

## ALIEN ARCHAEOLOGY

by Neal Asher

**Neal Asher lives in a village near Maldon in Essex, England, with his wife Caroline. His most recently published books have been Prador Moon and The Voyage of the Sable Keech, with Hildiggers in the pipeline. Presently, he's working on his ninth book for Macmillan: Line War, which, he hopes, completes the Cormac sequence. Neal tells us he's been accused of overproduction (despite spending far too much time ranting on his blog, cycling, and drinking too much wine), but doesn't intend to slow down just yet. Having done numerous jobs ranging from programming machine tools to delivering coal, he rather likes this one. "Alien Archaeology" fits neatly into the Polity universe of his books, and gives readers a chance to sample that somewhat fraught and dangerous future.**

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The sifting machine had been working nonstop for twenty years. The technique, first introduced by the xeno-archaeologist Alexion Smith and frowned on by others in his profession as being too blunt an instrument, was in use here by a private concern. An Atheter artifact had been discovered on this desert planetoid: a species of plant that used a deep extended root system to mop up platinum grains from the green sands, which it accumulated in its seeds to drop on the surface. Comparative analysis of the plant's genome—a short trihelical strand—proved it was a product of Atheter technology. The planet had been deep-scanned for other artifacts, then the whole project abandoned when nothing else major was found. The owners of the sifting machine came here afterward in the hope of picking up something the previous searchers had missed. They had managed to scrape up a few minor finds, but reading between the lines of their most recent public reports, Jael knew they were concealing something and, breaking into the private reports from the man on the ground here, learned of a second big find.

Perched on a boulder, she stepped down the magnification of her eyes to human normal so that all she could see was the machine's dust plume from the flat green plain. The *Kobashi* rested in the boulder's shade behind her. The planetary base was some ten kilometers away and occupied by a sandapt called Rho. He had detected the U-space signature of her ship's arrival and sent a terse query as to her reason for being here. She expressed her curiosity about what he was doing, to which he had replied that this was no tourist spot before shutting down communication.

Obviously he was the kind who relished solitude, which was why he was suited for this assignment and was perfect for Jael's purposes. She could have taken her ship directly to his base, but had brought it in low below the base's horizon to land it. She was going to surprise the sandapt, and rather suspected he wouldn't consider it a pleasant surprise.

This planet was hot enough to kill an unadapted human and the air too thin and noxious for her to breathe, but she wore a hotsuit with its own air supply, and, in the one-half gravity, could cover the intervening distance very quickly. She leapt down the five meters to the ground, bounced in a cloud of dust, and set out in a long lope—her every stride covering three meters.

Glimmering beads of metal caught Jael's attention before she reached the base. She halted and turned to study something like a morel fungus—its wrinkled head an open skin of cubic holes. Small seeds glimmered in those holes, and as she drew closer some of them were ejected. Tracking their path, she saw that when they struck the loose dusty ground they sank out of sight. She pushed her hand into the ground and scooped up dust in which small objects glittered. She increased the sensitivity of her optic nerves and ramped up the magnification of her eyes. Each seed consisted of a teardrop of organic matter attached at its widest end to a dodecahedral crystal of platinum. Jael supposed the Atheter had used something like the sifting machine far to her left to collect the precious metal, separating it from the seeds and leaving them behind to germinate into more of these useful little plants. She pocketed the seeds—she knew people who would pay good money for them—though her aim here was to make a bigger killing than that.

She had expected Rho's base to be the usual inflated dome with resin-bonded sand layered over it, but some other building technique had been employed here. Nestled below an escarpment that marked the edge of the dust bowl and the start of a deeply cracked plain of sun-baked clay, the building was a white-painted cone with a peaked roof. It looked something like an ancient windmill without vanes, but then there were three wind generators positioned along the top of the escarpment—their vanes wide to take into account the thin air down here. Low structures spread out from either side of the building like wings, glimmering in the harsh white sun glare. Jael guessed these were greenhouses to protect growing food plants. A figure was making its way along the edge of these towing a gravsled. She squatted down and focused in.

Rho's adaptation had given him skin of a deep reddish gold, a ridged bald head, and a nose that melded into his top lip. She glimpsed his eyes, which were sky blue and without pupils. He wore no mask—his only clothing being boots, shorts, and a sun visor. Jael leapt upright and broke into a run for the nearest end of the escarpment, where it was little more than a mound. Glancing back, she noticed the dust trail she'd left and hoped he wouldn't see it. Eventually she arrived at the foot of one of the wind generators and from her belt pouch removed a skinjector and loaded it with a selection of drugs. The escarpment here dropped ten meters in a curve from which projected rough reddish slates. She used these as stepping stones to bring her down to the level of the base, then sprinted in toward the back wall. She could hear him now—he was whistling some ancient melody. A brief comparison search in the music library in her left-hand aug revealed the name: "Greensleeves." She walked around the building as he approached.

"Who the hell are you?" he exclaimed.

She strode up to him. "I've seen your sifting machine; have you had any luck?"

He paused for a moment, then, in a tired voice, said, "Bugger off."

But by then she was on him. Before he could react, she swung the skinjector round from behind her back and pressed it against his chest, triggered it.

"What the...!" His hand swung out and he caught her hard across the side of the face. She spun, her feet coming up off the ground, and fell in ridiculous slow motion in the low gravity. Error messages flashed up in her visual cortex—broken nanoconnections—but they faded quickly. Then she received a message from her body monitor telling her he had cracked her cheekbone—this before it actually began to hurt. Scrambling to her feet again she watched him rubbing his chest. Foam appeared around his lips, then slowly, like a tree, he toppled. Jael walked over to him thinking, *You're so going to regret that, sandapt.* Though maybe most of that anger was at herself—for she had been warned about him.

Getting him onto the gravsled in the low gravity was surprisingly difficult. He must have weighed twice as much as a normal human. Luckily the door to the base was open and designed wide enough to allow the sled inside. After dumping him, she explored, finding the laboratory sited on the lower floor, living quarters on the second, the U-space communicator and computer systems on the top. With a thought, she

summoned the *Kobashi* to her present location, then returned her attention to the computer system. It was sub-AI and the usual optic interfaces were available. Finding a suitable network cable, she plugged one end into the computer and the other into the socket in her right-hand aug, then began mentally checking through Rho's files. He was not due to send a report for another two weeks, and the next supply drop was not for three months. However, there was nothing about his most recent find, and recordings of the exchanges she had listened to had been erased. Obviously, assessing his find, he had belatedly increased security.

Jael went back downstairs to study Rho, who was breathing raggedly on the sled. She hoped not to have overdone it with the narcotic. Outside, the whoosh of thrusters announced the arrival of the *Kobashi*, so Jael headed out.

The ship, bearing some resemblance to a thirty-yard-long abdomen and thorax of a praying mantis, settled in a cloud of hot sand in which platinum seeds glinted. Via her twinned augs, she sent a signal to it and it folded down a wing section of its hull into a ramp onto which she stepped while it was still settling. At the head of the ramp the outer airlock door irised open and she ducked inside to grab up the pack she had deposited there earlier, then stepped back out and down, returning to the base.

Rho's breathing had eased, so it was with care that she secured his hands and feet in manacles connected by four braided cables to a winder positioned behind him. His eyelids fluttering, he muttered something obscure, but did not wake. Jael now took from the pack a bag that looked a little like a nineteenth century doctor's case, and, four paces from Rho, placed it on the floor. An instruction from her augs caused the bag to open and evert, converting itself into a tiered display of diagnostic and surgical equipment, a small drugs manufactory, and various vials and chainglass tubes containing an esoteric selection of some quite alien oddities. Jael squatted beside the display, took up a diagnosticer and pressed it against her cheekbone, let it make its diagnosis, then plugged it into the drug manufactory. Information downloaded, the manufactory stuck out a drug patch like a thin tongue. She took this up, peeled off the backing and stuck it over her injury, which rapidly numbed. While doing this she sensed Rho surfacing into consciousness, and awaited the expected.

Rho flung himself from the sled at her, very fast. She noted he didn't even waste energy on a bellow, but was spinning straight into a kick that would have taken her head off if it had connected. He never got

a chance to straighten his leg as the winder rapidly drew in the braided cables, bringing the four manacles together. He crashed to the floor in front of her, a little closer than she had expected, his wrists and ankles locked behind him—twenty years of digging in the dirt had not entirely slowed him down

“Bitch,” he said.

Jael removed a scalpel from the display, held it before his face for a moment, then cut his sun visor strap, before trailing it gently down his body to start cutting through the material of his shorts. He tried to drag himself away from her.

“Careful,” she warned, “this is chainglass and very very sharp, and life is a very fragile thing.”

“Fuck you,” he said without heat, but ceased to struggle. She noted that he had yet to ask what she wanted. Obviously he knew. Next she cut away his boots, before replacing the scalpel in the display and standing.

“Now, Rho, you’ve been sifting sand here for two decades and discovered what, a handful of fragmentary Atheter artifacts? So, after all that time, finding something new was quite exciting. You made the mistake of toning down your public report to a level somewhere below dry boredom, which was a giveaway to me. Consequently I listened in to your private communications with Charles Cymbeline.” She leaned down, her face close to his. “Now I want you to tell me where you’ve hidden the Atheter artifact you found two weeks ago.”

He just stared up at her with those bland blue eyes, so she shrugged, stood up, and began kicking him. He struggled to protect himself, but she took her time, walking round him and driving her boot in repeatedly. He grunted and sweated and started to bleed on the floor.

“All right,” he eventually managed. “Arcosect sent a ship a week ago—it’s gone.”

Panting, Jael stepped back. “There’ve been no ships here since your discovery.” Walking back around to the instrument display she began to make her selection. While she employed her glittering instruments, his grunts soon turned to screams, but he bluntly refused to tell her anything even when she peeled strips of skin from his stomach and crushed his testicles in a set of forceps. But all that was really only

repayment for her broken cheekbone. He told her everything when she began using her esoteric selection of drugs—could not do otherwise.

She left him on the floor and crossed the room to where a table lay strewn with rock samples and from there picked up a geological hammer. Back on the top floor she located the U-space coms—the unit was inset into one wall. Her first blow shattered the console, which she tore away. She then began smashing the control components surrounding the sealed flask-sized vessels ostensibly containing small singularity generators and Calabri-yau frames. After a moment she rapped her knuckles against each flask to detect which was the false one, and pulled it out. The top unscrewed and from inside she withdrew a small brushed aluminum box with a keypad inset in the lid. The code he had given her popped the box open to reveal—resting in shaped foam—a chunk of green metal with short thorny outgrowths from one end.

Movement behind...

Jael whirled. Rho, catching his breath against the door jamb, preparing to rush her. Her gaze strayed down to one of the manacles, a frayed stub of wire protruding from it. In his right hand he held what he had used to escape: a chainglass scalpel.

*Careless.*

Now she had seen him he hurled himself forward.

She could not afford to let him come to grips with her. He was obviously many times stronger than her. As he groped toward her she brought the hammer round in a tight arc against the side of his face, where it connected with a sickening crack. He staggered sideways, clutching his face, his mouth hanging open. She stepped in closer and brought the hammer down as hard as she could on the top of his head. He dropped, dragging her arm down. She released the hammer and saw it had punched a neat square hole straight into his skull and lodged there, then the hole brimmed with blood and overflowed.

Gazing down at him, Jael said, “Oops.” She pushed him with her foot but he was leaden, unmoving. “Oh well.” She pocketed the box containing the Atheter memstore. “One dies and another is destined for resurrection after half a million years. Call it serendipity.” She relished the words for a moment, then headed away.

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I woke, flat on my back, my face cold and my body one big ache from the sharpest pain at the crown of my skull, to my aching face, and on down to the throbbing from the bones in my right foot. I was breathing shallowly—the air in the room obviously thick to my lungs. Opening bleary eyes I lifted my head slightly and peered down at myself. I wore a quilted warming suit that obviously accounted for why only my face felt cold. I realized I was in my own bedroom, and that my house had been sealed and the environment controls set to Earth-normal.

“You look like shit, Rho.”

The whiff of cigarette smoke told me who was speaking before I identified the voice.

“I guess I do,” I said, “though who are you to talk?” I carefully heaved myself upright, then back so I was resting against the bed’s headboard, then looked aside at Charles Cymbeline, my boss and the director of Arcosect—a company with a total of about fifty employees. He too looked like shit, always did. He was blond, thin, wore expensive suits that required a great deal of meticulous cleaning, smoked unfiltered cigarettes though what pleasure he derived from them I couldn’t fathom, and was very, very dead. He was a reification—a corpse with chemical preservative running in his veins, skin like old leather, with bone and the metal of some of the cyber mechanisms that moved him showing through at his finger joints. His mind was stored to a crystal inside the mulch that had been his brain. Why he retained his old dead body when he could easily afford a Golem chassis or a tank-grown living vessel I wasn’t entirely sure about either. He said it stopped people bothering him. It did.

