

## Merlin's Gun

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Punishment saved Sora. If her marksmanship had not been the worst in her class, she would never have been assigned the task of overseeing proctors down in ship's docks. She would not have had to stand for hours, alone except for her familiar, running a laser-stylus across the ore samples the proctors brought back to the swallow-ship, dreaming of finishing shift and meeting Verdin. It was boring; menial work. But because the docks were open to vacuum it was work that required a pressure suit.

"Got to be a drill," she said, when the attack began.

"No," her familiar said. "It really does seem as if they've caught up with us."

Sora's calm evaporated.

"How many?"

"Four elements of the swarm; standard attack pattern; coherent-matter weapons at maximum range . . . novamine countermeasures deployed but seemingly ineffective . . . initial damage reports severe and likely underestimates . . ."

The floor pitched under her feet. The knee-high, androform proctors looked to each other nervously. The machines had no more experience of battle than Sora, and unlike her they had never experienced the simulations of warcreche.

Sora dropped the clipboard.

"What do I do?"

"My advice," her familiar said, "is that you engage that old mammalian flight response and run like hell."

She obeyed; stooping down low-ceilinged corridors festooned with pipes, snaking around hand-painted murals that showed decisive battles from the Cohort's history; squadrons of ships exchanging fire; worlds wreathed in flame. The endgame was much swifter than those languid paintings suggested. The swarm had been chasing Snipe for nine years of shiptime, during which time Sora had passed through warcreche to adulthood. Yet beyond the ship's relativistic frame of reference, nearly sixty years had passed. Captain Tchagra had done all that she could to lose the swarm. Her last gamble had been the most desperate of all; using the vicious gravity of a neutron star to slingshot the swallowship on another course, one that the chasing ships ought not have been able to follow, unless they skimmed the neutron star even more suicidally. But they had, forcing Snipe to slow from relativistic flight and nurse its wounds in a fallow system. It was there that the swarm attacked. Near the end, the floor drifted away from her feet as ship's gravity faltered, and she had to progress hand over hand.

"This is wrong," Sora said, arriving in the pod bay. "This part should be pressurized. And where is everyone?"

"Attack must be a lot worse than those initial reports suggested. I advise you get into a pod as quickly as you can." "I can't go, not without Verdin."

"Let me worry about him."

Knowing better than to argue, Sora climbed into the nearest of the cylindrical pods, mounted on a railed pallet ready for injection into the tunnel. The lid clammed shut, air rushing in.

"What about Verdin?"

"Safe. The attack was bad, but I'm hearing reports that the aft sections made it."

"Get me out of here, then."

"With all pleasure."

Acceleration came suddenly, numbness gloving her spine.

"I've got worse news," her familiar said. The voice was an echo of Sora's own, but an octave lower and calmer; like a slightly older and more sensible sister. "I'm sorry, but I had to lie to you. My

highest duty is your preservation. I knew that if I didn't lie, you wouldn't save yourself."

Sora thought about that, while she watched the ship die from the vantage point of her pod. The Husker weapons had hit its middle sphere, barely harming the parasol of the swallowscoop.

Bodies fell into space, stiff and tiny as snowflakes. Light licked from the sphere. Snipe became a flower of hurting whiteness, darkening as it bloomed. "What did you lie about?"

"About Verdin. I'm sorry. He didn't make it. None of them did."

Sora waited for the impact of the words; aware that what she felt now was only a precursor to the shock, like the moment when she touched the hot barrel of a gun in warcreche, and her fingers registered the heat but the pain itself did not arrive instantly, giving her time to prepare for its sting. She waited, for what she knew - in all likelihood - would be the worst thing she had ever felt. And waited.

"What's wrong with me? Why don't I feel anything?" "Because I'm not allowing it. Not just now. If you opt to grieve at some later point then I can restore the appropriate brain functions."

Sora thought about that, too.

"You couldn't make it sound any more clinical, could you?"

"Don't imagine this is easy for me, Sora. I don't exactly have a great deal of experience in this matter."

"Well, now you're getting it."

She was alone; no arguing with that. None of the other crew had survived - and she had only made it because she was on punishment duty for her failings as a oldier. No use looking for help: the nearest Cohort motherbase was seventy light-years toward the Galactic Core. Even if there were swallowships within broadcast range it would take decades for the nearest to hear her; decades again for them to curve around and rescue her. No; she would not be rescued. She would drift here, circling a nameless sun, until her energy reserves could not even sustain frostwatch.

"What about the enemy?" Sora said, seized by an urge to gaze upon her nemesis.

"Where are the bastards?"

A map of the system scrolled on the faceplate of her helmet, overlaid with the four Husker ships that had survived the slingshot around the neutron star. They were near the two Ways that punched through the system; marked on the map as fine straight flaws, surrounded by shaded hazard regions. Perhaps, like the Cohort, the Huskers were trying to find a way to enter the Waynet without being killed; trying to gain the initial edge in a war that had lasted twenty-three thousand years. The Huskers had been at war with the Cohort ever since these ruthless alien cyborgs had emerged from ancient Dyson spheres near the Galactic Core.

"They're not interested in me," Soa said. "They know that, even if anyone survived the attack, they won't survive much longer. That's right, isn't it?"

"They're nothing if not pragmatic."

"I want to die. I want you to put me to sleep painlessly and then kill me. You can do that, can't you? I mean, if I order it?"

Sora did not complete her next thought. What happened, instead, was that her consciousness stalled, except for the awareness of the familiar, thoughts bleeding; into her own. She had experienced something like this stalling; aboard Snipe, when the crew went into frostwatch for the lonest transits between engagements. But no frostwatch had ever fit this long. After an age, her thoughts oozed back to life. She groped for the mental routines that formed language.

"You lied again!"

"This time I plead innocence. I just put you in a position where you couldn't give me the order you were about to. Seemed the best thing under the circumstances."

"I'll bet it did." In that instant of stalled thought, the pod had turned opaque, concealing the starscape and the debris of the ship. "What else?"

The pod turned glassy across its upper surface, revealing a slowly wheeling starscape above filthy ice. The glass, once perfectly transparent, now had a smoky luster. "Once you were sleeping," the familiar said, "I used the remaining fuel to guide the pod to a cometary shard. It seemed safer than drifting."

"How long?" Sora was trying to guess from the state of the pod, but the interior looked as new as when she had ejected from Snipe. The sudden smokiness of the glass was alarming, however: Sora did not want to think how many years of cosmic ray abrasion would be required to scuff the material to that degree. "Are we talking years or decades, or more than that?"

"Shall I tell you why I woke you, first?"

"If it's going to make any difference . . ."

"I think it makes all the difference, quite frankly." The familiar paused for effect. "Someone has decided to pay this system a visit."

Sora saw it on the map now, revised to account for the new relative positions of the celestial bodies in this system. The new ship was denoted by a lilac arrow, moving slowly between Waynet transit nodes; the thickened points where the Way lines interecepted the ecliptic plane.

"It must have a functioning syrinx," Sora said, marveling, and for the first time feeling as if death was not the immediately preferable option. "It must be able to use the Ways!"

"Worth waking you up for, I think."

Sora had eight hours to signal the ship before it reached the other node of the Waynet. She left the pod - stiff, aching, and disorientated, but basically functional - and walked to the edge of a crater; one that the familiar had mapped some years earlier. Three thousand years earlier, to be precise, for that was how long it had taken to scratch the sheen from the glass. The news had been shocking, at first - until Sora realized that the span of time was not in itself important. All that she had ever known was the ship; now that it was gone, it hardly mattered how much time had passed.

