

## The Passengerby Paul McAuley

Before becoming a full-time writer, Paul McAuley worked as a researcher in biology in various universities, including Oxford and UCLA, and was a lecturer at St Andrews University. His novels and short stories have won the Philip K. Dick, Arthur C. Clarke, John W. Campbell, Sidewise, and British Fantasy Society Awards. His latest books are *The Secret of Life* and *Whole Wide World*. He lives in North London.

[Back to Table of Contents]

The sky was full of ships.

Sturdy little scows that were mostly motor; lumpy intrasystem shuttles, the workhorses of space; the truncated cones of surface-to-orbit gigs; freighters that, stripped of their cargo pods, looked like the unclad skeletons of skyscrapers; even an elegant clipper, a golden arc like the crescent moon of a fairy-tale illustration. More than a hundred ships spread in a rough sphere a thousand kilometers in diameter, in the Lagrangian point sixty degrees of arc ahead of Dione. All of them hulks. Combat wreckage. Spoils of war waiting to be rendered into useful components, rare metals, and scrap.

From the viewports of the battered hab-modules of the wrecking gangs, hung in the midst of this junkyard Sargasso, four or five ships were always visible, framed at various angles against starry space. Only a few showed obvious signs of damage. There was a passenger shuttle whose cylindrical lifestream had been unseamed by carefully placed bomblets, a kamikaze act of sabotage that had killed the fleeing government of Baghdad, Enceladus. There was a freighter wrecked by a missile strike, its frame peeled back and half-melted, like a Daliesque flower. A dozen tugs, converted into singleship fighters, had been drilled by X-ray lasers or holed by smart rocks. But most were simply brain dead, their cybernetic nervous systems zapped by neutron lasers, microwave bursts or emp mines during the investment of the Saturn system. Salvage robots had attached themselves to these hulks and pushed them into low-energy orbits that had eventually intersected that of Dione. Their cargo pods had been dismantled, the antihydrogen and antilithium had been removed from their motors, and now, two hundred days after the end of the Quiet War, they awaited the attention of the wrecking gangs.

The men and women of the gangs were all outers recruited by Symbiosis, the Earth-based transnat that had won the auction for salvaging and rendering these casualties of the Quiet War. They were engineers, General Labor Pool grunts, and freefall construction mechanics on thirty-days-on/thirty-days-off shifts under minimum wage contracts, and pleased to get the work; the Quiet War had wrecked the economy of the Outer System colonies, and seventy percent of the population depended upon the charity of the victorious Three Powers Alliance.

Maris Delgado, foreperson of Wrecking Gang #3, was supporting her mother and father, and her brother and his family back in Athens, Tethys. Every cent of her wages, after deductions, went to them. Maris was a practical, gruff, level-headed woman. She preferred to put her faith in machines rather than people. You could always flange up a rough solution to a machine's problems, but people were unfathomable and all too often untrustworthy. Her approach to running her gang was pragmatic: do what Symbiosis asked, no more and no less. Her family depended upon her, and she wanted to get the job done with the minimum of fuss. She took no part in the gossip and rumors the wrecking gangs exchanged by clandestine laser blink whenever they were out of the

line-of-sight of the Symbiosis supervisor's ship. She poured scorn on the rumors of ghosts and hauntings, of curses worked by dying crews, of hatches mysteriously locked or unlocked, machinery suddenly starting up or breaking down. She ridiculed the vivid stories that Ty Siriwardene, the youngest member of her gang, liked to conjure up, told him that the last thing you needed on a job like this was an imagination.

Not even on their latest assignment, which was a shuttle that Maris had helped to build a couple of years before the war, when she had been working in the orbital shipyards of Tethys. Ty said that the coincidence was spooky; Maris said that it was ridiculous to make anything of it. She'd worked fifteen years at the yards—all her working life. It was a statistical inevitability that sooner or later she'd find herself taking apart a ship that she had once helped assemble, and she was determined to treat it like any other.

Maris did the initial survey of the hulk with Somerset. It was grossly intact, and its lifesystem still pressurized; the only potential problem was the thick black crust growing around the motor, a vacuum organism that was probably subsisting on water vapor leaking from the attitude-control tanks. Somerset, who had been a data miner before getting religion, plugged a slate into the shuttle's dead computer and pulled the manifest from the memory core. The shuttle had been carrying a single passenger and miscellaneous agricultural supplies; it seemed likely that the vacuum organism had escaped from one of the cargo pods before they had been removed.

For once, Maris and Somerset didn't have to search for the crew; the Symbiosis workers who had uncoupled the cargo pods and decommissioned the motor had already done that. The three bodies, still wearing sealed pressure suits, were huddled together in an equipment locker around some kind of impedance heater lashed up from cable and an exhausted fuel cell. The locker, the heater, and the p-suits had been the crew's last stand against the inevitable after the shuttle's systems had been fritzed by an emp mine and the stricken lifesystem had cooled to minus two hundred degrees centigrade. One by one, they had succumbed to hypothermia's deep sleep, and their corpses had frozen solid.

Watched by one of the half-dozen drones that for some reason were floating about the lifesystem, Maris and Somerset identified each of the bodies, collected and documented their personal effects, and sealed them into coffins that Symbiosis would with impersonal charity deliver to surviving relatives. They were one body short—the passenger. Maris assumed that the woman had wandered off to die on her own in some obscure spot not discovered by the Symbiosis workers; the wrecking gang would find her frozen corpse by and by, when they stripped out the lifesystem.

Once the coffins had been sent on their way, the other two members of the wrecking gang came aboard. They rigged lights and a power supply, collected drifting trash, vented the lifesystem, and generally made the hulk safe, so that they could begin the second stage of the salvage operation, stripping out gold and silver, iridium and germanium, and all the other rare metals from the shuttle's control systems.

It was Ty Siriwardene who noticed that the shuttle's foodmaker had been dismantled, and that its yeast base block was missing. He told Maris about it at the end of the shift, back in the hab-module; she suggested that it couldn't be due to one of his famous ghosts, because it was well known that ghosts didn't eat.

"Somethingtook the stuff," Ty said stubbornly. "I'm not making this up."

He was a raggedy young man, scrawny and slight in his grubby blue suit-liner,

thick black tattoos squirming over his shaven scalp. He chewed gum incessantly; he was chewing it now, a tendon jumping on his neck, as he locked eyes with Maris.

"Maybe the crew ate the yeast because the maker couldn't synthesize food without power," Maris said.

Ty popped gum. "If they just wanted the yeast, why did they dismantle the maker? And why would they have eaten the yeast when they hardly touched the reserves of food paste in their suits?"

"They preferred yeast," Maris said curtly. She was tired. She had been working for twelve hours straight. She was looking forward to a shower and a long sleep. She didn't have time for Ty's spooky shit. He wanted her to contradict him, she realized, so that he could keep his silly notions alive in a pointless argument. She said, "We've got just one week left before we're all rotated rockside. Let it go, Ty, unless you want to write up a report for Barrett."

Ty didn't write it up, of course. The supervisor, James Lo Barrett, was considered a joke amongst the wrecking gangs: an inflexible bureaucrat who was working off some kind of demerit at this obscure posting, an incomer who hardly ever left his ship, who had no idea of the practical difficulties of the work. But Ty didn't let it go, either. The next day, mid-shift, he swam up to Maris and pulled a patch cord from his p-suit's utility belt. Maris sighed, but took the free end of the cord and plugged it in.

