

The Assassination of Faustino Malarte by Paul McAuley

Paul McAuley's most recent story for us, "The Passenger," appeared in our March 2002 issue. His latest novels are *The Secret of Life* (nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke and British Science Fiction Association Awards) and *Whole Wide World*. Mr. McAuley lives in North London.

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On the day the assassin was programmed to kill him, Colonel Faustino Malarte woke as usual from a dream of falling. He was alone in his sleeping niche. The woman was gone, his phone was ringing, his heart and head were pounding, and his legs were tangled in bloodstained spidersilk sheets—perhaps that was why, in his dream, he had been bound hand and foot as with swooning slowness he tumbled past the ice cliffs of Camelot Chasma, the sun a chill diamond pinned to the center of the black sky, deep shadows far below.

His mother, who had a reputation for riddling auguries and omens from dreams, said that dreams of falling were about death; that if in your dream you smashed into the ground before waking, you would die in the real world at the same moment, and your soul would be forever bound to your rotting corpse. Amongst Faustino's scattered thoughts, as he tried to map the extent of his hangover, with the sharp residue of snuff pricking the bridge of his nose and the phone indignantly drilling the air, was the notion that since he had escaped death in his dream he would surely escape death in real life. The assassin would be caught; his plan would succeed; he would buy back his family's honor and leave this insignificant iceball forever.

"Take the message," he told the house, certain that the call would be from Todd Krough, but the house told him that he was not being paged on its com system, and Faustino realized that the infernal racket was the high-pitched warble of his own official stealth-proofed phone, which was sewn into the lapel of his jacket, which lay with his trousers in a puddle of white cloth on the floor. He was pretty sure that his deputy was going to be on the other end, which meant that (1) it was not going to be good news, and (2) it would keep ringing until he got up and answered it.

Even after two years in Mimas's microgravity, Faustino was still as clumsy as any incomer fresh off the mass mover. He lost his balance when he swung out of the sleeping niche, tumbled as lightly as a feather across the egg-shaped room, and barely managed to catch hold of a double handful of the carpet's crisp green blades before he slammed headfirst against the wall. He rolled onto his back, dizzy and out of breath, and lay there until he was certain that he was not going to throw up. The ceiling showed a simulation of a predawn sky somewhere on Earth, and a carpet of green, half-life polymer grew up the curved walls, giving him the illusion that he was cupped in a deep, grassy hollow. A chill breeze wafting over his bare skin. Stars pricking a purple sky in which the woman's scribbles were barely visible. The shrill chorus of his stealth phone. He hitched himself across the floor like an overgrown toddler, pulled the jacket into his lap, and ran his thumb down the lumpy braid that edged its wide lapel.

"It is done," Todd Krough said.

"Christ's balls, man," Faustino said, his blood suddenly fizzing with spiders and amphetamine. "You shouldn't be using this channel!"

"It is done," Todd Krough said again.

"It's done?"

"Your problem, it is disposed of. Perhaps you require the details, Colonel. Perhaps you would like me to file a report."

"Of course I don't want the fucking details! Not over the phone, anyway. I'll talk to you face to face. I mean, it is safe for me to go out now, isn't it?"

"I told you that your problem was disposed of. The trap worked exactly as intended."

"Then there really was—"

Even though he had turned his house into a fortress, Faustino had not until this moment quite believed that someone had set an assassin after him.

"I have done my part, Colonel, as I said I would. I sent a message through the appropriate channel, and I have been waiting for you ever since."

"Waiting?"

Faustino looked at the watch tattooed on his wrist. He should have been woken more than two hours ago. The bitch must have reset the house system again.

"I have been waiting," Todd Krough's killingly patient voice said, "for exactly one hour. You did not respond when, three hours ago, I sent a message with the good news and details of our rendezvous, but I charitably ascribed that to the shocking lack of good manners you so often exhibit. However, it is now quite clear that you have no intention of attending this very important meeting, at which I planned to seal our agreement. I hope, Colonel, you have not had second thoughts. I hope that this does not mean that you have no faith or trust in my methods and my word of honor. Because if that is the case, I must say in all honesty that I would take the slur on my integrity very badly indeed."

"Of course I trust you."

It was a good thing the bitch wasn't here, Faustino thought—he would have been tempted to kill her, and although as head of security on Mimas he could easily square the death of a convicted prisoner, it would have led to all kinds of complications.

He said, "I've been incredibly busy, getting loose ends tied up. There's still plenty of time before the shuttle leaves. I'll be ready in an hour. You can—"

"If you are worried about your safety, Colonel, I suggest you look at the message I sent to you. It will assure you that it is quite safe for you to leave your house."

"Where should I—"

"Find somewhere discreet in the lower levels of the main dome, and make yourself comfortable," Todd Krough said. "One of my men will bring you to me posthaste."

Faustino asked the house if it had any messages for him; it said that it had received one three hours ago.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

"You instructed me not to disturb you."

"I did no such—" Then Faustino realized just how comprehensively the woman had meddled with the house's systems. "That bitch. Give me the message."

It was a compilation of anodyne news clips from Greater Brazil, playing in a cube of virtual light a meter in front of his face. Faustino found the encryption stick in the pocket of his jacket, waved it through the projection, and told the house to play the clip again.

This time it was a crude montage of mismatched spycam shots, a home-made snuff movie. A mild-faced middle-aged man shot with shark-like swiftness into a pod somewhere in one of Camelot's industrial levels, threw himself at another man trussed to a crossbrace and tore him apart with teeth and hands and feet, murderer and murderee disappearing in a fog of blood and bloody fragments. A jump-cut to a close-up of the murderer, his face a red wet mask, plucking at darts sticking in his neck and chest before shuddering and going limp; another jump-cut to pale, skeletal Todd Krough elegantly relaxed in a sling chair, telling Faustino that, as he could see, the assassin had taken the bait, and they must now meet at once.

When Faustino had first heard the rumor that an assassin had been programmed to kill him, he had thought that it was nothing more than a bit of black propaganda, a crude effort to make him panic, to fuck up his deal with Todd Krough. The gangster's ruthless, meteoric rise after the Quiet War had made him plenty of enemies on Mimas and the other moons of the Saturn system, and Faustino had enemies too, not all of them tweaks. But then, just two days ago,

Faustino's security force had confirmed that a dedicated vat-grown assassin had indeed infiltrated Camelot; investigation of the last batch of incomers had turned up an anomaly in the records of one man, who had vanished after scorching clean his capsule room and leaving a crude death's head and a date—today's date, the day Faustino was due to depart for Paris, Dione—scrawled in blood on the door. Faustino had locked himself in his house and surrounded it with a squad of troopers and several dozen drones, and Todd Krough had called in a favor from a grey market gene wizard. Now the trap, baited with an innocent victim treated to a crude cosmetic job and infected with tailored bacteria that gave him an exact duplicate of Faustino's body odor, had been sprung, and the assassin had been neutralized. "Play it again," Faustino told the house, and at the same moment the stealth phone rang.

This time it was Faustino's gloomy deputy, Gabriel Blanca. "Sri Hong-Owen wants to talk with you, boss. I know you don't want to leave your house, what with the assassin, so I told her that you had to attend to some very important business. But she said that she would send someone to find you, and I thought I had better warn you."

"You're right about the business," Faustino said. "As a matter of fact, I have to go out right now."

"You're going out, boss? What about the assassin?"

"Forget about the assassin. As for talking to the witch, forget about that, too. I have to take a little trip, Gabriel."

"A trip, boss? Is that wise?"

"A trip, Gabriel, to Paris, Dione. In six hours I'll have escaped from this miserable ball of ice. So, she is your problem, not mine."

"She said that she has made an important discovery, boss. And she was serious about sending someone to find you. Perhaps you should delay your trip, and find out what she wants. You can stay in your house, and meanwhile we will continue to search for the assassin."

Faustino, sprawled naked on the pseudograss carpet, stinking of sex and booze, could in his mind's eye clearly see his deputy's mournful face—his cap of curly black hair, the hyphen of his razor-trimmed moustache, his reproachful, poached-egg eyes—and felt a squirm of unease in his gut, a little blurt of acid. He could never decide if Gabriel Blanca was a model of rectitude, and too stupid or too unimaginative to see what was going on under his nose, or if he chose to ignore it because he didn't want to get involved.

"I won't be at home," Faustino said, "and I won't be coming into the office, except very briefly, when I expect you to keep everyone and anyone away from me. After that, I'll be on the shuttle to Dione. So you see that I don't have any time for this nonsense, Gabriel. You'll just have to handle this yourself."

"She said that she wanted you to see what she had found. She was very clear about that."

Faustino groaned. "This has to be about the cave full of vacuum organisms. We've both read her reports, Gabriel. We both know that she hasn't found anything interesting."

One of the AIs monitoring Mimas's communication traffic had intercepted and decrypted reports sent by Sri HongOwen's field crew to her laboratory in orbit above Titan. They had discovered and mapped a vast underground complex, and had located an entire ecosystem of vacuum organisms designed by Avernus, who had been the pre-eminent gene wizard in the solar system before the Quiet War, and was now its most wanted war criminal. Faustino had paid a professor of biology in the University of Brasilia a considerable fee to assess the tedious details of vacuum organism metabolism, only to be told that there was nothing novel—that is, nothing that was not already patented. Faustino suspected that these anodyne reports were a smokescreen, that Sri Hong-Owen was holding back the good stuff for herself, but she ran a notoriously tight crew that was impossible to infiltrate, and hiring black bag mercenaries to stage a hit-and-run job would have been horribly expensive. Besides, he was busy

enough with his own schemes, and most especially with the plan he had cooked up with Todd Krough.

