

The Gabble by Neal Asher

The curious creature that Neal Asher first introduced to Asimov's in "Softly Spoke the Gabbleduck" (August 2005) reappears along with a new mystery in his latest story for us. Inspiration for the gabble stemmed from some ideas first arising in his novel *The Line of Polity*, then touched on in *Brass Man*, and now being pursued in his current book project, *Polity Agent*. Neal's latest, non-gabble novel, *The Voyage of the Sable Keech* is just out from Tor. Another book, *The Engineer ReConditioned* is due out from Cosmos Books. Drop by his website freespace.virgin.net/n.asher for more information.

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The shimmer-shield visor was the most advanced Jonas had been able to acquire. It only occasionally caught the light as if to let him know it was still there, it allowed a breath of the native air through to his face as he guided this clunky aerofan over the landscape--the breather unit only adding the extra 10 percent oxygen he required--and he could actually experience the damp mephitic smell of the swampland below. This would be the closest he could get to this world, Masada, without some direct augmentation.

Jonas looked around. The sky was a light aubergine, the nebula a static explosion across it fading now with the rise of the sun, ahead of which the gas giant Calypse was in ascent: an opalescent orb of red, gold, and green. Below him a flat plain of flute grasses was broken by muddy gullies like a cracked pastry crust over some black pie. From up here the grasses looked little different from tall reeds reaching the end of their season. The reason for their name only became evident when Jonas spotted the monitor transport and brought his aerofan down to land beside it. The grasses tilted away from the blast of the fan, skirling an unearthly chorus. The hollow stems were holed down their length where their side branches had dropped away earlier in the season. Thus each one played its own tune.

Settling on a rhizome mat, the fan spattered mud all around as it wound down to a stop. Jonas waited for that to finish before opening the safety gate and stepping down. The mat was firm under his feet--this might as well have been solid ground. He looked across. Three individuals stood in a trampled clearing, whilst a third squatted beside something on the ground. Jonas walked over, raising a hand when he recognized Monitor Mary Cole turning to glance toward him. She spoke a few quiet words to her companions, then wandered over.

"Jonas." She smiled. He rather liked her smile: there was no pretension in it, no authoritarian air behind it. She was an ECS monitor here to do a job, so she knew the extent and limitations of her power, and felt no need to belittle others. "This is not what I would call the most auspicious start to your studies here, but I knew you would be interested."

"What's this all about, Mary? I just got a message via aug to come and meet you at these coordinates to see something of interest to me."

She shrugged as they turned to walk toward the clearing. "That was from B'Tana. He likes rubbing people's noses in the rougher side of our job whenever the opportunity presents." She glanced at him. "Are you squeamish?"

"I've been working for Taxonomy as a field biologist for fifty-three years. What have you got here?"

"A corpse, or rather, some remains."

Jonas halted. "Should I be here, then?"

"Don't worry. This is not murder and you won't be bringing any contamination to a crime scene. We got everything that happened here on sateye shortly after he screamed for help over his aug."

Entering the clearing, Jonas glanced around. No doubt about what that red stuff was staining the flattened grasses and spattering nearby upright stalks. Mary held back to talk to one of her companions while Jonas walked forward to stand beside the man working with the remains. There were fragments of bone scattered all about, the shredded rags of an envirosuit, one boot. The skull lay neatly divided in half, stripped clean, sucked dry.

"May I?" Jonas asked, gesturing to the bone fragments.

The man looked up from the handheld scanner he was running over the rhizome mat. Beside him rested a tray containing a chrome aug, a wristcom and a QC hand laser--all still bloody.

"Certainly--*he's* past caring."

Jonas immediately nailed the forensic investigator as a Golem android. That was the way it was sometimes: a disparity between speech, breathing, movement, maybe even a lack of certain pheromones in the air. It never took him long to see through human emulation programs. He turned his attention to the fragments, squatted down, and picked one up. It was a piece of thigh bone: as if someone had marked out a small diamond on that bone, drilled closely along the markings with a three millimeter bit, down to the marrow, then chiseled the piece free.

"Hooder," he said.

"Medium sized," the Golem replied.

Jonas turned to him. "Who was this?" He nodded toward the remains.

The Golem winced and glanced toward Mary Cole, then said, "A xenologist who came here to study mud snakes. We lose between five and ten each year."

Jonas called over to Mary, "Is this what you would call an educational outing for me?"

Glancing over she said, "Jonas, you would not have been sent here if you needed that." She nodded to her companions and they headed back toward the transport, then she came over and gestured at the remains. "We get them all the time. They upload skills then come here thinking they're going to brilliantly solve all the puzzles. You, as you say, have worked for Taxonomy for fifty-three years. The maximum experiential upload is less than a year--enough for a language or some small branch of one of the sciences."

Jonas watched the Golem stand, extend the head of his scanner on a telescopic arm, and begin swinging like a metal detector.

"I upload," he observed.

"Yes, on top of your fifty-three years of experience."

"Granted," he said. "So you get a lot like this?"

"Certainly--there's a great deal here to study."

Jonas knew that. Prior to twenty years ago, this world had been Out-polity and ruled by a vicious theocracy. With the help of undercover ECS agents, rebels managed a ballot of the planetary population, the result of which was the Polity subsuming this world. But events had been somewhat complicated. During that time, some biophysicist had come here in a stolen Polity dreadnought and caused all sorts of mayhem. Jonas did not know the details--all he knew was that it had taken ECS twenty years to clear up the mess, and that some areas of the planet were still under quarantine. Also, at about the same time, one of the four spheres of a transgalactic alien bioconstruct called Dragon had arrived and suicided on the planet's surface, and, in the process, out of its mass, created a new race: dracomen. These creatures alone were worthy of centuries of study. They used direct protein replication rather than some form of DNA transcription and could mentally control their body growth and substantially alter their offspring. Their initial shape was based on a human thought-experiment: what might dinosaurs have been like if there had been no extinction and they had followed the evolutionary path of humans. But, besides these, the planet boasted much weird fauna: the tricones forever churning the soil, a multitude of herbivores, mud snakes, siluroynes, heroynes, hooders, and the decidedly strange gableducks. And those were only the larger wild creatures.

"Do you know if there are any instructions concerning his remains?" Jonas asked.

"We will know, soon enough," said the Golem. He was squatting down now, digging at the ground with a small trowel. After a moment he stood, holding up some item about the size of a little finger.

"Memplant?" Jonas suggested.

The Golem nodded.

Jonas turned back to Mary. "I'd like to make some recordings and measurements, and take a few samples. That okay?"

"That's fine. And if he has no special requirements concerning his physical remains I'll have Gryge," she gestured to the Golem, "box them up for you."

"And a copy of the sat-eye recording?"

"Certainly."

"Thanks."

Jonas headed back to the aerofan for his holocorder and sampling equipment. He did not suppose he would learn anything new here, or from the recording--it would just be more

information to feed Rodol's appetite. The AI was already digesting everything the locals knew about hooders, plus twenty years of ECS data, but its hunger was never satisfied.

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Shardelle noted that within the last hour another forty-three linguists had come online, but that hour had also seen off sixty-two. Their number, now standing at just over seven hundred thousand, was in steady decline in the network. Comparative analyses with just about every language on record had been made. New languages had been generated for comparison--still no joy. Syntactic programs ranging from the deeply esoteric to the plain silly had been employed, but they had not come close to cracking one word or a hint of a morpheme, of what was now being called The Gabble.