Yet now there was this newcomer. Sora crisscrossed the crater, laying a line of metallic monofilament; doubling back on her trail many times until a glistening scribble covered the crater. It looked like the work of a drunken spider, but the familiar assured her it would focus more than satisfactorily at radio frequencies.

As for the antenna, that was where Sora came in: her suit was sheathed in a conductive epidermis; a shield against plasma and ion-beam weaponry. By modulating current through it, the familiar could generate pulses of radio emission. The radio waves would fly away from Sora in all directions, but a good fraction would be reflected back from the crater in parallel lines. Sora had to make gliding jumps from one rim of the crater to the other, so that she passed through the focus momentarily, synchronized to the intervals when the other ship entered view.

After two hours of light-transit time, the newcomer vectored toward the shard. When it was much closer, Sora secreted herself in a snowhole and set her suit to thermal stealth-mode. The ship nosed in; stiletto-sleek, devilishly hard to see against the stars. It was elongated, carbon-black, and nubbed by propulsion modules and weapons of unguessable function, arrayed around the hull like remora. Yet it carried Cohort markings, and had none of the faintly organic attributes of a Husker vessel. Purple flames knifed from the ship's belly, slowing it over the crater. After examining the mirror, the ship moved toward the pod and anchored itself to the ice with grapples.

"How did something that small ever get here?"

"Doesn't need to be big," the familiar said. "Not if it uses the Waynets."

After a few minutes, an access ramp lowered down, kissing the ice. A spacesuited figure ambled down the ramp. He moved toward the pod, kicking up divots of frost. The man - he was clearly male, judging by the contours of his suit - knelt down and examined the pod. Ribbed and striped by luminous paint, his suit made him seem naked, scarred by ritual marks of warriorhood. He fiddled with the sleeve, unspooling something before shunting it into a socket

in the side of the pod. Then he stood there, head slightly cocked.

"Nosy bastard," Sora whispered.

"Don't be so ungrateful. He's trying to rescue you." "Are you in yet?"

"Can't be certain." The familiar had copied part of itself into the pod before Sora had left. "His suit might not even have the capacity to store me."

"I'm going to make my presence known."

"Be careful, will you?"

Sora stood, dislodging a flurry of ice. The man turned to her sharply, the spool disengaging from the pod and whisking back into his sleeve. The stripes on his suit flicked over to livid reds and oranges. He opened a fist to reveal something lying in his palm; a designator for the weapons on the ship, swiveling out from the hull like snake's heads.

"If I were you," the familiar said, "I'd assume the most submissive posture you can think of."

"Sod that."

Sora took steps forward, trying not to let her fear translate into clumsiness. Her radio chirped to indicate that she was online to the other suit.

"Who are you? Can you understand me?"

"Perfectly well," the man said, after negligible hesitation. His voice was deep and actorly; devoid of any accent Sora knew. "You're Cohort. We speak Main, give or take a few kiloyears of linguistic drift."

"You speak it pretty well for someone who's been out there for ten thousand years."

"And how would one know that?"

"Do the sums. Your ship's from seven thousand years earlier than my own era. And I've just taken three thousand years of catnap."

"Ah. Perhaps if I'd arrived in time to waken you with a kiss you wouldn't be quite so grumpy. But your point was?"

"We shouldn't be able to understand each other at all. Which makes me wonder if you're lying to me."

"I see." For a moment she thought he heard him chuckling to himself; almost a catlike purring. "What I'm wondering is why I need to listen to this stuff and nonsense, given that I'm not the one in current need of rescuing."

His suit calmed; aggressor markings cooling to neutral blues and yellows. He let his hand drop slowly.

"I'd say," the familiar said, "that he has a fairly good point." Sora stepped closer. "I'm a little edgy, that's all. Comes with the territory."

"You were attacked?"

"Slightly. A swarm took out my swallowship."

"Bad show," the man said, nodding. "Haven't seen swallow-ships for two and a half kiloyears. Too hard for the halo factories to manufacture, once the Huskers started targeting motherbases. The Cohort regressed again - fell back on fusion pulse drives. Before very long they'll be back to generation starships and chemical rockets."

"Thanks for all the sympathy."

"Sorry . . . it wasn't my intention to sound callous. It's simply that I've been traveling. It gives one a certain - how shall I say? Loftiness of perspective? Means I've kept more up to date with current affairs than you have. That's how I understand you." With his free hand he tapped the side of his helmet. "I've a database of languages running half way back to the Flourishing."

"Bully for you. Who are you, by the way?"

"Ah. Of course. Introductions." He reached out the free hand, this time in something approximating welcome. "Merlin."

It was impossible; it cut against all common sense, but she knew who he was. It was not that they had ever met. But everyone knew of Merlin: there was no word for him other than legend. Seven, or more properly ten thousand years ago, it was Merlin who had stolen something from the Cohort, vanishing into the Galaxy on a quest for what could only be described as a weapon too dreadful to use. He had never been seen again - until, apparently, now.

"Thanks for rescuing me," Sora said, when he had shown her to the bridge of the ship he called Tyrant; a spherical chamber outfitted with huge black control seats, facing a window of flawless metasapphire overlooking cometary ice.

"Don't overdo the gratitude," the familiar said.

Merlin shrugged. "You're welcome."

"And sorry if I acted a little edgy."

"Forget it. As you say, comes with the territory. Actually, I'm rather glad I found you. You wouldn't believe how scarce human company is these days."

"Nobody ever said it was a friendly Galaxy."

"Less so now, believe me. Now the Cohort's started losing whole star-systems. I've seen world after world shattered by the Huskers; whole strings of orbiting habitats gutted by nuclear fire. The war's in its terminal stages, and the Cohort isn't in anything resembling a winning position." Merlin leaned closer to her, sudden enthusiasm burning in his eyes. "But I've found something that can make a difference, Sora. Or at least, I have rather a good idea where one might find it."

She nodded slowly.

"Let's see. That wouldn't be Merlin's fabulous gun, by any chance?"

"You're still not entirely sure I'm who I say I am, are you?" "I've one or two nagging doubts."

"You're right, of course." He sighed theatrically and gestured around the bridge. In the areas not reserved for control readouts, the walls were adorned with treasure: trinkets, finery, and jewels of staggering artistry and beauty, glinting with the hues of the rarest alloys, inset with precious stones, shaped by the finest lapidary skill of a thousand worlds. There were chips of subtly colored ceramic, or tiny white-light holograms of great brilliance. There were daggers and brooches, ornate ceremonial lasers and bracelets, terrible swords and grotesque, carnelian-eyed carnival masques.

"I thought," Merlin said, "that this would be enough to convince you."

He had sloughed the outer layer of his suit, revealing himself to be what she had on some level feared: a handsome, broad-shouldered man who in every way conformed to the legend she had in mind. Merlin dressed luxuriously, encrusted in jewelry which was, nonetheless, at the dour end of the spectrum compared to what was displayed on the walls. His beard was carefully trimmed and his long auburn hair hung loose, evoking leonine strength. He radiated magnificence.

"Oh, it's pretty impressive," Sora said. "Even if a good fraction of it must have been looted. And maybe I am half convinced. But you have to admit, it's quite a story."

"Not from my perspective." He was fiddling with an intricate ring on one forefinger. "Since I left on my quest" - he spoke the word with exquisite distaste - "I've lived rather less than eleven years of subjective time. I was as horrified as anyone when I found my little hunt had been magnified into something so . . . epic."

