partly to find out things from the past and partly to fulfil pledges and bequests what the relevant order has taken on. My order is called the Little Big Brothers of the Rich and we originally just looked after the encrypted souls of people what were very well off indeed thank-you-very-much but our remit has broadened a bit since then and now apparently we'll talk to any old rif raf if they got something interesting to say.

Now, the thing is this; just as the deeper you go into the crypt the hazier and more corrosive down there things get, so the longer it is since you died the more kind of disassociated you get from reality, and, eventually, even if you want to stay in some kind of human form, you just can't support that sort of complexity, and one of the things that might happen after that is that you get shunted into the animal kingdom; your personality, such as it is by then, is transferred into a panther or a roc or cat or a simurg or a shark or eagle or whatever. It's actually considered something of a privilege; loads of bags think there's nothing better than being a bird or something similar.

Of course, these animals is still linked into the crypt by their own implants, and thusly their brains is potentially available to a teller, though this is a pretty irregular - not to say kind of dangerous - occurrence. Irregular because nobody ever does it. Dangerous because what you are basically trying to do as a teller in such a circumstance is to try to fit your human size mind inside a bird size one. Takes some finessing, but I've always had this theory that because my thoughts come out with a spin on them, so to speak, I'm especially good at coping with two different thought modes at once, and so more than capable of taking on the task of becoming a bird and flying into their area of the crypt.

This, you may have gathered, is exactly what I am proposing to do, and Mr Zoliparia is not too enamoured of the idea.

Bascule, please, he says, attempt to retain a sense of proportion. It's only an ant and you are only a junior teller.

For sure, Mr Zoliparia, I says. But I'm a teller what hasn't even begun to be stretched yet. I'm a great teller. I'm a total blinking hot-shot teller and I just know I can find that bird.

And do what? Mr Zoliparia shouts. The damn ant is probably dead! That bird's probably eaten it by now! Why you want to torture yourself by finding that out?

If so, I want to know, but anyway I don't think that's right; I'm banking on her having been dropped by that big bird and I'm hoping it might remember where, or -

Bascule you are upset. Why don't you just go back to the order and try to calm down and think this -

Mr Zoliparia, I says quietly, I thank you for your concern but I intend to do this no matter what you say. Cheers all the same.

Mr Zoliparia looks at me different than he has in the past. I've always liked him and I've always looked up to him ever since he was one of the people they sent me to when they realised I talked fairly normal but I thought a bit funny, and I tend to do what he says - it was him who said, Perhaps you would make a good teller, and him what suggested I keep a journal, which is what you are reading - but this time I don't much care what he thinks, or at least I do but I don't much care how bad it makes me feel going against his advice because I just know I have to do this.

O dear Bascule, he says and shakes his head. I do believe you do intend to do this and is a sorry thing for any person to do for something as insignificant as an ant.

It's not the ant, Mr Zoliparia, I says feeling dead grownup, it's me.

Mr Zoliparia shakes his head. It's you and no goddamn sense of proportion, that's what it is.

All the same, I says. It was my friend; she was relying on me to keep her safe. Just one try, Mr Zoliparia. I feel I owe her that.

Bascule, please, just think -

Mind if I just hunker down here, Mr Zoliparia?

Given you're determined, Bascule, here is probably better than elsewhere but I'm not happy about this.

Don't worry, Mr Zoliparia. Won't take a second, literally.

There anything I can do?

Yep; let me borrow that pen of yours. Ta. Now I'm going to sit up here - I squatted on a chair, my chin on my knees, and put the pen in my mouth.

'en 'i 'en 'all ou' 'a 'ouf, I start to tell him

What you saying, Bascule?

I take the pen out my mouth. I was just saying, when the pen falls out of my mouth, let it hit the carpet then shake me and shout Bascule, fast awake!

Bascule, fast asleep, Mr Zoliparia says.

Awake! I yells. Not wide asleep; fast awake!

Fast awake, Mr Zoliparia repeats. Bascule, fast awake. He shakes his head and he's shaking. O dear Bascule, o dear.

If you're that worried, Mr Zoliparia, catch the pen before it hits and then wake me. Now, just give me a minute here ... I settled into place, getting comfortable; this'll only take a second but you have to feel settled and ready and at peace.

Right. I'm prepared.

This'll all happen very quickly, Mr Zoliparia; you ready? I put the pen back in my mouth.

O dear Bascule.

Here we go.

O dear.

And so it's off to the land of the dead for yours truly for the second time today, only this time it's a bit more serious.

It's like sinking into the sky on the other side of the Earth without going through the whole thing first. It's like floating into the earth and the sky at the time, becoming a line not a point, pluming the depths and ascending the heights and then branching out like a tree, like a plain tree, like a huge bush intermingling with every bit of the earth and the sky, and then it's like every one of those bits isn't just a bit of earth or a molecule of air any more, it's like all of them is suddenly a little system of their own; a book, a library, a person; a world... and you're connected with all of it, ignoring barriers, like you are a brain cell deep in the grainy grey mush of the brain all closed in but joined up to loads of other cells, awash in their

communication-song and set free by that trapped machine.

Boompf-badoom; slapadowndoodie through the topmost obvious layers what corresponds to the upper levels of the brain - the rational, sensible, easily understood layers - into the first of the deep down floors, the bit under the cerebral, under the crust, under the photosphere, under the obvious.

It's here you have to be a little bit careful; it's like being in a not-so-salubrious neighbourhood of a big dark city at night - only more complicated than that; much more so.

In here, the trick is thinking right. That's all you have to do. You have to think right. You have to be daring and cautious, you have to be very sensible and totally mad. Most of all you have to be *clever*, you have to be *ingenious*. You have to be able to use whatever is around you, and that's what it really comes down to; the crypt is what they call self-referential, which means that - up to a point - it means what you want it to mean, and displays itself to you as you're best able to understand it, so it's up to you really what use you make of it after that; it's all about ingenuity and that's why it's a young person's medium, frankly.

Anyway, I knew what I wanted so I thought *bird*.

And suddenly I was up in some dark building above the wee twinkly lights of the city, up there with big metallic sculptures of fearsome looking birds and there was lots of screeches and squawks about the place but you couldn't see no birds just hear the noise they made and it was sort of crusty-soft under foot and smelt acidic (or alkaline; one of the two).

I sniffed about, walking quietly, then hopped up onto one of the big metallic birds and squatted there, wings by my sides, staring out over the light-specked black grid of the city and not blinking, just looking for movement, and lowering my head now and again and poking in under my wings with the twig what I held in my beak, just like I was preening or something.

Noticed my wake-up code in the form of a ring round my left leg. Handy to know it was there, just in case things go wrong and/or Mr Zoliparia fluffs his line.

... Stayed there a while, patient as you like, just watching.

What you want then? said a voice from above and behind.

Nothing much, I said, not looking. I was aware of the twig in my beak but it didn't

seem to make speaking any harder.

You must want something, you wouldn't be here otherwise.

You got me there, I said. I'm here looking for somebody.

Oh?

Lost a friend of mine. Roost-mate. Like to trace her.

We all got friends we like to find.

This one very recent; half hour ago. Taken from the septentrional gargoyle Rosbrith.

Sep what?

Means - (this is complicated, referring to the upper data level while I'm down here in the first circle of the basement, but I do it) - means northern, I said (blimey). Rosbrith. North-west on the great hall.

Taken by what?

Lammergeier, I said. (Didn't know that neither til now.)

Really. What you giving in return?

I'm here, aren't I? I'm a teller. You got my ear now. I'll not forget you if you help. Look in me if you want; see what I say is true.

Not blind.

Didn't think you were.

This bird; you catch any distinguishing marks on it?

It was a lammergeier, that's all I know, but there can't be all that many of them around the north-west corner of the great hall half an hour ago.

Lammergeiers are a bit funny these days, but I'll ask around.

Thanks.

(flutter of wings, then:)

Well, you might be in luck -

- then there was a mega-squawk and a scream and I had to turn around and look and there was a huge great bird beating in the air behind and above me, holding another torn bird in one of its talons; the big bird was red-black on black and fierce as death and I could feel the wind of its flapping snapping wings on my face. It hung in the air, wings spread, beating like something fiercely crucified, shaking the dead bird in its talons so that its blood spattered in my eyes.

Why you asking questions, child? it screamed.

Trying to find a friend of mine I said, keeping calm. I clumped around on my perch to face the big red-black bird. Twig still in my beak.

It held up one foot; three talons up, one down. See these three claws? it said.

Yup. (Might as well play along for now, but I'm checking the exits, thinking of my leg-ring with the wake-up code on it.)

You got to the count of three to move your beak back to reality you skin job, the red bird says. You hear me? I'm starting counting now: 3.

I'm just looking for my friend.

2.

It's just an ant. I'm only looking for a little ant who was my friend.

1.

What's the fucking problem here? Don't a creature get no respect for - (and I'm shouting now angrily and I drop the twig from my beak).

Then the big red bird's foot comes out like its bleeding leg is telescopic and zaps itself towards my head and wraps round it and squishes me down before I can do anything and I feel myself trapped and squelched down through the fabric of the metallic bird I'm perched upon and down through the building it's part of and down through the city and down through the grid and down through the earth beneath

and down and down and down and down and what's worse I can feel that the ring round my leg that had my wake-up code on it has gone like that big red bird swiped it when it hit me and sure enough, I can't think what the hell the wake-up code is, meanwhile I'm still going down and down and down and I'm thinkin,

Oh shit...

[Next original section](#)

TRANSLATION - THREE - 4

[Original text](#)

Once the sky was full of birds; used to go black with birds it did and birds ruled the air (well, apart from the insects) but that's all changed now; humans came along and started shooting and trapping and killing them and even if they've mostly stopped doing that sort of thing now they're still top of the roost partly because they killed off so many species and partly because they make stuff fly, which when you think about it does kind of spoil it for the birds on account they had to spend millions of years jumping off cliffs and out of trees and crashing to the ground and dying and then doing it all over again and one time maybe not crashing quite so hard but gliding a bit and then a bit more and a bit more still and so on and so on etc. and just generally painstakingly evolving in this incredibly complicated way (I mean, lizard-scales into feathers! and hollow bones, for goodness sakes!) and then these bleeding humans, these ridiculous-looking bald monkeys come along what have never showed the slightest interest in flying nor sign of adaptation to the air what-so-bleeding-ever and they start buzzing around in flying machines just for a laugh!

Makes you sick. Didn't even have the decency to do it slow; one minute their flying machines is made from paper and spit, then one evolutionary blink of the eye and the bastards are playing golf on the moon!

Oh, there's still birds around all right but there's a damn sight fewer of them and a lot of what you would think is birds isn't; it's chimerics, or machines, and even if it is the case that what looks like a bird is a bird, if it's a big one it's probably not even got its head to itself but it's been taken over by a dead person. Can't even have

peace in your own bonce. Birds have coped with ticks and fleas and lice all their evolutionary life but these damn humans are worse and they get everywhere!

I'm flapping and squawking and walking about my perch and wishing Mr Zoliparia the human would hurry up and wake me because the more I think about people the less I like them and the more I like being a bird.

Been almost a week now; what's keeping the man? My own fault for entrusting my safety to an old geezer. That's the trouble with old persons; slow reactions. Probably dropped the pen I asked him to catch and is even now scrabbling about on the floor for it, forgetting the important thing is to wake me, not to get the bleeding pen. But it must have been a minute in real time by now; surely even an old person can't take that long to look for a bleeding pen for goodness sakes.

How am I going to wake up? I'm below the level where you get asked in your sleep automatically and my own wake-up code was taken from me by that big bastard bird what slapped me down here in the first place and even though I've remembered it since it just doesn't seem to be working no more.

My goose, like they say, may well be cooked.

I'm on a perch in a sort of little dark cave.

If you can imagine a giant black brain in an even bigger dark space, and then zoom in on the brain and go down in amongst its corrugations and folds and see that the walls of every fold is made out of zillions of little boxes with a perch in it, well, that's what this bit of bird-space is like, in the crypt.

My little box looks out onto a huge hanging dark space all filled with shadows and the occasionally passing bird flapping slowly past (we all flap slow - the pretend gravity is less here). Well, I'm saying it's all dark but maybe it isn't really, maybe that's just me because truth to tell I've not been very well; in fact I'm half blind, but that's better than what I was a couple of days ago, which was half dead.

There's a dainty flutter of wings at the entrance to my box, and in comes little Dartlin, who's the friend I've made here.

Hello, Dartlin, how's it going?

Fine, Mr Bathcule. I been terribly busy, you know; terribly busy bird I been. I flew through to the parliament of the crows and picked up some gossip, would you like to hear it?

Dartlin is my spy, sort of. When I imagined myself in here in the first place, back in Mr Zoliparia's pad, I just naturally somehow took on the appearance of a hawk, which is what I still am now. Dartlin's a sparrow, so in theory we should be raptor and prey respectively, but it doesn't actually work that way here, not in this bit anyway.

Dartlin found me on the floor here. I'd just got back from the level beneath where the real fun in the crypt starts and I was in a sorry state, let me tell you.

The first couple of days were the worst. When the big bird slapped me down through all them levels I thought my time was up; I mean, I knew I'd wake up in the eyeball of the septentrional gargoyle Rosbrith sooner or later, but I thought I was going to die in here, and that's a hell of a thing to take back to your waiting mind; scar you for life, that can.

It's very difficult to explain what it's like when you go that deep in the crypt, but if you can imagine being in a snow storm, flying in a thick snowstorm only the snow is multi-coloured and some of it seems to be coming at you from every angle (and each snow-flake seems to sing and hum and sizzle and hold little flashing images and hints of faces in it and as they go past you here snatches of speech or music or you feel a emotion or think of a idea or concept or seem to remember something) and if one of the snow-flakes hits you in the eye you are suddenly in somebody else's dream and it's an effort to remember who the hell you are, well if you can imagine experiencing all that when you are feeling a bit drunk and disoriented then that's a bit like what it's like, except worse of course. And weirder.

I don't actually remember much about that bit and I don't think I want too, either. I learnt to navigate by the flavour of the surrounding dreams and gradually sorted some sense out of the gibberish and though I got blinded by the abrading impact of all those snow-flakes and lost the wording of my wake-up code, I finally broke back through to the darkness and peace and quiet here, and lay exhausted on the floor amongst lots of scraggly dead feathers and solidified droppings and that's where Dartlin found me.

He'd been terrified by something and lost the memory of how to fly and so ended down on the floor too, but he could see and so once I'd got my strength back he got onto my back between my wings and guided me to where the sparrows gather. They told him how to fly again but they didn't feel comfortable having a hawk around so they found me this place down here and that's where I've been the

last four days, getting my sight back while Dartlin flits about making inquiries and being busy and nosy and gossiping, which is what sparrows like doing anyway.