What precisely did *Yaw-craggle flog nabble goop* mean, or *Scrzzz-besumber fleeble*? Even the AIs seemed to be failing, and they were making comparative analyses across a huge range of data: an enormous list of environmental parameters including the creature's location, the ambient temperature, variations in air mix, what the creature was looking at, hearing, smelling, or otherwise sensing; the time of the day or night, what objects were in the sky; variations in the speakers themselves including size, sex, number of limbs and what they happened to be doing with them at the time, what had happened to them earlier. Occasionally concurrence did occur. Two gableducks had said *yabber*, while peering into the distance and gesturing with one clawed limb. There had been other concurrences too. But utterly bewildering was that, statistically, if the five hundred creatures under scrutiny had been generating random noise, there should be more concurrences than this. It was a maddeningly negative result. Shardelle, however, felt this was a negative that must indicate *something*.

Shardelle disconnected her aug from the linguistic network and at once her sight and hearing returned. Plumped in a comfortable chair, she glanced around inside her ATV, but inevitably her gaze centered on the screen that was presently showing the view from holocam 107. This one was her favorite gableduck--the biggest and weirdest of them all. The creature was sitting in a stand of flute grass and in this pose its body was pyramidal. Its three pairs of forelimbs were folded monkishly over the jut of its lower torso, one fore-talon of one huge black claw seemingly beating time to some unheard song. Its domed head was tilted down, its duck bill against its chest. Some of its tiara of emerald eyes were closed. Obviously it was taking time out to digest its latest meal, the bones of which lay neatly stacked beside it.

What was known about this creature? Its double helical Masadan equivalent of DNA was enormously long and contained coding enough for every species on this planet. But the sheer quantity of coding material did not necessarily mean the creature was complex--most of this could be parasitic and junk DNA. The first researchers into human DNA had been somewhat surprised to discover that lizards, lungfish, and ferns possessed substantially more DNA than themselves, and that they had no more than common grass. What it did mean, however, was that as a species the gableducks were very old.

They were omnivores; often supplementing their diet with flute grass rhizomes, fungi, and, oddly, anything shiny on which they could lay their claws. They possessed complex voice boxes, and as was already demonstrable, there seemed no reason for this. Also, on the whole, they were solitary creatures and spoke only to themselves. When they met it was usually only to mate or fight, or both. There was also no reason for them to carry structures in their skulls

capable of handling vastly complex languages. Two thirds of their large convoluted brains they seemed hardly to use at all. In short: they were a puzzle.

Shardelle stood, walked along the metal floor of the ATV and climbed up into the chainglass bubble of the cockpit. Checking the map screen, she noted the transponder positions for the two hooders in the area, then chose a route to take her back to the Tagreb complex that avoided them completely. She had seen what had happened to an ATV and its four occupants when they had ignored this simple rule and driven close to one of the creatures for a look--or rather, she had seen the torn and very small fragments that remained of both people and vehicle. Taking up the joystick she drove herself rather than be guided in by Rodol. As an afterthought, she mentally sent the detach sequence to her aug and removed the chrome slug of sophisticated computer hardware from the side of her head. She had some thinking to do and found that easier while driving, bare-brained.

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Taxonomic and genetic research bases, or Tagrebs, looked like giant iron tulip flowers when stored in the vast hold of the research vessel *Beagle Infinity*. Launched, a Tagreb maintained its shape during entry into a planetary atmosphere while its AI came online. The AI then slowed the Tagreb in lower atmosphere with fusion thrusters before finally descending on the chosen location using gravmotors. Upon landing, the flower opened, folding four petals down to the ground. From this, five plasmel domes inflated--one at the center and one over each petal. Their internal structures--floors, ceilings, walls, and stairs--were inflated at the same time. The AI then took a look around to decide how best to continue.

Rodol, aware of the problems Masada might present, first injected a thick layer of a resin matrix into the boggy ground below to protect the base from the depredations of tricones--molluscan creatures that, given time, could grind their way through just about anything--before injecting the same substance into the hollow walls and floors of the structure itself. Next the AI woke its telefactors, which immediately took the requisite materials outside the base to construct an electrified perimeter fence and four gun towers. Unusually, these towers were supplied in this case with proton cannons capable of punching holes through thick armor, for some of the natives were anything but friendly. After three days the base was ready for the next stage. Automated landers descended inside the fence and the telefactors began bringing in supplies: food, bedding, nanoscopes, full immersion VR suites, soaps and gels, nano micro and submacro assembler rigs, an aspidistra in a pot, autodocs, autofactories, holocams, coffee makers.... Every item was slotted into its place or plugged in.

On day five a hooder came to investigate, attacked the fence, then retreated leaving its rear segment behind--incinerated by one of the cannons. On day six Rodol brought the fusion reactor fully online, supplying power to the multitude of sockets throughout the base. Lights, embedded in the ceilings, were ready to come on. Sanitary facilities were ready to recycle waste. Rodol stabbed filter heads down into the ground to suck up water, which was first cracked for its oxygen to bring the internal atmosphere to requirements, and thereafter pumped into holding tanks. The humans, haimans, and Golem arrived shortly afterward; disembarking from shuttles with massive hover trunks gliding along behind them. Only a few days after was it discovered that the five gravplatforms were not nearly enough for those who wanted to do field work. Grudgingly, Rodol cleared Polity funds to pay the local population for twenty aerofans and five fat-tired all-terrain vehicles.

Jonas arrived on foot, having been on the planet for six months getting to know the locals and many of the ECS monitors still assigned here. Six months later he raised in celebration a glass of malt whisky to the scene beyond the panoramic window of his upper dome apartment and laboratory. It was in a befuddled state that two hours later he received the message through his aug.

"Hi Jonas," said Mary Cole.

She was standing in the middle of his apartment--to his perception, for the augram was being played directly into his mind.

"Hello Mary." He toasted her with his glass.

"This is not real time or interactive so don't bother asking questions. I just want you to know that one of our coastal survey drones picked up precisely what you want, here..." The location downloaded into his aug. "That's only five hundred and thirty kilometers from you. Have a nice one."

As the image blinked out Jonas was already groping for his aldetox. "Rodol, I need the field autopsy gear, the big stuff, and I need it now!" he bellowed.

"What you require is available, but unfortunately the transport situation has not improved. All the gravplatforms are out and aerofans will not suffice," the AI replied.

Jonas gulped water to wash down the pills. He was already starting to feel sober even though the aldetox had yet to take effect. "What about the ATVs?"

"There are three here. Two require new drive shafts, which one of the autofactories is currently manufacturing. The other is assigned to Shardelle Garadon. Perhaps you should speak with her."

Jonas returned to his chair while the aldetox took effect. One of the ATVs had room enough to carry all the equipment he would require, initially, then came the problem of bringing specimens back. Perhaps he could get some help there from ECS? Something for a later date, he thought--plenty of work to do before then. After a moment he made a search for Shardelle's aug address, found it, and tried to make contact. Annoyingly her aug was offline. Instead, he found her apartment address within the Tagreb, stood, and unsteadily headed for the door.

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Fifteen hundred and thirty-two linguists remained: the hardcore. The rest dismissed The Gabble as having less meaning than the sounds lower animals made. At least those sounds had a reason, some logical syntax, some meaning related to alarm, pain, pleasure, or the basic "I'm over here, let's fuck."

Unfortunately only a third of that hardcore consisted of linguists who Shardelle felt had anything meaningful to contribute. Of those, one Kroval--a haiman based on Earth who, in the silicon part of his mind, held nearly every known language in existence--had the most to contribute. His analysis fined down to, "The phonemes are 80 percent the anglic of Masada,

and their disconnection from coherent meaning seems almost deliberate. I can say with certainty that they are not parroting the language, and perhaps a degree of understandable human paranoia engendered by the unknown, or possibly unknowable, leads me to feel they might be deriding it."

The latest offering from a small group of the others, who Shardelle labeled the lunatic fringe, had been, "It must be what is not said: meaning can be attributed to the synergetic whole of negatives. We just need to isolate the network of disaffirmative monads in a..." and so it had continued until the speaker in question seemed in danger of disappearing up his own backside. It was this last that had led Shardelle to disconnect her aug and cast it aside.

