

THE STAR SURGEON'S APPRENTICE
Alastair Reynolds

Through the bar's windows, Juntura Spaceport was an endless grid of holding berths, launch gantries, and radiator fins, coiling in its own pollution under a smeared pink sky. The air crackled with radiation from unshielded drives. It was no place to visit, let alone stay.

"I need to get out of here," I said.

The shipmaster sneered at my remaining credit. "That won't get you to the Napier Belt, kid, let alone Frolovo."

"It's all I've got."

"Then maybe you should spend a few months working in the port, until you can pay for a ride."

The shipmaster—he was a cyborg, like most of them—turned away with a whine of his servo-driven exoskeleton.

"Wait," I said. "Please . . . just a moment. Maybe this makes a difference."

I pulled a black bundle from inside my jacket, peeling back enough of the cloth to let him see the weapon. The shipmaster his name was Master Khorog—reached out one iron gauntlet and hefted the prize. His eye-goggle clicked and whirred into focus.

"Very nasty," he said appreciatively. "I heard someone used one of these against Happy Jack." The eye swiveled sharply onto me. "Maybe you know something about that?"

"Nothing," I said easily. "It's just an heirloom."

The heirloom was a bone gun. Kalarash Empire tech: very old, very difficult to pick up in security scans. Not much of it around anymore, which is why the gun cost me so much. It employed a sonic effect to shatter human bone, turning it into something resembling sugar. Three seconds was all it needed to do its work. By then the victim no longer had anything much resembling a skeletal structure.

You couldn't live long like that, of course. But you didn't die instantly either.

"The trick—so they say—is not to dwell on the skull," Khorog mused. "Leave enough cranial structure for the victim to retain consciousness. And the ability to hear, if you want to taunt them. There are three small bones in the ear. People usually forget those."

"Will you take the gun or not?"

"I could get into trouble just looking at it." He put the gun back onto the cloth. "But it's a nice piece. Warm, too. It might make a difference. There used to be a good market for antique weapons on Jelgava. Maybe there still is."

I brightened. "Then you can give me a berth?"

"I only said it makes a difference, kid. Enough that you can pay off the rest aboard the Iron Lady."

I could already feel Happy Jack's button men pushing their way through the port, asking urgent questions. Only a matter of time before they hit this bar and found me.

"If you can get me to the Frolovo Hub, I'll take it."

"Maybe we're not going to Frolovo. Maybe we're going to the Bafq Gap, or the Belterra Sphere."

"Somewhere nearby, then. Another hub. It doesn't matter. I just have to get off Mokmer."

"Show us your mitts." Before I could say yes, Khorog's metal hands were examining my skin-and-bone ones, splaying the fingers with surprising gentleness. "Never done a hard day's work in your life, have you? But you have good fingers. Hand-to-eye coordination okay? No neuromotor complications? Palsy?"

"I'm fine," I said. "And whatever it is you want me to do, I can learn."

"Mister Zeal—our surgeon—needs an assistant. It's manual labor, mostly. Think you can handle it?"

Jack's men, closer now. "Yes," I said. By then I'd have said anything to get off Mokmer.

"There'll be no freezer berth: the Iron Lady doesn't run to them. You'll be warm the whole trip. Two and a half years subjective, maybe three, till we make the next orbitfall. And once Zeal's trained you up, he won't want you leaving his service at the first port of call. You'll be looking at four or five years aboard the Lady; maybe longer if he can't find another pair of hands. Doesn't sound so sweet now, does it?"

No, I thought, but then neither did the alternative. "I'm still willing."

"Then be at shuttle dock nine in twenty minutes. That's when we lift for orbit."

We lifted on time.

I didn't see much of the ship from the shuttle: just enough to tellkit the Iron Lady looked much the same as all the other ramscoops parked in orbit around Mokmer: a brutalist gray cylinder, swelling to the armored mouth of the magnetic field intake at the front, tapering to the drive assembly at the back. Comms gear, radiators, docking mechanisms, and modular cargo containers ringed the ship around its gently in-curving waist. It was bruised and battered I from endless near-light transits, with great scorch marks and impact raters marring much of the hull.

The shuttle docked with just Khorog and me aboard. Even before I had been introduced to the rest of the crew—or even the surgeon—the Iron Lady was moving.

"Sooner than I expected," I said.

"Complaining?" Khorog asked. "I thought you wanted to get away from Mokmer as soon as possible."

"No," I said. "I'm glad we're under way." I brushed a wall panel as we walked.

"It's very smooth. I expected it to feel different." "That's because we're only on in-system motors at the moment."

"There's a problem with the ramscoop?"

"We don't switch on the scoop until we're well beyond Mokmer—or any planet, for that matter. We're safe in the ship—life quarters are well shielded—but outside, you're looking at the strongest magnetic field this side of the Crab pulsar. Doesn't hurt wetheads like you all that much ... but us, that's different." He knuckled his fist against his plated cranium. "Cyborgs like me ... cyborgs like everyone else you'll meet aboard this ship, or in any kind of space environment—we feel it. Get within a thousand kilometers of a ship like this . . . it warms up the metal in our bodies. Inductive heating: we fry from the inside. That's why we don't light the scoop: it ain't neighborly."

"I'm sorry," I said, realizing that I'd touched the cyborg equivalent of a nerve.

"We'll light in good time." Khorog hammered one of the wall plates. "Then you'll feel the old girl shiver her timbers."

On the way to the surgeon, we passed other members of the Iron Lady's redoubtable crew, none of whom Khorog saw fit to introduce. They were a carnival of grotesques, even by the standards of the cyborgs I'd seen around the spaceport. One man consisted of a grinning, cackling, gap-toothed head plugged into a trundling life-support mechanism that had apparently originated as a cleaning robot: in place of wheels, or legs, he moved on multiple spinning brushes, polishing the deck plates behind him. A woman glanced haughtily at me as she passed: normal enough except that the upper hemisphere of her skull was a glass dome, in which resided a kind of ticking orrery: luminous planetary heads orbiting the bright lamp of a star. As she walked she rubbed a hand over the swell of her belly and I understood—as I was surely meant to—that her brain had been relocated there for safekeeping. Another man moved in an exoskeleton similar to the one Khorog wore, but in this case there was very little man left inside the powered frame: just a desiccated wisp, like something that had dried out in the sun. His limbs were like strands of rope, his head a piece of shriveled, stepped-on fruit. "You'll be the new mate, then," he said in a voice that sounded as if he was trying to speak

while being strangled.

