

*Stephen Baxter was born in Liverpool, has degrees in mathematics and engineering, and applied to become a cosmonaut in 1991, with an eye toward a guest spot on Mir. Alas, he didn't make it, but instead of keeping that creaky Russian wreck in orbit he turned to full-time writing, producing more than ten science fiction novels, including Raft, The Time Ships (a marvelous sequel to The Time Machine), Manifold: Time, Moonseed, and, recently, Manifold: Space. He also cowrote The Light of Other Days with Arthur C. Clarke. He has won the Philip K. Dick Award and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, among others.*

*I tracked him down at I-Con, a science fiction convention on Long Island—and eventually, lucky for me, got him to write the following.*

## ***In the Un-Black***

**Stephen Baxter**

On the day La-ba met Ca-si she saved his life. She hadn't meant to. It was un-Doctrine. It just happened. But it changed everything.

It had been a bad day for La-ba.

She had been dancing. That wasn't un-Doctrine, not exactly, but the cadre leaders disapproved. She was the leader of the dance, and she got stuck with Cesspit detail for ten days.

It was hard, dirty work, the worst. And would-be deathers flourished there, in the pit. They would come swimming through the muck itself, to get you.

That was what happened just two hours after she started work. Naked, she was standing knee-deep in a river of unidentifiable, odorless muck.

Two strong hands grabbed her ankles and pulled her flat on her face. Suddenly her eyes, mouth and nose and ears were full of dense sticky waste.

La-ba folded up her body and reached down to her toes. She found hands on her ankles, farther up a shaven skull, wide misshapen ears.

She recognized him from those ears. He was a We-ku, one of a batch of look-alikes who had come down from the Birthing Vat at the same time and had clung together ever since. If they had ever had their own names, they had long abandoned them.

She wasn't about to be deathed by a We-ku. She pressed the heels of her hands into his eyes and shoved.

Her ankles started to slide out of his hands. The harder he gripped, the more his clutching fingers slipped. She pointed her toes and shoved harder.

Then she was free.

She pushed up to the surface and blew out a huge mouthful of dirt. She prepared to take the We-ku again, elbows and knees ready, fingers clawing for the knife strapped to her thigh.

But he didn't come for her, not for one heartbeat, two, three. She took the risk of wiping her eyes clear.

The We-ku had already found another victim. He was pressing a body into the dirt with great fat hands. If he got his victim to the floor, his piston legs would crack the spine or splinter the skull in seconds.

The We-ku was a surging monster of blood and filth. His eyes were rimmed with black where she had bruised him.

Something in La-ba rose up.

At a time like this, a time of overcrowding, there was a lot of deathing. You could *see* there were too many babies swarming out of the Birthing Vat, the great pink ball that hovered in the air at the very center of the Observation Post. At rally hours you could look beyond the Vat to the other side of the Post, where the people marched around on the roof with their heads pointing down at you, and you could *see* that almost every Cadre Square was overfull.

Commissaries would come soon, bringing Memory. They would Cull if they had to. The less the Commissaries had to Cull, the happier they would be. It was the duty of every citizen and of every cadre to bring down their numbers.

If you did well you would fly on a Shuttle out of here. You would fly to Earth, where life was un-ended. That was worded by the cadre leaders. And if you hid and cowered, even if the amateur deathers didn't get to you, then the Old Man would. *That* was worded in the dorms.

La-ba had no reason to un-believe this. She had seen hundreds deathed by others. She had deathed seventeen people herself.

La-ba was tall, her body lithe, supple: good at what she was trained for, deathing and secret work and hard physical work.

La-ba was five years old. Already half her life was gone. She leapt out of the muck and onto the We-ku's back, her knife in her hand.

The We-ku didn't know whether to finish the death at his feet or deal with the skinny man on his back. And he was confused because what La-ba was doing was un-Doctrine. That confusion gave La-ba the seconds she needed.

Still, she almost had to saw his head clean off before he stopped struggling-

He sank at last into the dirt, which was now stained with whorls of deep crimson. The head connected only by bits of gristle and skin, bobbed in the muck's sticky currents.

The We-ku's intended victim struggled to his feet. He was about La-ba's height and age, guessed, with a taut, well-muscled body. He was naked, but crusted with dirt.

