

## THE HERO

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"Is everybody ready?" shouted Captain Emmen. At least, Jessie thought that's what he'd said—it was impossible to hear anything over the spine-grating noise that filled the sky.

Jessie coughed, covering his mouth with his hand to stop the blood from showing. In this weightless air, the droplets would turn and gleam for everybody to see, and if they saw it, he would be off the team.

Ten miles away the sound of the capital bug had been a droning buzz. With two miles to go, it had become a maddening—and deafening—howl. Much closer, and the bug's defense mechanism would be fatal to an unshielded human.

Jessie perched astride his jet just off the side of the salvage ship *Mistelle*. *Mistelle* was a scow, really, but Captain Emmen had ambitions. Lined up next to Jessie were eight other brave or stupid volunteers, each clutching the handlebars of a wingless jet engine. Mounted opposite the saddle ("below" Jessie's feet) was a ten-foot black-market missile. It was his team's job to get close enough to the capital bug to aim their missiles at its noise-throats. They were big targets—organic trumpets hundreds of feet long—but there were a lot of them, and the bug was miles long.

Jessie had never heard of anybody breaking into a capital bug's pocket ecology while the insect was still alive. Captain Emmen meant to try, because there was a story that a Batetranian treasure ship had crashed into this bug, decades ago. Supposedly you could see it when distant sunlight shafted through the right perforation in the bug's side. The ship was still intact, so they said.

Jessie wasn't here for the treasure ship. He'd been told a different story about this particular bug.

Emmen swung his arm in a chopping motion and the other jets shot away. Weak and dizzy as he was, Jessie was slower off the mark, but in seconds he was catching up. The other riders looked like flies optimistically lugging pea-pods; they were lit from two sides by two distant suns, one red with distance, the other yellow and closer, maybe two hundred miles away. In those quadrants of the sky not lit by the suns, abysses of air stretched away to seeming infinity—above, below, and to all sides.

*Mistelle* became a spindle-shape of wood and iron, its jets splayed behind it like an open hand. Ahead, the capital bug was too big to be seen as a single thing: it revealed itself to Jessie as landscapes, a vertical flank behind coiling clouds, a broad plain above that lit amber by the more distant sun. The air between him and it was crowded with clouds, clods of earth, and arrowing flocks of birds somehow immune to the bug's sound. Balls of water shot past as he accelerated; some were the size of his head, some a hundred feet across. And here and there, mountain-sized boluses of bug-shit smeared brown across the sky.

The jet made an ear-splitting racket, but he couldn't hear it over the sound

of the bug. Jessie was swaddled in protective gear, his ears plugged, eyes protected behind thick goggles. He could hear the sound inside his body now, feel it vibrating his heart and loosening the bloody mess that was taking over his lungs. He'd start coughing any second, and once he did he might not be able to stop.

Fine, he thought grimly. Maybe I'll cough the whole damn thing out.

The noise had become pure pain. His muscles were cramping, he was finding it hard to breathe. Past a blur of vibration, he saw one of the other riders double up suddenly and tumble off his jet. The vehicle spun away, nearly hitting somebody else. And here came the cough.

The noise was too strong, he couldn't cough. The frozen reflex had stopped his breathing entirely; Jessie knew he had only seconds to live. Even as he thought this, curtains of cloud parted as the jet shot through them at a hundred miles an hour, and directly ahead of him stood the vast tower of the bug's fourth horn.

The jet's engine choked and failed; Jessie's right goggle cracked; the handlebars began to rattle loose from their fittings as his vision grayed. A rocket contrail blossomed to his right and he realized he was looking straight down the throat of the horn. He thumbed the firing button and was splashed and kicked by fire and smoke. In one last moment of clarity Jessie let go of the handlebars so the jet wouldn't break his bones in the violence of its tumble.

The ferocious scream stopped. Jessie took in a huge breath, and began to cough. Blood sprayed across the air. Breath rasping, he looked ahead to see that he was drifting toward some house-sized nodules that sprouted from the capital bug's back. The broken, smoking horns jutted like fantastically eroded sculptures, each hundreds of feet long. He realized with a start that one of them was still blaring, but by itself it could no longer kill.

In the distance, the Mistelle wallowed in a cloud of jet exhaust, and began to grow larger.

I did it, Jessie thought. Then the gray overwhelmed all thought and sense and he closed his eyes.

Bubbles spun over the side of the washtub. In the rotational gravity of Aitlin Town, they twirled and shimmered and slid sideways from Coriolis force as they descended. Jessie watched them with fascination—not because he'd never seen bubbles before, but because he'd never seen one fall.

They'd both gotten into trouble, so he and his oldest brother Camron were washing the troupe's costumes today. Jessie loved it; he never got a chance to talk to Camron, except to exchange terse barks during practice or a performance. His brother was ten years older than he, and might as well have lived in a different family.

"That's what the world is, you know," Camron said casually. Jessie looked at him quizzically.

"A bubble," said Camron, nodding at the little iridescent spheres. "The whole world is a bubble, like that."

"Is naaawwt."

Camron sighed. "Maybe Father isn't willing to pay to have you educated, Jessie, but he's sent me to school. Three times. 'The world of Virga is a hollow pressure-vessel, five thousand miles in diameter.'"

One big bubble was approaching the floor. Sunlight leaned across the window, a beam of gold from distant Candesce that was pinioning one spot of sky as the ring-shaped wooden town rotated through it. After a few seconds the beam flicked away, leaving the pearly shine of cloud-light.

"The whole world's a bubble," repeated Camron, "and all our suns are man-made."

Jessie knew the smaller suns, which lit spherical volumes only a few hundred miles diameter, were artificial: they'd once flown past one at night, and he'd seen that it was a great glass-and-metal machine. Father had called it a "polywell fusion" generator. But surely the greatest sun of all, so ancient it had been there at the beginning of everything, so bright and hot no ship could ever approach it—"Not Candesce," said Jessie. "Not the sun of suns."