They seemed to be getting nowhere. In fact, over the last six months, more imponderables had entered the equation. On the biological front little more was known than had been obtained by close scanning and sampling, and that had cost them fourteen mobile scanners and seven beetle-sized sampling drones--gobbleducks swatted them like flies and then, if they were shiny, ate them. What Shardelle had been waiting for, like so many others in the Tagreb, was a death. Other researchers had obtained their corpses: a siluroyne, a heroyne, and loads of mud snakes. But it seemed gobbleducks were in no hurry to die, and not one corpse or any remains had been picked up by the vast number of ECS drones constantly scanning the planet. Shardelle wondered about that: why so much scanning activity, why the quarantine areas still, what was it that ECS was keeping quiet? No matter, she had enough puzzles to concern her at present. Perhaps she should slip out one night with a pulse rifle and solve the corpse problem. The Gabble, and its source, frustrated her that much.

Time to sleep, she decided. Thinking like that was a sure way to get her expelled from the Tagreb and the planet. Nothing gets killed, unless in self-defense, until its sentience level has been properly assessed. Just then, as she was about to head for her bed, there came a hammering at her door. Shardelle grimaced and considered ignoring it, but there was urgency in that hammering--maybe the corpse? She opened the door expecting to see one of the others on her team. Who was this?

He held out a hand. "Jonas Clyde ... hooders. May I come in?"

Shardelle stood aside and waved him into her apartment. He looked younger than she had expected, but that meant nothing. His blond hair was cropped and he moved with athletic confidence. His face was tanned and his eyes electric green. His hands looked ... capable. He scanned around quickly, his gaze coming to rest on her screen. The big gobbleduck was lolloping through the flute grasses.

"Moves like a grizzly bear," he observed.

She, of course, recognized his name. Jonas Clyde was something of a legend in Taxonomy and usually studied exactly what he wanted on any new world. It had come as a pleasant surprise to Shardelle, upon hearing he was on this mission, that he had not chosen the gobbleducks.

"Substantially larger, though," she said, closing the door.

He obviously augged through to her screen control, for figures appeared along the bottom. "Eight tons--not something you'd want to be standing in the path of." He turned to her. "I hear they eat people."

"Chew, certainly ... coffee?" She walked over to her coffee maker--an antique almost three centuries old--and began making an espresso.

"Yes please--same for me. You say 'chew'?"

"Humans obviously disagree with their digestion, but if someone annoys them sufficiently they chew them up and spit out the pieces. But of course, like everything else with them, their behavior is puzzling. Gabbleducks have pursued human prey across hundreds of kilometers, for no particular reason, and killed them. There was one case of a hunter shooting a clip from an Optek into one creature and it ignoring him completely. A recent one we observed via holocam: a gabbleduck abandoned its territory, crossed five hundred kilometers, and drowned a pond worker in her squirm pond. We don't know why." Bringing two cups of espresso over, she nodded to her sofa. He sat down. Placing the cups on the table between, she took the armchair opposite. "I was surprised you did not choose them as your subject for study."

He grimaced. "They were my initial choice, but I have experience with dangerous fauna so it was suggested, rather strongly, that I choose the hooders. Obviously gabbleducks are dangerous, but not so lethal that it was felt necessary to fit every one with a transponder to know their locations."

"I see," Shardelle nodded, sipped her espresso. "So what can I do for you?"

"I want your ATV," he replied.

"Nothing if not direct. What for?"

"Hooders are long-lived and practically indestructible." He paused. "That's a puzzle too--we were told by the locals that when hooders reach a certain age they break into separate segments and each segment grows into a new hooter. This planet should be overrun with them ... perhaps some mechanism based on predator prey ratio...." He sat gazing off into space.

"You were saying," Shardelle prompted.

"Yes ... yes. They are practically indestructible but for one big fault. As you know, the sea tides here are vicious--the moons and Calypse all interact in that respect. Hooders sometimes stray down onto the eastern banks at low tide, get caught there, then washed into deep water where they eventually drown. It takes a while, but it's deep off the banks and hooders are very heavy."

"And?"

"Occasionally a hooter corpse will get dragged up by the bank current and deposited ashore."

"I see--you have your corpse."

"And no way of getting a large field autopsy kit to it."

Shardelle gazed up at the screen. "Where is it?"

Jonas touched his aug for a moment, frowned, then pointed. "Five hundred and thirty kilometers thataway--straight to the coast."

Shardelle nodded at the screen. "He is about three hundred kilometers in the same direction."

"Your point?"

"Of course you can use my ATV, but under one condition: I'm coming with you." Shardelle knew there was more to her decision than the gableduck's presence on the route. There was the escape from the frustration of her research, which in that moment seemed to have translated into sexual frustration.

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From the chainglass bubble cockpit Jonas glanced into the back of the ATV. Apparently these had been used as troop transports during the rebellion against the theocracy. Now either side of it was stacked from floor to ceiling with aluminum and plasmel boxes, strapped back against the sides, with only a narrow gangway leading back and elbowing right to the side door. It had been necessary for them to remove much of Shardelle's equipment, including the chair, but she did not seem to mind. He realized she was glad of this excuse for a journey to take her away from the meticulously boring research into gableduck biology, and the seemingly endless and fruitless analysis of The Gable.

"How long will it take us, do you think?" he asked, now looking ahead. They were leaving the Tagreb enclosure, rolling across an area of trammed flute grass through which new red-green shoots were spearing.

"How long do you want it to take?"

"Your meaning?"

"Sixty hours if we go non-stop. Rodol can guide the ATV during the night ... do you need sleep?"

"No--I'm asomnidapted."

"Ah, well I'm not." She glanced back. "I guess I could bed down there overnight."

Jonas shook his head. Now that they were on their way his urgency to get to the dead hooder had decreased. "No, let's stop during night time. I may not need to sleep, but I don't want to spend that length of time just sitting here. There's camping equipment in the back, so you can get your head down."

Shardelle guided the ATV down one of the many paths crushed through the flute grass and leading away from the Tagreb.

"And what will you do meanwhile?"

He tapped his aug. "Continue my research. Rodol is sequencing the hooder genome and transmitting the results to me. I'm running programs to isolate alleles and specific coding sequences. I intend to build a full virtual model of hooder growth."

"But first you need to be rid of the parasitic and junk DNA to get to the basic genome."

"Yeah, obviously--I've got programs working on that."

"It'll probably be a massive task. The assumption has always been that hooders are the most ancient creature on the planet's surface. The gableduck is probably younger, and its genome is immense."

"Yes, quite probably," Jonas replied, then after a moment, "I don't really like the term junk DNA."

Once, centuries ago, no one had known what all the extra coding was for. Now it was known that it was history: old defensive measures that no longer applied, viruses incorporated into the genome, patches much like additional pieces of computer code to cover weaknesses in a program. Some biologists likened much of it to the scar tissue of a species, but Jonas felt that not entirely true because it could, on occasion, provide survival strategies. Perhaps a better analogy would be to the scar tissue and consequent experience of an old warrior.

"You have a better one?" Shardelle asked.

"Reserve, complementary or supplementary."

"Very good."

By mid-morning the sun was passing underneath Calypse, throwing the gas giant into silhouette. Jonas spotted the snout spurs of mud snakes cleaving the rhizome layer ahead of them--attracted by the vibrations the vehicle created--but they disappeared from sight, perhaps recognizing the inedibility of ATV tires. Checking her map screen, Shardelle turned the vehicle from flattened track and nosed it into flute grasses standing three meters tall. The cockpit skimmed this, its lower half in the grass. A faint hissing sound impinged under the varying hum of the hydrogen motor and hydrostatic gearing. Eventually they broke from the flute grasses and began negotiating a compacted slope where the old grasses had been flattened by the wind. Reaching a low peak, a vista opened to one side of them. A fence stretched out of sight in two directions. Over the other side the ground was black, hazed with occasional reddish patches where new grass was sprouting.