"If Zeal agrees to it," Khorog said back. "Only then."

"What if Mister Zeal doesn't agree to it?" I asked, when we were safely out of earshot.

"Then we'll find you something else to do," Khorog replied. "Always plenty of jobs on the ..." And then he halted, as if he'd been meaning to say something else but had caught himself in time.

By then we'd reached the surgeon.

Mister Zeal occupied a windowless chamber near the middle of the ship. He was working on one of his patients when Khorog showed me in. Hulking surgical machines loomed over the operating table, carrying lights, manipulators, and barbed, savage-looking cutting tools.

"This is the new assistant," Khorog said. "Has a good pair of hands on him, so try and make this one last."

Zeal looked up from his work. He was a huge, bald, thick-necked man with a powerful jaw. There was nothing obviously mechanical about him: even the close-up goggle he wore over his left eye was strapped into place, rather than implanted. He wore a stiff leather apron over his bare, muscular chest, and he glistened with sweat and oil.

His voice was a low rumble. "Just a pup, Master Khorog. I asked for a man."

"Beggars can't be choosers, Mister Zeal. This is what was on offer."

Zeal stood up from the table and studied me with a curl on his lips, wiping his right hand against his apron. He pushed his left hand against the rust-dappled side of one of the surgical machines, causing it to move back on a set of caterpillar tracks. He stepped over a body that happened to be lying on the floor, scuffing his boot heel against the chest.

The voice rumbled again. "What's your name, lad?"

"Peter," I said, fighting to keep my nervousness in check. "Peter Vandry."

He pushed the goggle off his eye, up onto his forehead.

"Your hands."

"I'm sorry?"

He roared, "Show me your damned hands, boy!"

I stepped closer to the surgeon and offered him my hands. Zeal examined them with a particular attentiveness, his scrutiny more thorough, more methodical, than Khorog's had been. He looked at my tongue. He peeled back my eyelids and looked deep into my eyes. He sniffed as he worked, the curl never leaving his lips. All the while I tried to ignore the semihuman thing laid out on the operating table, horrified that it was still breathing, still obviously alive.

The crewman's torso was completely detached from his hips and legs.

"I need a new mate," Zeal told me. He kicked the body on the floor. "I've been trying to manage ever since with this lobot, but today ..."

"Temper got the better of you, did it?" Khorog asked. "Never mind my temper," Zeal said warningly.

"Lobots don't grow on trees, Mister Zeal. There isn't an inexhaustible supply."

The surgeon snapped his gaze back onto me. "I'm a pair of hands down. Do you think you can do better?"

My throat was dry, my hands shaking. "Master Khorog seemed to think I could do it." I held out my hand, hoping he didn't notice the tremble. "I'm steady."

"Steadiness is a given. But do you have the stomach for the rest?"

"I've seen worse than that," I said, glancing at the patient. But only today, I thought, only since I left Happy Jack flopping and oozing on the carpet.

Zeal nodded at the other man. "You may leave us now, Master Khorog. Please ask the captain to delay drive start-up until I'm finished with this one, if that isn't too much trouble?"

"I'll do what I can," Khorog said.

Zeal turned smartly back to me. "I'm in the middle of a procedure- u re. As you can tell from the lobot, things took a turn for the worse. You'll assist in the completion of the operation. If things conclude satisfactorily . . .

well, we'll see." The curl became a thin, uncharitable smile.

I stepped over the dead lobot. It was common knowledge that space crews made extensive use of lobots for menial labor, but quite another to see the evidence. Many worlds saw nothing wrong in turning urning criminals into lobotomized slave labor. Instead of the death sentence, they got neurosurgery and a set of implants so that they could be puppeted and given simple tasks.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

Zeal lowered his goggle back into place, settling it over his left eye.

"Looking in the rough direction of the patient would be a start, lad."

I forced myself to take in the bloody mess on the table: the two detached body halves, the details of meat and bone and nervous system almost lost amid the eruptive tangle of plastic and metal lines spraying from either half, carrying pink-red arterial blood, chemical green pneumatic fluid. The tracked machines attending to the operation were of ancient, squalid provenance. Nothing in Zeal's operating room looked newer than a thousand years old.

Zeal picked up the end of one segmented chrome tube. "I'm trying to get this thoracic line in. There was a lot of resistance ... the lobot kept fumbling the job. I'm assuming you can do better."

I took the end of the line. It was slippery between my fingers. "Shouldn't I ... wash, or something?"

"Just hold the line. Infection's the least of his worries."

"I was thinking of me."

Zeal made a small guttural sound, like someone trying to cough up an obstruction. "The least of yours as well."

I worked as best I could. We got the line in, then moved on to other areas. I just did what Zeal told me, while he watched me with his one human eye, taking in every slip and tremor of my hand. Once in a while he'd dig into the wide leather pocket sewn across the front of his apron and come out with some new blade or too. Occasionally a lobot would arrive to take away some piece of equipment or dead flesh, or arrive with something new and gleaming on a plate. Now and then the tracked robot would creep forward to assist in a procedure. I noticed, with skin-crawling horror, that its dual manipulator arms ended in a pair of perfect female human d hands, long fingered and elegant and white as snow.

"Forceps, " he'd say. "Laser scapel." Or, sometimes, "Soldering iron"

"What happened to this man?" I asked, feeling I ought to be showing interest in more than just the mechanics of the operation. "Hold that down," Zeal said, ignoring my question completely.

"Cut there. Now make a knot and tie off. God's teeth, careful."

A little while later, the engine lit up. The transition to thrust weight was sudden and unannounced. The floor shook violently.

Equipment clattered off trays. Zeal slipped with a knife, ruining half an hour's work, and swore in one of the ancient trade languages. "They've lit the drive," he said.

I I bought you asked ..

I did. Now apply pressure here."

We kept on working, even as the ship threatened to shake itself to bits. Scoop instability, Zeal said: it was always rough at first, before the fields settled down. My back began to ache from all the leaning over over the table. Yet after what felt like many hours, we were done: the two halves reunited, the interconnects joined, the bone and flesh encouraged to fuse across the divide.