"Something's screwy," Ty said. "I was outside, checking the service compartment? Turns out all the fuel cells in the back-up power system are gone."

"The crew moved them inside after their ship was crippled," Maris said. "We found one cell right by their bodies."

"Yeah, but where are the other three?"

"They'll turn up," Maris said. "Forget it, and get back to work."

They were floating head-to-head in the narrow shaft that ran through the middle of the shuttle's tiny lifesystem, where Maris was feeding circuitry into the squat cube of a portable refinery that boiled off metals and separated and collected them by laser chromatography. Ty's gaze was grabby and nervous behind his gold-filmed visor. He really was spooked. He said, "You don't feel it? It's not just that something weird happened here. It's as if something's still here. A presence, a ghost."

"That would be Barrett. You know he's always on my tail to keep you guys on schedule. We have fifteen days to strip this hulk. If we fall behind, he'll dock our pay. Can you afford that, Ty? I can't. I have people who depend on me. Forget about the fuel cells. It's one of those mysteries that really isn't worth thinking about. It's nothing. Let me hear you say that."

"It's something," Ty said, with a flicker of insolence. He pulled the patch cord, spun head-over-heels, and shot away down the long corridor.

"And another thing," Maris said over the common radio channel, as Ty did a tuck-and-turn and pulled himself through a hatchway, "don't fuck around with any more drones. Barrett called me up a couple of hours ago, said he thought you'd done something to one of them."

"I don't like being watched while I work," Ty said.

"What did you do, Ty?"

"Glued it to a bulkhead. If Barrett wants to spy on me, he can come out and unglue it himself."

Ty wouldn't give up his idea that something was haunting the shuttle. Later, Maris caught him plugged into a private conversation with Bruno Peterfreund, the fourth member of the wrecking gang. They had just spent a couple of hours combing through the shuttle's lifesystem, and presented her with an inventory: the com module gone; pumps and filters from the air conditioning dismounted; sleeping bags and tools missing.

"Something took all this stuff," Ty said, "and made itself a nice cozy nest."

"I think he's right, boss," Bruno said. "The stuff, it is not floating around somewhere. It's gone."

"The shuttle was zapped right at the beginning of the war," Maris said. "Nothing could have survived out here for three hundred days."

"Nothing human," Ty said. "It's a spook of some kind for sure. Hiding in the shadows, waiting to jump our asses."

Maris told the two men to get back to work, but she knew this wouldn't be the end of it. Ty and Bruno had wasted precious time chasing a ghost that couldn't possibly exist. They had fallen behind on the job.

Sure enough, Barrett called her that evening. He'd checked her day log, and wanted to know why her gang were still refining rare metals when they should have started to dismount the fusion plant. Maris wasn't prepared to expose her crew to Barrett's acid ridicule, so she flat-out lied. She told him that the calibration of the refinery had drifted, that there had been cross-contamination in the collection chambers, that she had had to run everything through the refinery all over again.

"I don't want to fine you," Barrett said, "but I'm going to have to do it all the same. You've gotten behind, Maris, and I can't be seen to favor one gang over another. It's nothing, just 30 percent of the day's pay, but if your gang don't have the fusion plant dismounted by the end of tomorrow, I'm afraid that I'll be forced to invoke another penalty."

James Lo Barrett, the smug bastard, giving her a synthetic look of soapy sympathy. He had a fleshy, pouched face, a shaven head (even his eyebrows were shaved), and a pussy little beard that was no more than a single long braid hung off his chin and wrapped in black silk thread. He looked, Maris thought, like a fetus blimped up by some kind of accelerated growth program. He was sitting at his desk, at ease in the centrifugal gravity of his ship in a clean, brightly lit room, with real plants growing on a shelf behind him and a mug of something smothered in his podgy hands. Coffee, probably—Maris thought she could see steam rising from it. She hadn't had a proper hot drink or meal in twenty days; the hab-module's atmosphere was a nitrox mix at less than half an atmosphere, and water boiled at seventy degrees centigrade. It stank too, because its air scrubbers didn't work properly; its joints needed careful monitoring because they were prone to spring leaks; its underpowered electrical system was liable to unpredictable brown-outs and cut-offs; it had a low grade but intractable black mold infection; the motors and fans of its air conditioning thrummed and clanked and groaned in a continual dismal chorus. But it was infinitely better than sitting rockside, subsiding on the

meager charity of the Three Powers Occupation Force and enduring the random sweeps of its police. It was work, and work was what Maris lived for, even if she had to deal with people like Barrett.

She'd met him just once, at the start of her contract. He'd made a big deal about coming out to the hab-module to meet the new wrecking gang, had a clammy handshake, grabby eyes, and smelled of eucalyptus oil. He'd tried to convince her then that he was on her side, that he thought outers were getting a tough break. "The war is over," he'd told her. "We should draw a line under it and move on. There are tremendous possibilities out here, vast resources. Everyone can benefit. So don't think of me as the enemy, that's all in the past. Deal with me like you would anyone else, and we'll get along just fine."

Maris decided then that although she had to work for him, he couldn't make her pretend to like him. She said now, direct and matter-of-fact, "We'll get back on schedule. No problem."

"Work with me, Delgado. Don't let me down."

"Absolutely," Maris said. Her job would have been so much easier if Barrett had been a tough son of a bitch. Maris could deal with sons of bitches—you always knew where you were with them. But Barrett pretended that he was not responsible for the authority he wielded, pretended that punishing his crews hurt him as much as it hurt them, demanding their sympathy even as he sequestered money that was needed to feed starving children. His spineless mendacity made him a worse tyrant than any bully.

"If there's a problem," he said, "you know I'm always here to help."

Yeah, right. Maris knew that if there really was a problem, he'd get rid of her without a qualm. She gave her best smile, and said, "The refinery threw a glitch, but it's fixed now. We'll get on top of the schedule first thing."

"That's the spirit. And Delgado? No more games with my drones."

Wrecking Gang #3's hab-module was nothing more than two stubby, double-skinned cargo pods welded either side of a central airlock, like two tin cans kissing a fat ball bearing. Maris sculled from the workspace cylinder, with its lockers and racks and benches, through the spherical airlock, into the living quarters. Ty glanced up from his TV; he was an addict of the spew of reworked ancient programs pumped out by autonomous self-replicating satellites in Saturn's ring system. Half hidden by the flexing silvery tube of the air ducting, Bruno Peterfreund, his long blond hair coiled under a knitted cap, was painstakingly scraping mold from a viewport.

Maris told the two men the bad news. She gave it to them straight. She didn't mention their sudden obsession with missing fuel cells and the rest; she let the inference hang in the air. "You guys will start dismantling the fusion plant," she said, "and once Somerset and I have finished up metal reclamation, we'll come and give you a hand. We'll start early, finish late. Okay?"

"Whatever," Ty said, affecting indifference but not quite daring to meet Maris's fierce gaze.

"That won't interfere with your social plans, Bruno?"