"Bet you were."

"When I left, there was an unstated expectation that the war could be won, within a handful of centuries." Merlin snapped his fingers at a waiting proctor and had it bring a bowl of fruit. Sora took a plum, examining it suspiciously before consigning it to her mouth. "But even then," Merlin continued, "things were on the turn. I could see it, if no one else could."

"So you became a mercenary."

"Freelancer, if you don't mind. Point was, I realized that I could better serve humanity outside the Cohort. And old legends kept tickling the back of my mind." He smiled. "You see, even legends are haunted by legends!"

He told her the rest, which, in diluted form, she already knew. Yet it was fascinating to hear it from Merlin's lips; to hear the kernel of truth at the core of something around which falsehoods and half-truths had accreted like dust around a protostar. He had gathered many stories, from dozens of human cultures predating the Cohort, spread across thousands of light-years and dispersed through tens of thousands of years of history. The similarities were

not always obvious, but Merlin had sifted common patterns, piecing together - as well as he could - an underlying framework of what might just be fact.

"There'd been another war," Merlin said. "Smaller than ours, spread across a much smaller volume of space - but no less brutal for all that."

"How long ago was this?"

"Forty or forty five kiloyears ago - not long after the Way-makers vanished, but about twenty kays before anything we'd recognize as the Cohort." Merlin's eyes seemed to gaze over; an odd, stentorian tone entered his voice "In the long dark centuries of Mid-Galactic history, when a thousand cultures rose, each imagining themselves immune to time, and whose shadows barely reach us across the millennia . . ."

"Yes. Very poetic. What kind of war, anyway? Human versus human, or human versus alien, like this one?"

"Does it matter? Whoever the enemy were, they aren't coming back. Whatever was used against them was so deadly, so powerful, so awesome, that it stopped an entire war!"

"Merlin's gun."

He nodded, lips tight, looking almost embarrassed. "As if I had some prior claim on it, or was even in some sense responsible for it!" He looked at Sora very intently, the glittering finery of the ship reflected in the gold of his eyes. "I haven't seen the gun, or even been near it, and it's only recently that I've had anything like a clear idea of what it might actually be."

"But you think you know where it is?"

"I think so. It isn't far. And it's in the eye of a storm." They lifted from the shard, spending eight days in transit to the closest Way, most of the time in frostwatch. Sora had her own quarters; a spherical-walled suite deep in Tyrant's thorax, outfitted in maroon and burgundy. The ship was small, but fascinating to explore, an object lesson in the differences between the Cohort that had manufactured this ship, and the one Sora had been raised in. In many respects, the ship was more advanced than anything from her own time, especially in the manner of its propulsion, defenses, and sensors. In other areas, the Cohort had gained expertise since Merlin's era. Merlin's proctors were even stupider than those Sora had been looking after when the Husker attack began. There were no familiars in Merlin's time, either, and she saw no reason to educate him about her own neural symbiote.

"Well," Sora said, when she was alone. "What can you tell me about the legendary Merlin?"

"Nothing very much at this point." The familiar had been communicating with the version of itself that had infiltrated Tyrant, via Merlin's suit. "If he's impersonating the historical figure we know as Merlin, he's gone to extraordinary lengths to make the illusion authentic. All the logs confirm that his ship left Cohort-controlled space around ten kiloyears ago, and that he's been traveling ever since."

"He's back from somewhere. It would help if we knew where."

"Tricky, given that we have no idea about the deep topology of the Waynet. I can search the starfields for recognizable features, but it'll take a long time, and there'll still be a large element of guesswork."

"There must be something you can show me."

"Of course." The familiar sounded slightly affronted. "I found images. Some of the formats are obscure, but I think I can make sense of most of them." And even before Sora had answered, the familiar had warmed a screen in one hemisphere of the suite. Visual records of different solar systems appeared, each entry displayed for a second before being replaced. Each consisted of an orbital map; planets and Waynet nodes were marked relative to each system's sun. The worlds were annotated with enlarged images of each, overlaid with sparse astrophysical and military data, showing the roles - if any - they had played in the war. Merlin had visited other places, too. Squidlike protostellar nebulae, stained with green and red and flecked by the light of hot 100

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blue stars. Supernova remnants, the eviscera of gored stars, a hundred of

which had died since the Flourishing, briefly outshining the galaxy.

"What do you think he was looking for?" Sora said. "These points must have been on the Waynet, but they're a long way from anything we'd call civilization."

"I don't know. Souvenir hunting?"

"Are you sure Merlin can't tell you're accessing this information?"

"Absolutely - but why should it bother him unless he's got something to hide?"

"Debatable point." Sora looked around to the sealed door of her quarters, half expecting Merlin to enter at any moment. It was absurd, of course - from its present vantage point, the familiar could probably tell precisely where Merlin was in the ship, and give Sora adequate warning. But she still felt uneasy, even as she asked the inevitable question. "What else?"

"Oh, plenty. Even some visual records of the man himself, caught on the internal cameras."

"Sorry. A healthy interest in where he's been is one thing, but spying on him is something else."

"Would it change things if I told you that Merlin hasn't been totally honest with us?"

"You said he hadn't lied."

"Not about anything significant - which makes this all the odder. There." The familiar sounded quietly pleased with itself. "You're curious now, aren't you?"

Sora sighed. "You'd better show me."

Merlin's face appeared on the screen, sobbing. He seemed slightly older to her, although it was difficult to tell, since most of his face was caged behind his hands. She could hardly make out what he was saying, between each sob.

"Thousands of hours of this sort of thing," the familiar said. "They started out as serious attempts at keeping a journal, but soon deteriorated into a form of catharsis."

"I'd say he did well to stay sane at all."

"More than you realize. We know he's been gone ten thousand years - just as he told us. Well and good. That's objective time. But he also said that eleven years of shiptime had passed."

"And that isn't the case?"

"I suspect that may be, to put a diplomatic gloss on it, a slight underestimate. By a considerable number of decades. And I don't think he spent much of that time in frostwatch."

Sora tried to remember what she knew of the methods of longevity available to the Cohort in Merlin's time. "He looks older than he does now - doesn't he?"

The familiar chose not to answer.

When the transit to the Way was almost over, Merlin called her to the bridge. "We're near the transit node," he said. "Take a seat, because the insertion can be a little . . . interesting."

"Transition to Waynet in three hundred seconds," said the ship's cloyingly calm voice.

The crescent of the cockpit window showed a starfield transected by a blurred, twinkling filament, like a solitary wave crossing a lake at midnight. Sora could see blurred stars through the filament, wide as her outspread hand, widening by the second. A thickening in it like a bulge along a snake was the transit node; a point, coincidental with the ecliptic, where passage into the accelerated spacetime of the Way was possible. Although the Waynet stream was transparent, there remained a ghostly sense of dizzying motion.

"Are you absolutely sure you know what you're doing?"

"Goodness, no." Merlin was reclining back in his seat, booted feet up on the console, hands knitted behind his neck. Ancient orchestral music was piping into the room, building up to a magnificent and doubtless delicately timed climax. "Which isn't to say that this isn't an incredibly tricky maneuver, of course, requiring enormous skill and courage."

"What worries me is that you might be right."

Sora remembered the times Captain Tchagra had sent probes into the Waynet, only to watch as each was shredded, sliced apart by momentum gradients that could flense matter down to its fundamentals. The Waynet twinkled because tiny grains of cosmic dust were constantly drifting into it, each being annihilated in a pretty little flash of exotic radiation. Right now, she thought, they were cruising toward that boundary, dead set on what ought to have been guaranteed destruction.