The patient was sewn up, rebooted, and restored to consciousness. I rubbed my back as Zeal spoke softly to the man, answering his questions and nodding now and then.

"You'll be all right," I heard him say. "Just keep away from any argo lifts for a while."

"Thanks," the cyborg said.

The crewman got up off the table, whole again—or as whole as he would ever be. He walked stiffly to the door, pawing at his healed injuries in a kind of

stunned wonderment, as if he had never expected to leave the operating table. "It wasn't as bad as it looked," Zeal told me, when the patient had gone. "Stick with me, and you'll see a lot worse."

"Does that mean you'll let me stay?"

Zeal picked up an oily rag and threw it my way. "What else would it mean? Clean yourself up and I'll show you to your quarters."

It was a job, and it had got me off Mokmer. As gruesome as working for Zeal might have been, I kept reminding myself that it was a lot better than dealing with Happy Jack's button men. And in truth, it could have been a lot worse. Gruff as he had been to start with, Zeal gradually opened up and started treating me . . . not exactly as an equal, but at least as a promising apprentice. He chided me when I made mistakes but was also careful to let me know when had done something well—when I'd sewn up a wound nicely or when I'd wired in a neuromotor implant without causing too much surrounding brain damage. He wouldn't say anything, but the end of his lip would soften and he'd favor my efforts with a microscopic nod of approval.

Zeal, I came to learn, enjoyed an uneasy relationship with the rest of the Iron Lady's crew. It must have always been that way for ship's surgeons. They were there to keep the crew healthy, and much of their work was essentially benign: the treating of minor ailments, the prescribing of restorative drugs and diets. But occasionally they had to do unspeakable things, things that inspired dread and horror. And no one was beyond the surgeon's reach, not even the captain. If a crewman needed treatment, he was going to get it—even if Zeal and his lobots had to drag the man screaming and kicking to the table. Most of the accidents, though, tended to happen during port time. Now that we were under flight, sucking interstellar gases into the ramscoop field, climbing inexorably closer to the speed of light, Zeal's work tended to minor operations and adjustments. Days went by with nobody to treat at all. During these intervals, Zeal would have me practicing on the lobots, refining my techniques.

Three or four years, Khorog had said. Longer, if Zeal couldn't find a replacement. With only a week under my belt, it seemed like a life sentence aboard the Iron Lady. But I would get through it, I promised myself. If conditions became intolerable, I would just jump ship in the next port of call.

In the meantime I got to know as much of my new home as I was allowed. Large areas of the Iron Lady were out-of-bounds: the rear section was deemed too radioactive, while the front was closed to low-ranking crew members like myself. I never saw the captain, never learned his name. But that still left a labyrinth of rooms, corridors, and storage bays in which I was allowed to roam during my off-duty hours. Now and then I would pass other crew members, but apart from Khorog, none of them ever gave me the time of day. Zeal told me not to take it to heart: it was just that I was working for him and would always be seen as the butcher's boy.

After that, I began to take a quiet pride in the fear and respect Zeal and I enjoyed. The other crew might loathe us, but they needed us as well. Our knives gave us power.

The lobots were different: they neither feared nor admired us but simply did what we wanted with the instant obedience of machines. They didn't have enough residual personality to feel emotions. That was what I'd been told, anyway, but I still found myself wondering. There were nine of them on the Iron Lady: five men and four women. Looking into their slack, sleepwalker faces, I couldn't help wondering what kind of people they had been before, what kinds of lives they had led. It was true that they must have all committed capital crimes to have become lobots in the first place. But not every planet defined capital crimes in exactly the same way.

I knew there were nine, and only nine, because they came through Zeal's room on a regular basis, for minor tweaks to their control circuitry. I got to know their faces, got to recognize their slumping, shuffling gait as they walked into a room.

One day, however, I saw a tenth.

Zeal had sent me off on an errand to collect replacement parts for one of his machines. I'd taken a wrong turn, then another one, and before I realized quite how lost I was, I had ended up in an unfamiliar part of the Iron Lady. I stayed calm at first, expecting that after ten or twenty minutes of random wandering, I'd find a corridor I recognized.

I didn't.

After thirty minutes became an hour, and every new corridor looked less familiar than the last, I began to panic. There were no markings on the walls, no navigation consoles or color-coordinated arrows. The ship's dark architecture seemed to be rearranging itself as I passed, confounding my attempts at orientation. My panic changed to dread as I considered my plight. I might starve before I found my way back to the part of the ship I knew. The Iron Lady was huge, and its living crew tiny. If they had little cause to visit these corridors, it might be years before they found my dead body.

I turned another corner, more in desperation than hope, and faced yet another unrecognized corridor. But there was someone standing at the end of it. The harsh overhead light picked out only her face and shoulders, with the rest of her lost in shadow. I could see from her collar that she wore the same kind of overall as the other lobots. I could also see that she was quite pretty. The lobots were usually shaved to the scalp, to make life easier when their heads had to be opened. This one had a head of hair. It grew out ragged and greasy, tangled like the branches of an old tree, but it was still hair. Beneath it was a pale, almond-shaped face half lost in shadow.

She started back from me, vanishing into deeper shadow and then around a bend at her end of the corridor.

"Wait!" I called. "I'm lost! I need someone to show me the way out of here!" Lobots never spoke, but they understood spoken instructions. The girl should have obeyed me instantly. Instead she broke into a running shuffle. I heard her shoes scuffing on the deck plating.

I chased after her, catching up with her easily before she reached the end of the next corridor. I seized her by the left arm and forced her to look at me.

"You shouldn't have run. I just need to know how to get out of here. I'm lost."

She looked at me from under the stiff, knotted overhang of her hair. "Who you?" she asked.

"Peter Vandry, surgeon's mate," I said automatically, before frowning. "You talk. You're not meant to talk."

She lifted up her right arm, the sleeve of her overall slipping down to reveal a crude mechanical substitute for a hand. This claw-like appendage was grafted onto her forearm, held in place by a tight black collar. I thought for a moment that she meant to shock me, but then I realized that she was only making a human gesture, touching the tip of her mechanical hand against the side of her head.

"I ... talk. Still . . . something left."

I nodded, understanding belatedly. Some of the lobots were clearly allowed to retain more mental faculties than others. Presumably these were the lobots that needed to engage in more complex tasks, requiring a degree of reciprocal communication.

But why had I never seen this one before?