"Nothing I can't put off, boss." Bruno was a stolid, taciturn man of thirty-five, exactly the same age as Maris, a ship's engineer from Europa who had been stranded in the Saturn system by the war. He had spent more than a hundred days in a forced labor camp, helping to rebuild wrecked agricultural

domes. Now that the Three Powers Occupation Force had declared "normalization" throughout the Outer System, and the embargo on civilian travel had been lifted, he hoped to earn enough from salvage work to pay for his ticket home. He had a round, impassive face and dark watchful eyes that didn't miss much; lately, Maris had caught him checking out her trim whenever he thought she wasn't looking. He was lonesome, she thought, missing the family he hadn't seen for almost a year. If he hadn't been married, and if they hadn't been working together, she might have responded; as it was, by unspoken agreement, they kept it at the level of mutually respectful banter.

"We'll make up the time," Maris told the two men. "I know you guys can work hard when you have to. Where's Somerset? Gardening?"

"As usual," Ty said.

Somerset was cocooned in a sleeping bag in a curtained niche at the far end of the chamber, eyes masked by spex, ringed fingers flexing like pale sea plants.

"Hey," Maris said.

Somerset pushed up the spex and turned its calm, untroubled gaze toward her. Like all neuters, its age was difficult to estimate; although it was thirty years older than Maris, and its spiky crest of hair was as white as nitrogen snow, its coffee-and-cream skin had the smooth, unlined complexion of a child. It was a member of some kind of Buddhist sect, and all of its wages went to the refugee center run by its temple. It owned nothing but a couple of changes of clothes, its p-suit, and its garden—a virtual microhabitat whose health and harmony were, according to the precepts of its faith, a reflection of its spiritual state.

Maris said, "How's everything growing?"

Somerset shrugged and said dryly, "You don't have to attempt pleasantries, Maris. I will do my part."

"You heard what I told Ty and Bruno."

"I thought you were quite restrained, considering the trouble they have caused."

"I want to know just one thing," Maris said. "I want to know if this is some kind of joke on me. If you're all winding me up because I helped build the ship, and I've bored you to death about why I don't believe in ghosts. If that's what it is, ha-ha, you've all made your point, and I'm wiser for it. But we have to get back on schedule."

"I don't play games," Somerset said disdainfully.

Maris said, "But you know what's going on, don't you? It's Ty. Ty for sure, and maybe Bruno. Bruno's quiet, but he's sly."

"To begin with," Somerset said, "I thought Ty's stories were as silly as you did, but now I'm not so sure. We still haven't found that missing passenger, after all."

"She died in some obscure little spot," Maris said, "or she took a walk out of the airlock. One or the other. The ship was shut down, Somerset. It was killed stone dead. The emp blast fritzed every circuit. No lights, no air conditioning, no heat, no communications, no hope of rescue. Remember that other shuttle we did, last shift? All the crew were gone. They took the big

step rather than die a long lingering death by freezing or asphyxiation."

"I did an infrared scan," Somerset said. "Just in case."

Maris nodded. Somerset was smart; Somerset was methodical. Anything warmer than the vacuum, such as a hidey-hole with a warm body living in it, would show up stark white in infrared. She said, "I should have thought of that."

Somerset smiled. "But I didn't find anything."

"There you are."

"Of course, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence."

"Meaning?"

"Its hiding place could be well-insulated. It could be buried deep in the shuttle's structure."

"Bullshit," Maris said. "We'll finish stripping out the circuitry tomorrow. We'll find her body in some corner, and that will be an end to it."

\* \* \*

Maris and Somerset didn't find the missing passenger. Ty and Bruno did.

The two men came into the lifiesystem a couple of hours before the end of the shift, ricocheting down the central shaft like a couple of freefall neophytes. Ty was so shaken that he couldn't string together a coherent sentence; even the normally imperturbable Bruno was spooked.

"You have to see it for yourself, boss," Bruno told Maris, after they had all used patch cords to link themselves together, so that Barrett couldn't overhear them.

"If you guys are setting me up for something, I'll personally drag your asses rockside."

"No joke," Ty said. "Clan's honor this is no joke."

"Tell us again what you found," Somerset said calmly. "Think carefully. Describe everything you saw."

Ty and Bruno talked: ten minutes.

When they were finished, Maris said, "If she's in there, she can't be alive."

"Gang #1 found bodies hung on a bulkhead in one of the freighters," Ty said. "Bodies with chunks missing from them. They figure that one of the crew killed the rest. They think that he might still be alive."

Maris said firmly, "No one could have survived for long in any of these hulks. No power, no food, no air ... it isn't possible."

"You don't know what the gene wizards made for the war," Ty said. "No one does."

Maris had to admit that Ty had a point. Before the Quiet War, Earth had infiltrated the Outer System colonies with spies, dopplegängers, and suicide artists, most of them clones and most of them gengineered. The suicide artists had been the worst-terror weapons in human form, berserkers, walking bombs.

One type had hidden themselves near sensitive installations and simply died; symbiotic bacteria had transformed their corpses into unstable lumps of high explosive. Maris's younger brother had been killed when one of these corpse-bombs had blown a hole in the agricultural dome where he had been working.

She said, "Did any of Barrett's drones follow you?"

"Not a one," Ty said.

"You're sure."

"My suit's radar can spot a flea's heartbeat at a hundred clicks. Yeah, I'm sure."

"If Barrett suspected anything, boss," Bruno said, "he would be asking you some hard questions around about now."

"We should consider telling him," Somerset said. "If something dangerous is hiding in there, Symbiosis can provide the appropriate back-up."

"Soldiers," Ty said. "Armedsoldiers."

"If we could tell anyone other than Barrett, I'd agree with you," Maris said. "But Barrett can't make a decision to save his life. Faced with something like this, something that isn't covered by his precious rule book, he'll panic. The first thing he'll do is sling our asses rockside. The second thing he'll do is, if by some miracle she's still alive, he'll kill her. He'll declare her a saboteur or a spy, kill her, and get promoted for it. Or he'll simply get rid of her, pretend she never existed. And don't try and tell me that this is some spook or monster, Ty. This has to be the missing passenger—Alice Eighteen Singh Rai. A person, not a monster."

"The boss has a point," Bruno said. "Barrett does not accept responsibility for his actions. He hides behind his position in the company, and his position in the company is all he is. In the camp, there were many like him, people who told themselves that they must do terrible things to the prisoners because their superiors demanded it, people who refused to see that they were doing these things out of fear and denial. Those people, they made themselves into monsters, and I think Barrett is that kind of monster. He will commit murder rather than risk doing something that might endanger his status, and he will tell himself it is for the good of the company."

It was the longest speech any of them had heard Bruno make, and the only time he had ever talked about the labor camp.

"Aw, shit," Ty said. "Let's do it. But if we all get killed by some kind of monster, don't say I didn't warn you."

"I would like you all to remember that I have expressed my reservations," Somerset said.

"If it was a monster," Maris said, "don't you think it would have killed us already?"

They went out together. They carried percussion hammers, bolt cutters, glue guns. Bruno carried a portable airlock kit. Ty carried a switchblade he'd somehow smuggled past Symbiont security. Maris carried a tube of plastic explosive. Somerset carried a portable ultrasonic scanner. They fingertip-flew over the swell of the shuttle's main body toward the flared skirt of the



motor's radiation shield. Saturn's pale crescent, nipped like a fingernail paring in the delicate tweezers of its ring system, hung just a few degrees above it. At zenith, the twin stars of the Symbiosis ship, motor and lifesystem linked by a fullerene tether four kilometers long, rotated once a second around their common center.