Camron nodded smugly. "Even Candesce. 'Cept that in the case of Candesce, whoever built it only made so many keys—and we lost them all." Another shaft of brilliance burst into the laundry room. "People made Candesce—but now nobody can turn it off."

The bubble flared in purples, greens, and gold, an inch above the floorboards.

"That's just silly," scoffed Jessie. "'Cause if the whole world were just a bubble, then that would make it—"

The bubble touched the floor, and vanished.

"—mortal," finished Camron. He met Jessie's eye, and his look was serious.

Jessie shivered and wiped at his mouth. Dried blood had caked there. His whole chest ached, his head was pounding, and he felt so weak and nauseous he doubted he'd have been able to stand if he'd been under gravity.

He hung weightless in a strange fever-dream of a forest, with pale pink tree trunks that reached past him to open into, not leaves, but a single stretched surface that had large round or oval holes in it here and there. Beyond them he could see sky. The tree trunks didn't converge onto a clump of soil or rock as was usual with weightless groves, but rather tangled their roots into an undulant plain a hundred yards away from the canopy.

The light that angled through the holes shone off the strangest collection of life forms Jessie had ever seen. Fuzzy donut-shaped things inched up and down the "tree" trunks, and mirror-bright birds flickered and flashed as

the light caught them. Something he'd taken to be a cloud in the middle distance turned out to be a raft of jellyfish, conventional enough in the airs of Virga, but these were gigantic.

The whole place reeked, the sharp tang reminding Jessie of the jars holding preserved animal parts that he'd seen in the one school he briefly attended as a boy.

He was just under the skin of the capital bug. The jet volunteers had taken turns squinting through the Mistelle's telescope, each impressing on him- or herself as many details of the giant creature's body as they could. Jessie recalled the strange skin that patched the monster's back; it'd had holes in it.

It was through these holes that they'd caught glimpses of something that might be a wrecked ship. As the fog of pain and exhaustion lifted, Jessie realized that he might be close to it now. But where were the others?

He twisted in midair and found a threadlike vine or root within reach. Pulling himself along it (it felt uncomfortably like skin under his palms) he reached one of the "tree trunks" which might really be more analogous to hairs for an animal the size of the capital bug. He kicked off from the trunk, then off another, and so maneuvered himself through the forest and in the direction of a brighter patch.

He was so focused on doing this that he didn't hear the tearing sound of the jet until it was nearly on him. "Jessie! You're alive!" Laughter dopplered down as a blurred figure shot past from behind.

It was Chirk, her canary-yellow jacket an unmistakable spatter against the muted colors of the bug. As she circled back, Jessie realized that he could still barely hear her jet; he must be half-deaf from the bug's drone.

Chirk was a good ten years older than Jessie, and she was the only woman on the missile team. Maybe it was that she recognized him as even more of an outsider than herself, but for whatever reason she had adopted Jessie as her sidekick the day she met him. He indulged her—and, even three months ago, he would have been flattered and eager to make a new friend. But he hid the blood in his cough even from her—particularly from her—and remained formal in their exchanges.

"So?" She stopped on the air, ten feet away, and extended her hand. "Take a lift from a lady?"

Jessie hesitated. "Did they find the wreck?"

"Yes!" She almost screamed it. "Now come on! They're going to beat us there—the damned Mistelle itself is tearing a hole in the bug's back so they can come up alongside her."

Jessie stared at her, gnawing his lip. Then: "It's not why I came." He leaned back, securing his grip on the stalk he was holding.

The bug was turning ponderously, so distant sunlight slid down and across Chirk's astonished features. Her hand was still outstretched. "What the 'f

you talking about? This is it! Treasure! Riches for the rest of your life—but you gotta come with me now!"

"I didn't come for the treasure," he said. Having to explain himself was making Jessie resentful. "You go on, Chirk, you deserve it. You take my share too, if you want."

Now she drew back her hand, blinking. "What is this? Jessie, are you all right?"

Tears started in his eyes. "No, I'm not all right, Chirk. I'm going to die." He stabbed a finger in his mouth and brought it out, showed her the red on it. "It's been coming on for months. Since before I signed on with Emmen. So, you see, I really got no use for treasure."

She was staring at him in horror. Jessie forced a smile. "I could use my jet, though, if you happen to have seen where it went."

Wordlessly, she held out her hand again. This time Jessie took it, and she gunned the engine, flipping them over and accelerating back the way Jessie had come.

As they shot through a volume of clear air she turned in her saddle and frowned at him. "You came here to die, is that it?"

Jessie shook his head. "Not yet. I hope not yet." He massaged his chest, feeling the deep hurt there, the spreading weakness. "There's somebody here I want to talk to."

Chirk nearly flew them into one of the pink stalks. "Someone here? Jess, you were with us just now. You heard that. . . song. You know nobody could be alive in here. It's why nobody's ever gotten at the wreck."

He nodded. "Not a—" He coughed. "Not a person, no—" The coughing took over for a while. He spat blood, dizzy, pain behind his eyes now too. When it all subsided he looked up to find they were coming alongside his jet, which was nuzzling a dent in a vast rough wall that cut across the forest of stalks.

He reached for the jet and managed to snag one of its handlebars. Before he climbed onto it he glanced back; Chirk was looking at him with huge eyes. She clearly didn't know what to do.

He stifled a laugh lest it spark more coughing. "There's a precipice moth here. I heard about it by chance when my family and me were doing a performance in Batetran. It made the newspapers there: Moth Seen Entering Capital Bug."

"Precip—Precip moth?" She rolled the word around in her mouth. "Wait a minute, you mean a world-diver? One of those dragons that're supposed to hide at the edges of the world to waylay travelers?"

He shook his head, easing himself carefully onto the jet. "A defender of the world. Not human. Maybe the one that blew up the royal palace in Slipstream last year. Surely you heard about that."