She was aroused. Deathing always aroused her. Glancing down at his crotch, at the stiff member that stuck out of the dirt there, she saw that this other felt the same.

"You crimed," he breathed, and he stared at her with eyes that were bright white against the dirt.

He was right. She should have let the deathing go ahead, and then take out the We-ku. Then there would have been two deaths, instead of one. Un-Doctrine.

She glanced around. Nobody was close. Nobody had seen how the We-ku died. Nobody but this man, this intended victim.

"Ca-si," he said. "Cadre Fourteen." That was on the other side of the sky.

"La-ba. Cadre Six. Will you report?" If he did she could be summarily executed, deathed before the day was out.

Still he stared at her. The moment stretched.

He said, "We should process the We-ku."

"Yes."

Breathing hard, they hauled the We-ku's bulky corpse toward a hopper that was already

half-full—of tangled limbs, purple guts, bits of people. The work brought them close. She could feel the warmth of his body.

They dumped the We-ku into the hopper. La-ba kept back one ugly ear as a trophy.

La-ba and Ca-si sexed, there and then, in the slippery dirt.

Later, at the end of the shift, they got clean, and sexed again.

Later still they joined in a dance, a vast abandoned whirl of a hundred citizens, more. Then they sexed again.

He never did report her crime. By failing to do so, of course, he was criming himself. Maybe that bonded them.

They kept sexing, whatever the reason.

Hama stood beside his mentor, Arles Thrun, as the citizens of the Observation Post filed before them. The marching drones stared at Hama's silvered Raoul-technology skin, and then they reached respectfully to stroke the gleaming egg-shaped Memory that Arles held in his hand.

One in three of the drones who passed was assigned, by Arles's ancient, wordless gesture, to the Cull. Perhaps half of those assigned would survive. Each drone so touched shrank away from Arles's gleaming finger.

When Hama looked to the up-curving horizon he saw that the line of patiently queuing drones stretched a quarter of the way around the Post's internal equator.

This Observation Post was a sphere of Woven Space, so small he could have walked around its interior in a day. The folded-over sky was crowded with Cadre Squares, dormitory blocks and training and indoctrination centers, and the great sprawls of the Post's more biological functions, the Cesspits and the Cyclers and the Gardens, green and brown and glistening blue. Every surface was covered with instructive images, symbols and pictures of man's long battle against the Xeelee, ten thousand years out of date. Drones walked all over the inner surface of the sphere, stuck there by manipulated gravity. The great Birthing Vat itself hung directly over his head, pink and fecund, an obscene sun. The air was thick with the stink of growing things, of dirt and sweat.

To Hama, it was like being trapped within the belly of some vast living thing.

It didn't help his mood to reflect that beyond the Woven Space floor beneath his feet, no more than a few Planck's-lengths away, the host planet's atmosphere raged: a perpetual hydrogen storm, laced with high-frequency radiation and charged particles.

Absently he reached into his drab monastic robe and touched his chest, stroked the cool, silvered Planck-zero epidermis, sensed the softly gurgling fluid within, where alien fish swam languidly. *Here* in this dismal swamp, immersed in the primeval, he could barely sense the mood even of Arles, who stood right next to him. He longed for the cool inter-galactic gulfs, endless open where the merged thoughts of Commissaries sounded across a trillion stars.

"Hama, pay attention," Arles Thrun snapped.

Hama focused reluctantly on the soft round faces of the drones, and saw they betrayed agitation and confusion at his behavior.

"Remember, this is a great day," Arles murmured dryly. "The first Commission visit in ten thousand years—and it is happening in the brief lifetime of *this* creature," and his silvered hand patted indulgently at the bare head of the drone before him. "How lucky they are, even if we will have to order the deaths of a sixth of them. There is so little in their

lives—little more than the wall images that never change, the meaningless battle for position, the cadre hierarchies . . ."

And the dance, Hama thought reluctantly, their wild illegal dance.

"They disgust me," he hissed, surprising himself. Yet it was true.

Arles glanced at him. "You're fortunate they do not understand."

"They disgust me because their language has devolved into jabber," Hama said. "They disgust me because they have bred themselves into overpopulation."