"Quarantine area," Shardelle observed. "You were here for six months before the Tagreb arrived. Do you know what they're so worried about?"

"No monitor will answer direct questions, but, by the methods used, I'd guess biogenetic weaponry was employed." He gestured to the blackened terrain. "What you see here is only the flash-over area--the perimeter of a firestorm. I'd guess that the hypocenter was the strike point of an orbital beam weapon. They burnt that inner area right down to the bedrock and now they're watching to make sure nothing survived."

"Seems rather excessive."

Jonas decided to tell her the whole story, and wondered if she would think the actions ECS had taken here so excessive then. "You have to consider: how did one man 'steal' a Polity dreadnought? Mary Cole, a monitor I know, let slip that the research vessel *Jerusalem* was here for a time. You know what that means."

She glanced at him. "Jain technology?"

He nodded. "A few fragments sit in the Tranquility Museum on the Moon. That part of the museum can be instantly ejected and destroyed by CTD. It seems that fact is the biggest part of the attraction of the exhibit, because what sits there in a chainglass case just looks like a few bits of coral. It's the potential though: a complexity of dead nanomachinery that still, as far as I know, defies analysis."

"Someone used active Jain technology?"

"It would seem so. First to steal the dreadnought, then use both dreadnought and technology to hit this place."

"I'm surprised anyone has been allowed here at all."

"I'd guess the AI view is that they can't be overprotective. Three distinct and extinct ancient races have been identified: the Jain, Atheter, and Csorians. Remnants of their technologies exist, so it's no good us burying our heads in the sand in the hope they'll go away. We have to learn how to deal with them, hopefully before we run head first into something that might destroy us."

"And, of course, there are those that are not extinct, like whatever created Dragon."

"Precisely."

She looked at him, waiting for something more, then prompted: "Do you think we'll ever get the full story of what happened here?"

"The bones will be fleshed out in time. We know the Theocracy was supplying Separatists on Cheyne III and used technology, bought from Dragon, to destroy an Outlink station. The Polity supported the rebellion here that finally overthrew the Theocracy. Dragon changed sides, apparently because it did not like blame being attributed to it for the destruction of the station, and assisted that rebellion before suiciding on the surface. The guy who stole the dreadnought? Some Separatist coming here on the side of the Theocracy. He and his ship were incinerated while pursuing Polity agents to the Elysium smelting facilities."

"But is that really what happened here? The whole thing could be a cover for something deeper, something the AIs have been doing out here, perhaps some experiment that went wrong," said Shardelle.

Jonas snorted. It amazed him how scientists, whose entire ethos was based on logic and empirical proof, sometimes wanted to believe complete rubbish.

"I've never put much credence in conspiracy theories," he stated, which killed the conversation for some time.

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Shardelle listened to the engine wind down, and to the slow ticking of cooling metal. She had parked the ATV on a hillock that she knew extended in a ring some kilometers in diameter. It was a good place to camp, the ground being too dry for mud snakes. She liked the view as well and felt safer being able to see for kilometers in either direction. Rodol was watching over them by satellite and would warn if anything was getting too close, but this vantage gave them the opportunity to eyeball any of the natives and decide themselves whether it might be necessary to run. She turned to Jonas.

His eyes were closed, but, obviously, he was not sleeping. He was auging--probably deep in some virtuality in which the hooder genome lay across his entire horizon and, godlike, he peeled away clumps of it for analysis and compiled the resultant data. She studied his profile, the hard intensity of his features, the natural tan that came from spending a lot of time outside. Eventually she unstrapped herself and left him to it, turning on her shimmer-shield visor and snagging up her field tent and related equipment on the way out of the ATV. The landscape was red gilded by the nebula when he joined her an hour later. She was sitting in her camp chair before her tent, her visor flicking off and on as she sipped coffee.

"My apologies," he said. "I tend to get annoyed when anything blurs my focus."

"Me too," she replied. "But I've been focused on The Gabble for so long I need a break. Incidentally I don't put much credence in conspiracy theories, myself, and you really need some practice in recognizing irony."

"So no sinister experiments conducted by the AIs?" he queried, raising an eyebrow.

She laughed. "No ... I see here the results of some ECS action which for a while will be considered a net gain for the Polity until the dirt starts to surface."

"Mmmm ... and talking of dirt: Rodol has finished sequencing the hooder genome."

"Dirt?"

"There is none, or rather, surprisingly little."

"What do you mean?"

"Still a lot of analysis to do, but thus far we've found nothing that can be identified as parasitic in the genome. There is, however, a vast number of superfluties, accounting for immune response identifiers."

"That makes no sense. If it's old enough to acquire so high a level of immune response, it will have acquired parasitic DNA as well."

"You'd think."

There was something he was not telling her. She let it rest. At present she felt the most relaxed she had been in some time--just thinking about nothing and watching the world. She did not need his frustrations right then.

"I'm going to lie down now." She cast away the dregs from her cup and returned it to her pack. Standing, she faced him. "Would you care to join me?"

"I don't sleep," he said, looking distracted.

"Don't be obtuse."

He turned to her, focused, grinned.

"I promise not to be too rough with you," she added, and to save pride turned away and entered her tent. She felt slightly miffed that he took so long following, and came in after she had turned on the oxygenator and stripped naked. He bowed in, quickly closing and sealing the entrance behind him. Shedding his breather gear he said, "You surprised me."

"Are propositions so rare for you?"

"Not rare, but frequently problematical." He paused thoughtfully, as if about to launch into further explanation.

Shardelle reached across, snagged the front of his envirosuit and pulled him into a kiss, then down on top of her. He seemed reluctant for a moment, then softened into it. His hands began caressing her with almost forensic precision, as if he were checking the location of all her parts. Eventually he backed off and struggled out of his envirosuit. There was not much foreplay after that. She did not want any, and came violently and quickly. After cleaning herself with wipes from her toiletries she said, "Perhaps we should continue this in the morning."

"Perhaps we should," he replied.

She lay back relaxed, her body heavy on the ground as if someone had adjusted up the strength of a gravplate below her. Closed her eyes for a second ... He was shaking her by the shoulder.

"Come see."

Shardelle lay bleary and confused before realizing that she must have fallen asleep. Checking her wristcom she saw that five hours had passed. "What is it?"

"Heroynes."

She took up her breather gear only, clicking only mouth mask into place, and stepped out naked with that up against her mouth. Out there, striding through the flute grasses, were four heroynes. She studied one closely. It stood on two long thin legs that raised it high above the grass itself, much like its namesake. Its body was L-shaped and squat with a long curved neck extending up from it. To its fore, numerous sets of forearms were folded as if in prayer. It had no head as such; the neck just terminated in a long serrated spear of a beak. Each of these

creatures stood a good ten meters high, and moved swiftly across the terrain in delicate arching steps carrying them many meters at a time.

"Always weird," she said into her mask.

She turned to him. He was fully dressed and watching her.

"Are you still tired?" he asked.

Her answer was no, and he took her from behind, bent over the tire of the ATV, then again in the morning, long and slow in the tent, before they set out. Shardelle felt this trip out was most rewarding for her.

* * * *

Jonas smiled to himself as he considered the night past. He felt enlivened and humanized by the experience, and certainly it had been beneficial for Shardelle. She seemed relaxed and easy, sated. But Jonas compartmentalized it as she started the ATV on its way, and returned his thoughts to some things that had been bothering him throughout the long watches of the night.

Hooders. Damn them.

Perhaps the sex had blown the crap out of his system, because certain biological peculiarities now seemed clear to him.