Gabriel Blanca said, "She didn't say what it was about, boss. Only that she wanted you to see something."

"You didn't think to ask, of course."

"I did not ask," Gabriel Blanca said primly, "because we are not supposed to know anything about it."

Faustino was picking at a patch of dried blood—the woman's blood—on his thigh. Black flakes fell slowly into the wiry turf of half-life polymer that would, by and by, absorb them. He said, "No doubt she's found something that she thinks is important, but will anyone else care? Do I care? I think not. She's an obsessive. Give her just one moment of your attention, and she'll never let you go."

"I only tell you what she said, boss," Gabriel Blanca said stubbornly. "That it was important, and that you had to see it for yourself. Perhaps you should go. At least you would be safe from the assassin."

Faustino clutched the back of his aching head. Bristly hair rasped under his palm. He had the wild idea that if he squeezed hard enough his headache would spray into the air like black milk. He said, "I have business to attend to. I have a shuttle to catch. Stall the witch. Say anything you like, but stall her. I don't have time for her nonsense."

He had to talk with Todd Krough, calm the tweak down, soothe his affronted sense of honor, and extract the first tranche of the fee. He had to arrange the transfer of credit through a web of virtual middlemen to his anonymous account on the Bourse. He had to go to his office and pick up the bribe for the general in charge of traffic control, and he had to catch the shuttle to Dione. For a moment,

contemplating the extent of these interlocking tasks gave him a bad case of claustrophobic dread.

Gabriel Blanca was protesting that he didn't have the authority to deal with Sri Hong-Owen.

"I'm giving you the authority," Faustino said. "Imagine that I'm already on Dione, that I'm in Paris, strolling beside one of its famous rivers, in one of its famous parks. In gravity where you can actually walk upright, as God intended. You're in charge, Gabriel, so you will have to deal with the witch. Meanwhile, I will do you the favor of praying that she returns to Titan as soon as she can."

"I'll note your transfer of authority," Gabriel Blanca said stiffly.

"You do that," Faustino said, and switched off the phone and added, "Write it on a stick, Gabriel, and shove it up your ass."

He called for light and coffee, and when the house told him in its soft contralto that there was no coffee, remembered that in a moment of careless generosity last night he had allowed the woman to take it all in return for fulfilling the lubricious promises she had whispered in his ear. Real coffee was as good as Greater Brazilian dollars on the grey market.

"I can synthesize coffee," the house said.

"I'd rather drink yeast shit."

"As an alternative, I have chocolate or seven types of tea," the house said, and Faustino told it chocolate would be fine, remembering how the woman's quick clever mouth had planted lingering kisses on every centimeter of his skin, how she had looked at him across the hairy expanse of his torso with the sullen contempt that excited him so—even now his poor chafed penis grew in weight at the thought, a tender throb.

He'd managed to trick her into playing one of his little games last night—a game with his pistol, waving it in her face, setting it down between them, goading her into trying to use it. As usual, she had refused, and as usual he had worked her into a fine fury with inventively embellished war stories (he really was rather good at concocting disgusting details; next time, he should ask the house to make a recording), her quivering outrage inspiring him to even greater heights of invention, until at last, because it was the only way

she could make him stop, she had made a grab for the pistol he had carefully left within reach. He took her on the instant the viral fit seized her; it was like riding a condemned prisoner when the first jolt of electricity struck. It was a pity that the loyalty virus, another of Todd Krough's little gifts, couldn't be made legal. There were thousands of prisoners rotting in the forced labor camps. One dose of virus, a session of indoctrination, and every trooper could have his own body servant.

Faustino asked the house to turn up the lights, and saw that the woman had added another drawing to the involuted scrawls that now stretched halfway across the low, curved ceiling of the sleeping chamber. She slept far less than he did: all tweaks seemed to need little sleep, surviving on strings of snatched catnaps. Often, after sex, she would swing into the day hammock and lie there doodling with a stylus gripped in hand or foot. She had elaborated a regular Sistine Chapel up there, although the sketches of flayed or bursting bodies and body parts skewered like grotesque flowers on branches or bits of broken machinery were more like a work by Goya that Faustino had once seen in the Prado than Michaelangelo's great murals. He remembered his father pointing out the gruesome details, telling him that this was the necessary cost of war, that this was what men sometimes had to do to other men. He remembered his father's grave, gravelly voice, his complex odor compounded of sweat, stale tobacco, sherry fumes and the polish of his black boots, the weight of his hand on his shoulder. His father had shot himself at his desk two weeks later, his web of debts and deceit unraveling far and wide, a court order sequestering the family estate spattered with his blood and brains.

Faustino had once asked the woman if these drawings were the kind of thing she had stenciled on pressure suits, and she'd given him one of her dark, contemptuous looks and said that it had been different before the war. This new bit of work was a skull born aloft on dove's wings that sprouted below its jaw; Faustino realized, as he pulled himself toward the shower, that the bony face was somehow his. Sublimation, that was what the brain doctors called it. The woman wanted so badly to kill him, and she couldn't, even with a charged pistol in her hand: the loyalty virus saw to that. All she could do was show him how much she wanted him dead, and that inspired him to greater cruelties, which made her hate him even more. Faustino liked to think that they were exquisitely matched.

In the shower capsule, he discovered that she had taken all his special soap beads again, the ones, delicately infused with frankincense and bergamot and mimosa, he had shipped in from the three-hundred-year-old shop in the exclusive arcade in Rio. What did she do with them? She certainly did not use them—she always came to him smelling of sour sweat, a calculated bit of defiance that was actually illegal in this fastidious city. All that was left were sachets of the pink, gritty soap synthesized by the foodmaker. And there was still black mold defining the edges of the capsule's door seal, even though he had told her about it—had shown her, pushing her face right up to it. She hadn't bothered to program the house mites to take care of it, although she had reset the capsule's temperature; it was so chilly his naked hide prickled with goose bumps, and he squealed when the shower's powerful fans threw a dense cold mist around him.

Black mold in the shower's airmask, too, he realized, as a musty, acrid taste filled his mouth. Well, it wouldn't kill him. The woman had once tried to poison him, but the virus had forced her to tell him all about it as soon as she had doctored the wine. Faustino had had a lot of fun with her that night, and the very next day she'd tried to get the house to suffocate him by gradually increasing the carbon dioxide content of the air while he slept. She'd had to wake him up so he could hear her strangled, weepy confession, and afterward they'd had a truly rousing session that had put her in the hospital for forty-eight hours.

Happy days.

Showered, shaven, medicated with aspirin and a tiny cup of bitter hot chocolate sprinkled with something that passably imitated cinnamon, the trench

between his lower lip and teeth tingling with a dusting of snuff he'd dredged from the bottom of the wrap he'd consumed last night, Colonel Faustino Malarte felt a good deal more human when, after briefly talking to the AI in charge of Camelot's spycam network, he left his house for the last time. It was ten fifteen. The shuttle to Dione was due to depart in just under six hours; he had plenty of time to finish his business.

The first thing he did was tell the sergeant in command of the squad guarding his house that he did not want an escort. The sergeant knew better than to argue with his superior officer, but Faustino had only just passed through the sphere of security mesh when his phone rang. It was, of course, Gabriel Blanca.

"You really are going out, boss."

"Want do you want, Gabriel?"

"You have to tell me where you are going, and you have to go with an escort. Those are the standing orders."

"They are my standing orders. Cancel them."

"You do remember what day it is, boss."

"Even I would hardly forget the day I am supposed to be killed, Gabriel. But none of that matters now."

"Of course it matters."

"It doesn't matter because it isn't going to happen."

"You don't know that, boss," Gabriel Blanca said stubbornly. "If you insist on going out, you must have an escort."

"Leave the squad to watch the house if you want, but I'll have your head if anyone follows me. And don't waste any more time looking for the assassin, by the way. I can assure you that there's no need."

"Assassins were designed to be hard to find, boss. That's why they were so successful in the war. That's why we are watching you. That's why you should stay in your house until the matter is resolved."

Poor Gabriel Blanca. His plodding mind, trapped within the narrow confines of bureaucratic procedure, was entirely unable to think sideways, could never in a thousand years have come up with the cunning, albeit entirely illegal, ambush that had caught the assassin.

Faustino, swollen with secret amusement, said, "Assassins are terrible weapons, yes, and that is without doubt why one of our enemies hatched this pernicious rumor in the first place. Whisper that a rewired assassin is loose, then sit back and watch us go crazy as we chase around after a ghost. Trust me on this, Gabriel: there is no assassin. It's a trick. No doubt to divert us from something someone doesn't want us to know about."

"It isn't a trick, boss. It's very real. A man disappeared. He set off an incendiary charge in his room to foil our forensics. He left a message written in blood—"

"Really, Gabriel. That was nothing more than a bit of stage management to add to the lie."

"But, boss, this is the day—"

"I have work to do, Gabriel. Don't call me again, don't have me followed, and don't even bother trying to use the spycams to keep an eye on me. I've already had a word with the AI about that. I'll be at headquarters in a couple of hours."