Arles murmured, "Hama, when you accepted the Burden of Longevity you chose a proud name. I sometimes wonder whether you have the nobility to match that name. *These* creature names were chosen for them by a random combination of syllables—"

"They spend their lives on make-work. They eat and screw and die, crawling around in their own filth. What need a candle-flame of a name?"

Arles was frowning now, sapphire eyes flickering in the silver mask of his face. "Have you forgotten the core tenet of the Doctrine? *A brief life burns brightly*, Hama. These creatures and their forebears have maintained their lonely vigil, here between the galaxies—monitoring the progress of the war across a million fronts—for *sixty thousand years*. These drones are the essence of humanity. And we Commissaries—doomed to knowledge, doomed to life—we are their servants."

"Perhaps. But this *essence of humanity* is motivated by lies. Already we understand the jabber well enough to know that. These absurd legends—"

Arles raised a hand, silencing him quickly. "Belief systems drift, just as languages do. The flame of the Doctrine still burns here, if not as brightly as we would wish."

Now two of the drones came before Hama, hand in hand, male and female, nude like the rest. This pair leaned close to each other, showing an easy physical familiarity.

They had made love, he saw immediately. Not once, but many times. Perhaps even recently.

On a thong around her neck the female wore what looked hideously like a dried human eel. The fish in his chest squirmed.

He snapped: "What are your names?"

They didn't understand his words, but comprehended the sense. They pointed to their chests.

"*La-ba.*"

"*Ca-si.*"

Arles smiled, amused, contemptuous. "We have the perspective of gods. They have only their moment of light, and the warmth of each other's body. . . . What is it, Hama? Feeling a little attraction, despite your disgust? A little *envyl*?"

With an angry gesture, Hama sentenced both the drones to the Cull. The drones, obviously shocked, clung to each other.

Arles laughed. "Don't worry, Hama. You are yet young. You will grow—distant." Arles passed him the Memory. "Carry on alone. Perhaps it will be a useful discipline for you. Or three for the Cull. And remember—*love them.*"

Space tore and knit up, and Arles Thrun was gone.

Hama weighed the Memory; it was surprisingly heavy. The contents of the Memory would be downloaded into the Post's fabric and transcribed on its walls, in images timeless enough to withstand further linguistic drift. Nothing else could be written or drawn on the surfaces of

Post—certainly nothing made by the inhabitants of this place. What had they to write or draw? What did they need to read, save the glorious progress of mankind?

The drone couple had moved on. More ugly shaven heads moved past him, all alike, meaningless.

Later that night, when the Post's sourceless light dimmed, Hama watched the drones dance their wild untutored tangos, sensual and beautiful. He clung to the thought of how he had doomed the lovers: their shocked expressions, the way they had grabbed each others' arms, their distress.

After another sleep, La-ba and Ca-si were thrust out of the Observation Post.

To La-ba, stiff in her hardsuit, it was a strange and unwelcome experience to pass through the Woven Space shell of the Post, to feel gravity shift and change, to feel *up* become *down*. And then she had to make sense of a floor that curved away beneath her, to understand that the horizon now hid what lay beyond rather than revealed it.

Only one of them, La-ba or Ca-si, would come back—one, or neither.

This was the Cull.

Crimson fog glowed around La-ba.

The air was racked by huge storms. Far below she saw the smooth glint of this world's surface, a hard plain of metallic hydrogen, unimaginably strange. Above her huge black clouds jostled and squirming like *We-kus* in the mud. Lightning crackled between and beyond the clouds.

Rain slammed down around her, a hail of pebbles that glowed red-hot. They clattered against the smooth skin of the Post, and her hard-suit. The clouds were a vapor of silicates. The rain was molten rock laced with pure iron.

The Post was a featureless ball that floated in this ferocious sky, a world drifting within a world. A great cable ran up from the floor before her, up into the crowded sky above her, up—it was said—to the cool emptiness of space beyond. La-ba had never seen space, though she believed it existed.

La-ba, used to enclosure, wanted to cringe, to fall against the floor, as, it was said, some infants hugged the smooth warm walls of the Birthing Vat. But she stood tall.

A fist slammed into the back of her head.

She fell forward, her hardsuited limbs clattering against the Woven Space floor.

