

# HATCH

## ROBERT REED

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

The “Sister Alice” stories, in which advanced humans with the powers and abilities of gods played out intricate political intrigues and struggles across a time span of millions of years, eventually collected in the mosaic novel *Sister Alice*, were Reed's first great contribution to the New Space Opera. In 1994, he launched a long series of stories, still continuing today, about the Great Ship: a Jupiter-sized starship found abandoned in deep space by exploring humans and retrofitted into a kind of immense interstellar cruise ship, off on a grand tour of the galaxy (circumnavigating it, in fact, a voyage that will take eons), with dozens of human and alien customers of different races aboard. In the powerful story that follows, which takes place after a disastrous attempt to hijack the Great Ship has reduced it nearly to ruins, he shows us what happens to some human survivors of the battle who are stranded *outside* of the Ship, locked out of the interior for generations, forced to create their own society on the hull—a place that, as it turns out, is equipped with quite a few wonders—and dangers—of its own.

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Yes, the galaxy possessed an ethereal beauty, particularly when magnified inside the polished bowl of a perfect mirror. Every raider conceded as much. And yes, the rocket nozzle on which they lived was a spectacular feature, vast and ancient, its bowl-like depths filled with darkness and several flavors of ice laid over a plain of impenetrable hyperfiber. Even the refugee city was lovely in its modest fashion, simple homes and little businesses clinging to the inside surface of the sleeping nozzle. But true raiders understood that the most intriguing, soul-soaring view was found when you stood where Peregrine was standing now: perched some five thousand kilo-meters above the hull, staring down at the Polypond—a magnificent, ever-changing alien body that stretched past the neighboring nozzles, reaching the far horizon and beyond, submerging both faces of a magnificent starship that itself was larger than worlds.

The Polypond had arrived thousands of years ago, descending as a violent rain of comet-sized bodies, scalding vapor, and sentient, hate-filled mud. The alien had wanted to destroy the Great Ship, and perhaps even today it dreamed of nothing less. But most of the city's inhabitants believed the war was over now, and in one fashion or another, the Ship had won. Some were sure the alien had surrendered unconditionally. Others believed that the Polypond's single mind had collapsed, leaving a multitude of factions endlessly fighting with one another. Both tales explained quite a lot, including the monster's indifference to a few million refugees living just beyond its boundaries. But the most compelling idea—the notion that always captivated Peregrine—was that human beings had not only won the war, but killed their foe too. Its central mind was destroyed, all self-control had been vanquished, and what the young man saw from his diamond blister was nothing more, or less, than a great corpse in the throes of ferocious, creative rot.

Whatever the truth, the Polypond was a spectacle, and no raider understood it better than Peregrine did.

Frigid wisps of atomic oxygen and nitrogen marked the alien's upper reaches, with dust and buckyballs and aerogel trash wandering free. That high atmosphere reached halfway to the hull, and it ended with a sequence of transparent skins—monomolecular sheets, mostly, plus a few energetic demon-doors laid out flat. Retaining gas and heat was their apparent purpose, and when those skins were pierced, what lay below could feel the prick, and on occasion, react instantly.

Beneath the skins was a thick wet atmosphere, not just warm but hot—a fierce blazing wealth of changeable gases and smart dusts, floating clouds and rooted clouds, plus features that refused description by any language. And drenching that realm was a wealth of light. The glare wasn't constant or evenly distributed. What passed for day came as splashes and winding rivers, and the color of the light as

well as its intensity and duration would vary. After spending most of his brief life watching the purples and crimsons, emeralds and golds, plus a wealth of blues that stretched from the brilliant to the soothing, Peregrine had realized that each color and its intricate shape held meaning.

“A common belief,” Hawking had told him. “But your translator AIs cannot find any message, or even the taste of genuine language.”

“Except I wasn’t thinking language,” Peregrine countered. “Not at all.”

His friend wanted more of an answer, signaling his desires with silence and circular gestures from his most delicate arms.

“I meant plain simple beauty,” the young man continued. “I’m talking about art, about visual poetry. I’m thinking about a magnificent show performed for a very special audience.”

“You might be the only soul holding that opinion,” Hawking counseled.

“And I feel honored because of it,” Peregrine had laughed.

The Polypond’s atmosphere was full of motion and energy, and it was exceptionally loud. Camouflaged microphones set near the base of the rocket nozzle sent home the constant roar of wind sounds and mouth sounds, thunder from living clouds and the musical whine of great wings. But even richer than the air was the watery terrain beneath: tens of kilometers deep, the Polypond’s body was built from melted comets mixed with rock and metal stolen from vanished worlds. This was an ocean in the same sense that a human body was mere salt water. Yes, it was liquid, but jammed full of structure and purpose. Alien tissues supplied muscles and spines and ribs, and there were regions serving roles not unlike those of human hearts and livers and lungs. Long, sophisticated membranes were dotted with giant fusion reactors. And drifting on the surface were island-sized organs that spat out free-living entities—winged entities that would gather in huge flocks and sometimes rise en masse, millions and even billions of them soaring higher than any cloud.

Hatches, those events were called.

What Peregrine knew—what every person in his trade understood—was that each hatch was a unique event, and the great majority were worthless. Sending a fleet of raiders that returned with only a few thousand tons of winged muscle and odd enzymes... well, that was a waste of their limited power, and always a potential waste of lives. What mattered were those rare hatches that rose high enough to be reached cheaply, and even then it didn’t pay to send raiders if there wasn’t some respectable chance of acquiring hyperfiber or rare elements, or best of all, machines that could be harvested and tamed, then set to work in whatever role the city demanded.

Judging a hatch's value was three parts diagnosis, two parts art, and, inevitably, ten parts good fortune. Telescopes tied into dim-witted machines did nothing but happily stuff data into shapes that brighter AIs could analyze. Whatever was promising or peculiar was sent to the raider leaders. The average day brought ten or fifteen events worthy of closer examination, and because of his service record, Peregrine was given first glance at those candidates. But even with ripe pickings, he often did nothing. Other raiders flying their own ships would dive into the high atmosphere every few days. But sometimes weeks passed without Peregrine once being tempted to sit in the pilot's padded chair.

"I want to grow old in this job," he confessed whenever his bravery was questioned. "Most souls can't do what I do. Most of you are too brave, and bravery is suicide. Fearlessness is a handicap. Chasing every million-wing flight of catabolites or sky-spinners is the quickest way to go bankrupt, if you're lucky. Or worse, die."