"I heard about a monster. It was a moth?" She was being uncharacteristically thick-headed. Jessie was ready to forgive that, considering the circumstances.

She showed no signs of hying off to her well-deserved treasure, so Jessie told her the story as he'd heard it—of how Admiral Chaison Fanning of Slipstream had destroyed an invasion fleet, hundreds of cruisers strong, with only seven little ships of his own. Falcon captured him and tortured him to find out how he'd done it, but he'd escaped and returned to Slipstream, where he'd deposed the Pilot, Slipstream's hereditary monarch.

"Nobody knows how he stopped that invasion fleet," said Chirk. "It was impossible."

Jessie nodded. "Yeah, that's right. But I found out."

Now she had to hear that story, but Jessie was reluctant to tell her. He'd told no one else because he trusted no one else, not with the location of one of the greatest secrets of the world. He trusted Chirk—she had her own treasure now—yet he was still reluctant, because that would mean admitting how he'd been wedged into a dark corner of Rainsouk Amphitheater, crying alone when the place unexpectedly began to fill with people.

For months Jessie had been hearing about Rainsouk; his brothers were so excited over the prospect of performing here. Jessie was the youngest, and not much of an acrobat—he could see that in his father's eyes every time he missed a catch and sailed on through the weightless air to fetch up, humiliated, in a safety net. Jessie had given up trying to please the family, had in fact become increasingly alone and isolated outside their intense focus and relentless team spirit. When the cough started he tried to hide it, but their little traveling house was just too small to do that for long.

When Father found out, he was just disappointed, that was all. Disappointed that his youngest had gotten himself sick and might die. So Jessie was off the team—and though nobody said it out loud, off the team meant out of the family.

So there he'd been, crying in the amphitheater he'd never get to perform in, when it began to fill with black-garbed men and women.

As he opened his mouth to refuse to tell her, Jessie found himself spilling the whole story, humiliating as it was. "These visitors, they were terrifying, Chirk. It looked like a convention of assassins, every man and woman the last person you'd want to meet on a dark night. And then the scariest of them flew out to the middle of the place and started to talk."

The very world was threatened, he'd said. Only he and his brothers and sisters could save it, for this was a meeting of the Virga home guard. The guard were a myth—so Jessie had been taught. He'd heard stories about them his whole life, of how they guarded the walls of the world against the terrifying monsters and alien forces prowling just outside.

"Yet here they were," he told Chirk. "And their leader was reminding them that something is trying to get in, right now, and the only thing that keeps

it out is Candescence. The sun of suns emits a . . . he called it a 'field,' that keeps the monsters out. But the same field keeps us from developing any of the powerful technologies we'd need to stop the monsters if they did get in. Technologies like radar. . . . and get this:

"It was radar that made Admiral Chaison Fanning's ships able to run rings around Falcon Formation's fleet. Because Fanning had found a key to Candescence, and had gone inside to shut down the field for a day."

Chirk crossed her arms, smiling skeptically. "Now this is a tall tale," she said.

"Believe it or not," said Jessie with a shrug, "it's true. He gave the key to the precipice moth that helped him depose the Pilot, and it flew away. . . the home guard didn't know where. But I knew."

"Ahh," she said. "That newspaper article. It came here."

"Where it could be sure of never being disturbed," he said eagerly.

"And now you're, what?—going to duel it for the key?" She laughed. "Seems to me you're in no state to slay dragons, Jess." She held out her hand. "Look, you're too weak to fly, even. Come with me. At least we'll make you rich before. . ." She glanced away. "You can afford the best doctors, you know they—"

He shook his head, and spun the pedals of the jet's starter spring. "That moth doesn't know what I overheard in the amphitheater. That the walls of the world are failing. Candescence's shield isn't strong enough anymore. We need the key so we can dial down the field and develop technologies that could stop whatever's out there. The moth's been hiding in here, it doesn't know, Chirk."

The jet roared into life. "I can't slay a dragon, Chirk," he shouted. "But at least I can give it the news."

He opened the throttle and left her before she could reply.

They dressed as heroes. Dad wore gold and leather, the kids flame-red. Mom was the most fabulous creature Jessie had ever seen, and every night he fell in love with her all over again. She wore feathers of transparent blue plex, plumage four feet long that she could actually fly with when the gravity was right. She would be captured by the children—little devils—and rescued by Dad. They played all over the principalities, their backdrop a vast wall of spinning town wheels, green ball-shaped parks and the hithering-thithering traffic of a million airborne people. Hundreds of miles of it curved away to cup blazing Candescence. They had to be amazing to beat a sight like that. And they were.

For as long as Jessie could remember, though, there had been certain silences. Some evenings, the kids knew not to talk. They stuck to their picture books, or played outside or just plain left the house for a while. The silence radiated from Mom and Dad, and there was no understanding it. Jessie didn't notice how it grew, but there came a time when the only music in their lives seemed to happen during performance. Even rehearsals were

strained. And then, one day, Mom just wasn't there anymore.

They had followed the circus from the principalities into the world's outer realms, where the suns were spaced hundreds of miles apart and the chilly darkness between them was called "winter."

Jessie remembered a night lit by distant lightning that curled around a spherical stormcloud. They were staying on a little town wheel whose name he no longer remembered—just a spinning hoop of wood forty feet wide and a mile or so across, spoked by frayed ropes and home to a few hundred farm families. Mom had been gone for four days. Jessie stepped out of the hostel where they were staying to see Dad leaning out over the rushing air, one strong arm holding a spoke-rope while he stared into the headwind.

"But where would she go?" Jessie heard him murmur. That was all that he ever said on the matter, and he didn't even say it to his boys.

They weren't heroes after that. From that day forward, they dressed as soldiers, and their act was a battle.

The capital bug was hollow. This in itself wasn't such a surprise—something so big wouldn't have been able to move under its own power if it wasn't. It would have made its own gravity. What made Jessie swear in surprise was just how little there was to it, now that he was inside.

