

Camouflage

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Robert Reed sold his first story in 1986 and quickly established himself as a frequent contributor to The Magazine of Fantasy (5 Science Fiction and Asimov's Science Fiction as well as to Science Fiction Age, Universe, New Destinies, Tomorrow, Synergy, Starlight, and elsewhere. Reed may be one of the most prolific of today's young writers, particularly at short fiction lengths, seriously rivaled for that position only by authors such as Stephen Baxter and Brian Stableford. And —like Baxter and Stableford —he manages to keep up a very high standard of quality while being prolific, something that is not at all easy to do. Reed stories such as "Sister Alice," "Brother Perfect," "Decency," "Savior," "The Remoras," "Chrysalis," "Whiptail," "The Utility Man," "Marrow," "Birth Day," "Blind," "The Toad of Heaven," "Stride," "The Shape of Everything," "Guest of Honor," "Waging Good," and "Killing the Morrow," among at least a half dozen others equally as strong, count as among some of the best short work produced by anyone in the eighties and nineties. Many of his best stories were assembled in his first collection, The Dragons of Springplace. Nor is he nonpro-lific as a novelist, having turned out ten novels since the end of the eighties, including The Leeshore, The Hormone Jungle, Black Milk, The Remark-ables, Down the Bright Way, Beyond the Veil of Stars, An Exaltation of Larks, Beneath the Gated Sky, Marrow, and Sister Alice. His most recent books are a chapbook novella, Mere, a new collection, The Cuckoo's Boys, and a new novel, The Well of Stars. Reed lives with his family in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Here he unravels a deadly murder mystery, set on a spaceship bigger than worlds.

I

The human male had lived on the avenue for some thirty-two years. Neighbors enerally regarded him as being a solitary creature, short-tempered on occasion, but never rude without cause. His dark wit was locally famous, and a withering intelligence was rumored to hide behind the brown-black eyes. Those with an appreciation of human beauty claimed that he was not particularly handsome, his face a touch asymmetrical, the skin rough and fleshy, while his thick mahogany-brown hair looked as if it was cut with a knife and his own strong hands. Yet that homeliness made him intriguing to some human females, judging by the idle chatter. He wasn't large for a human, but most considered him substantially built. Perhaps it was the way he walked, his back erect and shoulders squared while his face tilted slightly forwards, as if looking down from a great height. Some guessed he had been born on a high-gravity world, since the oldest habits never died. Or maybe this wasn't his true body, and his soul still hungered for the days when he was a giant. Endless speculations were woven about the man's past. He had a name, and everybody knew it. He had a biography, thorough and easily observed in the public records. But there were at least a dozen alternate versions of his past and left-behind troubles. He was a failed poet, or a dangerously successful poet, or a refugee who had escaped some political mess —unless he was some species of criminal, of course. One certainty was his financial security; but where his money came from was a subject of considerable debate. Inherited, some claimed. Others voted for gambling winnings or lucrative investments on now-distant colony worlds. Whatever the story, the man had the luxury of filling his days doing very little, and during his years on this obscure avenue, he had helped his neighbors with unsolicited gifts of money and sometimes more impressive flavors of aid.

Thirty-two years was not a long time. Not for the creatures that routinely traveled between the stars.

Most of the ship's passengers and all of its crew were ageless souls, durable and disease-free, with enhanced minds possessing a stability and depth of memory ready to endure a million years of comfortable existence. Which was why three decades was little different than an afternoon, and why for another century or twenty, locals would still refer to their neighbor as the newcomer.

Such was life onboard the Great Ship.

There were millions of avenues like this one. Some were short enough to walk in a day, while others stretched for thousands of uninterrupted kilometers. Many avenues remained empty, dark and cold as when humans first discovered the Great Ship. But some had been awakened, made habitable to human owners or the oddest alien passengers. Whoever built the ship—presumably an ancient, long-extinct species — it had been designed to serve as home for a wide array of organisms. That much was obvious. And there was no other starship like the Great Ship: larger than most worlds and durable enough to survive eons between the galaxies, and to almost every eye, lovely.

The wealthiest citizens from thousands of worlds had surrendered fortunes for the pleasure of riding inside this fabulous machine, embarking on a half-million-year voyage to circumnavigate the galaxy. Even the poorest passenger living in the tiniest of quarters looked on the majesty of his grand home and felt singularly blessed.

This particular avenue was almost a hundred kilometers long and barely two hundred meters across. And it was tilted. Wastewater made a shallow river that sang its way across a floor of sugar-and-pepper granite. For fifty thousand years, the river had flowed without interruption, etching out a shallow channel. Locals had built bridges at the likely places, and along the banks they erected tubs and pots filled with soils that mimicked countless worlds, giving roots and sessile feet happy places to stand. A large pot rested outside the man's front door—a vessel made of ceramic foam trimmed with polished brass and covering nearly a tenth of a hectare. When the man first arrived, he poisoned the old jungle and planted another. But he wasn't much of a gardener, apparently. The new foliage hadn't prospered, weed species and odd volunteers emerging from the ruins.

Along the pot's edge stood a ragged patch of llano vibra — an alien flower famous for its wild haunting songs. "I should cut that weed out of there," he would tell neighbors. "I pretty much hate the racket it's making." Yet he didn't kill them or tear out the little voice boxes. And after a decade or two of hearing his complaints, his neighbors began to understand that he secretly enjoyed their complicated, utterly alien melodies.

Most of his neighbors were sentient, fully mobile machines. Early in the voyage, a charitable foundation dedicated to finding homes and livelihoods for freed mechanical slaves leased the avenue. But over the millennia, organic species had cut their own apartments into the walls, including a janusian couple downstream, and upstream, an extended family of harum-scarums.

The human was a loner, but by no means was he a hermit.

True solitude was the easiest trick to manage. There were billions of passengers onboard, but the great bulk of the ship was full of hollow places and great caves, seas of water and ammonia and methane, as well as moon-sized tanks filled with liquid hydrogen. Most locations were empty. Wilderness was everywhere, cheap and inviting. Indeed, a brief journey by cap-car could take the man to any of six wild places —alien environments and hidden sewage conduits and a maze-like cavern that was rumored to never have been mapped. That was one advantage: At all times, he had more than one escape route. Another advantage was his neighbors. Machines were always bright in easy ways, fountains of information if you knew how to employ them, but indifferent to the subtleties of organic life, if not out and out blind.

Long ago, Pamir had lived as a hermit. That was only sensible at the time. Ship captains rarely abandoned their posts, particularly a captain of his rank and great promise.

He brought his fall upon himself, with the help of an alien.

An alien who happened to be his lover, too.

The creature was a Gaian and a refugee, and Pamir broke several rules, helping find her sanctuary deep inside the ship. But another Gaian came searching for her, and in the end, both of those very odd creatures were nearly dead. The ship was never at risk, but a significant facility was destroyed, and after making things as right as possible, Pamir vanished into the general population, waiting for the proverbial coast to clear.

Thousands of years had brought tiny changes to his status. By most accounts, the Master Captain had stopped searching for him. Two or three or four possible escapes from the ship had been recorded, each placing him on a different colony world. Or he had died in some ugly fashion. The best story put him inside a frigid little cavern. Smugglers had killed his body and sealed it into a tomb of glass, and after centuries without food or air, the body had stopped trying to heal itself. Pamir was a blind brain trapped inside a frozen carcass, and the smugglers were eventually captured and interrogated by the best in that narrow field. According to coerced testimonies, they confessed to killing the infamous captain, though the precise location of their crime was not known and would never be found.

Pamir spent another few thousand years wandering, changing homes and remaking his face and name. He had worn nearly seventy identities, each elaborate enough to be believed, yet dull enough to escape notice. For good reasons, he found it helpful to wear an air of mystery, letting neighbors invent any odd story to explain the gaps in his biography. Whatever they dreamed up, it fell far from the truth. Machines and men couldn't imagine the turns and odd blessings of his life. Yet despite all of that, Pamir remained a good captain. A sense of obligation forced him to watch after the passengers and ship. He might live on the run for the next two hundred millennia, but he would always be committed to this great machine and its precious, nearly countless inhabitants.

Now and again, he did large favors.

Like with the harum-scarums living next door. They were a bipedal species—giants by every measure—adorned with armored plates and spine-encrusted elbows and an arrogance earned by millions of years of wandering among the stars. But this particular family was politically weak, and that was a bad way to be among harum-scarums. They had troubles with an old Mother-of-fathers, and when Pamir saw what was happening, he interceded. Over the course of six months, by means both subtle and decisive, he put an end to the feud. The Mother-of-father came to her enemies' home, walking backwards as a sign of total submission; and with a plaintive voice, she begged for death, or at the very least, a forgetting of her crimes.

No one saw Pamir's hand in this business. If they had, he would have laughed it off, and moments later, he would have vanished, throwing himself into another identity in a distant avenue.

Large deeds always demanded a complete change of life.

A fresh face.

A slightly rebuilt body.

And another forgettable name.

That was how Pamir lived. And he had come to believe that it wasn't a particularly bad way to live. Fate or some other woman-deity had given him this wondrous excuse to be alert at all times, to accept nothing as it first appeared, helping those who deserved to be helped, and when the time came, remaking himself all over again.

And that time always came...

II

"Hello, my friend." "Hello to you." "And how are you this evening, my very good friend?"

Pamir was sitting beside the huge ceramic pot, listening to his llano vibra. Then with a dry smirk, he mentioned, "I need to void my bowels."

The machine laughed a little too enthusiastically. Its home was half a kilometer up the avenue, sharing an apartment with twenty other legally sentient AIs who had escaped together from the same long-ago world. The rubber face and bright glass eyes worked themselves into a beaming smile, while a happy voice declared, "I am learning. You cannot shock me so easily with this organic dirty talk." Then he said, "My friend," again, before using the fictitious name.

Pamir nodded, shrugged.

"It is a fine evening, is it not?"

"The best ever," he deadpanned.

Evening along this avenue was a question of the clock. The machines used the twenty-four-hour ship-cycle, but with six hours of total darkness sandwiched between eighteen hours of brilliant, undiluted light. That same minimal aesthetics had kept remodeling to a minimum. The avenue walls were raw granite, save for the little places where organic tenants had applied wood or tile facades. The ceiling was a slick arch made of medium-grade hyperfiber—a mirror-colored material wearing a thin coat of grime and lubricating oils and other residues. The lights were original, as old as the ship and laid out in the thin dazzling bands running lengthwise along the ceiling. Evening brought no softening of brilliance or reddening of color. Evening was a precise moment, and when night came... in another few minutes, Pamir realized... there would be three warning flashes, and then a perfect smothering blackness.

The machine continued to smile at him, meaning something by it. Cobalt-blue eyes were glowing, watching the human sit with the singing weeds.

"You want something," Pamir guessed.

"Much or little. How can one objectively measure one's wishes?"

"What do you want with me? Much, or little?"

"Very little."

"Define your terms," Pamir growled.

"There is a woman."

Pamir said nothing, waiting now.

"A human woman, as it happens." The face grinned, an honest delight leaking out of a mind no bigger than a fleck of sand. "She has hired me for a service. And the service is to arrange an introduction with

you."

Pamir said, "An introduction," with a flat, unaffected voice. And through a string of secret nexuses, he brought his security systems up to full alert.

"She wishes to meet you."

"Why?"

"Because she finds you fascinating, of course."

"Am I?"

"Oh, yes. Everyone here believes you are most intriguing." The flexible face spread wide as the mouth grinned, never-used white teeth shining in the last light. "But then again, we are an easily fascinated lot. What is the meaning of existence? What is the purpose of death? Where does slavery end and helplessness begin? And what kind of man lives down the path from my front door? I know his name, and I know nothing."

"Who's this woman?" Pamir snapped.

The machine refused to answer him directly. "I explained to her what I knew about you. What I positively knew, and what I could surmise. And while I was speaking, it occurred to me that after all of these nanoseconds of close proximity, you and I remain strangers."

The surrounding landscape was unremarkable. Scans told Pamir that every face was known, and the nexus traffic was utterly ordinary, and when he extended his search, nothing was worth the smallest concern. Which made him uneasy. Every long look should find something suspicious.

"The woman admires you."

"Does she?"

"Without question." The false body was narrow and quite tall, dressed in a simple cream-colored robe. Four spidery arms emerged from under the folds of fabric, extending and then collapsing across the illusionary chest. "Human emotions are not my strength. But from what she says and what she does not say, I believe she has desired you for a very long time."

The llano vibra were falling silent now.

Night was moments away.

"All right," Pamir said. He stood, boots planting themselves on the hard pale granite. "No offense meant here. But why the hell would she hire you?"

"She is a shy lady," the machine offered. And then he laughed, deeply amused by his own joke. "No, no. She is not at all shy. In fact, she is a very important soul. Perhaps this is why she demands an intermediary."

"Important how?"

"In all ways," his neighbor professed. Then with a genuine envy, he added, "You should feel honored by her attentions."

A second array of security sensors was waiting. Pamir had never used them, and they were so deeply

hidden no one could have noticed their presence. But they needed critical seconds to emerge from their slumber, and another half-second to calibrate and link together. And then, just as the first of three warning flashes rippled along the mirrored ceiling, what should have been obvious finally showed itself to him.

"You're not just my neighbor," he told the rubber face.