Beyond the radiation shield, the bulbous cylinder of the motor and most of its ancillary spheres and spars were coated with the black crust of the vacuum organism, smooth as spilled paint in some places, raised in thin, stiff sheets in others. The biggest sheets clustered like mutant funeral flowers around the mass-reaction tanks, a ring of six aluminum spheres, each three meters in diameter, that were tucked in the lee of the radiation skirt. The tanks contained water that had fuelled superheated steam venturis used for delicate attitude control; one of the tanks, Ty claimed, was the hiding place of a monster.

They plugged in patch cords; they went to work.

While Somerset fiddled with the ultrasonic scanner, Maris used a wand to confirm that the tank was leaking minute traces of an oxyhelium mix. Bruno showed her a clear spot in the otherwise ubiquitous coating of the vacuum organism, hidden behind one of the triangular struts that secured the tank to the motor's spine. It was like a dull grey eye surrounded by ridged and puckered black tar; in its center, a fine seam defined a circle about half a meter in diameter.

"That is what gave us the clue," Bruno said. "The vacuum organism must be an oxygen hater. Also, we find a current flowing in it."

"It's not just photosynthetic," Ty said. He hung back from the tank as if ready to bolt, the patch cord that connected him to Bruno at full stretch. His white p-suit was painted with swirling lines and dots that echoed his tattoos.

"It generates electricity," Bruno said. "Something like ten point six watts over its entire surface. Not very much, but enough--"

"I'm ahead of you," Maris said. "It's enough to run the tank's internal heaters. Well, but it doesn't mean that she's alive. What do you see, Somerset?"

Somerset, hanging head down close to the tank's sphere, his orange p-suit vivid against the stiff black sheets of the vacuum organism, was using the ultrasonic scanner. It said, "Nothing at all. It is very well insulated. Maris, you know that we have to tell Symbiosis."

"If it is the missing passenger, she has to be crazy," Bruno said. "Or why would she still be hiding?"

"She has to be some kind of thing," Ty said.

"She has to be dead," Maris said. "Let's get her out of there."

They set dots of plastic explosive around the almost invisible seam. They rigged the portable airlock over it. They took shelter behind another tank, and Maris blew the charges.

An aluminum disc, forced out by pressure inside the tank, shot to the top of the transparent tent of the airlock and bounced back to meet something shuddering out of the hole--another portable airlock struggling to fit inside the first. After nothing else happened for a whole minute, Maris sculled over

to investigate. She pushed the visor of her helmet against the double layer of taut, transparent plastic, and shone her flashlight inside.

At the center of the tank, curled up in a nest made from the absorbent material and honeycomb vanes that had channeled the water, was the body of a little girl in a cut-down pressure suit.

\* \* \*

They thought at first that she was dead: her p-suit's internal temperature was just two degrees centigrade, barely above the freezing point of water, and she had no pulse or respiration signs. But a quick ultrasonic scan showed that her blood was sluggishly circulating through a cascade filter pump connected to the femoral artery of her left leg. There was also a small machine attached to the base of her skull, something coiled in her stomach, and a line in the vein of her left arm that went through the elbow joint of her p-suit and was coupled to a lash-up of tubing, pumps and bags of clear and cloudy liquids, and the three missing fuel cells.

"That's what happened to the foodmaker," Ty said. "She's got some kind of continuous culture running."

He hung just outside the hatch, watching as Maris and Somerset worked inside the tank, tying off the line into the little girl's arm, detaching a cable trickling amps to her p-suit.

"She is hibernating," Bruno said, his helmet jostling beside Ty's. "I have heard of the technique. Soldiers on the other side were infected with nanotech that could shut them down if they were badly injured."

"Then she's a spy," Ty said.

"I don't know what she is," Somerset said, looking across the little girl's body at Maris, "but I do know that no ordinary child could have rigged this. We should leave her here. Let Symbiosis deal with her as I have already suggested."

"I don't think so," Maris said. "The temperature inside her suit has risen by five degrees, and it's still rising. I think she's waking up."

They waited until the Symbiosis ship was eclipsed by a freighter that was slowly rotating end over end thirty klicks beyond the shuttle, and then rode their sled to the hab-module. Halfway there, the little girl's arms and legs spasmed; Maris held her down, saw that she was dribbling a clear liquid from her mouth and nostrils. Then her eyes opened, and she looked straight at Maris.

Her eyes were beaten gold, with silvery, pinprick pupils.

Maris touched her visor to the little girl's. "It's okay," she said. "Everything's okay, sweetheart. We'll look after you. I promise."

By the time they had bundled her inside the hab-module, the little girl was dazed but fully awake. Out of her p-suit, she stank like a pharm goat and was as skinny as a snake, in a liner that was two sizes too big. Even though the intravenous line had been dripping vitamins, amino acids, and complex carbohydrates from the yeast culture into her blood, she had used up all of her body fat and a good deal of muscle mass in her long sleep. She seemed to be about eight or nine, was completely hairless, and had bronze skin, and those big silver-on-gold eyes that stared boldly at the wrecking crew who hung around her.

Although she responded to her name, she wouldn't or couldn't talk; hardly surprising, Maris said, considering what she had been through. When Bruno tried to examine the blood pump that clung to her leg like a swollen leech, she drew her knees to her chest and carefully detached it, then reached behind her head, plucked the tiny machine from the base of her skull, and flicked it away. Bruno deftly caught it on the rebound, and after a brief examination said it was some kind of Russian Sleep gadget. "Some monster, boss," he said. "I'm disappointed."

"We could throw her back," Maris said, "and try for something better."

Ty laughed, showing for a moment the wad of green gum that lay on his tongue. He was fascinated by the little girl; his fear had transformed directly to excitement and a kind of proprietorial pride. "She's amazing," he said. "Could you have done what she did? I couldn't."

"None of us could," Somerset said. "That's why she can't be a normal little girl. That's why we have taken a very grave risk in bringing her aboard."

"Aw, come on," Ty said. "Look at her. She's a kid. She's half-starved to death. She couldn't harm a blade of grass."

"Appearances can be deceptive," Somerset said.

Alice Eighteen Singh Rai watched them carefully as they spoke about her, but showed no sign that she understood what they were saying.

"She would have died if we had not found her," Bruno said. "Whatever she is, she needs our help."

"Of course," Somerset said. "But we know nothing about her."

Ty snorted air through his nose. "What are you saying, we should tie her up?"

"We should certainly take precautions," Somerset said, ignoring Ty's sarcasm.

Maris decided that Somerset needed something to do, and told him, "Before we can decide anything, I need you to find out everything you can about where Alice came from."

"Somewhere on Iapetus, I should think," Somerset said. "That was the shuttle's point of departure, according to its manifest. It was on a straight run to Mimas when the emp mine intercepted it."

"I'm sure you can find out exactly where on Iapetus."

"I will try my best," Somerset said, and swam off to its cubicle.

"And take the rod out of your ass while you're about it," Ty murmured.

"Somerset does have a point," Bruno said. "We have to think very carefully about what we're going to do."

"I'm going to have to come up with some excuse for Barrett," Maris said. "But first, I'm going to give this little girl her first shower in three hundred days."