She tried to inject calm into her voice. "So how did you come by the syrinx, Merlin?"

"Isn't much to look at, you know. A black cone, about as long as you're tall. Even in my era we couldn't make them, or even safely dismantle the few we still had. Very valuable things."

"The Cohort weren't overly thrilled that you stole one, according to the legend."

"As if they cared. They had so few left, they were too scared to actually use them."

Sora buckled herself into a seat.

She knew roughly what was about to happen, although no one had understood the details for tens of thousands of years. Just before hitting the Way, the syrinx would chirp a series of quantum-gravitational fluctuations at the boundary layer, the skin, no thicker than a Planck-length, which separated normal spacetime from the rushing spacetime contained within the Way. For an instant, the momentum gradients would relax, allowing the ship to enter the accelerated medium without being sliced.

That was the theory, anyway.

The music reached its crescendo now, ship's thrust notching higher, pushing Sora and Merlin back into their seats. The shriek of the propulsion system merged with the shriek of violins, too harmoniously to be accidental. Merlin's look of quiet amusement did not falter. A cascade of liquid notes played over the music; the song of the syrinx translated into the audio spectrum. There was a peak of thrust, then the impulse ended abruptly, along with the music.

Sora looked to the exterior view.

For a moment, it seemed as if the stars, and the nearer planets and sun of this system, hadn't actually changed at all. But after a few seconds, she saw that they burned appreciably brighter - and, it seemed, bluer - in one hemisphere of the sky, redder and dimmer in the other. And they were growing bluer and redder by the moment, and now bunching, swimming like shoals of luminous fish, obeying relativistic currents. A planet slammed past from out of nowhere, distorted as if squeezed in a fist. The system seemed frozen behind them, shot through with red like an iron orrery snatched from the forge.

"Transition to Waynet achieved," said the ship.

Later, Merlin took her down to the forward observation blister, a pressurized sphere of metasapphire that could be pushed beyond the hull like a protruding eye. The walls were opaque when they arrived, and when Merlin sealed the entry hatch, it turned the same shade of grey, merging seamlessly.

"Not to alarm you or anything," the familiar said. "But I can't communicate with the copy of myself from in here. That means I can't help you if . . ."

Sora kissed Merlin, silencing the voice in her head. "I'm sorry," she said, almost instantly. "It seemed . . ."

"Like the right thing to do?" Merlin's smile was difficult to judge, but he did not seem displeased.

"No, not really. Probably the wrong thing, actually."

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't find you attractive, Sora. And like I said - it has been rather a long time since I had human company." He drew himself to her, their free-floating bodies hooking together in the center of the blister, slowly turning until all sense of orientation was gone. "Of course, my reasons for rescuing you were entirely selfless. . . ."



". . . of course. . . ."

"But I won't deny that there was a small glimmer of hope at the back of my mind; the tiniest spark of fantasy. . . ."

They shed their clothes, untidy bundles which orbited around their coupled bodies. They began to make love, slowly at first, and then with increasing energy, as if it was only now that Sora was fully waking from the long centuries of frostwatch.

She thought of Verdin, and then hated herself for the crass biochemical predictability of her mind, the unfailing way it dredged up the wrong memories at the worst of times. What had happened back then, what had happened between them, was three thousand years in the past, unrecorded by anything or anyone except herself. She had not even mourned him yet, not even allowed the familiar to give her that particular indulgence. She studied Merlin, looking for hints of his true age . . . and failed, utterly, to detach the part of her mind capable of the job.

"Do you want to see something glorious?" Merlin asked, later, after they had hung together wordlessly for many minutes.

"If you think you can impress me . . ."

He whispered to the ship, causing the walls to lose their opacity.

Sora looked around. By some trick of holographics, the ship itself was not visible at all from within the blister. It was just her and Merlin, floating free.

And what she saw beyond them was indeed glorious - even if some detached part of her mind knew that the view could not be completely natural, and that in some way the hues and intensities of light had been shifted to aid comprehension. The walls of the Waynet slammed past at eye wrenching speed, illuminated by the intense, doppler-shifted annihilation of dust particles, so that it seemed as if they were flying in the utmost darkness, down a tube of twinkling violet that reached toward infinity. The spacetime in which the ship drifted like a seed moved so quickly that the difference between its speed and light amounted to only one part in a hundred billion. Once a second in subjective time, the ship

threaded itself through shining hoops as wide as the Waynet itself; constraining rings spaced eight light-hours apart, part of the inscrutable exotic-matter machinery that had serviced this Galaxy-spanning transit system. Ahead, all the stars in the universe crowded into an opalescent jeweled mass, hanging ahead like a congregation of bright angels. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

"It's the only way to travel," Merlin said.

The journey would take four days of shiptime: nineteen centuries of worldtime. The subjective time spent in Waynet flight amounted only to twenty-three hours. But the ship had to make many transitions between Ways, and they were never closer than tens of light-minutes apart, presumably because of the nightmarish consequences that would ensue if two opposing streams of accelerated spacetime ever touched.

"Aren't you worried we'll wander into Huskers, Merlin?"

"Worth it for the big reward, wouldn't you say?"

"Tell me more about this mystical gun, and I might believe you."

Merlin settled back in his seat, drawing a deep breath. "Almost everything I know could be wrong."

"I'll take that risk."

"Whatever it was, it was fully capable of destroying whole worlds. Even stars, if the more outlandish stories are to be believed." He looked down at his hand, as if suddenly noticing his impeccably manicured fingernails.

"Ask him how he thinks it works," the familiar said. "Then at least we'll have an idea how thorough he's been."

She put the question to Merlin, as casually as she could.

"Gravity," he said. "Isn't that obvious? It may be a weak force, but there isn't anything in the universe that doesn't feel it." "Like a bigger version of the srxinx?"

Merlin shrugged. Sora realized that it was not his fingernails to which he was paying attention, but the ornate ring she had noticed before, inset with a ruby stone in which two sparks seemed to orbit like fireflies. "It's almost certainly the product of Waymaker science. A posthuman culture that was able to engineer - to mechanize - spacetime. But I don't think it worked like the syrinx. I think it made singularities; that it plucked globules of mass energy from vacuum and squashed them until they were within their own event horizons."

"Black holes," the familiar said, and Sora echoed her words aloud. Merlin looked pleased. "Very small ones; atomic-scale. It doped them with charge, then accelerated them up to something only marginally less than the speed of light. They didn't have time to decay. For that, of course, it needed more energy, and more still just to prevent itself being ripped apart by the stresses.

"A gun that fires black holes? We'd win, wouldn't we? With something like that? Even if there was only one of them?" Merlin fingered the ruby-centered ring.

"That's the general idea."

Sora took Merlin's hand, stroking the fingers, until her own alighted on the ring. It was more intricate than she had realized before. The twin sparks were whirling around each other, glints of light locked in a waltz, as if driven by some microscopic clockwork buried in the ruby itself.

"What does it mean?" she asked, sensing that this was both the wrong and the right question.

"It means . . ." Merlin smiled, but it was a moment before he completed the sentence. "It means, I suppose, that I should remember death."