"That is a reasonable philosophy," his friend mentioned, speaking through the voice box sewn into a convenient neural center.

"I'm sorry," Peregrine replied. "I wasn't talking to you. I was chatting with a woman friend."

The alien lifted one of his intricate limbs, signaling puzzlement. "And where is this woman?"

"Inside my skull." Peregrine gave his temple a few hard taps. "I met her last night. I thought she was pretty, and she was pleasant enough. But she said some critical words about raiders wasting too many resources, and I thought she was accusing me of being a coward."

"You listed your sensible reasons, of course."

"Not all of them," he admitted.

"Why not?"

"I told you," said Peregrine. "I thought she was pretty. And if I acted like an unapologetic coward, I wouldn't get invited to her bedroom."

Hawking absorbed this tidbit about human spawning. Or he simply ignored it. Who could know what that creature was thinking beneath his thick carapace? Low-built and long, Hawking held a passing resemblance to an earthly trilobite. A trio of crystalline eyes pulled in light from all directions, delicate optical tissues teasing the meaning out of every photon. His armored body was carried on dozens of jointed legs. But where trilobites had three sections to their insectlike bodies, this alien had five. And where trilobites were dim-witted creatures haunting the floors of

ancient seas, Hawking's ancestors had evolved grasping limbs and large, intricate minds while scurrying across the lush surface of a low-gravity world.

Hawking was not a social animal. And this was a blessing, since he was the only one of his kind in the city. Peregrine had studied the available files about his species, but the local data sinks were intended to help military operations, not educate any would-be xenologists. And likewise, after spending decades in close association with the creature, and despite liking as well as admiring him, Peregrine found there were moments when old Mr. Hawking was nothing but peculiar, standoffish, and quite impossible to read.

But Peregrine had a taste for challenges.

"Anyway," he said, cutting into the silence. "I lied to that woman. I told her that I wasn't flying because I knew something big was coming. I had a feeling, and until that ripe moment, I was resting both my body and my ship."

"And she believed you?"

"Perhaps."

After a brief silence, Hawking said, "She sounds like a foolish young creature."

"And that's where you're wrong." Peregrine laughed and shrugged. "Just as I hoped, I climbed into her bed. And during one of our slow moments, she admitted who she was."

"And she is?"

"An engineer during the War. She was working in the repair yards while my mother was serving as a pilot. So like you, my new girlfriend is one of the original founders."

"Interesting," his friend responded.

"Fusillade is her name," he mentioned. "And she seems to know you."

"Yet I do not know her."

Then Peregrine added, "And by the way, she very clearly remembers your arrival here."

Fourteen moon-sized rocket nozzles stood upon the Great Ship's aft, and during the fighting, the center nozzle served as the gathering place for tired pilots and engineers and such. Once the fighting ended, representatives of twenty different

species found themselves trapped in this most unpromising location, utterly isolated, with few working machines, minimal data sinks, and no raw materials. Facing them was the daunting task of building some kind of workable society. Hawking was a rarity—the rich passenger who had visited the hull before the comets began to fall, and who managed to outlive both his guides and fellow tourists. Alone, this solitary creature had scaled one of the outlying nozzles, and then his luck lasted long enough to find passage with a harum-scarum unit—the final group of refugees to make it to this poor but safe place.

“She feels sorry for you, Hawking.”

“Why would she?”

“Because you’re a species with a population of one.”

The alien was unimpressed with that assessment. He cut the air with two limbs, his natural mouth rippling before leaking a disapproving click.

“I know better than that,” Peregrine continued. “I told her that you’re a loner, that it’s difficult for you to share breathing space with me, and you know me and approve of me far more than you know and approve of anyone else.”

The creature had no reply.

““Why call him Hawking?” she asked me. ‘Nobody else does.’”

“Few others speak to me,” his friend said.

“I explained that too,” said Peregrine. “And I told her that your species are so peculiar, you never see reason for any permanent names. When two of you cross trails, each invents a new name for himself or herself. A private name that lasts only as long as that single perishable relationship.”

The limbs gave the air an agreeable sweep.

“You picked Hawking, and I don’t know why,” Peregrine continued. “Except it’s a solid sound humans can utter. Unlike your own species’ name, of course.”

Quietly, with his natural mouth, Hawking made a sharp clicking sound followed by what sounded like “!Eech.”

“!Eech,” the human tried to repeat.

As always, there was something intensely humorous about his clumsy attempt. Nothing changed in the creature’s domelike eyes or the rigid face, but suddenly all of the long legs wiggled together, signaling laughter, the ripples moving happily beneath

his hard low unreadable body.

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## 2

“And I remember your mother,” the old woman had mentioned last night.

Like that of every citizen, Fusillade’s apartment was tiny and cold; power had always been a scarce commodity in the city. But her furnishings were better than most, made from fancy plastics and cultured flesh, and even a glass tub filled with spare water. Winking at her young lover, she added, “No, I doubt if your mother ever actually knew me. By name, I mean. But I was part of the team that kept those early raider ships flying. Without twenty ad-lib repairs from me, that woman wouldn’t be half the hero she is today.”

Peregrine’s mother was as famous as anyone in the city, and that despite being dead for dozens of centuries. She had defended these giant rockets during the Polypond War. But the alien eventually destroyed each of the Great Ship’s engines, choking and plugging every vent, trying to keep reinforcements from reaching the hull. And at the same time, the captains below had blocked every doorway, desperate to keep the Polypond from infiltrating the interior. Brutal fights were waged near the main ports, but none had lasted long. A barrage of tiny black holes was fired through the Ship’s heart, but none delivered a killing blow. Then the final assault came, and despite long odds, a starship that was more ancient than any visible sun survived.

Afterward, over the course of several months and then several years, the Polypond grew quieter, and by every credible measure, less menacing.

Something was different. The alien was different, and maybe the Great Ship too. But those few thousand survivors could never be sure what had changed. With the clarity of the doomed, they had come here and built a refugee camp. Peregrine’s mother was a natural leader. Like her son, she was a small person, dark as space, blessed with long limbs and a gymnast’s perfect balance. And she was more than just an early raider. No, what made the woman special was that she was first to realize that nobody was coming to rescue them. The giant engines remained dead and blocked. High-grade hyperfiber had plugged even the most obscure route through the armored hull. And even worse, the Great Ship was now undergoing some mysterious but undeniable acceleration. Without one working rocket, the world-sized machine was gaining velocity, hurrying its way along a course that would soon take it out of the Milky Way.