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I . . . tend." She screwed up her face. Even this stripped-down approximation of normal speech was costing her great effort. "Them. Keep them . . . working."

"What do you mean, them?"

She cocked her head behind us, in the direction of wall plating. "Them."

"The engine systems?" I asked.

"You . . . go now." She nodded back the way I had chased her "Second . . . left. Third right. Then you ... know."

I let go of her, conscious that I had been holding her arm too tightly. I saw

then that both her hands had been replaced by mechanical substitutes. With a shudder my thoughts raced back to the surgical machine in Zeal's operating room, the one with the feminine hands.

"Thank you," I said softly.

But before I could leave her, she suddenly reached out her left hand and touched the metal to the side of my head, running her fingers against the skin. "Wethead," she said, with something like fascination. "Still."

"Yes," I said, trying not to flinch against the cold touch. "Zeal's talked about putting some implants into me soon, to help with the surgery . . . nothing irreversible, he says . . . but he hasn't done it yet."

Why was I talking to her so openly? Because she was a girl. Because it had been a long time since I'd seen someone who looked even remotely human, let alone someone pretty.

"Don't let," she said urgently. "Don't let. Bad thing happen soon. You okay now. You stay okay."

"I don't understand."

"You stay wethead. Stay wethead and get off ship. Soon as can. Before bad thing."

"How am I supposed to get off the ship? We're in interstellar space!"

"Your problem," she said. "Not mine."

Then she turned away, the sleeves of her overalls falling down to hide her hands.

"Wait," I called after her. "Who are you? What is . . . what was your name?"

She paused in her stiff shuffle and looked back at me. "My name . . . gone." Then her eyes flashed wild in the shadows. "Second left. Third right. Go now, Peter Vandry. Go now then get off ship."

Zeal and I were midway through another minor procedure when the engagement began. The Iron Lady shook like a struck bell. "God's teeth!" Zeal said, flinging aside his soldering iron. "What now?"

I picked up the iron and wiped sandpaper across its tip until it was bright again. "I thought the scoop fields were supposed to have settled down by now."

"That didn't feel like a field tremor to me. Felt more like an attack. Pass me the iron: we'll sew this one up before things get worse."

"An attack?" I asked.

Zeal nodded grimly. "Another ship, probably. They'll be after our cargo."

"Pirates, you mean?"

"Aye, son. Pirates. If that's what they are."

We tidied up the patient as best we could, while the ship continued to shudder. Zeal went to an intercom, bent a stalk to his lips, and spoke to the rest of the crew before returning to me. "It's an attack," he said. "Just as I reckoned. Apparently we've been trying to outrun the other ship for weeks. Quite why no one thought to tell me this . . ." He shook his head ruefully, as if he expected no better.

We were a long way in from the hull, but the impacts sounded like they were happening next door. I shuddered to think of the energies being flung against the Iron Lady's already bruised armor. "How long can we hold?" I asked.

"Come with me," Zeal said, pushing the goggle up onto his forehead. "There's a reinforced observation bubble not far from here. It's not often you'll get to see close action, so you might as well make the most of it."

Something in Zeal's tone surprised me. He'd been annoyed at the interruption to his surgical work, but he still did not sound particularly alarmed at the fact that we were being shot at by another ship.

What did Zeal know that I didn't?

As he led me to the observation bubble, I finally found the nerve to ask the question I had been meaning to put to him ever since I met the girl in the corridor, several weeks ago. Now that he was distracted with the battle, I assumed he wouldn't dwell overlong on my questions.

"Mister Zeal . . . that robot we were just working on . . ." He looked back at me.

"What about it?"

"It seems funny that we can do so much to their brains . . . stuff in, take stuff out . . ."

"Go on."

"It seems funny that we never give them language. I mean, they can understand us . . . but wouldn't it be easier if they could talk to us as well? At least that way we'd know that they'd understood our instructions."

"Language modules are too expensive. The captain has one, but that's only because a hull spar took out his speech center."

"I'm not talking about cyber modules."

Zeal halted and looked back at me again. Around us, the ship dived and roared. Emergency alarms sounded from the distance. A mechanical voice intoned warning messages. I heard the shriek of severed air line.

"What, then?"

"Why do we take out the language center in the first place? I mean, why not just leave it intact?"

"We take the lobots as we get 'em, son. If the speech center's been scooped out . . . it isn't in our power to put it back again."

I steadied myself against a bulkhead, as the floor bucked under us. "Then they're all like that?"

"Unless you know otherwise." Zeal studied me with chilling suspicion. "Wait," he said slowly. "This line of questioning . . . it wouldn't be because you've seen her, would it?"

"Her, Mister Zeal?"

"You know who I mean. The other lobot. The tenth one. You've met her, haven't you?"

"I . . ." Zeal had the better of me. "I got lost. I bumped into her somewhere near the back of the ship."

The curl of his lip intensified. "And what did she say?" "Nothing," I said hurriedly. "Nothing. Just . . . how to find my way back. That's all I asked her. That's all she said."

"She's out of control," he said, more to himself than me. "Becoming trouble. Needs something done to her."

I sensed further questions would be unwise, bitterly regretting that I had raised the subject in the first place. At least the battle was still ongoing, with no sign of any lessening in its intensity. Difficult as it was to look on that as any kind of positive development, it might force Zeal's mind onto other matters. If we had a rush of casualties, he might forget that I'd mentioned the girl at all.

Some chance, I thought.

We reached the observation bubble, Zeal silent and brooding at first. He pulled back a lever, opening an iron shutter. Beyond the glass, closer than I'd expected, was the other ship. It couldn't have been more than twenty or thirty kilometers from us.

It was another ramscoop, shaped more or less like the Iron Lady. We were so close that the magnetic fields of our scoops must have been meshed together, entangled like the rigging of two sailing ships, exchanging cannon fire. Near the front of the other ship, where the scoop pinched to a narrow mouth, I could actually see the field picked out in faint purple flickers of excited, inrushing gas. Behind the other ship was the hot spike of its drive flame: the end result of all that interstellar material being sucked up in the first place, compacted and compressed to stellar core pressures in her drive chamber. A similar flame would have been burning from the Iron Lady's stern, keeping us locked alongside.

The other ship was firing on us, discharging massive energy and projectile weapons from hull emplacements.