They fell out of the Way for the last time, entering a system that did not seem markedly different than a dozen others they had skipped through. The star was a yellow main-sequence sun, accompanied by the usual assortment of rocky worlds and gas giants. The second and third planets out from the sun were steaming hot cauldrons, enveloped by acidic atmosphere at crushing temperature, the victims of runaway heat-trapping processes, the third more recently than the second. The fourth planet was smaller, and seemed to have been the subject of a terraforming operation that had taken place some time after the Flourishing: its atmosphere, though thin, was too dense to be natural. Thirteen separate Ways punched through the system's ecliptic at different angles, safely distant from planetary and asteroidal orbits.

"It's a Nexus," Merlin said. "A primary Waynet interchange. You find systems like this every thousand or so light-years through the plane of the Galaxy, and a good way out of it as well. Back when everyone used the Waynet, this system would have been a meeting point, a place where traders swapped goods and tales from half-way to the Core."

"Bit of a dump now, though, isn't it."

"Perfect for hiding something very big and very nasty, provided you remember where it was you hid it."

"You mentioned something about a storm . . ."

"You'll see."

The Way had dropped them in the inner part of the system, but Merlin said that what he wanted was further out, beyond the system's major asteroid belt. It would take a few days to reach.

"And what are we going to do when we get there?" Sora asked. "Just pick this thing up and take it with us?"

"Not exactly," Merlin said. "I suspect it will be harder than that. Not so hard that we haven't got a chance, but hard enough . . ." He seemed to falter, perhaps for the first time since she had known him; that aura of supreme confidence cracking minutely.

"What part do you want me to play?"

"You're a soldier," he said. "Figure that out for yourself."

"I don't know quite what it is I've found," the familiar said, when she was again alone. "I've been waiting to show you, but he's had you in those war

simulations for hours. Either that or you two have been occupying yourselves in other ways. Any idea what he's planning?"

Merlin had a simulator, a smaller version of the combat-training modules Sora knew from warcreche.

"A lot of the simulations had a common theme: an attack against a white pyramid." "Implying some foreknowledge, wouldn't you say? As if Merlin knows something of what he will find?"

"I've had that feeling ever since we met him." She was thinking of the smell of him, the shockingly natural way their bodies meshed, despite their being displaced by thousands of years. She tried to flush those thoughts from her mind. What they were now discussing was a kind of betrayal, on a more profound level than anything committed so far, because it lacked any innocence. "What is it, then?"

"I've been scanning the later log files, and I've found something that seems significant, something that seemed to mark a turning point in his hunt for the weapon. I have no idea what it was. But it took me until now to realize just how strange it was." "Another system?"

"A very large structure, nowhere near any star, but nonetheless accessible by Waynet."

"A Waymaker artifact, then."

"Almost certainly."

The structure was visible on the screen. It looked like a child's toy star, or a metallic starfish, textured in something that resembled beaten gold or the luster of insect wings, filigreed in a lacework of exotic-matter scaffolds. It filled most of the view, shimmering with its own soft illumination.

"This is what Merlin would have seen with his naked eyes, just after his ship left the Way."

"Very pretty." She had meant the remark to sound glib, but it came out as a statement of fact.

"And large. The object's more than ten light-minutes away, which makes it more than four light-minutes in cross-section. Comfortably larger than any star on the main sequence. And yet somehow it holds itself in shape - in quite preposterous shape - against what must be unimaginable self-gravity. Merlin, incidentally, gave it the name Brittlestar, which seems as good as any."

"Poetic bastard." Poetic sexy bastard, she thought.

"There's more, if you're interested. I have access to the sensor records from the ship, and I can tell you that the Brittlestar is a source of intense gravitational radiation. It's like a beacon, sitting there, pumping out gravity waves from somewhere near its heart. There's something inside it that is making spacetime ripple periodically."

"You think Merlin went inside it, don't you?"

"Something happened, that's for sure. This is the last log Merlin filed, on his approach to the object, before a month-long gap."

It was another mumbled soliloquy - except this time, his sobs were of something other than despair. Instead, they sounded like the sobs of the deepest joy imaginable. As if, finally, he had found what he was looking for, or at least knew that he was closer than ever, and that the final prize was not far from reach. But that was not what made Sora shiver. It was the face she saw. It was Merlin, beyond any doubt. But his face was lined with age, and his eyes were those of someone older than anyone Sora had ever known.

The fifth and sixth planets were the largest.

The fifth was the heavier of the two, zones of differing chemistry banding it from tropic to pole, girdled by a ring system that was itself braided by the resonant forces of three large moons. Merlin believed that the ring system had been formed since the Flourishing. A cloud of radiation-drenched human relics orbited the world, dating from unthinkably remote eras; perhaps earlier than the Waymaker time. Merlin swept the cloud with sensors tuned to sniff out weapons systems, or the melange of neutrino flavors that betokened Husker presence. The sweeps all returned negative.

"You know where the gun is?" Sora asked.

"I know how to reach it, which is all that matters."

"Maybe it's time to start being a little less cryptic. Especially if you want me to help you."

He looked wounded, as if she had ruined a game hours in the making. "I just thought you'd appreciate the thrill of the chase."

"This isn't about the thrill of the chase, Merlin. It's about the nastiest weapon imaginable and the fact that we have to get our hands on it before the enemy, so that we can incinerate them first. So we can commit xenocide." She said it again: "Xenocide. Sorry. Doesn't that conform to your romantic ideals of the righteous quest?"

"It won't be xenocide," he said, touching the ring again, nervously. "Listen: I want that gun as much as you do. That's why I chased it for ten thousand years." Was it her imagination, or had the ring not been on his hand in any of the recordings she had seen of him? She remembered the old man's hands she had seen in the last recording, the one taken just before his time in the Brittlestar, and she was sure they carried no ring. Now Merlin's voice was matter of fact. "The structure we want is on the outermost moon."

"Let me guess. A white pyramid?"

He offered a smile. "Couldn't be closer if you tried."

They fell into orbit around the gas giant. All the moons showed signs of having been extensively industrialized since the Flourishing, but the features that remained on their surfaces were gouged by millennia of exposure to sleetling cosmic radiation and micrometeorites. Nothing looked significantly younger than the surrounding landscapes of rock and ice. Except for the kilometer-high white pyramid on the third moon, which was in a sixteen-day orbit around the planet. It looked as if it had been chiseled out of alabaster some time the previous afternoon.

"Not exactly subtle," Merlin said. "Self-repair mechanisms must still be functional, to one degree or another, and that implies that the control systems for the gun will still work. It also means that the counter-intrusion systems will also be operable."

"Oh, good."

"Aren't you excited that we're about to end the longest war in human history?"

"But we're not, are we? I mean, be realistic. It'll take tens of thousands of years simply for the knowledge of this weapon's existence to reach the remotest areas of the war. Nothing will happen overnight."

"I can see why it would disturb you," Merlin said, tapping a finger against his teeth. "None of us have ever known anything other than war with the Huskers."

"Just show me where it is."

They made one low orbital pass over the pyramid, alert for buried weapons, but no attack came. On the next pass, lower still, Merlin's ship dropped proctors to snoop ground defenses. "Maybe they had something bigger once," Merlin said. "Artillery that could take us out from millions of kilometers. But if it ever existed, it's not working anymore."

They made groundfall a kilometer from the pyramid, then waited for all but three of the proctors to return to the ship. Merlin tasked the trio to secure a route into the structure, but their use was limited. Once the simple-minded machines were out of command range of the ship - which happened as soon as they had penetrated beyond the outer layer of the structure - they were essentially useless.

"Who built the pyramid? And how did you know about it?"