Peregrine’s mother helped invent the raider’s trade. In makeshift vehicles, she dove into the Polypond’s atmosphere, stealing volatiles and rare earths, plus the

occasional machine-encrusted body. Those treasures allowed them to build shelters and synthesize food. Every few days, she bravely led an expedition into the monster's body, stealing what was useful and accepting every danger.

Time and Fate ensured her death.

She left no body, save for a few useful pieces that made up her meager estate. Her funeral was held ages ago, yet even today, whenever an important anniversary arrived, those rites and her name were repeated by thousands of thankful souls.

By contrast, Peregrine's father was neither heroic nor well regarded. But he was a prosperous fellow, and he was shrewd, and when one of the great woman's eggs came on the market, he spent a fortune to obtain it and a second fortune to build the first artificial womb in the city's history.

"I remember your mother," the old woman told Peregrine, plainly proud of any casual association. Then with an important tone, she added, "That good woman would have been pleased with her young son. I'm sure."

Peregrine was almost three hundred years old, which made him young—particularly in the eyes of a much older lady who seemed to be happily feeding a fantasy. He offered nods and a polite smile, saying, "Well, thank you."

"And I know your father fairly well," she continued.

"I never see the man," Peregrine replied with a sneer, warning her off the topic.

"I know," she said.

Then after a pause, she asked, "Did you mean it? Do you really feel that an especially large hatch is coming?"

"No," he replied, finally admitting the truth.

Then before his honesty evaporated, he added, "There are no trends, and I don't have intuitions. And I never, ever see into the future."

Something in those words made the old woman laugh. Then quietly, with a sudden tenderness, she said, "Darling. Everybody sees some little part of the future. Only the dead can't. And if you think about it, you'll realize... nothing more important separates big-eyed us from poor cold blind them."

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There was nothing to add after Peregrine's laughable attempt to say "Eech." Hawking fell into a deep silence, indistinguishable from countless others; and Peregrine responded with his own purposeful quiet. He was sitting at one end of the hangar, working with the latest data about hatches and general Polypond activity. His friend stood near the raider ship. Which was less animated, that sleeping machine or the alien? Hours and even days might pass, and the creature wouldn't move one antenna. Yet Hawking claimed to never feel lonely or bored. "A respectable mind always has fascinating tasks waiting in its neurons," he would say. Which was why his very odd species lacked the words to describe painful solitude or empty time.

The day's hatches were distant and scarce.

Peregrine finally gave up the hunt. He sat at the end of the diamond blister, feeling the cold of deep space and studying the ever-changing scenery below. Clouds were gathering between their home nozzle and the next, the thinnest and lightest clouds shoved high above the others. This happened on occasion, and it meant nothing. But the result was a splotch of deep blackness, larger than a healthy continent and unpromising to the bare human eye.

Just to be sure, Peregrine played with infrared frequencies and flashes of laser light to make delicate measurements. Something inside that blackness was different, he noticed. Straight before him, something was beginning to happen. That's why he wasn't particularly surprised when the clouds began to split, bleeding a strange golden light that was brighter than anything else in view.

Through his own telescope, he saw the vanguards of the rising hatch.

Moments later, on a shielded line, an AI expert contacted him. With a navigational code and the simple words "This interests," the machine changed the complexion of Peregrine's day and his week.

Having a worthy topic, he admitted to Hawking, "I thought I was lying to that woman. About having intuitions, I mean. But look at this hatch! Look at the diversity. And that's without being able to see much of it yet." His heart was pounding, his voice dry and quick. "I don't know if anybody has seen, ever... a hatch as big and diverse as this one..."

Hawking did not move, but the hemispherical eyes absorbed the data in a few moments. Then the complicated mouth of tendrils and rasping teeth made a series of little motions—motions that Peregrine had never seen before, and chose to ignore for the moment.

“I’m leaving,” the human announced.

Every raider with a working ship would be embarking now.

“It’s going to be a rich day,” he continued, throwing himself into the first layer of his flight suit.

Finally, Hawking spoke.

“You are my friend,” said the alien, nothing about his voice out of the ordinary. “And from all that is possible, I wish you the best.”

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Simplicity was the hallmark of a raider’s ship. The hull was made from diamond scales bolstered with nanowhiskers, all laid across a flexible skeleton of salvaged hyperfiber. Resting in its berth, Peregrine’s ship held a long, elegant shape reminiscent of the harpoons that populated ancient novels about fishermen and lost seas. But that narrow body swelled when liquid hydrogen was pushed into the fuel tanks. One inefficient fusion reactor fed a lone engine that was sloppy but powerful. The launch felt like the end-less slap of a monster’s paw, brutal enough to smash bone and pulverize the sternest living flesh. But like every citizen, Peregrine was functionally immortal, blessed with repair mechanisms that could take the stew inside a flight suit and remake the man who had been sitting there.

His body died, and time leaped across a string of uneventful minutes.

Opening new eyes, Peregrine found himself coasting, climbing away from the Great Ship. Six AIs of various temperaments and skills made up his crew. In his absence, they had continued studying the available data. One served as his pilot, and even when Peregrine reclaimed the helm, the machine waited at a nanosecond’s distance, ready to correct any glaring mistakes.

Inside any large hatch, the multitude of bodies came in different shapes, different species. The AI most familiar with mercantile matters pointed at the center of the hatch. “These gull-wands match those we saw fifteen years ago. Their wings had some good-grade hyperfiber, and nearly ten percent of the collected hearts were salvageable.”

Gull-wands had tiny fusion reactors in their chests. One reactor was powerful enough to light and heat a modest home.

“How much could we make?” Peregrine asked.

An estimate was generated, followed by an impressed silence from every sentient entity.

But then Peregrine noticed a closer feature. “Over here... is that some kind of cloud?”

“No,” was the best guess.

The mass was black along its surfaces, swirling in its interior, and through cracks that were tiny at any distance, glimmers of a fantastically bright blue-white light emerged.

“Anything like it in the records?”

There was an optical similarity to clouds of tiny, extremely swift bodies observed only eight times in the past.

“In my past?”

“Not in your life, no,” one voice replied. “During the city’s life, I mean.”

“Okay. What were those bodies made of?”

That was unknown, since none had ever been captured.

“So pretend we’re seeing them,” he began. “Estimate the numbers in that single gathering.”