The bug's perforated back let in sunlight, and in those shafts he beheld a vast oval space, bigger than any stadium he had ever juggled in. The sides and bottom of the place were carpeted in trees, and more hung weightless in the central space, the roots of five or six twined together at their bases so that they thrust branch and leaf every which way. Flitting between these were mirror-bright schools of long-finned fish; chasing those were flocks of legless crimson and yellow birds. As Jessie watched, a struggling group of fish managed to make it to a thirty-foot-diameter ball of water. The pursuing birds peeled away at the last second as the punctured water ball quivered and tossed off smaller spheres. This drama took place in complete silence; there was no sound at all although the air swarmed with insects as well as the larger beasts.

Of course, nothing could have made itself heard over the buzz of the capital bug itself. So, he supposed nothing tried.

The air was thick with the smell of flowers, growth, and decay. Jessie took the jet in a long curving tour of the vast space, and for a few moments he was able to forget everything except the wonder of being here. Then, as he returned to his starting point, he spotted the wreck, and the Mistelle. They were high up in something like a gallery that stretched around the "top" of the space, under the perforated roof. Both were dwarfed by their setting, but he could clearly see his teammates' jets hovering over the wreck. The stab of sorrow that went through him almost set him coughing again. It would only take seconds and he'd be with them. At least he could watch their jubilation as they plundered the treasure he'd helped them find.

And then what? They could shower him with jewels but he couldn't buy his life back. At best he could hold such baubles up to the light and admire them for a while, before dying alone and unremarked.



He turned the jet and set to exploring the forested gut of the capital bug.

Jessie had seen very few built-up places that weren't inhabited. In Virga, real estate was something you made, like gravity or sunlight. Wilderness as a place didn't exist, except in those rare forests that had grown by twining their roots and branches until their whole matted mass extended for miles. He'd seen one of those on the fringe of the principalities, where Candescence's light was a mellow rose and the sky permanently peach-tinged. That tangled mass of green had seemed like a delirium dream, an intrusion into the sane order of the world. But it was nothing to the wilderness of the capital bug.

Bugs were rare; at any one time there might only be a few dozen in the whole world. They never got too close to the sun of suns, so they were never seen in the principalities. They dwelt in the turbulent middle space between civilization and winter, where suns wouldn't stay on station and nations would break up and drift apart. Of course, they were also impossible to approach, so it was likely that no one had ever flown through these cathedrals walled by gigantic flowers, these ship-sized grass stalks dewed by beads of water big as houses. Despite his pain and exhaustion, the place had its way with him and he found himself falling into a meditative calm he associated with that moment before you make your jump—or, in midair, that moment before your father catches your hand.

In its own way, this calm rang louder than any feeling he'd ever had, maybe because it was about something, about death, and nothing he'd ever felt before had grown on such a foundation.

He came to an area where giant crystals of salt had grown out of the capital bug's skin, long geodesic shapes whose inner planes sheened in purple and bottle-green. They combined with the dew drops to splinter and curl the light in a million ways.

Stretched between two sixty-foot grass stalks was the glittering outline of a man.

Jessie throttled back and grabbed a vine to stop himself. He'd come upon a spider's web; the spider that had made it was probably bigger than he was. But someone or something had used the web to make a piece of art, by placing fist- to head-sized balls of water at the intersections of the threads, laying out a pattern shaped like a man standing proudly, arms out, as though about to catch something.

Jessie goggled at it, then remembered to look for the spider. After a cautious minute he egged the jet forward, skirting around the web. There were more webs ahead. Some were twenty or more feet across, and each one was a tapestry done in liquid jewels. Some of the figures were human; others were of birds, or flowers, but each was exquisitely executed. It came to Jessie that when the capital bug was in full song, the webs and drops would vibrate, blurring the figures' outlines until they must seem made of light.

Spinning in the air, he laughed in surprise.

Something reared up sixty feet away and his heart skipped. It was a

vaguely humanoid shape sculpted in rusted metal and moss-covered stone. As it stood it unfolded gigantic wings that stretched past the tops of the grass stalks.

Its head was a scarred metal ball.

"THIS IS NOT YOUR PLACE." Even half-deaf as he was, the words battered Jessie like a headwind. They were like gravel speaking. If his team from the Mistelle were here, they'd be turning tail at this point; they would probably hear the words, even as far away as the wreck.

Jessie reached down and pointedly turned off the jet. "I've come to talk to you," he said.

"YOU BRING NO ORDERS," said the precipice moth. It began to hunker back into the hollow where it had been coiled.

"I bring news!" Jessie had rehearsed what he was going to say, picturing over and over in his mind the impresario of the circus and how he would gesture and stretch out his vowels to make his speech pretty and important-sounding. Now, though, Jessie couldn't remember his lines. "It's about the key to Candesce!"

The moth stopped. Now that it was motionless, he could see how its body was festooned with weapons: its fingers were daggers, gun barrels poked under its wrists. The moth was a war machine, half flesh, half ordnance.

"CLARIFY."

Jessie blew out the breath he'd been holding and immediately started coughing. To his dismay little dots of blood spun through the air in the direction of the moth. It cocked its head, but said nothing.

When he had the spasms under control, Jessie told the monster what he'd overheard in the amphitheater. "What the leader meant—I think he meant—was that the strategy of relying on Candesce to protect us isn't working anymore. Those things from outside, they've gotten in at least twice in the last two years. They're figuring it out."

"We destroy them if they enter." The moth's voice was not so overwhelming now; or maybe he was just going deaf.

"Begging your pardon," said Jessie, "but they slipped past you both times. Maybe you're catching some of them, but not enough."

There was a long pause. "Perhaps," said the moth at last. Jessie grinned because that one word, a hint of doubt, had for him turned the moth from a mythical dragon into an old soldier, who might need his help after all.