Faustino's house was one of the finest in Camelot, confiscated from the eldest son of what had been, before the war, its richest family. It sat at the top of the leafiest of the little city's many domes, hidden from its neighbors by trees and bushes and vines that in the fractional gravity grew from hydroponic tubing in extravagant puffball explosions and cascading ridges dripping with flowers and fruit. As Faustino hauled himself toward the main cordway, he felt that he was swimming through a fantastic floral replica of a coral reef, the spheres and blunt-ended ovals of houses tucked away amongst hanging curtains of foliage like the Easter eggs his mother used to hide in the garden of the estate,

constellations of suspensor lamps burning overhead, and Saturn a swollen storm

cloud tilted beyond the spiderweb of the dome's fullerene struts and diamond panes. A gang of gardeners were trimming a puffball of shaggy cypresses, like fish grazing at a great green cloud of algae. Before the war, tribes of tweaked rats had taken care of the plantings, but most of the incomers couldn't tolerate the idea of vermin swarming freely about their homes and businesses, and the rats had been culled by a tailored plague. Faustino missed them. Their fur had been patterned as gorgeously as Persian carpets, and it had been fun, at the end of the day, to take pot-shots at them with a wire gun from the terrace of his new house. The bloom of blood and flesh when an explosive needle hit one of the little fuckers! Ah, the good old days just after the war, when everything had been free and easy. There had been no need for all this black-bagging and finicky intrigue back then. If you wanted something done, you arranged it directly. It was in its way a more honest time. Back then, Colonel Faustino Malarte could have arrested a crook like Todd Krough, confiscated his business and had him shot for treason, and no questions would have been asked. Now, he was forced to make deals with him. Below the busy cordways that girdled the equator of Camelot's main dome, the lighting was dimmer, the air colder, the air conditioning noisier. Pipes leaked steam that condensed into drifting clouds of cold droplets, sucked this way and that by humming fans. The fat resin and plastic cylinders of studios and workshops were suspended like bowerbird nests amongst islands of dark green foliage, complex tangles of electrical and fiberoptic cables and service pipes strung between them. Discreet holographic signs hung shimmering in dim air that smelled of solvents, paint, and hot metal and plastic, and tingled with the greedy hiss of suction pumps and the stuttering blurt of power tools.

Faustino found an open air café beside a fall of jasmine and golden ivy, and ordered up a sticky pastry and a beaker of coffee, making sure the counterman prepared the coffee with a triple helping of real ground beans. It went without saying that he did not pay; he did not have to pay for anything in the city. He commandeered the café's phone and told Todd Krough where he was, cut off the man's impertinent bluster mid-sentence, and then hooked himself to a sling chair, sipping coffee and watching the street scene like a benevolent emperor.

Camelot was famous for its pressure suits, and this was where they were made, along with sleds, air plants, reaction pistols, tethers, and a hundred specialist tools for vacuum work. Tweaks came from all over the Saturn system to buy custom-made p-suits and accessories. They made a big deal about authentic hand-crafted artifacts. They valued things not just for their utility but for the intrinsic worth of skilled labor and artistry, could argue for hours about the particular merits of a single artisan. Another district, in the dome west of this one, specialized in the growth and quickening of suit liners. A third, devoted to the decoration of p-suits, was where the woman had worked before the war, painting whatever it was she had painted before she had started specializing in skulls and filleted corpses. Baalambs and bluebirds perhaps. Prewar pastoral scenes. The only time Faustino had ever seen her look interested in anything at all had been when he'd taken her to his office to show off his prize, a p-suit chestplate decorated with the third of Munk's Seven Views of Saturn's Rings. Faustino was going to use it to bribe the general in charge of traffic control in the Saturn system. The man already had two of them; three more were in museums on Earth; only God knew what had happened to the seventh. Faustino remembered the way the woman's gaze had moved over the painting—her look so dreamily intense that for the pleasure of seeing it vanish he'd immediately switched off the lights and ordered the safe to shut itself away. She'd told him that he didn't deserve to own it, and had pretended not to listen to the amusing story of how the piece had come into Faustino's possession after its owner had committed ritual suicide at the end of the Quiet War.

That new drawing she had left on the ceiling—was it really a death's-head portrait of him? Why had she done it? A warning? A malign joke? She knew about

the assassin and the promise he had scrawled in blood; Faustino had told himself he wouldn't tell her, and then he'd gotten drunk and told her anyway. A gengineered killing machine is after you, she'd said, so what? It didn't impress someone who had spent every second of the Quiet War's hundred and twenty days wondering if a missile or a chunk of rock was about to smash her city flat.

As Faustino perched in the sling chair, sweating into yesterday's slightly soiled uniform as he sipped his coffee, he noticed that many of the tweaks who swam or glided past glanced sidelong at him, and three were openly watching him from the mouth of one of the studios a hundred meters down the cordway. Eyes big and dark in pale faces, sly whispers. How tweaks liked to stare at incomers—especially at him, one of the most important people in their miserable little city, which for all its vaunted ecological design and integrated systems was really nothing more than a collection of fragile bubbles raised on stilts above a wasteland of ice colder than the inner circle of Hell and pocked everywhere with ancient craters.

Maybe those fuckers up there, staring at him like a bunch of affronted lemurs, had heard about the assassin—maybe they were waiting for something to happen. You could definitely sell tickets for that kind of show to the tweaks; they'd pay any price to see one of their so-called oppressors reamed from throat to balls. Faustino toyed with the notion of identifying them with his phone and calling in a squad of troopers and giving them the roughest day of their lives—and he would have done it, too, except he had only a few hours to fix things with Todd Krough, pick up the first installment of the fee and get aboard the shuttle, dot the i's and cross the t's of the sweet deal that meant early retirement, purchase of land to replace the estate his profligate father had lost, and restoration of his family's honor.

A stick-thin young man with a powder-white complexion, in a plain black jumper and tights patterned with black and white diamonds, was hanging nonchalantly on the other side of the street's skein of red and yellow cords, and taking a good long look at him. After a moment, Faustino realized that he knew the tweak—he was one of Todd Krough's junior hoods, Joly or Josif or some other dumb anglo name—and gave him a cool nod of recognition.

The boy gangster looked left and right and up and down, and swung neatly across the cordway onto the café's net platform. Faustino drained his beaker of coffee, tossed it in the general direction of the disposal, and said, "Where's your boss, compañero?"

The boy said, "Todd doesn't like public places. Todd told me to take you to him."

His black eyes were set close together above the sharp blade of his nose; he must have practiced for hours in front of the mirror to perfect that flat, fuck-you stare. He was twice Faustino's height, but so thin that in Earth's gravity he would have collapsed like a bundle of twigs. Faustino could have snapped one of his arms between thumb and forefinger.

"Suppose I want to talk to him here, out in the open with God as our witness. What would Todd do about that?"

The boy shrugged. "Todd knows that you must leave soon. Todd knows you have no time to play games. Todd also told me to tell you that you are late, and Todd isn't happy about that. Todd wants you to know he's pissed."

"Todd needs to learn patience," Faustino said, thinking that this kid had big balls to try and give him such grief. He was about to elaborate on this theme, to explain to the boy exactly where he stood in the scheme of things, when someone called his name.

Faustino turned—too quickly and with too much force. He almost tipped out of the sling chair and had to grab the boy's shoulder to steady himself. The boy's collar bone made a sharp edge under the slick material of his jumper.

"Oh no," Faustino said.

Coming down the cordway, smooth and fast as any native, was Sri Hong-Owen's right-hand man, Yamil Chou. He saw Faustino staring at him, smiled, and came on.



"Who the fuck is that?" the boy said.

"It isn't anything to do with you," Faustino said. "It shouldn't be anything to do with me, either. Stay frosty, friend. Let me deal with it."

But the boy reached for something under his jumper as Yamil Chou swung down to the net platform, and Yamil Chou, quick as a striking snake, caught the boy's thin wrist and broke it with a crunching snap. Faustino winced; the boy turned even paler but somehow managed not to cry out. He had big balls, all right. Yamil Chou looked Faustino up and down, perfectly balanced on the swaying net, neat as a cat in white tunic jumper and white tights, his startling green eyes radiating a weird serenity. It was impossible to read from his face or his body language his intentions or his state of mind. Perhaps he didn't have a state of mind. Perhaps he was some kind of tweak, too: a vat-grown zombie. It was entirely possible. After all, what was the point of being a gene wizard if you couldn't make your servants exactly the way you wanted them? Perhaps Yamil Chou, with his porcelain perfect skin, his small still face and those extraordinary eyes, was what an assassin looked like before assuming a temporary human disguise.

"Lieutenant-General Hong-Owen is very anxious to show you what she has found," he told Faustino. He was still holding on to the gangster's broken wrist, but other than that he seemed to be paying the poor kid no attention whatsoever.

"It will have to wait," Faustino said, trying to kindle some anger from the ashes of his utter dismay. How the fuck had this creature found him, down in the bowels of the city? Did he have access to the surveillance system? Or had that moron Gabriel Blanca somehow overridden the spycam AI, traced him, and blabbed?

"This is of extreme importance," Yamil Chou said.

"So is my business," Faustino said. "You can let go of the kid, by the way. He isn't going to cause any trouble."