“So we lost the memstore,” he ventured, then took another pull on his cigarette. Smoke coiled from the gaps in his shirt, obviously making its way out of holes eaten through his chest. He sat in my favorite chair. I would probably have had to clean it, if I’d any intention of staying here.

“I reckon,” I replied.

“So she tortured you and you gave it to her,” he said. “I thought you were tougher than that.”

“She tortured me for fun, and I thought maybe I could draw it out until you arrived, then she used the kind of drugs you normally don’t find anywhere outside a Batian interrogation facility. And anyway, it would have come to a choice between me dying or giving up the memstore, and you just don’t pay me enough to take the first option.”

“Ah,” he nodded, his neck creaking, and flicked ash on my carpet.

I carefully swung my legs to one side and sat on the edge of the bed. In one corner a pedestal-mounted autodoc stood like a chrome insectile monk. Charles had obviously used it to repair much of the torture damage.

“You said ‘she,’” I noted.

“Jael Feogril—my crew here obtained identification from DNA from the handle of that rock hammer we found imbedded in your head. You’re lucky to be alive. Had we arrived a day later you wouldn’t have been.”

“She’s on record?” I enquired, as if I’d never heard of her.

“Yes—Earth Central Security supplied the details: born on Masada when it was an out-Polity world and made a fortune smuggling weapons to the Separatists. Well connected, augmented with twinned augs as you no doubt saw, and, it would appear, lately branching out into stealing alien artifacts. She’s under a death sentence for an impressive list of crimes. I’ve got it all on crystal if you want it.”

“I want it.” It would give me detail.

He stared at me expressionlessly, wasn’t really capable of doing otherwise.

“What have you got here?” I asked.

“My ship and five of the guys,” he said, which accounted for the setting of the environmental controls since he certainly didn’t need “Earth-normal.” “What are your plans?”

“I intend to get that memstore back.”

“How, precisely? You don’t know where she’s gone.”

“I have contacts, Charles.”

“Who I’m presuming you haven’t contacted in twenty years.”

“They’ll remember me.”



He tilted his head slightly. “You never really told me what you used to do before you joined my little outfit. And I have never been able to find out, despite some quite intensive inquiries.”

I shrugged, then said, “I’ll require a little assistance in other departments.”

He didn’t answer for a while. His cigarette had burned right down to his fingers and now there was a slight bacony smell in the air. Then he asked, “What do you require?”

“A company ship—the *Ulriess Fire* since it’s fast—some other items I’ll list, and enough credit for the required bribes.”

“Agreed, Rho,” he said. “I’ll also pay you a substantial bounty for that memstore.”

“Good,” I replied, thinking the real bounty for me would be getting my hands around Jael Feogril’s neck.

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From what we can tell, the Polity occupies an area of the galaxy once occupied by three other races. They’re called, by us, the Jain, Csorians, and the Atheter. We thought, until only a few years ago, that they were all extinct—wiped out by an aggressive organic technology created by the Jain, which destroyed them and then burgeoned twice more to destroy the other two races—Jain technology. I think we encountered it, too, but information about that is heavily restricted. I think the events surrounding that encounter have something to do with certain Line worlds being under quarantine. I don’t know the details. I won’t know the details until the AIs lift the restrictions, but I do know something I perhaps shouldn’t have been told.

I found the first five years of my new profession as an xeno-archaeologist something of a trial, so Jonas Clyde’s arrival on the dust ball I called home came as a welcome relief. He was there direct from Masada—one of those quarantine worlds. He’d come to do some research on the platinum producing plants, though I rather think he was taking a bit of a rest cure. He shared my home and on plenty of occasions he shared my whisky. The guy was non-stop—physically and mentally adapted to go without sleep—I reckon the alcohol gave him something he was missing.

One evening, I was speculating about what the Atheter might have looked like when I think something snapped in his head and he started laughing hysterically. He augged into my entertainment unit and showed me some recordings. The first was obviously the view from a gravcar taking off from the roof port of a runcible complex. I recognized the planet Masada at once, for beyond the complex stretched a checkerboard of dikes and ponds that reflected a gas giant hanging low in the aubergine sky.

“Here the Masadans raised squirms and other unpleasant life forms for their religious masters,” Jonas told me. “The people on the surface needed an oxygenating parasite attached to their chests to keep them alive. The parasite also shortened their lifespan.”

I guessed it was understandable that they rebelled and shouted for help from the Polity. On the recording I saw people down below, but they wore envirosuits and few of them were working the ponds. Here and there I saw aquatic agrobots standing in the water like stilt-legged steel beetles.

The recording took us beyond the ponds to a wilderness of flute grasses and quagmires. Big fences separated the two. “The best discouragement to some of the nasties out there is that humans aren’t very nutritious for them,” Jonas told me. “Hooders, heroynes, and gableducks prefer their fatter natural prey out in the grasses or up in the mountains.” He glanced at me, a little crazily I thought. “Now those monsters have been planted with transponders so everyone knows if something dangerous is getting close, and which direction to run to avoid it.”

The landscape in view shaded from white to a dark brown with black earth gullies cutting between islands of this vegetation. It wasn’t long before I saw something galumphing through the grasses with the gait of a bear, though on Earth you don’t get bears weighing in at about a thousand kilos. Of course I recognized it—who hasn’t seen recording of these things and the other weird and wonderful creatures of that world? The gravcar view drew lower and kept circling above the creature. Eventually it seemed to get bored with running, halted, then slumped back on its rump to sit like some immense pyramidal Buddha. It opened its composite forelimbs into their two sets of three “sub-limbs” for the sum purpose of scratching its stomach. It yawned, opening its big duck bill to expose thorny teeth inside. It gazed up at the gravcar with seeming disinterest, some of the tiara of green eyes arcing across its domed head blinking as if it was so bored it just wanted to sleep.

“A gabbleduck,” I said to Jonas.

He shook his head and I saw that there were tears in his eyes. “No,” he told me, “that’s one of the Atheter.”

Lubricated on its way by a pint of whisky the story came out piece by piece thereafter. During his research on Masada he had discovered something amazing and quite horrible. That research had later been confirmed by an artifact recovered from a world called Shayden’s Find. Jain technology had destroyed the Jain and the Csorians. It apparently destroyed technical civilizations—that was its very purpose. The Atheter had ducked the blow, foregoing civilization, intelligence, reducing themselves to animals, to gabbleducks. Tricone mollusks in the soil of Masada crunched up anything that remained of their technology, monstrous creatures like giant millipedes ate every last scrap of each gabbleduck when it died. It was an appalling and utterly alien nihilism.

The information inside the Atheter memstore Jael had stolen was worth millions. But who was prepared to pay those millions? Polity AIs would, but her chances of selling it to them without ECS coming down on her like a hammer were remote. Also, from what Jonas told me, the Polity had obtained something substantially more useful than a mere memstore, for the artifact from Shayden’s Find held an Atheter AI. So who else? Well, I knew about her—though, until she’d stuck a narcotic needle in my chest, I had never met her—and I knew that she had dealings with the Prador, that she sold them stuff, sometimes living stuff, sometimes human captives—for there was a black market for such in the Prador Third Kingdom. It was why the Polity AIs were so ticked off about her.

Another thing about Jael was that she was the kind of person who found things out, secret things. She was a Masadan by birth so probably had a lot of contacts on her home world. I wasn’t so arrogant as to assume that what Jonas Clyde had blabbed to me had not been blabbed elsewhere. I felt certain she knew about the gabbleducks. And I felt certain she was out for the big killing. The Prador would pay *billions* to someone who delivered into their claws a living, breathing, *thinking* Atheter.

A tenuous logic chain? No, not really. Even as my consciousness had faded, I’d heard her say, “*One dies and another is destined for resurrection, after half a million years. Call it serendipity.*”

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The place stank like a sea cave in which dead fish were decaying. Jael brought her foot down hard, but the ship louse tried to crawl out from under it. She put all her weight down on it and twisted, and her foot sank down with a satisfying crunch, spattering glutinous ichor across the crusted filthy floor. Almost as if this were some kind of signal, the wide made-for-something-other-than-human door split diagonally, the two halves revolving up into the wall with a grinding shriek.

The tunnel beyond was dank and dark, weedy growths sprouting like dead man's fingers from the uneven walls. With a chitinous clattering, a flattened-pear carapace scuttling on too many legs appeared and came charging out. It headed straight toward her but she didn't allow herself to react. At the last moment it skidded to a halt, then clattered sideways. Prador second-child, one eye-palp missing and a crack healing in its carapace, a rail-gun clutched in one of its underhands, with power cables and a projectile belt-feed trailing back to a box mounted underneath it. While she eyed it, it fed some scrap of flesh held in one of its foreclaws into its mandibles and champed away enthusiastically.

Next a bigger shape loomed in the tunnel and advanced at a more leisurely pace, its sharp feet hitting the floor with a sound like hydraulic chisels. The first-child was big—the size of a small gravcar—its carapace wider and flatter and looking as hard as iron. The upper turret of its carapace sported a collection of ruby eyes and sprouting above them it retained both of its palp-eyes, all of which gave it superb vision—the eyesight of a carnivore, a predator. Underneath its mandibles and the nightmare mouth they exposed, mechanisms had been shell-welded to its carapace. Jael hoped one of these was a translator.

“I didn't want to speak to you at a distance, since, even using your codes, an AI might have been listening in,” she said.

After a brief pause to grate its mandibles together, one of the hexagonal boxes attached underneath it spoke, for some reason, in a thick Marsman accent. “Our codes are unbreakable.”

Jael sighed to herself. Despite having fought the Polity for forty years, some Prador were no closer to understanding that, to AIs, no code was unbreakable. Of course all Prador weren't so dumb—the clever ones now ruled the Third Kingdom. It was just aping its father, who was a Prador down at the bottom of the hierarchy and scrabbling to find some advantage to climb higher. However, that father had acquired enough wealth to be able to send its first-child off in a cruiser like this, and would probably be able to acquire more by cutting deals with its competitors—

all Prador were competitors. The first-child would need to make those deals, for what Jael hoped to sell, it might not be able to afford by itself

“I will soon be acquiring something that could be of great value to you,” she said. Mentioning the Atheter memstore aboard *Kobashi* would have been suicide—Prador only made deals for things they could not take by force.

“Continue,” said the first-child.

“I can, for the sum of ten billion New Carth Shillings or the equivalent in any stable currency, including Prador diamond slate, provide you with a living breathing Atheter.”

The Prador dipped its carapace—perhaps the equivalent of a man tilting his head to listen to a private aug communication. Its father must be talking to it. Finally it straightened up again and replied, “The Atheter are without mind.”

Jael instinctively concealed her surprise, though that was a pointless exercise since this Prador could no more read her expression than she could read its. How had it acquired that knowledge? She only picked it up by running some very complicated search programs through all the reports coming from the taxonomic and genetic research station on Masada. Whatever—she would have to deal with it.

“True, they are, but I have a mind to give to one of them,” she replied. “I have acquired an Atheter memstore.”

The first-child advanced a little. “That is very interesting,” said the Marsman voice—utterly without inflection.

“Which I of course have not been so foolish as to bring here—it is securely stored in a Polity bank vault.”

“That is also interesting.” The first-child stepped back again and Jael rather suspected something had been lost in translation. It tilted its carapace forward again and just froze in place, even its mandibles ceasing their constant motion.

Jael considered returning to her ship for the duration. The first-child’s father would now be making its negotiations, striking deals, planning betrayals—the whole complex and vicious rigmarole of Prador politics and economics. She began a slow pacing, spotted another ship

louse making its way toward her boots and went over to step on that. She could return to *Kobashi*, but would only pace there. She played some games in her twinned augs, sketching out fight scenarios in this very room, between her and the two Prador, and solving them. She stepped on four more ship lice, then accessed a downloaded catalog and studied the numerous items she would like to buy. Eventually the first-child heaved itself back upright.

“We will provide payment in the form of one half diamond slate, one quarter a cargo of armor scales and the remainder in Polity currencies,” it said.

Jael balked a little at the armor scales. Prador exotic metal armor was a valuable commodity, but bulky. She decided to accept, reckoning she could cache the scales somewhere in the Graveyard and make a remote sale by giving the coordinates to the buyer.

“That’s acceptable,” she said.

“Now we must discuss the details of the sale.”