Why I certainly would like to here what you heard, little friend, I tell Dartlin.

Well, it's terribly interesting and I hope you don't get frightened but, though you are a *fierce* hawk after all and probably don't get frightened ... Oh, isn't this a dark old place? I don't like perching here on the edge. May I hop up beside you?

By all means, Dartlin, I says, shuffling along a bit on my perch.

Thank you. Now; I says, now I don't want to make you nervous anything - like I say, with you being fierce I can't imagine you know the meaning of the word - but it would appear that there's a bit of a disturbance in the air - oh, it gives me a shiver just looking at those big fierce talons of yours - what was I saying? - oh yes, a disturbance in the air, affecting everybody, near enough - you know I think I felt it begin myself even though I was down on that horrible floor at the time with other things on my mind - wasn't it horrible down there? I hated it. Anyway, it seems the raptors and carrion-feeders and most *especially* the lammergeiers have been behaving strangely - oh! was that a seagull just there? I knew a seagull once, his name was...

That's the trouble with sparrows; they got a very limited attention span and are inclined to go wittering on for ages before they get to the point, always fluttering off at tangents and keeping you guessing what it is they're actually talking about. It's very frustrating but you just have to be patient.

Anyway, I better paraphrase or we'll be here all bleeding day listening to this sparrow-crap.

First, some of the birds is looking for somebody and I get a funny feeling it might be yours truly. The song goes that there's a hunt on for somebody who's loose in the system, existing in the crypt and/or the base-world and there's a price on their head. Apparently this person's a first-born, which fits me. Fits lots of people, you might say, but apparently this person's got something a bit different about them; they have some peculiarity, some strangeness, and they're a signal carrier, carrying a message they might not even know they have.

Oh I know it's probably not me, but you know how it is; I always felt I was special - just like everybody else - but unlike everybody else I got this weird wiring in my brain so I can't spell right, just have to do everything phonetically. It's not a problem because you can put any old rubbish through practically anything, even a

child's toy computer and get it to come out spelled perfectly and grammatisized too and even improved to the point where you'd think you was Bill bleeding Shakespeare by the language. Anyway, you can probably see why I got a bit paranoid when I first heard all this, and it gets worse.

The story goes that this person - maybe a bird, maybe not - is a contaminant from the crypt's nasty old nether regions, a virus come to corrupt even more levels, which is quite a thought and might even be a bit worrying just in case it was me, only not everybody seems to believe this bit of the rumour because it's reckoned that the story comes from the palace and the King and the Consistorians are behind it and they can almost be guaranteed not to tell the truth.

Some folk reckon it's all to do with the approaching Encroachment; they think the chaotic levels of the crypt have somehow woken up to the fact that things could eventually get a bit hazardous even for them.

You see, everybody's assumed that the crypt's chaotic levels quite liked the idea of the Encroachment; something that ushered in a new ice age (at the very least) and cut off the sunlight and killed off practically the whole planetary ecosphere and just generally gave humans and biological stuff a hard time sounded right up the crypt's tree thank-you-very-much, but now that it looks like the Encroachment might be even more serious than that and possibly threatening the existence of the sun, the planet, the castle and the crypt, well the beasts of the chaotic zones have finally sat up and took notice and things have been stirring ever since.

Why it should be happening in the realm of the birds specifically is a good question but there you are; not much point trying to figure out the crypt.

Exactly *what* is going on apart from the fact that they're looking for somebody isn't too clear either, there's too many conflicting rumours (and anyway this is all being transmitted by Dartlin, who is a dear little bird but would not even get an honourable mention if they was giving out prizes for conversational coherence) but the point of it all is that basically there's big doo-doo flying around and all the flocks is nervous and a bit hysterical and anybody who's a bit different is being sought out, rounded up, interrogated and taken away. All of which might sound familiar to any students of history and just goes to show that some things never change, least not when these plucking humans designed the original system.

So there you are Mr Bascule, isn't it all terribly, terribly interesting?

Oh it's interesting all right, Dartlin, old chum.

I think though to - oh look, I think I just saw a flea on your leg there; may I preen

you?

I feel like saying, You sure it's a flea not an ant? because I still think tenderly of poor little lost Ergates now and again, but I just says, Preen away, young Dartlin.

Dartlin pecks round the feathery top of my left leg and eventually crunches on a flea.

Yum. Thank you. Well anyway, I wonder what on earth can be going on? Who do you think they are looking for? Do you think it could actually be one of us birds? I don't think so, do you?

Probably not.

Oh, it's not you, is it? Tee-hee. Tee-hee-hee-hee.

I don't think so. I just a poor blinded old hawk.

Well *I* know that, silly, though you are a very *fierce* old hawk, and getting less blind all the time. I was just kidding. Oh look another sea-gull. Or is it? Looks more like an albino crow, actually. Well, I can't stand around here all day chatting with you; I have to fly, Dartlin says, and hops down off the perch. Is there anything I can get you, Mr Bathcule?

No, Dartlin, I'm getting better all the time, thanks. Just you keep your ears open though; I like hearing about all this stuff.

My pleasure. Sure I can't get you something to eat, perhaps?

No, I'm fine.

Very well.

Dartlin hops towards the edge of the box looking out over the dark canyon. It preens itself a bit, then balances on the edge, looks round to say, Well, bye then... but its little voice sort of trails off, and it looks back round to the outside and then it starts shivering and it jumps back and almost falls over and keeps jumping back until it's underneath my perch.

Dartlin! I shout. What's the matter? What is it? and I look down at the little fella and he's just pressed back against the rear of the box and quivering with fright, his tiny eyes bulging and staring and not seeing me, and meanwhile there's movement

and the sound of fluttering wings outside the box and some whispered squawks. A couple of large dark shapes flit past the entrance to the box.

Dartlin shakes like the poor little bugger's having his own private earthquake.

He looks at me and wails, Fierce, Mr Bathcule! Fierce! and then just keels over onto the floor of the box, his eyes still open.

Dartlin! I says, not shouting, but I don't think this sparrow's going to be doing no more spying nor flying. I can see his fleas getting ready to move out of his scrawny little body, and that's always the worst of signs.

I look up again and there's more movement and a rustling sound from outside and then suddenly the noise of huge great wings flapping.

A crow pops its head round the side of the box.

It looks at me with one beady black glinting eye and croaks,

Yeah that's him, must be him.

It disappears before I can say anything.

Then there's a face at the entrance to the box, and I can't believe it; it's a human face, a human head but it's been flayed, it's got no skin on it at all and it's all red with blood and you can see tendons and muscles and its eyes are staring out with no lids neither but it's also got the biggest smile you ever seen and it's held in the claws of some huge bird I can't see apart from its talons and lower legs; the talons are holding the head by the ears and the head opens its mouth and starts making this weird noise, incredibly loud and guttural and its tongue comes out, but it's not an ordinary tongue, it's far too long for a start and it's flapping and lashing and the head's making this screaming noise and the tongue is snaking right at me and it's got hooks and claws at the end of it and the tongue flicks towards me and I jump backwards off the perch and land almost on top of Dartlin's body and the tongue is snapping back and forth over the top of the perch trying to get me and I'm pecking and screeching and trying to get at it with my talons but it's too high up and all the while this hoarse cacophony of noise is ringing in my ears and at first I think it's screaming Gimme gimme gimme but it isn't, it's more like Gididibididibididigididigigibididigibibibi all run together like that, like it's a machinegun or something and the tongue lashes back round the top of the perch and down and now is coming straight for me and I slash at it with my talons but it twists and grabs my right wing and starts to pull and I'm screeching and it's going

gididibibibigigibigigibibigigi and I'm trying to hold onto the perch with one talon and scratch the tongue with the other and peck at it too and it's tearing my wing off, breaking it and it snaps and it pulls off a whole bunch of feathers and the horrible face gets a mouthful of those and I hop back again to the rear of the box, flapping and screeching and trailing my broken wing; the tongue flicks back in and I kick little Dartlin's body at it and the tongue wraps tight round it and pulls it back but throws it away when it gets it outside and it's still hammering away with this gigigibididibibibigigigi stuff filling my ears and I'm just about to die of fright as the tongue comes snapping towards my face when it goes gididibibibibibigididibigiBasculefastawake!

- and I'm back in the study of the gargoyle Rosbrith squatting on the chair and staring at this huge human Mr Zoliparia holding a pen and shaking my shoulder and going, Bascule? You all right?

It can be a bit of a shock watching somebody come out of a crypt trip; if it's only a minute in your time, it's a week in theirs and a lot of things can happen in a week and if it's been a bad one it tends to show in your face, so for the person waking you up it's like they tell you to wake up and instantly your face goes old and pained and worn-looking and the person thinks, Oh no, what have I done?

I'm squatting on the balustrade where Ergates was lifted from, hunkered down taking more tea and biscuits with Mr Zoliparia. He's looking a bit worried because I'm squatting here facing the drop like I'm about to launch myself into the air, but there is the safety net after all and anyway I just feel comfortable perched here and I like the view and the feel of the wind on my face.

My left arm has that sort of echo-pain you get from a bad crypt trip injury and I keep wanting to lift the biscuits with my foot and eat them that way but I think I'm gradually losing my birdishness. I can tell Mr Zoliparia wants to ask me lots of questions but I'm still finding it a bit hard to talk.

Phew, that was a hard old crypt trip that one. I suppose you could argue I should have taken a bit more time and just sent a send of myself in; a image or construct who'd have done everything I did and felt everything I felt and in fact would have been a duplicate me, except meanwhile I'd still have been fully conscious here with Mr Zoliparia, but it takes much longer doing it that way; you have to prepare thoroughly before you go and you have to spend ages reintegrating your two selves when the send comes back, sorting memories and feelings and character changes and so on; just jumping in and out with the one personality is a lot quicker; less

than a second rather than up to half a day... but of course that supposed second doesn't allow for the person who's supposed to wake you up getting confused because almost the last thing you said to him was, 'Just give me a minute here,' and them totally misunderstanding what you meant on account of them being old and confused, and so you spend a week in the crypt instead of a few hours, and thusly getting so altered by your crypt-self that you think you're a blinking hawk for the next couple of hours.

I see a flock of small birds in the distance and while one half of me's thinking, this is how this all started, and remembering that poor dear little ant, the other half is going, Ha! Prey!

No I don't think it is all an hallucination, Mr Zoliparia, I says (I'm missing out the bits where he keeps apologising for what happened). I think it's all as true as you and me sitting here. There's something happening in the crypt; I couldn't work out what part of it's to do with the palace and what part is to do with the chaotic regions, but there's something going on, and there's a watch being kept for somebody or something unusual in there and out here too, and something really disgusting from the human realm has access to the bird part of the crypt and has secured the cooperation of at least some of the birds.

It all sounds more like a nightmare, especially the last part, Mr Zoliparia says.

We're both sitting now; I feel less like a hawk all the time. Mind you, I still need to be out here on the balcony; don't like the thought of going inside and being trapped.

I saw it with my own eyes, Mr Zoliparia. I know you don't hold with the crypt and all and think it's all a dream anyway, but it's not that simple, and what I saw I saw, and I never seen nor heard of nothing like that thing like a flayed head and making that horrible noise; I mean, you hear stories of ghosts and beasties and stuff like that from the chaotic realms coming up and snatching people and gobbling them up, but you never see it happen; that stuff's just myth; this was real.

You are sure that because it had a human head it was something from the human part of the crypt?

That's the way it works, Mr Zoliparia. It was something that had to preserve human form even in its monstrousness or it couldn't function, or maybe because it might have let the birds see what it was really like, which given that birds don't much like humans in the first place, is saying something.

And it was after you.

It sure was. I'm not saying I am what they're actually looking for - don't expect I am - but they're catching and caging everybody a bit different or suspicious and that head thing seems to be involved in the round-up.

Mr Zoliparia shakes his head. O dear Bascule, o dear.

Never mind, Mr Zoliparia. No harm done.

That's true, Bascule; least you back here safe and sound, no thanks to me. Anyway, I think you should keep away from the crypt for a bit, don't you?

Well that might be an idea, Mr Zoliparia, I says. You certainly got a point there...

Good boy, he says. I know; why don't we play a game? Or maybe you would like to go for a walk; take a constitutional round some of the terraces on the roof, maybe stop off somewhere for lunch - what you say, Bascule?

All sounds good to me, Mr Zoliparia.

Let's do both things, he laughs. We'll go for a walk but we'll take the portable Go board with us and have a game over a nice long lunch at a rather nice restaurant I know.

Good idea, Mr Zoliparia. That's a fine old complicated game, that Go.

Right! I'll get the Go, then we'll go! he laughs, and he jumps up and heads indoors. Drink up your tea! he shouts.

I look out at them birds again, circling above a far tower. I don't want to tell Mr Zoliparia but I'm going straight back in there to that crypt just as soon as I feel able. I still want to find out what happened to poor Ergates, but I want to know what's going on, too.

Truth be told, it terrifies me half to death just thinking about it, but I got this feeling I learnt a lot while I was in the crypt today and it's true what they say; it's like a addictive game, and once you come out of it a bit bruised and wounded, the first thing you want to do is get straight back in there and get it right next time. I just won't think about that horrible head thing.

I finish my tea and tidy up the cups and stuff (you have to do this at Mr Zoliparia's because he hasn't any servitors) and take the tray inside just as he's putting on his coat and stuffing the portable Go board in his pocket.

Ready, Bascule? he asks.

I'm ready, Mr Zoliparia.

Ready all right. Big stuff happening in the crypt and some poor bugger being hunted and me with a headstart on the people doing the hunting.

Bascule the Rascal, that's me and I'm more than ready; *I'm fierce*.

A little bird told me.

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TRANSLATION - FOUR - 4

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I've got a very good view of the fast-tower from here. I'm half-lying and half-sitting cradled by the babel branches and am looking up through a gap in the foliage at the dirty great hugeness of the castle's central tower.

You forget the tower's there a lot of the time because (a) it's usually behind you if you're looking out the way from the castle and (b) it's obscured by cloud more than half the time anyway.

According to Mr Zoliparia the fast-tower is where the space elevator was anchored to Earth.

That's why it's called a fastness, Mr Zoliparia says; in English fastness means a stronghold, and also because when things are tied hard against each other they are said to be tied fast to each other like the space elevator was tied fast to Earth, and in a sense tied to the Earth's surface and space together, too (I said; and the space

elevator was a way of getting into space fast; but Mr Z said no actually it was slower than a rocket or whatever but much more efficient). Mr Zoliparia thought the space elevator was a great idea and it was a shame we'd got rid of it and if we hadn't then we wouldn't be in the pickle we are, i.e. about to get clobbered by the Encroachment.

But I thought space was just full of nothing I said to Mr Zoliparia. What's the point of going there?