Alice Eighteen Singh Rai scrubbed up well, submitting docilely to the airmask necessary in the freefall shower. Enveloped in one of Maris's jumpers, she

refused the bags of chow Ty patiently offered one by one, then suddenly kicked off toward the kitchen nook, quick and agile as an eel. She had ripped open a tube and was cramming black olive paste into her mouth before Ty could pull her away by an ankle.

"Let her eat," Maris said. "I think she knows what her body needs."

"Man," Ty said, wonderingly, "she sure is hungry."

Bruno said, "I have only a minimum of medical training, boss. I don't know anything about mental illness or brain damage. The autodoc can work up her blood and urine chemistry for chemical signs of psychosis, but that's about all. I hate to say it, but the Symbiosis ship has better facilities."

"I don't want to turn her over to Barrett."

Bruno nodded. His eyes were dark and solemn under the brim of his knitted cap. "She's one of us, isn't she?"

"She's no ordinary little girl. Somerset is right about that. But she's no monster, either."

"She sure is hungry," Ty said again, watching with tender pride as Alice unseamed her third tube of olive paste.

Maris left her with Ty and Bruno, and, with heavy foreboding, wrote up a false report for the day log and sent it off. Barrett called back almost at once. He said, "I want to believe you, but somehow I'm having a hard time."

Maris's first thought was that one of Barrett's drones had spotted them working around Alice's nest. She hunched over the com, sweat popping over her body. Her pulse beat heavily in her temples. She said, "If this is about why we're still behind—"

"Of course it is. And I'm very disappointed."

"The vacuum organism caused a bigger problem than we anticipated."

"All you have to do is cut through it," Barrett said scornfully. "Cut through it, scorch it off, deal with it."

"Can you tell me about the shuttle's cargo, Barrett? What was it carrying?"

Barrett gave her a sharp, bright look. "Why do you want to know?"

"Perhaps the vacuum organism was part of the cargo. If we know what it is, we can deal with it more easily."

"The v.o. was checked out when the cargo pods were detached. It's nothing out of the ordinary."

"Don't you have more specific information? The ship was recovered five months ago. Symbiosis must know what was in the cargo pods by now."

"That's none of your business, Delgado. Your business is to render down that shuttle, and your gang is a whole ten hours behind. You have to understand that Symbiosis wrote up these work schedules with generous margins—"

Relief that Barrett didn't seem to know about Alice made Maris bold. She said, "The schedules weren't drawn up with vacuum organism contamination in mind."

"Please don't interrupt me again," Barrett said, all frosty rectitude. "The margins are there, and you've overrun them. You know the contract regs as well as I, Delgado. What else can I do?"

"Okay, fine, take off ten hours pay."

"A day's pay plus penalties. The contract is quite specific."

"Okay."

"What's wrong, Delgado? Talk to me. Are you having trouble maintaining discipline?" Barrett suddenly mock-solicitous, leaning so close to the camera that his face looked like a pockmarked moon, his silly little braid wagging on his chin.

"There's no problem," Maris said, snapping off the com and instantly regretting it. It was a sign of weakness, and the one skill that Barrett had honed to perfection was sniffing out weaknesses in others.

She waited five minutes in case he called back, then sculled back to the living quarters. Ty and Alice were watching a TV sheet floating in the air. Both were chewing gum. Bruno and Somerset broke off a whispered conversation, and Somerset told Maris, "I have found out where she came from."

\* \* \*

The Saturn infonet had been badly damaged during the Quiet War, but after running Alice's name through half a dozen clandestine search engines, Somerset had discovered that the shuttle's cargo and passenger had both originated in Hawaiki, an agricultural settlement on the great dark plains of Iapetus's Cassini Regio.

"I discovered something else, too," Somerset said. "The settlement was designed by Avernus."

The name of the woman who had been the Outer System's most famous gene wizard, and was now its most wanted so-called war criminal, hung in the air for a moment.

"Man," Ty said, "I knew our Alice was something special. Didn't I say she was special?"

"Avernus was famous for the totality of her designs," Somerset said. "She tailored both ecospheres and their inhabitants. Given her appearance and what she did to survive, it seems quite likely that our guest benefited from Avernus's art."

Alice smiled at them all, seemingly quite happy to be the center of their attention.

"It doesn't mean that she's a monster," Maris said forthrightly, although she had to admit that Somerset's discovery was disquieting. Avernus had dedicated her considerable skills to pushing the envelope of humanity's range. Some of her commissions—a sect in which adults lost the use of their limbs and eyes and grew leathery, involuted integuments stained purple with photosynthetic pigment, becoming sessile eremites devoted to praising God; a community with a completely closed ecosystem, the bellies of its citizens swollen with sacs of symbiotic bacteria—had tested even the generously inclusive tolerance of the outers.

"Aw, hell," Ty said, "according to the flatlanders, we're all monsters. And you know what? It's true. We're all tweaks, and we're all proud to be tweaks! Flatlanders need drugs and nanotech to live here, but we're engineered for low-gravity. Maybe Avernus gave Alice a few extra special abilities, but so what?"

Maris asked Somerset, "Can we get in touch with Alice's home?"

"Hawaiki no longer exists," Somerset said. "It was captured and destroyed during the war."

"There must be survivors," Maris said.

"They were probably put in a camp," Bruno said darkly. "One of those experimental camps."

"Hey," Ty said, "not in front of Alice."

"The TPA must know," Somerset said, "but there are no records that I can access."

"One thing is certain," Maris said. "We were absolutely right not to tell Barrett about Alice."

She remembered with a chill the supervisor's sudden bright look when she had asked about the shuttle's cargo, and knew that he knew all about the shuttle's passenger, knew that she was valuable.

"You're going to stay here," Ty told the golden-eyed little girl. "Stay here with us, until we find a way of getting you back to your family."

"I would like to know," Somerset said, "how we can keep Barrett from finding out about her."

"We just don't tell him," Maris said.

"I'm relieved to see that you have thought it through," Somerset said.

Bruno said, "The boss is right, Somerset. Barrett hardly ever leaves his ship. If we don't tell him about Alice, he'll never know."

"This isn't like playing around in your garden," Ty said. "This is for real."

"My garden has nothing to do with this," Somerset said.

"Ty didn't mean anything by it," Maris said.

"I meant," Ty said doggedly, "that this is the real world, where what you do has real consequences for real people. We rescued Alice, Somerset, so it's up to us to look after her."

"I believe that we have all agreed that Barrett would almost certainly kill Alice if he found out about her," Somerset said, with acid patience. "It follows that the only morally correct course of action is to assume responsibility for her care. I merely point out that it is also a very dangerous course of action."

"Nevertheless, we're all in this together," Maris said.

Everyone looked at everyone else. Everyone said yes. Alice smiled.

\* \* \*

Maris, strung out by anxiety and the physical exhaustion of zero-gravity work, fell asleep almost as soon as she wriggled into her sleeping bag. She slept deeply and easily, and when she woke in the middle of the night, it took her a little while to realize what was wrong.

The spavined rattle and bone-deep thrum of the air conditioning was gone.

Maris pushed up her mask, hitched out of the sleeping bag, and ducked through her privacy curtain. Ty and Bruno hung in midair, watching Alice mime something in the soft red light of the hab-module's sleep-cycle illumination. Ty spun around as Maris caught a rung. He was chewing gum and grinning from ear to ear. "She fixed the air conditioning," he said.

"You mean she broke it."

"She fixed it," Ty insisted. "Listen."