The superfluties in the hooder genome could explain the lack of virally implanted parasitic DNA. The creature might have, quite simply, from the beginning, had a powerful and almost complete immune response to viral attack. Dubious, but explainable. What was not explainable was something so obvious, he cursed himself as an idiot for not seeing it. The hooder was the top predator here. Hooders did not fight each other. Their prey were, on the whole, soft-bodied grazers with little more defense than speed. Why then did hooders need armor capable of stopping an anti-tank round?

"You know how hooders are hard to kill?" he asked.

The ATV was rolling down the hill into a crater that was known as Dragon's Fall. Shardelle glanced at him with that slight lustful twist to her mouth. "I know. It's why the Tagreb perimeter is supplied with proton weapons."

He nodded, tried to concentrate on the matter in hand. "It's their armor, and their speed, but mostly the armor." He paused for a moment. "You know there are other creatures with thick armor capable of bouncing bullets, but that's usually because there's something in their environment with a fair chance of cracking through it. The laminated chitin on a hooder stops most projectile weapons. Even lasers have little effect. If you want to damage one of those creatures, you need to upgrade to APWs and particle weapons, and even then you're talking about the kind of armament most people could not even carry."

"Maybe some other predator now extinct?"

"But what the hell would that be?"

She gestured ahead into the crater. "We'll probably never know. ECS apparently had teams excavating this place for ages trying to find draconic remains. They didn't find much."

"Tricones." Jonas nodded.

The molluscan soil makers of this planet were a problem in that respect. There were some fossils to be found in the mountains, but only there. Out here the tricones crunched up nearly everything solid down to a huge depth. All that could be found below the deep soil layer was the chalk, then limestone remains of the tricones themselves.

"Maybe there's a parasitic reason for the thick shell," Shardelle suggested. "I'm thinking in terms of the Earth parasite of snails that thickens the snail's shell to protect itself."

"But that results in the snail being unable to breed. There's always some balance to be upset. I'd also expect to see some hooders uninfected--thin-shelled." He shrugged. "Then again, a general infection of them all may account for their low population."

"Perhaps you'll find the answers on that beach."

"Perhaps."

Abruptly Shardelle slowed the ATV. He glanced at her and saw she was peering intently at the further edge of the crater. There were figures over there, humanoid.

"Dracomen," she whispered excitedly.

Jonas initiated a visual program in his aug, magnified what he was seeing and cleaned up the image. Six dracomen, two of them carrying some animal corpse strapped to a pole between them, the other four scattered around them. Two of the others were small--dracoman children. This was the first time Jonas had seen them and he studied them closely. Though humanoid, their legs hinged the wrong way, like birds. Their scaling was green over most of their bodies but yellow from groin to throat. Their heads were toadish, jutting forward on long necks. They carried rifles of some kind.

Shardelle set the ATV moving again, altering its course to intersect with theirs.

"What are you doing?" Jonas asked.

"I want to talk to them."

"We're not here to study dracomen. There's a whole branch of ECS that does that--military, now dracomen are being recruited."

"Not study. You've got your corpse, but I still want mine. Dracomen hunt, as we can see--I'd just like some information on what exactly they do hunt."

The dracomen obviously spotted that the ATV was heading in their direction. The two carrying the pole laid it down and then they all stood waiting. As Shardelle and Jonas drew

closer, and he could see them more clearly, Jonas began to wonder if this was a good idea. These creatures looked dangerous. Then he dismissed the idea as unworthy. They may have looked like something out of a VR hack-and-slash fantasy, but, from what he knew, they might well be more sophisticated and technically advanced than most Polity citizens. Shardelle parked the ATV on the brow of the crater edge ahead of them. Turning on their masks, the two of them left the ATV.

"Good morning!" said Shardelle, holding up a hand and advancing.

One of them moved forward, its head tilted as it eyed her, almost like a cockerel coming to inspect a grub.

"We greet you," it said, halting.

Jonas eyed the rifle this one carried. It appeared to be made of translucent bone and something shifted inside it like visible organs. It seemed alive.

"If you don't mind," said Shardelle, "I have some questions I would like to ask."

Jonas now saw that their catch was a mud snake: a fat grublike body terminating in a hard angular head that looked a bit like a horse's skull. Yellow ichor ran from something that was stuck in the body just behind the skull: a short glassy shaft to the rear of which were affixed two testicular objects. The dracoman tracked the direction of his attention, then abruptly stooped and pulled the object from the mud snake. He now saw that this thing possessed a barbed point. It looked like a greatly enlarged bee sting. The dracoman did something with its rifle and the side of the weapon split open. It shoved the barbed object inside and closed the weapon up. All the time it did not take its eyes off Jonas.

"Ask," it said.

"You hunt many animals," said Shardelle.

That was not a question so the dracoman did not dignify it with a reply.

"Do you hunt gableducks?" she asked.

The dracoman exposed its teeth in something that might have been a grin. It glanced around at its fellows who grinned similarly.

"No," it replied.

"Why not?"

"We only hunt prey."

"Not predators?" She gestured to their catch. "Surely mud snakes are predators."

"All predators are prey."

"I don't understand."

"Yes."

"Do you hunt hooders?" Jonas interjected.

By the amount of exposed ivory he guessed that was a hilarious question to ask.

Shardelle waved a hand as if to dismiss his question. "Why don't you hunt gabbleducks?"

"They are protected."

"Under Polity law, yes, but I thought your people had been allowed hunting rights to feed yourselves ... within limits."

Some unspoken signal passed between the dracomen, for the two bearers once again took up the pole.

"Wait! You have to give me something!" said Shardelle.

Jonas glanced at her, realizing by the tone of her voice how desperate she was to find answers about the gabbleducks. The dracomen began to move off.

"Please," she said.

One of the dracoman children halted and gazed up at her.

"The meat is forbidden," it lisped, licking out a black forked tongue. It glanced at Jonas. "Except to hooders." Then the child scampered off after the adults.

"Delphic, just like their creator," said Jonas.

"There was probably a wealth of information there, if we could figure it out," Shardelle replied. She peered down the slope to where a tricone about half a meter long had breached. This creature consisted of three long cones joined like Pan pipes, each revealing in their mouths gelatinous nodular heads which extended sluglike to lift the creature up, then propel it narrow end first back down into the ground.

"We will," said Jonas, turning back toward the ATV, "given time."

* * * *

They made love on the second night, slowly, leisurely, and most of the time Jonas remained in the tent with her while she slept. He did not have to do that, but she was glad he did.

"In the morning we should come upon your big friend," he said at one point. "What do you intend?"

Shardelle grinned at him, suddenly unreasonably happy. "Well, I'd like to ask him what he and the rest of his kind have been talking about. Do you think he'll tell me?"

He smiled. "You know there's a kids' interactive book you can find here. The technology is Polity stuff but the stories were created here--distortions of old Earth fairy tales. When I said to you it moves like a bear, I was thinking of one particular fairy tale: Goldilocks and the Three Bears, but in this case the three bears were gableducks."

"Your point?" Shardelle asked.

"Well, she crept into their house to try their food and their beds...."

"Yes, I know ... and baby gableduck's bed was just right...."

"It was," said Jonas, "and baby gableduck thought Goldilocks just right when he ate her."

"Is there a moral to this?"

"Just be careful. I don't want to lose you now that I'm getting to know you."

Frustration awaited in the morning with Rodol telling them to divert from their course. Two hooders lay in their way. It would be too dangerous to approach the giant gableduck.

"They might attack it," said Shardelle, half minded to ignore Rodol's warning.

Jonas reached out and put a hand on her arm. "On the way back--I promise you."

They passed through an area where the shore wind had blown fragments of dead flute grass inland and mounded it in drifts, then into an area clear of everything but new shoots. Evening sunset revealed the sea and the beach. They spent the night inside the ATV, Shardelle bedding down on the floor. At sunrise they traveled the remaining kilometer to the edge of a cliff, and they soon located the dead hooter.