Basculé, he said, you are so thick sometimes.

He told me the fast-tower led to the planets and the stars; once you were in space you had limitless energy and raw materials and after that brainpower took you wherever you wanted but we'd thrown all that away.

Mr Zoliparia says the fast-tower represents something of an enigma, on account that we don't strictly speaking know what's actually in the top of it; it's been explored up to about the 10th or 11th levels but after that you can't get no higher, so they say. Blocked on the inside and nothing to hold onto on the outside and too high up for a balloon or an aircraft to go. The knowledge of what's up there's been lost long ago in the chaos of the crypt, says Mr Z.

You hear rumours that there are people up there in the top of the tower but that's got to be nonsense; how'd they breathe?

Mr Zoliparia isn't the only person to have theories concerning the big tower; Ergates the ant told me there used to be three space elevators; one here, one in Africa near a place called Kilimanjaro and one in Kalimantan. According to her, they've all been dismantled long since of course but we've got the biggest stump on account of whoever designed the American continent space elevator had the wizard idea of making the terminus particularly spectacular and so designed it to look like a huge castle, viz. the vastness of the fastness (which she claimed used to be called Acsets, which was another of them acronyms, apparently).

I thought this all sounded a bit iffy and asked Mr Z if he'd ever heard of there being other fast-towers and he said nope, not as far as he knew, and sure enough when I searched the crypt for info there wasn't any on no other elevators and when you actually look into it there doesn't seem to be anywhere where it says straight out the fast-tower used to be one end of a space elevator, though it's not a secret. Anyway, Kilimanjaro is a lake and Kalimantan is a big island (it's got a Crater Lake too) and I think Ergates' imagination was running away with her a bit there and besides if her theory was right the name of this place would begin with a K not a S or a A, stands to reason.

Poor Ergates. I still wonder what happened to that dear little ant, even though I've got plenty of other things to worry about now.

I turn over in the little nest I've made for myself in the babil branches and look down the curved trunk to the wall. Nobody else around. Looks like I gave the bastards the slip.

My shoulder still hurts. So do my wrists and my knees.

Oh what a sorry state we're in, young Bascule, I says to myself.

I just know that sooner or later I'm going to have to go back into the crypt to find out what on earth's going on, even though the last thing the big bat said was not to. Don't think it's going to be much fun.

I'm frightened.

You see, I've become an outcast.

I have to say I had a very pleasant lunch with Mr Zoliparia and a good game of Go which he won of course (like he always does) in this travelling restaurant. The restaurant starts in a vertical village in the babil near the top of the great hall gable and slowly descends to floor level over the next couple of hours. Good food and views. Anyway, I had a very nice time and almost totally forgot about Dartlin and the giant brain in bird space and horrible skinned heads and things what go gididibibibigdidibigigi and so on.

Me and Mr Zoliparia talked about loads of stuff.

Eventually though it was time for me to go because I still had evening calls to do for the Little Big Brothers and they like you to be there in the monastery to do them and I'd already done one lot on the hoof as it were that morning in the hydrovator so I thought for the evening I ought to actually be there within the precinct.

Mr Z saw me to the west wall tube train.

You promise you won't go back into that crypt until you have to? Until you're back with the brothers? Mr Z said to me, and I said, Oh all right then Mr Zoliparia.

Good boy, he said.

Everything went as per normal till I got to the other end where there was a long wait at the hydrovator. I thought of a better idea and took a travelator across the allure to a funicular line up a flying buttress; I'd get to the monastery by dropping from above.

There were a couple of novice brothers in the funicular car with me; they were a bit drunk, and singing loudly. I thought one of them seemed to recognise me but I just looked away and he ignored me too.

They kept singing as the car when slowly up the curve of the buttress. I wouldn't have minded, but they were out of tune.

Little-Big, Little-Big, Little-Big!
We're the Mediums who don't give a fig!

Well, here's a fine to-do, I said to myself, sighing and staring out the window and trying to ignore the noise and their beery breaths. I looked out the window; it was dusk by this time and the lights were on in the funicular car's cabin and the sky outside looked pretty and very colourful.

When you're dead, when you're dead, when you're dead,
We'll happily live inside your he - ad!

O, what the heck, I thought.

In a way what I was going to do would make the trip longer not shorter but at least I'd have some respite from all this cheery-drunken shit, and even if I forgot my return code again these noisy prats would wake me up soon enough. I dipped into the crypt, intending to spend maybe half a second in there.

Less than that was quite enough.

There was something going on.

The first place you go from transport is into a representation of the castle's transport system, a transparent holo of the fastness with the tube, train and funicular lines, lift shafts, roads, hydrovator lines and clifter slots all highlighted. Then you move onto where you want to go elsewhere in the crypt. Most bags don't even spare this setup a passing glance, but if you're

something of a connoisseur of the crypt's states, like I am, then you just always swing past this sort of thing and click it out and do a quick comparison with actual movements to see if Transport's on its bols or not. Upshot is, if there's anything amiss you spot it, like I spotted the transport setup wasn't quite right.

It looked like there was an odd kind of hole around the monastery; nothing moving out, just stuff in-going. Very strange, I thought. I didn't go no further into the crypt. I checked the monastery's crypt business during the afternoon. Definitely phase-change in the traffic around an hour ago. Somebody trying to make things look normal when they weren't.

Where was brother Scalopin's usual call to the *Martian Days* storyline, for example? Or sister Ecrope's tea-time interlope with her lover in the Uitlander embassy? All replaced by making-up-numbers traffic, that's where.

I knew I was probably being paranoid, but I worried all the same.

The funicular was due to make one more stop before the station I'd normally get off at. I told it to stop ASAP.

A minute later it did, and I got off at this little silly halt three quarters of the way up the buttress which served a couple of clan-execs' love nests, a old babil farm and a glider club, all of them deserted. The two brothers I left on the funicular looked puzzled but waved bye-bye and kept singing as the car trundled away again.

Then there was a thump in my head. The funicular car stopped, then reversed and clunked and whirred back down towards me.

The thump in my head was some bastard trying to knock me out with a bit of feedback from the crypt; theoretically impossible and technically difficult but it can be done and the jolt I'd just got would have knocked out most people, only I've got the equivalent of shock absorbers because I'm a teller and therefore used to getting a rough ride from the crypt.

The funicular car was coming glowing back down the curved track, its cabin lights reflecting off the babil plants festooning the broad arched back of the buttress. The two brothers inside were at the back window, staring at me. They didn't look so drunk now, and they were each holding things in their hands that could have been guns.

Oh shit, I thought.

I ran down a spiral stairway at the side of the buttress. I heard the car stop above me. The stairway went on and on and on and on spiralling all the time and I thought when it levels out I'm not going to be able to stop going round; they'll find me whirling round in a tight little circle unable to go straight. I hit the bottom and sheer terror proved a very efficient course-straightener. I raced across a gantry slung underneath the stonework and went down another stairway set against a metal-frame building on the far side of the buttress. Footsteps clanged behind me.

I came out on a broad balcony and dodged through a doorway and down some more steps into a sort of hanger where old gliders sat tilted like great ghostly stiff-winged birds and a bunch of little bats started chattering and flying round my head. Footsteps above, then behind. Oh shit oh shit oh shit. The bats were kicking up a hell of a racket.

I spotted a ladder against one wall leading down through the floor and I ran for it. Somebody shouted behind me; the footsteps slapped loud. Something went, Bang! and a glider next to me exploded with flame and lost a wing; the blast of air was warm and almost knocked me off my feet.

I threw myself at the ladder, held the sides and dropped, sliding down without using my feet at all, hitting the floor and twisting my ankle.

I was in some kind of circular platform slung under the glider building. Nothing but air underneath and nowhere to go. I looked back at the ladder. The footsteps were right above me.

I heard a noise like quick, distant surf, and a huge black shape lifted from under the platform on wings longer than I'm tall. It wavered in the air alongside then grasped at the thin metal rail round the platform on the far side from the ladder, its talons gripping the rail while its wings beat quickly and almost silently back and forward.

I could hear somebody coming down the ladder, breathing hard.

Here! shouted the black shape at the other side of the platform. I'd thought it was a bird but it was more like a giant bat. Its wings clapped in and out in and out.

Quickly! it said.

I think if the brothers coming down the ladder hadn't shot at me in the hanger I wouldn't have gone, but they had so I did.

I ran for the big bat. It held its feet out. I grabbed its ankles and it wrapped its

talons round my wrists making me shout with the bone-crunching pain while it pulled me off the platform, cracking my knees off the rail.

We twisted and dropped like the thing couldn't carry me and I screamed, then it spread its wings with a snap and I nearly lost my grip as we curved out and away. Light sparkled above me and I heard the bat cry out but I was too busy looking down at the dark fields in the allure, 5 or 600 metres below and thinking well, if I die, there's still another seven lives to go. Except I didn't think that was right somehow, I reckoned whatever trouble I was in went beyond this life and I wasn't guaranteed another seven lives or even one.

I held on tight, but the light crackled again and the bat thing juddered in the air and cried out again and I smelled smoke. We lurched and side-slipped towards the wall of the great hall, then fell like the proverbial, and in a scream of air and a scream from me dipped below the allure and the parapet and went on down till we were level with the lower bretasche, where the bat wheeled round so hard I lost my grip on its scaly legs and only its steel-like clasp on my wrists stopped me from falling to the roof of the second level tower underneath.

Felt like my arms were about to pop out of my sockets. I'd have screamed but the breath was gone from me.

The air shrieked round my ears as we plummeted between the great tower and the second level wall, down into a layer of cloud where I couldn't see a damn thing and it was freezing cold, then we turned in what I thought was the direction of the tower and out of the mist loomed this bleeding great rock wall. I closed my eyes.

We twisted once, twice and I went - phew - to myself but when I opened my eyes we was still heading straight for naked stonework. O fuck, I thought, but by then I'd decided I'd rather die with my eyes open. At the last moment we lifted, I saw hanging bunches of foliage strung from the machicolation above and a instant later we crashed into the babil; my shoulder was wrenched and I was thrown off the bat and into the babil, grabbing at leaves and twigs and branches and slipping and falling down through it.

The bat beat furiously, shouting, Hold on! Hold on! while I tried to get a hold on the damn stuff.

Hold on! it shouted again.

I'm bloody trying too! I yelled.

You safe?

Just about, I said, hugging a big strand of babil like it was a long-lost mum or something, not able to look behind but still hearing the big bat flap and beat at my back.

I'm sorry I couldn't help you more, the bat says. You must save yourself now. They're looking for you. Beware the crypt. Keep out of things! Erch! Erch! I must go. Farewell, human.

Yeah, and to you, I shouted, turning round to look at it. And thanks!

Then the big bat dropped, and I saw it disappear in the mist, falling away straight down, trailing smoke and then just before I lost sight of it curving away following the circumference of the tower, beating hard but looking weak and still falling.

Disappeared.

I crawled into the darkness of the babil, nursing my aches.

Oh dear Bascule, I said to myself. Oh dear oh dear oh dear.

I spent the night in the foliage, constantly dreaming of flying through the air with Ergates in my hand but then dropping her and her tumbling away and me not being able to catch her and my wings coming off and me falling too and screaming through the air, then waking clutching the branches, shivering and covered in sweat.

So here I am, looking up at the fast-tower and I've spent some time so far this morning trying to pluck up the courage to go straight back into the crypt to find out what's going on and look for poor little Ergates and this time take no nonsense... and I've also spent some time vowing never to even think of the bleeding crypt again and deciding not to decide about it for now and so instead I'm just sitting here wondering what I'm to do in general and not able to come to a decision on that score neither.

I turn over in my little nest again and look down through the branches and this time

I freeze and stare, because I can see this big animal coming climbing up through the babil; it's bleeding huge, the size of a bear and it's got thick black fur with streaks of green on it and it's got big shiny black claws and it's looking at me with two little beady eyes and a funny pointed head and it's coming up the branch I'm on, straight towards me.

Oh shit, I hear myself say, looking round to see if there's a way to escape.

There isn't. Oh shit.

The animal opens its mouth. Its teeth are the size of my fingers.

... Stay where you are! it hisses.

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TRANSLATION - FIVE - 4

[Original text](#)

I stare at the big black beast coming up the branch toward me.

I've got a gun! I shout (this is a lie).

... I very much doubt that, the thing says. It stops all the same smiling and showing its teeth again. But anyway, it says, stop being silly. I'm here to help you.

I'll bet, I says, glancing round and still trying to figure out a way of escape.

Yes. If I'd wanted to harm you I could have shaken you out of there five minutes ago.

Oh yeah? I says, hanging on tighter. Well maybe you don't want to kill me, maybe you just want to capture me.

... In which case I'd have dropped on you from above, you silly boy.

Oh you would, would you?

...Yes. You're Bascule, aren't you?

Perhaps, I says. And who or what are you when you're at home then?

... I'm a sloth, it says proudly. You can call me Gaston.

So I'm being led through the babil plants by a sloth called Gaston who has a kind of mutant lisp and takes such pride in his appearance he's got fungus growing on his back; that's what the green streaks are. He offered to let me ride on his back hanging onto his fur but I declined.

We climb through the babil, going down and round the tower.

Who sent you then? I ask.

...Same people sent the jericule last night, Gaston says, talking over his shoulder.

What, that big bat?

...That's right.

What happened to him anyway, do you know?

...Her, Gaston says. No.

Oh.

I follow Gaston down through the babil branches. Following Gaston isn't difficult on account of him being a quite remarkably slow mover. If he had been coming to attack me I could probably have just gone down the branch he was on and climbed right over him before he could have started to react.

Anyway. Who was it sent you here then?

...Friends.

You don't say.

...No, I do say; friends.

Well thanks, that's pretty enlightening.

...Patience, young man.

We negotiate a few more branches.

Where you taking me anyway?

... to a place of safety.

Yeah, but where?

... Patience, young man, patience.

I can see I'm not going to get nothing out of this sloth so I just shut up and content myself with making silly faces at its big black green-streaked back.

It's a long slow journey.

... There's things going on, Mr Bascule, that's all I can say; there's things going on. Frankly I don't know exactly what they are myself, or whether I'd be able to tell you about them if I did, but as I don't I can't anyway, you see?

Not really, I says, which is the truth.

The sloth-geezer what can only say, There's things going on, is called Hombetante and he's the chief sloth; he's got implants and is actually considered a bit of a live wire by sloth standards though you could still go off and have a pee, wash your hands and brush your teeth in the time it takes him to blink. He's fat and old and gray and his fungus looks more lively than he does.

I'm in a half-ruined bit of the same tower where the big bat called a jericule dropped me last night. Me and Gaston the sloth got here after about an hour in the babil, coming in through a tall window half overgrown with babil branches.