A second flash passed overhead. Then he saw the shielded cap-car hovering nearby, a platoon of soldiers nestled in its belly.

"Who else stands in that body?" Pamir barked.

"I shall show you," the machine replied. Then two of the arms fell away, and the other two reached up, a violent jerk peeling back the rubber mask and the grit-sized brain, plus the elaborate shielding. A face lay behind the face. It was narrow, and in a fashion lovely, and it was austere, and it was allowing itself a knife-like smile as a new voice said to this mysterious man:

"Invite me inside your home."

"Why should I?" he countered, expecting some kind of murderous threat.

But instead of threatening, Miocene said simply, "Because I would like your help. In a small matter that must remain —I will warn you —our little secret."

III

Leading an army of captains was the Master Captain, and next in command was her loyal and infamous First Chair. Miocene was the second most powerful creature in this spectacular realm. She was tough and brutal, conniving and cold. And of all the impossible crap to happen, this was the worst. Pamir watched his guest peel away the last of her elaborate disguise. The AI was propped outside, set into a diagnostic mode. The soldiers remained hidden by the new darkness and their old tricks. It was just the two of them inside the apartment, which made no sense. If Miocene knew who he was, she would have simply told her soldiers to catch him and abuse him and then drag him to the ship's brig.

So she didn't know who he was.

Maybe.

The First Chair had a sharp face and black hair allowed to go a little white, and her body was tall and lanky and ageless and absolutely poised. She wore a simple uniform, mirrored in the fashion of all captains and decorated with a minimum of epaulets. For a long moment, she stared into the depths of Pamir's home. Watching for something? No, just having a conversation through a nexus. Then she closed off every link with the outer world, and turning toward her host, she used his present name.

Pamir nodded.

She used his last name.

Again, he nodded.

And then with a question mark riding the end of it, she offered a third name.

He said, "Maybe."

"It was or wasn't you?"

"Maybe," he said again.

She seemed amused. And then, there was nothing funny about any of this. The smile tightened, the mouth nearly vanishing. "I could look farther back in time," she allowed. "Perhaps I could dig up the moment when you left your original identity behind."

"Be my guest."

"I am your guest, so you are safe." She was taller than Pamir by a long measure — an artifact of his disguise. She moved closer to the wayward captain, remarking, "Your origins don't interest me."

"Well then," he began.

And with a wink, he added, "So is it true, madam? Are you really in love with me?"

She laughed abruptly, harshly. Stepping away from him, she again regarded the apartment, this time studying its furnishings and little decorations. He had a modest home — a single room barely a hundred meters deep and twenty wide, the walls paneled with living wood and the ceiling showing the ruddy evening sky of a random world. With a calm voice, she announced, "I adore your talents, whoever you are."

"My talents?"

"With the aliens."

He said nothing.

"That mess with the harum-scarums... you found an elegant solution to a difficult problem. You couldn't know it at the time, but you helped the ship and my Master, and by consequence, you've earned my thanks."

"What do you wish from me tonight, madam?"

"Tonight? Nothing. But tomorrow—early in the morning, I would hope—you will please apply your talents to a small matter. A relatively simple business, we can hope. Are you familiar with the J'Jal?"

Pamir held tight to his expression, his stance. Yet he couldn't help but feel a hard kick to his heart, a well-trained paranoia screaming, "Run! Now!"

"I have some experience with that species," he allowed. "Yes, madam."

"I am glad to hear it," said Miocene.

As a fugitive, Pamir had lived among the J'Jal on two separate occasions. Obviously, the First Chair knew much more about his past. The pressing question was if she knew only about his life five faces ago, or if she had seen back sixty-three faces — perilously close to the day when he permanently removed his captain's uniform.

She knew his real identity, or she didn't.

Pamir strangled his paranoia and put on a wide grin, shoulders managing a shrug while a calm voice inquired, "And why should I do this errand for you?"

Miocene had a cold way of smirking. "My request isn't reason enough?"

He held his mouth closed.

"Your neighbors didn't ask for your aid. Yet you gave it willingly, if rather secretly." She seemed angry but not entirely surprised. Behind those black eyes, calculations were being made, and then with a pragmatic tone, she informed him, "I will not investigate your past."

"Because you already have," he countered.

"To a point," she allowed. "Maybe a little farther than I first implied. But I won't use my considerable resources any more. If you help me."

"No," he replied.

She seemed to flinch.

"I don't know you," he lied. "But madam, according to your reputation, you are a bitch's bitch."

In any given century, how many times did the First Chair hear an insult delivered to her face? Yet the tall woman absorbed the blow with poise, and then she mentioned a figure of money. "In an open account, and at your disposal," she continued. "Use the funds as you wish, and when you've finished, use some or all of the remaining wealth to vanish again. And do a better job of it this time, you should hope."

She was offering a tidy fortune.

But why would the second most powerful entity on the ship dangle such a prize before him? Pamir considered triggering hidden machines. He went as far as activating a tiny nexus, using it to bring a battery of weapons into play. With a thought, he could temporarily kill Miocene. Then he would slip out of the apartment through one of three hidden routes, and with luck, escape the pursuing soldiers. And within a day, or two at most, he would be living a new existence in some other little avenue... or better, living alone in one of the very solitary places where he had stockpiled supplies...

Once again, Miocene confessed, "This is a confidential matter."

In other words, this was not official business for the First Chair.

"More to the point," she continued, "you won't help me as much as you will come to the aid of another soul."

Pamir deactivated the weapons, for the moment.

"Who deserves my help?" he inquired.

"There is a young male you should meet," Miocene replied. "A J'Jal man, of course."

"I'm helping him?"

"I would think not," she replied with a snort.

Then through a private nexus, she fed an address to Pamir. It was in the Fall Away district—a popular home for many species, including the J'Jal.

"The alien is waiting for you at his home," she continued.

Then with her cold smirk, she added, "At this moment, he is lying on the floor of his backmost room, and he happens to be very much dead."

IV

Every portion of the Great Ship had at least one bloodless designation left behind by the initial surveys, while the inhabited places wore one or twenty more names, poetic or blunt, simple or fabulously contrived. In most cases, the typical passenger remembered none of those labels. Every avenue and cavern and little sea was remarkable in its own right, but under that crush of novelty, few were unique enough to be famous.

Fall Away was an exception.

For reasons known only to them, the ship's builders had fashioned a tube from mirrored hyperfiber and cold basalt—the great shaft beginning not far beneath the heavy armor of the ship's bow and dropping for thousands of perfectly vertical kilometers. Myriad avenues funneled down to Fall Away. Ages ago, the ship's engineers etched roads and paths in the cylinder's surface, affording views to the curious. The ship's crew built homes perched on the endless brink, and they were followed by a wide array of passengers. Millions now lived along its spectacular length. Millions more pretended to live there. There were more famous places onboard the Great Ship, and several were arguably more beautiful. But no other address afforded residents an easier snobbery. "My home is on Fall Away," they would boast. "Come enjoy my view, if you have a free month or an empty year."

Pamir ignored the view. And when he was sure nobody was watching, he slipped inside the J'Jal's apartment.

The Milky Way wasn't the largest galaxy, but it was most definitely fertile. Experts routinely guessed that three hundred million worlds had evolved their own intelligent, technologically adept life. Within that great burst of natural invention, certain patterns were obvious. Haifa dozen metabolic systems were favored. The mass and composition of a home world often shoved evolution down the same inevitable pathways. Humanoids were common; human beings happened to be a young example of an ancient pattern. Harum-scarums were another, as were the Glory and the Aabacks, the Mnotis and the Striders.

But even the most inexpert inorganic eye could tell those species apart. Each humanoid arose on a different life-tree. Some were giants, others quite tiny. Some were built for enormous worlds, while others were frail little wisps. Thick pelts of fur were possible, or bright masses of downy feathers. Even among the naked mock-primates, there was an enormous range when it came to hands and faces. Elaborate bones shouted, "I am nothing like a human." While the flesh itself was full of golden blood and DNA that proved its alienness.

And then, there were the J'Jal.

They had a human walk and a very human face, particularly in the normally green eyes. They were diurnal creatures. Hunter-gatherers from a world much like the Earth, they had roamed an open savanna for millions of years, using stone implements carved with hands that at first glance, and sometimes with a second glance, looked entirely human.

But the similarities reached even deeper. The J'Jal heart beat inside a spongy double-lung, and every breath pressed against a cage of rubbery white ribs, while the ancestral blood was a salty ruddy mix of iron inside a protein similar to hemoglobin. In fact, most of their proteins had a telltale resemblance to human types, as did great portions of their original DNA.

A mutation-by-mutation convergence was a preposterous explanation.

Ten million times more likely was a common origin. The Earth and J'Jal must have once been neighbors. Ages ago, one world evolved a simple, durable microbial life. A cometary impact splashed a piece of

living crust into space, and with a trillion sleeping passengers safely entombed, the wreckage drifted free of the solar system. After a few light-years of cold oblivion, the crude ark slammed into a new world's atmosphere, and at least one microbe survived, happily eating every native pre-life ensemble of hydrocarbons before conquering its new realm.

Such things often happened in the galaxy's early times. At least half a dozen other worlds shared biochemistries with the Earth. But only the J'Jal world took such a similar evolutionary pathway.

In effect, the J'Jal were distant cousins.

And for many reasons, they were poor cousins, too.

Pamir stood over the body, examining its position and condition. Spider-legged machines did the same. Reaching inside the corpse with sound and soft bursts of X-rays, the machinery arrived at a rigorous conclusion they kept to themselves. With his own eyes and instincts, their owner wished to do his best, thank you.

It could have been a human male lying dead on the floor.

The corpse was naked, on his back, legs together and his arms thrown up over his head with hands open and every finger extended. His flesh was a soft brown. His hair was short and bluish-black. The J'Jal didn't have natural beards. But the hair on the body could have been human—a thin carpet on the nipples, chest that thickened around the groin.

In death, his genitals had shriveled back into the body.

No mark was visible, and Pamir guessed that if he rolled the body over, there wouldn't be a wound on the backside either. But the man was utterly dead. Sure of it, he knelt down low, gazing at the decidedly human face, flinching just a little when the narrow mouth opened and a shallow breath was drawn into the dead man's lungs.

Quietly, Pamir laughed at himself.

The machines stood still, waiting for encouragement.

"The brain's gone," he offered, using his left hand to touch the forehead, feeling the faint warmth of a hibernating metabolism. "A shaped plasma bolt, something like that. Ate through the skull and cooked his soul."

The machines rocked back and forth on long legs.

"It's slag, I bet. The brain is. And some of the body got torched too. Sure." He rose now, looking about the bedroom with a careful gaze.

A set of clothes stood nearby, waiting to dress their owner.

Pamir disabled the clothes and laid them on the ground beside the corpse. "He lost ten or twelve kilos of flesh and bone," he decided. "And he's about ten centimeters shorter than he used to be."

Death was a difficult trick to achieve with immortals. And even in this circumstance, with the brain reduced to ruined bioceramics and mindless glass, the body had persisted with life. The surviving flesh had healed itself, within limits. Emergency genetics had been unleashed, reweaving the original face and scalp and a full torso that couldn't have seemed more lifelike. But when the genes had finished, no mind was found to interface with the rejuvenated body. So the J'Jal corpse fell into a stasis, and if no one had entered this apartment, it would have remained where it was, sipping at the increasingly stale air, its lazy

metabolism eating its own flesh until it was a skeleton and shriveled organs and a gaunt, deeply mummified face.

He had been a handsome man, Pamir could see.

Regardless of the species, it was an elegant, tidy face.

"What do you see?" he finally asked.

The machines spoke, in words and raw data. Pamir listened, and then he stopped listening. Again, he thought about Miocene, asking himself why the First Chair would give one little shit about this very obscure man.

"Who is he?" asked Pamir, not for the first time.

A nexus was triggered. The latest, most thorough biography was delivered. The J'Jal had been born onboard the ship, his parents wealthy enough to afford the luxury of propagation. His family's money was made on a harum-scarum world, which explained his name. Sele'ium — a play on the harum-scarum convention of naming yourself after the elements. And as these things went, Sele'ium was just a youngster, barely five hundred years old, with a life story that couldn't seem more ordinary.

Pamir stared at the corpse, unsure what good it did.

Then he forced himself to walk around the apartment. It wasn't much larger than his home, but with a pricey view making it twenty times more expensive. The furnishings could have belonged to either species. The color schemes were equally ordinary. There were a few hundred books on display—a distinctly J'Jal touch—and Pamir had a machine read each volume from cover to cover. Then he led his helpers to every corner and closet, to new rooms and back to the same old rooms again, and he inventoried every surface and each object, including a sampling of dust. But there was little dust, so the dead man was either exceptionally neat, or somebody had carefully swept away every trace of their own presence, including bits of dried skin and careless hairs.

"Now what?"

He was asking himself that question, but the machines replied, "We do not know what is next, sir."

Again, Pamir stood over the breathing corpse.

"I'm not seeing something," he complained.

A look came over him, and he laughed at himself. Quietly. Briefly. Then he requested a small medical probe, and the probe was inserted, and through it he delivered a teasing charge.

The dead penis pulled itself out of the body.

"Huh," Pamir exclaimed.

Then he turned away, saying, "All right," while shaking his head. "We're going to search again, this place and the poor shit's life. Mote by mote and day by day, if we have to."

