

MINLA'S FLOWERS

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Alastair Reynolds is a frequent contributor to *Interzone*, and has also sold to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Spectrum SF*, and elsewhere. His first novel, *Revelation Space*, was widely hailed as one of the major SF books of the year; it was quickly followed by *Chasm City*, *Redemption Ark*, *Absolution Gap*, and *Century Rain*, all big sprawling space operas that were big sellers as well, establishing Reynolds as one of the best and most popular new SF writers to enter the field in many years. His other books include a novella collection, *Diamond Dogs*, *Turquoise Days*. His most recent book is a new novel, *Pushing Ice*. Coming up are two new collections, *Galactic North* and *Zima Blue and Other Stories*. A professional scientist with a Ph.D. in astronomy, he comes from Wales, but lives in the Netherlands, where he works for the European Space Agency.

Reynolds's work is known for its grand scope, sweep, and scale—in one story, “Galactic North,” a spaceship sets out in pursuit of another in a stern chase that takes thousands of years of time and hundreds of thousands of light-years to complete; in another, “Thousandth Night,” ultrarich immortals embark on a plan that will call for the physical rearrangement of all the stars in the galaxy. In the intricate and surprising novella that follows (a sort of prequel to his story “Merlin's Gun”), he shows us that long-term plans can also have long-term *consequences*—some of them not at all expected.

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Mission interrupted.

I still don't know quite what happened. The ship and I were in routine Waynet transit, all systems ticking over smoothly. I was deep in thought, a little drunk, rubbing clues together like a caveman trying to make fire with rocks, hoping for the spark that would point me toward the gun, the one no one ever thinks I'm going to find, the one I know with every fiber of my existence is out there somewhere.

Then it happened: a violent lurch that sent wine and glass flying across the cabin, a shriek from the ship's alarms as it went into panic mode. I knew right away that this was no ordinary Way turbulence. The ship was tumbling badly, but I fought my way to the command deck and did what I could to bring her back under control. Seat-of-the-pants flying, the way Gallinule and I used to do it on Plenitude, when Plenitude still existed.

That was when I knew we were outside the Waynet, dumped back into the crushing slowness of normal space. The stars outside were stationary, their colors showing no suggestion of relativistic distortion.

“Damage?” I asked.

“How long have you got?” the ship snapped back.

I told it to ease off on the wisecracks and start giving me the bad news. And it most certainly was bad news. The precious syrinx was still functional—I touched it and felt the familiar tremble that indicated it was still sensing the nearby Waynet—but that was about the only flight-critical system that hadn’t been buckled or blown or simply wiped out of existence by the unscheduled egress.

We were going to have to land and make repairs. For a few weeks or months—however long it took the ship to scavenge and process the raw materials it needed to fix itself—the search for my gun would be on hold.

That didn’t mean I was counting on a long stopover.

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The ship still had a slow tumble. Merlin squinted against hard white glare as the burning eye of a bright sun hove into view through the windows. It was white, but not killingly so. Probably a mid-sequence star, maybe a late F or early G type. He thought there was a hint of yellow. Had to be pretty close too.

“Tell me where we are.”

“It’s called Calliope,” *Tyrant* told him. “G-type. According to the last Cohort census the system contained fifteen planet-class bodies. There were five terrestrials, four of which were uninhabitable. The fifth—the farthest from Calliope—was supposedly colonized by humans in the early Flourishing.”

Merlin glanced at the census data as it scrolled down the cabin wall. The planet in question was called Lecythus. It was a typical watery terrestrial, like a thousand others in his experience. It even had the almost-obligatory large single moon.

“Been a while, ship. What are the chances of anyone still being down there?”

“Difficult to say. A later Cohort flyby failed to make contact with the settlement, but that doesn’t mean no one was alive. After the emergence of the Huskers, many planetary colonies went to great lengths to camouflage themselves against the aliens.”

“So there could still be a welcoming committee.”

“We’ll see. With your permission, I’ll use our remaining fuel to reach Lecythus. This will take some time. Would you like to sleep?”

Merlin looked back at the coffinlike slab of the frostwatch cabinet. He could skip over the days or weeks that it would take to reach the planet, but that would mean subjecting himself to the intense unpleasantness of frostwatch revival. Merlin had never taken kindly to being woken from normal sleep, let alone the deep hibernation of frostwatch.

“Pass on that, I think. I’ve still got plenty of reading to catch up on.”

Later—much later—*Tyrant* announced that they had reached orbit around Lecythus. “Would you like to see the view?” the ship asked, with a playful note in its voice.

Merlin scratched fatigue from his eyes. “You sound like you know some-thing I don’t.”

Merlin was at first reassured by what he saw. There was blue ocean down there, swatches of green and brown landmass, large islands rather than any major continental masses, cyclonic swirls of water-vapor clouds. It didn’t necessarily mean there were still people, but it was a lot more encouraging than finding a cratered, radioactive corpse of a world.

Then he looked again. Many of those green and brown swatches of landmass were surrounded by water, as his first glimpse had indicated. But some of them appeared to be floating above the ocean completely, casting shadows beneath them. His glance flicked to the horizon, where the atmosphere was compressed into a thin bow of pure indigo. He could see the foreshortened shapes of hovering landmasses, turned nearly edge on. The landmasses appeared to be one or two kilometers thick, and they all appeared to be gently curved. Perhaps half were concave in shape, so their edges were slightly upturned. The edges were frosted white, like the peaks of mountain ranges. Some of the concave masses even had little lakes near their centers. The convex masses were all a scorched tawny gray in color, devoid of water or vegetation, save for a cap of ice at their highest point. The largest shapes, convex or concave, must have been hundreds of kilometers wide. Merlin judged that there must have been at least ten kilometers of clear airspace under each piece. A third of the planet’s surface was obscured by the floating shapes.

“Any idea of what we’re looking at here?” Merlin asked. “This doesn’t look like anything in the census.”

“I think they built an armored sky around their world,” the ship said. “And then something—very probably Husker-level ordnance—shattered that sky.”

“No one could have survived through that,” Merlin said, feeling a rising tide of sadness. *Tyrant* was clever enough, but there were times—long times—when Merlin became acutely aware of the heartless machine lurking behind the personality. And then he felt very, very alone. Those were the hours when he would have done anything for companionship, including returning to the Cohort and the tribunal that undoubtedly awaited him.

“Someone does appear to have survived, Merlin.”

He perked. “Really?”

“It’s unlikely to be a very advanced culture: no neutrino or gravimagnetic signatures, beyond those originating from the mechanisms that must still be active inside the sky pieces. But I did detect some very brief radio emissions.”

“What language were they using? Main? Tradespeak? Anything else in the Cohort database?”

“They were using long beeps and short beeps. I’m afraid I didn’t get the chance to determine the source of the transmission.”

“Keep listening. I want to meet them.”

“Don’t raise your hopes. If there are people down there, they’ve been out of contact with the rest of humanity for a considerable number of mil-lennia.”

“I only want to stop for repairs. They can’t begrudge me that, can they?”

“I suppose not.”

Then something occurred to Merlin, something he realized he should have asked much earlier. “About the accident, ship. I take it you know why we were dumped out of the Waynet?”

“I’ve run a fault-check on the syrx. There doesn’t appear to be anything wrong with it.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I know.” *Tyrant* sounded sullen. “I still don’t have an explanation for what went wrong. And I don’t like that any more than you do.”

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Tyrant fell into the atmosphere of Lecythus. The transmissions had resumed,

allowing the ship to pinpoint the origin to one of the larger airborne masses.

Shortly afterward, a second source began transmitting from another floating mass, half the size of the first, located three thousand kilometers to the west. The way the signals started and stopped suggested some kind of agonizingly slow communication via radio pulses, one that probably had nothing to do with Merlin's arrival.

"Tell me that's a code in our database," Merlin said.

"It isn't. And the code won't tell us much about their spoken language, I'm afraid."

Up close, the broken edges of the floating mass soared as tall as a cliff. They were a dark, streaked gray, infinitely less regular than they had appeared from space. The edge showed signs of weathering and erosion. There were wide ledges, dizzying promontories, and cathedral-sized shadowed caves. Glinting in the low light of Calliope, ladders and walkways—impossibly thin and spindly scratches of metal—reached down from the icebound upper reaches, following zigzag trajectories that only took them a fraction of the way to the perilous lower lip, where the floating world curved back under itself.

Merlin made out the tiny moving forms of birdlike creatures, wheeling and orbiting in powerful thermals, some of them coming and going from roosts on the lower ledges.

"But that isn't a bird," *Tyrant* said, highlighting a larger moving shape.

Merlin felt an immediate pang of recognition as the image zoomed. It was an aircraft: a ludicrously fragile assemblage of canvas and wire. It had a crescent moon painted on both wings. There'd been a machine not much more advanced than that in the archive inside the Palace of Eternal Dusk, preserved across thirteen hundred years of family history. Merlin had even risked taking it outside once, to see for himself if he had the nerve to repeat his distant ancestor's brave crossing. He still remembered the sting of reprimand when he'd brought it back, nearly ruined.

This aircraft was even flimsier and slower. It was driven by a single chugging propeller rather than a battery of rocket-assisted turbines. It was following the rim of the landmass, slowly gaining altitude. Clearly it intended to make landfall. The air on Lecythus was thicker at sea level than on Plenitude, but the little machine must still have been very close to its safe operational ceiling. And yet it would have to climb even higher if it was to traverse the raised rim.

"Follow it," Merlin said. "Keep us astern by a clear two kilometers. And set hull to stealth."

Merlin's ship nosed in behind the struggling aircraft. He could see the single pilot now, goggled and helmeted within a crude-looking bubble canopy. The plane had reached ten kilometers, but it would need to double that to clear the upturned rim. Every hundred meters of altitude gained seemed to tax the aircraft to the limit, so that it climbed, leveled, climbed. It trailed sooty hyphens behind it. Merlin could imagine the sputtering protest from the little engine, the fear in the pilot's belly that the motor was going to stall at any moment.

That was when an airship hove around the edge of the visible cliff. Calli-ope's rays flared off the golden swell of its envelope. Beneath the long ribbed form was a tiny gondola, equipped with multiple engines on skeletal out-riggers. The airship's nose began to turn, bringing another crescent-moon emblem into view. The aircraft lined up with the airship, the two of them at about the same altitude. Merlin watched as some kind of netlike apparatus unfurled in slow motion from the belly of the gondola. The pilot gained further height, then cut the aircraft's engine. Powerless now, it followed a shallow glide path toward the net. Clearly, the airship was going to catch the aircraft and carry it over the rim. That must have been the only way for aircraft to arrive and depart from the hovering landmass.

Merlin watched with a sickened fascination. He'd occasionally had a pre-sentiment when something was going to go wrong. Now he had that feeling again.

Some gust caught the airship. It began to drift out of the aircraft's glide path. The pilot tried to compensate—Merlin could see the play of light shift on the wings as they warped—but it was never going to be enough. Without power, the aircraft must have been cumbersome to steer. The engines on the gondola turned on their mountings, trying to shove the airship back into position.

Beyond the airship loomed the streaked gray vastness of the great cliff.

"Why did he cut the engines..." Merlin breathed to himself. Then, an instant later: "Can we catch up? Can we do something?"

"I'm afraid not. There simply isn't time."

Sickened, Merlin watched as the aircraft slid past the airship, missing the net by a hundred meters. A sooty smear erupted from the engine. The pilot must have been desperately trying to restart the motor. Moments later, Merlin watched as one wingtip grazed the side of the cliff and crumpled instantly, horribly. The aircraft dropped, dashing itself to splinters and shreds against the side of the cliff. There was no possibility that the pilot could have survived.

For a moment Merlin was numb. He was frozen, unsure what to do next.

He'd been planning to land, but it seemed improper to arrive immediately after

witnessing such a tragedy. Perhaps the thing to do was find an uninhabited landmass and put down there.

“There’s another aircraft,” *Tyrant* announced. “It’s approaching from the west.”

Still shaken by what he’d seen, Merlin took the stealthed ship closer. Dirty smoke billowed from the side of the aircraft. In the canopy, the pilot was obviously engaged in a life-or-death struggle to bring his machine to safety. Even as they watched, the engine appeared to slow and then restart.

Something slammed past *Tyrant*, triggering proximity alarms. “Some kind of shell,” the ship told Merlin. “I think someone on the ground is trying to shoot down these aircraft.”

Merlin looked down. He hadn’t paid much attention to the landmass beneath them, but now that he did—peering through the holes in a quilt of low-lying cloud—he made out the unmistakable flashes of artillery positions, laid out along the pale scratch of a fortified line.

He began to understand why the airship dared not stray too far from the side of the landmass. Near the cliff, it at least had some measure of cover. It would have been far too vulnerable to the shells in open air.

“I think it’s time to take a stand,” he said. “Maintain stealth. I’m going to provide some lift support to that aircraft. Bring us around to her rear and then approach from under her.”

“Merlin, you have no idea who these people are. They could be brigands, pirates, anything.”

“They’re being shot at. That’s good enough for me.”

“I really think we should land. I’m down to vapor pressure in the tanks now.”

“So’s that brave fool of a pilot. Just do it.”

The aircraft’s engine gave out just as *Tyrant* reached position. Taking the controls manually, Merlin brought his ship’s nose into contact with the underside of the aircraft’s paper-thin fuselage. Contact occurred with the faintest of bumps. The pilot glanced back down over his shoulder, but the goggled mask hid all expression. Merlin could only imagine what the pilot made of the sleek, whale-sized machine now supporting his little contraption.

Merlin’s hands trembled. He was acutely aware of how easily he could damage the fragile thing with a miscalculated application of thrust. *Tyrant* was

armored to withstand Waynet transitions and the crush of gas giant atmospheres. It was like using a hammer to push around a feather. For a moment, contact between the two craft was lost, and when *Tyrant* came in again it hit the aircraft hard enough to crush the metal cylinder of a spare fuel tank bracketed on under the wing. Merlin winced in anticipation of an explosion—one that would hurt the little airplane a lot more than it hurt *Tyrant*—but the tank must have been empty.