This seems to be Sloth Central; it's like a whole room full of scaffolding and hanging tents and hammocks and stuff. There's rubble on the floor and no glass or anything in the windows and the wind blows in through a window on the other side of the huge circular room and through the scaffolding and makes everything sway in the breeze and the sloths don't seem to take very good care of the place no more than they do themselves, but at least they gave me some water to drink and have a quick wash in and then gave me some fruit and nuts to eat. I'd have preferred something hot but I don't think the sloths are great fans of fire so heating stuff up might be a problem.

We're in a big space in the centre of the scaffolding where the sloths apparently hold their meetings. Bet those are a bundle of laughs.

Hombetante is hanging upside down from a bit of scaffolding on a low stage at one end of the meeting space, the floor of which is covered with similar curved lengths of scaffolding like very tall railings. They've given me a sort of sling thing to sit in suspended from Hombetante's scaffold pole. The only other sloth present is Gaston, who's hanging from another bit of scaffolding alongside, munching slowly on some particularly un-yummy looking leaf.

... You are welcome to stay here, Hombetante says, until things settle down.

What you mean, settle down? I ask. How are they settled up at the moment? What exactly is supposed to be going on?

... Just things, Mr Bascule. Things which need not concern you at the moment.

What about a certain ant who goes by the name of Ergates? You know anything about her fate?

... You are just young and doubtless headstrong, Hombetante says, very much like he hasn't heard what I just said... I was young once myself you know. Yes I know you might find that hard to believe but it is true; I well remember...

I won't bore you with the rest. What it boils down to is there's trouble at the crypt and somehow I've got mixed up in it. Might all be cleared up soon, might not. Whoever is supposed to be the good guys in all this are behind the jericule picking me up yesterday and Gaston coming to find me today. Now I'm here with the sloths I've been told to lie low, and not to go near the crypt.

And - of course - to have patience.

After my audience with Hombetante during which he tells me have his life story and I nearly fall asleep twice Gaston takes me to a place near the outside of the scaffolding where there's a room with a hammock and a sling chair and an old fashioned screen working off broadcasts. There's a sort of cubby-hole in one corner with a pipe sticking up which is supposed to be a toilet. Two floors above there's a place where the sloths gather for food every evening. Also in the room is a bowl of fruit and a jug of water. There's a window in one wall what looks out to the big vertical tower window we came through. Gaston shows me how the screen works and says if I get bored I can always go fruit and nut gathering with him.

I say thanks, maybe tomorrow, and he goes and I get into the hammock and pull the covers over and go straight to sleep.

I just know I'm going to go crazy here, and I know that I'm going to have to visit the crypt sooner or later, to look for Ergates and find out what's going on, so when I wake up in the late afternoon I splash some water on my face, have a pee and once I've decided I generally feel awake and refreshed, I get right down to it, on the principal that there's no time like the present.

I try to clear my mind of all things sloth-like (can't think of anything less useful to take into the crypt than any semblance of slothfulness) and plunge right in.

I think I learnt a thing or two during all that time I spent in the crypt as a bird so I head back in that direction only this time I'm not fucking about with wee dainty sparrows or hawks or nothing; I'm going as a big bastarding bird; a simurg. They're so big their brains can cope with a human mind without much finessing, which means I don't have to spend most of my time remembering what I am or disguising my wake-up code as a ring. It's a bit ambitious but sometimes that's the only way to get anywhere.

I close my eyes.

/Check out the immediate locality first; nothing out of the ordinary in the nearby crypt-space. Have a shuftly at the architecture of the tower just on general principals - this old tower is a interesting place right enough - then look a bit further out. The traffic around the Little Big Brothers' monastery is just about back to normal but I don't go any nearer to find out more.

Zoom into birdspace.

/And I'm a huge wild bird floating on the currents sliding within the drifting wind, hanging lazily loosed on my outstretched wings cantilevered across the singing air. My wingtip feathers are each the size of hands; they flutter like a lamb's heart flutters when my shadow falls over it. My feet are steel-tipped grapples hung on the end of my hawser legs. My talons are unsheathed razors; only my eyes are sharper. My beak is harder than bone, keener than just-broke glass. My keel bone is a great knife cozened in my flesh and cleaving the soft air; my ribs are glistening springs, my muscles sleek bunched fists of oily power, my heart a chamber filled with slow thunder, quiet and unstressed; a towering damn trickling power, ticking over, headwaters of charged blood pent and latent.

Well, YES! This is more like it! Why did I ever bother being a hawk? Why was I so bleeding *unambitious*? I feel fierce, I feel *powerful*.

I look about, surveying. Air everywhere. Clouds. No ground.

Other birds flying in vast Vs, climbing in huge columns in the air, gathered in their own dark clouds, wheeling and calling. I think towards roosts.

/And I'm in the midst of them; spherical trees floating in the groundless blueness like brown planets of twigs in a universe of air, surrounded by a squawking atmosphere of birds to-ing and fro-ing.

The parliament of crows, I think.

/And I'm there, in bitter air between layers of white cloud like mirrored landscapes of snow; the great dark winter-trees are massed to the density of black cliffs against the icy billows of freezing cloud. The crows' parliament is in the tallest, greatest biggest tree of all, its brown-black twigs like the sooty bones of a million hands clutching at the chill blank face of heaven. The meeting breaks up when they see me and they come squawking and screeching out to mob me.

I beat, pushing down the air, rising over the pestering birds, seeking one who stays back, directing.

The crows swarm up around me. A few land blows on my head but it doesn't hurt. I laugh and stretch my neck, swivelling my head and ripping a few of their little toyish bodies from the air. I toss them aside; red blood beads, pulverized white bone pushes through their coal black feathers and they tumble torn to the snow-cloud billows. The rest scream, pull fluttering back a moment then mob in again. I stroke forwards. Air snaps swirling under my wings, rolling the pursuing birds round like bubbles under a waterfall.

I see my prey. He's a big grey-black fella perched on the topmost twig of the topmost branch of the parliament-tree and he's just realised what's going on.

He rises, cawing and shrieking into the air. Foolish; if he'd dived into the branches he might have had a chance.

He tries some acrobatic stuff but he's old and stiff and I snatch him so easily it's almost disappointing. *Snap!* and he's neatly encased in one cage of foot, flapping and screaming and losing feathers and pecking at my toes with his little black beak and tickling me. I slice another couple of his fellows out of the air, spreading their blood like a artist would, paint on a white canvas, then I think *eyrie*.

/And am alone with my little crowy friend above a tawny plane of sand and rock, beating towards a fractured cliff where a gnarled finger of rock juts out, its summit topped with a giant nest of sunbleached timbers and splintered white animal and bird bones.

I land and fold the soft cloaks of my wings and stand upon the brittle nest - timbers creak, branches burst, picked-clean bones snap - looking down at my balled foot with the old gray-black crow imprisoned in it, flapping and beating and hollering.

Skreak! Skrawk! Awrk! Gerout!

Oh shut up, I tell it, and the rock-crushing weight of my voice stuns it to quiet stillness. I balance on that leg, compressing the trapped crow and reaching through the bars of my talons with a talon from the other foot, tickling the bird's grey-black throat while the breath wheezes out of it.

Now then my little chum, I say - and my voice is acid on a slicing blade, boiling lead down a open throat - I've a few questions I'd like to ask you.

[Next original section](#)

TRANSLATION - SIX - 4

[Original text](#)

You know what I'm going to do if you don't tell me what I want to know, don't you? I says to the old crow caged in my talons.

I'm resting in my big nest on the finger of stone looking out over the desert, sitting here quite happily pulling out the old grey-black crow's feathers one by one with my free foot, humming to myself and trying to get some sense out of the old bird.

I don't know nothing! the grey-black crow shouts. You'll pay for this, you piece of filth! Set me back where you found me immediately and maybe we say no more about this - eark!

(I scrunch his beak a bit with two of my talons.)

You swine! he blubbers.

I decided it's time to fix the old fella with a serious stare, so I lower my great-beaked head down to his level and look in through the talon-bars at his little black beady eyes. He tries to look away but I hold his head round looking towards me with a talon and put my head closer to him (though not too close - I'm not stupid). Crows can't actually move their eyes very much and now he couldn't move his head neither. They've got a thing called a nictitating membrane what they can flick over their eye and this old chap's nictitating like mad trying to block me out and if I wasn't such a fine firm fleshed-out example of a simurg he might block me out (or even taking me over if he was trying), but I am, so he couldn't and I was in there.

I had decided in my own mind by this time that simurgs were related to lammergeiers and as any fool will tell you lammergeiers are also known as bone crushers. So the old crow looks into my mind and sees what I intend to do and promptly shits himself.

I look at the mess on my fine razor-sharp talons and my nicely decorated nest and then look at him again.

Oh f-f-fuck, he whimpers. Sorry about that. His voice is quivering. I will tell you anything you want to know; just don't do those things to me.

Hmm, I says, lifting him up a bit to look pointedly at the shit on my nest. We'll see.

What you want to know? he shrieks. Just tell me! What you looking for?

I jab my head towards him. An ant, I tell him.

A *what?*

You heard. But let's start with the lammergeiers.

The lammergeiers? They're gone.

Gone?

From the crypt. Gone.

Gone where?

Nobody knows! They been weird and distant for a while and now they just ain't around no more. It's the truth; check it out for yourself.

I will, and before I let you go, so you *better* be telling the truth. Now what about this bleeding red-face thing goes gidibidibigibi etc. etc. you get the idea, eh? What's it when it's at home then?

The old crow freezes for a second, then he starts to shake and then he - I can hardly believe it - he laughs!

What? he shrieks, all hysterical. You mean that thing behind you, is that what you mean?

I shake my head. What sort of bird you take me before? I ask it, shaking it up and down so it rattles like a dice in a cup. Eh? Eh? Just how stupid you think I am? Do I *look* like a bleeding pigeon?

Gidibidibigidigibigi! screams a voice behind me.

(I feel my eyes go very wide.)

I stare at the bedraggled black crow trapped in the talons of my right foot.

Another time, I says, and crush the crow to the size of a thrush.

I whirl round and throw the dead crow at where I hope the horrible red head thing is, pushing myself off the nest at the same time.

Gidibidibigidigibigi! the skinned head shrieks, and the old dead crow explodes into flame and disappears as it hits the jagged red hole of the thing's flayed nose. The head's bigger than it was before and it's got wings of its own now; wings like the wings of a skinned bat, all wet and bloody and glistening. Fucker's bigger than I am and its teeth look sharp as hell. I beat my wings, not turning and flying away but hovering there, staring at it like it's staring at me.

Gidibidibigidigibigi! it screams again and then it's expanding, rushing towards me like it's a planet bloating, a sun exploding. I'm not fooled; I know it's still the size it was really and this is just a feint. I glimpse the real thing coming straight at me like a punch thrown through the exploding image.

This is my nest. The head's over the edge of it right now.

I take one quick flap closer and reach out with a foot and slap down on a huge white-bleached hunk of timber; the timber is most of a tree-trunk and it levers up in a explosion of smaller branches and smacks straight into the face of the thing going Gidibidi-urp!

Its wings close involuntarily around the tent of branches sticking up in front of it and it falls flapping to the nest, all tangled and shrieking and bouncing and flapping and tearing its wings and I just know I should get the hell out while the going's good but call it instinct, call it madness, I just have to attack.

I give one more flap to get a bit of height - noticing that the sky seems to be getting brighter - then spread my talons and start to drop towards the horrible head thing.

The sky's gone very white and bright.

I cancel the stoop and flap once more, hovering over the flapping screaming entangled head and looking up at the sky; it's gone dark again, but it's starting to bulge somewhat.

Oh-oh, I think, and say my wake-up word to myself.

There are certain things which will impose themselves on you even when you are in the depths of the crypt, and an explosion is one of them; either a very bright flash of light or a shock wave and certainly both, which is what I was getting here. You

don't have to wake up and if you're in deep enough you won't, you'll just explain it away to yourself even if it's blowing you apart as you think, but I'm not so daft.

The blast rolls me over in my room, bouncing me off a taut-strung wall and flinging me back into the centre of the room again.

I look out the door through smoke and flames and see men coming down ropes from above the big window in the tower; a handful of guys in wing-chutes are flying in through the window, heading for the scaffolding, shooting with guns that send bolts of light through the smoke. A sloth falls flaming past the doorway of my room, making a tearing, roaring noise as it falls and leaving a trail of thick black smoke. Another explosion rocks the scaffolding around me and the walls bulge. I see the light of big flames shining through the fabric wall to my right. Outside, the guys in the wing-chutes swing their guns to one side and reach out to grab the scaffolding as they thump into it; their chutes fall away as soon as they touch.

I roll away to the back of my room and bite at the fabric just above the floor; it holes and I haul and pull at it till it tears some more then squirm out through and into relative darkness.

I'm behind the walls of the sloths' scaffold structure, swinging from pole to pole like a monkey, heading downwards. A huge explosion of flame bursts out overhead, showering me with flaming debris; I have to hang by one hand from a pole and pat out flames on my shirt. The debris falls on down, lighting the way. There are quite a lot of flames now, and gunfire.

Part of my mind is thinking, Blimey, can all this really be for me? and another part is thinking, No, Bascule, don't be silly! But the first bit is going, Then how come there's all this violence and stuff happening around yours truly? This ain't a violent society; bags is pretty peaceful as a rule. How come all this is happening all of a sudden? Oh fuck; those poor sloths was just trying to be friendly and how do I repay them? I wonder how things have shaken out for Gaston and old Hombetante. Then I figure maybe it's best if I try not to think about that sort of thing; it's done now.

Amazing the survival mechanisms you build up in times like this.

Ahead of me I can see the curved inner surface of the wall of the tower, it's undressed stone and all black and glistening with moisture in the light of flames. A few last poles to go, regularly spaced.

Right hand left hand right hand left hand; I'm in a fever or something because I think; just the time to crypt for a second, and as I reach for the next pole I think,

right, crypt until you touch this pole, and I'm there, deliberately not thinking about where I am at the moment but swinging out into the immediate locality

/only to find it isn't there any more.

It's like there's just a grey fog all around me; a metallic, growling, hissing, static-ish sort of fog. I can roughly remember where things were from earlier but I don't want to have to trust to memory that much. Then the fog seems to collect around me and it's like it's not fog at all it's made up not of water but of metal filings, metal dust, sleeting into my skin like acid, burrowing into my pores and it hurts and my eyes go wide and the metal dust is sandpapering my eyes and making me scream and as I open my mouth it's filling it and nose with metal grit and I'm breathing it in and it's fire, like breathing flame, filling me, roasting me from inside.

I flail out at it, trying to push it away and my hand touches something solid and I remember that means something and with a struggle I wake up.

