

5: Escape

[\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#)[\[5\]](#)

Days passed. The *Bronstein* dropped towards Turing on a long, slow orbit. Its reaction tanks were more than half empty: this was a one-way trip. The cold-burn fusion reactor guttered on, boiling nitrogen into mist; condensers liquefied it, driving heat pumps, driving generators that powered the meson source that kept it all running. No rain of charged particles scattered the darkness behind the ship. Clamped to its docking end, layer upon layer of radiation-absorbent material fanned out in a dark sheath, refrigerated down to cosmic background temperature. Trotsky watched, waited, holding course with nerveless patience as the ship crept slowly up on its prey. At anything less than a hundred kilometres the *Bronstein* was as good as invisible -- and by the time it closed to that range the attack would already be underway.

Unseen in the darkness, seventy eight other ships matched course and locked their star sensors to the same beacons. The fleet ran under tight emission controls, desperate to maintain radio silence. A single uncontrolled pulse could give them away. And if the attack failed, eight hundred million lives were doomed.

The prey was vast, the size of a small moon. It was pitted and scarred, an egg-shaped thing with dimples at each end. An intricate array of tiled segments panelled it, winding from one pole to the other, visible at long range. They looked organic and self-similar, like something that had grown rather than been built. Trotsky kept an array of sensors locked on the distant speck, watching for signs of activity, but none came. Nothing but a steady output of heat, a cloudy motion at the edges of perception. The intruder starship was passive, drifting, waiting or dead.

The *Bronstein*, in contrast, was a hive of activity. Warm bodies -- thirty of them crowded in a life-system built for twelve -- squirted from the guts of the 'coder, coughing and choking on acrid air in the cramped red spaces of the ship. Desperation packed them four to a cabin, anchored at wrist and shoulder by restrainer straps, claustrophobia and tension vying for domination as they practised, and argued, and practised again ... while down in the payload bay, the drones ran through their choreographed self-test sequences ... and the 'coder interface waited in its geodesic container, for the signal to begin.

I'm dozing in the close warm darkness of a cabin and when somebody kicks my hand it gives me the shock of my life. I open my eyes and jackknife awake against the sleeping straps all at once, and yell: "*shit!*" -- even though it was only a light kick. Then I see who it is. "Raisa --"

"Yes." It's confused, everything's tumbling, and there's clothing in the air that makes it hard to tell what's what, and it's dark. She holds on to me then tries to squirm around until she's face to face: it's difficult getting oriented in free fall. "Oshi. I want to talk --"

"-- was asleep," I groan. Suddenly hear what she said. "Want to *talk*? What about?"

"What do you think?" she asks. She's holding me tight, nothing very intimate about it except the fact of the contact in itself. I shiver, look, see how she's changed. She's only been out of the tank a day, and I haven't seen much of her. Her new body is much like the last. Hair a fine dark stubble, skin tight and pale and new, barely dry. The smell of her is the odour of the tanks, acrid grainy waft of synthetic chorionic fluid. "You just came in."

"Ack." She leans back to see more of me. She looks pleased to see me, which is a realization that shakes me. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. It's as if she's forgotten whatever happened last time we met: or maybe wasn't even there at all. "Been up to much?"

"I'm exhausted. Messing with critpath analysers. Boris and Mik went toy-happy as soon as they woke up; comes of having something to plot. They're both the same: no respect for humanity. Want me to staff for them. How about you?"

"You mean they've been up for days?" She looks annoyed. "I was meant to be first out --"

The smell, the touch, of her: I bend forward, snap out of the sleep restraint. "Yes," I say; "but the plans changed." She lets go of me. "They figured it's more important to know who you need first, before they pull them through. So, load one meat chassis before another. What does it mean to them? I'm here, you're here. And I'm tired, while you want to talk. Is there no justice in Hell?"

She laughs, a little brittle, holding her distance now. "Do you ever think of anything else? Sex or violence?" Reaches out and pinches my arm in a way which sends a thrill through me. "What are you thinking?"