Ahead, the airship had regained some measure of stability. The capture net was still deployed. Merlin pushed harder, giving the aircraft more altitude in readiness for its approach glide. At the last moment he judged it safe to disengage. He steered *Tyrant* away and left the aircraft to blunder into the net.

This time there were no gusts. The net wrapped itself around the aircraft, the soft impact nudging down the nose of the airship. Then the net began to be winched back toward the gondola like a haul of fish. At the same time the airship swung around and began to climb.

“No other planes?” Merlin asked.

“That was the only one.”

They followed the airship in. It rose over the cliff, over the ice-capped rim of the aerial landmass, then settled down toward the shielded region in the bowl, where water and greenery had gathered. There was even a wispy layer of cloud, arranged in a broken ring around the shore of the lake. Merlin presumed that the concave shape of the landmass was sufficient to trap a stable microclimate.

By now Merlin had an audience. People had gathered on the gondola’s rear observation platform. They wore goggles and gloves and heavy brown overcoats. Merlin caught the shine of glass lenses being pointed at him. He was being studied, sketched, perhaps even photographed.

“Do you think they look grateful?” he asked. “Or pissed off?”

Tyrant declined to answer.

Merlin kept his distance, conserving fuel as best he could as the airship crossed tens of kilometers of arid, gently sloping land. Occasionally they overflowed a little hamlet of huts or the scratch of a minor track. Presently the ground became soil-covered, and then fertile. They traversed swaths of bleak gray-green grass, intermingled with boulders and assorted uplifted debris. Then there were trees and woods. The communities became more than just hamlets. Small ponds fed rivers that ambled down to the single lake that occupied the landmass’s lowest point. Merlin spied waterwheels and rustic-looking bridges. There were fields with grazing animals, and evidence of some tall-chimneyed industrial structures on the far side of the lake. The lake itself was an easy fifty or sixty kilometers wide. Nestled around a

natu-ral harbor on its southern shore was the largest community Merlin had seen so far. It was a haphazard jumble of several hundred mostly white, mostly single-story buildings, arranged with the randomness of toy blocks littering a floor.

The airship skirted the edge of the town and then descended quickly. It approached what was clearly some kind of secure compound, judging by the guarded fence that encircled it. There was a pair of airstrips arranged in a cross formation, and a dozen or so aircraft parked around a painted copy of the crescent emblem. Four skeletal docking towers rose from another area of the compound, stayed by guylines. A battle-weary pair of partially de-flated airships was already tethered. Merlin pulled back to allow the incom-ing craft enough space to complete its docking. The net was lowered back down from the gondola, depositing the airplane—its wings now crumpled, its fuselage buckled—on the apron below. Service staff rushed out of bun-kers to untangle the mess and free the pilot. Merlin brought his ship down at a clear part of the apron and doused the engines as soon as the landing skids touched the ground.

It wasn't long before a wary crowd had gathered around *Tyrant*. Most of them wore long leather coats, heavily belted, with the crescent emblem sewn into the right breast. They had scarves wrapped around their lower faces, almost to the nose. Their helmets were leather caps, with long flaps covering the sides of the face and the back of the neck. Most of them wore goggles; a few wore some kind of breathing apparatus. At least half the number were aiming barreled weapons at the ship, some of which needed to be set up on tripods, while some even larger wheeled cannons were being propelled across the apron by teams of well-drilled soldiers. One figure was gesticulat-ing, directing the armed squads to take up specific positions.

“Can you understand what he’s saying?” Merlin asked, knowing that *Tyrant* would be picking up any external sounds.

“I’m going to need more than a few minutes to crack their language, Merlin, even if it *is* related to something in my database, of which there’s no guarantee.”

“Fine. I’ll improvise. Can you spin me some flowers?”

“Where exactly are you going? What do you mean, *flowers*?”

Merlin paused at the airlock. He wore long boots, tight black leather trou-sers, a billowing white shirt, and brocaded brown leather waistcoat, accented with scarlet trim. He’d tied back his hair and made a point of trimming his beard. “Where do you think? Outside. And I want some flowers. Flowers are good. Spin me some indigo hyacinths, the kind they used to grow on Springhaven, before the Mentality Wars. They always go down well.”

“You’re insane. They’ll shoot you.”

“Not if I smile and come bearing exotic alien flowers. Remember, I did just save one of their planes.”

“You’re not even wearing armor.”

“Armor would really scare them. Trust me, ship: this is the quickest way for them to understand I’m not a threat.”

“It’s been a pleasure having you aboard,” *Tyrant* said acidly. “I’ll be sure to pass on your regards to my next owner.”

“Just make the flowers and stop complaining.”

Five minutes later Merlin steeled himself as the lock sequenced and the ramp lowered to kiss the ground. The cold hit him like a lover’s slap. He heard an order from the soldiers’ leader, and the massed ranks adjusted their aim. They’d been pointing at the ship before. Now it was only Merlin they were interested in.

He raised his right hand palm open, the newly spun flowers in his left.

“Hello. My name’s Merlin.” He thumped his chest for emphasis and said the name again, slower this time. “*Mer-lin*. I don’t think there’s much chance of you being able to understand me, but just in case... I’m not here to cause trouble.” He forced a smile, which probably looked more feral than reassuring. “Now. Who’s in charge?”

The leader shouted another order. He heard a rattle of a hundred safety catches being released. Suddenly, the ship’s idea of sending out a proctor first sounded splendidly sensible. Merlin felt a cold line of sweat trickle down his back. After all that he had survived so far, both during his time with the Cohort and since he had become an adventuring free agent, it would be something of a letdown to die by being *shot* with a chemically propelled projectile. That was only one step above being mauled and eaten by a wild animal.

Merlin walked down the ramp, one cautious step at a time. “No weap-ons,” he said. “Just flowers. If I wanted to hurt you, I could have hit you from space with charm-torps.”

When he reached the apron, the leader gave another order and a trio of soldiers broke formation to cover Merlin from three angles, with the barrels of their weapons almost touching him. The leader—a cruel-looking young man with a scar down the right side of his face—shouted something in Merlin’s direction, a word that sounded vaguely like “distal,” but which was in no language Merlin recognized. When Merlin didn’t move, he felt a rifle jab into the small of his back. “Distal,” the man said again, this time with an emphasis bordering on the hysterical.

Then another voice boomed across the apron, one that belonged to a much older man. There was something instantly commanding about the voice. Looking to the source of the exclamation, Merlin saw the wrecked aircraft entangled in its capture net, and the pilot in the process of crawling out from the tangle, with a wooden box in his hands. The rifle stopped jab-bing Merlin's back, and the cruel-looking young man fell silent while the pilot made his way over to them.

The pilot had removed his goggles now, revealing the lined face of an older man, his gray-white beard and whiskers stark against ruddy, weather-worn skin. For a moment Merlin felt that he was looking in the mirror at an older version of himself.

"Greetings from the Cohort," Merlin said. "I'm the man who saved your life."

"Gecko," the red-faced man said, pushing the wooden box into Merlin's chest. "Forlorn gecko!"

Now that Merlin had a chance to examine it properly, he saw that the box was damaged, its sides caved in and its lid ripped off. Inside was a matrix of straw padding and a great many shattered glass vials. The pilot took one of these smashed vials and held it up before Merlin's face, honey-colored fluid draining down his fingers.

"What is it?" Merlin asked.

Leaving Merlin to hold the box and flowers, the red-faced pilot pointed angrily toward the wreckage of his aircraft, and in particular at the cylindrical attachment Merlin had taken for a fuel tank. He saw now that the cylinder was the repository for dozens more of these wooden boxes, most of which must have been smashed when Merlin had nudged the aircraft with *Tyrant*.

"Did I do something wrong?" Merlin asked.

In a flash the man's anger turned to despair. He was crying, the tears smudging the soot on his cheeks. "Tangible," he said, softer now. "All tangible inkwells. Gecko."

Merlin reached into the box and retrieved one of the few intact vials. He held the delicate thing to his eyes. "Medicine?"

"Plastrum," the man said, taking the box back from Merlin.

"Show me what you do with this," Merlin said, as he motioned drinking the vial. The man shook his head, narrowing his wrinkled ice-blue eyes at him as if he thought that Merlin was either stupid or making fun. Merlin rolled up the sleeve of his arm and motioned injecting himself. The pilot nodded tentatively.

“Plastrum,” he said again. “Vestibule plastrum.”

“You have some kind of medical crisis? Is that what you were doing, bringing medicines?”

“Tangible,” the man repeated.

“You need to come with me,” Merlin said. “Whatever that stuff is, we can synthesize it aboard *Tyrant*.” He held up the intact vial and then placed his index finger next to it. Then he pointed to the parked form of his ship and spread his fingers wide, hoping the pilot got the message that he could multiply the medicine. “One sample,” he said. “That’s all we need.”

Suddenly there was a commotion. Merlin looked around in time to see a girl running across the apron, toward the two of them. In Cohort terms she could only have been six or seven years old. She wore a child’s version of the same greatcoat everyone else wore, buckled black boots and gloves, no hat, goggles, or breathing mask. The pilot shouted “Minla” at her approach, a single word that conveyed both warning and something more intimate, as if the older man might have been her father or grandfather. “Minla oak tre-foil,” the man added, firmly but not without kindness. He sounded pleased to see her, but somewhat less than pleased that she had chosen this exact moment to run outside.

“Spelter Malkoha,” the girl said, and hugged the pilot around the waist, which was as high as she could reach. “Spelter Malkoha, ursine Malkoha.”

The red-faced man knelt down—his eyes were still damp—and ran a gloved finger through the girl’s unruly fringe of black hair. She had a small, monkeylike face, one that conveyed both mischief and cleverness.

“Minla,” he said tenderly. “Minla, Minla, Minla.” Then what was clearly a rhetorical question: “Gastric spar oxen, fey legible, Minla?”

“Gorse spelter,” she said, sounding contrite. And then, perhaps for the first time, she noticed Merlin. For an anxious moment her expression was frozen somewhere between surprise and suspicion, as if he were some kind of puzzle that had just intruded into her world.

“You wouldn’t be called Minla, by any chance?” Merlin asked.

“Minla,” she said, in barely a whisper.

“Merlin. Pleased to meet you, Minla.” And then on a whim, before any of the adults could stop him, he passed her one of the indigo hyacinths that *Tyrant* had just spun for him, woven from the ancient molecular templates in its biolibrary. “Yours,”

he said. “A pretty flower for a pretty little girl.”

“Oxen spray, Minla,” the red-faced man said, pointing back to one of the buildings on the edge of the apron. A soldier walked over and extended a hand to the girl, ready to escort her back inside. She moved to hand the flower back to Merlin.

“No,” he said, “you can keep it, Minla. It’s for you.”

She opened the collar of her coat and pushed the flower inside for safe-keeping, until only its head was jutting out. The vivid indigo seemed to throw something of its hue onto her face.

“Mer-lin?” asked the older man.

“Yes.”

The man tapped a fist against his own chest. “Malkoha.” And then he indicated the vial Merlin was still carrying. “Plastrum,” he said again. Then a question, accompanied by a nod toward *Tyrant*. “Risible plastrum?”

“Yes,” Merlin said. “I can make you more medicine. *Risible plastrum.*”

The red-faced man studied him for what seemed like many minutes. Merlin opted to say nothing: if the pilot hadn’t got the message by now, no further persuasion was going to help. Then the pilot reached down to his belt and unbuttoned the leather holster of a pistol. He removed the weapon and allowed Merlin sufficient time to examine it by eye. The low sun gleamed off an oiled black barrel, inlaid with florid white ornamentation carved from something like whalebone.

“Mer-lin risible plastrum,” Malkoha said. Then he waved the gun for emphasis. “Spar apostle.”

“Spar apostle,” Merlin repeated, as they walked up the boarding ramp. “No tricks.”

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Even before *Tyrant* had made progress in the cracking of the local language, Merlin had managed to hammer out a deal with Malkoha. The medicine had turned out to be a very simple drug, easily synthesized. A narrow-spectrum 8-lactam antibiotic, according to the ship: exactly the sort of thing the locals might use to treat a gram-positive bacterial infection—something like bacterial meningitis, for instance—if they didn’t have anything better.

Tyrant could pump out antibiotic medicine by the hundreds of liters, or

synthesize something vastly more effective in equally large quantities. But Merlin saw no sense in playing his most valuable card so early in the game. He chose instead to give Malkoha quantities of the drug in approximately the same dosage and quantity as he must have been carrying when his air-craft was damaged, packaged in similar-looking glass vials. He gave the first two consignments as a gift, in recompense for the harm he was presumed to have done when attempting to save Malkoha, and let Malkoha think that it was all that *Tyrant* could do to make drugs at that strength and quantity. It was only when he handed over the third consignment, on the third day, that he mentioned the materials he needed to repair his ship.

He didn't say anything, of course, or at least nothing that the locals could have understood. But there were enough examples lying around of the materials Merlin needed—metals and organic compounds, principally, as well as water that could be used to replenish *Tyrant's* hydrogen-fusion tanks—that Merlin was able to make considerable progress just by pointing and miming. He kept talking all the while, even in Main, and did all that he could to encourage the locals to talk back in their own tongue. Even when he was inside the compound, *Tyrant* was observing every exchange, thanks to the microscopic surveillance devices Merlin carried on his person. Through this process, the ship was constantly testing and rejecting language models, employing its knowledge of both the general principles of human grammar and its compendious database of ancient languages recorded by the Cohort, many of which were antecedents of Main itself. Lecythus might have been isolated for tens of thousands of years, but languages older than that had been cracked by brute computation, and Merlin had no doubt that *Tyrant* would get there in the end, provided he gave it enough material to work with.

It was still not clear whether the locals regarded him as their prisoner, or honored guest. He'd made no attempt to leave, and they'd made no effort to prevent him returning to his ship when it was time to collect the vials of an-tibiotic. Perhaps they had guessed that it would be futile to stop him, given the likely capabilities of his technology. Or perhaps they had guessed—cor-rectly, as it happened—that *Tyrant* would be going nowhere until it was repaired and fueled. In any event they seemed less awed by his arrival than intrigued, shrewdly aware of what he could do for them.