Jael nodded to herself. This was where it got rather difficult. Organizing a sale of something to the Prador was like working out how to hand-feed white sharks while in the water with them.

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I gazed out through the screen at a world swathed in cloud, encircled by a glittering ring shepherded by a sulphurous moon, which itself trailed a cometary tail resulting from impacts on its surface a hundred and twenty years old—less than an eye-blink in interstellar terms. The first settlers, leaving just before the Quiet War in the Solar System, had called the world Paris—probably because of a strong French contingent amidst them and probably because “Paradise” had been overused. Their civilization was hardly out of the cradle when the Polity arrived in a big way and subsumed them. After a further hundred years the population of this place surpassed a billion. It thrived, great satellite space stations were built, and huge high-tech industries sprang up in them and in the arid equatorial deserts down below. This place was rich in every resource—surrounding space also swarming with asteroids that were heavy in rare metals. Then, a hundred and twenty years ago, the Prador came. It took them less than a day to depopulate the planet and turn it into the Hell I saw before me, and to turn the stations into that glittering ring.

“Ship on approach,” said a voice over com. “Follow the vector I give you and do not deviate. At the pick-up point shut down to minimal life-support and a grabship will bring you in. Do otherwise and you’re smeared. Understood?”

“I understand perfectly,” I replied.

Holofiction producers called this borderland between Prador and Human space the Badlands. The people who haunted this region hunting for salvage called it the Graveyard and knew themselves to be grave robbers. Polity AIs had not tried to civilize the area. All the habitable worlds were still smoking, and why populate any space that acted as a buffer zone between them and a bunch of nasty clawed fuckers who might decide at any moment on a further attempt to exterminate the human race?

“You got the vector, Ultriss?” I asked.

“Yeah,” replied my ship’s AI. It wasn’t being very talkative since I’d refused its suggestion that we approach using the chameleonware recently installed aboard. I eyed the new instruments to my left on the console, remembering that Earth Central Security did not look kindly on anyone but them using their stealth technology. Despite ECS being thin on the ground out here, I had no intention of putting this ship into “stealth mode” unless really necessary. Way back, when I wasn’t a xeno-archaeologist, I’d heard rumors about those using inadequate chameleonware ending up on the bad end of an ECS rail-gun test firing. “Sorry, we just didn’t see you,” was the usual epitaph.

My destination rose over Paris’s horizon, cast into silhouette by the bile-yellow sun beyond it. Adjusting the main screen display to give me the best view, I soon discerned the massive conglomeration of station bubble units and docked ships that made up the “Free Republic of Montmartre”—the kind of place that in Earth’s past would have been described as a banana republic, though perhaps not so nice. Soon we reached the place designated, and, main power shut down, the emergency lights flickered on. The main screen powered down too, going fully transparent with a photo-reactive smear of blackness blotting out the sun’s glare and most of the space station. I briefly glimpsed the grabship approaching—basically a one-man vessel with a massive engine to the rear and a hydraulically operated triclave extending from the nose—before it disappeared back into the smear. They used such ships here since a large enough proportion of their visitors weren’t to be trusted to

get simple docking maneuvers right, and wrong moves in that respect could demolish the relatively fragile bubble units and kill those inside.

A clanging against the hull followed by a lurch told me the grabship now had hold of *Ulriss Fire* and was taking us in. It would have been nice to check all this with exterior cameras—throwing up images on the row of subscreens below the main one—but I had to be very careful about power usage on approach. The Free Republic had been fired on before now, and any ship that showed energy usage of the level enabling weapons usually ended up on the mincing end of a rail-gun.

Experience told me that in about twenty minutes the ship would be docked, so I unstrapped and propelled myself into the rear cabin where, in zero-g, I began pulling on my gear. Like many visitors here I took the precaution of putting on a light spacesuit of the kind that didn't constrict movement, but would keep me alive if there was a blow-out. I'd scanned through their rules file, but found nothing much different from when I'd last read it: basically you brought nothing aboard that could cause a breach—this mainly concerned weaponry—nor any dangerous biologicals. You paid a docking tax and a departure tax. And anything you did in the intervening time was your own business so long as it didn't harm station personnel or the station itself. I strapped a heavy carbide knife to my boot, and at my waist holstered a pepper-pot stun gun. It could get rough in there sometimes.

Back in the cockpit I saw *Ulriss Fire* was now drawing into the station shadow. Structural members jutted out all around and ahead I could see an old-style carrier shell, like a huge hexagonal nut, trailing umbilicals and connected by a docking tunnel to the curve of one bubble unit. Unseen, the grabship inserted my vessel into place and various clangs and crashes ensued.

“Okay, you can power up your airlock now—nothing else, mind.”

I did as instructed, watching the display as the airlock connected up to an exterior universal lock, then I headed back to scramble out through the *Ulriss Fire's* airlock. The cramped interior of the carrier shell smelt of mold. I waited there holding onto the knurled rods of something that looked like a piece of zero-g exercise equipment, eyeing brownish splashes on the walls while a saucer-shaped scanning drone dropped down on a column and gave me the once over. Then I proceeded to the docking tunnel, which smelt of urine. Beside the final lock into the bubble unit was a payment console, into which I inserted the required amount in New Carth Shillings. The lock opened to admit me and now I



was of no further interest to station personnel. Others had come in like this. Some of their ships still remained docked. Some had been seized by those who owned the station to be broken for parts or sold on.

\* \* \* \*

Clad in a coldsuit, Jael trudged through a thin layer of CO2 snow toward the gates of the Arena. Glancing to either side, she eyed the numerous ships down on the granite plain. Other figures were trudging in from them too, and a lucky few were flying toward the place in gravcars. She'd considered pulling her trike out of storage, but it would have taken time to assemble and she didn't intend staying here any longer than necessary.

The entry arches—constructed of blocks of water ice as hard as iron at this temperature—were filled with the glimmering menisci of shimmer-shields, probably scavenged from the wreckage of ships floating about in the Graveyard, or maybe from the surface of one of the depopulated worlds. Reaching one of the arches, she pushed through a shield into a long anteroom into which all the arches debouched. The floor was flat granite cut with square spiral patterns for grip. A line of airlock doors punctuated the inner wall. This whole set-up was provided for large crowds, which this place had never seen. Beside the airlock she approached was a teller machine of modern manufacture. She accessed it through her right-hand aug and made her payment electronically. The thick insulated lock door thumped open, belching vapor into the frigid air, freezing about her and falling as ice dust. Inside the lock, the temperature rose rapidly. CO2 ice ablated from her boots and clothing, and after checking the atmosphere reading down in the corner of her visor she retracted visor and hood back down into the collar of her suit.

Beyond the next door was a pillared hall containing a market. Strolling between the stalls, she observed the usual tourist tat sold in such places in the Polity, and much else besides. There, under a plasmel dome, someone was selling weapons, and beyond his stall she could hear the hiss and crack of his wares being tested in a thick-walled shooting gallery. There a row of food vendors were serving everything from burgers to alien arthropods you ate while they were still alive and which apparently gave some kind of high. The smell of coffee wafted across, along with tobacco, cannabis, and other more esoteric smokes.

All around the walls of the hall, stairs wound up to other levels, some connecting above to the tunnels leading to the arena itself, others to the pens and others to private concerns. She knew where to go, but had

some other business to conduct first with a dealer in biologicals. Anyway, she didn't want the man she had specifically come here to see to think she was in a hurry, or anxious to buy the item he had on offer.

The dealer's emporium was built between four pillars, three floors tall and reaching the ceiling. The lower floor was a display area with four entrances around the perimeter. She entered and looked around. Aisles cut to a central spiral stair between tanks, terrariums, cages, display cases, and stock-search screens. She spotted a tank full of Spatterjay leeches, "Immortality in a bite! Guaranteed!" a cage in which big scorpion-like insects were tearing into a mass of purple and green bones and meat, and a display containing little tubes of seeds below pictures of the plants they would produce. Mounting the stair, she climbed to the next floor where two catadapts were studying something displayed on the screens of a nanoscope. They looked like customers, as did the thin woman who was peering into a cylindrical tank containing living Dracocorp augs. On the top floor Jael found who she was looking for.

The office was small, the rest of the floor obviously used for living accommodation. The woman with a severe skin complaint, baggy layered clothing, and a tricorn hat, sat back with heavy snow boots up on her desk, crusted fingers up against her aug while she peered at screens showing views of those on the floors below. She was nodding— obviously conducting some transaction or conversation by aug. Jael stepped into the room, plumped herself down in one of the form chairs opposite and waited. The woman glanced at her, smiled to expose a carnivore's teeth and held up one finger. Wait one moment.

Her business done, the woman took her feet off the desk and turned her chair so she was facing Jael.

"Well, what can I do for *you*?" she asked, utterly focused. "Anything under any sun is our motto. We're also an agent for Dracocorp and are now branching out into cosmetics."

"Forgive me," said Jael, "if I note that you're not the best advert for the cosmetics."

The woman leant an elbow on the table, reached up, and peeled a thick dry flake of skin from her cheek. "That's because you don't know what you're seeing. Once the change is complete my skin will be resistant to numerous acids and even to vacuum."

"I'm here to sell," said Jael.

The woman sat back, not quite so focused now. “I see. Well, we’re always prepared to take a look at what ... people have to offer.”

Jael removed a small sample tube from her belt cache, placed it on the desk edge and rolled it across. The woman took it up, peered inside, a powerful lens clicking down from her hat to cover her eye.

“Interesting. What are they?”

Jael tapped a finger against her right-hand aug. “This would be quicker.”

A message flashed across to Jael giving her a secure loading address. She transmitted the file she had compiled about the seeds gathered on that dusty little planet where she had obtained her real prize. The woman went blank for a few minutes while she ran through the data. Jael scanned around the room, wondering what security there was here.

“I think we can do business—once I’ve confirmed all this.”

“Please confirm away.”

The woman took the tube over to a combined nanoscope and multispectrum scanner and inserted it inside.

Jael continued, “But I don’t want money, Desorla.”

Desorla froze, staring at the scope’s display. After a moment she said, “This all seems in order.” She paused, head bowed. “I haven’t heard that name in a long while.”

“I find things out,” said Jael.

Desorla turned and eyed the gun Jael now held. “What do you want?”

“I want you to tell me where Penny Royal is hiding.”

Desorla chuckled unconvincingly. “Looking for legends? You can’t seriously—”

Jael aimed and fired three times. Two explosions blew cavities in the walls, a third explosion flung paper fragments from a shelf of books, and a metallic tongue bleeding smoke slumped out from behind. Two cameras and the security drone—Jael had detected nothing else.

“I’m very serious,” said Jael. “Please don’t make me go get my doctor’s bag.”

\* \* \* \*

Broeven took one look at me and turned white—well, as pale as a Kro-dorman can get. He must have sent some sort of warning signal, because suddenly two heavies appeared out of the fug from behind him—one a boosted woman with the face of an angel and a large grey military aug affixed behind her ear, the other an ophidapt man who was making a point of extruding the carbide claws from his fingertips. The thin guy sitting opposite Broeven glanced round, then quickly drained his schooner of beer, took up a wallet from the table, nodded to Broeven and departed. I sauntered over, turned the abandoned chair round and sat astride it.

“You’ve moved up in the world,” I said, nodding to Broeven’s protection.

“So what do I call you now?” he asked, the whorls in the thick skin of his face flushing red.

“Rho, which is actually my real name.”

“That’s nice—we didn’t get properly acquainted last time we met.” He held up a finger. “Gene, get Rho a drink. Malt whisky do you?”

I nodded. The woman frowned in annoyance and departed. Perhaps she thought the chore beneath her.

“So what can I do for you, Rho?” he inquired.

“Information.”

“Which costs.”

“Of course.” I peered down at the object the guy here before me had left on the table. It was a small chainglass case containing a strip of cha-meleoncloth with three crab-shaped and, if they were real, gold buttons pinned to it. “Are those real?”

“They are. People know better than to try cheating me now.”

I looked up. “I never cheated you.”

“No, you promised not to open the outer airlock door if I told you what you wanted to know. My life in exchange for information, and you stuck to your side of the deal. I can’t say that makes me feel any better about it.”

“But you’re a businessman,” I supplied.

“But I’m a businessman.”

The boosted woman returned carrying a bottle of ersatz malt and a tumbler that she slammed down on the table before me, before stepping back. I can’t say I liked having her behind me. I reached down and carefully opened a belt pouch, feeling the tension notch up a bit. The ophidapt partially unfolded his arms and fully extended his claws. I took out a single blue stone and placed it next to the glass case. Broeven eyed the stone for a moment, then picked it up between gnarled forefinger and thumb. He produced a reader and placed the etched sapphire inside.