Ty and Bruno and Alice watched as Maris concentrated on nothing but the sound of her own ragged breath ... and heard, at the very edge of audibility, a soft pulsing hum, a whisper of moving air.

Somerset shot through its privacy curtain, caught a rung, reversed. Its crest of white hair was all askew. It said, "What did she do?"

Bruno said, "She altered the rate of spin of every fan in the system, tuning them to a single harmonic. No more vibration."

"Alice knows machines," Ty said proudly.

"It seems she does not sleep," Bruno said. "So, while we slept, she fixed the air conditioning."

"Swaddling," Somerset said. "Or a tether. I am serious. Suppose she meddles with something else? We do not know what she can do."

"Alice knows machines," Ty insisted, proud as a new parent.

Which, in a sense, he was, Maris thought. Which, in a sense, they all were. She sculled through the air until her face was level with Alice's. Those strange silver-on-gold eyes, unreadable as coins, stared into hers. She said gently, "You did a good job, but you mustn't touch anything else. Do you understand?"

The little girl nodded—a fractional movement, but a definite assent.

"If she did a good job," Ty said, "what's the problem?"

"We hardly know anything about her," Somerset said. "That's the problem."

"You can find out," Bruno told Somerset. "Use those data mining skills of yours to dig deeper."

"I have found all there is to find," Somerset said. "The war wrecked most of the infonet. I am surprised that I found anything at all."

"Let's all get some rest," Maris said. "We have to start work in three hours. A lot of work."

She did not think that she would get back to sleep, but she did, and slept

peacefully in the harmonious murmur of the fans.

\* \* \*

They started their shift early. As they all sucked down a hasty breakfast of gritty, fruit-flavored oat paste and lukewarm coffee, Somerset made it clear just how unhappy it was about leaving Alice alone in the hab-module.

"We should take her with us," the neuter said. "If she is as good with machines as Ty claims, she can be of some help."

"No way," Maris said. "Even Barrett can count up to five. What do you think he'll do if he spots an extra body out there?"

"Then someone should stay behind with her," Somerset said stubbornly.

"If Barrett can count up to five," Maris said, "he can also count up to three. None of us can afford to lose any more pay, and we'll never catch up on our schedule if we're one body short."

Ty said, "Alice, honey, you know we have to go out, don't you? You promise you'll be good while we're away?"

Alice was floating in mid-air with her arms hooked under her knees, watching TV; when she heard her name, she looked over at Ty, eyes flashing in the half-dark, and nodded once.

"You see," Ty said. "It's not a problem."

"I don't like what she did to the air," Somerset said. "It smells strange."

"If bystrange you mean it doesn't smell of crotch-sweat and stale farts any more," Ty said, "then I don't think it's strange—I think it's an improvement!"

"The temperature is higher, too," Somerset said.

"Yeah," Ty said. "Nice and comfortable, isn't it? Look, Somerset, Alice is just a kid. I guess, what with your religious bent and all, you might not know much about kids, but I do. I used to look after a whole bunch of them back in the clan. Trust me on this. There's no problem ."

"She is not merely—"

Maris flicked her empty paste and coffee tubes into the maw of the disposal. "No time for argument, gentlemen. Suit up and ship out. We have plenty of work to do."

For a little while, absorbed in the hard, complicated job of dismantling the shuttle's fusion plant, they all forgot their worries. Clambering about the narrow crawlspaces around the plant's combustion chamber, they severed cables and pipes, sheared bolts and cut through supports, strung temporary tethers. They worked well; they worked as a team; they made good time. Maris was beginning to plan the complicated pattern of explosive charges that would pop the fusion plant out of its shaft when her radio shrieked, a piercing electronic squeal that cut off before she could access her suit's com menu.

Everyone shot out of the access hatch, using their suit thrusters to turn toward the hab-module.

"Alice," Ty said, his voice sounding hollow in the echo of the radio squeal. "She's in trouble."



Bruno, his p-suit painted, Jupiter-system style, with an elaborate abstract pattern, spun around and shot off toward the sled. Maris saw the black sphere of Barrett's pressurized sled clinging like a blood-gorged tick to one of the hatches of the hab-module's airlock, and chased after him.

Bruno took the helm of the sled, told them all to hang on, and punched out with a hard continuous burn. Directly ahead, the hab-module expanded with alarming speed.

"You'll overshoot," Somerset said calmly.

"Saint Isaac Newton, bless me now in my hour of need," Bruno said. He flipped the sled with a nicely judged blip of its attitude jets, opened the throttle in a hard blast of deceleration that seemed to squeeze every drop of Maris's blood into her boots, and fired off tethers whose sticky pads slapped against the airlock and jerked the sled to a halt.

Maris signed for radio silence. They fanned out, peering through viewports into the red-lit interiors of the two cylinders. Somerset's orange-suited figure, at the far end of the workspace, raised a hand, pointed down. The others clustered around him.

Alice stared up at them through the little disc of scratched, triple-layered plastic. After a moment, she smiled.

\* \* \*

They opened the airlock's secondary hatch and cycled through, the four of them crowding each other in the little spherical space as they shucked helmets and gloves. Alice was waiting placidly in the center of the cluttered workroom, floating as usual in midair, hands hooked under her knees.

"Oh my," Maris said in dismay.

Still in its yellow p-suit, Symbiosis's sunburst-in-a-green-circle logo on its chestplate, Barrett's body was strung against the bulkhead behind Alice. Its arms were bound to its sides by a whipcord tether; a wormy knot of patch sealant filled the broken visor of its helmet. The end of Barrett's braided beard stuck out of the hard white foam like a mountaineer's flag on a snowy peak. Maris didn't need Bruno's pronouncement to know that the supervisor was dead.

It took Ty ten minutes to get the story from Alice. He asked questions; she answered by nods or shakes. Apparently, Barrett had come looking for her after his AI had decrypted and audited Somerset's infonet usage records; he'd boasted about his cleverness. He had been friendly at first, but when Alice had refused to answer his questions, he had threatened to kill her. That was when she had immobilized him with the tether and suffocated him with the sealant.

Somerset found Barrett's weapon. It had fetched up against one of the air-conditioning outlets.

Ty asked Alice, "Did he threaten to kill you, honey?"

A quick nod.

"Why did he want to kill you? Was he scared of you?"

Alice nodded, then shook her head.

"Okay, he was scared of you, but that wasn't why he wanted to kill you."

A nod.

"He wanted something from you."

A nod.

"He probably wanted Alice, " Bruno said. "She has been engineered by Avernus. Her genome, it must be very valuable."

Alice shook her head.

Ty said, "What did he want, honey?"

Alice put a finger to her lips, assumed a sudden look of inward concentration, and started, very delicately, to choke. She shook her head when Ty reached for her, coughed, and started to pull something from her mouth.

Blue plastic wire, over two meters of it.

Maris's parents had owned a vacuum organism farm before the war; she knew at once what the wire was. "That's how vacuum organism spores are packaged."

Alice smiled and nodded.

Maris said, "Does it contain spores of the vacuum organism growing on the shuttle?"

Alice nodded again, then held up her right hand, opened and closed it half a dozen times.

Ty said, "It contains all kinds of spores?"

Bruno said, "This is why you were a passenger. You were carrying it all the time."