Merlin liked Malkoha, even though he knew almost nothing about the man. Clearly he was a figure of high seniority within this particular organi-zation, be it military or political, but he was also a man brave enough to fly a hazardous mission to ferry medicines through the sky, in a time of war. And his daughter loved him, which had to count for something. Merlin now knew that Malkoha was her “spelter” or father, although he did indeed look old enough to have been spaced from her by a further generation.

Almost everything that Merlin did learn, in those early days, was due to Minla rather than the adults. The adults seemed willing to at least attempt to answer his queries, when they could understand what he was getting at. But their chalkboard

explanations usually left Merlin none the wiser. They could show him maps and printed historical and technical treatises, but none of these shed any light on the world's many mysteries. Cracking text would take *Tyrant* even longer than cracking spoken language.

Minla, though, had picture books. Malkoha's daughter had taken an obvious liking to Merlin, even though she shared nothing in common. Merlin gave her a new flower each time he saw her, freshly spun from some exotic species in the biolibrary. Merlin made a point of never giving her flowers from a particular world twice, even when she wanted more of the same. He also made a point of always telling her something of the place from where the flowers had come, regardless of her lack of understanding. It seemed to be enough for her to hear the cadences of a story, even if it was in an alien language.

There was not much color in Minla's world, so Merlin's gifts must have had a luminous appeal to them. Once a day, for a few minutes, they were allowed to meet in a drab room inside the main compound. An adult was always stationed nearby, but to all intents and purposes Merlin and the girl were permitted to interact freely. Minla would show Merlin drawings and paintings she had done, or little compositions, written down in labored handwriting in approximately the form of script *Tyrant* had come to refer to as Lecythus A. Merlin would examine Minla's works and offer praise when it was merited.

He wondered why these meetings were allowed. Minla was obviously a bright girl (he could tell that much merely from the precocious manner of her speaking, even if he hadn't had the ample evidence of her drawings and writings). Perhaps it was felt that meeting the man from space would be an important part of her education, one that could never be repeated at a later date. Perhaps she had pestered her father into allowing her to spend more time with Merlin. Merlin could understand that; as a child he'd also formed harmless attachments to adults, often those that came bearing gifts and especially those adults that appeared interested in what he had to show them.

Could there be more than that, though? Was it possible that the adults had decided that a child offered the best conduit for understanding, and that Minla was now their envoy? Or were they hoping to use Minla as a form of emotional blackmail, so that they might exert a subtle hold on Merlin when he decided it was time to leave?

He didn't know. What he was certain of was that Minla's books raised as many questions as they answered, and that simply leafing through them was enough to open windows in his own mind, back into a childhood he'd thought consigned safely to oblivion. The books were startlingly similar to the books Merlin remembered from the Palace of Eternal Dusk, the ones he'd used to fight over with his brother. They were bound similarly, illustrated with spidery ink drawings scattered through the text or florid watercolors gathered onto glossy plates at the end

of the book. Merlin liked holding the book up to the light of an open window, so that the illustrated pages shone like stained glass. It was something his father had shown him on Plenitude, when he had been Minla's age, and her delight exactly echoed his own, across the unthinkable gulf of time and distance and circumstance that separated their childhoods.

At the same time, he also paid close attention to what the books had to say. Many of the stories featured little girls involved in fanciful adventures concerning flying animals and other magic creatures. Others had the worthy, overearnest look of educational texts. Studying these latter books, Merlin began to grasp something of the history of Lecythus, at least insofar as it had been codified for the consumption of children.

The people on Lecythus knew they'd come from the stars. In two of the books there were even paintings of a vast spherical spaceship heaving into orbit around the planet. The paintings differed in every significant detail, but Merlin felt sure that he was seeing a portrayal of the same dimly remembered historical event, much as the books in his youth had shown various representations of human settlers arriving on Plenitude. There was no reference to the Waynet, however, or anything connected to the Cohort or the Huskers. As for the locals' theory concerning the origin of the aerial landmasses, Merlin found only one clue. It lay in a frightening sequence of pictures showing the night sky being riven by lavalike fissures, until whole chunks of the heavens dropped out of place, revealing a darker, deeper firmament beyond. Some of the pieces were shown crashing into the seas, raising awesome waves that tumbled over entire coastal communities, while others were shown hovering unsupported in the sky, with kilometers of empty space under them. If the adults remembered that it was alien weaponry that had smashed their camouflaging sky (weapons deployed by aliens that were still *out there*) no hint of that uncomfortable truth was allowed into Minla's books. The destruction of the sky was shown simply as a natural catastrophe, like a flood or volcanic eruption. Enough to awe, enough to fascinate, but not enough to give nightmares.

Awesome it must have been too. *Tyrant's* own analysis had established that the aerial landmasses could be put together like a jigsaw. There were gaps in that jigsaw, but most of them could be filled by lifting chunks of land out of the seas and slotting them in place. The inhabited aerial landmasses were all inverted compared to their supposed positions in the original sky, requiring that they must have been flipped over after the shattering. *Tyrant* could offer little guidance for how this could have happened, but it was clear enough that unless the chunks were inverted, life-supporting materials would spill off over the edges and rain down onto the planet again. Presumably the necessary materials had been uplifted into the air when the unsupported chunks (and these must have been pieces that did not contain gravity nullifiers, or which had been damaged beyond the capacity to support themselves) came hammering down.

As to how people had come to the sky in the first place, or how the present

political situation had come into being, Minla's texts were frustratingly vague. There were pictures of what were obviously historic battles, fought with animals and gunpowder. There were illustrations of courtly goings-on; princes and kings, balls and regattas, assassinations and duels. There were drawings of adventurers rising on kites and balloons to survey the aerial masses, and later of what were clearly government-sponsored scouting ex-peditions, employing huge flotillas of flimsy-looking airships. But as to ex-actly why the people in the sky were now at war with the people on the ground, Merlin had little idea, and even less interest. What mattered—the only thing, in fact—was that Minla's people had the means to help him. He could have managed without them, but by bringing him the things he needed they made it easier. And it was good to see other faces again, after so long alone.

One of Minla's books intrigued him even more than all the others. It showed a picture of the starry night, the heavens as revealed after the fall of the camouflaging sky. Constellations had been overlaid on the patterns of stars, with sketched figures overlying the schematic lines joining the stars. None of the mythical or heroic figures corresponded to the old constella-tions of Plenitude, but the same archetypal forms were nonetheless present. For Merlin there was something hugely reassuring in seeing the evidence of similar imaginations at work. It might have been tens of thousands of years since these humans had been in contact with a wider galactic civiliza-tion; they might have endured world-changing catastrophes and retained only a hazy notion of their origins. But they were still people, and he was among them. There were times, in his long search for the lost weapon that he hoped would save the Cohort, that Merlin had come to doubt whether there was anything about humanity worth saving. But all it took was the look on Minla's face as he presented her with another flower—another relic of some long-dead world—to banish such doubts almost entirely. While there were still children in the universe, and while children could still be enchanted by something as simple and wonderful as a flower, there was still a reason to keep looking, a reason to keep believing.

* * * *

The coiled black device had the look of a tiny chambered nautilus, turned to onyx. Merlin pushed back his hair to let Malkoha see that he was already wearing a similar unit, then motioned for Malkoha to insert the translator into his own ear.

“Good,” Merlin said, when he saw that the other man had pushed the device into place. “Can you understand me now?”

Malkoha answered very quickly, but there was a moment's lag before Merlin heard his response translated into Main, rendered in an emotionally flat machine voice. “Yes. I understand good. How is this possible?”

Merlin gestured around him. They were alone together in *Tyrant*, with Malkoha ready to leave with another consignment of antibiotics. “The ship's been listening in on every conversation I've had with you,” Merlin said. “It's heard

enough of your language to begin piecing together a translation. It's still rudimentary—there are a lot of gaps the ship still needs to fill—but it will only get better with time, the more we talk.”

Malkoha listened diligently as his earpiece translated Merlin's response. Merlin could only guess at how much of his intended meaning was making it through intact.

“Your ship is clever,” Malkoha said. “We talk many times. We get good at understanding.”

“I hope so.”

Malkoha pointed now at the latest batch of supplies his people had brought, piled neatly at the top of the boarding ramp. The materials were unsophisticated in their manufacture, but they could all be reprocessed to form the complicated components *Tyrant* needed to repair itself.

“Metals make the ship good?”

“Yes,” Merlin said. “Metals make the ship good.”

“When the ship is good, the ship will fly? You will leave?”

“That's the idea.”

Malkoha looked sad. “Where will you go?”

“Back into space. I've been a long time away from my own people. But there's something I need to find before I return to them.”

“Minla will be unhappy.”

“So will I. I like Minla. She's a clever little girl.”

“Yes. Minla is clever. I am proud of my daughter.”

“You have every right to be,” Merlin said, hoping that his sincerity came across. “I have to start what I finished, though. The ship tells me it'll be flight-ready in two or three days. It's a patch job, but it'll get us to the near-est motherbase. But there's something we need to talk about first.” Merlin reached for a shelf and handed Malkoha a tray upon which sat twelve identical copies of the translator device.

“You will speak with more of us?”

“I've just learned some bad news, Malkoha: news that concerns you, and your people. Before I go I want to do what I can to help. Take these translators and

give them to your best people—Coucal, Jacana, the rest. Get them to wear them all the time, no matter who they're talking to. In three days I want to meet with you all."

Malkoha regarded the tray of translators with suspicion, as if the ranked devices were a peculiar foreign delicacy.

"What is the bad news, Merlin?"

"Three days isn't going to make much difference. It's better if we wait until the translation is more accurate, then there won't be any misunderstanding."

"We are friends," Malkoha said, leaning forward. "You can tell me now."

"I'm afraid it won't make much sense."

Malkoha looked at him beseechingly. "Please."

"Something is going to come out of the sky," Merlin said. "Like a great sword. And it's going to cut your sun in two."

Malkoha frowned, as if he didn't think he could possibly have understood correctly.

"Calliope?"

Merlin nodded gravely. "Calliope will die. And then so will everyone on Lecythus."

* * * *

They were all there when Merlin walked into the glass-partitioned room. Malkoha, Triller, Coucal, Jacana, Sibia, Niltava, and about half a dozen more top brass Merlin had never seen before. An administrative assistant was already entering notes into a clattering electromechanical transcription device squatting on her lap, pecking away at its stiff metal input pads with surprising speed. Tea bubbled in a fat engraved urn set in the middle of the table. An orderly had already poured tea into china cups set before each bigwig, including Merlin himself. Through the partition, on the opposite wall of the adjoining tactical room, Merlin watched another orderly make microscopic adjustments to the placement of the aerial landmasses on an equal-area projection map of Lecythus. Periodically, the entire building would rattle with the droning arrival of another aircraft or dirigible.

Malkoha coughed to bring the room to attention. "Merlin has news for us," he said, his translated voice coming through with more emotion than it had three days earlier. "This is news not just for the Skyland Alliance, but for everyone on Lecythus. That includes the Aligned Territories, the Neutrals, and yes, even our

enemies in the Shadowland Coalition.” He beckoned a hand in Merlin’s direction, inviting him to stand.

Merlin held up one of Minla’s picture books, open at the illustration of constellations in the sky over Lecythus. “What I have to tell you concerns these patterns,” he said. “You see heroes, animals, and monsters in the sky, traced in lines drawn between the brightest stars.”

A new voice buzzed in his ear. He identified the speaker as Sibia, a woman of high political rank. “These things mean nothing,” she said patiently. “They are lines drawn between chance alignments. The ancient mind saw demons and monsters in the heavens. Our modern science tells us that the stars are very distant, and that two stars that appear close together in the sky—the two eyes of Prinia the Dragon, for example—may in reality be located at very different distances.”

“The lines are more significant than you appreciate,” Merlin said. “They are a pattern you have remembered across tens of thousands of years, forgetting its true meaning. They are pathways between the stars.”

“There are no pathways in the void,” Sibia retorted. “The void is vacuum: the same thing that makes birds suffocate when you suck air out of a glass jar.”

“You may think it absurd,” Merlin said. “All I can tell you is that vacuum is not as you understand it. It has structure, resilience, its own reserves of energy. And you can make part of it shear away from the rest, if you try hard enough. That’s what the Waymakers did. They stretched great corridors between the stars: rivers of flowing vacuum. They reach from star to star, binding together the entire galaxy. We call it the Waynet.”

“Is this how you arrived?” Malkoha asked.

“My little ship could never have crossed interstellar space without it. But as I was passing close to your planet—because a strand of the Waynet runs right through this system—my ship encountered a problem. That is why *Tyrant* was damaged; why I had to land here and seek your assistance.”

“And the nature of this problem?” the old man pushed.

“My ship only discovered it three days ago, based on observations it had collated since I arrived. It appears that part of the Waynet has become loose, unshackled. There’s a kink in the flow where it begins to drift out of alignment. The unshackled part is drifting toward your sun, tugged toward it by the pull of Calliope’s gravitational field.”

“You’re certain of this?” Sibia asked.

“I’ve had my ship check the data over and over. There’s no doubt. In just over seventy years, the Waynet will cut right through Calliope, like a wire through a ball of cheese.”

Malkoha looked hard into Merlin’s eyes. “What will happen?”

“Probably very little to begin with, when the Waynet is still cutting through the chromosphere. But by the time it reaches the nuclear-burning core... I’d say all bets are off.”

“Can it be mended? Can the Waynet be brought back into alignment?”

“Not using any technology known to my own people. We’re dealing with principles as far beyond anything on Lecythus as *Tyrant* is beyond one of your propellor planes.”

Malkoha looked stricken. “Then what can we possibly do?”

“You can make plans to leave Lecythus. You have always known that space travel was possible: it’s in your history, in the books you give to your children. If you had any doubts, I’ve shown it to be the case. Now you must achieve it for yourselves.”

“In seventy years?” Malkoha asked.

“I know it sounds impossible. But you can do it. You already have flying machines. All you need to do is keep building on that achievement... build-ing and building... until you have the means.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It won’t be. It’ll be the hardest thing you’ve ever done. But I’m con-vinced that you can do it, if only you pull together.” Merlin looked sternly at his audience. “That means no more wars between the Skylands and the Shadowlands. You don’t have time for it. From this moment on, the entire industrial and scientific capacity of your planet will have to be directed toward one goal.”