“Ten thousand,” he said. “For what?”

“That’s for services rendered—twenty-three years ago—and if you don’t want to do further business with me, you keep it and I leave.”

He slipped the sapphire, and the glass case, into the inner pocket of his heavy coat, then sat upright, contemplating me. I thought for a moment he was going to get up and leave. Trying to remain casual, I scanned around the interior of the bar and noticed it wasn’t so full as I’d remembered it being. Everyone seemed a bit subdued, conversations whispered and more furtive, no one getting shit-faced.

“Very well,” he said. “What information do you require?”

“Two things: first, I want everything you can track down about gableducks possibly in or near the Graveyard.” That got me a rather quizzical look. “And second, I want everything you can give me about Jael Feogril’s dealings over the last year or so.”

“A further ten thousand,” he said, and I read something spooked in his expression. I took out another sapphire and slid it across to him. He checked it with his reader and pocketed it before uttering another word.

“I’ll give you two things.” He made a circular gesture with one finger. “Jael Feogril might be dealing out of her league.”

“Go on.”

“*Them* ... a light destroyer ... Jael’s ship docked with it briefly only a month ago, before departing. They’re still out there.”

I realized then why it seemed so quiet in the bar and elsewhere in the station. The people here were those who hadn’t run for cover, and were perhaps wishing they had. It was never the healthy option to remain in the vicinity of the Prador.

“And the second thing?”

“The location of the only gabbleduck in the Graveyard, which I can give you without even doing any checking, since I’ve already given it to Jael Feogril.”

After he’d provided the information I headed away—I had enough to be going on with, and, maybe, if I moved fast ... I paused on my way back to my ship, seeing that Broeven’s female heavy was walking along behind me, and turned to face her. She walked straight past me, saying, “I’m not a fucking waitress.”

She seemed in an awful hurry.

\* \* \* \*

On the stone floor two opponents faced off. Both were men, both were boosted. Jael wondered if people like them ever considered treatment for excessive testosterone production. The bald-headed thug was unarmed and resting his hands on his knees as he caught his breath, twin-pupil eyes fixed on his opponent. The guy with the long queue of hair was also unarmed, though the plate-like lumps all over his overly muscled body were evidence of subcutaneous armor. After a moment they closed and began hammering at each other again, fists impacting with meaty snaps against flesh, blows blocked and diverted, the occasional kick slamming home, though neither of them was really built for that kind of athleticism.

Inevitably, one of them was called “Tank”—the one with the queue. The other was called “Norris.” These two had been hammering away at each other for twenty minutes to the growing racket from the audience, but whether that noise arose from the spectators’ enjoyment of the show or because they wanted to get to the next event was debatable.

Eventually, after many scrappy encounters, Tank managed to deliver an axe kick to the side of Norris's head and laid him out. Tank, though the winner, needed to be helped from the arena too, obviously having over-extended himself with that last kick. Once the area was clear, the next event was announced and a gate opened somewhere below Jael. She observed a great furry muscular back and wide head as a giant mongoose shot out. The creature came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the arena and stood up to the height of a man on its hindquarters. Jael discarded her beer tube and stood, heading over toward the pens. The crowd were now shouting for one of the giant cobras the mongoose dispatched with utterly unamazing regularity. She wasn't really all that interested.

The doors down into the pens were guarded by a thug little different from those who had been in the ring below. He was there because previous security systems had often been breached and some of the fighters, animal, human, or machine, had been knobbed.

"I'm here to see Kooper," said Jael.

The man eyed her for a moment. "Jael Feogril," he said, reaching back to open the door. "Of course you are."

Jael stepped warily past, then descended the darkened stair.

Kooper was operating a small electric forklift on the tines of which rested the corpse of a seal. He raised a hand to her, then motored forward to drop the load down into one of the pens. Jael stepped over and peered down at the ratty-looking polar bear that took hold of the corpse and dragged it back across ice to one corner, leaving a gory trail.

Kooper, a thin hermaphrodite in much-repaired mesh inlaid overalls, leapt off the forklift and gestured. "This way." He led her down a stair into moist rancid corridors, then finally to an armored door that he opened with a press of his hand against a palm lock. At the back of the circular chamber within, squatting in its own excrement, was the animal she had come to see—thick chains leading from a steel collar to secure it to the back wall.

A poor looking specimen, about the size of a Terran black bear, its head was bowed low, the tip of its bill resting against the ground. Lying on the filthy stone beside it were the dismembered remains of something obviously grown hastily in a vat—weak splintered bones and watery flesh, tumors exposed like bunches of grapes. While Jael watched, the

gabbleduck abruptly hissed and heaved its head upright. Its green eyes ran in an arc across its domed head. There were twelve or so of them: two large egg-shaped ones toward the center, two narrow ones below these like underscores, two rows of small round ones arcing out to terminate against two triangular ones. They all had lids—the outer two blinking open and closed alternately. Its conjoined forelimbs were folded mummy-like across the raised cross-hatch ribbing of its chest, its gut was baggy and veined, and purple sores seeped in its brown-green skin.

“And precisely how much did you want for this?” inquired Jael disbelievingly.

“It’s very rare,” said Kooper. “There’s a restriction on export now and that’s pushed prices up. You won’t find any others inside the Graveyard, and those running wild on Polity worlds have mostly been tagged and are watched.”

“Why then are you selling it?”

Kooper looked shifty—something he seemed better at doing than looking after the animals he provided for the arena. “It’s not suitable.”

“You mean it won’t fight,” said Jael.

“Shunder-club froob,” said the gabbleduck, but its heart did not seem to be in it.

“All it does is sit there and do that. We put it up against the lion,” he pointed at some healing claw marks in its lower stomach, “and it just sat there and starting muttering to itself. The lion tried to jump out of the arena.”

Jael nodded to herself, then turned away. “Not interested.”

“Wait!” Kooper grabbed her arm. She caught his hand, turned it into a wrist lock forcing him down to his knees.

“Don’t touch me.” She released him.

“If it’s a matter of the price...”

“It’s a matter of whether it will even survive long enough for you to get it aboard my ship, and even then I wonder how long it will survive afterward.”



“Look, I’ll be taking a loss, but I’m sure we can work something out....”

Inside, Jael smiled. When the deal was finally struck she allowed that smile out, for even if the creature died she might well net a profit just selling its corpse. She had no intention of letting it die. The medical equipment and related gobbleduck physiology files aboard *Kobashi* should see to that, along with her small cargo of frozen Masadan grazers—the gobbleduck’s favored food.

\* \* \* \*

I was feeling slightly pissed off when, after the interminable departure from Paris station, the grabship finally released *Ulriss Fire*. Even as the grabship carried my ship out I’d seen another ship departing the station under its own power. It seemed that there were those for whom the rules did not apply, or those who knew who to bribe.

“Run system checks,” I instructed.

“Ooh, I never thought of that,” replied Ulriss.

“And there was me thinking AIs were beyond sarcasm.”

“It’s a necessary tool used for communicating with a lower species,” the ship’s AI replied. I still think it was annoyed that I wouldn’t let it use the chameleonware.

“Take us under,” I said, ignoring the jibe.

Sudden acceleration pushed me back into my chair, and I felt, at some point deep inside my skull, the U-space engine come online. My perception distorted, the stars in the cockpit screen faded, and the screen greyed out. It lasted maybe a few seconds, then *Ulriss Fire* shuddered like a ground car rolling over a mass of deep potholes, and a starry view flicked back into place.

“What the fuck happened?”

“Checking,” said Ulriss.

I began checking as well, noting that we’d traveled only about eighty million miles and had surfaced to the real in deep space. However, I was getting mass readings out there.

“We hit USER output,” Ulriss informed me.

I just sat there for a moment, wracking my brains to try and figure out what a “user” was. I finally admitted defeat. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I see,” said Ulriss, in an irritatingly superior manner. “The USER acronym stands for Underspace Inference Emitter—”

“Shouldn’t that be UIE, then?”

“Do you want to know what a USER is, or would you rather I began using my sarcasm tool again?”

“Sorry, do carry on.”

“A USER is a device that shifts a singularity in and out of U-space via a runcible gate, thus creating a disturbance that knocks any ships that are within range out of that continuum. The USER here is a small one aboard the Polity dreadnought currently three thousand miles away from us. I don’t think we were the target. I think that was the cruiser now coming up to port.”

With the skin crawling on my back, I took up the joystick and asserted positional control, nudging the ship round with spurts of air from its attitude jets. Stars swung across the screen, then a large ugly-looking vessel swung into view. It looked like a flattened pear, but one stretched from a point on its circumference. It was battered, its brassy exotic armor showing dents and burns that its memform hull and s-con grids had been unable to deal with, and which hadn’t been repaired since. Missile ports and the mouths of rail-guns and beam weapons dotted that hull, but they looked perfectly serviceable. Ulriss had neglected to mention the word “Prador” before the word “cruiser.” This is what had everyone checking their online wills and talking in whispers back in Paris.

“Stealth mode?” suggested Ulriss, with a degree of smugness.

“Fucking right,” I replied.

The additional instruments came alight and a luminescent ribbing began to track across the screen before me. I wondered how good the chameleonware was, since maybe bad chameleonware would put us in even greater danger—the Prador suspecting some sort of attack if they detected us.

“And now if you could ease us away from that thing?”

The fusion drive stuttered randomly—a low power note and firing format that wouldn't put out too-regular ionization. We fell away, the Prador cruiser thankfully receding, but now, coming into view, a Polity dreadnought. At one time, the Prador vessel would have outclassed a larger Polity ship. It was an advantage the nasty aliens maintained throughout their initial attack during the war: exotic metal armor that could take a ridiculously intense pounding. Now Polity ships were armored in a similar manner, and carried weapons and EM warfare techniques that could penetrate to the core of Prador ships.

“What the hell is happening here?” I wondered.

“There is some communication occurring, but I cannot penetrate it.”

“Best guess?”

“Well, ECS does venture into the Graveyard, and it is still considered Polity territory. Maybe the Prador have been getting a little bit too pushy.”

I nodded to myself. Confrontations like these weren't that uncommon in the Graveyard, but this one was bloody inconvenient. While I waited, something briefly blanked the screen. When it came back on again I observed a ball of light a few hundred miles out from the cruiser, shrinking rather than expanding, then winking out.

“CTD imploder,” Ulriss informed me.

I was obviously behind the times. I knew a CTD was an antimatter bomb, but an “imploder”? I didn't ask.

After a little while the Prador ship's steering thrusters stabbed out into vacuum and ponderously turned it over. Then its fusion engines flared to life and began taking it away.

“Is that USER still on?” I asked.

“It is.”

“Why? I don't see the point.”

“Maybe ECS is just trying to *make* a point.”

The USER continued functioning for a further five hours while the Prador ship departed. I almost got the feeling that those in the Polity dreadnought knew I was there and were deliberately delaying me. When it finally stopped, it took another hour before U-space had settled down enough for us to enter it without being flung out again. It had all been very frustrating.

\* \* \* \*

People knew that if a ship was capable of traveling through U-space it required an AI to control its engines. Mawkishly they equated artificial intelligence with the godlike creations that controlled the Polity, somehow forgetting that colony ships with U-space engines were leaving the Solar System before the Quiet War, and before anyone saw anything like the silicon intelligences that were about now. The supposedly primitive Prador, who had nearly smashed the Polity, failed because they did not have AI, apparently. How then did they run the U-space engines in their ships? It came down, in the end, to the definition of AI—something that had been undergoing constant revision for centuries. The thing that controlled the engines in the *Kobashi*, Jael did not call an AI. She called it a “control system” or sometimes, a “Prador control system.”

*Kobashi* surfaced from U-space on the edge of the Graveyard far from any sun. The coordinates Desorla had reluctantly supplied were constantly changing in relation to nearby stellar bodies, but, checking her scanners, Jael saw that they were correct, if this black planetoid—a wanderer between stars—was truly the location of Penny Royal. The planetoid was not much bigger than Earth’s Moon, was frigid, without atmosphere, and had not seen any volcanic activity quite possibly for billions of years. However, her scans did reveal a cannibalized ship resting on the surface and bonded-regolith tunnels winding away from it like worm casts to eventually disappear into the ground. She also measured EM output—energy usage—for signs of life. Positioning *Kobashi* geostationary above the other ship, she began sending signals.

“Penny Royal, I am Jael Feogril and I have come to buy your services. I know that the things you value are not the same as those valued by ... others. If you assist me, you will gain access to an Atheter memstore, from which you may retain a recording.”