There was a weight on her back and legs, pressing her down. She felt a scrabbling at her neck. Fingers probed at the joint between her helmet and the rest of the suit. If the suit was breached she would die at once. She did not resist.

She felt the fingers pull away from her neck.

With brisk roughness she was flipped on her back. Her assailant sat on her legs, heavy in his hardsuit. Rock rain pattered on his shoulders, red-gleaming pebbles that stuck for a second before dropping away, cooling to gray.

It was, of course, Ca-si.

"You un-hunted me," he said, and his words crackled in her ears. "And now you un-resist me." She felt his hands on her shoulders, and she remembered how his skin had touched her, but there was no feeling through the hardsuits. He said, "You crime if you un-death me. You crime if you let me death you."

"It is true." So it was. According to the Doctrine that shaped their lives, it was the duty of

the strong to destroy the weak.

Ca-si sat back. "I will death you." But he ran his gloved hands over her body, over her breasts, to her belly.

And he found the bulge there, exposed by the contoured hardsuit. His eyes widened.

"Now you know," she screamed at him.

His face twisted behind the thick plate. "I must death you even so."

"Yes! Death me! Get it over!"

". . . No. There is another way."

There was a hand on Ca-si's shoulder. He twisted, startled. Another stood over them, occluding the raging rock clouds. This other was wearing an ancient, scuffed hardsuit. Through a scratched and starred faceplate, La-ba made out one eye, one dark socket, a mesh of wrinkles.

It was the Old Man: the monster of whom infants whispered to each other even before they had left the Birthing Vat.

Ca-si fell away from her. He was screaming and screaming. La-ba lay there, stunned, unable to speak.

The Old Man reached down and hauled La-ba to her feet. "Come." He pulled her toward a cable that connected the Post to space.

There was a door in the cable.

Hama kept Ca-si in custody.

The boy paced back and forth in the small cell Hama had created for him, his muscles sliding beneath his skin. He would mutter sometimes, agitated, clearly troubled by whatever had become of his lost love.

But when Ca-si inspected the Commissary's silvered epidermis and the fish that swam in his chest, a different look dawned on his fleshy, soft face. It was a look of awe, incomprehension, and—admit it, Hama!— *disgust*.

He knew Arles disapproved of his obsession with this boy.

"The result of your assignment of them to the Cull was satisfactory. Two went out; one came back. What does it matter?"

But Hama pointed to evidence of flaws—the lack of trophies from the body being the most obvious. "All these disgusting drones take trophies from their kills. There's something wrong here."

"There is more than one way of manifesting weakness, Hama. If the other let herself die, better she is deleted from the gene pool anyhow."

"That is not the strict Doctrine."

Arles had sighed and passed a glimmering hand over the silver planes of his cheek. "But even our longevity is a violation of the Doctrine—if a necessary one. It is a hundred thousand years since Druz, Hama. His Doctrine has become—mature. You will learn."

But Hama had not been satisfied.

At last the translation suites cut in, rendering the drones' linguistically impoverished jab into reasonably acceptable Standard.

Hama faced the boy. He forced his silvered face into a smile. "You have been isolated for a long time."

"A thousand births," the boy said sullenly.

That was about right: ten thousand years since the last Commission visit, a thousand of the drones' brief generations. "Yes. A thousand births. And, in enough time, languages change. Do you know that? After just a few thousand years of separation two identical languages will diverge so much that they would share no common features except basic grammatical constructs—like the way a language indicates possession, or uses more subtle features like ergativity, which ..."

The boy was just staring at him, dull, not even resentful.

Hama felt foolish, and then angry to be made to feel that way. He said sternly, "To rectify language drift is part of our duty. The Commission for Historical Truth, I mean. We will reteach you Standard. Just as we will leave you the Memory, with the story of mankind since you were last visited, and we will take away your story to tell it to others. We bind up man on all our scattered islands. Just as it is your duty—"

"To death."

"Yes. The machines here watch for the enemy. They have watched for sixty thousand years and they may watch for sixty thousand years more. If the enemy come you must do everything you can to destroy them, and if you cannot, you must destroy the machines, and the Post, and yourself."

The boy watched him dully, his powerful hands clenched into fists.