“You’re going to help us, Merlin?” Malkoha asked. “Aren’t you?”

Merlin’s throat had become very dry. “I’d like to, but I must leave im-mediately. Twenty light-years from here is a bountiful system known to the Cohort. The great vessels of my people—the swallowships—sometimes stop in this system, to replenish supplies and make repairs. The swallowships cannot use the Way, but they are very big. If I could divert just one swallow-ship here, it could carry fifty thousand refugees; double that if people were prepared to accept some hardship.”

“That’s still not many people,” Sibia said.

“That’s why you need to start thinking about reducing your population over the next three generations. It won’t be possible to save everyone, but if you could at least ensure that the survivors are adults of breeding age...” Merlin trailed off, conscious of the dismayed faces looking at him. “Look,” he said, removing a sheaf of papers from his jacket and spreading them on the table. “I had the ship prepare these documents. This one concerns the production of wide-spectrum antibiotic medicines. This one concerns the construction of a new type of aircraft engine, one that will allow you to exceed the speed of sound and reach much higher altitudes than are now available to you. This one concerns metallurgy and high-precision machining. This one is a plan for a two-stage liquid-fueled rocket. You need to start learning about rocketry *now*, because it’s the only thing that’s going to get you into space.” His finger moved to the final sheet. “This document reveals certain truths about the nature of physical reality. Energy and mass are related by this simple formula. The speed of light is an absolute constant, irrespective of the observer’s motion. This diagram shows the presence of emission lines in the spectrum of hydrogen, and a mathematical formula that predicts the spacing of those lines. All this... *stuff*... should help you make some progress.”

“Is this all you can give us?” Sibia asked skeptically. “A few pages’ worth of vague sketches and cryptic formulae?”

“They’re more than most cultures ever get. I suggest you start thinking about them straightaway.”

“I will get this to Shama,” Coucal said, taking the drawing of a jet engine and preparing to slip it into his case.

“Not before everything here is duplicated and archived,” Malkoha said warningly. “And we must take pains to ensure none of these secrets fall into Shadowland hands.” Then he returned his attention to Merlin. “Evidently, you gave this matter some thought.”

“Just a bit.”

“Is this the first time you have had to deal with a world such as ours, one that will die?”

“I’ve had some prior experience of the matter. There was once a world—”

“What happened to the place in question?” Malkoha asked, before Merlin could finish his sentence.

“It died.”

“How many people were saved?”

For a moment Merlin couldn't answer. The words seemed to lodge in the back of his throat, hard as pebbles. “There were just two survivors,” he said quietly. “A pair of brothers.”

* * * *

The walk to *Tyrant* was the longest he had ever taken. Ever since he had made the decision to leave Lecythus he had rehearsed the occasion in his mind, replaying it time and again. He had always imagined the crowd cheering, daunted by the news, but not cowed, Merlin raising his fist in an encouraging salute. Nothing had prepared him for the frigid silence of his audience, their judgmental expressions as he left the low buildings of the compound, their unspoken disdain hanging in the air like a proclamation.

Only Malkoha followed him all the way to *Tyrant's* boarding ramp. The old soldier had his coat drawn tight across his chest, even though the wind was still and the evening not particularly cold.

“I'm sorry,” Merlin said, with one foot on the ramp. “I wish I could stay.”

“You seem like two men to me,” Malkoha said, his voice low. “One of them is braver than he gives himself credit for. The other man still has bravery to learn.”

“I'm not running away.”

“But you are running from something.”

“I have to go now. If the damage to the Waynet becomes greater, I may not even be able to reach the next system.”

“Then you must do what you think is right. I shall be sure to give your regards to Minla. She will miss you very much.” Malkoha paused and reached into his tunic pocket. “I almost forgot to give you this. She would have been very upset with me if I had.”

Malkoha had given Merlin a small piece of stone, a coin-shaped sliver that must have been cut from a larger piece and then set in colored metal so that it could be worn around the neck or wrist. Merlin examined the stone with interest, but in truth there seemed nothing remarkable about it. He'd picked up and discarded more beautiful examples a thousand times in his travels. It had been dyed red in order to emphasize the fine grain of its surface: a series of parallel lines like the pages of a book seen end-on, but with a rhythmic structure to the spacing of the lines—a widening and a narrowing—that was unlike any book Merlin had seen.

“Tell her I appreciated it,” he said.

“I gave the stone to my daughter. She found it pretty.”

“How did you come by it?”

“I thought you were in a hurry to leave.”

Merlin’s hand closed around the stone. “You’re right. I should be on my way.”

“The stone belonged to a prisoner of mine, a man named Dowitcher. He was one of their greatest thinkers: a scientist and soldier much like myself. I admired his brilliance from afar, just as I hope he admired mine. One day, our agents captured him and brought him to the Skylands. I played no part in planning his kidnap, but I was delighted that we might at last meet on equal terms. I was convinced that, as a man of reason, he would listen to my arguments and accept the wisdom of defecting to the Skylands.”

“Did he?”

“Not in the slightest. He was as firmly entrenched in his convictions as I was in mine. We never became friends.”

“So where does the stone come into it?”

“Before he died, Dowitcher found a means to torment me. He gave me the stone and told me that he had learned something of great significance from it. Something that could change our world. Something that had *cosmic* significance. He was looking into the sky when he said that: almost laugh-ing. But he would not reveal what that secret was.”

Merlin hefted the stone once more. “I think he was playing games with you, Malkoha.”

“That’s the conclusion I eventually reached. One day Minla took a shine to the stone—I kept it on my desk long after Dowitcher was gone—and I let her have it.”

“And now it’s mine.”

“You meant a lot to her, Merlin. She wanted to give you something in return for the flowers. You may forget the rest of us one day, but please don’t ever forget my daughter.”

“I won’t.”

“I’m lucky,” Malkoha said, something in his tone easing, as if he were finished judging Merlin. “I’ll be dead long before your Waynet cuts into our sun. But Minla’s generation won’t have that luxury. They know that their world is going to end, and that every year brings that event a year nearer. They’re the ones who’ll spend their whole lives with that knowledge looming over them. They’ll never know true happiness. I don’t envy them a moment of their lives.”

That was when something in Merlin gave way, some mental slippage that he must have felt coming for many hours without quite acknowledging it to himself. Almost before he had time to reflect on his own words he found himself saying to Malkoha, “I’m staying.”

The other man, perhaps wary of a trick or some misunderstanding brought about by the translator, narrowed his eyes. “Merlin?”

“I said I’m staying. I’ve changed my mind. Maybe it was what I always knew I had to do, or maybe it was all down to what you just said about Minla. But I’m not going anywhere.”

“What I said just now,” Malkoha said, “about there being two of you, one braver than the other... I know now which man I am speaking to.”

“I don’t feel brave. I feel scared.”

“Then I know it to be true. Thank you, Merlin. Thank you for not leaving us.”

“There’s a catch,” Merlin said. “If I’m going to be any help to you, I have to see this whole thing out.”

* * * *

Malkoha was the last to see him before he entered frostwatch. “Twenty years,” Merlin said, indicating the settings, which had been recalibrated in Lecythus time units. “In all that time, you don’t need to worry about me. *Tyrant* will take care of everything I need. If there’s a problem, the ship will either wake me or it will send out the proctors to seek assistance.”

“You have never spoken of proctors before,” Malkoha replied.

“Small mechanical puppets. They have very little intelligence of their own, so they won’t be able to help you with anything creative. But you needn’t be alarmed by them.”

“In twenty years, must we wake you?”

“No, the ship will take care of that as well. When the time is ready, the ship will allow you aboard. I may be a little groggy at first, but I’m sure you’ll make allowances.”

“I may not be around in twenty years,” Malkoha said gravely. “I am sixty years old now.”

“I’m sure there’s still life left in you.”

“If we should encounter a problem, a crisis...”

“Listen to me,” Merlin said, with sudden emphasis. “You need to understand one very important thing. I am not a god. My body is much the same as yours, our life spans very similar. That’s the way we did things in the Cohort: immortality through our deeds, rather than flesh and blood. The frostwatch casket can give me a few dozen years over a normal human life span, but it can’t give me eternal life. If you keep waking me, I won’t live long enough to help you when things get really tough. If there is a crisis, you can knock on the ship three times. But I’d urge you not to do so unless things are truly dire.”

“I will heed your counsel,” Malkoha said.

“Work hard. Work harder than you’ve ever dreamed possible. Time is going to eat up those seventy years faster than you can blink.”

“I know how quickly time can eat years, Merlin.”

“I want to wake to rockets and jet aircraft. Anything less, I’m going to be a disappointed man.”

“We will do our best not to let you down. Sleep well, Merlin. We will take care of you and your ship, no matter what happens.”

Merlin said farewell to Malkoha. When the ship was sealed up he settled himself into the frostwatch casket and commanded *Tyrant* to put him to sleep.

He didn’t dream.

* * * *

Nobody he recognized was there to greet Merlin when he returned to consciousness. Were it not for their uniforms, which still carried a recognizable form of the Skylanders’ crescent emblem, he could easily believe that he had been abducted by forces from the surface. His visitors crowded around his open casket, faces difficult

to make out, his eyes watering against the sudden intrusion of light.

“Can you understand me, Merlin?” asked a woman, with a firm clear voice.

“Yes,” he said, after a moment in which it seemed as if his mouth were still frozen. “I understand you. How long have I—”

“Twenty years, just as you instructed. We had no cause to wake you.”

He pushed himself from the casket, muscles screaming into his brain with the effort. His vision sharpened by degrees. The woman studied him with a cool detachment. She snapped her fingers at someone standing behind her and then passed Merlin a blanket. “Put this around you,” she said.

The blanket had been warmed. He wrapped it around himself with gratitude, and felt some of the heat seep into his old bones. “That was a long one,” he said, his tongue moving sluggishly, making him slur his words. “We don’t usually spend so long.”

“But you’re alive and well.”

“So it would seem.”

“We’ve prepared a reception area in the compound. There’s food and drink, a medical team waiting to look at you. Can you walk?”

“I can try.”

Merlin tried. His legs buckled under him before he reached the door. They would regain strength in time, but for now he needed help. They must have anticipated his difficulties, because a wheelchair was waiting at the base of *Tyrant’s* boarding ramp, accompanied by an orderly to push it.

“Before you ask,” the woman said, “Malkoha is dead. I’m sorry to have to tell you this.”

Merlin had grown to think of the old man as his only adult friend on Lecythus, and had been counting on his being there when he returned from frostwatch. “When did he die?”

“Fourteen years ago.”

“Force and Wisdom. It must be like ancient history to you.”

“Not to all of us,” the woman said sternly. “I am Minla, Merlin. It may be fourteen years ago, but there isn’t a day when I don’t remember my father and wish

he were still with us.”

As he was being propelled across the apron, Merlin looked up at the woman’s face and compared it against his memories of the little girl he had known twenty years ago. At once he saw the similarity and knew that she was telling the truth. In that moment he felt the first visceral sense of the time that had passed.

“You can’t imagine how odd this makes me feel, Minla. Do you remember me?”

“I remember a man I used to talk to in a room. It was a long time ago.”

“Not to me. Do you remember the stone?”

She looked at him oddly. “The stone?”

“You asked your father to give it to me, when I was due to leave Lecy-thus.”

“Oh, that thing,” Minla said. “Yes, I remember it now. It was the one that belonged to Dowitcher.”

“It’s very pretty. You can have it back if you like.”

“Keep it, Merlin. It doesn’t mean anything to me now, just as it shouldn’t have meant anything to my father. I’m embarrassed to have given it to you.”

“I’m sorry about Malkoha.”

“He died well, Merlin. Flying another hazardous mission for us, in very bad weather. This time it was our turn to deliver medicine to our allies. We were now making antibiotics for all the landmasses in the Skyland alliance, thanks to the process you gave us. My father flew one of the last consignments. He made it to the other landmass, but his plane was lost on the return trip.”

“He was a good man. I only knew him a short while, but I think it was enough to tell.”

“He often spoke of you, Merlin. I think he hoped you might teach him more than you did.”

“I did what I could. Too much knowledge would have overwhelmed you: you wouldn’t have known where to start, or how to put the pieces together.”

“Perhaps you should have trusted us more.”

“You said you had no cause to wake me. Does that mean you made

progress?”

“Decide for yourself.”

He followed Minla’s instruction. The area around *Tyrant* was still recognizable as the old military compound, with many of the original buildings still present, albeit enlarged and adapted. But most of the dirigible dock-ing towers were gone, as were most of the dirigibles themselves. Ranks of new aircraft now occupied the area where the towers and airships had been before, bigger and heavier than anything Merlin had seen before. The swept-back geometry of their wings, the angle of the leading edge, the rakish curve of their tailplanes, all owed something to the shape of *Tyrant* in atmospheric-entry mode. Clearly the natives had been more observant than he’d given them credit for. Merlin knew he shouldn’t have been surprised; he’d given them the blueprints for the jet turbine, after all. But it was still something of a shock to see his plans made concrete, so closely to the way he had imagined them.

“Fuel is always a problem,” Minla said. “We have the advantage of height, but little else. We rely on our scattered allies on the ground, together with raiding expeditions to Shadowland fuel bunkers.” She pointed to one of the remaining airships. “Our cargo dirigibles can lift fuel all the way back to the Skylands.”

“Are you still at war?” Merlin asked, though her statement rather confirmed it.

“There was a ceasefire shortly after my father’s death. It didn’t last long.”

“You people could achieve a lot more if you pooled your efforts,” Merlin said. “In seventy—make that fifty—years you’re going to be facing collective annihilation. It isn’t going to make a damned bit of difference what flag you’re saluting.”

“Thank you for the lecture. If it means so much to you, why don’t you fly down to the other side and talk to them?”

“I’m an explorer, not a diplomat.”

“You could always try.”

Merlin sighed heavily. “I did try once. Not long after I left the Cohort ... there was a world named Exoletus, about the same size as Lecythus. I thought there might be something on Exoletus connected with my quest. I was wrong, but it was reason enough to land and try and talk to the locals.”

“Were they at war?”