My hand clutches the cold bar of the scaffold pole and I feel the breath whistle out of me and I sneeze and my eyes water and my skin itches everywhere and I just manage to grab the last pole and then thump into the black stone wall and stop there, still shaking and not feeling too good.

The floor is a couple of metres lower down, covered in rubbish. Looking up, the wall disappears into darkness. On either side, it curves away, black and barely visible. The sloths' scaffolding structure fits raggedly against the wall, poles stuck resting on bits where the rough stone juts out and the grey sackcloth stuff flapping in the breeze. The channel I escaped down rises like a narrow black canyon above me. Flames burn in the distance.

I try to remember the layout of the place from the start of my crypting earlier. Bleeding hell.

I shake my head, then start leaping across from pole to pole along the side of the rough stone wall. Should be this way...

And so I go swinging off through the dark space behind the walls of the place where the sloths hang out, or at least did until these guys - with the guns and parachutes and stuff - came calling.

I'm a rat behind the bleeding walls, I think, scurrying above the rubbish looking for a hole to disappear down.

Oh dear Bascule I think to myself, not for the first time and I've a horrible feeling not for the last time neither. Oh dear oh dear oh dear.

[Next original section](#)

TRANSLATION - SEVEN - 4

[Original text](#)

I'm in the lammergeiers' roost, my breath sounding loud in my ears and mixed in with these hissy clicky noises because I'm wearing this mask on my face and a breathing bottle on me back both of which I got off the dead spyer.

This is a spooky old place and no mistake. There's nobody around and it's very cold indeed and the light is very white and intense and washed out looking. Being in the lammergeiers' roost is like being inside a giant holey cheese; sort of interconnected bubbles and stretched, punctured membranes of stone and metal everywhere and high up on the walls in places where the bubbles make cup and bowls jutting out there's these nests lined with babil plant and feathers only there's no birds in them nor eggs nor nothing. The floor of the roost is like a whole lot of little craters each of them holding loads a broken, splintered bones. My feet go crunch crunch as I walk, looking up and around and trying to see if there's anybody else here either human or creature but the place seems to be deserted.

There are huge circles in the outer walls like portholes where the winds come in whistling through and sounding high and ready and weird; I climb up to one of the bigger holes and look out. It's hazy white cloud out there like a layer of fog what extends to the horizon; you can just about see the lower levels of the castle showing underneath, like something trapped inside a transparent glacier. There's a couple of towers sticking up from the cloud but they look very small and far away. No sign of no birds out there neither, but then that's the thing; this is too far up for birds to fly, so how come the lammergeiers were ever here?

I slide down a curve of bubble and crunch into some bones, then head towards the centre of the tower, into the shades where there's a faint breeze coming from.

The nests thin out and disappear as I go deeper, still crunching over the occasional bone while it gets darker and darker and I can hardly see where I'm putting my feet. I've got this torch what the dead spyer had on him so I turn it on and just as well; there's a dirty great hole right in front of me. I edge closer and hold onto the wall and stick my head out over the huge circular hole. Must be 50 metres or more across. Black deep. Goes straight up into the darkness, too. There's a gentle draft of air coming up the shaft. It's warm, at least in comparison with the freezing air up here. No sign of any other entrances around the shaft, just this one.

I'm still not anywhere near the centre of the tower; that's way, way further deep, probably a couple of kilometres away. I'm in the fast-tower, still on the lam and searching for little Ergates.

I lean back from the hole.

Then there's a crunching noise somewhere in the darkness behind me. I whirl round.

I found Gaston the sloth peeking out over a stone ledge on the inside wall of the sloths' tower, near the sloped tunnel what led to the old lift shafts. According to the glimpse I'd had of the locality when I'd crypted earlier these shafts were abandoned and unused but I'd thought with any luck they'd be the type of shaft what has stairs going round the inside of the shaft for emergencies, and maybe they wouldn't be guarded by the bods what were attacking the sloths.

Well, that was the theory. In fact the scoop of the tunnel on the level below where Gaston was hiding was full of Security geezers with guns. Oh great, I thought.

I'd climbed along between the dank black wall of the tower and the framework of scaffolding what was the sloths' home neighbourhood, heading for here, where the floor dropped away in steps and the access tunnel was. Looked like old Gaston had had the same idea.

I didn't think I'd made a noise but he turned round slowly and saw me and pushed himself back from the edge of the ledge and climbed up the scaffolding towards me, pointing behind me.

We retreated a bit, behind some of the canvas-hung scaffolding.

... young Bascule, he said, you are safe; good.

Yeah and you, I said. But it looks like the Security boys have this place strung up good and tight. You know any other ways out of here?

...As it happens, Gaston says, I do actually. If you'll just follow me...

Gaston set off back from the scaffolding heading upwards at what was probably an extreme sprint for a sloth. I ambled after him.

We climbed up about seven floors of the sloth scaffolding; there was quite a lot of smoke up here and I could see flames in the distance, deeper inside the structure.

... Here, Gaston said, stopping at a pretty ordinary looking bit of wall. He gripped the top of a dripping black stone; it hinged down to reveal a round black hole. He motioned me in.

I must have looked dubious.

... I'll go first, then, he said, and clambered into the hole.

I shouldn't have looked dubious because I couldn't lift the stone back up after us and so Gaston had to squeeze past me to do it. I don't know if you have ever had a large sweaty sloth with copious quantities of fungus on its pelt squeeze past you in a confined space... Come to think of it probably you won't, but assuming that's the case think yourself lucky that's all I can say.

Having Gaston squeeze past me again didn't seem like such a good idea.

I'll just lead off then if it's all the same to you Gaston old son, I said.

... By all means, young Bascule.

The tunnel was cramped and only fit for crawling in. The damn thing went up, down and round this way and that way; it was like climbing around in the intestines of some huge stone giant. With Gaston's pelt-fungus still smeared all over me, it didn't smell dissimilar neither.

Listen Gaston, I said at one point while he was giving me a punt up a particularly steep bit of the giant intestine, I'm really sorry if that was me what brought all that there shit down on you guys. I really appreciate what you did, rescuing me and taking me in etc. and I'd hate to think I was responsible for all this.

...I quite understand your anguish, young Bascule, Gaston said. But it's not your fault certain persons are trying to persecute you.

You really think they was after me? I asked.

... That was the impression I formed from what I overheard, Gaston said. They did not seem to be interested in any of us. They were looking for somebody else they suspected us of harbouring.

Blimey.

... In any event, Gaston said, The responsibility is theirs, not yours. What happened is just one of those things I suppose.

Well, thanks, Gaston, I said.

...You didn't *crypt*, did you? Gaston said. It's just that might have led them to us. But you didn't, did you?

Oh no, I said. No, not me; I didn't. Nope. Not guilty. No sir-ee. Uh-uh. Wouldn't catch me doing a thing like that. Oh no.

...There you are then, Gaston said.

And so we wound on through the guts of the tower, me feeling lower than a tapeworm.

Eventually we came to a bit where the tunnel widened out and the floor turned from stone to wood; I more or less fell into this wooden bowl where a faint light shone. I didn't quite get out of the way in time so Gaston slid down on top of me.

More pelt fungus.

... there should be a trap here somewhere, Gaston said, feeling around on the floor... Ah, here it is. There was a sort of hollow clunking noise and in the half-light I could see Gaston pulling what looked like a huge plug up out of the floor.

... It's a hollowed out babil stem, Gaston explained, setting the plug to one side. I'll go first, I think.

The hollow babil trunk headed down in a series of long, stretched Ss. There were rungs on the walls; Gaston went down them pretty quickly for a sloth. Now and

again we passed what might have been doors in the trunk where the occasional crack of light showed, but mostly it was totally dark. We seemed to go on down forever and I nearly fell off a couple of times. Just as well Gaston was beneath me; the thought of another close encounter with his pelt fungus quickly concentrated my mind, I can tell you.

At last Gaston said, ... here we are, and we stepped on to a platform of stone and when through a door into a cramped space where Gaston wriggled and I crawled between a stone floor and this metal sealing which made a sort of blurbilurbilurbil sound. We came out in what looked like a big long curving service duct whose walls were lined with pipes; we'd just crawled under a big gurgling tank of some sort. I could here what sounded like a train rumbling somewhere nearby.

... There is a freight tube line junction through there, Gaston said, pointing at a hatch in the floor. The trains have to slow down to negotiate the points and it is possible for a human to jump on board a wagon and so secure a ride. I think I have to return to see what has befallen my friends, but if you can make your way to the second level south-west buttress you will find a town there. Go to the central square; someone will be looking for you and will look after you. I'm sorry to have to abandon you in this way, but it is all I can do.

That's all right, Gaston, I said. You done all you can and I don't deserve all the kindness you've shown me. I was so choked I could have hugged him, but I didn't. He just nodded his big funny pointed head and said,... Well, good luck young Bascule, you take care now... and you promise you will go to the south-west buttress at the town there?

Oh yes, I says, lying through my teeth.

Good. Fare well.

Then he was away, crawling back under the big gurgly tank.

I went down through the hatch in the floor into a broad dark cavern where lots of tube lines converged from single tunnels. There was nobody about but I hid behind some humming sort of cabinet things between two of the tracks and waited; a while later a train of open wagons came rattling through, clattering across the points; I let the unmanned engine and most of the wagons go past and then jumped on one near the end, hauling myself up the side and over into its empty interior.

After a few minutes during which the train entered a black-dark tunnel and picked up speed again, I reckoned it was safe to crypt.

There was no horrible corrosive fog/sleet here. Everything luckily seemed normal. The train was heading for the far end of the second level, near to the Southern Volcano Room. It would slow down at a few more places yet where I could get off. I crypted further afield.

/The lammergeiers roost was frozen. Its crypt-space representation was there but it was like a still picture instead of a movie; there were no birds nor anybody or anything there and you couldn't interact with nothing there. I sensed something nearby in the crypted space and suspected there was some kind of guard on the place, waiting to see who turned up interested in the lammergeiers. I disconnected quick.

The train rolled on. The lammergeiers lived - or used to live - in the fast-tower, on the 9th level. I reckoned there was something going on up there. The freight train would pass almost underneath the fast-tower. Good enough for me. The 9th level sounded a bit high and cold and inaccessible but I'd burn that bridge when I came to it.

I almost decapitated myself jumping off the train when it went through another set of points in a wide bit of tunnel the length of which I slightly overestimated, but apart from banging a shoulder on a wall and skinning one knee I escaped unscaved. I climbed a ladder, walked a bit of service tunnel and took a service elevator up to the main floor level. I found myself in what looked like a giant chemical works, all pipes and big pressure vessels and leaking steam and funny smells. Sure enough, a quick check on the crypt and I confirmed it was a plastics refinery.

After a lot of fancy and highly technical crypting, some walking and climbing over pipes and ducts and avoiding the dodgier-looking shadows I found an automatic freight elevator taking vats of some sort of fertilizer up the tower and hitched a ride up in that.

My ears popped after two minutes, and after about five, and ten.

Some more fancy crypting got the elevator to go a floor above where it was expected; this was as high as it could go. I got out in a sort of tall open gallery where a fierce cold wind blew and the view was of babil plants forming a fretwork of

gnarled branches letting in a spare icy light.

I let the elevator take itself back down a floor.

There was a pillar about 100 metres away which supported the roof of the tall gallery. The one in the other direction was twice as far away. I set off towards the nearer one.

I was still only dressed in my usual clothes and this wind was making me shiver already, but then it had been fairly warm further down so maybe it was just the suddenness of the change. I walked along the gallery, between the silhouetted babil and the smooth ashlar of the tower's barely curved wall. The floor felt cold through my shoes and I wished I had a hat.

The crypt started to get a bit vague and unhelpful about the layout of the fast-tower at around this level. I just had to hope the pillar might have a set of stairs in it.

It didn't. It had two sets of stairs in it, intertwined in a double helix like DNA.

Didn't seem to matter which one I took. I started climbing.

I went fast at first to try and warm up but the breath just whistled out of me and my legs turned to jelly; I had to sit down and put my pounding head between my knees before I could continue, more slowly.

The steps went round and round and round; pretty steep.

I plodded on and up, trying to settle into a rhythm. This seemed to work but I was getting a hell of a headache. Lucky I was fit, not to mention determined. (Not to mention bloody stupid, it was starting to occur to me.)

The pillar got to the next storey - another open gallery - and didn't stop; it went on up. Seemed to go on for a good ways yet so I stuck with it. The stair case had no handrails and though it was a good couple of metres wide it would have been frighteningly open and exposed on the outer side if the babil plants hadn't been hanging growing all over the outside of the tower. As it was it was still pretty frighteningly exposed on the other side, but the best thing to do was not to think about it and certainly not to look.

I kept climbing.

Another level. My head was hurting like mad. I looked for the pillar but it wasn't

there any more. Instead there was a whole network of twisted pillars, weaving this way and that with high altitude babil - thin weedy stuff - all over it, coating the floor of the gallery, netting the weave of the fretted stone wall.

I wandered, my feet tripping over the babil, looking for a strand of stonework with steps in it or on it so that I could go higher, my vision getting dark at the edges, my legs feeling bouncy and strange and something howling in my ears that might have been the wind and might not.

I don't know how long it was before I found the spyer, fallen amongst the babil, dead, crumpled, head shattered, skin dried, white bones poking through his kneepads. I remember looking up and thinking he must have falling from the open-work ceiling, and I saw his mask and the cylinder on his back but I just wandered off again, feeling like I was walking along this tunnel because that was all I could see and it seemed like hours later while I was still searching for another stairway or at least a door or something that I thought, Hey, maybe I could use the spyer's gear! and I started to turn round and almost tripped over him because I'd wandered in a circle.

There was old brown blood dried on the face mask but it fell away like dark dandruff when I knocked it. The oxygen in the tank was cold and it felt like it was freezing my lungs but my headache started to go and I wasn't looking down a tunnel all the time no more.

I finished the water in his canteen, took his jacket, hat and torch and left the poor bugger lying there.

The stairs were in a really obvious place, just along from the top of the pillar I'd climbed.

The lammergeiers' roost was on the next level. I got there at dusk and collapsed in a nest of dry babil and huge scratchy feathers. The din waked me and I started investigating, ending up looking down the big shaft.

I hear the crunching noise.

I swing the torch round aiming the beam down the tunnel; the warm breeze coming up the deep black shaft tugs at my jacket. The torch beam just disappears into the dark, swallowed up.

Something crunches again, then there's a noise of something coming whistling towards me.

I don't have time to duck and I don't see what hits me, but it bashes into my chest and knocks me backwards, the breath going *Hoof!*, out of my lungs. I feel myself start to go over the edge of the shaft and grab with one hand as the lip of stone skates under my bum. My hand misses.

I fall into the black throat of the shaft.

The roar of air builds up around me, tearing the mask off my face.

After a few seconds I get my breath back and I start screaming.