The dune across which the enormous creature was draped imparted a curve to its forward segments emphasizing its resemblance to a spinal column. Shardelle was reminded of ancient saurian exhibits in museums on Earth, and models and diagrams from the early years of the science of osteopathy. Its head was spoon-shaped, concave side down to the sand, its armor plates spreading in a radial pattern from the neck. Judging by the grooves leading down from the creature to the water's edge, its first discoverers had dragged it up the beach. They must have used some aerial craft to do this, since there was no sign of any other track marks in the sand.

"Do you know how we can get down there?" she asked, tapping up an elevation overlay on her map screen. The ATV rested above the beach just back from a steep muddy cliff. All around them the ground was level and had been scoured of even dead flute grass by the wind.

After auging for a moment, Jonas replied, "Go right."

Shardelle tracked elevation lines with her finger. "Yeah, I think I see it."

They traveled along above the beach for a kilometer, but downhill with the cliff growing shorter as they traveled and eventually petering out. A steep slope brought them down onto the sand whereupon they traveled back below the cliff. The lower part of the cliff was jagged

limestone. Shardelle looked up and saw burrows in the compacted soil above that, and many falls. Tricone shells were imbedded up there, and many more were shattered on the limestone. Many of the soil makers had obviously not known when to stop and burrowed straight out of the soil to fall and smash themselves. When they eventually reached the hooder it seemed more like some rock formation than any beast, being over two meters wide and a hundred meters long. Wind-blown sand had mounded around it. It seemed ancient: a dinosaur skeleton in the process of being revealed. She brought the ATV to a halt in the lee of the monster.

"Let's take a look," said Jonas.

The moment they exited the vehicle they smelled decay. Shardelle noted black insectile movement in the heaped sand, then spied one of the creatures close to her feet. It looked like a small prawn, but black and scuttling like a louse.

"Every living world has its undertakers," Jonas explained. "Let's just hope they haven't destroyed too much." He pointed toward the hooder's cowl, much of which Shardelle now saw was buried in sand. "I've brought a few hundred liters of repellent. I'll confine direct physical autopsy to the cowl and a couple of the segments behind it. I don't suppose the rest will tell me much more."

"But you'll scan it entire?"

"Yes." He turned to her. "If you could dig out the terahertz scanner and run it down both sides a segment at a time?"

Shardelle grinned. "I can do that."

"Start with the cowl and those front two segments. It's going to be hard work, but I'll run a carbide cutter through there," he pointed to a section behind the two mentioned segments, "then we can use the ATV to haul the front end over and drag it free ... let's get to work."

Shardelle nodded as he headed back toward the ATV, but, instead of following, she walked up close to the massive corpse, reached out and ran her fingers over the stony surface. Unlike the vertebrae of a spinal column, this was all hard sharp edges seeming as perilous as newly machined metal. It was not metal--more like rough flint and with the same near translucence. Seeing holograms, pictures, film of this creature in action in no way imparted the sheer scale of this lethal machine of nature. She shuddered to think what it would mean to be this close to a living specimen. But this one was definitely dead. She sensed an aura of some awesome force rendered impotent.

* * * *

The circular saw was gyro-stabilized, but it bucked and twisted as its diamond-tooth blade bit into hard carapace. Already the disk blade had shed three of its concentric layers of teeth, and Jonas's shimmer-shield visor was flicking off and on to shed the sweat that dropped from his face onto it. He had cut only halfway through, taking out wedges of carapace just as a woodsman would remove wood with an axe. Now he was into the soft tissue of the creature, "soft" in this case meaning merely of the consistency of old oak rather than carbide steel.

Glancing down the length of the monster's body he saw that Shardelle had nearly reached the tail with the terahertz scanner. All hard work, but he was satisfied. The scans alone, taken at close range on a static target, should reveal masses of features not detected with distance scans. And, soon, he himself would be delving inside that wonderfully complex, and macabre, cowl. He shook more sweat from his face and continued to work.

Three replacement blades later, he had broken through. Shardelle, bored with waiting, had maneuvered the ATV into position, sunk its ground anchors into the sand, and run out the cable from its front winch to the hooder, where she secured it through a hole diamond-drilled through the further edge of the cowl. Jonas backed out of the carnage he had wrought, lugging the circular saw, which now seemed to have doubled in weight. He gave her the signal to go ahead, and moved aside.

Shardelle started the winch running, the braided monofilament cable, thin as fishing line, drawing taut. After a moment, the note from the winch changed and the far side of the cowl began to lift. Black carrion-eaters began to swarm like ants. Sand poured from the cowl as it came up vertical to the ground, then in a moment turned over completely.

Jonas spotted something revealed where the cowl had lain and walked over. Carrion eaters were thick on the ground there amid a tangle of bones and tatters of leathery skin. He had wondered why they had been so numerous around the hooder itself, for it seemed unlikely they could feed upon its substance before time and bacteria had softened it sufficiently. The creature had obviously gone to its death still clutching recent prey. He returned, picking up the saw on the way, to Shardelle.

"Drag it over there." He pointed to the cliff. "We'll spray with repellent and set up a big frame tent over it."

She looked askance at him.

"Please," he added.

The cowl, with two body segments still attached, sledded easily across the sand. Jonas took a tank of the repellent from the ATV, slung it from his shoulder, and, using a stemmed pressure sprayer, walked around this section of the beast, liberally coating it. Carrion eaters fled in every direction. The tent, which came in a large square package, he sat on the first body segment and activated from a distance. Within seconds the package spidered out long carbon fiber legs, stabbed them into the ground, then dropped fabric down like a bashful woman quickly lowering her skirts.

"Let's get the equipment set up," Jonas said.

Later he was delving into the cowl: pulling up jointed limbs that terminated in scythe blades as sharp and tough as chainglass, or in telescopic protuberances that looked like hollow drills; excavating one red eye from the carapace, jumping back when it fluoresced, laughing and returning to work; running an optical probe down into one small mouth to study the cornucopia of cutting and grinding gear inside.

"You know, the present theory is that the hooder requires all this so it can deal with a kind of grazer living in the mountains. Those creatures feed on poisonous fungi, the toxins from

which accumulate in the black fats layered in their bodies. When the hooders capture them under their hoods, they need to slice their way through their prey very meticulously, to eat only what are called the creature's white fats." He glanced at Shardelle who was watching with fascination.

"They don't kill their prey," she observed.

"Apparently. When the hooder goes after a fungus grazer, the grazer immediately starts breaking down the black fat to provide itself with the energy to flee, and then its blood supply and muscles become toxic, too. So any serious damage to either could release poisons into the uncontaminated white fat. The hooder dissects its prey, not even allowing it to bleed. It eventually dies of shock."

"The same with any prey it catches," Shardelle added. "Including us."

"I don't believe it for a minute," said Jonas. "The fungus grazers are only a small part of its diet, and many hooders don't even range into the mountains."

"Why, then?"

"I just don't know." He lifted out another jointed limb, this one terminating in a set of chisel-faced pincers. "All I do know is that when they've finished with their victim there's usually nothing left larger than a coin."

He continued working, only noticing much later that the tent's light had come on, and that Shardelle had gone. Looking outside he saw that she had set up her own tent, and no light showed inside. He went back to work, only stopping in the morning to get something to eat and plenty to drink, and to then sit meditating for an hour while his asomnidapted body cleared its fatigue poisons. As Calypse gazed down and the rising sun etched fire across the horizon, he experienced a moment of deep calm clarity. He knew now, felt that somewhere, deep inside, he had always known. So much confirmed it. Total confirmation had come from close nanoscopic study of the carapace. The sun had breached the horizon when he returned inside to package his samples. He needed no more from this beast now. Others could come here if they wished.