“Just like you lot. Two massive power blocs, chemical weapons, the works. I

hopped from hemisphere to hemisphere, trying to play the peace-maker, trying to knock their heads together to make them see sense. I laid the whole cosmic perspective angle on them: how there was a bigger universe out there, one they could be a part of if they only stopped squab-bling. How they were going to have to be a part of it whether they liked it or not, when the Huskers came calling, but if they could only be ready for that—”

“It didn’t work.”

“I made things twenty times worse. I caught them at a time when they were inching toward some kind of ceasefire. By the time I left, they were going at it again hell-for-leather. Taught me a valuable lesson, Minla. It isn’t my job to sprinkle fairy dust on a planet and get everyone to live happily ever after. No one gave me the tool kit for that. You have to work these things out for yourself.”

She looked only slightly disappointed. “So you’ll never try again?”

“Burn your fingers once, you don’t put them into the fire twice.”

“Well,” Minla said, “before you think too harshly of us, it was the Skylands that took the peace initiative in the last ceasefire.”

“So what went wrong?”

“The Shadowlands invaded one of our allied surface territories. They were interested in mining a particular ore, known to be abundant in that area.”

Depressed as he was by news that the war was still rumbling on, Merlin forced his concentration back onto the larger matter of preparations for the catastrophe. “You’ve done well with these aircraft. Doubtless you’ll have gained expertise in high-altitude flight. Have you gone transonic yet?”

“In prototypes. We’ll have an operational squadron of supersonic aircraft in the air within two years, subject to fuel supplies.”

“Rocketry?”

“That too. It’s probably easier if I show you.”

Minla let the orderly wheel him into one of the compound buildings. A long window ran along one wall, overlooking a larger space. Though the interior had been enlarged and repartitioned, Merlin still recognized the tactical room. The old wall map, with its cumbersome push-around plaques, had been replaced by a clattering electromechanical display board. Opera-tors wore headsets and sat at desks behind huge streamlined machines, their gray metal cases ribbed with cooling flanges. They were staring at small flickering slate-blue screens, whispering into microphones.

Minla removed a tranche of photographs from a desk and passed them to Merlin for his inspection. They were black-and-white images of the Skyland airmass, shot from increasing altitude, until the curve of Lecythus's horizon became pronounced.

"Our sounding rockets have penetrated to the very edge of the atmosphere," Minla said. "Our three-stage units now have the potential to deliver a tactical payload to any unobstructed point on the surface."

"What would count as a 'tactical payload'?" Merlin asked warily.

"It's academic. I'm merely illustrating the progress we've made in your absence."

"I'm cheered."

"You encouraged us to make these improvements," Minla said chidingly. "You can hardly blame us if we put them to military use in the meantime. The catastrophe—as you've so helpfully pointed out—is still fifty years in the future. We have our own affairs to deal with in the meantime."

"I wasn't trying to create a war machine. I was just giving you the stepping stones you needed to get into space."

"Well, as you can doubtless judge for yourself, we still have a distance to go. Our analysts say that we'll have a natural satellite in orbit within fifteen years, maybe ten. Definitely so by the time you wake from your next bout of sleep. But that's still not the same as moving fifty thousand people out of the system, or however many it needs to be. For that we're going to need more guidance from you, Merlin."

"You seem to be doing very well with what I've already given you."

Minla's tone, cold until then, softened perceptibly. "We'll get you fed. Then the doctors would like to look you over, if only for their own note-books. We're glad to have you back with us, Merlin. My father would have been so happy to see you again."

"I'd like to have spoken with him again."

After a moment, Minla said: "How long will you stay with us, until you go back to sleep again?"

"Months, at least. Maybe a year. Long enough to know that you're on the right track, and that I can trust you to make your own progress until I'm awake again."

“There’s a lot we need to talk about. I hope you have a strong appetite for questions.”

“I have a stronger appetite for breakfast.”

Minla had him wheeled out of the room into another part of the compound. There he was examined by Skyland medical officials, a process that involved much poking and prodding and whispered consultation. They were interested in Merlin not just because he was a human who had been born on another planet, but because they hoped to learn some secret of frostwatch from his metabolism. Then they were done and Merlin was allowed to wash, clothe himself, and finally eat. Skyland food was austere compared to what he was used to aboard *Tyrant*, but in his present state he would have wolfed down anything.

There was to be no rest for him that day. More medical examinations followed, including some that were clearly designed to test the functioning of his nervous system. They poured cold water into his ears, shone lights into his eyes, and tapped him with various small hammers. Merlin endured it all with stoic good grace. They would find nothing odd about him because in all significant respects he was biologically identical to the people administering the examinations. But he imagined the tests would give the medical staff much to write about in the coming months.

Minla was waiting for him afterward, together with a roomful of Skyland officials. He recognized two or three of them as older versions of people he had already met, grayed and lined by twenty years of war—there was Triller, Jacana, and Sibia, Triller now missing an eye—but most of the faces were new to him. Merlin took careful note of the newcomers: those would be the people he’d be dealing with next time.

“Perhaps we should get to business,” Minla said, with crisp authority. She was easily the youngest person in the room, but if she didn’t outrank everyone present, she at least had their tacit respect. “Merlin, welcome back to the Skylands. You’ve learned something of what has happened in your absence: the advances we’ve made, the ongoing condition of war. Now we must talk about the future.”

Merlin nodded agreeably. “I’m all for the future.”

“Sibia?” Minla asked, directing a glance at the older woman.

“The industrial capacity of the Skylands, even when our surface allies are taken into account, is insufficient for the higher purpose of safeguarding the survival of our planetary culture,” Sibia answered, sounding exactly as if she were reading from a strategy document, even though she was looking Merlin straight in the eye. “As such, it is our military duty—our moral imperative—to bring all of Lecythus under one authority, a single Planetary Government. Only then will we have the

means to save more than a handful of souls.”

“I agree wholeheartedly,” Merlin said. “That’s why I applaud your earlier ceasefire. It’s just a pity it didn’t last.”

“The ceasefire was always fragile,” Jacana said. “The wonder is that it lasted as long as it did. That’s why we need something more permanent.”

Merlin felt a prickling sensation under his collar. “I guess you have some-thing in mind.”

“Complete military and political control of the Shadowlands,” Sibia re-plied. “They will never work with us, unless they become us.”

“You can’t believe how frightening that sounds.”

“It’s the only way,” Minla said. “My father’s regime explored all possible avenues to find a peaceful settlement, one that would allow our two blocs to work in unison. He failed.”

“So instead you want to crush them into submission.”

“If that’s what it takes,” Minla said. “Our view is that the Shadowland administration is vulnerable to collapse. It would only take a single clear-cut demonstration of our capability to bring about a coup, followed by a negotiated surrender.”

“And this clear-cut demonstration?”

“That’s why we need your assistance, Merlin. Twenty years ago, you revealed certain truths to my father.” Before he could say anything, Minla produced one of the sheets Merlin had given to Malkoha and his colleagues. “It’s all here in black-and-white. The equivalence of mass and energy. The constancy of the speed of light. The interior structure of the atom. Your remark that our sun contains a ‘nuclear-burning core.’ All these things were a spur to us. Our best minds have grappled with the implications of these ideas for twenty years. We see how the energy of the atom could carry us into space, and beyond range of our sun. We now have an inkling of what else they imply.”

“Do tell,” Merlin said, an ominous feeling in his belly.

“If mass can be converted into energy, then the military implications are startling. By splitting the atom, or even forcing atoms to merge, we believe that we can construct weapons of almost incalculable destructive force. The demonstration of one of these devices would surely be enough to collapse the Shadowland administration.”

Merlin shook his head slowly. "You're heading up a blind alley. It isn't possible to make practical weapons using atomic energy. There are too many difficulties."

Minla studied him with an attentiveness that Merlin found quite unsettling. "I don't believe you," she said.

"Believe me or don't believe me, it's up to you."

"We are certain that these weapons can be made. Our own research lines would have given them to us sooner or later."

Merlin leaned back in his seat. He knew when there was no point in maintaining a bluff.

"Then you don't need me."

"But we do. Most urgently. The Shadowland administration also has its bright minds, Merlin. Their interest in those ore reserves I mentioned earlier ... either there have been intelligence links, or they have independently arrived at similar conclusions to us. They are trying to make a weapon."

"You can't be sure of that."

"We can't afford to be wrong. We may own the sky, but our situation is dependent upon access to those fuel reserves. If one of our allies was targeted with an atomic weapon..." Minla left the sentence unfinished, her point adequately made.

"Then build your bomb," Merlin said.

"We need it sooner rather than later. That is where you come in." Now Minla produced another sheet of paper, nicking it across the table in Merlin's direction. "We have enough of the ore," she said. "We also have the means to refine it. This is our best guess for a design."

Merlin glanced at the illustration long enough to see a complicated diagram of concentric circles, like the plan for an elaborate garden maze. It was intricately annotated in machine-printed Lecythus B.

"I won't help you."

"Then you may as well leave us now," Minla said. "We'll build our bomb in our own time, without your help, and use it to secure peace for the whole world. Maybe that will happen quickly enough that we can begin redirecting the industrial effort toward the evacuation. Maybe it won't. But what happens will be on our

terms, not yours.”

“Understand one thing,” Jacana said, with a hawkish look on his face. “The day will come when atomic weapons are used. Left to our own devices, we’ll build weapons to use against our enemy below. But by the time we have that capability, they’ll more than likely have the means to strike back, if they don’t hit us first. That means there’ll be a series of exchanges, an escalation, rather than a single decisive demonstration. Give us the means to make a weapon now and we’ll use it in such a way that the civilian casualties are minimized. Withhold it from us, and you’ll have the blood of a million dead on your hands.”

Merlin almost laughed. “I’ll have blood on my hands because I *didn’t* show you how to kill yourselves?”

“You began this,” Minla said. “You already gave us secret knowledge of the atom. Did you imagine we were so stupid, so childlike, that we wouldn’t put two and two together?”

“Maybe I thought you had more common sense. I was hoping you’d develop atomic rockets, not atomic bombs.”

“This is our world, Merlin, not yours. We only get one chance at controlling its fate. If you want to help us, you must give us the means to overwhelm the enemy.”

“If I give you this, millions will die.”

“A billion will perish if Lecythus is not unified. You must do it, Merlin. Either you side with us, to the full extent, or we all die.”

Merlin closed his eyes, wishing a moment alone, a moment to puzzle over the ramifications. In desperation, he saw a possible solution: one he’d rejected before but was now willing to advance. “Show me the military targets on the surface that you would most like to eradicate,” he said. “I’ll have *Tyrant* take them out, using charm-torps.”

“We’ve considered asking for your direct military assistance,” Minla said. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t work for us. Our enemy already know something of your existence: it was always going to be a difficult secret to hide, especially given the reach of the Shadowlander espionage network. They’d be impressed by your weapons, that much we don’t doubt. But they also know that our hold on you is tenuous, and that you could just as easily refuse to attack a given target. For that reason you do not make a very effective deterrent. Whereas if they knew that *we* controlled a devastating weapon...” Minla looked at the other Skyland officials. “There could be no doubt in their minds that we might do the unthinkable.”

“I’m really beginning to wonder whether I shouldn’t have landed on the ground instead.”

“You’d be sitting in a very similar room, having a very similar conversation,” Minla said.

“Your father would be ashamed of you.”

Minla’s look made Merlin feel as if he were something she’d found under her shoe. “My father meant well. He served his people to the best of his abilities. But he had the luxury of knowing he was going to die before the world’s end. I don’t.”

* * * *

Merlin was aboard *Tyrant*, alone except for Minla, while he prepared to enter frostwatch again. Eight frantic months had passed since his revival, with the progress attaining a momentum of its own that Merlin felt sure would carry through to his next period of wakefulness.

“I’ll be older when we meet again,” Minla said. “You’ll barely have aged a day, and your memories of this day will be as sharp as if it happened yesterday. Is that something you ever get used to?”

Not for the first time, Merlin smiled tolerantly. “I was born on a world not very different from Lecythus, Minla. We didn’t have landmasses floating through the sky, we didn’t have global wars, but in many respects we were quite alike. Everything that you see here—this ship, this frostwatch cabinet, these souvenirs—would once have seemed unrecognizably strange to me. I got used to it, though. Just as you’d get used to it, if you had the same experiences.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“I am. I met a very intelligent girl twenty years ago, and believe me, I’ve met some intelligent people in my time.” Merlin brightened, remembering the thing he’d meant to show Minla. “That stone you had your father give me... the one we talked about just after I came out of the cabinet?”

“The worthless thing Dowitcher convinced my father was of cosmic significance?”

“It wasn’t worthless to you. You must have liked it, or you wouldn’t have given it to me in return for my flowers.”

“The flowers,” Minla said thoughtfully. “I’d almost forgotten them. I used to look forward to them so much, the sound of your voice as you told me stories I couldn’t understand but which still managed to sound so significant. You made me

feel special, Merlin. I'd treasure the flowers afterward and go to sleep imagining the strange, beautiful places they'd come from. I'd cry when they died, but then you'd always bring new ones."

"I used to like the look on your face."

"Tell me about the stone," she said, after a silence.

"I had *Tyrant* run an analysis on it. Just in case there was something significant about it, something neither you, I, nor your father had spotted."

"And?" Minla asked, with a note of fearfulness.

"I'm afraid it's just a piece of whetstone."

"Whetstone?"

"Very hard. It's the kind you use for sharpening knives. It's a common enough kind of stone on a planet like this one, wherever you have tides, shorelines, and oceans." Merlin had fished out the stone earlier; now he held it in his hand, palm open, like a lucky coin. "You see that fine patterning of lines? This kind of stone was laid down in shallow tidal water. Whenever the sea rushed in, it would carry a suspension of silt that would settle out and form a fine layer on the surface of the stone. The next time the tide came in, you'd get a second layer. Then a third, and so on. Each layer would only take a few hours to be formed, although it might take hundreds of millions of years for it to harden into stone."

"So it's very old."

Merlin nodded. "Very old indeed."

"But not of any cosmic significance."

"I'm sorry. I just thought you might want to know. Dowitcher *was* playing a game with your father after all. I think Malkoha had more or less guessed that for himself."