"The same culture who got into the war I told you about," he said, as they clamped on the armored carapaces of their suits in the airlock. "They were far less advanced than the Waymakers, but they were a lot closer to them historically, and they knew enough to control the weapon and use it for their own purposes."

"How'd they find it?"

"They stole it. By then the Waymaker culture was - how shall I put it - sleeping? Not really paying due attention to the use made of its artifacts?"

"You're being cryptic again, Merlin."

"Sorry. Solitude does that to you."

"Did you meet someone out there, Merlin - someone who knew about the gun, and told you where to find it?" And made you young in the process? she thought.

"My business, isn't it?"

"Maybe once. Now, I'd say we're in this together. Equal partners. Fair enough?"

"Nothing's fair in war, Sora." But he was smiling, defusing the remark, even as he slipped his helmet down over the neck ring, twisting it to engage the locking mechanism.

"How big is the gun?" Sora asked.

The pyramid rose ahead, blank as an origami sculpture, entrance ducts around the base concealed by intervening landforms. Merlin's proctors had already found a route that would at least take them some way inside.

"You won't be disappointed," Merlin said.

"And what are we going to do when we find it? Just drag it behind us?"

"Trust me." Merlin's laugh crackled over the radio. "Moving it won't be a problem."

They walked slowly along a track cleared by proctors, covered at the same time by the hull-mounted weapons on Tyrant.

"There's something ahead," Merlin said, a few minutes later. He raised his own weapon and pointed toward a pool of darkness fifteen or twenty meters in front of them. "It's artifactual; definitely metallic."

"I thought your proctors cleared the area."

"Looks like they missed something."

Merlin advanced ahead of her. As they approached the dark object, it resolved into an elongated form half buried in the ice, a little to the left of the track. It was a body.

"Been here a while," Merlin said, a minute or so later, when he was close enough to see the object properly. "Armor's pitted by micrometeorite impacts."

"It's a Husker, isn't it."

Merlin's helmet nodded. "My guess is they were in this system a few centuries ago. Must have been attracted by the pyramid, even if they didn't necessarily know its significance."

"I've never seen one this close. Be careful, won't you?"

Merlin knelt down to examine the creature.

The shape was much more androform than Sora had been expecting, the same general size and proportions as a suited human. The suit was festooned with armored protrusions, ridges, and horns, its blackened outer surface leathery and devoid of anything genuinely mechanical. One arm was outspread, terminating in a human-looking hand, complexly gauntleted. A long knobby weapon lay just out of reach, lines blurred by the same processes of erosion that had afflicted the Husker.

Merlin clamped his hands around the head.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" He was twisting now; she could hear the grunts of exertion, before his suit's servosystems came online and took the brunt of the effort. "I've always wanted to find one this well-preserved," Merlin said.

"Never thought I'd get a chance to tell if an old rumor was even half-way right."

The helmet detached from the creature's torso, cracking open along a fine seam which ran from the crown to the beaklike protrusion at the helmet's front.

Vapor pulsed from the gap. Merlin placed the separated halves of the helmet on the ground, then tapped on his helmet torch, bringing light down on the exposed head. Sora stepped closer. The Husker's head was encased in curling matte-black support machinery, like a statue enveloped in vine.

But it was well preserved, and very human.

"I don't like it," she said. "What does it mean?"

"It means," Merlin said, "that occasionally one should pay proper attention to rumors."

"Talk to me, Merlin. Start telling me what I need to hear, or we don't take another step toward that pyramid."

"You will like very little of it."

She looked, out of the corner of her eye, at the marblelike face of the Husker. "I already don't like it, Merlin; what have I got to lose?"

Merlin started to say something, then fell to the ground, executing the fall with the slowness that came with the moon's feeble gravity.

"Oh, nice timing," the familiar said.

Reflexes drove Sora down with him, until the two of them were crouching low on the rusty surface. Merlin was still alive. She could hear him breathing, but each breath came like the rasp of a saw.

"I'm hit, Sora. I don't know how badly."

"Hold on." She accessed the telemetry from his suit, graphing up a medical diagnostic on the inner glass of her helmet.

"There," said the familiar. "A beam-weapon penetration in the thoracic area; small enough that the self-sealants prevented any pressure loss, but not rapidly enough to stop the beam gnawing into his chest."

"Is that bad?"

"Well, it's not good . . . but there's a chance the beam would have cauterized as it traveled, preventing any deep internal bleeding. . . ."

Merlin coughed. He managed to ask her what it was. "You've taken a laser hit, I think." She was speaking quickly. "Maybe part of the pyramid defenses."

"I really should have those proctors of mine checked out." Merlin managed a laugh which then transitioned into a series of racking coughs. "Bit late for that now, don't you think?"

"If I can get you back to the ship . . ."

"No. We have to go on." He coughed again, and then was a long time catching his breath. "The longer we wait, the harder it will be."

"After ten thousand years, you're worried about a few minutes?"

"Yes, now that the pyramid defenses are alerted." "You're in no shape to move."

"I'm winded, that's all. I think I can . . ." His voice dissolved into coughs, but even while it was happening, Sora watched him push himself upright. When he spoke again, his voice was hardly a wheeze. "I'm gambling there was only one of whatever it was. Otherwise we should never have made it as far as we did."

"I hope you're right, Merlin."

"There's - um - something else. Ship's just given me a piece of not entirely welcome news. A few neutrino sources that weren't there when we first got here."

"Oh, great." Sora didn't need to be told what that meant: a Husker swarm, one that had presumably been waiting around the gas giant all along, chilled down below detection thresholds. "Bastards must have been sleeping, waiting for something to happen here."

"Sounds like a perfectly sensible strategy," the familiar said, before projecting a map onto Sora's faceplate, confirming the arrival of the enemy ships. "One of the moons has a liquid ocean. My guess is that the Huskers were parked below the ice."

Sora asked Merlin: "How long before they get here?" "No more than two or three hours."

"Right. Then we'd better make damn sure we've got that gun by then, right?"

She carried him most of the way, his heels scuffing the ground in a halfhearted attempt at locomotion. But he remained lucid, and Sora began to hope that the wound really had been cauterized by the beam-weapon.

"You knew the Husker would be human, didn't you?" she said, to keep him talking.

"Told you: rumors. The alien cyborg story was just that - a fiction our own side invented. I told you it wouldn't be xenocide."

"Not good enough, Merlin." She was about to tell him about the symbiote in her head, then drew back, fearful that it would destroy what trust he had in her.

"I know you've been lying. I hacked your ship's log."

They had reached the shadow of the pyramid, descending the last hillock toward the access ports spaced around the rim. "Thought you trusted me."

"I had to know if there was a reason not to. And I think I was right."

She told him what she had learnt; that he'd been traveling for longer than he had told her - whole decades longer, by shiptime -and that he had grown old in that journey, and perhaps a little insane. And then how he had seemed to find the Brittlestar.

"Problem is, Merlin, we - I - don't know what happened to you in that thing, except that it had something to do with finding the gun, and you came out of it younger than when you went in!"

"You really want to know?"

"Take a guess."

He started telling her some of it, while she dragged him toward their destination.

The pyramid was surrounded by tens of meters of self-repairing armor, white as bone. If the designers had not allowed deliberate entrances around its rim, Sora doubted that she and Merlin would ever have found a way to get inside.

"Should have been sentries here, once," said the man leaning against her shoulder. "It's lucky for us that everything falls apart, eventually."