She did not repeat the message. Penny Royal would have seen her approach and have been monitoring her constantly ever since. The thing called Penny Royal missed very little.

Eventually she got something back: landing coordinates—nothing else. She took *Kobashi* down, settling between two of those tunnels with the nose of her ship only fifty yards from the other ship's hull. Studying the other vessel, she recognized a Polity destroyer, its sleek lines distorted, parts of it missing as if it had been slowly draining into the surrounding tunnels. After a moment she saw an irised airlock open. No message—the invitation was in front of her. Heading back into her quarters she donned an armored spacesuit, took up her heavy pulse-rifle with its under-slung mini-launcher, her sidearm, and a selection of grenades. Likely the weapons would not be enough if Penny Royal launched some determined attack, but they might and that was enough of a reason for carrying them. She resisted the impulse to go and check on the gableduck, but it was fine, its sores healed and flesh building up on its bones, its nonsensical statements much more emphatic.

Beyond *Kobashi* her boots crunched on a scree surface. Her suit's visor set to maximum light amplification, she peered down at a surface that seemed to consist entirely of loose flat hexagonal crystals, like coins. They were a natural formation and nothing to do with this planetoid's resident. However, the thing that stabbed up through this layer nearby—like an eyeball impaled on a thin curved thorn of metal—certainly belonged to Penny Royal.

Jael finally stepped into the airlock, and noticed that the inner door was open too, so she would not be shedding her spacesuit. For no apparent reason other than to unnerve her, the first lock door swiftly closed once she was through. Within the ship she necessarily turned on her suit lights to complement the light amplification. The interior had been stripped right down to the hull members. All that Penny Royal had found no use for elsewhere, lay in a heap to one side of the lock, perhaps ready to be thrown outside. The twenty or so crew members had been desiccated—hard vacuum freeze-drying and preserving them. They rested in a tangled pile like some nightmare monument. Jael noticed the pile consisted only of woody flesh and frangible bone. No clothing there, no augs, no jewelry. It occurred to her that Penny Royal had not thrown these corpses outside because the entity might yet find a use for them.

She scanned about herself, not quite sure where to go now. Across the body of the ship from her was the mouth of one of those tunnels, curving down into darkness. *There?* No, to her right the mouth of another tunnel emitted heat a little above the ambient. Stepping over hull beams, she began to make her way toward it, then silvery tentacular fingers eased out around the lip of the tunnel and heaved out an object two yards across

and seemingly formed by computer junk from the ship compressed into a sphere. Lights glimmered inside the tangle and it extruded antennas, and eyes like the one she had seen outside. Settling down, it seemed to unravel slightly, whereupon a fleshless golem unpeeled from its surface, stood upright and advanced a couple of paces, a thick ribbed umbilicus still keeping it connected.

During the Prador-Human war it had been necessary to quickly manufacture the artificial intelligences occupying stations, ships and drones, for casualties were high. Quality control suffered and these intelligences, which in peacetime would have needed substantial adjustments, were sent to the front. As a matter of expediency, flawed crystal got used rather than discarded. Personality fragments were copied, sometimes not very well, successful fighters or tacticians recopied. The traits constructed or duplicated were not necessarily those evincing morality. Some of these entities went rogue and became what were described as black AIs.

Like Penny Royal.

\* \* \* \*

Standing at his shoulder, the boosted woman, Gene, gave Koober the confidence to defy me. I'd already told him that I knew Jael had bought the gabbleduck from him, I just wanted to know if he knew anything else: who else she might have seen here, where she was going ... anything really. I was equally curious to know how Broeven's ex-employee had ended up here. It struck me that this went beyond the bounds of coincidence.

"I don't have to tell you nothing, Sandman," he said, using my old name with its double meaning.

"True, you don't," I replied. I really hated how the scum I'd known twenty years ago all seemed to have floated to the top. "Which is why I'm prepared to pay for what you can tell me."

He glanced back at his protection, then crossed his arms. "You were the big man once, but that ain't so now. I got my place here at the Arena and I got a good income. I don't even have to speak to you." He unfolded his arms and waved a finger imperiously. "Now piss off."

Not only was he defiant, but stupid. The woman, no matter how vigilant, could not protect him from a seeker bullet or a pin, coated with

bone-eating nanite, glued to a door handle. But I didn't do that sort of stuff now. I was retired. I carefully reached into my belt pouch and took out one of my remaining etched sapphires. I would throw it, and while the gem arced through the air toward Koober and the woman I reckoned on getting the drop on them. My pepper-pot stun gun was lodged in the back of my belt. Of course I'd take her down first. I tossed the gem and began to reach.

She moved. Koober went over her foot and was heading for the ground. The sapphire glimmered in the air still as the barrel of the pulse-gun centered on my forehead. I guess I was rusty, because I didn't even consider throwing myself aside. For a moment I just thought, *that's it*, but no field-accelerated pulse of aluminum dust blew my head apart. She caught the gem in her other hand and flipped it straight back at me. With my free hand I caught it, my other hand relaxing its grip on my gun and carefully easing out to one side, fingers spread.

"I believe my boss just told you to leave," she said.

Koober was lying on the floor swearing, then he looked up and paused—only now realizing what had happened.

I nodded an acknowledgment to Gene, turned and quickly headed for the stair leading up from the pens, briefly glimpsed an oversized mongoose chewing on the remains of a huge snake on the arena floor, then headed back toward the market where I might pick up more information. What the hell was a woman like her doing with a lowlife like Koober? It made no sense, and the coincidence of her being here just stretched things too far. I wondered if Broeven had sent her to try to cash in—guessing I was probably after something valuable. Such thoughts concerned me—that's my excuse. She came at me from a narrow side-tunnel. I only managed to turn a little before she grabbed me, spun me round and slammed me against the wall of the exit tunnel. I turned, and again found myself looking down the barrel of that pulse-gun. People around us quickly made themselves scarce.

"Koober had second thoughts about letting you go," she said.

"Really?" I managed.

"He is a little slow, sometimes," she opined. "It occurred to him, once you were out of sight, that you might resent his treatment of you and come back to slip cyanide in his next soy-burger."

“He’s a vegetarian?”

“It’s working with the animals—put him off meat.”

I watched her carefully, wondering why I was still alive. “Are you going to kill me?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

“Many people, but in most cases the choice was theirs.”

“That’s very moral of you.”

“So it would seem,” she agreed. “Koober is shit-scared of you. Apparently you’re a multiple murderer?”

“Hit man.”

“Murderer.”

*Ah*, I thought I knew what she was now.

“I think you know precisely who I am and what I was,” I said. “Now I’m a xeno-archaeologist trying to track down stolen goods.”

“I stayed here too long,” she said distractedly, shaking her head. “It was going to be my pleasure to shut Koober down.” She paused for a moment, considering. “You should stay out of this, Rho. This has gone beyond you.”

“If you say so,” I said. “You’ve got the gun.”

She lowered her weapon, then abruptly holstered it. “If you don’t believe me, then I suggest you go and see a dealer in biologicals called Desorla. Apparently Jael visited her before coming to see Koober, and their dealings involved Jael shooting out the cameras and security drones in Desorla’s office.”

“Just biologicals?”

“Desorla has ... connections.”



She moved away and right then I felt no inclination to go after her. Maybe she was feeding me a line of bullshit or maybe she was giving me the lead I needed. If not, I'd come back to the pen well prepared.

In the market, one of the stall holders quickly directed me toward Desorla's emporium. I entered through one of the floor-level doors and found no activity inside. A spiral staircase led up, but a gate had been drawn across it and locked. I recognized the kind of lock immediately and set to work on it with the tools about my person. Like I said, I was rusty—it took me nearly thirty seconds to break the programs. I climbed up, scanned the next floor, then climbed higher still to the top floor.

The office was clean and empty, so I kicked in the flimsy door into the living accommodation. Nothing particularly unusual here ... then I saw the blood on the floor and the big glass bottle on her coffee table. Stepping round the spatters I peered into the bottle, and, in the crumpled and somewhat scabby pink mass inside, a nightmare eyeless face peered out at me. Then something dripped on top of my head. I looked up....

Over by the window I caught my breath, but no one was giving me time for that. Arena security thugs were running toward the emporium and beyond them I could see Gene striding off toward the exit. I opened the window just as the thugs entered the building below me, did a combination of scramble and fall down the outside of the building and hit the stone flat on my back. I had to catch my breath then. After a moment I heaved myself upright and headed for the exit, closing up the visor and hood of my envirosuit and keeping Gene just in sight. I went fast through an airlock far to the left of her, and some paces ahead of her, and was soon running down counting arches. I drew my carbide knife and dropped down beside one arch, hoping I'd counted correctly.

She stepped out to my left. I knew I could not give her the slightest chance or she would take me down yet again. I drove the knife in to the side, cut down, grabbed and pulled. In a gout of icy fog her visor skittered across the stone. Choking, she staggered away from me, even then drawing her pulse-gun, which must have been cold-adapted. I drove a foot into her sternum, knocked the last of her air out. Pulse-gun shots tracked along the frigid stone past me and I brought the edge of my hand down on her wrist, cracking bone and knocking the weapon away. Her fist slammed into my ribs and her foot came up to nearly take my head off. Blind and suffocating she was the hardest opponent I'd faced hand-to-hand ... or maybe it was that rustiness again. But she went down, eventually, and I dragged her to *Ulriss Fire* before anoxia killed her.

“Okay,” I said as she regained consciousness. “What the fuck killed her?”

After a moment of peering at the webbing straps binding her into the chair, she said, “You broke my wrist.”

“Talk to me and I’ll let my autodoc work on it. You set me up, Gene. Is that your real name?”

She nodded absently, though whether that was in answer to my question I couldn’t tell. “I noticed you said ‘what’ rather than ‘who.’”

“A human who takes the trouble to skin someone alive and nail them to the ceiling without making a great deal more mess than that shouldn’t be classified as a who. It’s a thing.” I watched her carefully—trying to read her. “So maybe it was a thing ... rogue golem?”

“Rho Var Olssen, employed by ECS for wet ops outside the Line, a sort of one-man vengeance machine for the Polity who maybe started to like his job just a little too much. Who are you to righteously talk about classifications?”

“So you know about me. I had you typed when you insisted on calling me a murderer. Nothing quite so moralistic as an ECS agent working outside of her remit—helps to justify it all.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hit a nerve did I?” I paused, thinking that perhaps I was being a little naïve. She was baiting me to lead me away from the point. “So it was a golem that killed Desorla?”

“In a sense,” she admitted grudgingly. “She was watched and she said too much—to Jael, specifically.”

“Tell me more about Jael.”

Staring at me woodenly, she said, “What’s to tell? We knew her interest in ancient technology and we knew she kept a careful eye on people like you. We put something in the way of your sifter and made sure she found out about it.”

I felt hollow. “The memstore ... it’s a fake?”

“No, it’s the real thing, Rho. It had to be.”

I thought about me lying on the floor of my home with a rock hammer imbedded in my skull. “I could have died.”

“An acceptable level of collateral damage in an operation like this,” she said flatly.

I thought about that for one brief horrible moment. Really, there were many people on many worlds trying to find Atheter artifacts, but how many of them were like me? How many of them were so *inconvenient*? I imagined this was why some AI had chosen my life as an “acceptable level of collateral damage.”

“And what is this operation?” I finally asked. “Are you out to nail Prador?”

She laughed.

“I guess not,” I said.

“You worked out what Jael was doing yourself. I don’t know how...” She gazed at me for a moment but I wasn’t going to help her out. She continued, “If she can restore the mind to a gabbleduck she has an item to sell to the Prador that will net her more wealth than even she would know how to spend. But there’s a problem: you don’t just feed the memstore to the gabbleduck, you’re not even going to be able to jury rig some kind of link-up using aug technology. That memstore is complex alien tech loaded in a language few can understand.”

“She needs an AI ... or something close...”

“On the button, but though some AIs might venture outside Polity law as we see it, there are certain lines even they won’t cross. Handing over a living Atheter to the Prador is well over those lines.”

“A Prador AI, then.”

“The only ones they have are in their ships—their purpose utterly fixed. They don’t have the flexibility.”

“So what the fuck—”

“Ever heard of Penny Royal?” she interrupted.

I felt a surge of almost superstitious dread. “You have got to be shitting me.”

“No shit, Rho. You can see this is out of your league. We’re done here.”

“You put some kind of tracer in the memstore.”

She gave me a patronizing smile. “Too small. We needed U-tech.”

Suddenly I got the idea. “You put it in the gabbleduck.”