For a moment Merlin thought that his explanation had satisfied Minla, enabling her to shut tight that particular chapter of her life. But instead she just frowned. "The lines aren't regular, though. Why do they widen and then narrow?"

"Tides vary," Merlin said, suddenly feeling himself on less solid ground. "Deep tides carry more sediment. Shallow tides less. I suppose."

"Storms raise high tides. That would explain the occasional thick band. But other than that, the tides on Lecythus are very regular. I know this from my

education.”

“Then your education’s wrong, I’m afraid. A planet like this, with a large moon.. .” Merlin left the sentence unfinished. “Spring tides and deep tides, Minla. No arguing with it.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

“Do you want the stone back?” he asked.

“Keep it, if it amuses you.”

He closed his hand around the stone. “It still meant something to you when you gave it to me. It’ll always mean something to me for that reason.”

“Thank you for not leaving us. If my stone kept you here, it served a useful purpose.”

“I’m glad I chose to stay. I just hope I haven’t done more harm than good, with the things I showed you.”

“That again,” Minla said with a weary sigh. “You worry that we’re going to blow ourselves to bits, just because you showed us the clockwork inside the atom.”

“It’s nasty clockwork.”

He had seen enough progress, enough evidence of wisdom and independent ingenuity, to know that the Skyland forces would have a working atomic bomb within two years. By then, their rocket program would have given them a delivery system able to handle the cumbersome payload of that primitive device. Even if the rocket fell behind schedule, they only had to wait until the aerial landmass drifted over a Shadowland target.

“I can’t stop you making weapons,” Merlin said. “All I ask is that you use them wisely. Just enough to negotiate a victory, and then no more. Then forget about bombs and start thinking about atomic rockets.”

Minla looked at him pityingly. “You worry that we’re becoming mon-sters. Merlin, we already *were* monsters. You didn’t make us any worse.”

“That strain of bacterial meningitis was very infectious,” Merlin said. “I know: I’ve run it through *Tyrant’s* medical analyzer. You were already having difficulties with supplies of antibiotics. If I hadn’t landed, if I hadn’t offered to make that medicine for you, your military effort might have collapsed within months. The Shadowlands would have won by default. There wouldn’t be any need to introduce atomic bombs into the world.”

“But we’d still need the rockets.”

“Different technology. The one doesn’t imply the other.”

“Merlin, listen to me. I’m sorry that we’re asking you to make these difficult moral choices. But for us it’s about only one thing: species survival. If you hadn’t dropped out of the sky, the Waynet would still be on its way to us, ready to slice our star in two. After that happened, you had no choice but to do everything possible to save us, no matter how bad a taste it leaves in your mouth.”

“I have to live with myself when this is all over.”

“You’ll have nothing to be ashamed of. You’ve made all the right decisions so far. You’ve given us a future.”

“I need to clear up a few things for you,” Merlin said. “It isn’t a friendly galaxy. The creatures that smashed your sky are still out there. Your ancestors forged the armored sky to hide from them, to make Lecythus look like an airless world. The Huskers were hunting down my own people before I left to work on my own. It isn’t going to be plain sailing.”

“Survival is better than death. Always and forever.”

Merlin sighed: he knew that this conversation had run its course, that they had been over these things a thousand times already and were no closer to mutual understanding. “When I wake up again, I want to see lights in the sky.”

“When I was a girl,” Minla said, “long before you came, my father would tell me stories of people traveling through the void, looking down on Lecythus. He’d put in jokes and little rhymes, things to make me laugh. Under it all, though, he had a serious message. He’d show me the pictures in my books, of the great ship that brought us to Lecythus. He said we’d come from the stars and one day we’d find a way to go back there. It seemed like a fantasy when I was a little girl, something that would never come to pass in the real world. Yet now it’s happening, just as my father always said it would. If I live long enough, I’ll know what it’s like to leave Lecythus behind. But I’ll be dead long before we ever reach another world, or see any of the wonders you’ve known.”

For an instant Minla was a girl again, not a driven military leader. Something in her face spoke to Merlin across the years, breaching the defenses he had carefully assembled.

“Let me show you something.”

He took her into *Tyrant’s* rear compartment and revealed the matte-black cone

of the syrxinx, suspended in its cradle. At Merlin's invitation, Minla was allowed to stroke its mirror-smooth surface. She reached out her hand gingerly, as if expecting to touch something very hot or very cold. At the last instant her fingertips grazed the ancient artifact and then held the contact, daringly.

"It feels old," she said. "I can't say why."

"It does. I've often felt the same thing."

"Old and very heavy. Heavier than it has any right to be. And yet when I look at it, it's somehow not quite there, as if I'm looking at the space where it used to be."

"That's exactly how it looks to me."

Minla withdrew her touch. "What is it?"

"We call it a syrxinx. It's not a weapon. It's more like a key or a passport."

"What does it do?"

"It lets my ship use the Waynet. In their time the Waymakers must have made billions of these things, enough to fuel the commerce of a million worlds. Imagine that, Minla: millions of stars bound by threads of accelerated spacetime, each thread strung with thousands of glittering ships rushing to and fro, drops of honey on a thread of silk, each ship moving so close to the speed of light that time itself slowed almost to stillness. You could dine on one world, ride your ship to the Waynet and then take supper on some other world, under the falling light of another sun. A thousand years might have passed while you were riding the flow, but that didn't matter. The Waymakers forged an empire where a thousand years was just a lazy afternoon, a time to put off plans for another day." Merlin looked sadly at Minla. "That was the idea, anyway."

"And now?"

"We breakfast in the ruins, barely remember the glory that was, and scavenge space for the handful of still-functioning syrxinxes."

"Could you take it apart, find out how it works?"

"Only if I felt suicidal. The Waymakers protected their secrets very well."

"Then it is valuable."

"Incalculably so."

Minla stroked it again. “It feels dead.”

“It just isn’t active yet. When the Waynet comes closer, the syrinx will sense it. That’s when we’ll really know it’s time to get out of here.” Merlin forced a smile. “But by then we’ll be well on our way.”

“Now that you’ve shown me this secret, aren’t you worried that we’ll take it from you?”

“The ship wouldn’t let you. And what use would it be to you anyway?”

“We could make our own ship, and use your syrinx to escape from here.”

Merlin tried not to sound too condescending. “Any ship you built would smash itself to splinters as soon as it touched the Waynet, even with the syrinx to help it. And you wouldn’t achieve much anyway. Ships that use the Waynet can’t be very large.”

“Why is that?”

Merlin shrugged. “They don’t need to be. If it only takes a day or two of travel to get anywhere—remember what I said about clocks slowing down—then you don’t need to haul all your provisions with you, even if you’re crossing to the other side of the galaxy.”

“But could a bigger ship enter the Waynet, if it had to?”

“The entry stresses wouldn’t allow it. It’s like riding the rapids.” Merlin didn’t wait to see if Minla was following him. “The syrinx creates a path that you can follow, a course where the river is easier. But you still need a small boat to squeeze around the obstacles.”

“Then no one ever made larger ships, even during the time of the Waymakers?”

“Why would they have needed to?”

“That wasn’t my question, Merlin.”

“It was a long time ago. I don’t have all the answers. And you shouldn’t pin your hopes on the Waynet. It’s the thing that’s trying to kill you, not save you.”

“But when you leave us... you’ll ride the Waynet, won’t you?”

Merlin nodded. “But I’ll make damned sure I have a head start on the collision.”

“I’m beginning to see how all this must look to you,” Minla said. “This is the worst thing that’s ever happened to us, the end of our history itself. To you it’s just a stopover, an incidental adventure. I’m sure there were hundreds of worlds before us, and there’ll be hundreds more. That’s right, isn’t it?”

Merlin bridled. “If I didn’t care about you all, I’d have left twenty years ago.”

“You very nearly did. I know how close you came. My father spoke of it many times, his joy when you changed your mind.”

“I had a change of heart,” Merlin said. “Everyone’s allowed that. You played a part in it, Minla. If you hadn’t told Malkoha to give me that gift...”

“Then I’m glad I did, if it meant so much.” Minla looked away, something between sadness and fascination on her face. “Merlin, before you sleep. Do something for me.”

“Yes?”

“Make me flowers again. From some world I’ll never ever see. And tell me their story.”

* * * *

The Planetary Government aircraft was a sleek silver flying wing with its own atomic reactor, feeding six engines buried in air-smoothed nacelles. Minla had already led Merlin down a spiral staircase, into an observation cupola set under the thickest part of the wing. Now she touched a brushed-steel panel, causing armored slats to whisk open in rapid sequence. Through the green-tinted blast-proof glass they had an uninterrupted view of the surface rolling by underneath.

The ocean carried no evidence of the war, but there was hardly any stretch of land that hadn’t been touched in some fashion. Merlin saw the rubble-strewn remains of towns and cities, some with the hearts gouged out by kilometer-deep craters. He saw flooded harbors, beginning to be clawed back by the greedy fingers of the sea. He saw swaths of gray-brown land where nothing grew anymore, and where only dead, petrified forests testi-fied to the earlier presence of living things. Atomic weapons had been used in their thousands, by both sides. The Skylanders had been first, though, which was why the weapons had a special name on Lecythus. Because of the shape of the mushroom cloud that accompanied each burst, they called them Minla’s Flowers.

She pointed out the new cities that had been built since the ceasefire. They were depressing to behold: grids of utilitarian blocks, each skull-gray multistory building identical to the others. Spidery highways linked the settlements, but not

once did Merlin see any evidence of traffic or commerce.

“We’re not building for posterity,” she said. “None of those buildings have to last more than fifty years, and most of them will be empty long before that. By the time they start crumbling, there’ll be no one alive on Lecythus.”

“You’re surely not thinking of taking everyone with you,” Merlin said.

“Why not? It seemed unthinkable forty years ago. But so did atomic war, and the coming of a single world state. Anything’s within our reach now. With social planning, we can organize matters such that the population shrinks to a tenth of its present size. No children will be allowed to be born in the last twenty years. And we’ll begin moving people into the Space Dormitories long before that.”

Merlin had seen the plans for the dormitories, along with the other elements of Minla’s evacuation program. There was already a small space station in orbit around Lecythus, but it would be utterly dwarfed by the hundred dormitories. The plans called for huge air-filled spheres, each of which would swallow one hundred thousand evacuees, giving a total in-orbit human presence of ten million people. Yet even as the Space Dormitories were being populated, work would be under way on the thousand Exodus Arks that would actually carry the evacuees out of the system. The Arks would be built in orbit, using materials extracted and refined from the moon’s crust. Merlin had already indicated to Minla’s experts that they could expect to find a certain useful isotope of helium in the topsoil of the moon, an isotope that would enable the Arks to be powered by nuclear fusion engines of an ancient and well-tested design.

“Forced birth control, and mass evacuation,” he said, grimacing. “That’s going to take some tough policing. What if people don’t go along with your program?”

“They’ll go along,” Minla said.

“Even if that meant shooting a few, to make a point?”

“Millions have already died, Merlin. If it takes a few more to guarantee the efficient execution of the evacuation program, I see that as a price worth paying.”

“You can’t push human society that hard. It snaps.”

“There’s no such thing as society,” Minla told him.

Presently she had the pilot bring them below supersonic speed, and then down to a hovering standstill above what Merlin took to be an abandoned building, perched near the shore amid the remains of what must once have been a great ocean seaport. The flying wing lowered itself on ducted jets, blowing dust and debris in all

directions until its landing gear kissed scorched earth and the engines quietened.

“We’ll take a stroll outside,” Minla said. “There’s something I want you to see. Something that will convince you of our seriousness.”

“I don’t need convincing.”

“I want you to see it nonetheless. Take this cloak.” She handed him a surprisingly heavy garment.

“Lead impregnated?”

“Just a precaution. Radiation levels are actually very low in this sector.”

They disembarked via an escalator that had folded down from the flying wing’s belly, accompanied by a detachment of guards. The armed men moved ahead, sweeping the ground with things that looked like metal brooms before ushering Minla and Merlin forward. They followed a wind-ing path through scorched rubble and junk, taking care not to trip over the obstacles and broken ground. Calliope had set during their descent and a biting wind was now howling into land from the sea, setting his teeth on edge. From somewhere in the distance a siren rose and fell on a mournful cycle. Despite Minla’s assurance concerning the radioactivity, Merlin swore he could already feel his skin tingling. Overhead, stars poked through the thinning layer of moonlit clouds.

When at last he looked up, he saw that the solitary building was in fact an enormous stone monument. It towered a hundred meters above the flying wing, stepped like a ziggurat and cut and engraved with awesome precision. Letters in Lecythus A marched in stentorian ranks across the highest vertical face. Beyond the monument, gray-black water lapped at the shattered remains of a promenade. The monument was presumably designed to weather storms, but it would only take one spring tide to submerge its lower flanks completely. Merlin wondered why Minla’s people hadn’t set it on higher ground.

“It’s impressive.”

“There are a hundred monuments like this on Lecythus,” Minla told him, drawing her cloak tighter around herself. “We faced them with whetstone, would you believe it. It turns out to be very good for making monuments, especially when you don’t want the letters to be worn away in a handful of centuries.”

“You built a hundred of these?” Merlin asked.

“That’s just the start. There’ll be a thousand by the time we’re finished. When we are gone, when all other traces of our culture have been erased from time, we hope that at least one of these monuments will remain. Shall I read you the

inscription?”

Merlin had still learned nothing of the native writing, and he'd neglected to wear the lenses that would have allowed *Tyrant* to overlay a translation.

“You'd better.”

“It says that once a great human society lived on Lecythus, in peace and harmony. Then came a message from the stars, a warning that our world was to be destroyed by the fire of the sun itself, or something even worse. So we made preparations to abandon the world that had been our home for so long, and to commence a journey into the outer darkness of interstellar space, looking for a new home in the stars. One day, thousands or tens of thousands after our departure, you, the people who read this message, may find us. For now you are welcome to make of this world what you will. But know that this planet was ours, and it remains ours, and that one day we shall make it our home again.”

“I like the bit about ‘peace and harmony.’”

“History is what we write, not what we remember. Why should we tar-nish the memory of our planet by enshrining our less noble deeds?”