The boy said, "Just tell me who the fuck—"

And then he was tumbling away head over heels, arms and legs flailing. He slammed into the roof of a workshop a dozen meters below the cordway, slid down its tight curve, howling when his broken wrist knocked against a resin spur, and managed to catch hold of a power cable with a prehensile foot. He twisted upside-down like a bat, his right hand going for his weapon and finding it not there—it was magically in Yamil Chou's hand, although the man had barely moved, was still poised like a dancer on the net platform, as if he was able to violate the law of action/reaction everyone quickly learnt about in Mimas's microgravity. He looked at the thing he'd taken from the boy, a fat tube of clear plastic with indented fingergrrips at one end, then tossed it into the maw of the café's disposal.

"You go tell your boss I'm busy," Faustino told Yamil Chou loudly, for the benefit of the boy. "Anything she wants to disclose to the security force should go directly to my deputy."

"You must come with me," Yamil Chou said.

"The fuck I will, you freak," Faustino said, and reached for his pistol and tried to pull back when Yamil Chou grasped his wrist. The freak's long, neatly manicured fingers were as strong as steel. His calm green eyes were scant centimeters from Faustino's.

"Colonel Faustino Malarte," Yamil Chou said formally, "Lieutenant General Sri Hong-Owen requests that you attend her at once. It is a matter of the gravest importance, concerning the fugitive war criminal known as Avernus. I must tell you now that I have been given the authority to carry out my duty in any way I see fit."

Yamil Chou let go of Faustino's wrist and slapped his cheek, all in one smooth quick motion. Something stuck just below Faustino's eye, and even as he reached up to pull it off his muscles went as weak as water. He saw café, cordway and flowering thickets revolve around each other as Yamil Chou towed him away; he heard, small as the squeak of an ant, the boy gangster shouting that Todd would kill him for this. Then something like sleep claimed him.

\* \* \*

Faustino was falling feet first past an endless cliff, with a demon riding his chest and a crackling jellyfish pressed against his nose and mouth. The assassin! He was being murdered! He tried to grab his pistol, but his arms were bound, the demon rode him expertly, and the movement was too much for his gorge. His stomach clenched and he spewed a hot jet of bitter brown fluid. Tears swelled in his eyes; in the vestigial gravity they did not break but clung to his lashes like watery goggles. A second spasm brought up a weaker surge of coffee and chyme, and he coughed and spat and snorted until he could get his breath.

"Hold still," the demon said. It was Yamil Chou. He deftly wiped Faustino's mouth and eyes with a tissue, flicked the tissue into the jellyfish, which somehow had become a plastic bag, and pinched the neck of the bag shut.

"What did you do to me?"

Faustino was strapped to an acceleration couch. His throat was raw, and his headache had returned. Sunlight splintered in his eyes. Beyond his boots, beyond a semireflective curve of clear diamond, a vast cliff was rushing past, its pale glare printed with inky crescents and clefts. Or no, Faustino realized, his stomach floating toward the top of his throat as his perspective swung through ninety degrees, it was not a cliff at all, but the surface of Mimas. This close little hemisphere of air was the cabin of a gig falling in a precise trajectory across the pockmarked face of the icy moon.

Yamil Chou unsnapped the couch's straps. "It was necessary to give you a small dose of tranquilizer, Colonel. I regret the side-effects of the counteragent."

Those cold green eyes gave nothing away. Faustino realized now that their color reminded him of the winter swells of the Atlantic breaking on the long, long beach at the northern boundary of his family's estate. His nostrils stung and he sneezed; disgustingly, a little spray of vomit shot from his nose. Faustino swallowed his nausea, gathered what was left of his dignity, and said, "You are going to have a lot to answer for, my friend."

Yamil Chou blotted at the widening constellation of opalescent globules with a tissue. "Lieutenant General Hong Owen requested your presence, Colonel. I was instructed to facilitate it."

Faustino's fingers ever-so-casually brushed the flap of his holster. It was empty. Of course it was empty. He had a sudden horrible vision of Yamil Chou towing his snoring self through the cordways of the city. Tweaks hanging everywhere, tweaks laughing at his shame, tweaks videoing him, and not one moving to help him. Pictures of his shame all over the city's infoweb.

"Facilitate my presence—is that what you call it? You drugged me, you freak! You kidnapped me!"

"I was instructed to use any means necessary, Colonel. Lieutenant-General Hong-Owen has made an important discovery, and it is necessary that you, as senior officer of Mimas's security force, witness it. I was instructed to bring you to her, and to show you this."

Yamil Chou held a sheet of film in front of Faustino's face.

Faustino said, "What the fuck is this?"

But he knew very well what it was. Greasy globules of panic sweat popped from his armpits and his forehead as he studied the neat rows of black and red numbers. Some data miner had reconstructed every scam and clandestine deal, had even pierced the black ice encryption protecting his very private account on the Bourse. It was all there. The blackbook enterprises, the placement bribes, the fees for expediting licenses: everything.

Yamil Chou gave the film a short, sharp shake. Numbers swarmed to its margin and a little window opened in its center, a spycam view of Faustino in his white uniform with its scrambled egg trim, talking head to head with Todd Krough.

"...No one will know about it," Faustino heard himself saying, "until the guidance motors fire, and then it will be too late. A nudge at the very end of its trajectory, and it will fertilize your own territory, not the

government's. A nudge that will be very reasonably explained by a mistake in the guidance system—a deliberate mistake inserted by a rogue technician who will be executed for sabotage. I have already selected our scapegoat. She had a cousin who was crewing a scow at the beginning of the war. The scow was taken out by an emp mine, and of course her cousin died—” Yamil Chou shook the film again, and the tinny whisper of Faustino's recorded voice cut off.

“An outrageous fake,” Faustino said with trembling defiance. “An evil tissue of lies woven by some story machine.”

“We have much more, of course,” Yamil Chou told Faustino. “More than enough to incriminate both the senior officer who has agreed to help you, and the man in the traffic control center who has been paid to infect the ring fragment's guidance AI with a virus, to alter its trajectory.”

“There is no such virus. I challenge you to ask for the guidance AI to be completely analyzed. Nothing out of the ordinary will be found.”

“Of course not, because the virus will be downloaded into the guidance AI tomorrow. That is why Lieutenant-General Sri Hong-Owen wishes to talk with you.”

“And I certainly will talk with her. After I have arrested her, and taken her back to Camelot.”

Yamil Chou pulled on mesh gloves with a brisk snap. “I suggest that you strap yourself into your couch. We are almost at our destination.”

“I will arrest her,” Faustino said, his voice loud in the tiny space. “And you, sir, and all of her crew.”

But Yamil Chou had turned away from him. He waved his hands through a virtual display, and the ice plain tilted away as the gig spun end for end. Faustino felt weight ghost through him as the gig's motor fired up, and he hastily fumbled with the snaps of the couch's straps. The gig was traveling backward as it decelerated, and now its nose was pointed toward Saturn, which hung huge and swollen just above the close, curved horizon.

They must be near Herschel crater and the western edge of the sub-saturnian hemisphere, Faustino thought, which meant that those long dark streaks thrown across the ground weren't shadows at all, but thin films of sooty material flung across ancient craters and fractured plains by the impact of the chunk of carbonaceous-rich ice that had been culled from Saturn's B ring a year ago. And if Sri Hong-Owen had gone to all this trouble to have him brought to Herschel crater, perhaps she really had found something after all.

Sri Hong-Owen had come to Mimas sixty-five days ago, after a survey team had discovered the entrance to a subsurface structure on the outer slope of Herschel crater's rimwall. The entrance had been revealed by quakes caused by the impact of a sooty ring fragment that had been intended to fertilize the ice plain north of Camelot Chasma, and turn it into vacuum organism farmland that could support the growing population of incomers. But instead of blowing into a cloud of fine dark dust a kilometer above the surface, the fragment had smashed down intact, creating a new crater half a kilometer in diameter, spattering debris over a quarter of the little moon's sub-saturnian hemisphere, and causing violent localized quakes and landslides as the rigid ice crust rang like a bell. Two of Camelot's domes had ruptured; more than eighty people had died because they had not been able to grab air masks in time. Luckily, Faustino, his senior officers, and half of the security force had taken the precaution of going into orbit, and had been able to restore order as soon as they had returned to the city.

At first, almost everyone had believed that this disaster had been caused by sabotage—three technicians with questionable security records had been arrested, tried, and executed within an hour of the impact—but a detailed inquiry had discovered that someone had entered a minus instead of a plus into the program that had controlled the explosive charges: they had been set to detonate a kilometer below the surface of Mimas instead of a kilometer above it.

Out of this comprehensive disaster came a single stroke of luck. A landslide

revealed the entrance to a tunnel high in an ice cliff at the western edge of Herschel crater, a tunnel that led into the warren of chambers and caves that was the secret laboratory of Avernus. The Three Powers Occupation Force had known that it was hidden somewhere in Herschel, but the gigantic crater was a hundred and thirty kilometers across, about one-third the diameter of Mimas, and whole cities could have been hidden in its jumbled icescapes. When a tourist had disappeared in the area a couple of years ago, a thorough grid search of ten square kilometers of fractured ice around his abandoned rover had failed to turn up so much as a boot print. It was pure chance that a survey team had spotted gases venting from the tunnel, that the very disaster that had given Faustino the idea for the scheme that would restore his family's fortune had also revealed the treasure Sri Hong-Owen so badly craved.

Chance. Fate. A bad cosmic joke.

Never tell anyone your plans, Faustino's mother liked to say, because God will hear about them.