"Symbiosis knew about it," Maris said. "They must have had the complete cargo inventory. When they didn't find it in the cargo pods, they searched the lifecosystem for the only passenger. And Barrett knew about it too, or found out about it. That's why he sent drones to watch us as we stripped out the lifecosystem."

"He did not watch us work outside," Bruno said.

"Barrett is a flatlander," Maris said. "It didn't occur to him that the passenger might be hiding outside. Outside is a bad, scary place, as far as flatlanders are concerned; that's why he hardly ever left his ship. But then he discovered Somerset's trail in the infonet, and worked out that we had found Alice. He wanted her for himself, so he couldn't confront us directly; he waited until we went to work, got up his nerve, and came here."

Somerset was hanging back from the others, near the hatch to the airlock. It said, "You grow an intricate story from only a few facts."

Ty told the neuter, "Don't you realize it's your fault Barrett found out about Alice?"

"I asked Somerset to make a search on the infonet," Maris said. "It isn't its

fault that Barrett's AI was able to break into its records. And I was stupid enough to ask Barrett about the shuttle's cargo, which probably made him suspicious in the first place." She took a breath to center herself, called up every gram of her resolve. "Listen up, you three. We all brought Alice back; we all decided that we couldn't give her up to Barrett; we're all in this together. We have to decide what to do, and we have to do it quickly, before the crew of the Symbiosis ship start to worry about their boss."

"Somerset has a point," Bruno said. "We don't know what happened between Alice and Barrett."

"He didn't come over for a social visit," Ty said. "He wanted these spores, he threatened her with the weapon. That's why she killed him."

Somerset said calmly, "I am not sure that Symbiosis will believe your story."

Ty knuckled his tattooed scalp. "Fuck you, Somerset! I know Alice is no murderer, and that's all that matters to me."

"That's the problem," Somerset said, and pointed Barrett's weapon at Ty. It was as black and smooth as a pebble, with a blunt snout that nestled between the neuter's thumb and forefinger.

Maris said, "What are you doing, Somerset?"

Somerset's narrow face was set with cold resolve. It looked wholly masculine now. It said, "This fires needles stamped from a ribbon of smart plastic. Some of the needles are explosive; others sprout hooks and barbs when they strike something; they all cause a lot of damage. It is a disgusting weapon, but I will use it if I have to, for the greater moral good."

"Stay calm, Somerset," Maris said. "Don't do anything foolish."

"Yeah," Ty said. "If you want to play with that, go outside."

"I want you all to listen to me. Ty, before we found Alice, you were convinced that she was a monster. I believe that you were right. Because she looks like a little girl, she triggers protective reflexes in ordinary men and women, and they do not realize that they are being manipulated. I, however, am immune. I see her for what she is, and I want you all to share this clear, uncomfortable insight."

Ty said, "She killed Barrett in self-defense, man!" He had drifted in front of Alice, shielding her from Somerset.

"We do not know what happened," Somerset said. "We see a dead man. We see what looks like a little girl. We make assumptions, but how do we know the truth? Perhaps Barrett drew this weapon in self-defense."

Maris said, "You don't like violence, Somerset. I understand that. But what you're doing now makes you as bad as Barrett."

"Not at all," Somerset said. "As I believe I have said before, if you take the side of a murderer with no good reason, then you are as morally culpable as she is."

"She isn't a murderer," Ty said.

"We do not know that," Somerset insisted calmly.

"You fucking traitor!" Bruno said, and dove straight at the neuter.

Somerset swung around. The weapon in his fist made a mild popping sound. Bruno bellowed with pain and clutched at his right arm. Suddenly off-balance, he missed Somerset entirely, slammed against the edge of the airlock hatch, and tumbled backward. And Alice spun head-over-heels and threw something with such force that Maris only saw it on the rebound, after it had sliced through Somerset's fingers. It was a power saw blade, a diamond disc that ricocheted sideways and lodged in the door of a locker with an emphatic thud. Somerset, its truncated right hand pumping strings of crimson droplets into the air, made a clumsy grab for the weapon; Maris snatched the black pebble out of the air, and Ty knocked the neuter through the airlock hatch.

\* \* \*

Ty and Maris trussed Somerset with tethers, and Bruno staunched its bleeding finger stumps and gave it a shot of painkiller before allowing Maris to bandage his own, much more superficial wound. Alice hung back, calm and watchful.

"I am lucky," Bruno said. "It was not an explosive needle."

"You're lucky Somerset couldn't shoot straight," Maris told him.

"I don't think Somerset wanted to kill me, boss."

"We should make the fucker take the big walk without its suit," Ty said, glaring at Somerset.

"You know we can't do that," Maris said.

"I can do it," Ty said grimly.

Somerset returned Ty's angry glare with woozy equanimity, and said, "If you kill me, you will only prove that I was right all along."

"Then we'll both be happy," Ty said.

"She's using us," Somerset said, slurring every, "and no one sees it but me."

Maris grabbed the hypo from the medical kit and swam up to Somerset. "You can't keep quiet, can you?"

"Silence is a form of complicity," Somerset said. Its eyes crossed as it tried to focus on the hypo. "I do not need another shot. I can bear pain."

"This is for us," Maris said, and pressed the hypo against Somerset's neck. The neuter started to protest, but then the blast of painkiller hit and its eyes rolled up.

"We could fly it right out of the airlock," Ty said. "It wouldn't feel a thing."

"You know we aren't going to do any such thing," Maris said. "Listen up. Any minute now, the ship's crew are going to notice that their boss is missing. What we have to do is work out what we're going to tell them."

Ty said, "I'm not giving her up."

"We know Alice must have killed Barrett in self-defense," Maris said. "We can testify—"

Bruno said, "Ty is right, boss. We know that Alice isn't a murderer, but our testimony won't mean much in court."

Alice waved her hands to get their attention, then pointed to the workshop's camera.

"It's recording," Ty said. He laughed, and turned a full somersault in midair. "Alice knows machines! She had the internal com record everything!"

Maris shook out a screen, plugged it into the camera, and started the playback. Ty and Bruno crowded around her, watched Barrett struggle through the airlock in his p-suit, watched him question Alice, his p-suit still sealed, his voice coming cold and metallic through its speaker. He loomed over her like a fully armed medieval knight menacing a helpless maiden. Her stubborn intervals of silence, his amplified voice getting louder, his gestures angrier. Alice shrank back. He showed her his weapon. And Alice flew at him, whipping a tether around his arms and body, the tether contracting in a tight embrace as her momentum drove him backward; she wrapped her legs around his chest, smashed his visor with a jackhammer, and emptied a canister of foam into his helmet.

The camera saw everything; it even picked up the glint of the weapon when it flew from Barrett's gloved hand. He flung his helmeted head from side to side, trying to shake off the foam's suffocating mask; Alice pressed against a wall, unobtrusively out of focus, as his struggles quietened.

Maris said, "It looks good, but will it look good to the court?"

"We can't turn her over to Symbiosis or the TPA police," Bruno said. "At best, they'll turn her into a lab specimen. At worst--"

"Where is she?" Ty said.

Alice was gone; the hatch to the airlock was closed. Neither the automatic nor manual system would budge it. As Bruno prized off the cover of the servomotor, Maris joined Ty at the door's little port, saw Alice wave bye-bye and shoot through the hatch into Barrett's sled. A moment later, there was a solid thump as the sled decoupled.