“The flock is enormous,” another AI reported. “In the range of ten or eleven billion—”

“That’s what we want!” Peregrine exclaimed.

Skeptical whispers buzzed in his ears.

But the human pointed out, “Everyone else is going to be harvesting gull-wands. Hearts and hyperfiber are going to be cheap for the next hundred years. But if we find something new and special... even gathering up just a few of them... we could pocket several fortunes, and maybe even upgrade our ship...”

His crew had to like the sound of that.

“But reaching the target,” warned the pilot, “will entail burning a large portion of our reserves—”

“So do it now,” Peregrine ordered, releasing the helm.

And for the second time in a very brief while, his fine young body was crushed into an anonymous jelly.

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There was no perfect consensus about what the Polypond was—undiminished foe, mad psyche divided against itself, or the spectacular carcass of a once great foe. And in the same fashion, there were competing ideas about the place and purpose of the hatches. Since the rising bodies had mouths and often fed, maybe they were one means of pruning old tissues and re-viving what remained. Or they were infected with some new, improved genetics that had to be spread through the greater body. Perhaps they had a punishing function, retraining regions that their Polypond master judged too independent. Unless of course hatches were exactly what they appeared to be: biological storms. One or many species were enjoying a season of plenty, and working together, those countless bodies would rise into the highest atmosphere, spreading their precious seeds and spores as far as physi-cally possible.

“Perhaps every answer is a little true,” Hawking liked to caution. “Just as every answer is a little bit of a lie too.”

Flying above the hatch, Peregrine thought of his odd friend. But only briefly, and then he consciously shoved him out of his exceptionally busy mind.

“Projections,” he demanded.

His ship was still plunging, its hull pulled into a teardrop configuration, the skin superheated and his sensors half-blinded by the plasmatic envelope. But his crew devised a simple picture showing him vectors and projections of a future that looked ready to end in the most miserable way.

“Our target is accelerating,” his pilot announced. “I wish to abort before we collide with it.”

The black mass, smooth-faced and distinctly iridescent, was punching its way through a scattering of high clouds. Some of those clouds were alive— vividly colored bodies as light as aerogel and easily shredded. Other clouds were water-stained gray and red with salts and iron, dead cells, and other detritus pushed skyward by the mayhem. Their target was tiny compared to the entire hatch. But it was already the tallest feature, and nothing like it had ever been seen before. Raiders bound for distant hunting grounds were noticing it. Even from two hundred kilometers overhead, the energies and wild violence were obvious. And even from

inside a cocoon of superheated gases, human eyes could appreciate the beauty of so many frantic bodies doing whatever it was they were doing.

“I want to abort,” the pilot repeated.

Peregrine agreed. “But find the best way to hold us here, in its path. Can we do that?”

Instantly, the machine said, “Yes. But braking and circling will exhaust our reserves, and there won’t be enough fuel for both cargo and the journey home.”

Peregrine had guessed as much. “Let’s compromise,” he said. “Brake and assume a gliding shape. Where does that leave us?”

“Still dancing with the break-even point,” the pilot warned.

“So make some calls.” Peregrine named a few smart competitors approaching from more distant berths. “Pay them to wait above us. And share their spare fuel, when the time comes.”

The teardrop flipped over, the engine throwing out a spectacular fire. Every raider knew: ships larger and more powerful than theirs could trigger retribution. An innate reflex or a Polypond strategy? Nobody knew. But Peregrine’s ship was as close to the maximum size as was allowed, and if his plume exceeded the usual limits, even for a moment, a giant laser would pop to the surface on the unreachable sea below, evaporating his ship and then his body, and finally, his very worried skull.

But this burn went unnoticed. Then the ship rested, pieces of its hull pulling away, forming dragonfly wings configured to work with the thickening winds. Each time they passed through one of the monomolecular skins, Peregrine felt a shudder. The vibrations worsened by the minute, growing violent and relentless, and after a point, numbing and nearly unnoticed.

Countless black bodies continued to rise.

At home, inside the refugees’ city, lived the data sinks that had survived from prewar times. Even the best of them were incomplete. But inside the biological sections, Peregrine had found digitals of fish swimming in schools—a hypnotic set of images where tiny, almost mindless creatures managed to stay in formation, displaying grace and a singleness of purpose that never failed to astonish him.

This was the same, only infinitely more spectacular.

Those black bodies didn’t ride on meat and fins, but on tiny rockets and stubby metal wings. Perfect coordination had built a flawless hemisphere better than five hundred kilometers wide. Peregrine’s best AI spotter singled out random

bodies, carefully watching as they climbed to the outside edge of the school and then worked their way upward, reaching the cloud's apex before doing a curious roll, each shucking off its little wings before firing a larger rocket, then diving back out of sight through gaps too tiny to see from above.

“Identify one of them,” Peregrine suggested, “and see when it emerges again.”

The spotter had already tried that, and failed. The bodies were too similar, and there were too many of them. But there was an easier, more elegant route. With the help of distant telescopes, the AI took a thorough census of the cloud, and then it let itself feel the gentle but precise tug made by that combined gravity. Then it precisely measured the size of the entire swarm, and with genuine astonishment, it admitted, “They are growing fewer, I think.”

“Fewer?”

“Every minute, a million bodies vanish.”

“Meaning what?” he asked. “The cloud is shrinking?”

“It grows, but its citizens are scarcer. And this has been happening from the outset, I would guess.”

The pilot was managing their long fall while the ship's architect constantly adapted the shape and stiffness of wings, and the shape and color of the fuselage. To the best of its ability, the raider ship was trying to vanish inside the Polypond's enormous sky.

“Will any little guys be left when they reach us?” Peregrine asked.

Yes. Billions still.

“But what happens to the others? Where do they go?”

Data gave clues. Neutrinos and the character of escaping light implied a fierce heat, X-rays and even gamma rays seeping free. There was no way to be certain, but the black bodies could be simple machines—lead-doped hyperfiber shells wrapped around nuclear charges, for instance. If those bombs were detonating, then the interior of that cloud was hell: a spherical volume perhaps one hundred kilometers in diameter with an average temperature hotter than the guts of most suns.

What would anyone want with so much heat?

“The cloud is a weapon,” Peregrine muttered, feeling horrible and sure. His first instinct was to glance at the rocket nozzle behind them, imagining the very worst: a bubble of superheated plasmas was being woven here, ready to be flung up

and out into space, like a child's ball aimed for a target several thousand kilometers wide. Drop that creation into the nozzle, and, after a soundless flash, the city would cease to be.