The gig was dropping toward a tall ice cliff that stood knee-deep in great fans of debris. Yamil Chou fluttered his gloved fingers, as if conducting a delicate minuet. Attitude jets thumped. The gig slewed sideways, dropping between two huge folds of ice toward silver-grey domes that clung to a sheer wall—they reminded Faustino of the swallows' nests under the eaves of the red-tiled roof of the villa his family had rented each year in the little Portuguese village, in the happy summers before his father had lost everything. Two puffs of white vapor briefly flowered beneath the domes and something explosively unfurled: a net of smart fullerene mesh. The gig yawed close to the ice wall, dropped. The net folded around it.

\* \* \*

Sri Hong-Owen was the best gene wizard on Earth; it was said that in all the solar system she was second only to Avernus. She had designed most of the bioweapons deployed by the Three Powers Alliance; she was a billionaire several times over (she was rumored to have bought outright the coorbital satellites Janus and Epimetheus); she was utterly obsessed with the woman she believed to be her sworn enemy.

Faustino had met Sri Hong-Owen just once before, when she had first arrived on Camelot. She was a short, slender woman with a large, vivid presence, punctilious, brusque, and caring not at all for social niceties. Her head was shaven, she wore plain coveralls and was barefoot—her toes were as long and flexible as fingers, the result of a famous self-experiment in postnatal homeobox morphogenesis. Her eyes, their pupils capped with silvery datalenses, raked Faustino from head to toe, and she told him that she was going to throw a security zone with a radius of fifty kilometers around what she called the nest, that all the supplies she required would be routed from Dione and sent directly to her research station unopened and untampered, that he, Colonel Faustino Malarte, could best help her by staying out of her way. Faustino had been entirely agreeable. For one thing, he had no choice—she outranked him, and could have bought and sold his soul with her spare change. For another, he wanted never to see the condescending, ice-cold witch again.

But now here he was, being hustled by the witch's chief of staff down the bore of a quilted corridor that had snaked out like a tongue to kiss the hatch of the gig. They passed through a series of pressure doors to a narrow walkway that twisted between little cubicles and cells and carousels where, in a hum of self-absorbed activity, techs were busy at whatever techs did, to a small, spherical room lined entirely with white fur where Sri Hong-Owen and her young son, Alder, lounged at their ease like a pair of haughty cats.

The gene wizard favored Faustino with a bright smile. "Thank you for coming," she said. "Yamil, fetch our guest tea."

Faustino felt prickly fur liquidly sway beneath him, and was struck by a weak surge of nausea. Was he going to throw up again? No, thank Christ.

The woman and the boy were watching him with barely concealed amusement. Both wore blood-red skinthins, and their shaven scalps gleamed in chilly light shed

by a single suspensor lamp. Both had the same intense, serious gaze, the same bright blue eyes with silver points instead of pupils, the same knowing smile crimping the corners of their bloodless lips. Faustino noticed that Sri Hong-Owen was stroking her son's calf with one of her long-toed feet, and remembered the rumor that she had illegally cloned herself and switched the embryo's sex; certainly, no one knew who the father of her son had been, or who was the father of the embryo she was currently incubating in an artificial womb on the Titan station.

Sri Hong-Owen said, "Do you believe in fate, Colonel? Do you believe that our destinies are shaped by patterns and forces we cannot see? Or do you think that everything we do is shaped by nothing more than chance and contingency?"

"I was raised as a Catholic, Madam."

"That's a slippery answer, Colonel. But then, you're a slippery man, aren't you? It's certainly been hard, getting hold of you."

"I understand that you have made a discovery," Faustino said. He felt the same mixture of dread and impatience that had settled over him while enduring the mandatory Sunday visit with his great-grandmother in her dim, stuffy suite, its dusty shadows cluttered with two centuries' worth of mementos and the little medical machines that kept her alive.

Sri Hong-Owen studied him for a moment, then said, "What do the citizens of Camelot have to say about Avernus, Colonel?"

Faustino shrugged. "I've never asked them."

"But you know that they think she's alive."

"I suppose so," Faustino said.

"It doesn't mean that she is alive," the little boy, Alder, said, his piping treble thickened by scorn.

Sri Hong-Owen ignored her son. "Do your spies keep you informed about the rumors concerning Avernus, Colonel?"

The mention of spies made Faustino uneasy. He said stiffly, "I take little notice of rumors, Madam. I prefer facts."

"The citizens of Camelot think she is alive—that's a fact. They think she has a secret laboratory. Not this one, which she has obviously abandoned, but one hidden somewhere far from here. In the rings, or in an asteroid whose orbit crosses that of Saturn, or even further out. On Charon, or in one of the Kuiper Belt objects, or even in a comet. There's even a story that she and her retinue lie sleeping in the heart of a comet outward bound from the sun, that when she returns, in a hundred or a thousand years, she will begin a war that will free the colonies of the Outer System. Romantic nonsense of course, but I believe that it has been elaborated around a kernel of truth."

"You came here to look for her, Madam. Have you found her?"

"Of course not. She is hiding somewhere, but not here." Sri Hong-Owen's gaze suddenly focused on something behind Faustino, and she said, "Thank you, Yamil."

The chief of staff had silently reappeared. With a modest flourish he presented to Faustino a beaker soothingly warm to the touch. The air of the fur-lined tent was so cold that everyone's breath was visible; Faustino was uncomfortably aware the whole structure was pinned to an ice cliff, with nothing but vacuum beyond its thin skin, was aware too of the soft sounds of the techs working in their cells all around, of an oppressive sense of watchful thought. It was if, somehow, he had become trapped inside Sri Hong-Owen's skull.

"The tea will help you," Sri Hong-Owen said. "It is a formulation of mine." Faustino took a polite sip, and found that the tea was good: hot, green, and sharpened with ginger.

"When you see what I have found, you will understand why I took such extraordinary measures to bring you here, Colonel Malarte," Sri Hong-Owen said.

"I am not sure whether I should congratulate you or arrest you, Madam. You may have made an important discovery, but that is no justification for kidnapping the head of Camelot's security force."

"You would not come voluntarily, Colonel. You were too busy with that silly little ruffian...."

Sri Hong-Owen snapped her fingers impatiently, and Yamil Chou said, "Todd Krough, Madam."

"That's the man. Please, Colonel, don't try to deny it. You know that I know all about your little scheme, but let me assure you that I did not bring you here to condemn you. Quite the contrary."

Faustino said, "Who gave you permission to pry into my business affairs?"

"I am operating within the parameters of our agreement, Colonel."

"I remember no such agreement, Madam."

"Of course you do. You waived all rights to oversee my investigation, and gave me carte blanche to proceed as I saw fit."

"Your investigation into this facility, yes--"

"The scope of my investigation includes all the activities of the war criminal, Avernus," Sri Hong-Owen said. "That includes assessing rumors, stories, gossip, and hearsay circulating within the local population. As part of that investigation, I turned up enough evidence of corruption to damn you forever."

Her cold, bright gaze pierced him through. The boy, Alder, was staring at him too.

"However," Sri Hong-Owen said, "I am not at all interested in your petty schemes, except that one of them makes you useful to me."

Faustino gave her his best smile. It was obvious that she needed something from him. He was acutely aware that the clock was ticking, but there was still enough time to make a deal with her, and to get back to Camelot and catch the shuttle to Dione. It was possible that he was not doomed after all.

He said, "I am in your hands, Madam. What do you want of me?"

\* \* \*

"Even I was beginning to believe that Avernus had stripped everything out of her nest," Sri Hong-Owen told Faustino. "But just as I was about to abandon the search, I found what she had been forced to leave behind."

"She wanted you to find it," Alder said, and told Faustino, "You'll have to forgive my mother. Until now, she's been unable to brag about her discovery."

The boy sat beside Sri Hong-Owen, facing Faustino and Yamil Chou. They were all cased in pressure suits and strapped into a cart that was traveling down a rack-and-pinion track laid down a narrow, steeply sloping shaft driven through four kilometers of ice to the bottom of Avernus's secret facility. Ripples and flaws within the opalescent walls of the shaft glowed in the cart's headlights like seams of semiprecious stones, slipping past at a steady twenty kilometers per hour. Faustino thought that it was like sliding down the throat of a giant.

Sri Hong-Owen said, "If she did mean me to find it, she set me no easy task. There are hundreds of chambers and at least a thousand kilometers of corridors and shafts. It is a labyrinth more complicated than any the pharaohs built to memorialize their deaths." (Alder whispered, "He won't know about them." His mother ignored him.) "But this is no monument; Avernus simply turned on dozens of mining machines and left them running. There are mazes in three dimensions and chambers as big as cathedrals. There is a shaft that runs for more than eighty kilometers to a system of deep fractures under the floor of Herschel crater; that's where she vented water vapor from the mining. Most of the chambers are empty, but we had to map everything using deep radar and then explore it all with drones before we could come in ourselves. The whole place epitomizes the woman's approach to her work--no design, no plan, just blind faith that chance will throw up something useful. A horribly wasteful fumbling, like trying to build a machine by repeatedly throwing its components into the air. Given an infinite amount of time, you can of course derive every possible structure by chance, but it's hardly a useful strategy."