V

Built in the upper reaches of Fall Away, overlooking the permanent clouds of the Little-Lot, the facility was an expansive collection of natural caverns and minimal tunnels. Strictly speaking, the Faith of the Many Joinings wasn't a church or holy place, though it was wrapped securely around an ancient faith.

Nor was it a commercial house, though money and barter items were often given to its resident staff. And it wasn't a brothel, as far as the ship's codes were concerned. Nothing sexual happened within its walls, and no one involved in its mysteries gave his or her body for anything as crass as income. Most passengers didn't even realize that a place such as this existed. Among those who did, most regarded it as an elaborate and very strange meetinghouse —like-minded souls passed through its massive wooden door to make friends, and when possible, fall in love. But for the purposes of taxes and law, the captains had decided on a much less romantic designation: The facility was an exceptionally rare thing to which an ancient human word applied.

It was a library.

On the Great Ship, normal knowledge was preserved inside laser files and superconducting baths. Access might be restricted, but every word and captured image was within reach of buried nexuses. Libraries were an exception. What the books held was often unavailable anywhere else, making them precious, and that's why they offered a kind of privacy difficult to match, as well as an almost religious holiness to the followers of the Faith.

"May I help you, sir?"

Pamir was standing before a set of tall shelves, arms crossed and his face wearing a tight, furious expression. "Who are you?" he asked, not bothering to look at the speaker.

"My name is Leon'rd."

"I've talked to others already," Pamir allowed.

"I know, sir."

"They came at me, one by one. But they weren't important enough." He turned, staring at the newcomer. "Leon'rd," he grunted. "Are you important enough to help me?"

"I hope so, sir. I do."

The J'Jal man was perhaps a little taller than Pamir. He was wearing a purplish-black robe and long blue hair secured in back as a simple horsetail. His eyes were indistinguishable from a human's green eyes. His skin was a pinkish brown. As the J'Jal preferred, his feet were bare. They could be human feet, plantigrade and narrow, with five toes and a similar architecture of bones, the long arches growing taller when the nervous toes curled up. With a slight bow, the alien remarked, "I am the ranking librarian, sir. I have been at this post for ten millennia and eighty-eight years. Sir."

Pamir had adapted his face and clothing. What the J'Jal saw was a security officer dressed in casual garb. A badge clung to his sleeve, and every roster search identified him as a man with honors and a certain clout. But his disguise reached deeper. The crossed arms flexed for a moment, hinting at lingering tensions. His new face tightened until the eyes were squinting, affecting a cop's challenging stare; and through the pinched mouth, he said, "I'm looking for somebody."

To his credit, the librarian barely flinched.

"My wife," Pamir said. "I want to know where she is."

"No."

"Pardon me?"

"I know what you desire, but I cannot comply."

As they faced each other, a giant figure stepped into the room. The harum-scarum noticed the two males facing off, and with an embarrassment rare for the species, she carefully backed out of sight.

The librarian spoke to his colleagues, using a nexus.

Every door to this chamber was quietly closed and securely locked.

"Listen," Pamir said.

Then he said nothing else.

After a few moments, the J'Jal said, "Our charter is clear. The law is defined. We offer our patrons privacy and opportunity, in that order. Without official clearance, sir, you may not enter this facility to obtain facts or insights of any type."

"I'm looking for my wife," he repeated.

"And I can appreciate your—"

"Quiet," Pamir growled, his arms unfolding, the right hand holding a small, illegal plasma torch. With a flourish, he aimed at his helpless target, and he said one last time, "I am looking for my wife."

"Don't," the librarian begged.

The weapon was pointed at the bound volumes. The smallest burst would vaporize untold pages.

"No," Leon'rd moaned, desperately trying to alert the room's weapon suppression systems. But none was responding.

Again, he said, "No."

"I love her," Pamir claimed.

"I understand."

"Do you understand love?"

Leon'rd seemed offended. "Of course I understand — "

"Or does it have to be something ugly and sick before you can appreciate, even a little bit, what it means to be in love."

The J'Jal refused to speak.

"She's vanished," Pamir muttered.

"And you think she has been here?"

"At least once, yes."

The librarian was swiftly searching for a useful strategy. A general alarm was sounding, but the doors he had locked for good reasons suddenly refused to unlock. His staff and every other helping hand might as well have been on the far side of the ship. And if the gun discharged, it would take critical seconds to fill the room with enough nitrogen to stop the fire and enough narcotics to shove a furious human to the floor.

Leon'rd had no choice. "Perhaps I can help you, yes."

Pamir showed a thin, unpleasant grin. "That's the attitude."

"If you told me your wife's name — "

"She wouldn't use it," he warned.

"Or show me a holo of her, perhaps."

The angry husband shook his head. "She's changed her appearance. At least once, maybe more times."

"Of course."

"And her gender, maybe."

The librarian absorbed that complication. He had no intention of giving this stranger what he wanted, but if they could just draw this ugly business out for long enough... until a platoon of security troops could swoop in and take back their colleague...

"Here," said Pamir, feeding him a minimal file.

"What is this?"

"Her boyfriend, from what I understand."

Leon'rd stared at the image and the attached biography. The soft green eyes had barely read the name when they grew huge—a meaningful J'Jal expression—and with a sigh much like a human sigh, he admitted, "I know this man."

"Did you?"

Slowly, the implication of those words was absorbed.

"What do you mean? Is something wrong?"

"Yeah, my wife is missing. And this murdered piece of shit is the only one who can help me find her. Besides you, that is."

Leon'rd asked for proof of the man's death.

"Proof?" Pamir laughed. "Maybe I should call my boss and tell her that I found a deceased J'Jal, and you and I can let the law do its important and loud and very public work?"

A moment later, with a silent command, the librarian put an end to the general alert. There was no problem here, he lied; and with the slightest bow, he asked, "May I trust you to keep this matter confidential, sir?"

"Do I look trustworthy?"

The J'Jal bristled but said nothing. Then he stared at shelves at the far end of the room, walking a straight line that took him to a slender volume that he withdrew and opened, elegant fingers beginning to flip through the thin plastic pages.

With a bully's abruptness, Pamir grabbed the prize. The cover was a soft wood stained blue to identify its subject as being a relative novice. The pages were plastic, thin but dense, with a running account of the dead man's progress. Over the course of the last century, the librarians had met with Sele'ium on numerous occasions, and they had recorded his uneven progress with this very difficult faith. Audio

transcripts drawn from a private journal let him speak again, explaining his mind to himself and every interested party. "My species is corrupt and tiny," Sele'ium had confessed with a remarkably human voice. "Every species is tiny and foul, and only together, joined in a perfect union, can we create a worthy society—a universe genuinely united."

A few pages held holos — stark, honest images of religious devotion that most of the galaxy would look upon as abominations. Pamir barely lingered on any picture. He had a clear guess about what he was looking for, and it helped that only one of the J'Jal's wives was human.

The final pages were key. Pamir stared at the last image. Then with a low snort and a disgusted shake of the head, he announced, "This must be her."

"But it isn't," said the librarian.

"No, it's got to be," he persisted. "A man should be able to recognize his own wife. Shouldn't he?"

Leon'rd showed the barest of grins. "No. I know this woman rather well, and she is not—"

"Where's her book?" Pamir snapped.

"No," the librarian said. "Believe me, this is not somebody you know."

"Prove it."

Silence.

"What's her name?"

Leon'rd straightened, working hard to seem brave.

Then Pamir placed the plasma torch against a random shelf, allowing the tip of the barrel to heat up to where smoke rose as the red wood binding of a true believer began to smolder.

The woman's journal was stored in a different room, far deeper inside the library. Leon'rd called for it to be brought to them, and then he stood close while Pamir went through the pages, committing much of it to a memory nexus. At one point, he said, "If you'd let me just borrow these things."

The J'Jal face flushed, and a tight hateful voice replied, "If you tried to take them, you would have to kill me."

Pamir showed him a wink.

"A word for the not-so-wise?" he said. "If I were you, I wouldn't give my enemies any easy ideas."

VI

How could one species prosper, growing in reach and wealth as well as in numbers, while a second species, blessed with the same strengths, exists for a hundred times longer and still doesn't matter to the galaxy?

Scholars and bigots had deliberated that question for ages.

The J'Jal evolved on a lush warm world, blue seas wrapped around green continents, the ground fat with metal ores and hydrocarbons, and a massive moon riding across the sky, helping keep the axis tilted just enough to invite mild seasons. Perhaps that wealth had been a bad thing. Born on a poorer world,

humans had evolved to live in tiny, adaptable bands of twenty or so — everyone related to everyone, by blood or by marriage. But the early **J'Jals** moved in troops of a hundred or more which meant a society wrapped around a more tolerant politics. Harmony was a given. Conflicts were resolved quietly, if possible; nothing was more precious to the troop than its own venerable peace. And with natural life spans reaching three centuries, change was a slow, fitful business brought on by consensus, or when absolutely necessary, by surrendering your will to the elders.

But quirks of nature are only one explanation for the future. Many great species had developed patiently. Some of the most famous, like the Ritkers and harum-scarums, were still tradition-bound creatures. Even humans had that sorry capacity: The wisdom of dead Greeks and lost Hebrews was followed long after their words had value. But the J'Jal were much more passionate about ancestors and their left-behind thoughts. For them, the past was a treasure, and their early civilizations were hide-bound and enduring machines that would remember every wrong turn and every quiet success.

After a couple hundred thousand years of flint and iron, humans stepped into space, while it took the J'Jal millions of years to contrive reasons for that kind of adventure.

That was a murderous bit of bad fortune.

The J'Jal solar system had metal-rich worlds and watery moons, and its neighbor suns were mature G-class stars where intelligence arose many times. While the J'Jal sat at home, happily memorizing the speeches of old queens, three different alien species colonized their outer worlds —ignoring galactic law and ancient conventions in the process.

Unknown to the J'Jal, great wars were being waged in their sky.

The eventual winner was a tiny creature accustomed to light gravity and the most exotic technologies. The K'Mal were cybernetic and quick-lived, subject to fads and whims and sudden convulsive changes of government. By the time the J'Jal launched their first rocket, the K'Mal outnumbered them in their own solar system. Millions of years later, that moment in history still brought shame. The J'Jal rocket rose into a low orbit, triggering a K'Mal fleet to lift from bases on the moon's hidden face. The rocket was destroyed, and suddenly the J'Jal went from being the masters of Paradise to an obscure creature locked on the surface of one little world.

Wars were fought, and won.

Peaces held, and collapsed, and the new wars ended badly.

True slavery didn't exist for the losers, even in the worst stretches of the long Blackness. And the K'Mal weren't wicked tyrants or unthinking administrators. But a gradual decay stole away the wealth of the J'Jal world. Birthrates plunged. Citizens emigrated, forced to work in bad circumstances for a variety of alien species. Those left home lived on an increasingly poisonous landscape, operating the deep mantle mines and the enormous railguns that spat the bones of their world into someone else's space.

While humans were happily hamstringing mammoths on the plains of Asia, the J'Jal were a beaten species scattered thinly across a hundred worlds. Other species would have lost their culture, and where they survived, they might have split into dozens of distinct and utterly obscure species. But the J'Jal proved capable in one extraordinary endeavor: Against every abuse, they managed to hold tight to their shared past, beautiful and otherwise; and in small ways, and then in slow large ways, they adapted to their far flung existence.

VII

"You'll be helping another soul."

Miocene had promised that much and said little else. She knew the dead J'Jal would point him to the library, and she had to know that he was bright enough to realize it was the human woman who mattered. Why the First Chair cared about the life of an apparently unremarkable passenger, Pamir couldn't guess. Or rather, he could guess too easily, drawing up long lists of motivations, each entry reasonable, and most if not all of them ridiculously wrong.

The human was named Sorrel, and it had been Sorrel since she was born two centuries ago. Unless she was older than that, and her biography was a masterful collection of inspired lies.

Like most of the library's patrons, she made her home on Fall Away. Yet even among that wealthy company, she was blessed. Not one but two trust funds kept her economy well fed. Her rich father had emigrated to a colony world before she was born, leaving his local assets in her name. While the mother—a decorated member of the diplomatic corps—had died on the ill-fated Hakkaleen mission. In essence, Sorrel was an orphan. But by most signs, she didn't suffer too badly. For the next several decades, she had appeared happy and unremarkable, wealthy and untroubled, and nothing Pamir found said otherwise.

What was the old harum-scarum saying?

"Nothing is as massive as the universe, but nothing is half as large as a sentient, imaginative mind."

Some time ago, the young woman began to change.

Like many young adults, Sorrel took an early vow of celibacy. With a million years of life stretching before her, why hurry into sex and love, disappointment and heartbreak? She had human friends, but because of her mother's diplomatic roots, she knew quite a few aliens too. For several years, her closest companions were a janusian couple—double organisms where the male was a parasite rooted in his spouse's back. Then her circle of alien friends widened... which seemed perfectly normal. Pamir searched the archives of forgotten security eyes and amateur documentaries, finding glimpses of luncheons and shopping adventures in the company of other species. Oxygen breathers; the traditional human allies. Then came the luxury cruise across a string of little oceans spread through the interior of the Great Ship—a brief voyage accomplished in the midst of the circumnavigation of the Milky Way—and near the end of that tame adventure, while drifting on a dim cold smooth-as-skin methane sea, she took her first lover.