"I'm here on behalf of humanity to ask you for the key to Candesce," he recited; he'd remembered his speech. "We can't remain at the mercy of the sun of suns and the things from outside. We have to steer our own course now, because the other way's not working. The home guard didn't know where you were, and they'd never have listened to me; so I came here myself."

"The home guard cannot be trusted," said the moth.

Jessie blinked in surprise. But then again, in the story of Admiral Fanning and the key, the moth had not in the end given it to the guard, though it had had the chance.

The moth shifted, leaning forward slightly. "Do you want the key?" it asked.

"I can't use it." He could explain why, but Jessie didn't want to.

"You're dying," said the moth.

The words felt like a punch in the stomach. It was one thing for Jessie to say it. He could pretend he was brave. But the moth was putting it out there, a fact on the table. He glared at it.

"I'm dying too," said the moth.

"W-what?"

"That is why I'm here," it said. "Men cannot enter this creature. My body would be absorbed by it, rather than be cut up and used by you. Or so I had thought."

"Then give me the key," said Jessie quickly. "I'll take it to the home guard. You know you can trust me," he added, "because I can't use the key to my own advantage. I'll live long enough to deliver it to the home guard, but not long enough to use it."

"I don't have the key."

Jessie blinked at the monster for a time. He'd simply assumed that the moth that had been seen entering this capital bug was the same one that had met Chaison Fanning in Slipstream. But of course there was no reason that should be the case. There were thousands, maybe millions of moths in Virga. They were almost never seen, but two had been spotted in the same year.

"That's it, then," he said at last. After that, there was a long silence between them, but the precipice moth made no effort to fit itself back into its hole. Jessie looked around, mused at the drifting jet for a while, then gave a deep sigh.

He turned to the moth. "Can I ask you a favor?"

"What is it?"

"I'd like to. . . stay here to die. If that wouldn't be too much of an inconvenience for you."

The precipice moth put out an iron-taloned forelimb, then another, very slowly, as if sneaking up on Jessie. It brought its round leaden head near to his, and seemed to sniff at him.

"I have a better idea," it said. Then it snatched him up in its great claws, opened its wide lidless mouth, and bit.

Jessie screamed as his whole torso was engulfed in that dry maw. He felt his chest being ripped open, felt his lungs being torn out—curiously, not as pain but as a physical wrenching—and then everything blurred and went gray.

But not black. He blinked, coming to himself, to discover he was still alive. He was hovering in a nebula of blood, millions of tiny droplets of it spinning and drifting around him like little worlds. Gingerly, he reached up to touch his chest. It was whole, and when he took a tentative breath, the expected pain wasn't there.

Then he spotted the moth. It was watching him from its cavity in the capital bug's flesh. "W-what did—where is it?"

"I ate your disease," said the moth. "Battlefield medicine, it is allowed."

"But why?"

"Few moths know which one of us has the key, or where it is," it said. "I cannot broadcast what I know, Candesce jams all lightspeed communications. I am now too weak to travel."

"You will take your message to the moth that has the key. It will decide."

"But I'm—I'm not going to—?"

"I could not risk your dying during the journey. You are disease-free now."

Jessie couldn't take it in. He breathed deeply, then again. It would hit him sometime later, he knew; for now, all he could think to say was, "So where's the one that does have the key?"

The moth told him and Jessie laughed, because it was obvious. "So I'll wait until night and go in," he said. "That should be easy."

The precipice moth shifted, shook its head. "It will not speak to you. Not unless you prove you are committed to the course that you say you are."

There was a warning in those words but Jessie didn't care. All that mattered was that he was going to live. "I'll do it."

The moth shook its head. "I think you will not," it said.

"You think I'll forget the whole thing, take my treasure from the ship over there," he nodded behind him, "and just set myself up somewhere? Or you think I'll take the key for myself, auction it off to the highest bidder? But I won't, you see. I owe you. I'll do as you ask."

It shook its head. "You do not understand." By degrees it was inching its way back into its hole. Jessie watched it, chewing his lip. Then he looked around at the beautiful jeweled tapestries it had made in the spiders' webs.

"Hey," he said. "Before I go, can I do something for you?"

"There is nothing you can do for me," murmured the moth.

"I don't know about that. I can't do very many things," he said as he snapped off some smaller stalks of the strange grass. He hefted a couple in his hands. "But the one or two things I can do, I do pretty well." He eyed the moth as he began spinning the stalks between his hands.

"Have you ever seen freefall juggling?"

Jessie stood alone on the tarred deck of a docking arm. His bags were huddled around his feet; there was nobody else standing where he was, the nearest crowd a hundred feet away.

The dock was an open-ended barrel, six hundred feet across and twice as deep. Its rim was gnarled with cable mounts for the spokes that radiated out to the distant rim of the iron city-wheel. This far from the turning rim, Jessie weighed only a pound, but his whole posture was a slump of misery.

There was only air where his ship was supposed to be.

He'd been late packing; the others had gone to get Dad at the circus pitch that had been strung, like a hammock, between the spokes of the city. Jessie was old enough to pack for himself, so he had to. He was old enough to find his way to the docks, too, but he'd been delayed, just by one thing and another.

And the ship wasn't here.

He stared into the sky as it grayed with the approach of a water-laden cloud. The long spindle-shapes of a dozen ships nosed at other points on the circular dock, like hummingbirds sipping at a flower. Passengers and crew were hand-walking up the ropes of their long proboscises. Jessie could hear conversations, laughter from behind him where various beverage huts and newspaper stands clustered.

But where would they go?

Without him? The answer, of course, was anywhere.

In that moment Jessie focused his imagination in a single desperate image: the picture of his father dressed as the hero, the way he used to be, arrowing out of the sky—and Jessie reaching up, ready for the catch. He willed it with everything he had, but instead, the gray cloud that had been approaching began to funnel through the docks propelled by a tailwind. It manifested as a horizontal drizzle. Jessie hunched into it, blinking and licking his lips.

A hand fell on his shoulder.