"Perhaps you could give me an idea of what you have found, Madam," Faustino said. Pinched in the shell of the badly fitting p-suit, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder and thigh-to-thigh beside Yamil Chou, he felt horribly

cramped and claustrophobic. He hated p-suits; this was only the fourth time he'd worn one since he had taken up his post. It chafed his knees and elbows and crotch, and smelt strongly and disagreeably of someone else's stale sweat. "Don't worry, Colonel," Sri Hong-Owen said, "I don't want you to miss your shuttle. As for what I found, I think you already know something about it." "If you were doing your duty by spying on me, Madam," Faustino said, "then you cannot blame me for doing mine."

"Of course not. But you should know that those reports were mostly lies. I had to tell the Three Powers Occupation Force something, you see, or they would have sent someone to investigate."

"This is all a waste of time," Alder said. "He won't understand a thing." Faustino smiled at the precocious monster. "I can assure you, young man, that I will try very hard to understand what your mother has discovered."

"Even his lies are feeble," the boy said contemptuously, "and lying is what he does best."

Faustino allowed himself a warm little fantasy—the brat's helmet smashed open, his silent gaping scream as vacuum ripped breath and bloody froth from his lungs—and was startled when Yamil Chou laid a gloved hand on the crook of his elbow.

"Yamil is very good at what he does," Alder said, with a nasty smirk.

Faustino belatedly worked out the trick; it was just what he would have done, in the circumstances. "My suit is monitoring me," he said, "and your man is snooping on the readouts."

"You're cleverer than you look," the boy said grudgingly, "even if you're not as clever as you think you are."

"Hush," Sri Hong-Owen told her son. "We must use what we can."

"We would have done better with the gangster," Alder said.

"Colonel Faustino not only has access to the general in charge of traffic control," Sri Hong-Owen said serenely, "he also has what the general craves." Faustino was beginning to understand what she wanted from him. He said, "We need each other, it seems."

"For the moment," Sri Hong-Owen said.

The shaft's steep slope flattened out. The cart slowed, glided dreamily through a tunnel supported by hoops of adamantite fullerene into a chamber lined with soft quilting that glowed a sickly yellow-green, and stopped with eerie precision by an oval hatch.

Yamil Chou kept his pincer-like grip on Faustino's elbow as they cycled through the double airlock. "Don't compromise your suit's integrity, Colonel," the chief of staff said. "The airlock is for the protection of what's inside, not to keep in an atmosphere."

The airlock led into a rectangular, low-roofed, dimly lit bunker.

Half-dismantled machines squatted like dead toads on the rubbery floor, and a spherical tent of clear plastic furnished with sling chairs, lockers, and a foodmaker stood in their midst like the nucleus of a cell.

Sri Hong-Owen and Alder, their blood-red p-suits vivid in the crepuscular light, glided through the gloomy junkyard to a wide window at the far side. Yamil Chou forced Faustino to follow. The window was set in the waist of a vast, spherical chamber lit by a pale point source hung at the apex of its icy ceiling. Muscular humps of ice swept down in smooth arcs toward a flattened floor, streaked with frozen eddies and swirls the color of old, clotted blood. Things the shiny black of beetles' wings grew where the ice was darkest: dense copses of half-melted candles; phalanxes of tooth-like spikes; heaps of tangled wires; wide meadows of brittle hairs; gardens of paper-thin sheets and curled scrolls like the bits of spun sugar the estate's pastry cook had sometimes slipped to the young, sweet-toothed Faustino. Many of the meadows and gardens had sickly white margins studded with what looked like giant toadstools, and a large copse half a kilometer downslope was clearly dying from the inside out, its lumpy spires crumbling into grey ash.

"Surely these are nothing more than vacuum organisms," Faustino said, unable to hide his disappointment.

He had been expecting a clone farm of exotically tweaked babies, a wonderland full of exotic plants and animals. These growths were little different from the thick black carpets cultivated in the experimental fields south and west of Camelot, on ice fertilized with expensively imported tarry stuff mined from carbonaceous chondrites.

"Of course," Sri Hong-Owen said. "But they are not at all like vacuum organisms grown for CHON food, except that they use light energy to convert primordial hydrocarbons and amino acids to more complex forms. Commercial vacuum organisms have a pseudocellular structure, and share the same DNA code as every organism on Earth, although of course it is written in artificial pyranosylic analogs of the four familiar nucleotide bases. In many ways, they are similar to terrestrial prokaryotes."

"Bacteria," Alder told Faustino. "Microbes. Bugs."

His mother did not seem to notice this interruption. She said liltily, as if wrapping herself in a comfortable story, "These, though, are far more primitive. If commercial vacuum organisms are synthetic analogs of prokaryotes, these are analogs of the ancestors of prokaryotes. They have no pseudocellular structure, and they have no genome. They are not generated by the systematic execution of a centralized set of encoded instructions, but are networks of self-catalyzing metabolic cycles derived from the interactions of pseudoproteinaceous polymers."

Alder said, "He won't have understood a single word."

Faustino, eager to prove the brat wrong, said, "These things are not alive. They are like carpets or suit-liners."

The boy's high-pitched giggle filled Faustino's helmet.

Sri Hong-Owen laid her gloved hand on the shoulder of her son's p-suit and said, "Be quiet, Alder. The Colonel is quite right, and you know it."

Alder shrugged off her grip, and told Faustino, "My mother believes that, without the ability to internally encode information essential to their reproduction, these are no more than machines. I disagree. I believe that they are alive. They use energy to transform simple compounds to complex compounds; they reproduce; they even exchange information among themselves, although that information is entirely analog in form. We are accustomed to thinking of information as being encoded in the written word, in the binary code at the base of all computer languages, or in the genome, written in the four-letter alphabet of DNA and RNA. Out there—" Alder made an oddly grand gesture at the icescape that fell away beyond the wide window—"is a world in which the word is flesh, and flesh is word. There is no distinction between the two—they are one, indivisible. In that world, there can be no subterfuge, no falsehoods or untruths, Colonel. What is, is. Of course, I expect that you find the idea quite alien."

The brat was a monster, all right.

"They are machines, Colonel," Sri Hong-Owen said. "Self-assembling machines made out of polymers that resemble proteins, but machines nevertheless. However, they respond to changes in their environment by obeying the same self-organizing principles exhibited by biological systems. Like natural proteins, their polymers have funnel-shaped energy landscapes. Like proteins, the functional shapes they assume are reached by bumping down the contours of those funnels until they come to rest at the lowest energy configuration. Avernus did not provide assembly instructions, but she made use of components that obey self-organizing rules. By gaining a complete understanding of those rules, it will be possible to control them."

Alder said, "My mother believes that these organisms can be manipulated to produce predictable states. She believes that it is a kind of puzzle, a challenge to her skill and intelligence. I disagree. Avernus's genius was to select rules that produced organisms lacking any internal description, so that it is impossible to change them in any predictable way, or to predict how they might evolve. She has set up a kind of analog computer that generates unique and unpredictable solutions to a single problem: how to survive and grow."

Sri Hong-Owen said, "You must forgive my son, Colonel. He is young; he is



still infected with romanticism. If Avernus was possessed by a kind of genius, it was a horribly self-indulgent genius, obsessed with playing games for the sake of nothing more than play itself. I will prove myself her superior. I will show that by providing this system with the right information to process, it will be possible to force it to produce predictable solutions."

Alder said, "My mother believes in the supremacy of logic and order. She believes that science is our only salvation; that only science can make sense of the world and of ourselves. She believes in control and determinacy. These organisms, and their unique, unrepeatable beauty, are an affront to her. She cannot believe that they are nothing more than a game. She has to believe that they have a purpose, and so she has no choice but to prove herself better than her enemy by trying to control something that by its very nature cannot be controlled. Something that is nothing more than an elaborate hoax, a beautiful joke, a system for cranking out random wonders."

"Sometimes I think I should have made you dumb and compliant," Sri Hong-Owen told her son.

"But then you would have had no one to talk to," Alder said complacently. They were like squabbling lovers, Faustino thought.

"Oh, don't think you are irreplaceable," Sri Hong-Owen said. "Avernus and I will have many things to talk about, after I have found her. And then there's your new brother, waiting to be born."

"I know that you'll love him more than me," Alder said, "but I don't care, because I know that I'm the only person in the whole solar system who is your equal."

"Of course you are," Sri Hong-Owen said indulgently, and turned to Faustino. "Despite our differences, Colonel, we both agree that if we want to discover the potential of this experiment, we have to let it grow. Avernus has left behind an uncontrolled experiment that, true to her so-called principles, can only be understood in its entirety."

"Not only that," Alder said, "but it is an experiment that is unrepeatable. These organisms have no internal description, no kernel containing a minimal set of instructions necessary to implement the resynthesis of their complex analog patterns. If they are lost, their past and future will also be lost, irretrievably. For even if it is possible to recreate the identical set of conditions from which they arose—and it is not possible, for they have no internal bootstrapping symbolism—there is no guarantee that the same path would be followed, that the same entities would be produced."

"That's why this experiment cannot be allowed to fail, Colonel," Sri Hong-Owen said. "I will not let it fail. I will understand it. I will learn how to control it and shape it."

Faustino had understood very little of this, except that these weird growths were of immense value to the gene wizard. He asked cautiously, "How can you control something that does not contain any internal control system? How can anything that does not contain information process information? It seems to me that it is a self-evident contradiction."

"I will provide a demonstration, Colonel," Sri Hong-Owen said, and asked the air for a view of a set of coordinates.