"They must be pirates," I said, bracing myself as the ship took another hit.

"I'd heard they existed but never really believed it until now."

"Start believing it," Zeal grunted.

"Could that ship be the Devilfish?"

"And what have you heard about the Devilfish?"

"If you take the stories seriously, that's the ship they say does most of the pirating between here and the Frolovo Hub. I suppose if pirates exist, then there's a good chance the Devilfish does as well."

The hull shook again, but it was a different kind of vibration than before: more regular, like the steady chiming of a great clock.

"That's us firing back," Zeal said. "About bloody time."

I watched our weapons impact across the hull of the other ship, 'lowering in a chain. Huge blasts ... but not enough to stop a wave retaliatory fire.

"She's switched to heavy slugs," Zeal said. "We'll feel this."

We did. It was worse than anything we had experienced before, .is if the entire ship were being shaken violently in a dog's jaw. By now the noise from the klaxons and warning voices had become deafening. Through the window I saw huge scabs of metal slam past.

"Hull plating," Zeal said. "Ours. That'll take some fixing."

"You don't seem all that worried."

"I'm not."

"But we're being shot to pieces here."

"We'll hold," he said. "Long enough."

"Long enough for what?"

I felt a falling sensation in my gut. "That's our drive flame stuttering," Zeal reported, with no sense of alarm. "Captain's turned off our scoop. We'll be on reserve fuel in a moment."

Sure enough, normal weight returned. The two ships were still locked alongside each other.

"Why's he done that?" I asked, fighting to keep the terror from my voice, not wanting to show myself up before Zeal. "We won't be able to burn reserve fuel for very long without the scoop to replenish..."

"Scoop's down for a reason, son."

I followed Zeal's gaze hack to the other ship. Once again, I saw the hot gases ramming into the engine mouth, flickering purple. But now there was something skewed about the geometry of the field, like a candle flame bending in a draught. The distortion to the field intensified, and then snapped back in the other direction.

"What's happening?"

"Her fieldmaster's trying to compensate," Zeal said. "He's pretty good, give him that."

Now the ramscoop field was oscillating wildly, caught between two distorted extremes. The pinched gas flared hotter—blue white, shifting into the violet.

"What's happening to them? Why doesn't the fieldmaster shut down the field, if he's losing control of it?"

"Too scared to. Most ships can't switch to reserve fuel as smoothly as we can."

"I still don't see ..."

That was when the field instabilities exceeded some critical limit. Gobbets of hot gas slammed into the swallowing mouth. An eyeblink later, an explosion ripped from the belly of the other ship. Instantly her drive flame and scoop field winked out.

She began to fall behind us.

We cut our engines and matched her velocity. The other ship was a wreck: a huge hole punched amidships, through which I saw glowing innards and pieces of tumbling debris, some of which looked horribly like people.

"She's dead now," I said. "We should leave, get out of here as quickly as we can. What if they repair her?"

Zeal looked at me and shook his head slowly. "You don't get it, do you? They weren't the pirates. They were just trying to get away from us."

"But I thought you said ..."

"I was having some fun. This was a scheduled interception—always ways was. It just happened a bit sooner than the captain told me."

"But then if they're not the pirates ..."

"Correct, lad. We are. And this isn't really the Iron Lady. That's only a name she wears in port." He tapped a hand against the metal framing of the bubble. "You're on the Devilfish, and that makes you one of us."

A week passed, then another. I learned to stop asking questions, afraid of where my tongue might take me. I kept thinking back to the girl in the corridor and the cryptic warning she had given me. About how I should get off the ship as soon as possible, before Mister Zeal put machines in my head or the bad thing happened. Well, a bad thing had certainly happened. The Iron Lady, or the Devilfish as I now had to think of her, had attacked and crippled another ship. Her holds had been looted for cargo. A handful of her crew had managed to escape in cryopods, but most had died in the explosion when her drive core went critical. I did not know what had happened to the few survivors, but it could not have been coincidence that I suddenly noticed we were carrying three new lobots. I had played no part in converting them, but it would not have taxed Zeal to do the surgery on his own. I knew my way around his operating room by now, knew what was difficult and what was easy. So we had murdered another ship and taken some of her crew as prize. Every hour that I stayed aboard the Devilfish made me complicit in that crime and any other attacks that were yet to take place. But where could I run to? We were between systems, in deep interstellar space. Get off ship. Before bad thing happens.

Had she meant the attack, or was she talking about something else, something yet to happen?

I had to find her again. I wanted to ask her more questions, but that wasn't the only reason. I kept seeing her face, frozen in the corridor lights. I knew nothing about her except that I wanted to know more. I wanted to touch that face, to pull back that messy curtain of hair and look into her eyes.

I fantasized about saving her: how I'd do the bare minimum in Zeal's service, just enough to keep him happy, and then jump ship at the first opportunity. Jump and run, and take the lobot girl with me. I'd outrun Happy Jack's button men; I could outrun the crew of the Devilfish.

But it wasn't going to be that easy.

"I've got a job for you," Zeal said. "Nice and easy. Then you can have the rest of the day off."

"A job?" I ventured timidly.

"Take this." He delved into his apron pocket and passed something to me: a gripped thing shaped a little like the soldering iron. "It's a tranquilizer gun," he said.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to bring the girl back in."

"The girl?"

"Don't try my patience, Peter." He closed my hand around the grip. "You know where she haunts. Find her, or let her find you. Shouldn't be too hard."

"And when I've found her?"

"Then you shoot her." He raised a warning finger. "Not to kill, just to incapacitate. Aim for a leg. She'll drop, after a minute or so. Then you bring her back to me."

He'd cleared the operating table. I knew from our work schedule that we were not expecting any more patients today.

"What do you want her for?" I asked.

"Always been a bit too chirpy, that one. She has a job to do ... a certain job that means she has to be brighter than the other lobots. But not that much brighter. I don't like it when they answer back, and I definitely don't like it when they start showing notions of free will." He smiled. "But it's all right. Nothing we can't fix, you and I."

"Fix?"

"A few minutes under the knife, is all."

My hand trembled on the gun. "But then she won't be able to talk."

"That's the idea."

"I can't shoot her," I said. "She's still a person. There's still something

left of who she was."

"How would you know? All she told you was how to get back home. Or did you talk more than you said?"

"No," I said, cowed. "Only what I told you."