Ca-si was no more than a backup mechanism, Hama thought. A final self-destruct, in case this station's brooding automated defenses failed. For this sole purpose, six thousand generations of humans had lived and loved and bred and died, here in the intergalactic wasteland.

As he gazed at the planes of the boy's stomach, Hama felt an uncomfortable inner warmth and restlessness.

On impulse he snapped, "Who do we fight? Do you know?"

"We fight the Xeelee."

"Why do we fight?"

The boy stared at him.

Hama ordered, "Look at me." He pulled open his robe. "This silver skin comes from a creature called a Silver Ghost. Once the Ghosts owned worlds and built cities. Now we fear them for their skin. The fish in my belly are called Squeem. Once they conquered man, they occupied Earth itself. Now they are mere symbiotes in my chest, enabling me to speak to my colleagues across the galactic Supercluster. These are triumphs for mankind."

The look on Ca-si's face made Hama think he didn't regard his condition as a triumph.

Angry, oddly confused, Hama snapped, "I know you didn't kill the girl. Why did you spare her? Why did she spare you? *Where is she?*"

But the boy wouldn't reply.

It seemed there was nothing Hama could do to reach Ca-si, as he longed to.

La-ba had been raised into strangeness.

The hollow cable had a floor that lifted you up, and windows so you could see out. Inside she rode all the way out of the air, into a place of harsh flat light.

When she looked down she saw a floor of churning red gas. Auroras flapped in its textured layers, making it glow purple. When she looked up she saw only a burning, glaring light.

The Old Man tried to make her understand. "The light is the sun. The red is the world. The Post floats in the air of the world."

She couldn't stop staring at his face. It was a mass of wrinkles. He had one eye, one dark purple pit. His face was the strangest thing of all, much stranger than the sun and the churning world.

The cable ended in another giant ball, like the Post. But this ball was dimpled by big black pits, like the bruises left by the heels of her hands in the face of the We-ku. And it floated in space, not the air.

Inside the ball there was a cavity, but there were no people or Cadre Squares and no Birthing Vat: only vast mechanical limbs that glistened, sinister, sliding over each other.

"No people live here," she said.

He smiled. "One person does."

He showed her his home. It wasn't a dorm. It was just a shack made of bits of shining plastic. There were blankets on the floor, and clothes, and empty food packets. It was dirty and it smelled a little.

She looked around. "There is no supply dispenser."

"People give me food. And water and clothes. From their rations."

She tried to understand. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Because life is short. People want—"

"What?"

"Something more than the war."

She thought about that. "There is the dance."

He grinned, his empty eye socket crumpling. "I never could dance. Come."

He led her to a huge window. Machines screened out the glare of the sun above and the glower of the overheated planet below.

Between sun and planet, there was only blackness.

"No," the Old Man said gently. "Not blackness. *Look.*"

They waited there for long heartbeats.

At last she saw a faint glow, laced against the black. It had structure, fine filaments and threads. It was beautiful, eerie, remote.

"It is un-black."

He pointed at the sun. "The sun is alone. If there were other suns near, we would see them as points of light. The suns gather in pools. There are not even pools of suns nearby. The un-black is pools of suns, very far away."

She understood that.

"Others lived here before me," he said. "They learned how to see with the machines. They left records of what they saw." He dug into a pocket and pulled out a handful of bones: human bones, the small bones of a hand or foot. They were scored by fine marks.

"They speak to you with *bones*?"

He shrugged. "If you smear blood or dirt on the walls it falls away. What else do we have to draw on, but our bones, and our hearts?" He fingered the bones carefully.

"What do the bones say?"

He gestured at the hulking machinery. "These machines watch the sky for the trace of ships. But they also see the un-black: the light, the faintest light, all the light there is. Some of the



comes from the suns and pools of suns. Most of the light was made in the birthing of the universe. It is old now and tired and hard to see. But it has patterns in it...."

This meant nothing to her. Bombarded by strangeness, she tried to remember the Doctrine of the Bones. I did not die, and I wanted to be deathed. Then you died. You could have deathed me. And here—"

"Here, I die." He grinned. "With every breath I die. Every one of these bones is a death, a record of ancient deaths. Like you, I was deathed."

"Deathed?"

"Brought here."

She asked the hardest question of all. "When?"