A two-dimensional virtual window scrolled down in front of them, panning across a bare slope to focus on a silvery box slung between four long, thin, articulated legs.

"Run the sequence," Sri Hong-Owen said.

The robot suddenly jerked forward, stalking stiffly across the ice to a cluster of lumpy spikes that stood in a puddle of sooty ice. It extruded a nozzle that jetted a brief mist, and the spikes' black skins immediately grew a pattern of luminous orange blotches.

"That was a spray of N-acetylglucosamine," Sri Hong-Owen said. "It is a common lectin, a protein that specifically binds to a sequence of sugar residues. Polymers on the surface of the machine bind to it, and that initiates a sequence that results in the luminescent display."

"Then these things, they are chemical detectors?"

"In the most basic sense, yes," Sri Hong-Owen said. "The polymers do not encode any information, but they are capable of processing information. Each organism consists of a specific set of polymers, and each polymer exists in one of two states, either on or off, determined by a number of limited rules. For instance, the polymer might switch on in the presence of either of two chemical substrates. Or it might require the presences of both substrates." "Boolean logic," Faustino said, relieved to at last have recognized a thread of argument.

The tutor that had lived in the softly glowing egg-shaped room at the far end of young Faustino's bedroom suite, manifesting as a kindly old man with a shock of white hair and a patient, twinkling expression, had once spent a whole week helping him build a variety of simple computers from blocks of virtual light. He had mourned his tutor when they had had to leave the estate; he had been too young to realize that AIs are not people.

"Exactly so," Sri Hong-Owen said. "The reaction you saw was a simple AND sequence—lectin plus binding polymer equals activation of another polymer that produces the luminescence. These machines are Boolean networks, capable of generating orderly dynamics—fixed state cycles. Imagine a machine made of just a hundred polymer components, each capable of being either on or off, and thus generating ten to the power of thirty possible arrays. If every component receives an input from every other component, the system will become chaotic, cycling through a vast number of states at random; it would take a very long time before it returned to its original state. But if each component receives just two inputs, the system will spontaneously generate order—it will cycle between just four of its ten to the power of thirty possible states. Constrained by spontaneous, self-organizing dynamical order, these polymer machines generate fixed state cycles that are very similar to chunks of our own metabolic processes. Since these cycles are capable of processing information, it is possible to generate predictable results by supplying them with the right information."

Faustino said, "It's very impressive."

Although he still could not imagine how they could be of any use at all, there was a strange beauty, a pleasing asymmetry, to the copses and forests and meadows of spikes and spires, scrolls and sheets, that were scattered across the vast bowl of the landscape. It reminded him of the neatly nested mechanism of the ancient watch his father had worn on his wrist, an heirloom centuries old. Once, his father had pried open the back of the watch to show his son the sets of cogs and springs and tiny balances working away at different cycles that somehow meshed to drive the hands around the face at exactly one second per second. Gone now, like everything else his father had owned.

Sri Hong-Owen said, "As a first step, I have been testing their reaction to a wide range of chemical messengers, but they are much more than chemical detectors. I have discovered that when two different forms grow together, their pseudometabolic hypercycles interact and produce new machines. It is quite possible that interactions between second generation machines could produce a third generation, and so on. The diversity of the system is constrained only by its size."

Faustino said, "So if this chamber was bigger, there would be many more different things growing in it?"

"It's a very good joke," Alder said. "The only way to discover what this system is capable of is to provide it with an arena where it can fully express itself. And so Avernus mocks you, Mother, and you do not see it."

"I will prove my son wrong," Sri Hong-Owen said. "I will derive solutions that will define the entire information space of these machines. However, there is an immediate problem that must be addressed."

She spoke to the air again. The view in the virtual window rotated away from the robot and the clump of waxy spires and rushed forward, swooping down a long, icy slope and coming to rest above a black, three-legged footstool that squatted at the ragged, bleached margin of a meadow of unraveled black springs.

"I call this a triffid," Sri Hong-Owen said. "They are motile scavengers, generated by any organism that begins to run out of carbonaceous material. Their legs are woven from strands of piezoelectric proteins that bend when a polarized current is applied, and lengthen or shorten depending upon the voltage applied. They feed on material that is no longer active, and there are more and more of them, because this ecosystem is slowly starving to death, and I cannot obtain carbonaceous material through the usual channels."

She told the air to switch off the screen, and turned to face Faustino; her son stared up at him with the same unnervingly steady and direct gaze. She said, "Now I think you can guess what I want from you, Colonel Malarte."

\* \* \*

When they met the gig at the landing field, Todd Krough's two men were not at all happy to see that Faustino was accompanied by Sri Hong-Owen's chief of staff. They bundled Yamil Chou and Faustino into an empty office, took away Faustino's pistol (which had been returned to him without its clip), and insisted that Yamil Chou strip. While one man ran a spin resonance loop over the chief of staff's compact body, the other examined the seams of his white jumper and turned his tights inside out as gingerly as a novice conjuror attempting a new trick.

Yamil Chou submitted to their attention with the equitable air of someone being measured for a p-suit. A tremendous scar, thickly ridged and puckered, slashed the well-defined slabs of muscle that banded his belly. When he saw Faustino looking at it, he said, "I keep it to remind me of the one time I made a mistake."

"Get dressed and keep your mouth shut," the older of the two men said, and told Faustino, "Todd wants you to know that he is very upset with you, Colonel."

"He'll like what I have to tell him," Faustino said.

He was eager to tell his story and close the deal he had made with Sri Hong-Owen. She would get her ice garden; he would get his estate. He had fantasized about it on the trip back, planning and planting its verdant acres, building a rambling stone house with cool, secret courtyards and broad sunny terraces, a dining hall hung with old masters, even—why not?—a wing for his as yet unborn children.

He clapped his hands and beamed at the two gangsters. "Are we done here? Then why are we waiting? Let's go!"

Todd Krough had made his fortune by organizing civilian labor at the Camelot spaceport after the war. Traffic was controlled by the Three Powers Occupation Force; he ran everything else. Faustino, Chou, and Krough's two men rode a capsule car five kilometers north. Camelot's cluster of spheres dropped below the abrupt, curved horizon; the spaceport's platforms and towers rose ahead like a castle from a fantasy serial. The four men swung across the mostly empty concourse of the terminal and crowded into a private elevator that shot half a kilometer up the side of an improbably slender tower to the diamond bubble where the gangster was waiting, with all his empire spread below. The burly woman planted solidly behind Todd Krough's sling chair casually slipped her hand inside a slit in her long jumper as Faustino and Yamil Chou were brought in; the young man beside her, a slithery swath of smartplasm wrapped around his wrist, scowled and told his boss, "This is the one."

"First you have trouble making your appointments," Todd Krough said to Faustino. "Now you turn up with the man who hurt Joly. I am beginning to feel deeply insulted, Colonel."

"There's been a change of plan," Faustino said. "Something so fantastic that if I had not been taken to see it with my own eyes, I would not have believed it."

"Something to do with the famous gene wizard, Sri Hong Owen?" Todd Krough steepled his long pale fingers in front of his smile. Even for a tweak he was tall and pale and skeletally thin, his skinniness accentuated by a black vinyl vest that showed every one of his ribs and left his arms bare. He swung idly to and fro in his sling chair; of the half dozen people in the glittering

bubble, only he and Yamil Chou seemed entirely at ease. He said, "Don't look so surprised, Colonel. After all, your friend works for Dr. Hong-Owen. She found something, didn't she? Something to do with Avernus."

Yamil Chou inclined his head very slightly and said, "Your intelligence is quite as good as Colonel Malarte claimed, Mr. Krough. I am pleased, because I am sure now that you will understand the value of what I can offer."

"I do not think so," Todd Krough said.

Yamil Chou was good; Yamil Chou was fast. He managed to disarm and kill the man nearest to him before a laser burst punched through his heart. Wisps of smoke trickled from the hole burnt in the back of his white jumper as he sank to the floor.

"A robot sentry," Todd Krough said calmly, after the bodies had been towed away. "I am a people person, Colonel, but sometimes it is good to put your trust in machines."

"You've made a horrible mistake," Faustino said. His dismay was so profoundly abysmal that it had entirely swallowed his foolish, eager happiness, his land, his house, his unborn family. He was sweating into his uniform, but his mouth was so dry it hurt to speak. "You don't even know how this deal—"

Todd Krough wagged a bony finger. "We had a deal, Colonel, before your head was so badly turned by Dr. HongOwen. You come with me. It is my turn to show you something."

Colonel Faustino Malarte, who knew now that Todd Krough wanted him dead, discovered that he was braver than he thought. He did not plead for his life, or try to run. He simply tried to convince the gangster that what Sri Hong-Owen had offered him was worth far more than merely controlling land fertilized by diversion of the ring fragment.

Krough listened with abstracted politeness as they rode the elevator down into the bowels of the spaceport, where two men were waiting with a cart whose wide, squashy wheels made a ripping noise as it drove through a maze of quilted corridors.

"I know all about it," the gangster said, when Faustino had at last run out of things to say.

"With respect, I don't think—"

"I know all about it, Colonel," Todd Krough said firmly. "I located one of Avernus's technicians after the facility was abandoned, and after only a little effort on the part of my men he became quite loquacious. It is nothing but a dream, a silly fancy."