“Spoken like a true leader, Minla.”

At that moment one of the guards raised his rifle and projected a line of tracer fire into the middle distance. Something hissed and scurried into the cover of debris.

“We should be leaving,” Minla said. “Regressives come out at night, and some of them are armed.”

“Regressives?”

“Dissident political elements. Suicide cultists who'd rather die on Lecythus than cooperate in the evacuation effort. They're our problem, Merlin, not yours.”

He'd heard stories about the regressives, but dismissed them as rumor until now. They were the survivors of the war, people who hadn't submitted eagerly to the iron rule of Minla's new Planetary Government. Details that didn't fit into the plan, and which therefore had to be brushed aside or sup-pressed or given a subhuman name. He pulled the cloak tighter, anxious not to spend a minute longer on the surface than necessary. But even as Minla turned and began walking back to the waiting aircraft—moonlight picked out the elegant sweep of its single great wing—something tugged at him, holding him to the spot.

“Minla,” he called, a crack in his voice.

She stopped and turned around. “What is it, Merlin?”

“I’ve something for you.” He reached under the cloak and fished out the gift she had given him as a girl, holding it before him. He’d had it with him for days, waiting for the moment he hoped would never come.

Impatiently, Minla retraced her steps. “I said we should be leaving. What is it you want to give me?”

He handed her the sliver of whetstone. “A little girl gave me this. I don’t think I know that little girl anymore.”

Minla looked at the stone with a curl of disgust on her face. “That was forty years ago.”

“Not to me. To me it was less than a year. I’ve seen a lot of changes since you gave me that gift.”

“We all have to grow up sometime, Merlin.” For a moment he thought she was going to hand him back the gift, or at least slip it into one of her own pockets. Instead, Minla let it drop to the ground. Merlin reached to pick it up, but it was too late. The stone fell into a dark crack between two shattered paving slabs; Merlin heard the chink as it bounced off something and fell even deeper.

“It’s gone.”

“It was just a silly stone,” Minla said. “That’s all. Now let’s be on our way.”

Merlin looked back at the lapping waters as he followed Minla to the moonlit flying wing. Something about the whetstone, something about tides of that sea, something about the moon itself, kept nagging at the back of his mind. There was a connection, trivial or otherwise, that he was missing.

He was sure it would come to him sooner or later.

* * * *

Minla walked with a stick, clicking its hard metal shaft against the echoing flooring of the station’s observation deck. Illness or injury had disfigured her since their last meeting; she wore her graying hair in a lopsided parting, hanging down almost to the collar on her right side. Merlin could not say for certain what had happened to Minla, since she was careful to turn her face away from him whenever they spoke. But in the days since his revival he had already heard talk of assassination attempts, some of which had apparently come close to succeeding. Minla seemed more stooped and frail than he re-remembered, as if she had worked every hour of those twenty years.

She interrupted a light beam with her hand, opening the viewing shields. “Behold the Space Dormitories,” she said, declaiming as if she had an audience of thousands rather than a single man standing only a few meters away. “Rejoice, Merlin. You played a part in this.”

Through the window, wheeling with the gentle rotation of the orbital station, the nearest dormitory loomed larger than Lecythus in the sky. The wrinkled gray sphere would soon reach operational pressure, its skin becoming taut. The final sun mirrors were being assembled in place, manipulated by mighty articulated robots. Cargo rockets were coming and going by the minute, while the first wave of evacuees had already taken up residence in the polar holding pens.

Twenty dormitories were ready now; the remaining eighty would come online within two years. Every day, hundreds of atomic rockets lifted from the surface of Lecythus, carrying evacuees—packed into their holds at the maximum possible human storage density, like a kind of three-dimensional jigsaw of flesh and blood—or cargo, in the form of air, water, and pre-fabricated parts for the other habitats. Each rocket launch deposited more radioactivity into the atmosphere of the doomed world. It was now fatal to breathe that air for more than a few hours, but the slow poisoning of Lecythus was of no concern to the Planetary Government. The remaining surface-bound colonists, those who would occupy the other dormitories when they were ready, awaited transfer in pressurized bunkers, in conditions that were at least as spartan as anything they would have to endure in space. Merlin had offered the services of *Tyrant* to assist with the evacuation effort, but as efficient and fast as his ship was, it would have made only a token difference to the speed of the exercise.

That was not to say that there were not difficulties, or that the program was exactly on schedule. Merlin was gladdened by the progress he saw in some areas, disheartened in others. Before he slept, the locals had grilled him for help with their prototype atomic rockets, seemingly in expectation that Merlin would provide magic remedies for the failures that had dogged them so far. But Merlin could only help in a limited fashion. He knew the basic principles of building an atomic rocket, but little of the detailed knowledge needed to circumvent a particular problem. Minla’s experts were frustrated, and then dismayed. He tried explaining to them that though an atomic rocket might be primitive compared to the engines in *Tyrant*, that didn’t mean it was simple, or that its construction didn’t involve many subtle principles. “I know how a sailing ship works,” he said, trying to explain himself. “But that doesn’t mean I could build one myself, or show a master boatbuilder how to improve his craft.”

They wanted to know why he couldn’t just give them the technology in *Tyrant* itself.

“My ship is capable of self-repair,” he’d said. “But it isn’t capable of making copies of itself. That’s a deep principle, embodied in the logical architecture at a

very profound level.”

“Then run off a blueprint of your engines. Let us copy what we need from the plans,” they said.

“That won’t work. The components in *Tyrant* are manufactured to exacting tolerances, using materials your chemistry can’t even explain, let alone reproduce.”

“Then show us how to improve our manufacturing capability, until we can make what we need.”

“We don’t have time for that. *Tyrant* was manufactured by a culture that had had over ten thousand years of experience in spacefaring, not to mention knowledge of industrial processes and inventions dating back at least as far again. You can’t cross that kind of gap in fifty years, no matter how hard you might want to.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

“Keep trying,” Merlin said. “Keep making mistakes, and learning from them. That’s all any culture ever does.”

That was exactly what they had done, across twenty painful years. The rockets worked now, after a fashion, but they’d arrived late and there was already a huge backlog of people and parts to be shifted into space. The dormitories should have been finished and occupied by now, with work already under way on the fleet of Exodus Arks. But the Arks had met obstacles as well. The lunar colonization program had run into unanticipated difficulties, requiring that the Arks be assembled from components made on Lecythus. The atomic rocket production lines were already running at maximum capacity without the burden of carrying even more tonnage into space.

“This is good,” Merlin told Minla. “But you still need to step things up.”

“We’re aware of that,” she answered testily. “Unfortunately, some of your information proved less than accurate.”

Merlin blinked at her. “It did?”

“Our scientists made a prototype for the fusion drive, according to your plans. Given the limited testing they’ve been able to do, they say it works very well. It wouldn’t be a technical problem to build all the engines we need for the Exodus Arks. So I’m told, at least.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Her hand gripped the walking stick like a talon. “Fuel, Merlin. You told us

we'd find helium 3 in the topsoil of our moon. Well, we didn't. Not enough to suit our needs, anyway."

"Then you mustn't have been looking properly."

"I assure you we looked, Merlin. You were mistaken. Now we'll have to find fuel from an alternative source, and redesign our fusion drive accordingly. We'll need your help, if we aren't to fall hopelessly behind schedule." Minla extended a withered hand toward the wheeling view. "To have come so far, to have reached this point, and then *failed*... that would be worse than having never tried at all, don't you think?"

Chastened, Merlin scratched at his chin. "I'll do what I can. Let me talk to the fusion engineers."

"I've scheduled a meeting. They're *very* anxious to talk to you." Minla paused. "There's something you should know, though. They've seen you make a mistake. They'll still be interested in what you have to say. But don't expect blind acceptance of your every word. They know you're human now."

"I never said I wasn't."

"You didn't, no. I'll give you credit for that. But for a little while some of us allowed ourselves to believe it."

Minla turned and walked away, the tap of her stick echoing into the distance.

* * * *

As space wars went, it was brief and relatively tame, certainly by comparison with the awesome battles delineated in the Cohort's pictorial history. The timeworn frescoes on the swallowships commemorated engagements where entire solar systems were reduced to mere tactical details, hills or ditches in the terrain of a much larger strategic landscape, and where the participants—human and Husker both—were moving at significant fractions of the speed of light and employing relativistic weapons of world-shattering destructive potential. A single skirmish could eat up many centuries of planetary time, whole lifetimes from the point of view of a starships crew. The war itself was a thing inseparably entwined with recorded history, a monstrous chok-ing structure with its roots reaching into the loam of deep time, and whose end must be assumed (by all except Merlin, at least) to lie in the unimaginably remote future.

Here, the theater of conflict was considerably less than half a light-second in diameter, encompassing only the immediate space around Lecythus, with its girdle of half-finished dormitories and Exodus Arks. The battle lasted barely a dozen hours, between first and last detonation. With the exception of Merlin's own late

intervention, no weapons more potent than hydrogen bombs were deployed. Horrific, certainly, but possessed of a certain genteel precision compared to the weapons that had consumed Plenitude.

It began with a surprise strike from the surface, using a wave of com-mandeered atomic rockets. It seemed that the Regressives had gained control of one of the rocket-assembly-and-launch complexes. The rockets had no warheads, but that didn't matter: kinetic energy, and the explosive force stored in their atomic engines, was still enough to inflict havoc on their targets. The weapons had been aimed with surprising accuracy. The first wave destroyed half of the unfinished dormitories, inflicting catastrophic damage on many of the others. By the time the second wave was rising, orbital defenses had sprung into action, but by then it was too late to intercept more than a handful of the missiles. Many of the atomic rockets were being piloted by suicide crews, steering their charges through Minla's hastily erected countermeasure screens. By the third hour, the Planetary Government was beginning to retaliate against Regressive elements using atmospheric-entry interceptors, but while they could pick away at enemy fortifications on the ground, they couldn't penetrate the antimissile cordon around the launch complex itself. Rogue warheads chipped away at the edges of aerial landmasses, sending mountain-sized boulders crashing to the surface. Even as the battle raged, brutal tidal waves ravaged the already-frail coastal communities. As the hours ticked by, Minla's analysts maintained a grim toll on the total number of surface and orbital casualties. In the fifth and sixth hours, more dormitories fell to the assault. Stray fire accounted for even more losses. A temporary ceasefire in the seventh hour was only caused by the temporary occultation of the launch complex by a medium-sized aerial landmass. When the skies were clear again, the rockets rose up with renewed fury.

"They've hit all but one of the Exodus Arks," Minla said, when the battle was in its ninth hour. "We just had time to move the final ship out of range of the atomics. But if they find a way to increase their reach, by eliminating more payload mass..." She turned her face from his. "It'll all have been for nothing, Merlin. They'll have won, and the last sixty years may as well have not happened."

He felt preternaturally calm, knowing exactly what was coming. "What do you want me to do?"

"Intervene," Minla said. "Use whatever force is merited."

"I offered once. You said no."

"You changed your mind once. Now I change mine."

Merlin went to *Tyrant*. He ordered the ship to deliver a concentrated charm-torp salvo against the compromised rocket facility, bringing more energy to bear on that one tiny area of land than had been deployed in all the years of the atomic wars. There was no need for him to accompany his ship; like a well-trained

dog, *Tyrant* was perfectly capable of carrying out his orders without direct supervision.

They watched the spectacle from orbit. When the electric-white fire erupted on the horizon of Lecythus, brightening that entire limb of the planet in the manner of a stuttering cold sunrise, Merlin felt Minla's hand tighten around his own. For all her frailty, for all that the years had taken from her, there remained astonishing steel in that grip. "Thank you," she said. "You may just have saved us all."

* * * *

It had been ten years.

Lecythus and its sun now lay many light-weeks to stern. The one re-maining Exodus Ark had reached five percent of the speed of light. In sixty years—faster, if the engine could be improved—it would streak into another system, one that might offer the possibility of landfall. It flew along-side the gossamer line of the Waynet, using the tube as cover from Husker long-range sensors. The Exodus Ark carried only twelve hundred exiles, few of whom would live long enough to see another world.

The hospital was near the core of the ship, safely distant from the sleet-ing energies of interstellar radiation or the exotic emissions of the Waynet. Many of its patients were veterans of the Regressive War, victims of the viciously ingenious injuries wrought by the close conjunction of vacuum and heat, radiation and kinetic energy. Most of them would be dead by the time the fusion engine was silenced for cruise phase. For now they were being afforded the care appropriate to war heroes, even those who screamed bloodcurdling pleas for the painkilling mercy of euthanasia.

In a soundproofed private annex of that same complex, Minla also lay in the care of machines. This time the assassins had come closer than ever before, and they had very nearly achieved their objective. Yet she'd survived, and the prognosis for a complete recovery—so Merlin was informed—was deemed higher than seventy-five percent. More than could be said of Minla's aides, injured in the same attack, but they were at least receiving the best possible care in *Tyrant's* frostwatch cabinets. The exercise was, Merlin knew, akin to knitting together human-shaped sculptures from a bloody stew of meat and splintered bone, and then hoping that those sculptures would retain some semblance of mind. Minla would have presented no challenge at all, but the Planetary Director had declined the offer of frostwatch care herself, preferring to give up her place to one of her underlings. Knowing that, Merlin allowed himself a momentary flicker of empathy.

He walked into the room, coughing to announce himself. "Hello, Minla."

She lay on her back, her head against the pillow, though she was not asleep.

Slowly she turned to face Merlin as he approached. She looked very old, very tired, but she still found the energy to form a smile.

“It’s so good of you to come. I was hoping, but...I didn’t dare ask. I know how busy you’ve been with the engine upgrade study.”

“I could hardly not pay you a visit. Even though I had a devil of a job persuading your staff to let me through.”

“They’re too protective of me. I know my own strength, Merlin. I’ll get through this.”

“I believe you would.”

Mink’s gaze settled on his hand. “Are those for me?”

He had a bouquet of alien flowers. They were of a peculiar dark hue, a shade that ought to have appeared black in the room’s subdued gold lighting yet which was clearly and unmistakably purple, revealed by its own soft inner illumination. They had the look of a detail that had been hand-tinted in a black-and-white photograph, so that it appeared to float above the rest of the image.