He was a J'Jal, as it happened.

Pamir saw enough on the security eyes to fill in the blanks.

Cre'llan was a spectacularly wealthy individual, and ancient, and in a Faith that cherished its privacy, he flaunted his membership and his beliefs. Elaborate surgeries had reshaped his penis to its proper form. Everyone involved in the Many Joinings endured similar cosmetic work; a uniform code applied to both genders, and where no gender existed, one was invented for them. During his long life, Cre'llan had married hundreds if not thousands of aliens, and then on that chill night he managed to seduce a young virginal human.

After the cruise, Sorrel tried to return to her old life. But three days later she visited the library, and within the week, she underwent her own physical reconfigurations.

Pamir had seen glimpses of the surgery in her journal—autodocs and J'Jaloverseers hovering around a lanky pale body. And when he closed his eyes now, concentrating on the buried data reserve, he could

slowly and carefully flip his way through the other pages of that elaborate but still incomplete record.

After a year as a novice, Sorrel purchased a bare rectangle of stone and hyperfiber some fifty kilometers directly beneath the library. The apartment she built was deep and elaborate, full of luxurious rooms as well as expansive chambers that could be configured to meet the needs of almost any biology. But while every environmental system was the best available, sometimes those fancy machines didn't interact well with one another, and with the right touch, they were very easy to sabotage.

"Is it a serious problem, sir?"

"Not for me," Pamir allowed. "Not for you, I'd guess. But if you depend on peroxides, like the Ooloops do, then the air is going to taste sour. And after a few breaths, you'll probably lose consciousness."

"I understand," the apartment offered.

Pamir was standing in the service hallway, wearing his normal rough face as well as the durable jersey and stiff back of a life-long technician. "I'll need to wander, if I'm going to find your trouble. Which is probably an eager filter, or a failed link of code, or a leak, or who knows what."

"Do whatever is necessary," the soft male voice replied.

"And thanks for this opportunity," Pamir added. "I appreciate new business."

"Of course, sir. And thank you."

The apartment's usual repair firm was temporarily closed due to a bureaucratic war with the Office of Environments. A search of available candidates had steered the AI towards the best candidate. Pamir was releasing a swarm of busy drones that vanished inside the walls, and he continued walking down the hallway, pausing at a tiny locked door. "What's past here?"

"A living chamber."

"For a human?"

"Yes, sir."

Pamir stepped back. "I don't need to bother anyone."

"No one will be." The lock and seal broke. "My lady demands that her home be ready for any and all visitors. Your work is a priority."

Pamir nodded, stepping through the narrow slot.

His first thought was that captains didn't live half as well as this. The room was enormous yet somehow intimate, carpeted with living furs, art treasures standing about waiting to be admired, chairs available for any kind of body, and as an added feature, at least fifty elaborate games laid out on long boards, the pieces playing against each other until there was a winner, after which they would play again. Even the air tasted of wealth, scrubbed and filtered, perfumed and pheromoned. And in that perfect atmosphere, the only sound was the quiet precise and distant singing of a certain alien flower.

Llano vibra.

Pamir looked at monitors and spoke through nexuses, and he did absolutely nothing of substance. What he wanted to accomplish was already done. By a handful of means, the apartment was now invested with hidden ears and eyes. Everything else was for his senses and to lend him more credibility.

A tall diamond wall stood on the far side of the enormous bedroom, and beyond, five hectares of patio hung over the open air. A grove of highly bred llano vibra was rooted in a patio pot, its music passing through a single open door. The young woman was sitting nearby, doing nothing. Pamir looked at Sorrel for a moment, and then she lifted her head to glance in his general direction. He tried to decide what he was seeing. She was clothed but barefoot. She was strikingly lovely, but in an odd fashion that he couldn't quite name. Her pale skin had a genuine glow, a capacity to swallow up the ambient light and cast it back into the world in a softer form. Her hair was silver-white and thick, with the tips suddenly turning to black. She had a smooth girlish face and a tiny nose and blue-white eyes pulled close together, and her mouth was broad and elegant and exceptionally sad.

It was the sadness that made her striking, Pamir decided.

Then he found himself near the door, staring at her, realizing that nothing was simple about her sadness or his reactions.

Sorrel glanced at him a second time.

A moment later, the apartment inquired, "Is the lady a point of technical interest, sir?"

"Sure." Pamir laughed and stepped back from the diamond wall.

"Have you found the problem? She wishes to know."

"Two problems, and yes. They're being fixed now."

"Very well. Thank you."

Pamir meant to mention his fee. Tradesmen always talked money. But there came a sound—the soft musical whine of a rope deploying—that quickly fell away into silence.

The apartment stopped speaking to him.

"What—?" Pamir began. Then he turned and looked outside again. The woman wasn't alone anymore. A second figure had appeared, dressed like a rock climber and running across the patio towards Sorrel. He was a human or J'Jal, and apparently male. From where Pamir stood, he couldn't tell much more. But he could see the urgency in the intruder's step and a right hand that was holding what could be a weapon, and an instant later, Pamir was running too, leaping through the open door as the stranger closed on the woman.

Sorrel stared at the newcomer.

"I don't recognize his face," the apartment warned her, shouting now. "My lady-!"

The inertia vanished from her body. Sorrel leapt up and took two steps backwards before deciding to stand and fight. It was her best hope, Pamir agreed. She lifted her arms and lowered them again. She was poised if a little blank in the face, as if she was surrendering her survival to a set of deeply buried instincts.

The stranger reached for her neck with his left hand.

With a swift clean motion, she grabbed the open hand and twisted the wrist back. But the running body picked her off her feet, and both of them fell to the polished opal floor of the patio.

The man's right hand held a knife.

With a single plunge, the stranger pushed the blade into her chest, aiming for the heart. He was working with an odd precision, or perhaps by feel. He was trying to accomplish something very specific, and when she struggled, he would strike her face with the back of his free hand.

The blade dove deeper.

A small, satisfied moan leaked out of him, as if success was near, and then Pamir drove his boot into the smiling mouth.

The stranger was human, and furious.

He climbed to his feet, fending off the next three blows, and then he reached back and pulled out a small railgun that he halfway aimed, letting loose a dozen flecks of supersonic iron.

Pamir dropped, hit in the shoulder and arm.

The injured woman lay between them, bleeding and pained. The hilt of the knife stood up out of her chest, a portion of the hyperfiber blade reflecting the brilliant red of the blood.

With his good arm, Pamir grabbed the hilt and tugged.

There was a soft clatter as a Darmion crystal spilled out of her body along with the blade. This was what the thief wanted. He saw the glittering shape and couldn't resist the urge to grab at the prize. A small fortune was within reach, but then his own knife was driven clear through his forearm, and he screamed in pain and rage.

Pamir cut him twice again.

The little railgun rose up and fired once, twice, and then twice more.

Pamir's body was dying, but he still had the focus and strength to lift the man—a bullish fellow with short limbs and an infinite supply of blood, it seemed. Pamir kept slashing and pushing, and somewhere the railgun was dropped and left behind, and now the man struck him with a fist and his elbows and then tried to use his knee.

Pamir grabbed the knee as it rose, borrowing its momentum as well as the last of his own strength to shove the thief against a railing of simple oak, and with a last grunt, flung him over the edge.

Only Pamir was standing there now.

Really, it was a beautiful view. With his chest ripped open and a thousand emergency genes telling his body to rest, he gazed out into the open expanse of Fall Away. Thirty kilometers across and lit by a multitude of solar-bright lights, it was a glory of engineering, and perhaps, a masterpiece of art. The countless avenues that fed into Fall Away often brought water and other liquids, and the captains' engineers had devised a system of airborne rivers—diamond tubes that carried the fluids down in a tangle of spirals and rings, little lakes gathering in pools held aloft by invisible means. And always, there were flyers moving in the air—organic and not, alive and not—and there was the deep musical buzz of a million joyous voices, and there were forests of epiphytes clinging to the wall, and there was a wet wind that hadn't ceased in sixty thousand years, and Pamir forgot why he was standing here. What was this place? Turning around, he discovered a beautiful woman with a gruesome wound in her chest telling him to sit, please. Sit. Sir, she said, please, please, you need to rest.

VIII

The Faith of the Many Joinings.

Where it arose first was a subject of some contention. Several widely scattered solar systems were viable candidates, but no single expert held the definitive evidence. Nor could one prophet or pervert take credit for this quasi-religious belief. But what some of the J'Jal believed was that every sentient soul had the same value. Bodies were facades, and metabolisms were mere details, and social systems varied in the same way that individual lives varied, according to choice and whim and a deniable sense of right. What mattered were the souls within all of these odd packages. What a wise soul wished to do was to befriend entities from different histories, and when possible, fall in love with them, linking their spirits together through the ancient pleasures of the flesh.

There was no single prophet, and the Faith had no birthplace. Which was a problem for the true believers. How could such an intricate, odd faith arise simultaneously in such widely scattered places? But what was a flaw might be a blessing, too. Plainly, divine gears were turning the universe, and this unity was just further evidence of how right and perfect their beliefs had to be. Unless the Faith was the natural outgrowth of the J'Jal's own nature: A social species is thrown across the sky, and every home belongs to more powerful species, and the entire game of becoming lovers to the greater ones is as inevitable and unremarkable as standing on their own two bare feet.

Pamir held to that ordinary opinion.

He glanced at his own bare feet for a moment, sighed and then examined his arm and shoulder and chest. The wounds had healed to where nothing was visible. Un-scarred flesh had spread over the holes, while the organs inside him were quickly pulling themselves back into perfect condition. He was fit enough to sit up, but he didn't. Instead, he lay on the soft chaise set on the open-air patio, listening to the llano vibra. He was alone, the diamond wall to the bedroom turned black. For a moment, he thought about things that were obvious, and then he played with the subtle possibilities that sprang up from what was obvious.

The thief—a registered felon with a long history of this exact kind of work—had fallen for several kilometers before a routine security patrol noticed him, plucking him out of the sky before he could spoil anybody else's day.

The unlucky man was under arrest and would probably serve a century or two for his latest crime.

"This stinks," Pamir muttered.

"Sir?" said the apartment. "Is there a problem? Might I help?"

Pamir considered, and said, "No."

He sat up and said, "Clothes," and his technician's uniform pulled itself around him. Its fabric had healed, if not quite so thoroughly as his own body. He examined what could be a fleck of dried blood, and after a moment, he said, "Boots?"

"Under your seat, sir."

Pamir was giving his feet to his boots when she walked out through the bedroom door.

"I have to thank you," Sorrel remarked. She was tall and elegant in a shopworn way, wearing a long gray robe and no shoes. In the face, she looked pretty but sorrowful, and up close, that sadness was a deep thing reaching well past today. "For everything you did, thank you."

A marathon of tears had left her eyes red and puffy.

He stared, and she stared back. For a moment, it was as if she saw nothing. Then Sorrel seemed to grow aware of his interest, and with a shiver, she told him, "Stay as long as you wish. My home will feed you

and if you want, you can take anything that interests you. As a memento..."

"Where's the crystal?" he interrupted.

She touched herself between her breasts. The Darmion was back home, resting beside her enduring heart. According to half a dozen species, the crystal gave its possessor a keen love of life and endless joy—a bit of mystic noise refuted by the depressed woman who was wearing it.

"I don't want your little rock," he muttered.

She didn't seem relieved or amused. With a nod, she said, "Thank you," one last time, planning to end this here.

"You need a better security net," Pamir remarked.

"Perhaps so," she admitted, without much interest.

"What's your name?"

She said, "Sorrel," and then the rest of it. Human names were long and complex and unwieldy. But she said it all, and then she looked at him in a new fashion. "What do I call you?"

He used his most recent identity.

"Are you any good with security systems?" Sorrel inquired.

"Better than most."

She nodded.

"You want me to upgrade yours?"

That amused her somehow. A little smile broke across the milky face, and for a moment, the bright pink tip of her tongue pointed at him. Then she shook her head, saying, "No, not for me," as if he should have realized as much. "I have a good friend... a dear old friend... who has some rather heavy fears..."

"Can he pay?"

"I will pay. Tell him it's my gift."

"So who's this worried fellow?"

She said, "Gallium," in an alien language.

Genuinely surprised, Pamir asked, "What the hell is a harum-scarum doing, admitting he's scared?"

Sorrel nodded appreciatively.

"He admits nothing," she added. Then again, she smiled... a warmer expression, this time. Fetching and sweet, even wonderful, and for Pamir, that expression seemed to last long after he walked out of the apartment and on to his next job.

XI

The harum-scarum was nearly three meters tall, massive and thickly armored, loud and yet oddly serene at the same time, passionate about his endless bravery and completely transparent when he told his lies. His home was close to Fall Away, tucked high inside one of the minor avenues. He was standing behind

his final door—a slab of hyperfiber-braced diamond—and with a distinctly human gesture, he waved off the uninvited visitor. "I do not need any favors," he claimed, speaking through his breathing mouth. "I am as secure as anyone and twelve times more competent than you when it comes to defending myself." Then with a blatant rudeness, he allowed his eating mouth to deliver a long wet belch.

"Funny," said Pamir. "A woman wishes to buy my services, and you are Gallium, her dear old friend. Is that correct?"

"What is the woman's name?"

"Why? Didn't you hear me the first time?"

"Sorrel, you claimed." He pretended to concentrate, and then with a little too much certainty said, "I do not know this ape-woman."