He smiled, and the wrinkles on his face gathered up. "Twenty years ago. Twice your life."

She frowned, barely comprehending. She leaned against the window, cupping her hands and peering out.

He asked, "What are you looking for now?"

"Shuttles."

He said gently, "There are no Shuttles."

"The cadre leaders—"

"The cadre leaders say what is said to them. Think. Have you ever known anybody to leave on a Shuttle? *There are no Shuttles.*"

"It is a lie?"

"It is a lie. If you live past age ten, the cadre leaders will death you. *They* believe they will win a place on the Shuttles. But they in turn are deathed by other cadre leaders, who believe they will steal their places on the Shuttles. And so it goes. Lies eating each other."

*No Shuttles.* She sighed, and her breath fogged the smooth surface of the window. "Then how will we leave?"

"We un-can leave. We are too remote. Only the Commissaries come and go. Only the Commissaries. Not us."

She felt something stir in her heart.

"The Shuttles are un-real. Is Earth real? Is the war real?"

"Perhaps Earth is a lie. But the war is real. Oh, yes. The bones talk of how distant pools of suns flare up. The war is real, and all around us, but it is very far away, and very old. But it shapes us." He studied her. "Soon the cadre leaders will pluck that baby from your belly and put it in the Birthing Vat. It will live and death for one purpose, for the war."

She said nothing.

The Old Man said dreamily, "Some of the Old Men have seen patterns in the birthing of the un-black. They have tried to understand them, as the cadre leaders make us understand the Memory images of the war. Perhaps they are thoughts, those patterns. Frozen thoughts of the creatures who lived in the first blinding second of the universal birth." He shook his head and gazed at the bones. "I un-want death. I want more than the war. I want to learn *this.*"

She barely heard him. She asked, "Who gives you food?"

He gave her names, of people she knew, and people she un-knew.

The number of them shocked her.

Hama and Arles Thrun drifted in space, side by side, two silver statues. Before them, the

hot-Jupiter world continued its endless frenetic waltz around its too-close sun. The sun was a rogue star that had evaporated out of its parent galaxy long ago and come to drift here, a meaningless beacon in the intergalactic dark.

Hama was comfortable here, in space, in the vacuum, away from the claustrophobic enclosure of the Post. Alien creatures swam through his chest cavity, subtly feeding on the distant calls of Commissaries all over the Supercluster. To Hama it was like being in a vast room where soft voices murmured in every shadowed corner, grave and wise.

"A paradox," Arles Thrun murmured now.

"What is?"

"Here we are, peering out at the Supercluster, a cluster of clusters of galaxies ..."

"The drones call it the *un-black*. The glow of the Supercluster, the relic light."

Arles ignored him. "All across the Supercluster mankind battles the Xeelee, a vast organic war. All that conflict is far from here. But *this* is a noisy place—the sun, this wretched overheated planet—the noisiest place in all this dreaming gulf. And yet it is here that we established our listening post."

"We had to camouflage it."

"Yes. And we had to provide matter and energy for the humans who would live here. That's in all our designs, we compromise with the needs of the human. Isn't that true, Hama?"

Hama glared, sensing an edge in his voice.

Arles said, "You know, your new Raoul rebuilding has extended beyond the superficial. You have been reengineered, the layers of evolutionary haphazardness designed out of you. The inner chemical conflicts bequeathed by humanity's past do not trouble you. You do not hear voices in your head, you do not invent gods to drive out your internal torment. You are the most *integrated* human being who ever lived."

"If I am still human," Hama said.

"Ah, yes, the great question. Certainly we are needed. It is impossible to begin to grasp the scale and complexity of an intergalactic war in a human lifetime. And yet the brevity of human life is the key to the war; we fight like vermin, for to the Xeelee we are vermin—*that* is the central uncomfortable truth of the Doctrine. *We*, who do not die, are a paradoxical necessity in maintaining the attention span of the species ..."

"We have no art. We are not scientists. We do not dance." "No," said Arles earnestly. "Our reengineered hearts are too cold for that. Or too much desire to make babies to fill up the empty spaces. *But we know our flaws, Hama*. We know that those brutish creatures down there in the Post, busily fighting and fornicating and breeding and dying, *they* are the true heart of humanity. And so we must defer to them." He eyed Hama, waiting for him to respond.