"Except your fabled gun." They were moving down a sloping corridor, the walls and ceiling unblemished, the floor strewn with icy debris from the moon's surface. "Anyway, stop changing the subject."

Merlin coughed and resumed his narrative. "I was getting very old and very disillusioned. I hadn't found the gun and I was about ready to give up. That or go insane. Then I found the Brittlestar. Came out of the Waynet and there it was, sitting there pulsing gravity waves at me."

"It would take a pair of neutron stars," the familiar said. "Orbiting around each other, to generate that kind of signature." "What happened next?" Sora asked.

"Don't really remember. Not properly. I went - or was taken -inside it - and there I met . . ." He paused, and for a moment she thought it was because he needed to catch his breath. But that wasn't the reason. "I met entities, I suppose you'd call them. I quickly realized that they were just highly advanced projections of a maintenance program left behind by the Waymakers."

"They made you young, didn't they."

"I don't think it was stretching their capabilities overmuch, put it like that."

The corridor flattened out, branching in several different directions. Merlin leant toward one of the routes.

"Why?"

"So I could finish the job. Find the gun."

The corridor opened out into a chamber, a bowl-ceilinged control room, unpressurized and lit only by the wavering light of their helmets. Seats and consoles were arrayed around a single spherical projection device, cradled in ash-colored gimbals. Corpses slumped over some of the consoles, but nothing remained except skeletons draped in colorless rags. Presumably they had rotted away for centuries before the chamber was finally opened to vacuum, and even that would have been more than twenty thousand years ago.

"They must have been attacked by a bioweapon," Merlin said, easing himself into one of the seats, which - after exhaling a cloud of dust - seemed able to take his weight. "Something that left the machines intact."

Sora walked around, examining the consoles, all of which betrayed a technology higher than anything the Cohort had known for millennia. Some of the symbols on them were recognizable antecedents of those used in Main, but there was nothing she could actually read.

Merlin made a noise that might have been a grunt of suppressed pain, and when Sora looked at him, she saw that he was spooling the optical cable from his suit sleeve, just as he had when they had first met on the cometary shard. He lifted an access panel back on the top of the console, exposing an intestinal mass of silvery circuits. He seemed to know exactly where to place the end of

the spool, allowing its microscopic cilia to tap into the ancient system. The projection chamber was warming to life now: amber light swelling from its heart, solidifying into abstract shapes, neutral test representations. For a moment, the chamber showed a schematic of the ringed giant and its moons, with the locations of the approaching Husker ships marked with complex ideograms. The familiar was right: their place of sanctuary must have been the moon with the liquid ocean. Then the shapes flowed liquidly, zooming in on the gas giant.

"You wanted to know where the gun was," Merlin said. "Well, I'm about to show you."

The view enlarged on a cyclonic storm near the planet's equator, a great swirling red eye in the atmosphere.

"It's a metastable storm," Sora said. "Common feature of gas giants. You're not telling me—"

Merlin's gauntleted fingers were at work now, flying across an array of keys marked with symbols of unguessable meaning.

"The storm's natural, of course, or at least it was, before these people hid the gun inside it, exploiting the pressure differentials to hold the gun at a fixed point in the atmosphere, for safekeeping. There's just one small problem."

"Go ahead . . ."

"The gun isn't a gun. It functions as a weapon, but that's mostly accidental. It certainly wasn't the intention of the Waymakers." You're losing me, Merlin."

"Maybe I should tell you about the ring."

Something was happening to the surface of the gas giant now. The cyclone was not behaving in the manner of other metastable storms Sora had seen. It was spinning perceptibly, throwing off debris from its curlicued edge like the tails of seahorses. It was growing a bloodier red by the second.

"Yes," Sora said. "Tell me about the ring."

"The Waymakers gave it to me, when they made me young. As a reminder of what I have to do. You see, if I fail, it will be very bad for every thinking creature in this part of the galaxy. What did you see when you looked at the ring, Sora?"

A red gem, with two lights orbiting inside it."

"Would you be surprised if I told you that the lights represent two neutron stars; two of the densest objects in the universe? And if they're in orbit about each other, spinning around their mutual center of gravity?"

"Inside the Brittlestar."

She caught his glance, directed quizzically toward her. "Yes," Merlin said slowly. "A pair of neutron stars, born in supernovae, bound together by gravity, slowly spiraling closer and closer to each other."

The cyclonic storm was whirling insanely now, sparks of atmospheric lightning flickering around its boundary. Sora felt the feeling that titanic - and quite inhuman - energies were being unleashed, as if something very close to magic was being loosed beneath the clouds. It was the most terrifying thing she had ever seen.

"I hope you know how to fire this when the time comes, Merlin."

All the knowledge I need is carried by the ring. It taps into my bloodstream and builds structures in my head that tell me exactly what I need to know, on a level so deep that I hardly know it myself."

"Husker swarm will be within range in ninety minutes," the familiar said, "assuming attack profiles for the usual swarm borer and charm-torp weapon configurations. Of course, if they have any refinements, they might be in attack range a little sooner than that . . ."

"Merlin: tell me about the neutron stars, will you? I need something to keep my mind occupied."

"The troublesome part is what happens when they stop spiraling around each other and collide. Mercifully, it's a fairly rare event even by Galactic standards - it doesn't happen more than once in a million years, and when it



does it's usually far enough away not to be a problem."

"But if it isn't far away - how troublesome would it be?"

"Imagine the release of more energy in a second than a typical star emits in ten billion years: one vast photo-leptonic fireball. An unimaginably bright pulse of gamma-rays. Instant sterilization for thousands of light-years in any direction.

The cyclone had grown a central bulge now, a perfectly circular bruise rising above the surface of the planet. As it rose, towering thousands of kilometers above the cloud layer, it elongated like a waterspout. Soon, Sora could see it backdropped against space. And there was something rising within it.

"The Waymakers tried to stop it, didn't they."

Merlin nodded. "They found the neutron star binary when they extended the Waynet deeper into the galaxy. They realized that the two stars were only a few thousand years from colliding together - and that there was almost nothing they could do about it."

She could see what she thought was the weapon, now, encased in the waterspout like a seed. It was huge - larger perhaps than this moon. It looked fragile, nonetheless, like an impossibly ornate candelabra, or a species of deep sea medusa, glowing with its own bioluminescence. Sloughing atmosphere, the thing came to a watchful halt, and the waterspout slowly retracted back toward the cyclone, which was now slowing, like a monstrous fly wheel grinding down.

"Nothing?"

"Well - almost nothing."

"They built the Brittlestar around it," Sora said. "A kind of shield, right? So that, when the stars collided, the flash would be contained?"

"Not even Waymaker science could contain that much energy." Merlin looked to the projection, seeming to pay attention to the weapon for the first time. If he felt any elation on seeing his gun for the first time, none of it was visible on his face. He looked, instead, ashen - as if the years had suddenly reclaimed what the Waymakers had given him. "All they could do was keep the stars in check, keep them from spiraling any closer. So they built the Brittlestar, a vast machine with only one function: to constantly nudge the orbits of the neutron stars at its heart. For every angstrom that the stars fell toward each other, the Brittlestar pushed them an angstrom apart. And it was designed to keep doing that for a million years, until the Waymakers found a way to shift the entire binary beyond the Galaxy. You want to know how they kept pushing them apart?"

Sora nodded, though she thought she half-knew the answer already.

"Tiny black holes," Merlin said. "Accelerated close to the speed of light, each black hole interacting gravitationally with the binary before evaporating in a puff of pair-production radiation."