“We did.” She stared at me for a long moment, then continued resignedly, “The signal remains constant, giving a Polity ship in the Graveyard the creature’s location from moment to moment. The moment the gabbleduck is connected to the memstore, the signal shuts down, then we’ll know that Penny Royal has control of both creature and store, and then the big guns move in. This is over, Rho. Can’t you see that? You’ve played your part and now the game has moved as far beyond you as it has moved beyond me. It’s time for us both to go home.”

“No,” I said. I guessed she didn’t understand how being tortured, then nearly killed, had really ticked me off. “It’s time for you to tell me how to find Jael. I’ve still got a score to settle with her.”

\* \* \* \*

Jael did not like being this close to a golem. Either they were highly moral creatures who served the Polity and would not look kindly on her actions, and who were thoroughly capable of doing something about them, or they were the rare amoral/immoral kind, and quite capable of doing something really nasty. No question here—the thing crammed in beside her in the airlock was a killer, or, rather, it was a remote probe, a submind that was part of a killer. As she understood it, Penny Royal had these submind golems scattered throughout the Graveyard, often contributing to the title of the place.

After the lock pressurized, the inner door opened to admit them into the *Kobashi*. While Jael removed her spacesuit, the golem just stood to one side—a static silver skeleton with hardware in its ribcage, cybermotors at its joints and interlinked down its spine, and blue irised eyeballs in the sockets of its skull. She wondered if it had willingly subjected itself to Penny Royal’s will or been taken over. Probably the latter.

“This way,” she said to it once she was ready, and led the way back toward the ship’s hold. Behind her the golem followed with a clatter of

metallic feet. Why did it no longer wear synthe flesh and skin? Just to make it more menacing? She wasn't sure Penny Royal was that interested in interacting with people. Maybe the usual golem coverings just didn't last in this environment.

At her aug command a bulkhead door thumped open and she paused beside it to don a breather mask before stepping through into an area caged off from the rest of the hold. The air within was low in oxygen and would slowly suffocate a human, but its mixing with the rest of the air in the ship while this door was open wasn't a problem since the pressure differential pushed the ship air into this space. The briefly higher oxygen levels would not harm the hold's occupant since its body was rugged enough to survive a range of environments—probably its kind was engineered that way long ago. Beyond the caged area in which they stood, the floor was layered a foot deep with flute grass rhizomes—as soggy underfoot as sphagnum. The walls displayed Masadan scenery overlaid with bars so the occupant didn't make the mistake of trying to run off through them. Masadan wildlife sounds filled the air and there were even empty tricorne shells on the rhizome mat for further authenticity.

The gabbleduck looked a great deal more alert and a lot healthier than when Koober had owned it. As always, when she came in here, it was squatting in one corner. Other than via the cameras in here, she had seen it do nothing else. It was as if, every time she approached, it heard her and moved to that corner, which should not have been possible since the bulkhead door was thoroughly insulated.

“Subject appears adequate,” said the golem. “It will be necessary to move it into the complex for installation.”

“Gruvver fleeg purnok,” said the gabbleduck dismissively.

“The phonetic similarity of the gabble to human language has always been puzzling,” said the golem.

“Right,” said Jael. “The memstore?” She gestured to the door and the golem obligingly moved out ahead of her.

She overtook the golem in the annex to the main airlock, opened another bulkhead door and led the way into her living area. Here she paused. “Before I show you this next item, there are one or two things we need to agree on.” She turned and faced the golem. “The gabbleduck and the memstore must go no deeper into your complex than half a mile.”

The golem just stared at her, waiting, not asking the question a human would have asked. It annoyed Jael that Penny Royal probably understood her reasoning and it annoyed her further that she still felt the need to explain. “That keeps it within the effective blast radius of my ship. If I die, or if you try to take from me the gabbleduck or the memstore, I can aug a signal back here to start up the U-space engine, the field inverted and ten degrees out of phase. The detonation would excise a fair chunk of this planetoid.”

The golem just said, “The AI here is of Prador manufacture.”

“It is.”

“My payment will be a recording of the Atheter memstore, and a recording of the Prador AI.”

“That seems ... reasonable, though you’ll receive the recording of the Prador AI just before I’m about to leave.” She didn’t want Penny Royal to have time to work out how to crack her ship’s security.

At that moment, the same Prador AI—without speaking—alerted her to activity outside the ship. Using her augs she inspected an external view from the ship’s cameras. One of the tunnel tubes, its mouth filled with some grub-like machine, was advancing toward *Kobashi*.

“What’s going on outside?” she inquired politely.

“I presume you have no spacesuit for the gabbleduck?”

“Ah.”

Despite her threat, Jael knew she wasn’t fully in control here. She stepped up to one wall, via her aug commanding a safe to open. A steel bung a foot across eased out then hinged to one side. She reached in, picked up the memstore, then held it out to the golem. The test would come, she felt certain, when Penny Royal authenticated that small item.

The golem took the memstore between its finger and thumb and she noticed it had retained the syntheflesh pads of its fingers. It paused, frozen in place, then abruptly its ribcage split down the center and one half of it hinged aside. Within lay optics, the grey lump of a power supply and various interconnected units like steel organs. There were also dark masses spread like multi-armed starfish that Jael suspected had not been there when this golem was originally constructed. It pressed the

memstore into the center of one of these masses, which writhed as if in pain and closed over it.

“Unrecognized programming format,” said the golem.

*No shit*, thought Jael.

The golem continued, “Estimate at one hundred and twenty gigabytes, synaptic mapping and chronology of implantation...”

Jael felt a sudden foreboding. Though measuring a human mind in bytes wasn't particularly accurate, the best guestimate actually lay in the range of a few hundred megabytes, so this memstore was an order of magnitude larger. But then, her assumption, and that of those who had found it, was that the memstore encompassed the life of one Atheter. This was not necessarily the case. Maybe the memories and mind maps of a thousand Atheter were stored in that little chunk of technology.

Finally the golem straightened up, reached inside its chest and removed the memstore, passing it back to Jael. “We will begin when the tunnel connects,” it said. “How will you move the gabbleduck?”

“Easy enough,” said Jael, and went to find her tranquilizer gun.

\* \* \* \*

Ulriss woke me with a, “Rise and shine, the game is afoot ... well, in a couple of hours—the signal is no longer dopplering so Jael's ship is back in the real.”

I lay there blinking at the ceiling as the lights gradually came up, then pushed back the heat sheet, heaved myself over the edge of the bunk and dropped to the floor. I staggered, feeling slightly dizzy, my limbs leaden. It always takes me a little while to get functional after sleep, hence the two-hour warning from Ulriss. After a moment, I turned to peer at Gene who lay slumbering in the lower bunk.

“Integrity of the collar?” I enquired.

“She hasn't touched it,” the ship AI replied, “though she did try to persuade me to release her by appealing to my sense of loyalty to the organization that brought me into being.”

“And your reply?”

“Whilst no right-thinking AI wants the Prador to get their hands on a living Atheter or one of their memstores, your intent to retrieve that store and by proxy carry out a sentence already passed on Jael Feogril should prevent rather than facilitate that. Polity plans will be hampered should you succeed, but, beside moral obligations, I am a free agent and Penny Royal’s survival or otherwise is a matter of indifference to me. Should you fail, however, your death will not hamper Polity plans.”

“Hey thanks—it’s nice to know you care.”

Sleepily, from the lower bunk, Gene said, “You’re rather sensitive for someone who was once described as a walking abattoir.”

“Ah,” I said, “so you’re frightened of me. That’s why you gave me the coding of that U-space signal?”

She pushed back her blanket and sat up. She’d stripped down to a thin singlet and I found the sight rather distracting, as I suspect was the intention. Reaching up, she fingered the metal collar around her neck. “Of course I’m frightened—you’ve got control of this collar.”

“Which will inject you with a short duration paralytic, not blow your head off as I earlier suggested,” I replied.

She nodded. “You also suggested that if I didn’t tell you what you wanted to know you would demonstrate on me the kind of things Jael did to you.”

“I’ve never tortured anyone,” I said, before remembering that she’d read my ECS record. “Well ... not anyone that didn’t deserve it.”

“You would have used drugs, and the other techniques Jael used on you.”

“True,” I nodded, “but I didn’t need to.” I gazed at her. “I think you’ve been involved in this operation for a while and rather resent not being in at the kill. I was your opportunity to change that. I understand—in the past I ended up in similar situations myself.”

“Yes, you liked to be in at the kill,” she said, and stooped down to pick up her clothing from where she had abandoned it on the floor. She’d sacked out after me, which had been okay as soon as I put the collar on her, since Ulriss had been watching her constantly.



I grunted and went off to find a triple espresso.

After a breakfast of bacon, eggs, mushroom steak, beans, a liter of grapenut juice, and more coffee, I reached the stage of being able to walk through doors without bouncing off the doorjamb. Gene ate a megaprawn steak, drank a similar quantity of the juice, and copious quantities of white tea. I thought I might try her breakfast the next time I used stores or the synthesizer. Supposing there would be a next time—only a few minutes remained before we surfaced from U-space. Gene followed me into the cockpit and sat in the co-pilot's chair, which was about as redundant as the pilot's chair I sat in, with the AI Ulriss running the ship.

We surfaced. The screen briefly showed stars, then banding began to travel across it. I glanced at the additional controls for chameleonware and saw that they had been activated.

“Ulriss—”

“Jael's ship is down on the surface of a free-roaming planetoid next to an old vessel that seems to have been stripped and from which bonded-regolith tunnels have spread.”

“So Penny Royal is there and might see us,” I supplied.

“True,” Ulriss replied, “but that was not my first concern.” The view on the screen swung across, magnified, and switched to light amplification, bringing to the fore the planetoid itself and the Prador cruiser in orbit around it.

“Oh shit,” I opined.

We watched the cruiser as, using that stuttering burn of the fusion engine, Ulriss took us closer to the planetoid. Luckily there had been no reaction from the Prador ship to our arrival, and as we drew closer I saw a shuttle detach and head down.

“I wonder if this is part of Jael's plan,” I said. “I would have thought she'd get the memstore loaded, then meet the Prador in some less vulnerable situation.”

“Agreed,” said Gene through gritted teeth. She glanced across at me. “What do you intend to do?”

“I intend to land.” I adjusted the screen controls to give me a view of Jael’s ship, the one next to it, and the surrounding spread of pipe-like tunnels. “She’s probably in there somewhere with the memstore and the gabbleduck. Shouldn’t be a problem getting inside.”

We watched the shuttle continue its descent and the subsequent flare of its thrusters as it decelerated over the network of tunnels.

“It could get ... somewhat fraught down there. Do you have weapons?” Gene asked.

“I have weapons.”

The Prador shuttle was now landing next to Jael’s vessel.

“Let me come in with you,” said Gene.

I didn’t answer for a while. I just watched. Five Prador clad in armored spacesuits and obviously armed to the mandibles departed the shuttle. They went over to one of the tunnels and gathered there. I focused in closer in time to see them move back to get clear of an explosion. It seemed apparent that they weren’t there at either Jael’s or Penny Royal’s invitation.

“Of course you can come,” I said, eventually.

\* \* \* \*

Jael frowned at the distant sound of the explosion and the roar of atmosphere being sucked out—the latter sound was abruptly truncated as some emergency door closed. There seemed only one explanation: the Prador had placed a tracker on the *Kobashi* when she had gone to meet them.

“Can you deal with them?” she asked.

“I can deal with them,” Penny Royal replied through its submind golem.

The AI itself continued working. Before Jael, the gabbleduck was stretched upright, steel bands around its body and a framework clamping its head immovable. It kept reaching up with one of its foreclaws to probe and tug at the framework, but, heavily tranquilized, it soon lost interest, lowered its limb, and began muttering to itself.

From this point, equipment—control systems, an atmosphere plant and heaters, stacked processing racks, transformers and other items obviously taken from the ship above—spread in every direction and seemed chaotically connected by optics and heavy-duty superconducting cables. Some of these snaked into one of the surrounding tunnels where she guessed the ship’s fusion reactor lay. Lighting squares inset in the ceiling illuminated the whole scene. She wondered if Penny Royal had put this all together after her arrival. It seemed possible, for the AI, working amidst all this like an iron squid, moved at a speed almost difficult to follow. Finally the AI moved closer to the gabbleduck, fitting into one side of the clamping framework a silver beetle of a ship’s autodoc, which trailed optics to the surrounding equipment.

“The memstore,” said Penny Royal, a ribbed tentacle with a spatulate end snapping out to hover just before Jael’s chest.

“What about the Prador?” she asked. “Shouldn’t we deal with them first?”