* * * *

Shardelle wormed out of her tent, smelling coffee and feeling a deep overpowering need for it. For a moment she could not figure out what was different, then she saw it: the frame tent was gone, the hooder's cowl and two attached segments were in pieces. Jonas was sitting crosslegged on one of the limestone slabs, sipping a self-heating coffee. He gestured to another sealed cup resting nearby. She walked over to him.

"You've finished?" she asked incredulously.

He grinned. "Amazing what you can achieve when you have no need for sleep. I've been working for Taxonomy for fifty-three years. In my last eighteen years of being asomnidapted I've done more work than in the previous thirty-five."

"Perhaps I should consider that for myself," said Shardelle, pulling the tab on her cup. She preferred the coffee from her machine in the Tagreb, but here this convenience was preferable. While she waited for her drink to heat, she observed that he had a piece of carapace resting on a brushed aluminum box before him.

"Any conclusions?" she asked, leaning her buttocks against a nearby slab.

"Very definitely." He reached inside his coat and removed a small handheld gun. Shardelle recognized it as a quantum cascade, QC, laser.

"I promise not to steal your research," she quipped.

He grimaced. "It's not the stealing I would worry about, but how it may well be hushed up." He pointed the laser at the carapace and fired. A wisp of smoke rose, picking out the beam in the air. There was a red glow at the point of contact, but whether from heat or simply reflected light, Shardelle could not tell. But nothing else was happening to the carapace.

"You know, every piece I've managed to study has been old and partially broken down by bacteria. These are the freshest remains I've ever studied." Still he was firing the laser, and still the carapace was unaffected. "You see, a piece of old carapace would have started disintegrating by now, that's because certain nanostructures inside it would have broken down." He turned off the laser, then abruptly put his bare hand flat down on the carapace.

Shardelle leaned forward. "An insulator?"

"You'd think." He poured coffee on the aluminum box and it immediately sizzled into steam.

"Shit!" Shardelle squatted down beside the box to peer closely at the carapace. She then looked up at Jonas. "Conductive ... *superconductive*?"

"Carbon fullerene nanotubes. When was the last time you saw something like that naturally produced?"

"About never."

"They're laced through the carapace material, which bears some resemblance to the shock-resistant composite laminates we use in our spaceships. The interesting part is that the nanotubes link down deep into the hooder's body. I'll have to look closely at the scans but my guess is that the more you heat up one of these bastards the faster it moves." He picked up the piece of carapace. "Of course, though you won't see stuff like this naturally produced, you can find it elsewhere."

"Sorry?"

He looked at her directly. "Polity battlefield armor."

"What? ... What are you saying?"

"The genome was the first clue: so short, so concise, so exact. What I'm saying is that hooders, though living creatures, are artifacts; biogenetic artifacts."

* * * *

Ahead lay a plain of flattened flute grass, boring and level as it disappeared into misty distance. Shardelle set the ATV on automatic, monitored by Rodol, and decided it was time, as Jonas was now doing, to check into the virtual world. She took her aug from a pocket of her envirosuit and plugged it in the permanent plug behind her ear, closed her eyes, and booted up.

First she checked her messages and was appalled to find over four thousand of them awaiting her attention. She opened only those from recognized sources. Some of them were personal; from her brother, from two of her three children, one from her third husband, another from her great-grandmother. The first ones were easy enough to answer with pages from her diary run through a personalizing program. The one from her great-grandmother, who was a xenobiologist of some standing, she took rather more care over. As she laid out the reply, detailing her frustrations and nascent theories, she wondered if Jonas knew her great-grandmother. She had been in Xeno for seventy years and he in Taxonomy for fifty-three, perhaps they had met at some time? Other messages updated her with news from the Tagreb. A gableduck's bill had been discovered in the mountains. In her absence it had been measured and analyzed ad nauseum, but nothing new learned. Still other messages debated the merits of this linguistic theory or that one, and it was with a sinking sensation that she opened some of the messages from unrecognized senders to find links to where papers on The Gabble had been published. She turned her attention to the linguistic net.

The hardcore had now dropped down to below a thousand. It seemed that most of the lunatic fringe had dissipated, hence the appearance of all those papers. Most serious theorists did not publish until they had something worth publishing. That was accepted protocol to prevent too much rubbish clogging up the informational highways. Nothing new on the net. Returning to her messages she deleted every one from unknown sources. Only then did she spot the message from the haiman Kroval on Earth:

"Every bird sings for a reason, similarly do dogs bark. Perhaps the Anglic similarity is misleading and the morphemes longer than we would suppose ... maybe the length of a gableduck's life. Perhaps they are all saying the same thing?"

That made Shardelle pause. She groped for meaning and it seemed to her to be lurking out of reach.

"The meat is forbidden," the dracomani child had said.

Something there ... something.

After time, her frustration became too much and she removed her aug. Once again taking up the controls of the ATV, she noticed that Rodol had reset its course, taking the vehicle away from the big gableduck. The reason was obvious: a hooeder only five kilometers away from it. With a quick glance at Jonas, Shardelle manually overrode that and put them back on course. She was damned if she was going to miss seeing it on the way back to the Tagreb. Jonas had made *his* big discovery. Maybe she could come out of this with at least something.

A minute later, Jonas looked at her and said, "Rodol just informed me that you are taking us closer to a hooeder than might be safe."

Shardelle pointed at the map screen.

He nodded. "Just be ready to run. Hooders move damned fast when they want to."

Shardelle felt almost angered by his reasonable attitude, and felt too ashamed to analyze too closely the reason for that.

Afternoon, and they were back into still-standing flute grass. Shardelle spotted the gableduck when they were still kilometers away from it. It sat, a pyramid of alien flesh, its green multi-eyed gaze fixed on the horizon, bill swinging gently from side to side.

"How close would be safe?" Jonas asked when they were only a kilometer away.

Shardelle looked down at her hand gripping the joystick. Her knuckles were white. "I'm going to approach it. I'm going to walk up to it. You can stay in the ATV if you want."

Five hundred meters, two hundred meters. Shardelle felt her frustration increase. The gableduck had not even turned to look at them. It was as if it could not be bothered to acknowledge their presence. At a hundred meters she just trickled the ATV forward.

"That thing is fucking immense," said Jonas. He had abandoned his seat to go into the back of the vehicle. She saw that he was clutching an ECS pulse-rifle.

"What do you intend to do with that?"

"I'll just keep watch. If it goes for you maybe I can drive it off, though seeing it now I realize it might just ignore this popgun."

Shardelle nodded, and brought the ATV to a halt ten meters away from the monstrous creature. Turning on her shimmer-shield visor, she maneuvered past him and headed for the door. When she finally stepped down onto the rhizome mat and began pushing her way through the flute grasses, she heard The Gabble.

"Umbel shockadisc po frzzzt," the gableduck grumbled to itself.

A few paces took her out of the standing flute grasses to where the creature sat. She recognized the stack of grazer bones beside it. The gableduck had returned to a previous location.

"Pthog," the gableduck intoned, "Erb scugalug."

It just made Shardelle angry. She marched forward and round until she was standing directly in front of the creature. It was indeed massive: folds of flesh hanging down from its body and almost concealing its powerful rear limbs. When it moved through the flute grasses its three sets of two forelimbs slotted neatly together to form two composite forelimbs so it seemed to run on all fours like, as Jonas had observed, a bear. Now those forelimbs were folded on its chest, and, sitting like this, it seemed some immense alien Buddha. Shardelle glared up at it.

"I've listened to over a thousand hours of that crap!" she shouted. "What the fuck are you saying?"

"Frogjig unth," it observed.

All so close to meaning, but no meaning there. Returning her attention to its fleshy torso she saw that it had acquired a whole ecology all its own. The gabbleduck was crawling with prawnlike crustaceans. These were most numerous around wet looking sores, and the occasional lumpish growth leaking milky fluid.

"Shardelle! Shardelle! Get back here quick!"

Those crustaceans...