"It's no dream, man," Faustino said. "It's real. When we divert the ring fragment to Herschel crater, it will be able to spread out and fully express itself and produce such wonders—"

"How did Dr. Hong-Owen persuade you, Colonel? She knows about our joint venture, of course, but I cannot help but think that she must also know about your other little schemes. Is that why you betrayed me?"

"Listen to me," Faustino said. "Listen. These vacuum organisms are dying. Dr. Hong-Owen is desperate to save them, and she can't order up her own ring fragment because she's kept the whole thing from the Three Powers Alliance. If we divert the ring fragment to Herschel crater, she can release Avernus's vacuum organisms and let them grow, and claim it was a result of the accident. I've told you how much she will pay us for that. It's far more than you can earn from selling off your land."

"Using the ring fragment to fertilize land I happen to own, and selling squatter licenses to incomers, that is only the beginning. I also control the rail line that crosses the territory. Then there is all the new construction work, the power and air plants ... your trouble, Colonel, is that you have always thought only of short term gain."

"Then let's talk long term," Faustino said. "When Herschel crater is fertilized, Dr. Hong-Owen will allow the vacuum organisms she's discovered to grow and spread and change. They'll generate hundreds of new forms. Thousands. Some of them will certainly be valuable. They will be able to do things we can't even imagine, man, amazing and wonderful things. I've seen it myself."

You have to believe me."

But Todd Krough shook his head, and Faustino knew then that the potential of Avernus's vacuum organisms was fated to be as unrealized as his dream of regaining his family fortune.

"My business is not in promises but in certainty," the gangster said. "Avernus was a great woman, but she was also an idealist. She hid away from the world and played games that meant nothing to anyone but herself. I had thought, Colonel, that you knew as well as I that the Outer System is no longer any place for dreamers or tinkerers. It is poised on the brink of a vast expansion in population. The incomers will need land and food and power and transportation. There's a lot of money to be made from supplying those things. A good deal more in the long term than whatever Dr. Hong-Owen has offered you."

The cart stopped outside an airlock hatch.

Faustino said, "It's not just the money. She knows all about us."

"Of course she does. However, I do not think that she will denounce us to the Three Powers Occupation Force, because that would mean that her own little secret would be made public too. And even if she does denounce me, I have the very best lawyers. They'll tie her up in the courts until I have made enough money to buy the courts. Forget her, Colonel, because it is my turn to show you something. I think you will find it very interesting. You don't want to come? Dieter and Piers can help you, although it would not be very dignified."

Faustino said, "I can walk."

"And run too, I hope. That's important. Do you remember the way here? That's important too."

"Don't do this. She's a dangerous enemy. Help me to help her. I'll even give you a share of my half of the fee. I understand what you mean about the long term, really I do, and I don't want you to lose out. Take as much as you want."

"Please, Colonel. Don't spoil my surprise by begging for your life. Face what I want to show you like a man."

The little airlock opened onto a big storage space that was mostly empty and mostly dark. A plastic net was strung tautly from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. As Faustino ducked through the inner hatch someone in the darkness beyond the net howled and ran straight at it and clung there, trying to rip through the dense mesh with nails and teeth.

It was the assassin. He was naked. Foam flew from his mouth as he worried at the mesh; blood flew from his broken fingernails. Behind him, a man-sized bundle lay on the floor.

Faustino forgot all about Sri Hong-Owen and her cave of marvels. Shock purged him clean.

"I think he is in love," Todd Krough said, and linked his arm with Faustino's and dragged him toward the net. "He wants so much to be with you, Colonel. It is as touching and tragic as any unfulfilled romance."

"You told me that you had killed him."

"I told you that I had disposed of your problem. This is where I disposed him to, after he took apart the sacrificial lamb. Did you ever wonder, Colonel, who set him after you?"

"Of course I did. But it didn't seem important."

"I must admit that I began to have serious doubts about you, Colonel, when you turned the whole thing over to me. I realized then that you were not only a foolish man, but you were lazy as well, and in my opinion that is generally a fatal combination. Well, once your little problem had been put into my hands, I dealt with it as I saw fit. We brought the guilty party here, made him put on your clothes, and gave him to your friend there. What a pity," Todd Krough said dryly, "you couldn't be here. I think you would have enjoyed it."

Lights went up behind the net, starkly illuminating the body. It lay on its back in a pool of its own blood. The assassin had clawed or bitten off most of its face, but Faustino recognized the lanky frame and black, curly hair of his

deputy, Gabriel Blanca.

"It was a clever ploy," Todd Krough said. "If the assassin had forced you to stay in your house, our deal would have been ruined. And if you had dared to venture out to try and see me, you would have been killed, with the same result."

"Why—"

"Your deputy was an honorable man, and he was trying to protect his honor. He knew that if your part in our deal was ever discovered, all of your staff would have been purged with you, and so he took steps to try and sabotage the deal. What a pity he underestimated my resourcefulness."

"Gabriel always was short on imagination."

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"Gabriel always was short on imagination."

"I don't think you should get any closer, Colonel. You wouldn't like to get any of your friend's spittle or blood on your skin. It contains a poison that's very specifically tailored to your metabolic quirks. And that would spoil the fun— wouldn't it, my dear?"

Todd Krough had addressed his last remark to someone in a corner of the big room. The woman. She stood still and straight on the balls of her bare feet, in a plain black jumper and black tights. The left side of her face was swollen and bruised from the little game she and Faustino had played last night.

"I don't think you two need any introduction," Todd Krough said. His smile stretched his pale skin over his prominent cheekbones, reminding Faustino of the woman's latest drawing.

The woman held up a little spray canister. "I have a new game," she told Faustino. Her voice was strained, the words forced from her by the loyalty virus. "I'm told that this will dissolve the material of the net—"

Faustino shrugged off Todd Krough's grip and threw himself at her, but she twitched aside and he bounced from the wall and tangled in the net. As the assassin clambered toward him like a hungry spider, two of Todd Krough's men came forward and dragged Faustino away.

"I do believe that the Colonel understands the rules of the game," Todd Krough told the woman dryly.

Caught between the two men, Faustino said, "You can't do this."

The woman took a deep, shuddering breath and said, "That's what I want to find out."

"She can't do it," Faustino told Todd Krough. "The loyalty virus—"

"She can't kill you directly," the gangster said, "but I wonder what will happen if she tries to kill you indirectly."

Faustino already knew the answer. The loyalty virus had forced her to confess about the poison, but she'd told Faustino after she'd added it to his wine. He tried to get free, but the two men held him tightly, their bare, prehensile feet hooked through loops in the floor.

"You still need me," Faustino told Todd Krough. "I have the chestplate. Let me go now, and I swear I'll deliver it. Listen to me, man. I'll even waive the fee."

"There's something else I want to show you," Todd Krough said.

A man glided forward, cradling something wrapped in a length of white cloth. Todd Krough snapped his fingers; the man pulled the cloth away; Faustino's blood thumped solidly in his head. It was the chestplate. It was the third in Munk's famous series, Seven Views of Saturn's Rings.

"It isn't the real thing," Todd Krough said. "That's still in your safe, and even I couldn't get access to that. But it's a wonderful job, don't you think?"

A checkered carpet of yellow and blood-red vacuum organisms stretched across a flat plain. The half dozen psuited figures were too busy with their emblematic tasks to look at the giant planet rising beyond the close horizon, the silver hoop of its rings tilted into the black sky.

"He'll know it's a fake in an instant," Faustino said.

"It was painted in Munk's very studio," Todd Krough said, "using his tools and his paints. Did you know that your lady friend was an apprentice of his? She could have told you so much about what you stole from the man you murdered—yes, I know about the truth behind the 'amusing story' of your acquisition."

Faustino tried to spit at the woman, but his mouth was too dry. "You bitch," he said.

"You know nothing about this place," the woman said. "You know nothing about us. You know nothing about me. I was nothing more than a piece of meat to you. Something to use in your filthy games."

"That's not true," Faustino said. "I chose you because I liked you."

"You don't even know my name," the woman said bitterly. "Of course I do. Iva. Your name is Iva."

"That's part of my name, yes, but you don't know the rest. You don't know my family name, even though you had them all executed on trumped up charges of treason."

She was close to the net now. Her thumb was on the button of the slim canister.

"I forbid you," Faustino said. "I order you. You wouldn't dare—"

She did. Then she shuddered, and said in a voice not quite her own, "I'm very sorry, Colonel, but I have made an attempt to kill you."

The assassin had gone very still, holding on to the net with fingers and toes. The woman said, her voice high and tight, "I sprayed the net with a solvent—" Todd Krough put a hand over her mouth, held her close. "Hush now," he said gently, and told Faustino, "I think you had better get going, Colonel. Your friend knows that something has happened, and I think that very soon he'll work out what it is."

The two men shoved Faustino toward the net. He tumbled and rolled, managed to clutch a loop protruding from the soft floor. Barely a meter away, the assassin violently shook the mesh, his wet red mouth twisted wide.

"I'll kill you," Faustino said. "I'll come back with troopers and I'll kill you all."

Todd Krough smiled, and took his hand from the woman's mouth. She said, "I'm sorry that I murdered you," and started to laugh, great whooping bursts of laughter that echoed across the huge room.

The assassin crabbed across the net toward the spot where the plastic mesh was beginning to sag apart.

Faustino, ice in his heart, flung himself at the airlock. Fear made him horribly clumsy, but he managed to get halfway down the corridor before the assassin caught him.