"Just the same way the gun functions. That's no coincidence, is it?"

"The gun - what we call the gun - was just a component in the Brittlestar; the source of relativistic black holes needed to keep the neutron stars from colliding."

Sora looked around the room. "And these people stole it?"

"Like I said, they were closer to the Waymakers than us. They knew enough about them to dismantle part of the Brittlestar, to override its defenses and remove the mechanism they needed to win their war."

"But the Brittlestar . . ."

"Hasn't been working properly ever since. Its capability to regenerate itself was harmed when the subsystem was stolen, and the remaining black-hole generating mechanisms can't do all the work required. The neutron stars have continued to spiral closer together - slowly but surely."

"But you said they were only a few thousand years from collision . . ."

Merlin had not stopped working the controls in all this time. The gun had come closer, seemingly oblivious to the ordinary laws of celestial mechanics. Down below, the planetary surface had returned to normality, except for a ruddier hue to the storm.

"Maybe now," Merlin said, "you're beginning to understand why I want the gun

so badly."

"You want to return it, don't you. You never really wanted to find a weapon."

"I did, once." Merlin seemed to tap some final reserve of energy, his voice growing momentarily stronger. "But now I'm older and wiser. In less than four thousand years the stars meet, and it suddenly won't matter who wins this war. We're like ignorant armies fighting over a patch of land beneath a rumbling volcano!"

Four thousand years, Sora thought. More time had passed since she had been born.

"If we don't have the gun," she said, "we die anyway - wiped out by the Huskers. Not much of a choice, is it?"

"At least something would survive. Something that might even still think of itself as human."

"You're saying that we should capitulate? That we get our hands on the ultimate weapon, and then not use it?"

"I never said it was going to be easy, Sora." Merlin pitched forward, slowly enough that she was able to reach him before he slumped into the exposed circuitry of the console. His coughs were loud in her helmet. "Actually, I think I'm more than winded," he said, when he was able to speak at all.

"We'll get you back to the ship; the proctors can help . . ." "It's too late, Sora."

"What about the gun?"

"I'm . . . doing something rather rash, in the circumstances. Trusting it to you. Does that sound utterly insane?"

"I'll betray you. I'll give the gun to the Cohort. You know that, don't you?" Merlin's voice was soft. "I don't think you will. I think you'll do the right thing and return it to the Brittlestar."

"Don't make me betray you!"

He shook his head. "I've just issued a command that reassigns control of my ship to you. The proctors are now under your command - they'll show you everything you need."

"Merlin, I'm begging you . . ."

His voice was weak now, hard to distinguish from the scratchy irregularity of his breathing. She leant down to him and touched helmets, hoping the old trick would make him easier to hear. "No good, Sora. Much too late. I've signed it all over."

"No!" She shook him, almost in anger. Then she began to cry, loud enough so that she was in no doubt he would hear it. "I don't even know what you want me to do with it!"

"Take the ring, then the rest will be abundantly clear."

"What?" She could hardly understand herself now.

"Put the ring on. Do it now, Sora. Before I die. So that I at least know it's done."

"When I take your glove off, I'll kill you, Merlin. You know that, don't you? And I won't be able to put the ring on until I'm back in the ship."

"I . . . just want to see you take it. That's enough, Sora. And you'd better be quick . . ."

"I love you, you bastard!"

"Then do this."

She placed her hands around the cuff seal of his gauntlet, feeling the alloy locking mechanism, knowing that it would only take a careful depression of the sealing latches, and then a quick twisting movement, and the glove would slide free, releasing the air in his suit. She wondered how long he would last before consciousness left him - no more than tens of seconds, she thought, unless he drew breath first. And by the state of his breathing, that would not be easy for him.

She removed the gauntlet, and took his ring.

Tyrant lifted from the moon.

"Husker forces grouping in attack configuration," the familiar said, tapping directly into the ship's avionics. "Hull sensors read sweeps by targeting

lidar . . . an attack is imminent, Sora."

Tyrant's light armor would not save them, Sora knew. The attack would be blinding and brief, and she would probably never know it had happened. But that didn't mean that she was going to let it happen.

She felt the gun move to her will.

It would not always be like this, she knew: the gun was only hers until she returned it to the Waymakers. But for now it felt like an inseparable part of her, like a twin she had never known, but whose every move was familiar to her fractionally in advance of it being made. She felt the gun energize itself, reaching deep into the bedrock of spacetime, plundering mass-energy from quantum foam, forging singularities in its heart.

She felt readiness.

"First element of swarm has deployed charm-torps," the familiar reported, an odd slurred quality entering her voice. "Activating Tyrant's countermeasures . . ."

The hull rang like a bell.

"Countermeasures engaging charm-torps . . . neutralized . . . second wave deployed by the swarm . . . closing . . ."

"How long can we last?"

"Countermeasures exhausted . . . we can't parry a third wave; not at this range.

Sora closed her eyes and made the weapon spit death.

She had targeted two of the three elements of the Husker swarm; leaving the third - the furthest ship from her - unharmed. She watched the relativistic black holes fold space around the two targeted ships, crushing each instantly, as if in a vice. "Third ship dropping to max . . . maximum attack range; retracting charm-torp launchers . . ."

"This is Sora for the Cohort," she said in Main, addressing the survivor on the general ship-to-ship channel. "Or what remains of the Cohort. Perhaps you can understand what I have to say. I could kill you, now, instantly, if I chose." She felt the weapon speak to her through her blood, reporting its status, its eagerness to do her bidding. "Instead, I'm about to give you a demonstration. Are you ready?"

"Sora . . ." said the familiar. "Something's wrong . . ."

"What?"

"I'm not . . . well." The familiar's voice did not sound at all right now; drained of any semblance to Sora's own. "The ring must be constructing something in your brain; part of the interface between you and the gun . . . something stronger than me . . . It's weeding me out, to make room for itself . . ."

She remembered what Merlin had said about the structures the ring would make.

"You saved a part of yourself in the ship."

"Only a part," the familiar said. "Not all of me . . . not all of me at all. I'm sorry, Sora. I think I'm dying."

She dismantled the system.

Sora did it with artistry and flair, saving the best for last. She began with moons, pulverizing them, so that they began to flow into nascent rings around their parent worlds. Then she smashed the worlds themselves to pieces, turning them into cauls of hot ash and plasma. Finally - when it was the only thing left to destroy - she turned the gun on the system's star, impaling its heart with a salvo of relativistic black holes, throwing a killing spanner into the nuclear processes that turned mass into sunlight. In doing so, she interfered - catastrophically - with the delicate hydrostatic balance between pressure and gravity that held the star in shape. She watched it unpeel, shedding layers of outer atmosphere in a premature display of the death that awaited suns like it, four billion years in the future. And then she watched the last Husker ship, which had witnessed what she had wrought, turn and head out of the system.

She could have killed them all.

But she had let them live. Instead, she had shown the power that was - albeit temporarily - hers to command.

She wondered if there was enough humanity left in them to appreciate the clemency she had shown.

Later, she took Tyrant into the Waynet again, the vast luminous bulk of the gun following her like an obedient dragon. Sora's heart almost stopped at the fearful moment of entry, convinced that the syrinx would choose not to sing for its new master.

But it did sing, just as it had sung for Merlin.

And then, alone this time - more alone than she had been in her life - she climbed into the observation blister, and turned the metasapphire walls transparent, making the ship itself disappear, until there was only herself and the rushing, twinkling brilliance of the Way.

It was time to finish what Merlin had begun.