Jessie looked up. One of the businessmen who'd been waiting for another ship was standing over him. The man was well dressed, sporting the garish feathered hat his class wore. He had a kindly, well-lined face and hair the color of the clouds.

"Son," he said, "were you looking for the ship to Mespina?"

Jessie nodded.

"They moved the gate," said the businessman. He raised his head and pointed way up the curve of the dock. Just for a second, his outline was prised by the water beading on Jessie's eyelashes. "It's at 2:30, there, see it?"

Jessie nodded, and reached to pick up his bags.

"Good luck," said the man as he sauntered, in ten-foot strides, back to his companions.

"Thanks," Jessie murmured too late. But he was thunderstruck. In a daze he tiptoed around the dock to find Father and his brothers waiting impatiently, the ship about to leave. They hadn't looked for him, of course. He answered their angry questions in monosyllables. All he could do was contemplate the wonder of having been saved by that man's simple little gesture. The world must be crammed with people who could be saved just as easily, if somebody bothered to take a minute out of their day to do it.

From that moment forward, Jessie didn't daydream about putting out a burning city or rescuing the crew of a corkscrewing passenger liner. His fantasies were about seeing that lone, uncertain figure, standing by itself on a dock or outside a charity diner—and of approaching and, with just ten words or a coin, saving a life.

He wasn't able to visit the wrecked treasure ship, because the capital bug's sound organs were recovering. The drone was already louder than Jessie's jet as he left the bowl-shaped garden of the bug's gut. From the zone just under the perforated skin of the bug's back, he could see that the main hull of the wreck was missing, presumably towed by the Mistelle, because that was gone too.

When Jessie rose out of the bug's back, there was no sign of the Mistelle in the surrounding air either. A massive cloud front—mushroom and dome-shaped wads of it as big as the bug—was moving in and would obscure one of the suns in minutes. Mistelle was probably in there somewhere but he would have the devil of a time finding it. Jessie shrugged, and turned the jet away.

He had plucked some perfect salt crystals, long as his thigh, from the precipice moth's forest, just in case. He'd be able to sell these for food and fuel as he traveled.

He did exactly this, in two days reaching the outskirts of the principalities, and civilized airs. Here he was able to blend in with streams of traffic that coursed through the air like blood through the arteries of some world-sized, invisible beast. The sky was full of suns, all competing to tinge the air with their colors. The grandly turning iron wheel cities and green clouds of forest had a wealth of light they could choose to bask in. All those lesser suns were shamed when Candescence awoke from its night cycle, and all cities, farms, and factories turned to the sun of suns during this true day.

Billions of human lives marked their spans by Candescence's radiance. All of the principalities were visible here: he could trace the curve of an immense bubble, many hundreds of miles across, that was sketched onto the sky by innumerable cities and houses, spherical lakes, and drifting farms. Nearby

he could tell what they were; further away, they blended and blurred together into one continuous surface whose curve he could see aiming to converge on the far side of Candescence. The sun of suns was too bright to follow that curve to its antipode—but, at night! Then, it was all so clear, a hollow sphere made of glittering stars, city and window lights in uncountable millions encircling an absence where Candescence slumbered or—some said—prowled the air like a hungry falcon.

The bubble had an inner limit because nothing could survive the heat too close to Candescence. The cities and forests were kept at bay, and clouds dissolved and lakes boiled away if they crossed that line. The line was called the anthropause, and only at night did the cremation fleets sail across it carrying their silent cargoes, or the technology scavengers who dared to look for the cast-offs of Candescence's inhuman industry. These fleets made tiny drifts of light that edged into the black immensity of Candescence's inmost regions; but sensible people stayed out.

For the first time in his life, Jessie could go anywhere in that mist of humanity. As he flew he took note of all the people in a way he never had before; he marked each person's role. There was a baker. Could he be that? There were some soldiers. Could he go to war? He would try on this or that future, taste it for a while as he flew. Some seemed tantalizing, though infinitely far out of reach for a poor uneducated juggler like himself. But none were out of reach anymore.

When he stopped to refuel at the last town before the anthropause, he found they wouldn't take the coins he'd gotten at his last stop. Jessie traded the last of his salt, knowing even as he did it that several slouching youths were watching from a nearby net. He'd shifted his body to try to hide the salt crystal, but the gas jockey had held it up to the light anyway, whistling in appreciation.

"Where'd you get this?"

Jessie tried to come up with some plausible story, but he'd never been very good at stuff like that. He got through the transaction, got his gas, and took the jet into the shadow of a three-hundred-foot-wide grove, to wait for dark. It was blazingly hot even here. The shimmering air tricked his eyes, and so he didn't notice the gang of youths sneaking up on him until it was too late.

The arm around his throat was a shocking surprise—so much so that Jessie's reflexes took over and he found himself and his attacker spinning into the air before the astonished eyes of the others. Jessie wormed his way out of the other's grasp. The lad had a knife but now that they were in free air that wasn't a problem. Jessie was an acrobat.

In a matter of seconds he'd flipped the boy around with his feet and kicked him at his friends, who were jumping out of the leaves in a hand-linked mass. The kick took Jessie backwards and he spun around a handy branch. He dove past them as they floundered in midair, got to his jet, and kick-started it. Jessie was off before they could regroup; he left only a rude gesture behind.

Under the hostile glare of Candesce, he paused to look back. His heart was pounding, he was panting, but he felt great. Jessie laughed and decided right there to go on with his quest, even if it was too early. He turned the jet and aimed it straight at the sun of suns.

It quickly became obvious that he couldn't just fly in there. The jet could have gotten him to it in two hours at top speed, but he'd have burned to death long before arriving. He idled, advancing just enough to discourage anyone from following.

He looked back after twenty minutes of this, and swore. There were no clouds or constructions of any kind between him and the anthropause, so the little dot that was following him was clearly visible. He'd made at least one enemy, it was clear; who knew how many of them were hanging off that lone jet?