“Of course,” Merlin said. “I always bring flowers, don’t I?”

“You always used to. Then you stopped.”

“Perhaps it’s time to start again.”

He set them by her bedside, in the watered vase that was already waiting. They were not the only flowers in the room, but the purple ones seemed to suck the very color from the others.

“They’re very beautiful,” Minla said. “It’s like I’ve never seen anything precisely that color before. It’s as if there’s a whole circuit in my brain that’s never been activated until now.”

“I chose them especially. They’re famous for their beauty.”

Minla lifted her head from the pillow, her eyes brightening with curiosity. “Now you’ll have to tell me where they’re from.”

“It’s a long story.”

“That never stopped you before.”

“A world called Lacertine. It’s ten thousand light-years from here; many days

of Shiptime, even in the Waynet. I don't even know if it still exists."

"Tell me about Lacertine," she said, pronouncing the name of the world with her usual scrupulousness.

"It's a very beautiful planet, orbiting a hot blue star. They say the planet must have been moved into its present orbit by the Waymakers, from an-other system entirely. The seas and skies are a shimmering electric blue. The forests are a dazzle of purple and violet and pink; colors that you've only ever seen when you close your eyes against the sun and see patterns behind your eyelids. White citadels rise above the tree line, towers linked by a fili-gree of delicate bridges."

"Then there are people on Lacertine?"

Merlin thought of the occupants, and nodded. "Adapted, of course. Ev-erything that grows on Lacertine was bioengineered to tolerate the scalding light from the sun. They say if something can grow there, it can grow almost anywhere."

"Have you been there?"

He shook his head ruefully. "I've never been within a thousand light-years of the place."

"I'll never see it. Nor any of the other places you've told me about."

"There are places I'll never see. Even with the Waynet, I'm still just one human man, with one human life. Even the Waymakers didn't live long enough to glimpse more than a fraction of their empire."

"It must make you very sad."

"I take each day as it comes. I'd rather take good memories from one world, than fret about the thousand I'll never see."

"You're a wise man," Minla said. "We were lucky to get you."

Merlin smiled. He was silent for many moments, letting Minla enjoy the last calmness of mind she would ever know. "There's something I need to tell you," he said eventually.

She must have heard something in his tone of voice. "What, Merlin?"

"There's a good chance you're all going to die."

Her tone became sharp. "We don't need you to remind us of the risks."

“I’m talking about something that’s going to happen sooner rather than later. The ruse of shadowing the Waynet didn’t work. It was the best thing to do, but there was always a chance...” Merlin spread his hands in exaggerated apology, as if there had ever been something he could have done about it. “*Tyrant’s* detected a Husker attack swarm, six elements lying a light-month ahead of you. You don’t have time to steer or slow down. They’d shadow every move you made, even if you tried to shake them off.”

“You promised us—”

“I promised you nothing. I just gave you the best advice I could. If you hadn’t shadowed the Waynet, they’d have found you even sooner.”

“We aren’t using the ramscoop design. You said we’d be safe if we stuck to fusion motors. The electromagnetic signature—”

“I said you’d be safer. There were never ironclad guarantees.”

“You lied to us.” Minla turned suddenly spiteful. “I never trusted you.”

“I did all in my power to save you.”

“Then why are you standing there looking so calm, when you know we’re going to die?” But before Merlin had time to answer, Minla had seen the answer for herself. “Because you can leave,” she said, nodding at her own percipience. “You have your ship, and a syrx. You can slip into the Waynet and outrun the enemy.”

“I’m leaving,” Merlin said. “But I’m not running.”

“Aren’t they one and the same?”

“Not this time. I’m going back to Plenitude, I mean Lecythus, to do what I can for the people we left behind. The people you condemned to death.”

“Me, Merlin?”

“I examined the records of the Regressive War: not just the official documents, but *Tyrant’s* own data logs. And I saw what I should have seen at the time, but didn’t. It was a ruse. It was too damned easy, the way they took control of that rocket factory. You let them, Minla.”

“I did nothing of the kind.”

“You knew the whole evacuation project was never going to be ready on time. The Space Dormitories were behind schedule, there were problems with the Exodus Arks...”

“Because you told us falsehoods about the helium in the moon’s soil.”

Merlin raised a warning hand. “We’ll get to that. The point is, your plans were in tatters. But you could still have completed more dormitories and ships, if you’d been willing to leave the system a little later. You could still have saved more people than you did, albeit at a slightly increased risk to your own survival. But that wasn’t acceptable. You wanted to leave there and then. So you engineered the whole Regressive attack, set it up as a pretext for an early departure.”

“The Regressives were real!” Minla hissed.

“But you gave them the keys to that rocket silo, and the know-how to target and guide those missiles. Funny how their attack just missed the one station that you were occupying, you and all your political cronies, and that you managed to move the one Exodus Ark to safety just in time. Damned convenient, Minla.”

“I’ll have you shot for this, Merlin.”

“Good luck. Try laying a hand on me, and see how far it gets you. My ship’s listening in on this conversation. It can put proctors into this room in a matter of seconds.”

“And the moon, Merlin? Do you have an excuse for the error that cost us so dearly?”

“I don’t know. Possibly. That’s why I’m going back to Lecythus. There are still people on the surface—Regressives, allies, I don’t care. And people you abandoned in orbit as well.”

“They’ll all die. You said it yourself.”

He raised a finger. “If they don’t leave. But maybe there’s way. Again, I should have seen it sooner. But that’s me all the way. I take a long time to put the pieces together, but I get there in the end. Just like Dowitcher, the man who gave your father the whetstone.”

“It was just a stone.”

“So you said. In fact, it was a vital clue to the nature of your world. It took spring tides and neap tides to lay down those patterns. But you said it yourself: Lecythus doesn’t have spring tides and neap tides. Not anymore, at least.”

“I’m sure this means something to you.”

“Something happened to your moon, Minla. When that whetstone formed,

your moon was raising tides on Lecythus. When the moon and Calliope were tugging on your seas in the same direction, you got a spring tide. When they were balancing each other, you got a neap tide. Hence the patterning on the whetstone. But now the tides are the same from day to day. Calliope's still there, so that only leaves the moon. It isn't exerting the same gravitational pull it used to. Oh, it weighs *something*—but the effect is much reduced, and if you could skip forward a few hundred million years and examine a piece of whetstone laid down now, you'd probably find very faint variations in sediment thickness. But whatever the effect is now, it must be insignificant compared to the time when your whetstone was formed. Yet the moon's still there, in what appears to be the same orbit. So what's happened?"

"You tell me, Merlin."

"I don't think it's a moon anymore. I think the original moon got ripped to pieces to make your armored sky. I don't know how much of the original mass got used for that, but I'm guessing it was quite a significant fraction. The question is, what happened to the remains?"

"I'm sure you have a theory."

"I think they made a fake moon out of the leftovers. It sits there in your sky, it orbits Lecythus, but it doesn't pull on your seas the way the old one used to. And because it's new—relatively speaking—it doesn't have the soil chemistry we'd expect of a real moon, one that's been sitting there for billions of years, drinking in solar winds. That's why you didn't find the helium you were expecting."

"So what is it?"

"That's what I'm keen to find out. The thing is, I know what Dowitcher was thinking now. He knew that wasn't a real moon. Which begs the question: what's inside it? And could it make a difference to the survivors you left behind?"

"Hiding inside a shell won't help them," Minla said. "You already told us we'd achieve nothing by digging tunnels into Lecythus."

"I'm not thinking about hiding. I'm thinking about moving. What if the moon's an escape vehicle? An Exodus Ark big enough to take the entire population?"

"You have no evidence."

"I have this." With that, Merlin produced one of Minla's old picture books. Seventy years had aged its papers to a brittle yellow, dimming the vibrancy of the old inks. But the linework in the illustrations was still clear enough. Merlin held the book open to a particular page, letting Minla look at it. "Your people had a memory

of arriving on Lecythus in a moon-sized ship,” he said. “Maybe that was true. Equally, maybe it was a case of mud-dling one thing with another. I’m wondering if the thing you were meant to remember was not that you came by moon, but that you could leave by one.”

Minla stared at the picture. For a moment, like a breeze on a summer’s day, Merlin felt a wave of almost unbearable sadness pass through the room. It was as if the picture had transported her back to her childhood, before she had set her life on the trajectory that, seventy years later, would bring it to this bed, this soundproofed room, the shameful survival of this one ship. The last time she had looked at the picture, everything had been possible, all life’s opportunities open to her. She’d been the daughter of a powerful and respected man, with influence and wisdom at her fingertips. And yet from all the choices presented to her, she had selected this one dark path, and followed it to its conclusion.

“Even if it is a ship,” she said softly, “you’ll never get them all aboard.”

“I’ll die trying.”

“And us? We get abandoned to our fates?”

Merlin smiled: he’d been expecting the question. “There are twelve hundred people on this ship, some of them children. They weren’t all party to your schemes, so they don’t all deserve to die when you meet the Huskers. That’s why I’m leaving behind weapons and a detachment of proctors to show you how to install and use them.”

For the first time since his arrival in the room, Minla spoke like a leader again. “Will they make a difference?”

“They’ll give your ship a fighting chance. That’s the best I can offer.”

“Then we’ll take what we’re given.”

“I’m sorry it came to this. I played a part in what you became, of that I’ve no doubt. But I didn’t make you a monster.”

“No,” she said. “I’ll at least take credit for myself, and for the fact that I saved twelve hundred of my people. If it took a monster to do that, doesn’t that mean we sometimes need monsters?”

“Maybe we do. But that doesn’t mean we should forgive them for what they are, even for an instant.” Gently, as if bestowing a gift, Merlin placed the picture book on Minla’s recumbent form. “I’m afraid I have to go now. There won’t be much time when I get back to Lecythus.”

“Please,” she said. “Not like this. Not this way.”

“This is how it ends,” he said, before turning from her bed and walking to the exit. “Goodbye, Minla.”

Twenty minutes later he was in the Waynet, racing back to Lecythus.

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There’s a lot to tell, and one day I’ll get around to writing it up properly. For now it’s enough to say that I was right to trust my instincts about the moon. I just wish I’d put the clues together sooner than I did. Perhaps then Minla would never have had to commit her crimes.

I didn’t save as many as I’d have wished, but I did save some of the people Minla left behind to die. I suppose that has to count for something. It was close, but if there’s one thing to be said for Waymaker-level technology, it’s that it’s almost childishly easy to use. They were like babies with the toys of the gods. They left that moon there for a good reason, and while it was necessary for them to camouflage it—it had to be capable of fooling the Huskers, or whoever they built that sky to hide from—the moon itself was obligingly easy to break into, once our purpose became clear. And once it started moving, once its great engines came online after tens of thousands of years of quiet dormancy, no force in the universe could have held it back. I shadowed the fleeing moon long enough to establish that it was headed into a sector that appeared to be free of Husker activity, at least for now. It’ll be touch-and-go for a few centuries, but with Force and Wisdom on their side, I think they’ll make it.

I’m in the Waynet now, riding the flow away from Calliope. The syrinx still works, much to my relief. For a while I considered riding the contra-flow, back toward that lone Exodus Ark. By the time I reached them they’d have been only days away from the encounter. But my presence wouldn’t have made a decisive difference to their chances of surviving the Huskers, and I couldn’t have expected much of a warm welcome.

Not after my final gift to Minla.

I’m glad she never asked me too much about those flowers, or the world they came from. If she’d wanted to know more about Lacertine, she might have sensed that I was holding something back. Such as the fact that the as-sassin guilds on Lacertine were masters of their craft, known throughout the worlds of the Waynet for their skill and cunning, and that no guild on Lacer-tine was more revered than the bioartificers who made the sleepflowers.

It was said that they could make them in any shape, any color, to match any known flower from any known world. It was said that they could pass all tests save

the most microscopic scrutiny. It was said that if you wanted to kill someone, you gave them a gift of flowers from Lacertine.

She would have been dead not long after my departure. The flowers would have detected her presence—they were keyed to locate a single breathing form in a room, most commonly a sleeper—and when the room was quiet they would have become stealthily animate, leaving their jar and creeping from point to point with the slowness of a sundial's shadow, their movement imperceptible to the naked eye, but enough to take them to the face of the sleeper. Their tendrils would have closed around Minla's face with the softness of a lover's caress. Then the paralyzing toxins would have hit her nervous system.

I hoped it was painless. I hoped it was quick. But what I remembered of the Lacertine assassins was that they were known for their cleverness, not their clemency.

Afterward, I deleted the sleepflowers from the biolibrary.

I knew Minla for less than a year of my life, and for seventy years by another reckoning. Sometimes when I think of her I see a human being in all her dimensions, as real as anyone I've ever known. Other times, I see something two-dimensional, like a faded illustration in one of her books, so thin that the light shines through her.

I don't hate her, even now. But I wish time and tide had never brought us together.

A comfortable number of light-hours behind me, the Waynet has just cut into Calliope's heart. It has already sliced through the photosphere and the star's convection zone. Quite what has happened, or is happening, or will happen, when it touched (or touches, or will touch) the nuclear-burning core is still far from clear.

Theory says that no impulse can travel faster than light. Since my ship is already riding the Waynet's flow at very nearly the speed of light, it seems impossible that any information concerning Calliope's fate will ever be able to catch up with me. And yet. . . several minutes ago I swear that I felt a kick, a jolt in the smooth glide of my flight, as if some report of that destructive event had raced up the flow at superluminal speed, buffeting my little ship.

There's nothing in the data to suggest any unusual event, and I don't have any plans to return to Lecythus and see what became of that world when its sun was gored open. But I still felt something, and if it reached me up the flow of the Waynet, if that impulse bypassed the iron barrier of causality itself, I can't begin to imagine the energies that must have been involved, or what must have happened to the strand of the Waynet behind me. Perhaps it's unraveling, and I'm about to breathe my last breath before I become a thin smear of naked quarks, stretched across several billion kilometers of interstellar space.

That would certainly be one way to go.

Frankly, it would be nice to have the luxury to dwell on such fears. But I still have a gun to find, and I'm not getting any younger.

Mission resumed.

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