But how would the Polypond launch the bubble?

The AIs were scrambling for answers. It was the ship's architect that imagined the next nightmare. What if the bubble wasn't going to be thrown, but instead it was dropped? If it was flung onto the Great Ship's hull... on the backside of the Ship, where the hyperfiber was thinnest... could it punch a hole into the hallways and habitats below?

Probably not, the majority decided.

But Peregrine and the architect wouldn't give up their nightmares. Since the war had ended, no one had seen energies approaching what was being seen today. But what if the Polypond had been waiting patiently since the war's end, silently gathering resources for this one spectacular attack... ?

Both solutions were possible and awful, and both were wrong.

The black cloud was still fifty kilometers below, and simulations were furiously working, and that was when a third, even stranger answer appeared with a withering flash of blue-white light.

In a blink, the top of that shimmering black mass parted.

Evaporated.

And from inside that carefully sculpted furnace sprang a shape at once familiar and wrong—a sphere of badly stressed, heavily eroded hyperfiber that was just a few kilometers across but rising fast on a withering plume of exhaust.

Making its frantic bid to escape: a starship.

“Reconfigure us now!” Peregrine shouted. “Whatever it takes get us out of the way...!”

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## 6

On occasion, Peregrine and his inhuman friend discussed the Great Ship and what might or might not be found within its unreachable interior. One despairing possibility was that the Polypond hadn't destroyed the ancient vessel, but it had

managed to annihilate both crew and passengers, leaving no one besides a few souls clinging to life outside. On the opposite end of the spectrum sat the most hopeful answer: life aboard the Ship was exactly as it had always been, peaceful and orderly, and the captains were still in charge, and the Polypond had been defeated, or at least fought to a meaningful armistice. And if that was true, then for a host of perfectly fine reasons, nobody at present was bothering to poke their heads out of the living ocean.

“But that doesn’t explain this new acceleration,” Peregrine would point out. “The engineers and captains... everybody everywhere... they assumed that these big rockets were the only engines. But plainly, they weren’t. Obviously, they weren’t even the most powerful thrusters available.”

“It is quite the puzzle,” Hawking conceded.

The acceleration was not huge, but to make anything as massive as the Great Ship move faster... well, that was an impressive trick. “The captains found something new during the war,” Peregrine suggested.

“A talent hidden until now,” his friend added. “That notion has a delightful sourness about it, yes.”

Sour was sweet to the leech.

Peregrine would narrow his gaze, imagining captains standing in a crowded, desperate bridge. “They wanted to outmaneuver the Polypond. That’s why they kicked the new motors awake, and now they can’t stop them.”

“A compelling possibility. I agree.”

But Peregrine didn’t believe his own words. “That still won’t explain why the captains don’t come out to get us. Even if they don’t suspect anybody’s here, they should send up teams to scout the situation... and even better, to send messages home to the Milky Way...”

Long limbs acquired the questioning position. “Where would you expect them to appear?” Hawking asked.

“Inside one of the nozzles. I would.”

Silence.

Peregrine offered his reasons as he thought of them. “Because the Polypond can’t reach inside the nozzles. Because the captains could pretty easily work their way through the barricades and hyperfiber plugs. And because from the nozzle floor, they’d have an unobstructed view of the galaxy, and they would be able to



measure our position and velocity—”

“The barricades are significant,” the alien cautioned.

“To us, they are. We don’t have the energy or tools to cut through the best grades of hyperfiber.” Shaking his head, he said, “From what I’ve heard, when my mother’s ship was damaged, she spent her free time trying to find some route to the interior. She explored at least a thousand of the old accessways leading down from here.” Every tunnel, no matter how obscure, was blocked with hyperfiber too deep and stubborn to cut through. “But if there were captains below us, and if only a fraction of the old reactors were working... they could still punch out in a matter of years... maybe weeks...”

Silence.

“So there are no captains,” Peregrine would decide. Every time.

“Which means what?”

“Somebody else is in charge of the Great Ship.” That answer seemed obvious, and it was inevitable, and it made a good mind usefully worried. Yet that answer was a most frustrating creation, since it opened doors into an infinite range of possibilities, imaginable and otherwise.

“Who is in charge?” Hawking would ask, on occasion.

A few powerful species were obvious candidates. But each of them would have sent teams to the surface. They might be different species, but they would be drawn by the same reasons and needs that humans would feel.

“Perhaps the culprit is someone else,” Hawking would propose. “An or-ganism you haven’t thought to consider.”

Anything was possible, yes.

Peregrine threw his ape arms into a posture that mimicked his friend’s, underscoring the importance of his next words. “Nobody here is looking for a route down,” he said. “I think it’s been what? A thousand years since anyone has even tried.”

The three hemispherical eyes were bright and still.

Peregrine continued. “Once I get enough savings in the bank, I’ll take up my mother’s other work. Just to see what I can see.”

“That could be a reasonable plan,” Hawking would say.

Then most of the time, their conversation ended. Peregrine often made that promise to himself, but he never had the resources or the simple will to invest in the luxury of a many-year search. Besides, he was the finest raider in the city, and raiders were essential. If he gave up his present work, the level of poverty everywhere would rise. Citizens would have to forgo having children and new homes. At least that was his excuse to wait for another decade or two, biding time before setting out on what surely would be a useless adventure.

Hawking never questioned Peregrine's lack of action. But then again, that creature was ancient and eerily patient, and who knew how many promises he had made to himself during the last eons, all bound up inside his powerful mind, waiting to be fulfilled?

One day, Peregrine surprised himself; he imagined a fresh candidate and a compelling logic that would explain the mystery.

"It's the Great Ship," he offered.

The leech was silent, but there was a different quality to his posture, and even the crystalline eyes looked brighter.

"The Ship itself has come to life," the young man proposed.

"And why would that be?"

"I don't know. Maybe it finally had enough of human beings at the helm, this damned Polypond trying to kill it, and all the rest of these unpleasant creatures running around inside it. So one day, it just woke up and said, 'Screw you. From here on, *I'm* in charge!'"

"Interesting," his friend offered.

"And what if...?" Peregrine continued. Swallowing and then smiling, he asked, "What if we aren't just following some random line? Instead of heading out into nothingness, the Ship is actually steering us toward a genuine destination?" Then he laughed in a tight, nervous fashion. "What if our voyage has only just begun, Hawking?"