Two of the numerous eyes protruding on stalks from the AI’s body flicked toward the golem, which abruptly stepped forward, grabbed a hold in that main body, then merged. In that moment Jael saw that it was one of many clinging there.

“They have entered my tunnels and approach,” the AI replied.

It occurred to her then that Penny Royal’s previous answer of “I can deal with them” was open to numerous interpretations.

“Are you going to stop them coming here?” she asked.

“No.”

“They will try to take the memstore and the gabbleduck.”

“That is not proven.”

“They’ll attack you.”

“That is not proven.”

Jael’s frustration grew. “Very well.” She unslung her combined pulse-rifle and launcher. “You are not unintelligent, but you seem to have forgotten about the instructions I left for the *Kobashi* on departing. Those

Prador will try to take what is mine without paying for it, and I will try to stop them. If I die, the *Kobashi* detonates and we all die.”

“Your ship will not detonate.”

“What?”

“I broke your codes two point five seconds after you departed your ship. Your ship AI is of Prador construction, its basis the frozen brain tissue of a Prador first-child. The Prador have never understood that no code is unbreakable and your ship AI is no different. It would appear that you are no different.”

Another boom and the thunderous roar of atmosphere departing reached them. Penny Royal quivered, a number of its eyes turning toward one tunnel mouth.

“However,” it said with a heavy resignation, “these Prador are showing a marked lack of concern for my property, and I do not want them interrupting this interesting commission.” Abruptly the golems began to peel themselves from Penny Royal’s core, five in all, until what was left was a spiny skeletal thing. Dropping to the floor, they detached their umbilici and scuttled away. Jael shuddered—they moved without any emulation of humanity, sometimes on all fours, but fast, horribly fast. They also carried devices she could not clearly identify. She did not suppose their purpose to be anything pleasant.

“Now,” said Penny Royal, snapping the spatulate end of its tentacle open and closed, “the memstore.”

Jael reached into her belt cache, took out the store and handed it over. The tentacle retracted and she lost it in a blur of movement. Items of equipment shifted and a transformer began humming. The autodoc pressed its underside against the gableduck’s domed head and closed its gleaming metallic limbs around it. She heard a snickering, swiftly followed by the sound of a bone drill. The gableduck jerked and reached up. Tentacles sped in and snaked around its limbs, clamping them in place.

“Wharfle klummer,” said the gableduck, with an almost frightening clarity.

Jael scanned around the chamber. Over to her right, across the chamber from the tunnel mouth which Penny Royal had earlier glanced

at—the one it seemed likely the Prador would be coming from if they made it this far—was a stack of internal walling and structural members from the cannibalized ship. She headed over, ready to duck for cover, and from there watched the AI carry out its commission.

How long would it take? She had no idea, but it seemed likely that it wouldn't be long. Now the autodoc would be making nanotube synaptic connections in line with a program the AI had constructed from the cerebral schematic in the memstore, it would be firing off electrical impulses and feeding in precise mixes of neurochemicals—all the stuff of memory, thought, mind. Already the gabbleduck seemed straighter, its pose more serious, its eyes taking on a cold metallic glitter. Or was she just seeing what she hoped for?

“Klummer wharfle,” it said. Wasn't that one of those frustrating things for the linguists who studied the gabble, that no single gabbleduck had ever repeated its meaningless words? “Klummer klummer,” it continued. “Wharfle.”

“Base synaptic network established,” said Penny Royal. “Loading at one quarter—layered format.”

Jael wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but it sounded like the AI was succeeding. Then, abruptly, the gabbleduck made a chittering, whistling, clicking sound, some of the whistles so intense they seemed to stab straight in behind Jael's eyes. Something else happened: a couple of optic cables started smoking, then abruptly shriveled; a processing rack slumped, something like molten glass pouring out and hissing on the cold stone. After a moment, Penny Royal released its grip upon the creature's claws.

“Loading complete.”

After a two-tone buzzing Jael recognized as the sound of bone and cell welders working together, the autodoc retracted. The gabbleduck reached up and scratched its head. It made that sound again, and, after a moment, Penny Royal replied in kind. The creature shrugged and all its bonds folded away. It dropped to the floor and squatted like some evil Buddha. It did not look in the least bit foolish.

“They chose insentience,” said Penny Royal, “and put in place the means of retaining that state, in U-space, constructed there before they sacrificed their minds.”

“And what does that mean?” Jael asked.

Three stalked eyes swiveled toward her. “It means, human, that in resurrecting me you fucked up big time—now, go away.”

She wondered how it had happened: when Penny Royal copied the memstore, or through some leakage during the loading process. There must have been a hidden virus or worm in the store.

Suddenly, both the gabbleduck and Penny Royal were enclosed in some kind of bubble. It shifted slightly, and, where it intersected any of the surrounding equipment, sheared clean through. Within, something protruded out of nothingness like the peak of a mountain—hints of vastness beyond. Ripples, like those in sunlit water, traveled down to the tip, where they ignited a dull glow that grew brighter with each succeeding ripple.

Jael, always prepared to grab the main chance, also possessed a sharply honed instinct for survival. She turned and ran for the nearest tunnel mouth.

\* \* \* \*

“Something serious happened in there,” I said, looking at the readings Ulriss had transmitted to me on my helmet display.

“Something?” Gene enquired.

“All sorts of energy surges and various U-space signatures.” I read the text Ulriss had also transmitted—text since a vocal message, either real-time or in a package, would have extended the transmission time and given Penny Royal more of a chance of intercepting it and breaking the code. “It seems that just before those surges and signatures the U-signal from the gabbleduck changed. They’ve installed the contents of the memstore ... how long before the Polity dreadnought gets here?”

“It isn’t far away—it should be able to jump here in a matter of minutes.”

“Then what happens?”

“They either bomb this place from orbit or send down an assault team.”

“You can’t be more precise than that?”

“I would guess the latter. ECS will want to retrieve the gableduck.”

“Why? It’s just an animal!”

I could see her shaking her head within her suit’s helmet. “Gableducks are Atheter even though they’ve forgone intelligence. Apparently, now that Masada is part of the Polity, they are to receive the same protections as Polity citizens.”

“Right.” I began tramping through the curiously shaped shale toward the hole the Prador had blown in one of Penny Royal’s pipes. The protections Polity citizens received were on the basis of the greatest good for the greatest number. If a citizen needed to die so ECS could take out a black AI, I rather suspected that citizen would die. A sensible course would have been to retreat to *Ulriss Fire* and then retreat from this planetoid. However, human Polity citizens numbered in the trillions and the gableduck population was just in the millions. I rather suspected Polity AIs would be quite prepared to expend a few human lives to retrieve the creature.

“Convert to text packet for ship AI,” I said. “Ulriss, when that dreadnought gets here, tell it that we’re down here and that Penny Royal doesn’t look likely to be escaping, so maybe it can hold off on the planet busters.”

After a moment, I received an acknowledgment from the Ulriss, then I stepped into the gloom of the pipe and looked around. To my right the tunnel led back toward the cannibalized ship. According to the energy readings, the party was to my left and down below. I upped light amplification, then said, “Weapons online”—a phrase shortly repeated by Gene.

My multigun suddenly became light as air as suit assister motors kicked in. Cross hairs appeared on my visor, shifted from side to side as I swung the gun across. A menu down one side gave me a selection of firing modes: laser, particle beam, and a list of projectiles ranging from inert to high explosive. “Laser,” I told the gun, because I thought we might have to cut our way in at some point, and it obliged by showing me a bar graph of energy available. I could alter numerous other settings to the beam itself, but the preset had always been the best. Then I added, “Auto-response to attack.” Now, if anyone started shooting at me, the gun

would take control of my suit motors to aim and fire itself at the aggressor. I imagined Gene was setting her weapon up to operate in the same manner, though with whatever other settings she happened to be accustomed to.

The tunnel curved round and then began to slope down. In a little while we reached an area where debris was scattered across the floor, this including an almost intact hermetically sealed cargo door. Ahead were the remains of the wall out of which it had been blown. I guess the Prador had found the cargo door too small for them—either that, or had started blowing things up to attract attention. The Prador were never ones to tap gently and ask if anyone was in. We stepped through the rubble and moved on.

The pipe began to slope down even more steeply and we both had to turn on the gecko function of our boot soles. Obviously this was not a tunnel made for humans. Noting the scars in the walls, I wondered just precisely what it had been made for. What did Penny Royal look like, anyway? Slowly, out of the darkness ahead resolved another wall with a large airlock in it. No damage here. Either the Prador felt they had made their point or this lock had simply been big enough to admit them. I went over and gazed at the controls—they were dead, but there was a manual handle available. I hauled on it, but got nowhere until upping the power of my suit motors. I crunched the handle over and pulled the door open. Gene and I stepped inside, vapor fogged around us from a leak through the interior door. I pulled the outer closed, then opened the inner, and we stepped through into the aftermath of a battle that seemed to have moved on. Distantly I could hear explosions, the thunderous racket of rail-guns and the sawing sound of a particle cannon.

The place beyond was expanded like a section of intestine and curved off to our right. A web of support beams laced all the way around, even across the floor. Items of machinery were positioned here and there in this network, connected by s-con cables and optics. I recognized two fusion reactors of the kind I knew did not come from the stripped vessel above and wondered if it was just one in a series so treated. In a gap in the web of floor beams, an armored Prador second-child seemed to have been forced sideways halfway into the stone, its legs and claw on the visible side sticking upward. It was only when I saw the glistening green spread around it that I realized I was seeing half a Prador lying on the stone on its point of division. Tracking a trail of green ichor across I saw the other half jammed between the wall beams.



“Interesting,” said Gene.

It certainly was. If something down here had a weapon that could slice through Prador armor like that—there was no sign of burning—then our armored suits would be no defense at all. We moved out, boots back to gecko function as, like tight-rope walkers, we balanced on beams. With us being in so precarious a position, this was a perfect time for another Prador second-child to come hurtling round the corner ahead.

The moment I saw the creature, my multigun took command of my suit motors and tracked. I squatted to retain balance, said, “Off auto, off gecko,” then jumped down to the floor. Gene was already there before me. Yeah—rusty. The second-child was emitting an ululating squeal and moving fast, its multiple legs clattering down on the beams so it careened along like a gravcar flown by a maniac. I noticed that a few of its legs were missing, along with one claw, and that only a single palp eye stood erect, directed back toward whatever pursued it. On its underside it gripped in its manipulator hands a nasty rail-gun. It slammed to a halt, gripping beams, then fired, the smashing clattering racket almost painful to hear as the gun sprayed out an almost solid line of projectiles. I looked beyond the creature and saw the sparks and flying metal tracking along the ceiling and down one wall, but never quite intersecting with the path of something silvery. That silvery thing closed in, its course weaving. It disappeared behind one of the reactors and I winced as rail-gun missiles spanged off of the housing leaving a deep trail of dents. The thing shot out from under the reactor, zigged and zagged, was upon the Prador in a second, then past.

The firing ceased.

The Prador’s eye swiveled round, then dipped. The creature reached tentatively with its claw to its underside. It shuddered, then with a pulsing spray of green ichor, ponderously slid into two halves.

I began scanning round for whatever had done this.

“Over there,” said Gene quietly, over suit com. I looked where she was pointing and saw a skeletal golem clinging to a beam with its legs. It was swaying back and forth, one hand rubbing over its bare ceramal skull, the other hanging down with some gourd-shaped metallic object enclosing it. Easing up my multigun, I centered the cross-hairs over it and told the gun, “Acquire. Particle beam, continuous fire, full power,” and wondered if that would be enough.

The golem heard me, or it detected us by some other means. Its head snapped round a full hundred and eighty degrees and it stared at us. After a moment, its head revolved slowly back as if it were disinterested. It hauled itself up and set off back the way it had come. My heart continued hammering even as it moved out of sight.

“Penny Royal?” I wondered.

“Part of Penny Royal,” Gene supplied. “It was probably one like that who nailed Desorla to her ceiling.”

“Charming.”

We began to move on, but suddenly *everything* shuddered. On some unstable worlds I’d experienced earthquakes, and this felt much the same. I’d also been on worlds that had undergone orbital bombardment.

“Convert to text packet for ship AI,” I said. “Ulriiss, what the fuck was that?”

Ulriiss replied almost instantly, “Some kind of gravity phenomena centered on the gabbleduck’s location.”