Maris and Bruno and Ty rushed to the viewports.

"Look at her go!" Maris said.

"Where is she going?" Ty said.

"It looks like she is heading straight to the Symbiosis ship," Bruno said. "She sure can fly that sled."

"Of course she can," Ty said. "What do you think she's going to do?"

"We'll see soon enough," Maris said. "Meanwhile, let's get busy, gentlemen."

Bruno glanced at her. "I do believe you have a plan," he said.

"It's not much of one, but hear me out."

\* \* \*

By the time Ty and Maris had hauled Barrett's body to the shuttle, his sled had docked with the motor section of the Symbiosis ship. They tethered the

body to the tank where Alice had slept out three hundred days, and tethered the weapon to the utility belt of its p-suit. Maris dragged some of the plastic insulation out of the tank's hatch for dramatic effect, fired a couple of shots into the tangle of bags and tubes inside, then scooted back to look at her work. The tank looked like something had hatched from it in a hurry; Barrett's body, with its mask of lumpy foam, hung half-folded like a grotesque unstrung puppet, its yellow p-suit vivid against the black film of the vacuum organism.

"It looks kind of cheesy," Ty said doubtfully, over their patch cord link.

"If you have a better idea," Maris said, "let me know."

"Maybe it's because I don't think he would have had the sense to tether his weapon."

"He found where Alice was hiding," Maris said, "and opened up the tank. There was a struggle. She killed him and took his sled. The weapon is necessary. It shows he meant her harm. If we don't tether it to him, it'll drift off somewhere and no one will find it. So let's pretend that in his last moments he was overcome with common sense."

"Yeah, well, none of that will matter if the crew knew where he was going in the first place."

"We've been over that already. Barrett wouldn't have told them where he was going because he wanted what Alice had for himself. Otherwise, you can bet that he would have come with plenty of back-up, or sat tight in the safety of his ship and let the Symbiosis cops take care of it."

Ty looked as though he was ready to argue the point, but before he could say anything, Bruno broke in on the common channel. "Heads up," he said. "The Symbiosis ship just broke apart. It would seem that the cable linking the two halves has been severed."

Maris called up her suit's navigation menu, and after a couple of moments, it confirmed Bruno's guess. With the cable cut, the lifesystem and motor section of the ship had shot away in opposite directions. The lifesystem, tumbling badly, was heading into a slightly higher orbit; the motor section was accelerating toward Saturn, its exhaust a steady, brilliant star beyond the ragged sphere of wrecked ships. Maris's com system lit up: the distress signal of the Symbiosis ship's lifesystem; messages from the other two wrecking gangs; Dione's traffic control.

"A perfect burn," Bruno said, with professional admiration. "It is too early to judge exactly, but if I had to make a guess, I would say that it is heading toward the rings."

"Let's get packed up," Maris told Ty, over the patch cord. "The cops will be here pretty soon."

"She'll be all right, won't she?"

"I think she knew what she was doing all along."

Back at the hab-module, Maris and Ty stripped off their suits and grabbed tubes of coffee while Bruno flipped through a babble of voices on the radio channels. Two tugs were chasing the Symbiosis ship's lifesystem, but as yet no one was pursuing the motor section. Bruno had worked up a trajectory, and showed Maris and Ty that it would graze the outer edge of the B ring.

"One hears many wild stories of rebels and refugees hiding inside the minor bodies of the rings," he remarked. "Perhaps some of them are true."

Maris said, "She's going home."

A small, happy thought to cling to, in the cold certainty of days of inquiries, investigations, accusations. Wherever Alice was going, Wrecking Gang #3 was headed rockside, their contracts terminated.

"We'll have to let Somerset go," she said.

"I still think we should make it take the big step," Ty said. "Anyone seen my TV? Maybe the news channels will tell us what's going down."

"Somerset is a fool," Bruno said, "but it is also one of us."

Maris said, "I can't help wondering if Somerset was right. That we were manipulated by Alice. She killed Barrett and ran off, and left us to deal with the consequences."

"She could have taken Barrett's shuttle as soon as she killed him," Bruno said. "Instead, she took a very big risk, alerting us with that radio squeal, waiting for us to get back. She wanted us to know she was innocent. And she wanted to give us a chance to get our story straight."

Maris nodded. "It's a pretty thought, but we'll never know for sure."

Ty suddenly kicked back from his locker, waving something as he tumbled backward down the long axis of the living quarters. It was his TV, rolled up in a neat scroll. "Will you look at this," he said.

The scroll was tied with a length of blue wire. The wire Alice had regurgitated. The cargo she had guarded all this time.

\* \* \*

The consequences of Barrett's murder and the sabotage of the Symbiosis ship took a couple of dozen days to settle. Maris and the rest of Wrecking Gang #3 spent some of that time in jail, but were eventually released without trial.

Before the cops came for them, they agreed to take equal shares of Alice's gift. At first, Ty didn't want to give Somerset anything, and Somerset refused to take its share of the wire.

"I have agreed to lie about what happened. I have agreed to tell the police that my injury was caused by an accident. I do not need payment for this; I do it to make amends to you all."

"It isn't payment," Maris said. "It's a gift. You take it, Somerset. What you do with it is up to you."

Maris hid the wire by splicing it into the control cable of her p-suit's thruster pack. It turned out to be an unnecessary precaution; Symbiosis believed that the passenger had taken the missing vacuum organism spores with her, after she had killed Barrett and hijacked the engine section of his ship, and the police's search of the hab-module was cursory. After they were released, the members of Wrecking Gang #3 met just once, to divide the spore-laden spool of wire into four equal lengths. They never saw each other again.

Somerset and Bruno sold their portions on the grey market. Somerset donated the money to his temple's refugee center; Bruno bought a ticket on a Pacific Community liner to the Jupiter System. Maris became a farmer. With an advance on the license fees for the two novel varieties of vacuum organism that her length of wire yielded, she and her family set up an agribusiness on Iapetus, ten thousand square kilometers of the black, carbonaceous-rich plains of Cassini Regio. The farm prospered: the population of the Outer System was expanding rapidly as the economy recovered and migrants poured in from Earth. Maris married the technician who had helped type her vacuum organisms. He was ten years younger than her, and eager to start a family. The dangerous idea of exploring the ruins of the domed crater where Alice's family had lived was an itch that soon dissolved in the ordinary clamor of everyday life.

A few years later, on a business trip to Tethys, Maris paid a spur-of-the-moment visit to the hearth-home of Ty's clan. She learned that he'd given them his length of wire and set off on aWanderjahr . His last message had been sent from a hotel in Camelot, the only city on Mimas, the small, icy moon whose orbit lay between Saturn's G and E rings. It seemed that Ty had taken a sled on a trip to the central peak of Hershel, the huge crater smashed into the leading edge of Mimas, and had not returned. The sled had been found, but his body had never been recovered.

Maris believed that she knew what grail Ty might have been searching for under the geometric glory of Saturn's rings, but she kept her thoughts to herself. Tales of feral communities, fiddler's greens, pirate cities, rebel hideouts, edens, posthuman clades, and other wonders hidden in the millions of moonlets of Saturn's rings were by now the mundane stuff of sagas, psychodramas, and the generic fictions broadcast on illicit TV. Maris knew better than most that a few of these stories had been grown from grains of truth, but by now there were so many that it was impossible even for her to tell fact from fable.