There was a momentary silence.

Then his friend replied, "Every voyage has just begun. If you consider those words in the proper way..."

\* \* \* \*

Buried in those old data sinks were schematics for a host of impossible machines—devices too intricate or demanding to be built by refugees and their children. Included were wondrous starships like those that once brought passengers to the Great Ship. Peregrine had always dreamed of seeing vessels like those, and judging by the spectrums, that's what the ap-paration was: an armored starship equipped with a streakship drive, efficient and relentless, yet operating at some minuscule fraction of full throttle. With just that whisper of thrust, the gap between him and it closed in an instant. Peregrine's ship was a tiny, toyish rocket that barely had time enough to fold its wings and kick itself out of the way. The rising starship missed Peregrine by less than ten kilometers. The silvered ball of hyperfiber stood on a plume of hard radiations, the exhaust narrow at the nozzle but widening as it drove downward, scorching heat causing it to explode outward into an atmosphere that was cooked to a broth of softer plasmas, a stark blue-white fire betraying only the coldest of the unfolding energies.

“Run!” he ordered.

His pilot had already made that panicked assessment. Using the last shreds of its wings, the raider ship tilted its nose and leaped toward space, not following the starship so much as simply trying to keep ahead of the awful fire. The black mass beneath them continued to churn and spin. And the living ocean below everything could see the starship too, a thousand defensive systems triggered, the burning air suddenly full of laser bursts and particle beams and a host of slow ballistic weapons that could never catch their target. Whatever the reason for fighting, hatred or simple instinct, the Polypond employed every trick in its bid to kill its opponent. And that's when Peregrine's tiny ship was kissed by one of the lasers, a portion of his hull and two entire wings turned to carbon ash and a telltale glow.

“Reconfigure!” he screamed.

The AIs began shuffling the surviving pieces, pulling their ship back into a rough shape that might remain whole for another few moments.

But the main fuel tank was pierced, leaking and unpatchable.

“We can't make it home,” was the uniform verdict.

Peregrine had already come to that grim conclusion.

“Hunt for help,” he said. “Who's close—?”

“No one is,” he heard.

The surviving portions of the black mass were still churning, a few billion fusion bombs riding little rockets. It was a useless gesture, Peregrine believed. But then he noticed how the cloud was changing as it moved, acquiring a distinct pancake-shaped base above which a tiny fraction of the bombs were gathering, pulling themselves into a dense, carefully stacked bundle.

In a shared instant, the pancake below ignited itself.

The resulting flash dwarfed every bolt of laser light, and even the stardrive faded from view. A hypersonic slap struck the last of those bombs, destroying most but throwing the rest of them skyward at a good fraction of light-speed. Then as the bombs passed into the last reaches of the atmosphere, they gave themselves one last shove, rockets carrying them close enough that the starship was forced to react, shifting its plume slightly, evaporating every last one of its pursuers.

But the pancake burst had launched more than just bombs. A fat portion of the atmosphere was being shoved upward, and soon it would stand higher than Peregrine had ever seen. More out of instinct than calculation, he said, "Try wings again, and ride this updraft."

It wouldn't lift them much, no. But the soaring maneuver would keep them at a safer altitude for a little while longer.

"Now are there any raiders who can reach us?"

Several, maybe.

"Offer them anything," Peregrine told his mercantile AI. "Thanks. Money. My family name. Whatever works."

Moments later, a deal was secured.

The airborne wreckage of his ship continued to jump and lurch through the blazing atmosphere. Life support was close to failing, and once it did, his body would cook and temporarily die. Peregrine invested his last conscious moments looking up at the streakship, watching as it broke into true space, that relentless engine throwing back a jet of plasma that grew even thinner and hotter as it began to finally throttle up.

"Yell at the ship," he ordered.

That brought confused silence.

"Assume there's a tribe of humans onboard," he instructed his AIs. "Curse at them and blame them for all our miseries. Say whatever you have to, but get them to talk back to us..."

“And then what?” asked his pilot.

“Remember everything they say,” he muttered as his lips burned. “And everything they don’t say too—”

\* \* \* \*

## 8

“You were once an engineer,” he had whispered to Fusillade. “But not anymore, I have to believe.”

“And why not?”

The arbitrary moment on the clock called “morning” was approaching. The two humans were sleepy and physically spent. But Peregrine found the energy to explain, “I know every engineer. By face. By name. By skills. After all, I am a raider.”

“You are.”

“None of you founders are helping us fly. Your children and grandchil-dren, sure. But never you.”

Silence.

“It’s funny,” he allowed. “I don’t keep track of you. I mean humans and harum-scarums, the fef and all the others. .. those lucky ones who founded our city. I doubt if I could attach ten faces to the right names, since most of you seem happy to keep close to each other...”

The only response was a smile, thin and wary.

Peregrine grew tired of this dance. “So what do you do with your time?” he finally asked.

The smile brightened. “I study.”

“The subject?”

“Many matters.” The woman was taller than Peregrine, and stronger. She pushed on his chest—pushed harder than necessary—and he felt his heart beating against the flat of her palm. Then very quietly, Fusillade asked, “What do you know about your half brother?”

Peregrine offered a crisp, inadequate biography of a man who lived and died long ago.

“And your two sisters?”

There were three siblings in all. Two were raiders who eventually didn't return from their missions, while that final sister had followed their mother's other pursuit, hunting for a route back into the Great Ship. But a crude plasma drill exploded during testing, obliterating most of her mind along with her bones and meat.

With a shrug, Peregrine confessed, “I don't think about them very often. Different fathers, and we never knew each other. .. and all that...”

His lover winked and said, “You know, he was their friend too.”

“Who was?”

“You know who.” The smile had been replaced by a genuinely cold expression, eyes weighing everything they saw—not unlike the leech eyes. “He wore different names, yes. But he was a companion to your sisters and your brother too. They weren't as good friends as you are to him, but he was always close. And when your mother had no living children, he would strike up relationships with whoever seemed to be the best raider.”

“I've heard that story before,” Peregrine muttered. Then with a pride that took him a little by surprise, he added, “Yeah, everyone says that I've got some odd tie with Hawking, or whatever he wants to call himself...”

“And what about your mother?”

“What about her?”

“She and the alien knew each other. Not at first, no. At least, nobody in my circle remembers any relationship. But your mother invited your dear companion along when she went below, hunting for an open road to the Great Ship. I'm sure you can imagine why. That leech could slip his way into some amazingly tiny crevices, if he had to...”