Hama said with difficulty, "I am not—happy."

"You were promised integration, not happiness."

"I failed to find the girl. *La-ba*."

Arles smiled in the vacuum. "I traced her. She escaped to the sensor installation."

"The sensors?"

"Another renegade lives up there. To what purpose, I can't imagine," Arles murmured.

"This place is flawed," Hama said bitterly.

"Oh, yes. Very flawed. There is a network of drones who provision the renegade. And there are more subtle problems: the multiple births occurring in the Vat, the taking of trophies from

kills, the *dancing* . . . These drones seek satisfaction beyond the Doctrine. There has been ideological drift. It is a shame. You would think that in a place as isolated as this a certain purity could be sustained. But the human heart, it seems, is full of spontaneous imperfection.

"They must be punished."

Arles looked at him carefully. "We do not punish, Hama. We only correct."

"How? A program of indoctrination, a rebuilding—"

Arles shook his head. "It has gone too far for that. There are many other Observation Points. We will allow these flawed drones to die."

There was a wash of agreement from the Commissaries all over the Supercluster, all of them loosely bound to Hama's thinking and Arles's, all of them concurring in Arles's decision.

Hama found he was appalled. "They have done their duty here for sixty thousand years—Lethe, a third of the evolutionary history of the human species—and now you would destroy them so casually, for the sake of a little deviance?"

Arles gripped Hama's arms and turned him so they faced each other. Hama glimpsed cold power in his eyes; Arles Thrun was already a thousand years old. "Look around, Hama. Look at the Supercluster, the vast stage, deep in space and time, on which we fight. Our foe is unimaginably ancient, with unimaginable powers. And what are we but half-evolved apes on the plains of some dusty, lost planet? Perhaps we are not *smart* enough to fight this war. And yet we fight even so.

"And to keep us united in our purpose, this vast host of us scattered over more galaxies than either of us could count, we have the Doctrine, our creed of mortality. Let me tell you something. The Doctrine is not perfect. *It may not even enable us to win the war*, no matter how long we fight. But it has brought us this far, and it is all we have."

"And so we must destroy these drones, not for the sake of the war—"

"But for the sake of the Doctrine. Yes. Now, at last, you begin to understand."

Arles released him, and they drifted apart.

La-ba stayed with the Old Man.

She woke. She lay in silence. It was strange not to wake under a sky crowded with people. She could feel her baby inside her, kicking as if it were eager to get to the Birthing Vat.

The floor shuddered.

The Old Man ran to her. He dragged her to her feet. "It begins," he said.

"What?"

He took her to the hatch that led to the hollow cable.

A We-ku was there, inside the cable, his fat face split by a grin, his stick-out ears wide.

She raised her foot and kicked the We-ku in the forehead. He clattered to the floor, howling.

The Old Man pulled her back. "What did you do?"

"He is a We-ku."

"Look." The Old Man pointed.

The We-ku was clambering to his feet and rubbing his head. He had been carrying a bag of ration packs. Now the packs were littered over the floor, some of them split.

The Old Man said, "Never mind the food. Take her back." And he pushed at La-ba again, urging her into the cable. Reluctantly she began to climb down.

She felt a great sideways wash, as if the whole of this immense cable was vibrating back

and forth, as if it had been plucked by a vast finger.

She looked up at the circle of light that framed the Old Man's face. She was confused, frightened. "I will bring you food."

He laughed bitterly. "Just remember me. Here." And he thrust his hand down into hers. Then he slammed shut the hatch.

When she opened her hand, she saw it contained the scrimshawed bones.

The cable whiplashed, and the lights failed, and they fell into darkness, screaming.

Hama stood in the holding cell, facing Ca-si. The walls were creaking. He heard screaming and running footsteps.

With its anchoring cable severed, the Post was beginning to sink away from its design altitude, deeper into the roiling murk of the hot Jupiter's atmosphere. Long before it reached its glimmering, enigmatic metallic-hydrogen core, it would implode.

Ca-si's mouth worked, as if he was gulping for air. "Take me to the Shuttles."

"There are no Shuttles."

Ca-si yelled, "Why are you here? What do you *want*'?"