[Next original section](#)

TRANSLATION - EIGHT - 4

[Original text](#)

I get tired screaming. Even more I get tired of getting bashed on the head with the mask what has come off my face; it's still attached to the air tank on my back and it's slipped round behind my neck and is going thump thump thump on the back of my bonce.

I feel behind me and tear it away.

My ears are going pop pop pop. The air is blasting round me so hard there's hardly any point in me screaming anyway. It's almost totally dark; I've got a sort of gray sensation of the walls rushing past around me, and if I twist round I can look up and see a vague impression of a tiny patch of dark gray on the blackness.

Downwards, there's just blackness.

I try to crypt but I can't; don't know if it's because I'm moving too fast or because the shaft is shielded or because I'm too terrified to concentrate properly. I start

screaming again, then stop, gulping for breath.

I'd have shat my pants by now but it's been so long since I ate that I can't.

The air is cold and I'm shivering but it's not freezing. I settle into a sort of floppy X-shape after a while, like I've seen skydivers do; I drift towards one wall, then manoeuvre myself away again. I have to keep swallowing to keep my ears from bursting. I try to think how far up I was and how long it's going to take me to fall to the bottom, if it's the bottom that's going to break my fall. I realise that there might be something between me and the bottom and I could hit at any moment and I start screaming again.

I stop after a while. Tears get whipped off my face but it's not me crying it's just the fierceness of the wind tearing at my eyes.

I've never died before. I don't know what it's like. I've heard from other people and I've been in the minds of bags what have died and got their impressions but they say it's different for everybody and I don't know what it'll be like for me and I was hoping not to find out for a while yet thanks very much but there we go.

I start wondering if they'll resuscitate me at all. Oh fuck; what if I'm in such big trouble they'll just lose my identity from the crypt? What if they catch my dying thoughts and then just interrogate me, or don't bother saving me at all?

I feel like I'm going to be sick.

The roaring around me goes on forever. My eyes are dry and soar. My ears hurt too.

Oh fuck I don't want to die.

I can't believe how long this is taking. I feel like I'm in crypt-time. It occurs to me maybe I am, maybe I crypted without knowing about it. But I can't be. I'm obviously not. I'm here, falling down this shaft, dammit. I try crypting again.

It works. I'm on the second basement level, practically at sea level.

How much further down can this bleeding shaft go?

/I port across into the crypt; at least I can avoid the moment of impact. My implants will pull me back when I die, so there won't be two of me, but at least... wait a bleeding minute.

According to the local hardware I'm still on the same level. The crypt thinks I'm stationary. What's going on here?

I double check, treble check, quadruple check. Yep; the cryptosphere thinks I've stopped.

I give a sort of mental gulp, then port back across to my body.

/The air is still screaming up round me. It's still totally black but with the thermal bit of my vision I can still make out the walls to either side. Sure enough, they do look a bit different; no impression of them hurtling past no more. I stare down.

I don't see nothing but blackness but now I think about it the sound is different somehow; even more of a roar.

Then suddenly there's lights everywhere, blinding me.

I close my eyes. I think; blimey, I never felt a thing. That's me dead and this is the long tunnel with the light at the end what everybody gets to see and I must have hit the bottom and not even felt it.

Except the roaring's still there and the wind is still pushing into my face. I open my eyes again.

I'm staring straight down at a sort of a hexagonal grid of wires or metal or something, and beyond the grid, a few metres further down, there's all these big propeller things, 7 of them, all whirling away and roaring and sending the air screaming up past me.

I look to the side.

There's a door in the wall level with me and a couple of big black mean looking birds with scaly necks perched there, looking at me, beady-eyed, their feathers ruffling in the draft.

I can't think what else to do. So I wave to them.

That was how we used to reach our home, one of the birds tells me.

I'm walking along a broad brightly lit tunnel. The two lammergeiers are keeping pace with me by sort of half-hovering in the air one on either side of me, their wings going whuf whuf, whuf whuf. I didn't even know they could do this.

I'm walking kind of funny because I think I did crap my pants just a little, but they don't seem to notice, or they're too pol-ite.

You mean you got blasted up there by those fans? I say, surreptitiously pulling at the seat of my pants.

Correct, says the bird (having to shout above the noise of its wings going whuf whuf).

So why'd you leave? I shout. And who was that up there who pushed me down?

We left because it was no longer safe, and we were needed down here, yells the bird. As to who pushed you into the shaft, I imagine it was probably a state employee.

What, a Security geezer or something? But-?

Please; I can't tell you any more. Our commander may be able to answer any other questions you have. Look; would you mind running?

Running? I says, Why, is there somebody after us? I glance behind expecting to see Security people pursuing us but there's just the long bright tunnel stretching way into the distance.

No, shouts the bird, it's just this pace is very tiring for us.

Sorry, I says, and break into a run. Doesn't do my chafed bum no good but it keeps the two lammergeiers happy, beating alongside.

And so that was how I arrived at the lammergeiers' HQ; breathless, on the double and with my pants spotted with cack.

The head lammergeier is a fierce big bugger of a bird; taller than me when he's perched and wings longer than I'm tall. He isn't no old guy neither, he's in his prime with sleek black and white feathers, steely looking talons, a naked neck that

looks old and bright, and jet-black eyes. I don't know if he's got a name; we haven't been properly introduced.

He's sitting on a perch, I'm sat on the floor. The room is funnel shaped and the broad circular roof has an image of a blue sky with little fluffy clouds in it. There's another half dozen or so other lammergeiers perched around the room too.

You have been a proper pest to certain people, master Bascule, the big bird says, staring at me and rocking from side to side and sort of stamping its feet on the perch. A most persistent pest.

Thank you very much, I says.

That was not a compliment! the bird screeches, flapping.

I sit back, blinking (my eyes are still a bit sore after all that wind roaring past me when I fell). What do you mean? I ask.

It's quite possible that we have given away our new position here by turning on the lift fans so we could save your miserable hide! the bird shouts.

Well, sorry I'm sure, but I was told you might have some information about the whereabouts of a friend of mine.

What? the head bird says, sounding puzzled. Who?

It's an ant. Her name is Ergates.

The bird stares at me. You're looking for an *ant*? he squawks, and sounds incredulous.

A very special ant. (I narrow my eyes.) What was taken by a *lammergeier*.

The bird shakes its head. Well, it wasn't done by one of us, it says, shaking its feathers.

Oh yeah? I says.

We are chimerics, master Bascule. This... ant must have been taken by a wild lammergeier.

And where are they then? I ask. (Damn, thought I was on the right track at last!)

Dead, the head bird says.

I blink my eyes. Dead?

The state had them killed during yesterday evening when it realized we opposed it; most of them were mobbed by chimeric crows and brought down. We believe we were the real targets. Two of us were caught and destructed. All the wild lammergeiers are dead.

Oh, I said. Oh dear, I thought.

Hmm, I said, I don't suppose you know if any of them said anything about-?

Wait a minute, the bird says, waving one wing at me. It closes its eyes for a moment. It opens them again.

It looks steadily at me for a moment, then sort of half shakes its head. Well, master Bascule, it says. As I said, you have been nothing if not persistent. And you have not been frightened to risk your life. It stamps its feet again. There is something you might do.

Do for what, for who?

I can't tell you too much, young sir; it's best for you if you don't know too much, believe me; but there are some very important things happening right now, things which affect - and which will affect - all of us. The state - the people who have attacked our friends the sloths and have tried to kill you - are trying to prevent something happening. Will you give us your help in making it happen?

What happen? I ask, suspicious. They say there's an emissary from the chaotic bits of the crypt around, wanting to infect the upper layers.

The big bird shakes its wings impatiently. The emissary, it says, is called an asura and it is from one of the few parts of the crypt which has *not* been touched by the chaos. It carries within it the means of our salvation, but its mission is in jeopardy; the state opposes it to because the fulfilment of its mission would - conceivably - mean the end of the present power structure. Of course the state has used the bogey of the chaos to attempt to turn others against the asura and those who would aid it. The fact remains it is our only hope. If it does not succeed we are all lost.

I shift my bum a bit. I really should have asked to clean up a bit before all

this. Not that a place where lammergeiers are is likely to be big on washrooms, judging from the state of some of the floors I've seen around here. I'm thinking through what the head geezer's just told me. It might be true, but I very much doubt I'm being told the whole truth here.

And what am I supposed to do? I ask.

The head bird looks distinctly uncomfortable, and flaps its wings a bit. It's dangerous, it says.

I'd kind of guessed that, I says urbanely, feeling pretty grown-up, thank you very much. What did you have in mind? I ask.

The lammergeier fixes me with its ice-black eyes. Going back up the fast-tower, it says. Only higher this time. (It stamps its feet, one after another, and the other birds do the same thing.) Much higher.

I sit back. Throats gone a bit dry.

You got a toilet I could use? I ask.

Looks like the whole bleeding fast-tower's just packed with shafts. We're here at the foot of another one. It's bigger than the one I fell down; a lot bigger. This is the one in the centre of the tower and it must be easily half a kilometre across. Very faint light filters down from... blimey, I don't know; hell of a far up, that's for sure.

We are here courtesy of the war, the head bird tells me. Both sides think the other controls this space.

Oh really.

Yes; the fact they may be about to reach an accommodation shortly is another reason for there being a degree of urgency about the present situation.

The head bird is perched with his half-dozen pals on what looks like a peace of crumpled, soot-blackened missile wreckage near the centre of the shaft base. Other lammergeiers are flitting about the place through the shadows. The rock floor of the shaft looks like it used to be smooth but it's all chipped and scarred

now and littered with bits of broken machines. There's a double set of rails leading in from the side of the shaft which is where we came from; there's a big cavern there what looks like a museum of rocket flight or something; full of big sheds and mysterious bits of equipment and rusting missiles and big spherical tanks and telescopes and radar dishes and deflated silver balloons like discarded bolgounz.

I look straight up. Didn't know you could get vertigo looking up.

This is the main shaft, the head bird says, and poses. Once it led to the stars.

I look up again and I can believe it. My head spins at the thought & I almost fall over.

The top of the fast-tower has been inaccessible for as long as anybody or anything can remember, the lammergeier tells me. Many attempts have been made, mostly in secret, to reach its heights. All have failed, as far as we know. It lifts up one foot and looks down at the bit of missile it's perched on. You see some of the wreckage around you.

Uh-huh, I says. Something up there keeps shooting them down, yeah?

No; but there appears to be an armoured conical base to the tower's upper reaches at about 20 kilometres which nobody has been able to penetrate.

I look round at all the missile wreckage. The authorities don't usually let airplanes operate within the castle for fear of a crash weakening the structure, let alone missiles. You can't help wondering what sort of damage has been done up there by all this wrecked hardware.

So? I says.

We have a final vacuum balloon, the lammergeier says.

A what?

A vacuum balloon, it repeats. Technically, a very strong impermeable membrane enclosing a high vacuum and fitted with a harness.

A harness, I said.

And we have some high-altitude breathing equipment.

You have, have you? I says. (and am thinkin, oh-oh...)

Yes, master Bascule. We are asking you to take the balloon up as far as you can and then climb some way beyond the level the balloon attains.

Is that possible? How far up we talking?

It is certainly possible, though not without risk. The altitude is approximately 20 kilometres.

Has anybody else been up that high?

They have.

They get back down again?

Yes, the lammergeier says, stamping from side to side again and flapping its wings out a bit. Several missions have attained such heights in the past.

What am I supposed to do up there?

You will be given a package to take with you. All you have to do is deliver it.

Where? Who to?

You will see when you get there. I can't tell you any more.

If this is so urgent, how come you guys can't do it? I ask, looking round at the other birds.

One of our number tried, the head bird says. We believe he is dead. Another was about to mount a second attempt just before you appeared but we were not very hopeful of success. The problem is that we cannot fly to a half of the altitude required, and once the balloon will rise no more simply walking up steps appears to be the best means of gaining height. We are not built for walking. You are.

I think about all this.

It is a simple task in a sense, the head lammergeier says, but without it the asura's mission will surely fail. However, this is a dangerous undertaking. If you lack the courage to take it on then be sure that most humans would feel the same way. Probably the sensible thing to do is to turn it down. You are barely an

adolescent, after all.

The head bird lowers his neck a little and looks round at his to nearest pals.

We ask too much, he says, sounding sorrowful. Come - and he starts to open his wings as if to fly away.

I swallow hard.

I'll do it, I says.

[Next original section](#)

TRANSLATION - NINE - 4

[Original text](#)

Hoo-wee! I'm probably higher than anybody else in the whole wide world right now, excepting only the people in the fast-tower assuming there's anybody up there of course.

The balloon is a great enormous shadow above me. I'm hanging under it by what looks like a pair of threads from a wispy net of more threads what loop over the big sphere. The lammergeiers strapped these three oxygen tanks to my chest and gave me this light little package to put on my back. I've got another mask on now, too.

& a bottle of water.

& warmer clothes.

& a torch,

& a knife.

& a headache, though that's probably the least of my problems, but nevermind.

& I've got a parachute too, though that might have to go when I get a bit higher up.

The birds at the bottom of the shaft seemed to be in a bit of a hurry and I only got about 10 minutes of instruction on how to control the balloon while I was getting kitted out with the high-altitude clothing and stuff, but it boils down to using a couple of pairs of lines to pull hinged flaps like airbrakes which should steer me a bit, and (to control my speed of ascent) waiting for the balloon to slow down and then cutting off lengths of plastic tubing secured to the same threads holding me.

The lammergeiers brought the balloon out of a big shed in the cavern at the foot of the shaft; it ran on rails attached to the ceiling. The balloon is just a big sphere full of vacuum; it's as simple as that. It looks greyish and according to the birds is made of some sort of stuff similar to the fabric of the castle, so it must be pretty strong. The threads were already draped over the balloon.

What if it busts? I asked, joking really, but the head bird looked kind of awkward and said something about other models with lighter balloons inside them not being up to the job and if it was going to burst it would be low down probably and they would give me a parachute for lower altitudes.

Anyway, not to worry I said, kind of wishing I hadn't asked in the first place.

I got my flying lesson, they weighed me, then they gave me the various bits of stuff, strapped me in, pushed the balloon - with me hanging under it - along the rails out into the bottom of the shaft and along to just before where the rails ended. They attached the lengths of plastic tubing to the harness in front of me and that was us ready.

Good luck, master Bascule, the head bird said. We wish you all the best.

Me too, I said, which might not have been very gracious, but at least it was true. Oh, and thanks for all your help, I said.

You are welcome, the head lammergeier said. It seemed to stiffen, then said, We'd better get on with it; things appear to be coming to a head. It went quiet for a moment, then seemed to nod to itself. I would advise you not to use the crypt for the moment, it told me.

Righty-ho, I said, and gave the thumbs up sign.