"Good. Then you won't lose any sleep over it, will you?"

With gun in my hand I considered turning it on Mister Zeal and putting him under and then killing him. With the rest of the crew still alive, my chances of stopping the Devilfish (let alone making it off the ship in one piece) were practically zero. It would be a futile gesture, nothing more. Without Zeal the crew would be inconvenienced, but most of them would still survive.

I still wanted to stop them, but the gun wasn't the answer. And she was just a lobot, after all. She hadn't even remembered her name. What kind of person did that make her?

I slipped the gun into my belt.

"Good lad," Zeal said.

I found her again. It didn't take all that long, considering. I kept a careful note on the twists and turns I took, doubling back every now and then to make sure the ship really wasn't shifting itself around me. That much had always been my imagination, and now that I was revisiting the zone where I had been lost before, it all looked a degree more familiar. Now that I had been given license to enter this part of the ship, I felt more confident. I still wasn't happy about shooting the girl ... but then it wasn't as if Zeal was going to kill her. When so much had already been taken from her, what difference did a little bit more make?

I turned a corner and there she was. She wolfed vile-looking paste into her mouth from some kind of spigot in the wall, the stuff lathering her metal hands.

My hand tightened on the gun, still tucked into my belt. I took a pace closer, hoping she would stay engrossed in her meal.

She stopped eating and looked at me. Through the tangled fringe of her hair, eyes shone feral and bright.

"Peter Vandry," she said, and then did something horrible and unexpected, something no lobot should ever do.

She smiled.

It was only a flicker of a smile, quickly aborted, but I had still seen it. My hand trembled as I withdrew the gun and slipped off the safety catch.

"No," she said, backing away from the spigot.

"I'm sorry," I said, aiming the gun. "It isn't personal. If I don't do it, Zeal'll kill me."

"Don't," she said, raising her hands. "Not shoot. Not shoot me. Not now. Not now."

"I'm sorry," I said again.

My finger tightened on the trigger. Two things made me hesitate, though. The first was: what did she mean: not now? What did it matter to her if I shot her now, rather than later? The second thing was those fierce, beautiful eyes.

My hesitation lasted an instant too long.

"Baby," she said.

The gun quivered in my hand, and then leapt free with painful force, nearly snapping my fingers as it escaped my grip. It slammed into the wall, the impact smashing it apart. The metal remains hovered there for an agonizing instant, before dropping—one by one—to the floor.

I looked on, stunned at what had just happened.

"Warn ... you," she said. "Warn you good, Peter Vandry. Warn you . . . get off ship. Stay wethead. Soon bad thing happen and you still here."

I pushed my hand against my chest, trying to numb the pain in my forefinger, where it had been twisted out of the trigger grip.

"The bad thing already happened," I said, angry and confused at the same time.

"We took out a ship . . . killed its crew."

"No," she said, shaking her head gravely. "That not what I mean. I mean real bad thing. Real bad thing happen here. Here and soon. This ship."

I looked at the remains of the gun. "What just happened?" "She save me."
I frowned. "She?"
For a moment the girl seemed torn between infinite opposed possibilities.
"You try shoot me, Peter Vandry. I trust you and you try shoot me."
"I'm sorry. I didn't want to . . . it's just that I need to keep on Mister Zeal's good side."
"Zeal bad man. Why you work for Zeal?"
"I didn't have a choice. They tricked me aboard. I didn't know this was a pirate ship. I just needed a ticket off Mokmer." "What happen on Mokmer?"
"Bad thing," I said, with half a smile.
"Tell."
"A man called Happy Jack did something to my sister. I got even with Happy Jack. Unfortunately, that meant I couldn't stick around."
"Happy Jack bad man?"
"As bad as Zeal."
She looked at me, hard and deep and inquiring, and then said, "I hope you not lie, Peter Vandry."
"I'm not lying."
of their function, the brutal way they'd been grafted to her arms. She showed me her hands, giving me time to admire the crudity
"Zeal did this."
"I figured."
"Once I work for Zeal. All go well . . . until one day. Then I make mistake. Zeal get angry. Zeal take hands. Zeal say 'more use on end of machine.'
"I'm sorry."
"Zeal got temper. One day Zeal get angry with you." "I'll be off the ship before then."
"You hope."
Now it was my turn to sound angry. "What does it matter?
There's nowhere for me to go. I have no choice but to work with Zeal."
"No," she said. "You have choice."
"I don't see that I do."
"I show. Then you understand. Then you help."
I looked at her. "I just tried to shoot you. Why would you still trust me?"
She cocked her head, as if my question made only the barest sense to her. "You ask me . . . what my name is." She blinked, screwing up her face with the effort of language. "What my name was."
"But you didn't know."
"Doesn't matter. No one else . . . ever ask. Except you, Peter Vandry."
She took me deeper into the ship, into the part I had always been told was off-limits because of its intense radiation. Dimly, it began to dawn on me that this was just a lie to dissuade the curious.
"Zeal not happy, you not bring me in," she said.
"I'll make something up. Tell him I couldn't find you, or that you tricked me and destroyed the gun."
"Not work on Zeal."
"I'll think of something," I said glibly. "In the meantime . . . you can just hide out here. When we dock, we can both make a run for it."
She laughed. "I not get off Devilfish, Peter Vandry. I die here."
"No," I said. "It doesn't have to happen like that."
"Yes, it does. Nearly time now."
"Back there," I said. "When you did that thing with the gun . . . what did you mean when you said 'baby'?"
"I mean this," she said, and opened a door.
It led into a huge and bright room: part of the engine system. Since my time on the ship, I had learned enough of the ramscoop design to understand that the interstellar gases collected by the magnetic scoop had to pass through the middle of the ship to reach the combustion chamber at the rear . . . which was somewhere near where we were standing.

Overhead was a thick, glowing tube, running the length of the room. That was the fuel conduit. With the drive off, the glass lining the tube would have been midnight black. Only a fraction of the glow from the heated gases shone through ... but it was still enough to bathe the room in something like daylight.

But that wasn't the only bright thing in the room.

We walked along a railed catwalk, high above the floor. Below, but slightly off to one side, was a thick metal cage in the form of a horizontal cylinder. The cage flickered with containment fields.