Peregrine was perfectly awake now.

Quietly, firmly, the ageless lover said, “I wouldn't want you to mention this to your good friend. What I'm sharing, I mean. Let's keep it between ourselves.”

Again and again, the young man realized that he knew little about any-thing. Looking at the woman's stiff, unreadable face, he asked again, “What exactly do

you do with your time?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“You’re still an engineer, aren’t you?”

“Do you think so?”

“The founders, and particularly the oldest of you. .. each of you have celebrated tens of thousands of birthdays. Minds like yours have habits, and habits don’t easily change.” Now he sat up and pushed against her chest. The woman had a peculiar asymmetry—a giant black nipple tipped the small hard right breast, while its large and very soft neighbor wore a tiny silver cap. Between the breasts lay a heart beating faster than he expected. “So tell me: what kind of engineering do you do?”

“Mostly, I buy useless items in the markets.”

“Which items?”

“Pieces of neural networks. You know, the little brains of those big corpses that you bring home... from gull-wands and clowners and the rest of the free-ranging bodies...”

Those brains were always tiny, simple of design, and often mangled or burned. Generations of raiders had collected the trinkets, and not even the largest few had shown any hint of sentience.

“Maybe as individual fragments, they’re simple.” She pulled Peregrine’s other hand over her chest, and smiled. “But if you splice them together, very carefully... if you spend a few thousand years doing little else... you’ll cobble together something that captures a portion of one genuine soul. Maybe it’s the Polypond’s mind, maybe something else. Whatever it is, you’ll find memories and images and ideas... and on occasion, you might even hear some timely, important news...”

“Such as?”

She refused to say.

“And what does this have to do with Hawking?”

“Maybe nothing,” she replied with an agreeable tone. “But now that you mention it: what should we say about that very good friend of yours?”

\* \* \* \*

In the end what was saved was too small and far too mutilated to reconstitute itself. Peregrine was a lump of caramelized tissue surrounding a fractured skull that held a bioceramic brain cut through by EM surges and furious rains of charged particles. The damage was so severe that every memory and tendency and each of his precious personal biases had to migrate into special shelters, and life had ceased completely for a timeless span covering almost eighteen days. Death held sway—longer than he had ever known, Nothingness ruled—and then after a series of quick tickling sensations and flashes of meaningless light, the raider found himself recovered enough that his soul migrated out of its hiding places and his newest eyes opened, gazing at a face that was not entirely unexpected.

“The streakship,” he blurted with his new mouth. “Where?”

A limb touched his mouth and both cheeks, and then another limb touched his chest, feeling his heart. The limbs were soft, strong, and human—a woman’s two hands—and then he heard her voice saying, “Gone,” with finality. “Gone now. Gone.”

“It got away safely?”

She said, “Yes,” with a nod, then with her eyes, and finally with a whisper. And she leaned closer, adding, “The streakship has escaped, yes. Eighteen days, and it’s still accelerating. Faster than you would ever guess, it is racing toward the Milky Way.”

Peregrine tried to move, and failed. His legs and arms were only half-grown, wearing wraps filled with blood and amino acids. But he could breathe deeply, enjoying that sensation quite a lot. “What about my crew?”

“Degraded, but alive.” The woman’s face was pleased and a little as-tonished, telling him, “At the end, when you were rescued. .. when that other raider plucked you out of the mayhem. .. the AIs were flying what was really just a toy glider, barely as big as me, and with maybe a tenth my mass...”

Peregrine tried to absorb his good fortune. How could you even calculate the long odds that he had crossed?

The ancient woman sat back, biding her time.

“Did the streakship ever talk?” he asked.

“Yes.” She nodded and smiled wistfully, and then with a matter-of-fact shrug, she added, “As soon as the streakship got above us, it hit us with a narrow-beam



broadcast. Yes.”

“What did it say?”

“Life survives inside the Great Ship,” she reported. “But our old leaders, the wise and powerful captains... they’re gone now. All of them. Either dead or in hiding somewhere.”

“Who is in charge?”

“Nobody.”

“What does that mean?”

“From what the streakship told us, passengers are fending for themselves.” The woman paused, studying his new face. Then she quietly mentioned, “However, there is one exceptionally obscure species that’s come into some prominence. In fact, at the end of the Polypond War, they took control of the Great Ship’s helm.” She offered a flickering wink, and then added, “And, oh... now that I mentioned that... guess who else has gone away... ?

“Somebody you know...

“Even before your body arrived home, he picked up his shell, and by the looks of it, scuttled away...”

\* \* \* \*

## 10

Peregrine was perfectly healthy and profoundly poor. The raider who saved him had acquired most of his assets, while his debts to the hospital remained substantial, possibly eternal. He had no ship, and his crew was repaired and working with others. Several investors came forward, offering to pay for a new ship in return for a fat percentage of all future gains. But the only fair offer was a brief contract from his father, and for a variety of reasons, personal and otherwise, the young man decided to send it back unsigned and follow an entirely new course.

If you live cheaply and patiently, it takes astonishingly little money to keep you breathing and content.

For most of a century, Peregrine stalked the deep tunnels and access ports that laced the Ship’s central nozzle. Armed with maps left behind by his mother and sister, he hunted for routes they might have missed. He managed to find two or three every year, but each one was inevitably plugged with the high-grade hyperfiber.

It was easy to see why no one kept up this kind of search for long. Yet Peregrine refused to quit, if only because the idea of failure gave his mouth such an awful taste.

New lovers drifted in and out of his life.

He occasionally saw the old lady engineer, meeting her for a meal and conversation. They hadn't slept together in decades, but they remained friendly enough. Besides, she had a sharp mind and important connections, and sometimes, when she was in the mood, she gave him special knowledge.

"You knew a big hatch was coming," Peregrine accused her. "That's why you seduced me when you did. Somehow, you and your founder friends pieced together clues that the rest of us don't ever get to see."

"Yet that hatch, big as it was, was just a secondary phenomenon," she explained. "Like blood from a fresh cut. I won't tell exactly how we knew, but we did. And what was more important was that someone or something had emerged from one of the old ports. We had reason to believe that an armored vessel was pushing through the Polypond ocean, heading our way... pre-sumably to get into a useful position before jumping free of the Ship."

"And you suspected Hawking?"