They pulled some levers and the rails above me swung up and open; the balloon took off with a whoosh of air, dragging me and the lengths of plastic tubing up with it. It was like falling upwards. Felt like my stomach was pulled down to my boots.

They either closed the doors to the covering alongside the bottom of the shaft or put the lights out, because it all went dark down there and I was left with just the dark greyness of the shaft walls. The slipstream wind tugged at my clothes.

The balloon seemed to go up pretty straight, though I pulled on the control lines connected to the hinged flaps just to make sure they worked.

Even with all that tubing and stuff we fairly shot up and I had to keep yawning to clear my ears. Some of the lammergeiers had flown up inside the shaft, and I waved to their shadowy shapes as I went past. The whole huge circle of the shaft bottom seemed to shrink like some closing shutter as me and the balloon whistled upwards; pretty soon the birds wheeling round inside the shaft had grown too small to see, and the bottom of the shaft was just a black circle getting slowly smaller.

I don't know how many minutes it took to get to where I needed oxygen, but it had got pretty bleeding cold by then, I can tell you. I was glad of the thermals and stuff they'd given me. My head was a bit sore by this time.

I turned on the first oxygen tank and took a breath. The balloon had slowed down a lot and I didn't want to use any more oxygen than I had too, so I cut a length of the tubing off; it was thick stuff like you'd make a drain or something out of and it fell away like a big stiff worm; the balloon picked up speed again and the thin air hissed past me.

The walls of the dark shaft were plain and boring, just lines and rails and occasional circular outlines that might have been doors but which were never open.

I'd let 5 of the 8 bits of plastic tubing go when I saw flashes down below, in the depths of the shaft. A bit later I heard some muffled bangs.

There were more brief flashes, and then I saw a little wavering spark of light what didn't fade; in fact the bugger seemed to be getting brighter and closer.

Oh fuck, I thought, and cut the strings holding the other three lengths of plastic tubing. The balloon whooshed up the shaft; the harness bit into my thighs and my arms were dragged down to my sides. The air roared distinctly around me and my headache got worse.

I watched the three bits of tubing falling away, hoping they'd hit whatever it was coming up after me, but they didn't. The rocket - which is what I was assuming it was - climbed on after me. I didn't want to cut my parachute free and I didn't think that would make much difference anyway and there was just a chance if the rocket destroyed the balloon I'd survive and be able to use the parachute (Ha! Who was I kidding?). I felt my bladder getting ready to lighten me a bit.

Water, I thought. I got my water bottle out and was about to chuck it away when the fire around the tail of the rocket went out. It still kept coming for bleeding ages mind you, and I was half waiting for some second stage or something to ignite, and still hesitating about chucking away the water bottle.

Never happened; the rocket got to within about half a kilometre or so and then just sort of toppled over and slowly started to fall away, tumbling end over end back into the darkness and eventually disappearing.

I breathed a sigh of relief that misted up my face plate. The balloon almost scraped the side of the shaft but with a bit of dextrous pulling and a modicum of swearing and panicking I got the damn thing back on the correct course.

There was a explosion at the bottom of the shaft.

No more rockets.

I couldn't see upwards naturally, but the base of the shaft was an awful long way away and I thought I had to be near the top of the thing by now. On the other hand, the balloon was still fairly racing upwards, so I guessed I was wrong. Sure enough, the climb went on for some time after that. My feet and fingers was starting to get really cold. My head was aching fit to burst.

I didn't feel I was breathing right, but couldn't remember what you were supposed to do to breathe right. I started to worry about what would happen if they'd taken the top off the tower or I drifted out the side through a hole and went on up into space. What'd I do then? I wondered. I looked down; my gloved fingers were fiddling about with the valves on top of the little bottles strapped to my chest. I shook my head. Doing this hurt a lot.

I think I must have blacked out for a bit because when I awake I was stationary.

My head still hurts like hell but at least I'm alive. The balloon is floating against one

wall of the shaft and sort of bobbing me up and down very gently. It's a bit lighter at last. I can see the tracks going up the side of the shaft in great detail, but no doors. I try to think what I can throw away. An oxygen tank; there's one empty. I must have changed over to the second one after all.

I unscrew the tank with very cold gloved fingers and let it drop.

The balloon floats up very slowly.

My head feels tight and buzzy like it's going to burst and my whole body feels bloated like I'm a balloon myself. Lights sparking in front of my eyes and roaring in my head.

The balloon stops, bobbing again.

Still no sign of a door.

I rock back and forward as if I'm on a swing; this scrapes the balloon against the side of the shaft, but it can't be helped. Swinging quite hard, I can see a door - an open door! - a bit further up the shaft.

I take a drink from the water bottle, then let it drop into the darkness. The balloon bobs a bit higher over the next few minutes. Nearly there but not quite.

I might need the knife; can't throw that away. I look at my boots and my gloves, but I suspect it would be crazy to throw them away. I could throw away the parachute but then I'd have no chance at all of getting back down.

It looks pretty light up here; I take the torch out and throw it downwards as hard as I can.

I keep the balloon going from side to side as it floats up a bit higher. I'm level with the door; it's human sized and like a sort of square O shape. Looks dark inside there. I can almost reach the door but I need to make the balloon rock some more. The balloon floats down a bit and I shout and curse but I keep swinging and swinging and eventually I'm whipping back and forward in a almost complete half-circle and the door's just about in range; I fling out one leg and hook onto the sill of the doorway, then pull myself in with my legs.

I dunno; I must be dopey with the altitude or something because I just undo the harness and of course the balloon races off up the shaft, nearly dragging me out of the doorway at the same time; I stagger with one hand flailing out of the door while

the other glove slides along the flange inside the doorway.

I pull myself back in, gasping for breath. I look up the shaft. There's a big black cone hanging down feeling the top of the shaft, and there's big long holes like sort of upwardly-sloped gill slits letting in some light around the walls of the shaft opposite the cone. The light looks like daylight, though it must be coming from a fair distance as this is the centre of the tower and everybody knows it don't taper much.

There's another couple of balloons up there where the one that brought me up is heading. I watch mine thump against the side of the black cone. It goes on up, nearly disappears out of one of the big long slits, then comes to a stop at the top of the shaft, between the cone and the shaft side, bobbing like a balloon lost to the ceiling at a kids' party.

Oh you silly fool Bascule, I think to myself. I look down the shaft. How am I going to get back down now? Still got the parachute but without the balloon to slow me down initially the lammergeiers reckon the parachute's nearly useless. Oh well, might as well leave the damn thing here. I take it off and dump it by the doorway.

Blimey it's cold. I peer into the darkness beyond the door.

There's another door and a sort of control-panel looking thing. Could be a lift I suppose but I should be so lucky. Sure enough, nothing happens when I press the symbols. I try crypting, very carefully and short-range, so it's really not like crypting at all. Blimey; there's nothing here! Not even any electrics nearby! I never been so far away from the crypt, from civilisation.

Anyway, the point is, this elevator's dead.

There's another door to one side. It isn't quite closed. I push it open. Very dark, but there's steps there all right. Very dark indeed. Wish I still had that torch. Spiral steps. Bloody big deep steps, too; must be only three to a metre. Oh well, I think, trying to encourage myself; I didn't have any other plans for today.

I start climbing.

I count the steps in hundreds, trying to keep to a steady rhythm. It doesn't get any darker or any brighter.

I try not to think about how high I am, even though there's a kind of pride in me that I've got this far. I also try not to think about how I'm going to get down, or

about the people who shot the rocket at me and whether they will still be there if I am able to find a way back down. I pass another side door; it's locked. 500 steps and another door. It's locked too. I also try not to think of the things you hear about the fast-tower; about real ghosts or monsters from before the Diaspora or from the depths of space or just put here to guard it and stop silly bags from attempting to explore it. I spend quite a lot of my time trying not to think about all these things.

Another doorway. The doors are spaced every 256 steps. All locked so far.

1000 steps.

Suddenly there's something ahead of me, round the turn of the stair; something that looks like it's alive and waiting and crouched looking at me.

It's still almost pitch black but this thing's blacker, and it's huge and it's poised over me like some avenging angel of darkness. I feel for my knife. The thing above me on the steps doesn't move. I'd like to kid myself it isn't really there but it is. Can't find my knife. It's hanging on a bit of string somewhere here but I can't find it; oh blimey, oh fuck.

I find the knife and hold it out in front of me with one shaking hand. The black thing still doesn't move. I glance behind me. I *can't* go back. I stare at the motionless thing blocking my way.

It takes a few more moments for me to realise.

It's the frozen dead body of the lammergeier they sent up before. I breathe a bit easier (if you can be said to be breathing easier when your lungs feel like they're about to come out down your nose and your skin feels tight and about to split like a ripe fruit), but when I go up past the bird I try not to touch it.

I keep going.

There's a door at 1024 steps, blocking the way up. I try crypting but the doors electrically dead. There's a big sort of wheel thing on the front so I spin it and after sticking at first, it turns. After a awful lot of wheel whirling there's a click. The door sticks too but it opens eventually, hissing and scraping.

On and up.

1500 steps.

I have to switch to the third and last oxygen bottle at 1540 steps.

Keep going, keep going, keep going. Round and round and round and round forever and ever and ever...

2000. Keep climbing. Roaring ears, flashing eyes, sickness in my stomach, coppery taste of blood in my mouth.

I'm expecting something at 2048 steps but I can't remember what it is. I get there and it's a closed door. I remember the last one. Same performance here except this one sticks worse and I can hardly move the bugger.

2200. 2202. 2222. I want to stop here, I keep bashing into the walls and I'm frightened of falling all the way back down to wherever it was I started from. It's so cold. I can't feel my feet or my hands. Just my nose with my glove and can't feel that neither. Hack and spit. Spit goes *crick* in mid-air. That means something but I can't remember what. Something bad, I think. 2300. 2303. 2333. Not such a good place to stop. Think I'll keep going.

2444. 2555. 2666.

I don't know where I'm going nor barely where I am any more. I'm in a huge screw thing what is winding down into the earth as I climb up inside it.

2777. 2888. 2999, 3000.

Then there's an emptiness in my lungs. I try hard to think.

I'm in the fast-tower, in a stairway. 3000 steps. I can see some lights, but they're just in my eyes. Nothing in the tank, nothing in my lungs, nothing in my head.

256, something keeps telling me. 256. 256. 256. I don't know what it is but it keeps bleeding banging on about 256 256 256 all the damn time. 2560; there wasn't anything there was there? I stand there, swaying, suddenly thinking, Oh no! What if I missed a open door? What if I've gone past wherever it was I was supposed to be going?

256 256 256.

Oh shut up.

256 256 256.

Oh hell, all right; 256; what's 12 times 256?

Bugged if I know. Too difficult to work out.

256 256 256.

Fucking hell I'm going to keep going just to get away from this damn noise in my head.

256 256 256.

3050. Tunnel vision. No noise but roar. 3055. Sparks gone. Not sure if I'm still climbing or not. 3060. Highest corpse in the castle maybe. Shit, I'm going to die and I'm out of reach of the bleeding crypt; I'm going to really really die, forever.

Try crypting but it's hard, just like keeping my eyes open is hard. Get a hint of a reply though. A wee tiny small voice going:

Bascule! Keep going! Keep going! We're almost there!

Oh, it's Ergates. Ergates the little ant. Come back to me now.

That's nice. But I have to break the connection, it's too hard to maintain.

3065. Taking off the harness now; it's useless, like the crypt. I can see to do it though. Very cold now. Very very cold.

3070. More light.

3071. Light; doorway. Doorway to the side. Don't believe it. Just another hallucination.

3072. Open doorway, bright and warm. Lungs on fire. Going to keep going.

Fall.

Fall into the doorway. Hit the floor.

It's good to lie down.

Lights light up, sounds sound.

Flash!-flash!-flash! Hiss. Vhoot!-vhoot!-vhoot! Clunk. Flash!-flash!-flash! Hiss. Vhoot!-vhoot!-vhoot!

Blimey, I think, closing my eyes, I didn't know dying involved such a bleeding commotion...

[Next original section](#)

TRANSLATION - TEN - 5

[Original text](#)

It's a very strange feeling waking up alive when you were fully expecting to be dead. Especially when you thought you were really really dead, like completely utterly and finally. You sort of come round slowly thinking; I must be dead, but I'm thinking, so I can't be, so what's going on here then? You are even a bit frightened about waking up any more in case there's some sort of unpleasant surprise in store, but then you think, well, I'm never going know what's going on unless I do wake up, and so you do.

I open my eyes.

Glory bleeding be, it's bright and warm. I'm lying on my back looking up at some sort of sculpture or mobile or something; a bloody huge one, too. There's this great big planet thing suspended right above me and all these others suspended from the ceiling and connected with hoops and stuff. I sit up. I'm in some kind of big circular room with dark windows; stars out of one side, the Encroachment on the other. The thing above me seems to be a model of the solar system and it takes up most of the space in the room. In the middle of the room, under the big globe of the sun, there's a bunch of couches, seats and desks and stuff. There's a guy there, standing on a desk, holding his hand up to the model sun. He says something, nods, then gets down and comes over to me. He's got blond hair and golden eyes and skin like dark polished wood. He's wearing a pair of shorts and a little waistcoat. He waves to me.

O hello, he says, are you all right?

Not too bad, I say, which is true. My sore head's a lot better and the rest of me isn't aching too much either but if I had to pick one improvement above all the others it would have to be the fact I don't feel like I'm just about to die anymore.

Welcome to the High Great Tower, the hollow blossom of the fastness, he says. This is the Orrery Room. May I help you up?

Thanks, I says, accepting his hand and getting to my feet.

The lights in the room flicker. The man looks up and smiles.

Ah, he says. He looks back at the centre of the room, goes still for a second, then looks at me and with a great big smile on his face says, Faith moves mountains. From our hollowness is discharged our central purpose; *it* is sent that we may be delivered.

Pardon? I said.

Come; let me find you something to eat and drink.

Well, I went with the guy, but I don't mind saying I was giving him a funny look behind his back. He got me to sit in a chair in the centre of the room and started fiddling with some sort of control thing on one of the desks.

It's been so long, he says, scratching his head. What would you like? he asks.

Frankly chum, I said, I'm parched. I fancy a cup of tea but anything wet would do.

Tea, he says, scratching at his noddle again. Tea; let me see. He punches some more controls.

I look up at the model of the sun hanging over my head. I still don't feel too brilliant but I'm a lot better than I was. I have a stretch and look around. Lying on a nearby desk there's the package I was supposed to deliver here.

Oh I says. Excuse me, is that package for you then? and point at it.

What? he says, turning and looking at it. Oh, I suppose so, if you like, he says, and turns back to the controls.

Ahem, I says. I don't want to appear ungrateful or nothing but I did nearly die getting that package up here; would you mind telling me what was in it?