A sudden excitement filled her. It was the very same species they had seen crawling around the dead hooder: carrion eaters, they never fed on living flesh, but, like vultures, possessed an instinct for death.

"Shardelle!"

This gabbleduck was dying! She would have her corpse!

Then, through her aug: "This is Rodol. You must flee your current location at once. A hooder approaches."

What?

Shardelle turned and gazed out across the plain the gabbleduck viewed. A black train was heading toward her, weaving back and forth. The hooder bore some resemblance to a giant millipede with its segments and many paddlelike legs. It also moved with the fast oiled smoothness of that insect. Shardelle froze to the spot, not out of fear, but through incredible angry frustration. She could not have this taken away from her, not now. It just was not fair.

"For fuck sake get in here! Maybe it'll ignore us!"

The ATV was parked right next to her. She had not heard it arrive.

"Brogon ahul bul zzzk," said the gabbleduck.

She suddenly realized how jealous and stupid she had been, and that both she and Jonas might pay for that. She ran for the door of the ATV and piled inside, hauled herself forward. Jonas was in the driving seat trying to get the thing into reverse. He did not take the power off and with a crunching shudder the vehicle stalled.

"Fuck fuck fuck."

They both looked through the screen. The hooder was close, its front end rising off the ground like the striking head of a cobra. Inside its cowl was a mass of glittering knifish movement through which two vertical rows of red eyes glared. It was not focused on them. It was focused on the gabbleduck. Surely it would respond to this. Shardelle looked at the exterior intercom Jonas had been calling her through to check it was still on. No need really. She could hear the hard oily clattering of the hooder's movement.

"Brogon," the gabbleduck repeated, waving a black claw in the air.

The hooder froze. The gabbleduck turned its bill toward the ATV. It blinked some of its emerald eyes, then returned its attention to the hooder. After a moment it reached out with one claw and made an unmistakably dismissive gesture. The hooder sank down, turned in a gleaming arc and sped away.

"How do I get this damned thing started again?" Jonas asked.

"There's no need. It's gone."

He snorted a harsh laugh. "Yeah, right. Well, when you've quit having your moment of epiphany, perhaps you'd like to take a look at the map screen."

Shardelle did so, and for a moment could not make much of the graphics displayed there. They did not seem to make much sense.

"About thirty of them," said Jonas.

Then it did make sense. There were thirty hooders scattered all around them. They were moving, but seemed to be holding off for the present.

* * * *

"You say the bill of a gabbleduck was found in the mountains?" Jonas asked.

"Yes."

Jonas turned off the ATV's engine. Moving the vehicle back into a stand of flute grass had been the best they could do. Hopefully the hooders would attack the gabbleduck and be too sated by that to attack them. There was no way to hide completely. He had studied the hooder sensorium and knew it would pick up body heat even through the skin of the ATV. Leaving the engine running would generate more heat to further attract attention.

"Nothing else?" he asked.

"It's damned annoying. There should be more--bones at least."

They were having a perfectly sensible conversation, sitting in the ATV, waiting to die. The nearest monitor force had sent a transport, but that would not be here for another hour. The hooders, it now seemed evident, were holding off until the gabbleduck finally expired. That could happen at any moment.

"But the tricones grind away all remains, which was why that bill was found in the mountains."

Jonas wondered for just how many millions of years the tricones had been grinding stuff away. He augged through to the Tagreb and directly into the database maintained by those researching the mollusks. It did not take him long to discover that the tricone genome was just as concise and devoid of rubbish as that of the hooder. He connected then to the AI.

"Rodol, are you listening in?"

"I am."

"Good."

To Shardelle he said, "Three ancient races, the physical technological remains of which probably would not fill the back of this ATV."

She glanced at him, seemed about to say something, then abruptly returned her attention to the gabbleduck. He thought she was swallowing tears.

"Tricones are biogenetic artifacts as well," he added.

"I think it's nearly dead," she said.

The gabbleduck seemed a sleepy old man, its head nodding, bill lowering to its chest, then jerking up again. Removing his QC laser, Jonas laid it on the console before him. They both stared at it. He guessed she understood his intent. They both knew how hooders fed.

"But of biogenetic artifacts left by those races there are many: plants obviously made to refine metals from soil, worms made to accumulate radioactives in their bodies, and perhaps many others we don't recognize. You know there are theories that even some Terran life forms are such artifacts? Why do some creatures carry a venomous punch so far in excess of that required to kill their prey? Why the chalk builders, the coral makers, why this, why that? Much was attributed to Gaean theories. Now there is some doubt."

"You'll be getting to a point sometime soon," said Shardelle. "I think we are running out of time for discussion ... Oh hell." She leant forward.

The gabbleduck held out a claw.

"Kzzz lub luha Brogon," it stated, its voice clear over exterior com, then it abruptly sagged and its bill came down to rest upon its chest. The light went out of its eyes.

Jonas lowered his gaze to the map screen.

"They're coming."

He picked up his QC laser.

A rushing hissing impinged. Jonas could feel the ATV vibrating. He closed his eyes and swallowed dryly. What did his theories matter now? And, should he not state them, Rodol would have most certainly worked it all out.

The first hooder came in from the right, its front end rearing thirty meters into the air, then coming down like a striking snake on the mountainous corpse. It began feeding, its long body rippling down its length. He did not see the second approach, just suddenly there were two hooders there, tearing at the corpse. Then a crash and the ATV shifted to one side, bouncing on its suspension as another of the monstrous creatures came past. Another rose up behind the

others, vertical rows of eyes glowing, eating utensils opening out in a deadly glassy array. Down. Corpse jerked this way and that. Limbs conveyed away, sheets of skin peeled, fat and muscle and sprays of milky blood. Soon there was more hooder to be seen than gabbleduck: a great black Gordian tangle, racketing with the sound of some vast machine shop. It took less than an hour. One hooder slid away, then another. Jonas waited for one to come straight at the ATV. He wondered when he would fire the first shot through the side of Shardelle's head. When it hit the vehicle, when it tore it open, or at the point when one of those cowls poised above them? One of the creatures came close, shaking the ATV and jouncing it along the ground as its carapace worked like some giant rough saw down the side of the bodywork. Then they were all gone, and he was staring down at the map screen watching their transponder signals depart.

"I guess they've eaten enough," said Shardelle.

There was nothing solid left, only fluids splattered on ground that looked as if it had been ploughed.

"Bones as well--everything," said Jonas. "But then that is probably their purpose."

She looked at him, sharp, annoyed. He stood and headed for the door and she followed.

"You want to know what The Gabble is?" he asked, standing at the edge of the churned ground.

"Of course I do."

He gestured to the mess before them. "Something made the hooders and the tricones. The hooders were most certainly a weapon in some war and the tricones made to digest the physical remnants of a civilization."

"But why?"

"We'll probably never know the answer to that. Tricones and hooders possess the same planetary genome as the gabbleducks, which means the gabbleducks probably made them. But their final purpose might not be the gabbleduck's own."

"You hinted that you knew what The Gabble is," said Shardelle stubbornly.

"Maybe it's a language of non-meaning: words spoken by a race that has given up, withdrawn, even chosen to forego intelligence. A race become so self-effacing it has made tricones to wipe out every trace of its civilization, and turned its own war machines to the purpose of destroying even the remains of its own devolved descendents. Or perhaps it's even worse than that."

"How could it possibly be worse?"

"Perhaps they lost some war, and this was done to them by the victors: their civilization erased, their creatures turned upon them--just enough mind remaining to them so they always remember what happened, that scrap of intelligence just enough for them to know how to hold off the hooders until they die."

Shardelle shivered. Jonas felt an immense sadness at the core of which grew the seed of new purpose. Calypse hung above the far horizon, etched out by the setting sun, and, silhouetted, came the ECS transport. Tragedy here, or choice--he did not know. He swore to himself, in that moment, that one day he would.

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