"Is that so?" Pamir shook his head. "She knows you."

"She is mistaken."

"So then how did you know she was human? Since I hadn't quite mentioned that yet."

The question won a blustery look from the big black eyes. "What are you implying to me, little ape-man?"

Pamir laughed at him. "Why? Can't you figure it out for yourself?"

"Are you insulting me?"

"Sure."

That won a deep silence.

With a fist only a little larger than one of the alien's knuckles, Pamir wrapped on the diamond door. "I'm insulting you and your ancestors. There. By the ship's codes and your own painful customs, you are now free to step out here, in the open, and beat me until I am dead for a full week."

The giant shook with fury, and nothing happened. One mouth expanded, gulping down deep long breaths, while the other mouth puckered into a tiny dimple—a harum-scarum on the brink of a pure vengeful rage. But Gallium forced himself to do nothing, and when the anger finally began to diminish, he gave an inaudible signal, causing the outer two doors to drop and seal tight.

Pamir looked left and then right. The narrow avenue was well-lit and empty, and by every appearance, it was safe.

Yet the creature had been terrified.

One more time, he paged his way through Sorrel's journal. Among those husbands were two harum-scarums. No useful name had been mentioned in the journal, but it was obvious which of them was Gallium. Lying about his fear was in character for the species. But how could a confirmed practitioner of this singular faith deny that he had even met the woman?

Pamir needed to find the other husbands.

A hundred different routes lay before him. But as harum-scarums liked to say, "The shortest line stretches between points that touch."

Gallium's security system was ordinary, and it was porous, and with thousands of years of experience in these matters, it took Pamir less than a day to subvert codes and walk through the front doors.

"Who is with me?" a voice cried out from the farthest room.

In J'Jal, curiously.

Then, "Who's there?" in human.

And finally, as an afterthought, the alien screamed, "You are in my realm, and unwelcome." In his own tongue, he promised, "I will forgive you, if you run away at this moment."

"Sorrel won't let me run," Pamir replied.

The last room was a minor fortress buttressed with slabs of high-grade hyperfiber and bristling with weapons, legal and otherwise. A pair of rail-guns followed Pamir's head, ready to batter his mind if not quite kill it. Tightness built in his throat, but he managed to keep the fear out of his voice. "Is this where you live now? In a little room at the bottom of an ugly home?"

"You like to insult," the harum-scarum observed.

"It passes my time," he replied.

From behind the hyperfiber, Gallium said, "I see an illegal weapon."

"Good. Since I'm carrying one."

"If you try to harm me, I will kill you. And I will destroy your mind, and you will be no more."

"Understood," Pamir said.

Then he sat—a gesture of submission on almost every world. He sat on the quasi-crystal tiling on the floor of the bright hallway, glancing at the portraits on the nearby walls. Harum-scarums from past ages stood in defiant poses. Ancestors, presumably. Honorable men and women who could look at their cowering descendant with nothing but a fierce contempt.

After a few moments, Pamir said, "I'm pulling my weapon into plain view."

"Throw it beside my door."

The plasma gun earned a respectful silence. It slid across the floor and clattered to a stop, and then a mechanical arm unfolded, slapping a hyperfiber bowl over it, and then covering the bowl an explosive charge set to obliterate the first hand that tried to free the gun within.

The hyperfiber door lifted.

Gallium halfway filled the room beyond. He was standing in the middle of a closet jammed with supplies, staring at Pamir, the armored plates of his body flexing, exposing their sharp edges.

"You must very much need this work," he observed.

"Except I'm not doing my work," Pamir replied. "Frankly, I've sort of lost interest in the project."

Confused, the harum-scarum stood taller. "Then why have you gone to such enormous trouble?"

"What you need," Pamir mentioned, "is a small, well-charged plasma gun. That makes a superior

weapon."

"They are illegal and hard to come by," argued Gallium.

"Your rail-guns are criminal, too." Just like with the front doors, there was a final door made of diamond reinforced with a meshwork of hyperfiber. "But I bet you appreciate what the shaped plasma can do to a living mind."

Silence.

"Funny," Pamir continued. "Not that long ago, I found a corpse that ran into that exact kind of tool."

The alien's back couldn't straighten anymore, and the armor plates were flexing as much as possible. With a quiet voice —an almost begging voice —Gallium asked the human, "Who was the corpse?"

"Sele'ium."

Again, silence.

"Who else has died that way?" Pamir asked. It was a guess, but not much of one. When no answer was offered, he added, "You've never been this frightened. In your long, ample life, you have never imagined that fear could eat at you this way. Am I right?"

Now the back began to collapse.

A miserable little voice said, "It just worsens."

"Why?"

The harum-scarum dipped his head for a moment.

"Why does the fear get worse and worse?"

"Seven of us now."

"Seven?"

"Lost." A human despair rode with that single word. "Eight, if you are telling the truth about the J'Jal."

"What eight?" Pamir asked.

Gallium refused to say,

"I know who you are," he continued. "Eight of Sorrel's husbands, and you. Is that right?"

"Her past husbands," the alien corrected.

"What about current lovers — ?"

"There are none."

"No?"

"She is celibate," the giant said with a deep longing. Then he dropped his gaze, adding, "When we started to die, she gave us up. Physically, and legally as well."

Gallium missed his human wife. It showed in his stance and voice and how the great hand trembled,

reaching up to touch the cool pane of diamond while he added, "She is trying to save us. But she doesn't know how—"

A sudden ball of coherent plasma struck the pane just then. No larger than a human heart, it dissolved the diamond and the hand, and the grieving face, and everything that lay beyond those dark lonely eyes.

X

Pamir saw nothing but the flash, and then came a concussive blast that threw him off his feet. For an instant, he lay motionless. A cloud of atomized carbon and flesh filled the cramped hallway. He listened and heard nothing. At least for the next few moments, he was completely deaf. Keeping low, he rolled until a wall blocked his way. Then he started to breathe, scalding his lungs, and he held his breath, remaining absolutely still, waiting for a second blast to shove past.

Nothing happened.

With his mouth to the floor, Pamir managed a hot but breathable sip of air. The cloud was thinning. His hearing was returning, accompanied by a tireless high-pitched hum. A figure swam into view, tall and menacing—a harum-scarum, presumably one of the dead man's honored ancestors. He remembered that the hallway was littered with the portraits. Pamir saw a second figure, and then a third. He was trying to recall how many images there had been... because he could see a fourth figure now, and that seemed like one too many...

The plasma gun fired again. But it hadn't had time enough to build a killing charge, and the fantastic energies were wasted in a light show and a burst of blistering wind.

Again the air filled with dirt and gore.

Pamir leaped up and retreated.

Gallium was a nearly headless corpse, enormous even when mangled and stretched out on his back. The little room was made tinier with him on the floor. When their owner died, the rail-guns had dropped into their diagnostic mode, and waking them would take minutes, or days. The diamond door was shredded and useless. When the cloud fell away again, in another few moments, Pamir would be exposed and probably killed.

Like Gallium, he first used the J'Jal language.

"Hello," he called out.

The outer door was open and still intact, but its simple trigger was useless to him. It was sensitive only to pressure from a familiar hand. Staring out into the hallway, he shouted, "Hello," once again.

In the distance, a shape began to resolve itself.

"I am dead," he continued. "You have me trapped here, my friend."

Nothing.

"Do what you wish, but before you cook me, I would love to know what this is about."

The shape seemed to drift one way, then back again.

Pamir jerked one of the dead arms off the floor. Then he started to position it, laying the broad palm against the wall, close to the door's trigger. But that was the easy part of this, he realized.

"You're a clever soul," he offered. "Allow a human to open the way for you. I outsmart the harum-scarum's defenses, and then you can claim both of us."

How much time before another recharge?

A few seconds, he guessed.

The corpse suddenly flinched and the arm dropped with a massive thunk.

"Shit," Pamir muttered.

On a high shelf was a plate, small but dense as metal. He took hold of it, made a few practice flings with his wrist, and then once again called out, "I wish you would tell me what this is about. Because I haven't got a clue."

Nothing.

In human, Pamir said, "Who the hell are you?"

The cloud was clearing again, revealing the outlines of a biped standing down the hallway, maybe ten meters from him.

Kneeling, Pamir again grabbed the dead arm. Emergency genes and muscle memory began to fight against him, the strength of a giant forcing him to grunt as he pushed the hand to where it was set beside the trigger. Then he threw all of his weight on the hand, forcing it to stay in place. For a moment, he panted. Then he grabbed the heavy plate with his left hand, and with a gasping voice, he said, "One last chance to explain."

The biped was beginning to aim.

"Bye-bye, then."

Pamir flipped the plate, aiming at a target barely three meters away. And in the same instant, he let the dead hand fall onto the trigger. A slab of hyperfiber slid from the ceiling, and the final door was shut. It could withstand two or three blasts from a plasma gun, but eventually it would be gnawed away. Which was why he flipped the plate onto the floor where it skipped and rolled, clipping the edge of the shaped charge of explosives that capped his own gun.

There was a sudden sharp thunder.

The door was left jammed shut by the blast. Pamir spent the next twenty minutes using a dead hand and every override to lift the door far enough to crawl underneath. But a perfectly symmetrical blast had left his own weapon where it lay, untouched beneath a bowl of mirror-bright hyperfiber.

His enemy would have been blown back up the hallway.

Killed briefly, or maybe just scared away.

Pamir lingered for a few minutes, searching the dead man's home for clues that refused to be found, and then he slipped back out into the public avenue —still vacant and safe to the eye, but possessing a palpable menace that he could now feel for himself.

XI

A ninety-second tube ride placed him beside Sorrel's front door. The apartment addressed him by the only name it knew, observing, "You are injured, sir." Performing its own rapid examination, a distinct

alarm entered into an otherwise officious voice. "Do you know how badly you are injured, sir?"

"I've got a fair guess," Pamir allowed, an assortment of shrapnel still buried inside his leg and belly, giving him a rolling limp. "Where's the lady?"

"Where you left her, sir. On the patio."

Everyone was terrified, it seemed, except for her. But why should she worry? Sorrel had only been knifed by a quick-and-dirty thief, which on the scale of crimes was practically nothing.

"Have her come to her bedroom."

"Sir?"

"I'm not talking to her in the open. Tell her."

"What about her friend — ?"

"Another husband is dead."

Silence.

"Will you tell her—?" Pamir began.

"She is already on her way, sir. As you have requested." Then after a pause, the apartment suggested, "About Gallium, please... I think you should deliver that sorry news..."

He told it.

She was dressed now in slacks and a silk blouse made by the communal spiders of the Kolochon district, and her bare feet wore black rings on every toe, and while she sat on one of the dozens of self-shaping chairs, listening to his recount of the last brutal hour, her expression managed to grow even more sad as well as increasingly detached. Sorrel made no sound, but always there was a sense that she was about to speak. The sorry and pained and very pretty face would betray a new thought, or the pale eyes would recognize something meaningful. But the mouth never quite made noise. When she finally uttered a few words, Pamir nearly forgot to listen.

"Who are you?"

Did he hear the question correctly?

Again, she asked, "Who are you?" Then she leaned forward, the blouse dipping in front. "You aren't like any environmental technician I've known, and I don't think you're a security specialist either."

"No?"

"You wouldn't have survived the fight, if you were just a fix-it man." She almost laughed, a little dimple showing high on the left cheek. "And even if you had lived, you would still be running now."

"I just want you to point me in the safest direction," he replied.

She didn't respond, watching him for what seemed like an age. Then sitting back in the deep wide chair, she asked, "Who pays you?"

"You do."

"That's not what I mean."

"But I'm not pushing too hard for my wages," he offered.

"You won't tell me who?"

"Confess a few things to me first," he replied.

She had long hands, graceful and quick. For a little while, the hands danced in her lap, and when they finally settled, she asked, "What can I tell you?"

"Everything you know about your dead husbands, and about those who just happen to be alive still." Pamir leaned forward, adding, "In particular, I want to hear about your first husband. And if you can, explain why the Faith of the Many Joinings seemed like such a reasonable idea."

XII

She had seen him earlier on the voyage and spoken with him on occasion—a tall and slender and distinguished J'Jal man with a fondness for human clothes, particularly red woolen suits and elaborately knotted white silk ties. Cre'llan seemed handsome, although not exceptionally so. He was obviously bright and engaging. Once, when their boat was exploring the luddite islands in the middle of the Gone-A-Long Sea, he asked if he might join her, sitting on the long chaise lounge beside hers. For the next little while—an hour, or perhaps the entire day—they chatted amiably about the most ordinary of things. There was gossip to share, mostly about their fellow passengers and the boat's tiny crew. There were several attempts to list the oceans that they had crossed to date, ranking them according to beauty and then history and finally by their inhabitants. Which was the most intriguing port? Which was the most ordinary? What aliens had each met for the first time? What were their first impressions? Second impressions? And if they had to live for the next thousand years in one of these little places, which would they choose?

Sorrel would have eventually forgotten the day. But a week later, she agreed to a side trip to explore Greenland.

"Do you know the island?"

"Not at all," Pamir lied.