He opened the throttle a little, hunkering down behind the jet's inadequate windscreen to cut the blazing light and heat as much as he could. After a few minutes he noticed that it was lessening of itself: Candesce was going out.

The light reddened as the minutes stretched. The giant fusion engines of the sun of suns were winking out one by one; Candesce was not one sun, but a flock of them. Each one was mighty enough to light a whole nation, and together they shaped the climate and airflow patterns of the entire world. Their light was scattered and absorbed over the leagues, of course, until it was no longer visible. But Candesce's influence extended to the very skin of the world where icebergs cracked off Virga's frost-painted wall. Something, invisible and not to be tasted or felt, blazed out of here as well with the light and the heat: the field, which scrambled the energies and thoughts of any device more complicated than a clock. Jessie's jet was almost as complex as a machine could get in Virga. Since the world's enemies depended entirely on their technologies, they could not enter here.

This was protection; but there had been a cost. Jessie understood that part of his rightful legacy was knowledge, but he'd never been given it. The people in Virga knew little about how the world worked, and nothing about how Candesce lived. They were utterly dependent on a device their ancestors had built but that most of them now regarded as a force of nature.

Light left the sky, but not the heat. That would take hours to dissipate, and Jessie didn't have time to wait. He sucked some water from the wine flask hanging off his saddle, and approached the inner circle of Candesce. Though the last of its lamps were fading red embers, he could still see well enough by the light of the principalities. Their millionfold glitter swam and wavered in the heat haze, casting a shimmering light over the crystalline perfection of the sun of suns. He felt their furnace-heat on his face, but he had dared a capital bug's howl; he could dare this.

The question was, where in a cloud of dozens of suns would a precipice moth nest? The dying moth had told Jessie that it was here, and it made perfect sense: Where was the one place from which the key could not be stolen? Clearly in the one place that you'd need that key to enter.



This answer seemed simple until you saw Candesce. Jessie faced a sky full of vast crystal splinters, miles long, that floated freely in a formation around the suns themselves. Those were smaller, wizened metal-and-crystal balls, like chandeliers that had shrunk in on themselves. And surrounding them, unfolding from mirrored canopies like flowers at dawn, other vast engines stirred.

He flew a circuit through the miles-long airspace of the sun of suns; then he made another. He was looking for something familiar, a town wheel for giants or some sort of blockhouse that might survive the heat here. He saw nothing but machinery, and the night drew on towards a dawn he could not afford to be here to see.

The precipice moth he'd spoken to had been partly alive—at least, it had looked like that leathery skin covered muscles as well as body internal machinery. But what living thing could survive here? Even if those mirrored metal flowers shielded their cores from the worst of the radiation, they couldn't keep out the heat. He could see plainly how their interiors smoked as they spilled into sight.

Even the tips of those great diamond splinters were just cooling below the melting point of lead. Nothing biological could exist here.

Then, if the moth was here, it might as well be in the heart of the inferno as on the edge. With no more logic to guide him than that, Jessie aimed his jet for the very center of Candesce.

Six suns crowded together here. Each was like a glass diatom two hundred feet in diameter, with long spines that jutted every which way in imitation of the gigantic ones framing the entire realm. Thorns from all the suns had pinioned a seventh body between them—a black oval, whose skin looked like old cast iron. Its pebbled surface was patterned with raised squares of brighter metal, and inset squares of crystal. Jessie half-expected to faint from the heat as he approached it, and he would die here if that happened; but instead, it grew noticeably cooler as he closed the last few yards.

He hesitated, then reached out to touch the dark surface. He snatched his hand back: it was cold.

This must be the generator that made Candesce's protective field. It was this thing that kept the world's enemies at bay.

Gunning the jet, he made a circuit of the oval. It looked the same from all angles and there was no obvious door. But, when he was almost back to his starting point, Jessie saw distant city-light gleam off something behind one of the crystal panels. He flew closer to see.

The chrome skeleton of a precipice moth huddled on the other side of the window. It was too dark for Jessie to make out what sort of space it was sitting in, but from the way its knees were up by its steel ears, it must not be large.

There wasn't a scrap of flesh on this moth, yet when Jessie reached impulsively to rap on the crystal, it moved.

Its head turned and it lowered a jagged hand from its face. He couldn't see eyes, but it must be looking at him.

"Let me in!" Jessie shouted. "I have to talk to you!"

The moth leaned its head against the window and its mouth opened. Jessie felt a kind of pulse—a deep vibration. He put his ear to the cold crystal and the moth spoke again.

"WAIT."

"You're the one, aren't you? The moth with the key?"

"WAIT."

"But I have to. . ." He couldn't hear properly over the whine of the jet, so Jessie shut it down. The sound died—then, a second later, died again. An echo? No, that other note had been pitched very differently.

He cursed and spun around, losing his grip on the inset edge of the window. As he flailed and tried to right himself, a second jet appeared around the curve of the giant machine. There was one rider in its saddle. The dark silhouette held a rifle.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want what you want," said a familiar voice. "Nothing less than the greatest treasure in the world."

"Chirk, what are you doing here? How did—did you follow me?"

She hove closer and now her canary-yellow jacket was visible in the glow of distant cities. "I had to," she said. "The wreck was empty, Jess! All that hard work and risking our lives, and there was nothing there. Emmen took it under tow—had to make the best of the situation, I guess—but for our team, there was nothing. All of us were so mad, murderous mad. Not safe for me.

"Then I remembered you. I went looking for you and what should I find? You, juggling for a monster!"

"I think he liked it," said Jessie. He hoped he could trust Chirk, but then, why did she have that rifle in her hands?

"You said you were going to give it a message. When you left I trailed after you. I was trying to think what to do. Talk to you? Ask to join you? Maybe there was a prize for relaying the message. But then you set a course straight for the sun of suns, and I realized what had happened.

"Give me the key, Jessie." She leveled the rifle at him.

He gaped at her, outraged and appalled. "I haven't got it," he said.