At least the Polity hadn’t arrived and started bombing us. We moved on toward the sound of battle, pausing for a moment before going round a tangled mass of beams in which lay the remains of another second-child and a scattering of silvery disconnected bones. I counted two golem skulls and was glad this was a fight I’d missed. Puffs of dust began lifting from the structures around us, along with curls of a light metal swarf. I realized a breeze had started and was growing stronger, which likely meant that somewhere there was an atmosphere breach. Now, ahead, arc-light was flaring in accompaniment to the sound of the particle cannon. The wide tunnel ended against a huge space—some chamber beyond. The brief glimpse of a second-child firing upward with its rail-gun, and the purple flash of the particle weapon told us this was where it was all happening.

\* \* \* \*

*Bad choice*, thought Jael as she ducked down behind a yard-wide pipe through which some sort of fluid was gurgling. A wind was tugging at her cropped hair, blowing into the chamber ahead where the action seemed to be centered. She unhooked her spacesuit helmet from her belt

and put it on, dogged it down, then ducked under the pipe and crawled forward beside the wall.

The first-child had backed into a recess in the chamber wall to her right, a second-child crouched before it. The three golems were playing hide-and-seek amidst the scattered machinery and webworks of beams. Ceiling beams had been severed, some still glowing and dripping molten metal. There was a chainglass observatory dome above, some kind of optical telescope hanging in gimbals below it. An oxygen fire was burning behind an atmosphere plant—an eight-foot pillar wrapped in pipes and topped with scrubber intakes and air output funnels. The smoke from this blaze rose up into a spiral swirl then stabbed straight to a point in the ceiling just below the observatory dome, where it was being sucked out. Around this breach beetlebots scurried like spit bugs in a growing mass of foamstone.

The other second-child, emitting a siren squeal as it scurried here and there blasting away at the golem, had obviously been sent out as a decoy—a ploy that worked when, sacrificing two of its legs and a chunk of its carapace it lured out one of the golems. The second-child's right claw snapped out and Jael saw that the tip of one jaw was missing. From this an instantly recognizable turquoise beam stabbed across the chamber and nailed the golem center on. Its body vaporized, arms, legs, and skull clattering down. One arm with the hand enclosed by some sort of weapon fell quite close to Jael and near its point of impact a beam parted on a diagonal slice. Some kind of atomic shear, she supposed.

Watching this action, Jael was not entirely sure which side she wanted to win. If the Prador took out the two remaining golems they would go after the Atheter in the chamber behind her. Maybe they would just ignore her, maybe they would kill her out of hand. If the golems finished off the Prador they might turn their attention on her. And she really did not know what to expect from whatever now controlled them. Retreating and finding some other way out was not an option—she had already scanned Penny Royal's network of tunnels and knew that any other route back to *Kobashi* would require a diversion of some miles, and she rather suspected that thing back there would not give her the time.

The decoy second-child lucked out with the next golem, or rather it lucked out with its elder kin. Firing its rail-gun into the gap between a spherical electric furnace and the wall, where one of the golems was crouching, the second-child advanced. The golem shot out underneath the furnace toward the Prador child. A turquoise bar stabbed out, nailing the

golem, but it passed through the second-child on the way. An oily explosion centered on a mass of legs collapsed out of sight. The first-child used its other claw to nudge out its final sibling into play. The remaining golem, however, which Jael had earlier seen on the far side of the room, dropped down from above to land between them.

It happened almost too fast to follow. The golem spun, and in a spray of green the second-child slid in half along a diagonal cut straight through its body. The first-child's claw and half its armored visual turret and enclosing visor fell away. Its fluids fountained out as it fell forward, swung in its remaining claw and bore down. The golem collapsed, pinned to the floor under the claw containing the particle weapon. A turquoise explosion followed underneath the collapsing Prador, then oily flames belched out.

Jael remained where she was, watching carefully. She scanned around the chamber, but there seemed no sign of any more of those horrible golems. The Prador just lay there, its legs sprawled, its weaponized claw trapped underneath it, its now-exposed mandibles grinding, ichor still flowing from the huge excision from its visual turret. Jael realized she couldn't have hoped for a better outcome. After a moment she stepped out, her weapon trained on the Prador.

"Jael Feogril," its translator intoned, and it began scrabbling to try and get some purchase on the slick floor.

"That's me," said Jael, and fired two explosive rounds straight into its mouth. The two detonations weren't enough to break open the Prador's enclosing artificial armor, but their force escaped. Torn flesh, organs, ichor, and shattered carapace gushed from the hole the golem had cut. Jael stood there for a moment, hardly able to see through the green sludge on her visor. She peered down at something like a chunk of liver hanging over her arm, and pulled it away. Yes, a satisfactory outcome, apart from the mess.

"Jael Feogril," said a different voice. "Drop the gun, or I cut off your legs."

\* \* \* \*

I was telling myself at the time that I needed detail on the location of the memstore. Rubbish, of course. The energy readings had located it in the chamber beyond—somewhere near to the gabbleduck. I should have just fried her on the spot, then gone on to search. Twenty years

earlier I would have, but now I was less tuned-in to the exigencies of surviving this sort of game. Okay, I was rusty. She froze, seemed about to turn, then thought better of it and dropped the weapon she'd just used to splash that Prador.

With Gene walking out to my left I moved forward, crosshairs centered on Jael's torso. What did I want? Some grandstanding, some satisfaction in seeing her shock at meeting someone she'd left for dead, a moment or two to gloat before I did to her what she had done to the first-child? Yeah, sure I did.

With her hands held out from her body she turned. It annoyed me that I couldn't see her face. Glancing up I saw that the beetlebots had about closed off the hole, because the earlier wind had now diminished to a breeze.

"Take off your helmet," I ordered.

She reached up and undogged the manual outer clips, lifted the helmet carefully, then lowered it to clip it to her belt. Pointless move—she wouldn't be needing it again. Glancing aside, I saw that Gene had moved in closer to me. No need to cover me now, I guessed.

"Well hello, Rho," said Jael, showing absolutely no surprise on seeing me at all. She smiled. It was that smile, the same smile I had seen from her while she had peeled strips of skin from my torso.

"Goodbye, Jael," I said.

The flicker of a high intensity laser punched smoke, something slapped my multigun and molten metal sprayed leaving white trails written across the air.

"Total malfunction. Safe mode—power down," my helmet display informed me. I pulled the trigger anyway, then gazed down in bewilderment at the slagged hole through the weapon.

"Mine, I think," said Jael, stooping in one to pick up her weapon and fire. Same explosive shell she'd used against the Prador. It thumped into my chest, hurling me back, then detonated as it ricocheted away. The blast flung me up, trailing flame and smoke, then I crashed down feeling as if I'd been stepped on by some irate giant. My chainglass visor was gone and something was sizzling ominously inside my suit. Armored

plates were peeled up from my arm, which I could see stretched out ahead of me, and my gauntlet was missing.

“What the fuck are you doing here with him?” Jael enquired angrily.

“He turned up on Arena before I left,” Gene replied. “Just to be on the safe side I was keeping to the Pens until Penny Royal’s golem left.”

“And you consider that an adequate explanation?”

“I put Arena Security onto him, but he somehow escaped them and ambushed me outside.” Gene sounded somewhat chagrined. “I let him persuade me to give him the U-signal code from the gabbleduck.”

I turned my head slightly but only got a view of tangled metal and a few silver golem bones. “Ulriiss,” I whispered, but received only a slight buzzing in response.

“So much for your wonderful ECS training.”

“It was enough to convince him that I still worked for them.”

So, no ECS action here, no Polity dreadnought on the way. I thought about that encounter I’d seen between the Prador cruiser and the dreadnought. I’d told Gene about it and she’d used the information against me, convincing me that the Polity was involved. Of course, what I’d seen was the kind of saber-rattling confrontation between Prador and Polity that had been going on in the Graveyard for years.

“What’s the situation here?” Gene asked.

“Fucked,” Jael replied. “Something’s intervened. We have to get out of here now.”

I heard the sounds of movement. They were going away, so I might survive this. Then the sounds ceased too abruptly.

“You used an explosive shell,” Gene noted from close by.

“What?”

“He’s still alive.”

“Well,” said Jael, “that’s a problem soon solved.”

Her boots crunched on the floor as she approached, and gave me her location. I reached out with my bare hand and slid it into slick silvery metal. Finger controls there. I clamped down on them and saw something shimmering deep into twisted metal.

“Collar!” I said, more in hope than expectation, before heaving myself upright.

Jael stood over me, and beyond her I saw Gene reach up toward her neck, then abruptly drop to the floor. I swung my arm across as Jael began to bring her multi-gun up to her shoulder. A slight tug—that was all. She stood there a moment longer, still aiming at me, then her head lifted and fell back, attached still at the back of her neck by skin only, and a red stream shot upward. Air hissing from her severed trachea, she toppled.

I carefully lifted my fingers from the controls of the golem weapon, then caught my breath, only now feeling as if someone had worked me over from head to foot with a baseball bat. Slowly climbing to my feet I expected to feel the pain of a broken bone somewhere, but there was nothing like that. No need to check on Jael’s condition, so I walked over to Gene. She was unconscious and would be for some time. I stooped over her and unplugged the power cable and control optics of her weapon from her suit, then plugged them into mine. No response and of course no visor read-out. I set the weapon to manual and turned away. I decided that once I’d retrieved the memstore—if that was possible—I would come back in here and take her suit, because mine certainly would not get me to *Ulriss Fire*.

The hum of power and the feeling of distorted perception associated with U-jumping greeted me. I don’t know what that thing was poised over the gableduck, nor did I know what kind of force-field surrounded it and that other entity that seemed the bastard offspring of a sea urchin and an octopus. But the poised thing was fading, and as it finally disappeared, the field winked out and numerous objects crashed to the floor.

I moved forward, used the snout of my weapon to lift one tentacle, and then watched it flop back. *Penny Royal*, I guessed. It was slumped across the floor beams and other machinery here. The gableduck turned its head as if noticing me for the first time, but it showed no particular signs of hostility, nor did it seem to show any signs of its containing some formidable alien intelligence. I felt sure the experiment here had failed, or rather, had been curtailed in some way. *Something’s intervened*, Jael had

said. Nevertheless, I kept my attention focused on the creature as I searched for and finally found the memstore. It was fried but I pocketed it anyway, for it *was* my find, not something ECS had put in the path of my sifting machine.

Returning to the other chamber, I there stripped Gene of her spacesuit and donned it myself.

“Ulriiss, we can talk now.”

“Ah, you *are* still alive,” the AI replied. “I was already composing your obituary.”

“You’re just a bundle of laughs. You know that?”

“I am bursting with curiosity and try to hide that in levity.”

I explained the situation, to which Ulriiss replied, “I have put out a call to the Polity dreadnought we sighted and given it this location.”

“Should we hang around?”

“There will be questions ECS will want to ask, but I don’t see why we should put ourselves at their disposal. Let their agents find us.”

“Quite right,” I replied.

I bagged up a few items, like that golem weapon, and was about to head back to my ship when I glanced back and saw the gabbleduck crouching in the tunnel behind.

“Sherber grodge,” it informed me.

Heading back the way I’d come into this hell-hole, I kept checking back on the thing. Gabbleducks don’t eat people, apparently—they just chew them up and spit them out. This one followed me like a lost puppy and every time I stopped it stopped too and sat on its hindquarters, occasionally issuing some nonsensical statement. I got the real weird feeling, which went against all my training and experience, that this creature was harmless to me. I shook my head. Ridiculous. Anyway, I’d lose it at the airlock.

When I did finally reach the airlock and began closing that inner door, one big black claw closed around the edge and pulled it open again. I raised my gun, crosshairs targeting that array of eyes, but I just could



not pull the trigger. The gabbleduck entered the airlock and sat there, close enough to touch and close enough for me to fry if it went for me. What now? If I opened the outer airlock door the creature would die. Before I could think of what to do, a multi-jointed arm reached back and heaved the inner door closed, whilst the other arm hauled up the manual handle of the outer door, and the lock air pressure blew us staggering into the pipe beyond.

I discovered that gabbleducks can survive in vacuum ... or at least this one can.

Later, when I ordered Ultriss to open the door to the small hold of my ship, the gabbleduck waddled meekly inside. I thought then that perhaps something from the memstore had stuck. I wasn't sure—certainly this gabbleduck was not behaving like its kind on Masada.

I also discovered that gabbleducks will eat raw recon bacon.

\* \* \* \*

I hold the fried memstore and think about what it might have contained, and what the fact of its existence means. A memstore for an Atheter mind goes contrary to the supposed nihilism of that race. A race so nihilistic could never have created a space-faring civilization, so that darkness must have spread amidst them in their last days. The Atheter recorded in the memstore could not have been one of the kind that wanted to destroy itself, surely?

I'm taking the gabbleduck back to Masada—I feel utterly certain now that it wants me to do this. I also feel certain that to do otherwise might not be a good idea.

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