Something huge floated in the cage. It was a creature: sleek and elongated, aglow with its own fierce, brassy light. Something like a whale but carved from molten lava. Quilted in fiery platelets that flexed and undulated as the creature writhed in the field's embrace. Flickering with arcs and filaments of lightning, like a perpetual dance of St. Elmo's fire.

I squinted against the glare from the alien thing.

"What ... ?" I asked, not needing to say any more.

"Flux Swimmer," she said. "Devilfish found her . . . living in outflow jet from star. Didn't evolve there. Migrated. Star to star, billions of years. Older than Galaxy."

I stared, humbled, at the astonishing thing. "I've heard of such things. In the texts of the Kalarash ... but everyone always assumed they were legendary animals, like unicorns, or dragons, or tigers."

"Real," she said. "Just ... rare."

The creature writhed again, flexing the long, flattened whip of its body. "But why? Why keep it here?"

"Devilfish needs Flux Swimmer," she said. "Flux Swimmer . . . has power. Magnetic fields. Reaches out . . . shapes. Changes."

I nodded slowly, beginning to understand. I thought back to the engagement with the other ramscoop; the way its intake field had become fatally distorted.

"The Flux Swimmer is the Devilfish's weapon against other ships," I said, speaking for the girl. "She reaches out and twists their magnetic fields. Zeal always knew we were going to win." I looked down at the creature again, looking so pitiful in its metal cage. I did not have to read the animal's mind to know that it did not want to be held here, locked away in the heart of the Devilfish.

"They .. make her do this," the girl said.

"Torture?"

"No. She could always ... choose to die. Easier for her." "How, then?"

She led me along an extension to the catwalk, so that we walked directly over the trapped animal. It was then that I understood how the crew exerted their control on the alien.

Hidden from view before, but visible now, was a smaller version of the same cage. It sat next to the Flux Swimmer. It held another version of the alien animal, but one that was much tinier than the first. Probes reached through the field, contacting the fiery hide of the little animal.

"Baby," the girl said. "Hurt baby. Make mother shape field, or hurt baby even more. That how it works."

It was all too much. I closed my eyes, numbed at the implication horror I had just been shown. The baby was not being hurt now, but that was only because the Devilfish did not need the mother's set vices. But when another ship needed to be destroyed and looted . . . then the pain would begin again, until the mother extended her alien influence beyond the hull and twisted the other ship's magnetic field.

"I see why the captain cut our field now," I said. "It was so she could reach through it."

"Yes. Captain clever."

"Where do you come into it?" I asked.

"I look after them. Tend them. Keep them alive." She nodded upward, to where smaller conduits branched off the main fuel line. "Swimmers drink plasma."

Captain lets them have fuel. Just enough...keep alive. No more."

"We've got to stop this evern happening again," I said, reopening my eyes. Then a thought occured to me. "But she can stop it, can't she? If the mother has enough influence over magnetic fields to twist the ramscoop of a ship thirty kilometers away...surely she can stop the captain and hiw crew? They're cyborgs, after all. They're practically made of metal."

"No," she said, shaking her head in exasperation--either with the situaiton, or her own limitaitons. "Mother...too strong. Long range...good control. Smash other ship, eays. Short range...bad. Too near"

"So what you're saying is . . . she can't exercise enough local intro!, because she's too strong?"

"Yes," she said, nodding emphatically. "Too strong. Too much danger ... kill baby."

So the mother was powerless, I thought: she had the ability to destroy another ramscoop, but not to unshackle herself from her own chains without harming her child.

"Wait, though. The thing with the gun ... that took some precision, didn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "But not mother. Baby."

She had said it with something like pride. "The baby can do the same trick?"

"Baby weak . . . for now. But I make baby stronger. Give baby more fuel. They say starve baby . . . keep baby alive, but just." She clenched her fist and snarled. "I disobey. Give baby more food. Let baby get stronger. Then one day..."

"The baby will be able to do what the mother can't," I said. "Kill them all. That's the bad thing, isn't it? That's what you were warning me about. Telling me to, get off the ship before it happened. And to make sur eZEal didn't pu timplant sin my head. So I'd have a chance."

"Someone..live," she said. 'Someone...come back. Find Devilfish. Let mother and baby go. Take them home."

"Why not you?"

She touched the side of her head. "I, lobot."

"Oh, no."

"When bad thing happen, I go too. But you live, Peter Vandy. You wethead. You come back."

"How soon?" I breathed, not wanting to think about what she had just said.

"Soon. Baby stronger . . . hour by hour. Control . . . improving. See, feel, all around it. Empathic. Know what to do. Understand good." Again that flicker of pride. "Baby clever."

"Zeal's on to you. That's why he sent me here."

"That why ... has to happen soon. Before Zeal take away ... mc. What left behind after ... not care about baby."

"And now?"

"I care. I love."

"Well, isn't that heartwarming," said a voice behind us.

I turned around, confronted by the sight of Mister Zeal blocking the main catwalk, advancing toward us with a heavy gun in his human hand: not a tranquilizer this time. He shook his head disappointedly. "Here was I, thinking maybe you needed some help . . . and when I arrive I find you having a good old chinwag with the lobot!"

"Zeal make you lobot too," she said. "He train you now . . . just to build up neuromotor patterns."

"Listen to her," Zeal said mockingly. "Step aside now, Peter. Let me finish the job you were so tragically incapable of completing."

I stood my ground. "Is that right, Zeal? Were you going to make me into one of them as well, or were you just planning on taking my hands?"

"Stand aside, lad. And it's Mister Zeal to you, by the way." "No," I said.

"I'm not letting you touch her."

"Fine, then."

Zeal aimed the gun and shot me. The round tore through my leg, just below the

knee. I yelped and started to fold as my leg buckled under me. By tightening my grip on the railings I managed not to slip off the catwalk.

Zeal advanced toward me, boots clanging on the catwalk. I could barely hold myself up now. Blood was drooling down my leg from the wound. My hands were slippery on the railing, losing their grip.

"I'm trying not to do too much damage," Zeal said, before leveling the gun at me again. "I'd still like to be able to salvage something."

I steeled myself against the shot.

"Baby," the girl called.

Zeal's arm swung violently aside, mashing against the railing. His hand spasmed open to drop the gun. It clattered to the deck of the catwalk, then dropped all the way to the floor of the chamber, where it smashed apart. Zeal grunted in anguish, using his good hand to massage the fingers of the other.