She hissed angrily. "Don't lie to me! Why else would you be here?"

"Because he's got it," said Jessie. He jabbed a thumb at the window. He saw Chirk's eyes widen as she saw what was behind it. She swore.

"If you thought I had it, why didn't you try to take it from me earlier?"

She looked aside. "Well, I didn't know exactly where you were going. If it gave you the key, then it told you where the door was, right? I had to find out."

"But why didn't you just ask to come along?"

She bit her lip. "'Cause you wouldn't have had me. Why should you? You'd have known I was only in it for the key. Even if I was. . . nice to you."

Though it was dark, in the half-visible flight of emotions across her face Jessie could see a person he hadn't known was there. Chirk had hid her insecurities as thoroughly as he'd hoped to hide his bloody cough.

"You could have come to me," he said. "You should have."

"And you could have told me you were planning to die alone," she said. "But you didn't."

He couldn't answer that. Chirk waved the rifle at the door. "Get it to open up, then. Let's get the key and get out of here."

"If I can get the key from it, ordering it to kill you will be easy," he told her. A little of the wild mood that had made him willing to dive into a capital bug had returned. He was feeling obstinate enough to dare her to kill him.

Chirk sighed, and to his surprise said, "You're right." She threw away the rifle. They both watched it tumble away into the dark.

"I'm not a good person, and I went about this all wrong," she said. "But I really did like you, Jessie." She looked around uneasily. "I just. . . I can't let it go. I won't take it from you, but I need to be a part of this, Jess. I need a share, just a little share. I'm not going anywhere. If you want to sic your monster on me, I guess you'll just have to kill me." She crossed her arms, lowered her head, and made to stare him down.

He just had to laugh. "You make a terrible villain, Chirk." As she sputtered indignantly, he turned to the window again. The moth had been impassively watching his conversation with Chirk. "Open up!" he shouted at it again, and levering himself close with what little purchase he could make on the window's edge, he put his ear to the crystal again.

"WAIT."

Jessie let go and drifted back, frowning. Wait? For what?

"What did it say?"

"The other moth told me this one wouldn't let me in unless I proved I was committed. I had to prove I wouldn't try to take the key."

"But how are you going to do that?"

"Oh."

Wait.

Candesce's night cycle was nearly over. The metal flowers were starting to close, the bright little flying things they'd released hurrying back to the safety of their tungsten petals. All around them, the rumbling furnaces in the suns would be readying themselves. They would brighten soon, and light would wash away everything material here that was not a part of the sun of suns. Everything, perhaps, except the moth, who might be as ancient as Candesce itself.

"The other moth told me I wouldn't deliver the message," said Jessie. "It said I would decide not to."

She frowned. "Why would it say that?"

"Because. . . 'cause it cured me, that's why. And because the only way to deliver the message is to wait until dawn. That's when this moth here will open the door for us."

"But then—we'd never get out in time. . ."

He nodded.

"Tell it—yell through the door, like it's doing to you! Jessie, we can't stay here, that's just insane! You said the other moth cured you? Then you can escape, you can live—like me. Maybe not with me, and you're right not to trust me, but we can take the first steps together. . ." But he was shaking his head.

"I don't think it can hear me," he said. "I can barely hear it, and its voice is loud enough to topple buildings. I have to wait, or not deliver the message."

"Go to the home guard, then. Tell them, and they'll send someone here. They'll—"

"—not believe a word I say. I've nothing to show them, after all. Nothing to prove my story."

"But your life! You have your whole life. . ."

He'd tried to picture it on the flight here. He had imagined himself as a baker, a soldier, a diplomat, a painter. He longed for every one of them, for any of them. All he had to do was start his jet and follow Chirk, and one of them would come to pass.

He started to reach for his jet, but there was nowhere he could escape the responsibility he'd willingly taken on himself. He realized he didn't want to.

"Only I can do this," he told her. "Anyway, this is the only thing I ever had that was mine. If I give it up now, I'll have some life. . . but not my life."

She said nothing, just shook her head. He looked past her at the vast canopy of glittering lights—from the windows in city apartments and town wheel-houses, from the mansions of the rich and the gas-fires of industry: a sphere of people, every single one of them threatened by something that

even now might be uncoiling in the cold vacuum outside the world; each and every one of them waiting, though they knew it not, for a helping hand.

Ten words, or a single coin.

"Get out of here, Chirk," he said. "It's starting. If you leave right now you might just get away before the full heat hits."

"But—" She stared at him in bewilderment. "You come too!"

"No. Just go. See?" He pointed at a faint ember-glow that had started in the darkness below their feet. "They're waking up. This place will be a furnace soon. There's no treasure here for you, Chirk. It's all out there."

"Jessie, I can't—" Flame-colored light blossomed below them, and then from one side. "Jessie?" Her eyes were wide with panic.

"Get out! Chirk, it's too late unless you go now! Go! Go!"

The panic took her and she kicked her jet into life. She made a clumsy pass, trying to grab Jessie on the way by, but he evaded her easily.

"Go!" She put her head down, opened the throttle, and shot away. Too late, Jessie feared. Let her not be just one second too late.

Her jet disappeared in the rising light. Jessie kicked his own jet away, returning to cling to the edge of the window. His own sharp-edged shadow appeared against the metal skull inches from his own.

"You have your proof!" He could feel the pulse of energy—heat, and something deeper and more fatal—reaching into him from the awakening suns. "Now open up."

"Open up!"

The moth reached out and did something below the window. The crystalline pane slid aside, and Jessie climbed into the narrow, boxlike space. The window slid shut, but did nothing to filter the growing light and heat from outside. There was nowhere further to go, either. He had expected no less.

The precipice moth lowered its head to his.

"I have come to you on behalf of humanity," said Jessie, "to tell you that the ancient strategy of relying on Candesce for our safety will no longer work. . ."

He told the moth his story, and as he spoke the dawn came up.