"I never made sense of that name," Sorrel admitted, eyes narrowing as if to reexamine the entire question. "Except for some fringes of moss and the like, the climate is pure glacial. The island has to be cold, I was told. It has to do with the upwellings in the ocean and the sea's general health. Anyway, there is a warm current upwind from it, which brings the moisture, and the atmosphere is a hundred kilometers tall and braced with demon-doors. The snows are endless and fabulous, and you can't sail across the Gone-A-Long Sea without visiting Greenland once. At least that's what my friends told me."

"Was Cre'llan in your group?"

"No." Somehow that amused her. She gave a little laugh, adding, "Everybody was human, except for the guide, who was an AI with a human-facsimile body."

Pamir nodded.

"We power-skied up onto the ice during an incredibly hard snowfall. But then our guide turned to us, mentioning that it was a clear day, as they went. And we should be thankful we could see so much."

At most, they could see twenty meters in any direction. She was with a good friend—a child of the Great

Ship like Sorrel, but a thousand years older. Sorrel had known the woman her entire life. They had shared endless conversations and gone to the same fine parties, and their shopping adventures had stretched on for weeks at a time. They always traveled together. And in their combined lives, nothing with real substance had occurred to either of them.

The glacier was thick and swiftly built up by the waves of falling snow. Sorrel and her companion skied away from the rest of the group, scaling a tall ridge that placed them nearly a kilometer above the invisible sea. Then the snow began to fall harder—fat wet flakes joining into snowballs that plunged from the white sky. They were skiing close together, linked by a smart-rope. Sorrel happened to be in the lead. What happened next, she couldn't say. Her first guess, and still her best guess, was that her friend thought of a little joke to play. She disabled the rope and untied herself, and where the ridge widened, she attempted to slip ahead of Sorrel, probably to scare her when she was most vulnerable.

Where the friend fell was a bit of a mystery.

Later, coming to the end of the ridge, Sorrel saw that she was alone. But she naturally assumed her companion had grown tired and gone back to rejoin the others. There wasn't cause for worry, and she didn't like worry, and so Sorrel didn't give it another thought.

But the other tourists hadn't seen her missing friend, either.

A search was launched. But the heavy snowfall turned into what can only be described as an endless avalanche from the sky. In the next hour, the glacier rose by twenty meters. By the time rescue crews could set to work, it was obvious that the missing passenger had stumbled into one of the vast crevices, and her body was dead, and without knowing her location, the only reasonable course would be to wait for the ice to push to the sea and watch for her battered remains.

In theory, a human brain could withstand that kind of abuse.

But the AI guide didn't believe in theory. "What nobody tells you is that this fucking island was once an industrial site. Why do you think the engineers covered it up? To hide their wreckage, of course. Experimental hyperfibers, mostly. Very sharp and sloppy, and the island was built with their trash, and if you put enough pressure on even the best bioceramic head, it will crack. Shatter. Pop, and die, and come out into the sea as a few handfuls of fancy sand."

Her friend was dead.

Sorrel never liked the woman more than anyone else or felt any bond unique just to the two of them. But the loss was heavy and persistent, and for the next several weeks, she thought about little else.

Meanwhile, their voyage through the Great Ship reached a new sea.

One night, while surrounded by a flat gray expanse of methane, Sorrel happened upon the J'Jal man wearing his red jacket and red slacks, and the fancy white tie beneath his nearly human face. He smiled at her, his expression genuine with either species. Then quietly, he asked, "Is something wrong?"

Nobody in her own group had noticed her pain. Unlike her, they were convinced that their friend would soon enough return from the oblivion.

Sorrel sat with the J'Jal. And for a very long while, they didn't speak. She found herself staring at his bare feet, thinking about the fragility of life. Then with a dry low voice, she admitted, "I'm scared."

"Is that so?" Cre'llan said.

"You know, at any moment, without warning, the Great Ship could collide with something enormous. At

a third the speed of light, we might strike a sunless world or a small black hole, and billions would die inside this next instant."

"That may be true," her companion purred. "But I have invested my considerable faith in the talents of our captains."

"I haven't," she countered.

"No?"

"My point here..." She hesitated, shivering for reasons other than the cold. "My point is that I have lived for a few years, and I can't remember ever grabbing life by the throat. Do you know what I mean?"

"Very well," he claimed.

His long toes curled and then relaxed again.

"Why don't you wear shoes?" she finally asked.

And with the softest possible touch, Cre'llan laid his hand on hers. "I am an alien, Sorrel." He spoke while smiling, quietly telling her, "And it would mean so much to me if you could somehow, in your soul, forget what I am."

"We were lovers before the night was finished," she admitted. A fond look passed into a self-deprecating chuckle. "I thought all J'Jal men were shaped like he was. But they aren't, he explained. And that's when I learned about the Faith of the Many Joinings."

Pamir nodded, waiting for more.

"They did eventually find my lost friend, you know." A wise sorry laugh came out of her. "A few years later, a patrol working along the edge of the glacier kicked up some dead bones and then the skull with her mind inside. Intact." Sorrel sat back in her chair, breasts moving under the blouse. "She was reconstituted and back inside her old life within the month, and do you know what? In the decades since, I haven't spoken to my old friend more than three times.

"Funny, isn't it?"

"The Faith," Pamir prompted.

She seemed to expect the subject. With a slow shrug of the shoulders, Sorrel observed, "Whoever you are, you weren't born into comfort and wealth. That shows, I think. You've had to fight in your life... probably through much of your life... for things that any fool knows are important. While someone like me—less than a fool by a long way—walks through paradise without ever asking herself, 'What matters?'"

"The Faith," he repeated.

"Think of the challenge," she said. Staring through him, she asked, "Can you imagine how very difficult it is to be involved—romantically and emotionally linked—with another species?"

"It disgusts me," he lied.

"It disgusts a lot of us," she replied. For an instant, she wore a doubting gaze, perhaps wondering if he was telling the truth about his feelings. Then she let the doubt fall aside. "I wasn't exceptionally horrified by the idea of sex outside my species," she admitted. "Which is why I wasn't all that interested either.

Somewhere in the indifferent middle, I was. But when I learned about this obscure J'Jal belief... how an assortment of like-minded souls had gathered, taking the first critical steps in what might well be the logical evolution of life in our universe..."

Her voice drifted away.

"How many husbands did you take?"

She acted surprised. "Why? Don't you know?"

Pamir let her stare at him.

Finally, she said, "Eleven."

"You are Joined to all of them."

"Until a few years ago, yes." The eyes shrank, and with the tears, they brightened. "The first death looked like a random murder. Horrible, but imaginable. But the second killing was followed a few months later by a third. The same weapon was used in each tragedy, with the same general manner of execution..." Her voice trailed away, the mouth left open and empty. One long hand wiped at the tears, accomplishing little but pushing moisture across the sharp cheeks. "Since the dead belonged to different species, and since the members of the Faith... my husbands and myself... are sworn to secrecy—"

"Nobody noticed the pattern," Pamir interrupted.

"Oh, I think they saw what was happening," she muttered. "After the fifth or sixth death, security people made inquiries at the library. But no one there could admit anything. And then the killings slowed, and the investigation went away. No one was offered protection, and my name was never mentioned. At least that's what I assume, since nobody was sent to interview me." Then with a quiet, angry voice, Sorrel added, "After they linked the murders to the library, they didn't care what happened."

"How do you know that?"

She stared at Pamir, regarding him as if he were a perfect idiot.

"What? Did the authorities assume this was some ugly internal business among the Joined?"

"Maybe," she said. "Or maybe they received orders telling them to stop searching."

"Who gave the orders?"

She looked at a point above his head and carefully said, "No."

"Who wouldn't want these killings stopped?"

"I don't..." she began. Then she shook her head, adding, "I can't. Ask all you want, but I won't tell you anything else."

He asked, "Do you consider yourself in danger?"

She sighed. "Hardly."

"Why not?"

She said nothing.

"Two husbands are left alive," Pamir reminded her.

A suspicious expression played over him. Then she admitted, "I'm guessing you know which two."

"There's the Glory." Glories were birdlike creatures, roughly human-shaped but covered with a bright and lovely plumage. "One of your more recent husbands, isn't he?"

Sorrel nodded, and then admitted, "Except he died last year. On the opposite side of the Great Ship, alone. The body was discovered only yesterday."

Pamir flinched, saying, "My condolences."

"Yes. Thank you."

"And your first lover?"

"Yes."

"The J'Jal in the red suit."

"Cre'llan, yes. I know who you mean."

"The last man standing," he mentioned.

That earned a withering stare from a pained cold face. "I don't marry lightly. And I don't care what you're thinking."

Pamir stood and walked up beside her, and with his own stare, he assured, "You don't know what I'm thinking. Because I sure as hell don't know what I've got in my own soggy head."

She dipped her eyes.

"The J'Jal," he said. "I can track him down for myself, or you can make the introductions."

"It isn't Cre'llan," she whispered.

"Then come with me," Pamir replied. "Come and look him in the eye and ask for yourself."

XIII

As a species, the J'Jal were neither wealthy nor powerful, but among them were a few individuals of enormous age who had prospered in a gradual, relentless fashion. On distant worlds, they had served as cautious traders and inconspicuous landowners and sometimes as the bearers of alien technologies; and while they would always be aliens on those places, they had adapted well enough to feel as if they were home. And then the Great Ship had arrived. Their young and arrogant human cousins promised to carry them across the galaxy—for a fee. The boldest of these wealthy J'Jal left a hundred worlds behind, spending fortunes for the honor of gathering together again. They had no world of their own, yet some hoped to eventually discover some new planet reminiscent of their cradle world—an empty world they could claim for their own. Other J'Jals believed that the Earth and its humans were the logical, even poetic goal for their species—a place where they might blend into the ranks of their highly successful relatives.

"But neither solution gives me any particular pleasure," said the gentleman wearing red. With a nearly human voice, he admitted, "The boundaries between the species are a lie and impermanent, and I hope for a radically different future."

According to his official biography, Cre'llan was approximately the same age as *Homo sapiens*.

"What's your chosen future?" Pamir inquired.

The smile was bright and a little cold. "My new friend," the J'Jal said. "I think you already have made a fair assessment of what I wish for. And more to the point, I think you couldn't care less about whatever dream or utopia I just happen to entertain."

"I have some guesses," Pamir agreed. "And you're right, I don't give a shit about your idea of paradise."

Sorrel sat beside her ancient husband, holding his hand fondly. Divorced or not, she missed his company. They looked like lovers waiting for a holo portrait to be taken. Quietly, she warned Cre'llan, "He suspects you, darling."

"Of course he does."

"But I told him... I explained... you can't be responsible for any of this..."

"Which is the truth," the J'Jal replied, his smile turning into a grim little sneer. "Why would I murder anyone? How could it possibly serve my needs?"

The J'Jal's home was near the bottom of Fall Away, and it was enormous. This single room covered nearly a square kilometer, carpeted with green woods broken up with quick little streams, the ceiling so high that a dozen tame star-rocs could circle above and never brush wings. But all of that grandeur and wealth was dwarfed by the outside view: The braided rivers that ran down the middle of Fall Away had been set free some fifty kilometers above their heads, every diamond tube ending at the same point, their contents exploding out under extraordinary pressure. A flow equal to ten Amazons roared past Cre'llan's home, water and ammonia mixing with a spectacular array of chemical wastes and dying phytoplankton. Aggressive compounds battered their heads together and reacted, bleeding colors in the process. Shapes appeared inside the wild foam, and vanished again. A creative eye could see every face that he had ever met, and he could spend days watching for the faces that he had worn during his own long, strange life.

The window only seemed to be a window. In reality, Pamir was staring at a sheet of high-grade hyperfiber, thick and very nearly impervious to any force nature could throw at it. The view was a projection, a convincing trick. Nodding, he admitted, "You must feel remarkably safe, I would think."

"I sleep quite well," Cre'llan replied.

"Most of the time, I can help people with their security matters. But not you." Pamir was entirely honest, remarking, "I don't think the Master Captain has as much security in place. That hyperfiber. The AI watchdogs. Those blood-and-meat hounds that sniffed our butts on the way in." He showed a wide smile, and then mentioned, "If I'm not mistaken, you'd never have to leave this one room. For the next ten thousand years, you could sit where you're sitting today and eat what falls off these trees, and no one would have to touch you."

"If that was what I wished, yes."

"But he is not the killer," Sorrel muttered.

Then she stood and stepped away from the ancient creature, her hand grudgingly releasing his grip. She approached Pamir, kneeling before him. Suddenly she looked very young, serious and determined. "I know this man," she implored. "You have no idea what you're suggesting, if you think that he could hurt anyone... for any reason..."

"I once lived as a J'Jal," Pamir allowed.

Sorrel leaned away from him, taken by surprise.

"I dyed my hair blue and tinkered with these bones, and I even doctored my genetics, far enough to pass half-assed scans." Pamir gave no specifics, but he understood he was telling too much. Nonetheless, he didn't feel as if he had any choice. "I even kept a J'Jal lover. For a while, I did. But then she saw through my disguise, and I had to steal away in the middle of the night."

The other two watched him now, bewildered and deeply curious.