"For thousands of years, I did. We did." Fusillade nodded, and then said, "This isn't official. But in the final seconds of the War, a few messages arrived from the interior. They were heavily coded military broadcasts, which is why they aren't common knowledge. They describe the creatures that were taking over the battered Ship. The leech, the broadcasts called them. And not wanting to alert the spy in our midst, we decided to keep those secrets to ourselves."

"But he's gone," Peregrine countered. "Why not make a public announcement?"

"Because we don't want to panic our children, of course."

"Am I panicking?" he asked.

"In slow motion, you are. Yes." The ancient engineer sat back in her chair, tapping at the heart nestled between her unequal breasts. "Spending your life searching for a way into the Ship, when we are as certain as we can be that there is no way inside... yes, I think that's genuinely panicked behavior.

"Hawking disappeared to someplace," he replied. "That means there's at least one route off this nozzle."

"If he went back into the Great Ship, perhaps. But for all we know, he's

walking today on a living cloud off on some distant piece of the Polypond's body."

Peregrine had wasted decades walking empty hallways and dangling from soft glass ropes. He could have wasted a thousand centuries before finding the relevant clue. But he was a lucky individual, and he had the good fortune of becoming lost at the proper moment. After two wrong turns, he found himself standing beside a tiny chute exactly like ten thousand other chutes. Except, that is, for the marks left behind by a delicate limb that had been dipped in paint. No, in blood. A blackish alien blood with a distinctive flavor, and the writing was a familiar script, showing the simple word "HAWKING," followed by a simple yet elegant arrow pointing straight down.

\* \* \* \*

## 11

The chute ended with a vast airless room built for no discernible purpose. Its walls were half a kilometer tall, and the floor was a circular plain covering perhaps ten square kilometers of featureless hyperfiber—stuff as old as the Ship, far better than any grade that could be chiseled through today. The only obvious doorway led out into the dormant rocket nozzle. Peregrine set up a torch in the room's center, and then he kneeled, searching that expanse with a powerful night scope. He should have missed the second doorway. If anyone else had ever visited this nameless place, they surely would have ignored what looked like a crevice, horizontal and brief. But someone was standing in front of the opening—a distinctive alien wearing a gossamer lifesuit, his long jointed legs locked into a comfortable position, the body motionless now and perhaps for a very long while.

Peregrine walked a few steps, then broke into a hard run.

On their private channel, Hawking said, "You look fit, my friend. And rather troubled too, I see."

"What are you doing here?" Peregrine blurted.

"Waiting for you," was the reply.

"Why?"

"Because you are my friend."

"I don't particularly believe that," said Peregrine. "From what I've heard, the leech are my enemies..."

"I have injured you how many times?"

“Never,” he thought, saying nothing.

“My friend,” said Hawking. “What precise treacheries am I guilty of?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

Silence.

Peregrine had invested years wondering what he would say, should this moment arrive. “Why live with us?” he asked. “Were you some kind of spy? Were you sent here to watch over us?”

There was a pause, then a cryptic comment. “You know, I saw you entering this place. I saw that quite easily.”

“I’ve been climbing toward you for several hours,” Peregrine complained. “Of course you saw me...”

Then he hesitated, rolling the alien’s confession around in his head.

With relentless patience, Hawking waited.

Peregrine slowed his gait, asking, “How long have you been watching my approach?”

“Since your birth,” the leech confessed.

Peregrine stopped now.

After a few minutes of reflection, he said, “Those eyes of yours... they see into the future... ?”

Silence.

“Do they see everything that’s going to happen?”

“Do your eyes absorb everything there is to see?”

Peregrine shook his head. “A limited sight, is that it?”

One of the distant legs lifted high, signaling agreement.

“What else can you see, Hawking?”

“That I have never hurt you,” the alien repeated.

“My half sister... the one who died in the plasma blast... did you arrange that accident?”

“No.”

“But did you see the accident approaching?”

Silence.

“And why did you come up on the hull, Hawking? The only reason I can think of is to spy on us.”

“An obvious answer. And your imagination is richer than that, my friend.”

Hard as it was to believe, the apparent compliment forced Peregrine to smile. “Okay,” he muttered. “You wanted to spy on our future. We’re an in-dependent society, free of the leech, and maybe you’re scared of us.”

“That is an interesting assessment, but mistaken.”

“I don’t understand then.”

“In time, you will,” the leech promised.

Then every one of its limbs was moving, carrying the creature backward into the narrow, almost invisible crevice. Peregrine began to run again, in a full sprint; but he was still half a kilometer from his goal when a warm gooey stew of fresh hyperfiber flowed into view, filling the crevice and pushing across the slick floor, glowing in the infrared as it swiftly cured.

\* \* \* \*

## 12

The final doorway had been opened just enough for a small human wearing a minimal lifesuit to slip through, and, walking alone, he then stepped onto a frigid, utterly flat plain. During the War, portions of the Polypond had splashed into the giant nozzle, dying here or at least freezing into a useless hibernation. Peregrine strode out to where he found a modest telescope as well as a set of telltale marks. His friend once stood here, those powerful eyes of his linked to the light-hungry mirror. By measuring the marks in the ice, and with conservative estimates of the heat lost by Hawking’s lifesuit, Peregrine guessed that the creature had stood here for many years, pulling up his many feet when they had melted to uncomfortable depth, then danc-ing over to a fresh place before reclaiming his watchful pose.

Peregrine lay on his back now, slowly melting into the dead ice, and he fixed the same telescope to his eyes and purposefully stared at the sky.

The little city was barely visible—a sprinkling of tiny lights and heat signatures threatening to vanish against the vast bulk of the timeless and utterly useless nozzle. Millions of souls were up there, breeding and spreading out farther in a profoundly impoverished realm. Yet despite all of their successes, they seemed to have no impact on a scene that dwarfed all men and their eternal urges.

What wasn't the nozzle was the galaxy.

Here was what the leech had been watching. Hawking had lived for thousands of years in a place that offered him comfort and the occasional companionship. But once the streakship had left, carrying its important news to the universe beyond, the creature's work had begun: sitting on this bitter wasteland, those great eyes had been fixed on three hundred billion suns. Peregrine studied the maelstrom of stars and worlds, dust and busy minds; and perhaps for the first time in his life, he appreciated that this was something greater than any silly Polypond. Here lay an ocean beyond any other, and someday, in one fashion or another, a great hatch would rise from it—furious bodies riding upon a trillion, trillion wings, reaching for this prize that has been lost.

This Great Ship.

\* \* \* \*