"Nice trick," he said. "But it'll only make it slower and messier for both of you."

With both hands—he couldn't have been hurt that badly—he delved into the pocket on the front of his apron. He came out with a pair of long, vicious-looking knives, turning them edge-on so that we'd see how sharp they were.

"Baby ..." I called.

But Zeal kept advancing, sharpening the knives on each other, showing no indication that the baby was having any effect on his weapons. It was only then that I realized that the knives were not necessarily made of metal. Baby wasn't going to be able to do anything about them.

Zeal's huge boots clanged ponderously closer. The pain in my leg was now excruciating, beginning to dull my alertness. Slumped down on the deck, I could barely reach his waist, let alone the knives.

"Easy now, lad," he said as I tried to block him. "Easy now, and we'll make it nice and quick when it's your turn. How does that sound?"

"It sounds ..."

I pawed ineffectually at the leather of his apron, slick with blood and oil. I couldn't begin to get a grip on it, even if I'd had the strength to stop him.

"Now lad," he said, sounding more disappointed than angry. "Don't make me slash at your hands. They're too good to waste like that."

"You're not getting any part of me."

He clucked in amusement and knelt down just far enough to stab the tip of one of the knives—the one he held in his right hand—against my chest. "Seriously, now."

The pressure of the knife made me fall back, so that my back was on the deck. That was when I touched the deck with my bare hand and felt how warm it was. Warm and getting hotter.

Inductive heating, I thought: Baby's magnetic field washing back and forth over the metal, cooking it.

I twisted my neck to glance back at the girl and saw her pain. She held her hands in front of her, like someone expecting a gift. Baby must have been warming her hands as well as the deck.

Baby couldn't help it.

Flat on the deck now, Zeal lowered his heel onto my chest. "Yes, the deck's getting hotter. I can just feel it through the sole of my shoe."

"Don't you touch her."

He increased the pressure on my chest, crushing the wind from my lungs. "Or what, exactly?"

I didn't have the strength to answer. All I could do was push ineffectually against his boot, in the hope of snatching a breath of air. "I'll deal with you in a moment," Zeal said, preparing to move on. But then he stopped.

Even from where I was lying, I saw something change on his face. The cocky set of his jaw slipped a notch. His eyes looked up, as if he'd seen something on the ceiling.

He hadn't. He was looking at his goggle, pushed high onto his forehead.

Nothing about the goggle had changed, except for the thin wisp of smoke curling away from it where it contacted his skin.

It was beginning to burn its way into his forehead, pulled tight by the strap. Zeal let out an almighty bellow of pain and fury: real this time. His hands jerked up reflexively, as if he meant to snatch the goggle away. But both hands were holding knives.

He screamed, as the hot thing seared into his forehead like a brand. He lowered his hands, and tried to fumble one of the knives into his apron pocket. His movements were desperate, uncoordinated. The knife tore at the leather but couldn't find its way home. Finally, shrieking, he simply dropped the weapon.

It fell to the decking. I reached out and took it.

Zeal reached up with his bare hand and closed his fingers around the goggle. Instantly I heard the sizzle of burning skin. He tried to pull his hand away, but his fingers appeared to have stuck to the goggle. Thrashing now, he reached up with the other knife—still unwilling to relinquish it—and tried to use its edge to lever offending mass of fused metal and skin from his forehead.

That was when I plunged the other knife into his shin, and twisted. Zeal teetered, fighting for balance. But with one hand stuck to his forehead and the other holding the knife, he had no means to secure himself.

I assisted him over the edge. Zeal screamed as he fell. Then there was a clatter and a sudden, savage stillness.

For what seemed like an age I lay on the catwalk, panting until the pain lost its focus.

"It won't be long before the rest of the crew comes after us," I told the girl.

She was still holding her metal hands before her: I could only imagine her pain.

"Need to make baby strong now," she said. "Feed it more." She moved to a console set into a recess in the railing itself. She touched her claws against the controls, and then gasped, unable to complete whatever action she'd had in mind.

I forced myself to stand, putting most of my weight on my good leg. My arm was in a bad way, but the fingers still worked. If I splinted it, I ought to be able to grip something.

I lurched and hobbled until I was next to her.

"Show me what to do."

"Give Baby more fuel," she said, indicating a set of controls. "Turn that. All the way."

I did what she said. The decking rumbled, as if the ship itself had shuddered. Overhead, I noticed a dimming in the glow of the pipe after the point where the smaller lines branched out of it.

"How long?" I said, pushing my good hand against the slug wound to keep the blood at bay.

"Not long. Ship get slower . . . but not enough for captain to notice. Baby drink. Then . . . bad thing."

"Everyone aboard will die?"

"Baby kill them. Fry them alive, same way as Zeal. Except you."

I thought of all that the Devilfish had done. If only half of those stories were true, it was still more than enough to justify what was about to happen.

"How long?" I repeated.

"Thirty . . . forty minutes."

"Then it's time enough," I said.

She looked at me wonderingly. "Time enough . . . for what?" "To get you to the surgeon's room. To get you on the table and get those implants out of your head."

Something like hope crossed her face. It was there, fleetingly. Then it was gone, wiped away. How often had she dared to hope, before learning to crush the emotion before it caused any more pain? I didn't want to know . . . not yet.

"No," she said. "Not time."

"There is time," I said. If I could extract those implants in time, and remove those metal hands, she would weather Baby's magnetic storm when it ripped through the rest of the crew. There was nothing I could do for the other lobots, not in the time that was left. And maybe there was nothing anyone could do for them now.

But the girl was different. I knew there was something more in there . . . something that hadn't been completely erased. Maybe she didn't remember her name now, but with time . . . with patience . . . who knew what was possible? But first we had to save the aliens. And we would, too. We'd have the Devilfish to ourselves. If we couldn't work out how to fly the aliens home, we could at least let them go. They were creatures of space: all that they really craved was release.

Then . . . once the Flux Swimmers were taken care of . . . we'd find a cryopod and save ourselves. So what if it took a while before anyone found us?

"No time," she said again.

"There is," I said. "And we're doing this. You're my patient, and I'm not giving up on you. I'm Peter Vandry, surgeon."

"Surgeon's mate," she corrected.

I looked down at Zeal's spread-eagled, motionless form and shook my head.

"Surgeon, actually. Someone just got a promotion."