"Anyway," he continued. "During my stay with the J'Jal, a certain young woman came of age. She was very desirable. Extraordinarily beautiful, and her family was one of the wealthiest onboard the ship. Before that year was finished, the woman had acquired three devoted husbands. But someone else fell in love with her, and he didn't want to share. One of the new husbands was killed. After that, the other husbands went to the public hall and divorced her. They never spoke to the girl again. She was left unattached, and alone. What rational soul would risk her love under those circumstances?" Pamir shook his head while studying Cre'llan. "As I said, I slipped away in the night. And then several decades later, an elder J'Jal proposed to the widow. She was lonely, and he was not a bad man. Not wealthy, but powerful and ancient, and in some measure, wise. So she accepted his offer, and when nothing tragic happened to her new husband, not only did everyone understand who had ordered the killing. They accepted it, too. In pure J'Jal fashion."

With a flat, untroubled voice, Cre'llan said, "My soul has never been thought of as jealous."

"But I'm now accusing you of jealousy," Pamir countered.

Silence.

"Conflicts over females is ordinary business for some species," he continued. "Monopolizing a valuable mate can be a good evolutionary strategy, for the J'Jal as well as others, too. And tens of millions of years of civilization hasn't changed what you are, or what you can be."

Cre'llan snorted, declaring, "That old barbarism is something I would never embrace."

"Agreed."

The green gaze narrowed. "Excuse me, sir. I don't think I understand. What exactly are you accusing me of?"

"This is a beautiful, enormous fortress," Pamir continued. "And as you claim, you're not a jealous creature. But did you invite these other husbands to live with you? Did you offer even one of them your shelter and all of this expensive security?"

Sorrel glanced at the J'Jal, her breath catching for an instant.

"You didn't offer," Pamir continued, "because of a very reasonable fear: What if one of your houseguests wanted Sorrel for himself?"

An old tension rippled between the lovers.

"Every other husband was a suspect, in your mind. With those two harum-scarums being the most obvious candidates." He looked at Sorrel again. "Gallium would be his favorite—a relatively poor entity born into a biology of posturing and violence. His species is famous for stealing mates. Both sexes do it, every day. But now Gallium is dead, which leaves your husband with no one to worry about, it seems."

"But I am not the killer," Cre'llan repeated.

"Oh, I agree," Pamir said. "You are innocent, yes."

The statement seemed to anger both of them. Sorrel spoke first, asking, "When did you come to that conclusion?"

"Once I learned who your husbands were," Pamir replied. "Pretty much instantly." Then he sat forward in his chair, staring out at the churning waters. "No, Cre'llan isn't the murderer."

"You understand my nature?" the J'Jal asked.

"Maybe, but that doesn't particularly matter." Pamir laughed. "No," he said. "You're too smart and far too old to attempt this sort of bullshit with a human woman. Talk all you want about every species being one and the same. But the hard sharp damning fact is that human beings are not J'Jal. Very few of us, under even the most difficult circumstances, are going to look past the fact that their spouse is a brutal killer."

Cre'llan gave a little nod, the barest smile showing.

Sorrel stood, nervous hands clenching into fists. She looked vulnerable and sweet and very sorry. The beginnings of recognition showed in the blue-white eyes, and she started to stare at the J'Jal, catching herself now and forcing her eyes to drop.

"And something else was obvious," Pamir mentioned. "Pretty much from the beginning, I should think."

With a dry little voice, Cre'llan asked, "What was obvious?"

"From the beginning," Pamir repeated.

"What do you mean?" Sorrel asked.

"Okay," Pamir said, watching her face and the nervous fists. "Let's suppose that I'm killing your husbands. I want my rivals dead, and I want a reasonable chance of surviving to the end. Of course, I would start with Cre'llan. Since he enjoys the most security... better than everyone else combined, probably... I would hit him before he could smell a danger..."

That earned a cold silence.

Pamir shook his head. "The killer wants the husbands out of your life. From the start, I think he knew exactly what was required. The other ten husbands had to be murdered, since they loved you deeply and you seemed to love them. But this J'Jal... well, he's a different conundrum entirely, I'm guessing..."

Cre'llan appeared interested but distant. When he breathed, it was after a long breathless pause, and he sounded a little weak when he said, "I don't know what you are talking about."

"You told me," Pamir said to Sorrel.

"WhatdidI-?"

"How you met him during the cruise. And what happened to you and your good friend just before you went to bed with this alien man — "

"I don't understand," she muttered.

Cre'llan snapped, "Be quiet."

Pamir felt a pleasant nervousness in his belly. "Cre'llan wanted you, I'm guessing. He wanted you badly. You were a wealthy, unattached human woman — the J'Jal adore our species — and you would bring

him a fair amount of status. But to seduce you... well, he needed help. Which is why he paid your friend to vanish on the ice in Greenland, faking her own death...

"He wanted to expose you emotionally, with a dose of mortality—"

"Stop that," she told him.

Cre'llan said, "Idiot," and little more.

"The AI guide was right," Pamir told her. "The chances of a mind surviving the weight of that ice and the grinding against the hyperfiber shards... well, I found it remarkable to learn that your good friend was found alive.

"So I made a few inquiries.

"I can show you, if you wish. A trail of camouflaged funds leads from your friend back to a company formed just hours before her death. The mysterious company made a single transfer of funds, declared bankruptcy and then dissolved. Your friend was the recipient. She was reborn as a very wealthy soul, and the principal stockholder in that short-lived company happened to have been someone with whom your first lover and husband does quite a lot of business."

Sorrel sat motionless. Her mouth closed and opened, in slow motion, and then it began to close again. Her legs tried to find the strength to carry her away, but she looked about for another moment or two, finding no door or hatchway to slip through in the next little while. She was caught, trapped by things awful and true. And then, just as Pamir thought that she would crack into pieces, the young woman surprised him.

Calmly, she told Cre'llan, "I divorce you."

"Darling—?" he began.

"Forever," she said. And then she pulled from a pocket what seemed like an ordinary knife. Which it was. A sapphire blade no longer than her hand was unfolded, and it took her ten seconds to cut the Darmion crystal out of her chest—ripped free for the second time in as many days—and then before she collapsed, she flung the gory gift at the stunned and sorry face.

XIV

Pamir explained what had happened as he carried her into her apartment. Then he set her on a great round bed, pillows offering themselves to her head while a small autodoc spider-walked its way across the pale blue sheets, studying her half-healed wound, then with more penetrating eyes, carefully examining the rest of her body. Quietly, the apartment offered, "I have never known her to be this way." In his long life, Pamir had rarely seen any person as depressed, as forlorn. Sorrel was pale and motionless, lying on her back, and even with her eyes open, something in her gaze was profoundly blind. She saw nothing, heard nothing. She was like a person flung off the topmost portion of Fall Away, tumbling out of control, gusts of wind occasionally slamming her against the hard walls, battering a soul that couldn't feel the abuse anymore.

"I am worried," the apartment confessed.

"Reasonable," Pamir replied.

"It must be a horrid thing, losing everyone who loves you."

"But someone still loves her," he countered. Then he paused, thinking hard about everything again.

"Tell me," he said. "What is your species-strain?"

"Is that important?"

"Probably not," said Pamir.

The AI described its pedigree, in brief.

"What's your lot number?"

"I do not see how that matters."

"Never mind," he said, walking away from their patient. "I already know enough as it is."

Pamir ate a small meal and drank some sweet alien nectar that left him feeling a little sloppy. When the head cleared, he slept for a minute or an hour, and then he returned to the bedroom and the giant bed. Sorrel was where he had left her. Her eyes were closed now, empty hands across her belly, rising and falling and rising with a slow steady rhythm that he couldn't stop watching.

"Thank you."

The voice didn't seem to belong to anyone. The young woman's mouth happened to be open, but it didn't sound like the voice he expected. It was sturdy and calm, the old sadness wiped away. It was a quiet polite and rather sweet voice that told him, "Thank you," and then added, "For everything, sir."

The eyes hadn't opened.

She had heard Pamir approach, or felt his presence.

He sat on the bed beside her, and after a long moment said, "You know. You'd be entitled to consider me—whoever I am—as being your main suspect. I could have killed the husbands. And I certainly put an end to you and Cre'llan."

"It isn't you."

"Because you have another suspect in mind. Isn't that it?"

She said nothing.

"Who do you believe is responsible?" he pressed.

Finally, the eyes pulled open, slowly, and they blinked twice, tears pooling but never quite reaching the point where they would flow.

"My father," she said.

"He killed your husbands?"

"Obviously."

"He's light-years behind us now."

Silence.

Pamir nodded, and after a moment, he asked, "What do you know about your father?"

"Quite a lot," she claimed.

"But you've never seen him," he reminded her.

"I have studied him." She shook her head and closed her eyes again. "I've examined his biography as well as I can, and I think I know him pretty well."

"He isn't here, Sorrel."

"No?"

"He emigrated before you were even born."

"That's what my mother told me, yes."

"What else?" Pamir leaned closer, adding, "What did she tell you about the man...?"

"He is strong and self-assured. That he knows what is right and best. And he loves me very much, but he couldn't stay with me." Sorrel chewed on her lip for a moment. "He couldn't stay here, but my father has agents and ways, and I would never be without him. Mother promised me."

Pamir just nodded.

"My father doesn't approve of the Faith."

"I can believe that," he said.

"My mother admitted, once or twice... that she loved him very much, but he doesn't have a diplomat's ease with aliens. And his heart can be hard, and he has a capacity to do awful things, if he sees the need..."

"No," Pamir whispered.

The pale blue eyes opened. "What do you mean?"

"Your father didn't do any of this," he promised. Then he thought again, saying, "Well, maybe a piece of it."

"What do you mean —?"

Pamir set his hand on top of her mouth, lightly. Then as he began to pull his hand back, she took hold of his wrist and forearm, easing the palm back down against lips that pulled apart, teeth giving him a tiny swift bite.

A J'Jal gesture, that was.

He bent down and kissed the open eyes.

Sorrel told him, "You shouldn't."

"Probably not."

"If the murderer knows you are with me —"

He placed two fingers deep into her mouth, J'Jal fashion. And she sucked on them, not trying to speak

now, eyes almost smiling as Pamir calmly and smoothly slid into bed beside her.

XV

One of the plunging rivers pulled close to the wall, revealing what it carried. Inside the diamond tube was a school of finned creatures, not pseudofish nor pseudowhales, but instead a collection of teardrop-shaped machines that probably fused hydrogen in their hearts, producing the necessary power to hold their bodies steady inside a current that looked relentless, rapid and chaotic, turbulent and exceptionally unappealing.

Pamir watched the swimming machines for a moment, deciding that this was rather how he had lived for ages now.

With a shrug and a soft laugh, he continued the long walk up the path, moving past a collection of modest apartments. The library was just a few meters farther along—a tiny portal carved into the smooth black basaltic wall. Its significance was so well hidden that a thousand sightseers passed this point every day, perhaps pausing at the edge of the precipice to look down, but more likely continuing on their walk, searching richer views. Pamir turned his eyes toward the closed doorway, pretending a mild curiosity. Then he stood beside the simple wall that bordered the outer edge of the trail, hands on the chill stone, eyes gazing down at the dreamy shape of the Little-Lot.

The massive cloud was the color of butter and nearly as dense. A trillion trillion microbes thrived inside its aerogel matrix, supporting an ecosystem that would never touch a solid surface.

The library door swung open—J'Jal wood riding on creaky iron hinges.

Pamir opened a nexus and triggered an old, nearly forgotten captain's channel. Then he turned towards the creaking sound and smiled. Sorrel was emerging from the library, dressed in a novice's blue robe and blinking against the sudden glare. The massive door fell shut again, and quietly, she said to him, "All right."

Pamir held a finger to his closed mouth.

She stepped closer and through a nexus told him, "I did what you told me."

"Show it."

She produced the slender blue book.

"Put it on the ground here."

This was her personal journal—the only volume she was allowed to remove from the library. She set it in front of her sandaled feet, and then asked, "Was I noticed, do you think?"

"I promise. You were seen."

"And do we just wait now?"

He shook his head. "No, no. I'm far too impatient for that kind of game."

The plasma gun was barely awake when he fired it, turning plastic pages and the wood binding into a thin cloud of superheated ash.

Sorrel put her arms around herself, squeezing hard.

"Now we wait," he advised.

Not for the first time, she admitted, "I don't understand. Still. Who do you think is responsible?"

Again, the heavy door swung open.

Without looking, Pamir called out, "Hello, Leon'rd."

The J'Jal librarian wore the same purplish-black robe and blue ponytail, and his expression hadn't changed in the last few days—a bilious outrage focused on those who would injure his helpless dependents. He stared at the ruins of the book, and then he glared at the two humans, focusing on the male face until a vague recognition tickled.

"Do I know you?" he began.

Pamir was wearing the same face he had worn for the last thirty-two years. A trace of a smile was showing, except around the dark eyes. Quietly, fiercely, he said, "I found my wife, and thanks for the help."

Leon'rd stared at Sorrel, his face working its way through a tangle of wild emotions. "Your wife?" he sputtered.

Then he tipped his head, saying, "No, she is not."

"You know that?" Pamir asked.

The J'Jal didn't respond.

"What do you know, Leon'rd?"

For an instant, Leon'rd glanced back across a shoulder—not at the library door but at the nearby apartments. The man was at his limits. He seemed frail and tentative, hands pressing at the front of his robe while the long toes curled under his bare feet. Everything was apparent. Transparent. Obvious. And into this near-panic, Pamir said, "I know what you did."

"No," the J'Jal replied, without confidence.

"You learned something," Pamir continued. "You are a determined scholar and a talented student of other species, and some years ago, by design or by dumb luck, you unraveled something. Something that was supposed to be a deep, impenetrable secret."