In it? the guy says, frowning at me. Oh, there wasn't actually anything in it. He goes back to the screen. Tea, he says, tea tea tea. Hmm.

I stare at him.

Well then, hullo? I'm saying excuse me, but well then; what the bleeding hell was the point of me coming up here then?

The guy turns and smiles at me, then turns away again.

I just sit there shaking my head and feeling like a prize idiot.

The chap with the golden locks mutters to himself and eventually gets a sort of cylinder to appear up out of the desk. He reaches inside and brings out of a cup of stuff which he shows me.

Tea? he says.

I sniff the cup and shake my head. Cola, I says. But it'll do. Cheers.

Frankly it's crap cola but beggars can't be choosers.

Something to eat? the guy says, looking hopeful.

I think about this. What would you recommend? I ask.

I drink another few cups of soda - it's getting better with each cup - while the guy tries to get some cakes together but without much success. He's staring at a pile of steaming pink goo the desk's just produced when he straightens and looks at me, smiling and looking dead happy.

Then something drops onto my shoulder from above.

It's time to stare again. So I stare.

Bascule; hello again. Well done. Mission accomplished. You know, I lost count of the times I cursed you for your damned persistence over the past couple of days,

when far too much of my time seemed to be spent making arrangements for your safety which you seemed to devote all your efforts to frustrating, but in the end I needed help and you were there to provide it. I thank you. Well, something to tell your grandchildren, I suppose. Don't you think?... Bascule? Bascule, can you hear me?

I stare at the tiny little thing sitting on my shoulder.

Ergates? I says hoarsely.

Who else?

Is it really you?

You know any other talking ants?

What the bleeding hell you doing up here?

Delivering a message.

That's what they told *me*, I says, glancing at the blond guy, who's still muttering and punching buttons.

A necessary fabrication. What you were really delivering was me.

You?

Me. After I abandoned my balloon I had got so far up the steps from the central shaft, but then it became obvious I could go no further because of the door - doors in the plural as it turned out - blocking my way. Very frustrating. I was able to contact the lammergeiers but the bird they sent to help me could not even reach me before the poor creature died. You were like the answer to our prayers. I just hopped on you as you passed and hitched a lift.

So I did hear you when I tried to crypt! I thought I was dying!

Actually I think you were, Bascule, but you also did hear me.

Anyway, I says, pointing at the blond punter struggling with the food-desk thing, why couldn't this guy have come and helped you?

He did not know I was on my way. The fast-tower is not the easiest of places to

communicate with even if we had wanted to announce I was on my way. He only knew we were here when I was able to activate the door to the bottom-most live floor.

I just look at that damn ant for a while.

So are *you* this asura everybody's been talking about?

No, Ergates says, laughing. Though I was created in a similar manner. My task was to act as a key for the tower access systems; they were kept separate from the rest of the tower's functions so that if the tower AIs were ever infected with the chaos they could not facilitate a physical invasion of the tower's upper reaches. I suppose I'm a sort of micro-asura if you like, though all I've really done is press a lift button.

But what about that bleeding lammergeier what snatched you from Mr Zoliparia's; that was all a set-up, was it?

Of course.

But you shouted my name and went Eek!

Had to make it look convincing.

You might have said goodbye.

I waved my antennae; what more you want?

Bloody hell. I stare into the distance, then look up at the mobile.

So what's going to happen now? I ask. What were you doing up there?

I was delivering a message to a receptor chip buried in the model earth. The code itself is meaningless but it's supposed to activate the relevant systems. Everything seems to be working, though there are reports we may not have time to test the elevators. I have to say I didn't expect my arrival and that of the asura to occur in quite such close proximity.

Cake! the guy says, and brings over a plate covered with small steaming brown lumps. I sniff them.

Maybe something in the savoury line might be more appropriate, I suggest. The

guy looks like his crest just fell.

Oh! Hash browns; my favourite! Ergates says. Let me at them.

The guy looks happier and offers the plate to Ergates, who climbs onto it and lifts a crumb bigger than she is and then returns to my shoulder.

Your eyes are bigger than your stomach, I tell her.

I'm an ant; my eyes *are* bigger than my stomach.

Smart ass.

Then the golden-eyed geezer straightens, looks unfocused for a bit and says, Ah, we have somebody requesting to join us. Elevator West North West.

I'm about to say, So? What you telling me for? when Ergates speaks;

Is it her? she says.

Yes, the guy replies. (I give him a funny look; I thought only I could hear Ergates speak.) and one of the winged emissaries, the guy continues, and another she will vouch for.

I would suggest we allow them to ascend, says Ergates.

Very well, the guy says.

We're going to have company, Ergates tells me.

There were three sets of doors; they hissed open in sequence, revealing a small cylindrical elevator with couches similar to those in the waiting room. A wave of cold air spelled from the lift's opened doors. Gadfium and Asura walked into the chilly interior. The lammergeier hopped in after them, cackling excitedly.

The doors closed, one after another.

The elevator lifted quickly; Gadfium sat down along with Asura, who wore an expression that seemed both relaxed and concentrated at the same time. She

glanced once at her ring.

The lammergeier looked uncomfortable under the vertical acceleration.

It went on for some time.

[Next original section](#)

TRANSLATION - TEN - 6

[Original text](#)

Well here we are, us exiles trapped in the tower. It's been a whole month so far since we took refuge up here. Everybody seems happy enough so far.

There's me, Asura, Madam Gadfium and lots of lammergeiers. We've got a whole bloody flock of them birds up here; a load of them managed to get to the lift what brought up Asura and Madam Gadfium, before the Security geezers found it. Now they can't get up and we can't get down but I know where I'd rather be. Asura says it don't matter anyway as there's other lifts they haven't found, though we shouldn't be in any hurry to use those just yet.

... What happened when Asura and Madam Gadfium got here was dead simple; Asura went straight up to the big globe of the sun and put her hand up and touched it and stayed that way for a minute or so while the rest of us looked on, then she sat down and closed her eyes.

What happens now? I asked the golden-eyed guy.

We'll know if it's worked in 16 minutes, he said.

16 minutes, I thought.

Rang a bell, somehow, but I couldn't think quite which one.

Let me make some introductions, I heard Ergates say...

The fast-towers brains got the chaos but it didn't seem to be bothered. The golden hair-and-eyes bloke doesn't seem to have changed since the chaos got into the tower's computers but then frankly he was a few feathers short of a full wing to start with so no change there.

Asura says the whole nature of the chaos may be about to change soon anyway, or at least the way we look at it may be about to change, which would amount to the same thing. First we got to stop fighting it though.

I'll believe it when I see it.

The old fast-tower's a fascinating place; there's a lot more to it than just the big room with the orrery; that's like just one little room out of hundreds. Bits are a bit dilapidated and one or two bits are off limits because they were punctured by meteorites and beyond repair and so couldn't be re-pressurised and heated when the tower woke up, but most of it's up and running again and it's just a total hoot. Amazing views, for a start.

There's loads of fascinating machines up here; great big huge ones like space guns and stuff but also lots of little robots. The robots were trying to fix some of the big machinery they've got up here. They mostly broke down when the tower got the chaos and a lot of the ones that didn't had to be deactivated, but some of them still run on their own on-board computers, which aren't very clever but let them move and do stuff.

It's a bleeding education living up here, I tell you; there's telescopes and a museum of space flight with working simulators and hundreds of hotel rooms and swimming baths and flumes and ice rinks and a huge and totally brilliant spiral ski slope and a whole bloody squadron of space planes though they're far too old to be used and would certainly blow you to smithereens if you tried to fly them, which is a pity. There's also rockets and satellites and all sorts of stuff and as Asura pointed out when she was negotiating with this guy Oncaterius and the other bags downstairs, some of the stuff we got up here could make a really nasty mess of the castle if we was to start dropping it or launching it on them. She said they became greatly less aggressive when she sent them pictures.

Anyway, the rulers have got enough on their plates at the moment as it is without worrying about us; all sorts of shake ups happening down there. The Cryptographers and Engineers have got together and are trying to get the wormhole operational, even though it looks like we won't need it for escaping. Old Adijine is still King but he's having to fight increasing calls for his abdication and all

the clans have demanded and got representation on the Consistory but even so bags still aren't happy and feel they've been misled and want more info and say. Apparently the fastest growing political movement at the moment is one calling for Asura to be made Queen or President or something. Watch that space, like they say.

We've got access to the crypt now too, and I've been in touch with Mr Zoliparia, who was most relieved I was all right and is currently in a tricky position in our Go game. I also contacted the Little Big Brothers. Don't think I'll be doing any Telling for a while; we didn't lose much to the chaos but in the current State Of Emergency I'm not the sort of person the Little Bigs want to associate with, which is fair enough; plenty to do up here and I could always go freelance if I missed it, which I don't.

Asura must have mistakenly thought I was upset at getting knocked back by the Brothers because just afterwards she made me a present of her ring. I was really pleased anyway but even more so when I realised what it actually is. It's got a little red stone in it and if you look really closely you can see something moving about in there sometimes and if you try to crypt into it you can here something way way in the distance going gidibibibigidie (etc), very tiny and small and far away and plaintive.

Ha ha ha, I says.

Nope, I'm pretty happy here and so are the others I think. Asura and Madam Gadfium talk a lot and do lots of studying and there's another Madam Gadfium what lives in the fast-tower's brains and is helping Asura talk with the chaos. Ergates makes me learn lots of stuff too, claiming my education isn't over yet and she's probably right I suppose I've still got things to learn.

As for the whole reason Asura was sent here in the first place, to deliver the message which was supposed to put everything in motion in general and Do Something about the Encroachment, well that appears to have gone smoothly, after an iffy start.

The first sign of what was going on was a bad one; the amount of light from the sun dropped by an eighth, overnight. Everybody, even the scientists, got in a bit of a blue funk about this. There were riots in the castle and elsewhere and I myself remember thinking, Oh fuck, and What have we done? and What is to become of us? That sort of thing. But then from that day on the light started to increase again, very slowly but continually.

The sun shone down, the moon did likewise, the planets continued on their allotted

paths, but it was like the big old nasty Encroachment had gone into reverse, however unlikely that might sound.

It was some time before the astronomers spotted what was really happening and it was an even longer time before they convinced themselves it was true, but it was and it is and now we know exactly what the bags of the Diaspora left us with to get us out of trouble, and it's a fearsome engine indeed.

The sun shines a tiny bit stronger every day, and though it'll be a long time before anybody can see it with the naked eye, the stars have moved.

The End.

Terminology

Note this section is not in the book, but may prove helpful for some of the unusual terms. It is not intended as a guide to the book.

Allure	A walkway along the top of a wall.
Ashlar	Hewn squared and shaped blocks of building stones.
Bailey	The outer courtyard or ward inside the castle walls used for outdoor activities.
Balustrade	A railing topping a row of small columns placed along a walkway or an outside stairway.
Barbican	The gateway or outworks defending the drawbridge.
Bartizan	An overhanging battlemented corner turret, corbelled out; sometimes as grandiose as an overhanging gallery.
Bastion	A small enclosed tower placed at the edge of a curtain wall and used primarily as watch or guard post.

Breccia	Rock composed of sharp-angled fragments embedded in a fine-grained matrix.
Bretasche	A timber gallery built out at the top of a wall or tower.
Buttery	The storeroom for wine and other beverages.
Buttress	A projection of masonry or wood used to enforce and strengthen a wall. Type 1: Flying buttresses are a narrow arched bridge built against the wall. Type 2: Pilaster buttresses gradually recede into the wall as it ascends.
Chamber	An arched roof. A bedroom. A hall for meetings
Chancel	The space surrounding the altar of a church.
Chevron	A pattern having the shape of a V or an inverted V.
Cistern	A storage place for water.
Concentric	Two set of high defensive walls, with one totally inside of the other. And with both enclosed areas having a common centre.
Crenels	The open spaces between the merlons on an battlement fortifications. Also some are known and used as embrasures.
Crenelation	That which the crenels and merlons form as an battlement fortifications
Curtain wall	A castle wall enclosing the entire castle or a courtyard.
Drawbridge	A wooden bridge, capable of being raised or lowered, used to open a passageway or gate.
Embrasure	An opening through which arrows or bolts may be fired.
Frieze	A plain or decorated horizontal part of an entablature between the architrave and cornice. A decorative horizontal band, as along the upper part of a wall in a room.

Gable	The generally triangular section of wall covering the end of a roof ridge.
Gallery	An outdoor roofed balcony used for patrolling the castle walls. A corridor or room devoted to the exhibition of castle portraits and treasured trophies.
Groined	A roof with sharp edges at the intersection of cross-vaults.
Hoarding	A covered gallery built on or near the top and outside of a curtain wall or tower to defend against attackers.
Lammergeier	A large predatory bird (<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>) of the vulture family, ranging from the mountainous regions of southern Europe to China and having a wide wingspan and black plumage. Also called bearded vulture, ossifrage
Lancet	A long, narrow window with a pointed head.
Lintel	A horizontal stone or beam bridging an opening.
Machicolation	A masonry projection from a curtain wall or tower supported by corbels with an opening in the floor through which rocks, boiling water or arrows could be rained down upon attackers.
Merlon	That solid part of the wall or tower battlement that with the crenels form the crenelations. Provides protection to the castle defenders.
Mullion	The vertical division of windows.
Mural Tower	A tower built on the top of the curtain wall.
Narghile	A pipe with a long flexible tube connected to a container where the smoke is cooled by passing through water.
Narthex	An enclosed passage between the main entrance and nave of a church; also, vestibule
Nave	The principal hall of a church, extending from the narthex to the chancel.
Oubliette	A secret dungeon with a trap-door opening only in the ceiling.
Parapet	A protective wall built along the outer top of a wall or tower.

Pilaster	An auxiliary mass of masonry designed to strengthen a wall.
Pinnacle	An ornamental crowning spire, tower, etc.
Piscina	A hand basin with drain, usually set against or into a wall.
Plinth	A projecting base of wall.
Refectory	Communal dining hall.
Revetment	To face a slope of earthwork with a layer of stone to stabilize and strengthen the slope.
Roc	A mythical bird of prey having enormous size and strength.
Septentrional	Northern.
Shingle	A tile made from wood and used for roofing material.
Sill	The lower horizontal face of an opening.
Simurg	A mythical Persian bird. It was an agent of the good will of the gods. It killed harmful snakes and its feathers had healing powers.
Solar	A term commonly used for a small chamber or private sitting room usually off of the great hall. Originally referred to a private chamber located high up in the keep, with a window that allowed direct sun to enter to warm the room
Tracery	Intersecting ribwork in upper part of window.
Vault	An arched structure of masonry usually forming a ceiling or roof.
Ward	The inner courtyard of a castle or an open space within the castle's walls.