Hama laid one silvered hand against the boy's face. "I love you," he said. "It's my job to love you. Don't you see that?" But his silvered flesh could not detect the boy's warmth, and Ca-si flinched from his touch, the burned scent of vacuum exposure.

"... *I* know what you want."

Ca-si gasped. Hama turned.

La-ba stood in the doorway. She was dirty, bloodied. She was carrying a lump of shattered partition wall. Fragmentary animated images, of glorious scenes from humanity's past, played over it fitfully.

Hama said, "*You*."

She flicked a fingernail against the silver carapace of his arm. "You want to be like us. That's why you tried to death us."

And she lifted the lump of partition rubble and slammed it into his chest. Briny water gurgled down Kama's belly, spilling tiny silver fish that struggled and died.

Hama fell back, bending over himself. His systems screamed messages of alarm and pain at him—and, worse, he could feel that he had lost his link with the vaster pool of Commissar beyond. "What have you done? Oh, what have you done?"

"Now you are like us," said La-ba simply.

The light flickered and darkened. Glancing out of the cell, Hama saw that the great Birth Vat was drifting away from its position at the geometric center of the Post. Soon it would impact the floor in a gruesome moist collision.

"I should have gone with Arles," he moaned. "I don't know why I delayed."

La-ba stood over Hama and grabbed his arm. With a grunting effort, the two drones hauled him to his feet.

La-ba said, "Why do you death us?"

"It is the war. Only the war."

"Why do we fight the war?"

In desperation Hama said rapidly, "We have fought the Xeelee for half our evolutionary history as a species. We fight because we must. We don't know what else to do. We can't s

any more than you can stop breathing. Do you see? "

"Take us," said La-ba.

"*Take* you? Take you where? Do you even know what it is I do when I ... jump?" He tried to imagine explaining to them the truth about space—telling them of filaments and membranes vibrating in multiple-dimensional harmony, of ruptures in space and time as the fundamental fibers, at his command, reweave themselves . . .

In La-ba's set face there was ruthless determination, a will to survive that burned away the fog of his own weak thinking.

The Doctrine is right, he thought. Mortality brings strength. *A brief life burns brightly.* He felt ashamed of himself. He tried to stand straight, ignoring the clamoring pain from his smashed stomach.

The girl said, "It is un-Doctrine. But I have deatched your fish. Nobody will know."

He forced a laugh. "Is that why you killed the Squeem? . . . You are naive."

She clutched his arm harder, as if trying to bend his metallic flesh. "Take us to Earth."

"Do you know what Earth is like?"

Ca-si said, "It is a place where you live on the outside, not the inside. It is a place where water falls from the sky, not rock."

"How will you live? "

La-ba said, "The We-ku helped the Old Man live. Others will help us live."

Perhaps it was true, Hama thought. Perhaps if these two survived on some civilized world—a world where other citizens could see what was being done in the name of the war—they might form a focus for resistance. No, not resistance: *doubt*.

And doubt might destroy them all.

He must abandon these creatures to their deaths. That was his clear duty, his duty to the species.

There was a crack of shattering partition. The Post spun, making the three of them stagger and locked together.

Ca-si showed his fear. "We will be deatched."

"Take us to Earth," La-ba insisted.

Hama said weakly, "You broke my link to the Commission. I may not be able to find my way. The link helps me—navigate. Do you see?"

"Try," she whispered. She closed her eyes and pressed her cheek against the cold of his silvered chest.

Hama wrapped his arms around the two drones, and space tore.

For a single heartbeat the three of them floated in vacuum.

The close sun glared, impossibly bright. The planet was a floor of roiling gas, semi-infinite. Above, Hama could see the sensor installation. It was drifting off into space, dangling its tentacles like an impossibly long umbilical. It was startlingly bright in the raw sunlight, like a sculpted form.

From beneath the planet's boiling clouds, a soundless concussion of light flickered and faded. Sixty thousand years of history had ended, a subplot in mankind's tangled evolution; the long watch was over.

La-ba squirmed, stranded in vacuum. Her hands were clasped over the bump at her belly. She opened her mouth, and the last of her air gushed out, a hail of sparkling crystals, glimmering in the fierce sunlight.

Hama held the lovers close, and the three of them vanished.