"No."

"A secret about my wife," he said.

Sorrel blinked, asking, "What is it?"

Pamir laughed harshly. "Tell her," he advised.

The blood had drained out of Leon'rd's face.

"No, I agree," Pamir continued. "Let's keep this between you and me, shall we? Because she doesn't have any idea, either—"

"About what?" the woman cried out.

"She is not your wife," the librarian snapped.

"The hell she isn't." He laughed. "Check the public records. Two hours ago, in a civil ceremony overseen by two Hyree monks, we were made woman and male-impliment in a legally binding manner—"

"What do you know about me?" Sorrel pressed.

Pamir ignored her. Staring at the J'Jal, he said, "But somebody else knows what we do. Doesn't he? Because you told him. In passing, you said a few words. Perhaps. Unless of course you were the one who devised this simple, brutal plan, and he is simply your accomplice."

"No!" Leon'rd screamed. "I did not dream anything."

"I might believe you." Pamir glanced at Sorrel, showing a tiny wink. "When I showed him an image of one of your dead husbands, his reaction wasn't quite right. I saw surprise, but the J'Jal eyes betrayed a little bit of pleasure, too. Or relief, was it? Leon'rd? Were you genuinely thrilled to believe that Sele'ium was dead and out of your proverbial hair?"

The librarian looked pale and cold, arms clasped tight against his shivering body. Again, he glanced at the nearby apartments. His mouth opened and then pulled itself closed, and then Pamir said, "Death."

"What did you say?" Leon'rd asked.

"There are countless wonderful and inventive ways to fake your own death," Pamir allowed. "But one of my favorites is to clone your body and cook an empty, soulless brain, and then stuff that brain inside that living body, mimicking a very specific kind of demise."

"Sele'ium?" said Sorrel.

"What I think." Pamir was guessing, but none of the leaps were long or unlikely. "I think your previous husband was a shrewd young man. He grew up in a family that had lived among the harum-scarums. That's where his lineage came from, wasn't it, Leon'rd? So it was perfectly natural, even inevitable, that he could entertain thoughts about killing the competition, including his own identity..."

"Tell me what you know," Sorrel begged.

"Almost nothing," Pamir assured. "Leon'rd is the one who is carrying all the dark secrets on his back. Ask him."

The J'Jal covered his face with his hands. "Go away," he whimpered.

"Was Sele'ium a good friend of yours and you were trying to help? Or did he bribe you for this useful information?" Pamir nodded, adding, "Whatever happened, you pointed him toward Sorrel, and you must have explained, 'She is perhaps the most desirable mate on the Great Ship —"

A sizzling blue bolt of plasma struck his face, melting it and obliterating everything beyond.

The headless body wobbled for a moment and then slumped and dropped slowly, settling against the black wall, and Leon'rd leaped backwards, while Sorrel stood over the remains of her newest husband, her expression tight but calm —like the face of a sailor who has already ridden through countless storms.

XVI

Sele'ium looked like a pedestrian wandering past, his gaze distracted and his manner a little nervous. He seemed embarrassed by the drama that he had happened upon. He looked human. The cold blond hair and purplish-black skin were common on high-UV worlds, while the brown eyes were as ordinary as

could be. He wore sandals and trousers and a loose-fitting shirt, and he stared at the destroyed body, seeing precisely what he expected to see. Then he glanced at Sorrel, and with a mixture of warmth and pure menace, he said, "You do not know... you cannot... how much I love you..."

She recoiled in horror.

He started to speak again, to explain himself.

"Get away!" she snapped. "Leave me alone!"

His reaction was to shake his head with his mouth open—a J'Jal refusal—and then he calmly informed her, "I am an exceptionally patient individual."

Which wrung a laugh out of her, bitter and thin.

"Not today, no," he conceded. "And not for a thousand years, perhaps. But I will approach you with a new face and name—every so often, I will come to you—and there will be an hour and a certain heartbeat when you come to understand that we belong to one another—"

The corpse kicked at the empty air.

Sele'ium glanced at what he had done, mildly perturbed by the distraction. Then slowly, he realized that the corpse was shrinking, as if it were a balloon slowly losing its breath. How odd. He stared at the mysterious phenomenon, not quite able to piece together what should have been obvious. The headless ruin twitched hard and then harder, one shrinking leg flinging high. And then from blackened wound rose a puff of blue smoke, and with it, the stink of burnt rubber and cooked hydraulics.

With his left hand, Sele'ium yanked the plasma gun from inside his shirt—a commercial model meant to be used as a tool, but with its safeties cut away—and he turned in a quick circle, searching for a valid target.

"What is it?" Leon'rd called out.

"Do you see him — ?"

"Who?"

The young J'Jal was more puzzled than worried. He refused to let himself panic, his mind quickly ticking off the possible answers, settling on what would be easiest and best.

In the open air, of course.

"Just leave us," Leon'rd begged. "I will not stand by any longer!"

Sele'ium threw five little bolts into the basalt wall, punching out holes and making a rain of white-hot magma.

Somewhere below, a voice howled.

Sorrel ran to the wall and looked down, and Sele'ium crept beside her, the gun in both hands, its reactor pumping energies into a tiny chamber, readying a blast that would obliterate everything in its path.

He started to peer over, and then thought better of it.

One hand released the weapon and the arm wrapped around Sorrel's waist, and when she flung her

elbow into his midsection, he bent low. He grunted and cursed softly and then told her, "No."

With his full weight, he drove the woman against the smooth black wall, and together, his face on her left shoulder, they bent and peered over the edge.

Pamir grabbed the plasma gun, yanking hard.

And Sorrel made herself jump.

Those two motions combined to lift her and Sele'ium off the path, over the edge and plummeting down. Pamir's gecko-grip was ripped loose from the basalt, and he was falling with them, one hand on the gun, clinging desperately, while the other arm began to swing, throwing its fist into the killer's belly and ribs. Within moments, they were falling as fast as possible. A damp singing wind blew past them, and the wall was a black smear to one side, and the rest of Fall Away was enormous and distant and almost changeless. The airborne rivers and a thousand flying machines were out of reach and useless. The three of them fell and fell, and sometimes a voice would pass through the roaring wind—a spectator standing on the path, remarking in alarm, "Who were they?" Three bodies, clinging and kicking. Sele'ium punished Pamir with his own free hand, and then he let himself be pulled closer, and with a mouth that wasn't more than a few days old, he bit down on a wrist, hard, trying to force the stranger to release his hold on the plasma gun.

Pamir cried out and let go.

But as Sele'ium aimed at his face, for his soul, Pamir slammed at the man's forearm and pushed it backwards again, and he put a hard knee into the elbow, and a weapon that didn't have safeties released its stored energies, a thin blinding beam that coalesced inside the dying man's head, his brain turning to light and ash, a supersonic *crack* leaving the others temporarily deafened.

Pamir kicked the corpse away and clung to Sorrel, and she held tight to him, and after another few minutes, as they plunged toward the yellow depths of a living, thriving cloud, he shouted into her better ear, explaining a thing or two.

XVII

Again, it was nearly nightfall.

Once again, Pamir sat outside his apartment, listening to the wild songs of the llano vibra. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. Neighbors strolled past or ran past or flew by on gossamer wings. The janusian couple paused long enough to ask where he had been these last days, and Pamir said a few murky words about taking care of family troubles. The harum-scarum family was outside their apartment, gathered around a cooking pit, eating a living passion ox in celebration of another day successfully crossed. A collection of machines stopped to ask about the facsimile that they had built for Pamir, as a favor. Did it serve its intended role? "Oh, sure," he said with a nod. "Everybody was pretty much fooled, at least until the joke was finished."

"Was there laughter?" asked one machine.

"Constant, breathless laughter," Pamir swore. And then he said nothing else about it.

A single figure was approaching. He had been watching her for the last kilometer, and as the machines wandered away, he used three different means to study her gait and face and manner. Then he considered his options, and he decided to remain sitting where he was, his back against the huge ceramic pot and his legs stretched out before him, one bare foot crossed over the other.

She stopped a few steps short, watching him but saying nothing.

"You're thinking," Pamir told her. "Throw me into the brig, or throw me off the ship entirely. That's what you're thinking now."

"But we had an agreement," Miocene countered. "You were supposed to help somebody, and you have, and you most definitely have earned your payment as well as my thanks."

"Yeah," he said, "but I know you. And you're asking yourself, 'Why not get rid of him and be done with it?'"

The First Chair was wearing a passenger's clothes and a face slightly disguised, eyes blue and the matching hair curled into countless tight knots, the cheeks and mouth widened but nothing about the present smile any warmer than any other smile that had ever come from this hard, hard creature.

"You know me," she muttered.

A moment later, she asked, "Will you tell me who you are?"

"Don't you know yet?"

She shook her head, and with a hint of genuine honesty, she admitted, "Nor do I particularly care, one way or the other."

Pamir grinned and leaned back a little more.

"I suppose I could place you in custody," Miocene continued. "But a man with your skills and obvious luck... well, you probably have twelve different ways to escape from our detention centers. And if I sent you falling onto a colony world or an alien world... I suppose in another thousand years or so, you would find your way back again, like a dog or an ugly habit."

"Fair points," he admitted.

Then with a serious, warm voice, he asked, "How is Sorrel?"

"That young woman? As I understand it, she has put her apartment up for sale, and she has already moved away. I'm not sure where — "

"Bullshit," he interrupted.

Miocene grinned, just for a moment. "Perhaps I do have an idea or two. About who you might be..."

"She knows now."

The woman's face seemed to narrow, and the eyes grew larger and less secure. "Knows what?" she managed.

"Who her father is," said Pamir. "Her true father, I mean."

"One man's conjecture," the First Chair reminded him. Then with a dismissive shake of the head, she added, "A young woman in a gullible moment might believe you. But she won't find any corroboration, not for the next thousand years... and eventually, she will have to believe what she has always believed..."

"Maybe."

Miocene shrugged. "It's hardly your concern now. Is it?"

"Perhaps it isn't," he allowed. Then as the overhead lights flickered for the first time, he sat up straighter. "The thief was your idea, wasn't he? The one who came to steal away the Darmion crystal?"

"And why would I arrange such a thing?"

"What happened afterwards was exactly what you were hoping for," he said. "An apparently random crime leaves Sorrel trusting me, and the two of us emotionally linked to each other."

With a narrow grin, Miocene admitted, "But I was wrong in one way."

"Were you?"

"I assumed that the killer, whoever he was, would likely put an end to you. Exposing himself in the process, of course."

A second ripple of darkness passed along the avenue. Pamir showed her a stern face, and quietly, he said, "Madam First Chair. You have always been a remarkable and wondrously awful bitch."

"I didn't know it was Sele'ium," she admitted.

"And you didn't know why he was killing the husbands, either." Pamir stood up now, slowly. "Because the old librarian, Leon'rd, pieced together who Sorrel was. He told Sele'ium what he had learned, and he mentioned that Sorrel's father was a woman, and as it happens, that woman is the second most important person onboard the Great Ship."

"There are some flaws in the public records, yes." She nodded, adding, "These are problems that I'm taking care of now."

"Good," he said.

Miocene narrowed her gaze. "And yes, I am a difficult soul. The bitch queen, and so on. But what I do in my life is enormous and very complicated, and for a multitude of good reasons, it is best if my daughter remains apart from my life and from me."

"Maybe so," he allowed.

"Look at these last few days. Do you need more reasons than this?" she asked. Then she took a step closer, adding, "But you are wrong, in one critical matter. Whoever you are."

"Wrong where?"

"You assume I wanted you to be killed, and that's wrong. It was a possibility and a risk. But as a good captain, I had to consider the possibility and make contingency plans, just in case." She took another little step, saying, "No, what all of this has been... in addition to everything else that it seems to have been... is what I have to call an audition."

"An audition?" Pamir muttered, genuinely puzzled.

"You seem to be a master at disappearing," Miocene admitted. Then she took one last step, and in a whisper, she said, "There may come a day when I cannot protect my daughter anymore, and she'll need to vanish in some profound and eternal fashion..."

A third ripple of darkness came, followed by the full seamless black of night.

"That's your task, if you wish to take it," she said, speaking into the darkness. "Whoever you happen to be... are you there, can you hear me...?"

XVIII

Sorrel had been walking for weeks, crossing the Indigo Desert one step at a time. She traveled alone with her supplies in a floating pack tied to her waist. It was ten years later, or ten thousand. She had some trouble remembering how much time had passed, which was a good thing. She felt better in most ways, and the old pains had become familiar enough to be ignored. She was even happy, after a fashion. And while she strolled upon the fierce landscape of fire-blasted stone and purple succulents, she would sing, sometimes human songs and occasionally tunes that were much harder to manage and infinitely more beautiful.

One afternoon, she heard notes answering her notes.

Coming over the crest of a sharp ridge, she saw something utterly unexpected—a thick luxurious stand of irrigated llano vibra.

Louder now, the vegetation sang to her.

She started to approach.

In the midst of the foliage, a shape was sitting. A human shape, perhaps. Male, by the looks of it. Sitting with his back to her, his face totally obscured by the shaggy black hair. Yet he seemed rather familiar, for some reason. Familiar in the best ways, and Sorrel stepped faster now, and smiled, and with a parched voice, she tried to sing in time with the alien weed.