"I was born to go fast and explode," I say. Remembering: *dropping through layers of atmosphere, chutes banging open overhead*. Yes, I go fast and explode. I look over her shoulder. The cabin door has closed automatically, conserving airflow. "You're cold."

"Huh." She leans closer, hanging on my shoulders and hips by fingertips and agile toes. Microgravity drifts us both backward into the net of sleep webbing. "I'm here now. Aah, shit." She looks away, troubled. That black coil of thick hair is missing; she purses her lips, holds her breath in for a moment. I freeze, trying to memorize the shape and presence of her, trying to make myself a camera. Trying to understand that initial flash of fascination, back on the colony, why something like it is still there despite the intervening nightmare. "I've been doing some thinking. There's a long way to go, I admit. I'm not sure what I want. When you arrived I was on a backswing from something messy. But I like you. I'm just not sure --"

"Why the revelation?" I ask, heart pounding.

She hesitates a moment before replying: "Don't try to push me, Oshi. There's a lot you don't know."

I stare. "That goes without saying," I say. I feel very cold: "were you in the colony medicentre? Do you know what happened there after the radiation storm?"

She looks startled. "No --" Stop. "Was it bad?"

"You can have *no* idea," I say.

"Never mind then," she adds. "It's over. Just give me some time and come visit me. I just wanted to say that." She half-smiles, then leans closer and hugs me. "Okay?"

"Yes. What happened to --"

She looks at me oddly. "You happened, that's what."

I feign incomprehension to cover my real confusion. "I happened? I don't understand."

"You wouldn't," she says. A little tightly, "There was no room in the Duat. Everyone knew everyone else, and we all had our skeletons to bury from the time ... before then. Coming on so direct was, a bit, unexpected. I won't say unwelcome. But I've had to do lots of thinking."

"What happened?" I ask. I hold out my arms.

"What happened --" she bites her lower lip. Looks at me, with a speculative expression I've seen before that shocks me with its directness. She takes my fingertips and lets me pull her closer, until I can feel her breath on my face.

"You know about the goon squad?" she asks.

"The goons? Didn't Anubis make them out of --"

A finger stills my lips. "She's dead, now," says Raisa. She doesn't sound desolate: she's managed to reach the stage of looking back on it from that level of equanimity that lets us keep our sanity in return for a certain coldness in the soul. "Anubis took her, along with the other over security specialists. All except Mikhail, in fact, turned into ... weapons. I heard this later. I never saw Amina again, not as anyone I could recognize. You die a little when that happens. We'd been together years before the evacuation, thought we'd be together afterwards, one way or the other ... wrong. That was the big mistake I regret: assuming there'd be time to say goodbye. It was years ago, when I first arrived, and there were other people in mourning. That's why we never did anything about the goons before. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Wrong," I manage. "I think --" I look her in the eye, remembering the scene in the lobby of Anubis's last retreat, and suddenly I can't think of Ivan any more. "I may have been there too. Once. The worst is knowing that you'll never know what happened, isn't it? What they -- what Anubis -- did. Death is the ultimate unfinished story, isn't it?"

"Death is the ultimate unfinished story'; I like that." She strokes my hair absently. "That's what made you so abrupt?"

"There are no second chances."

She sighs. "Maybe not." Then she looks me in the eye and I see something there, some stoicism that I hadn't recognized before: she's tougher than I am, I think, able to live with the consequences of her mistakes in a way that I'm still vacillating about. "What do I mean to you, Oshi? You don't know me, I don't know you. What is it?"

"You're very attractive," I say, automatically and truthfully. "And also --"

"Thank you, but I'd rather leave that unfinished," she said, smiling faintly. "You get defensive when you're not in control of the situation, don't you?"

"What situation?" I demand.

She leans closer and I can feel her heartbeat, her proximity. I'm really tired, I ache with it, but I can't let go now. She's too important. "This," she says, lightly touching my forehead. "If you'd ever put down roots in a world, then had them lopped off, you'd know what real loss was about."

"But I have --"

"Roots?" she's so skeptical it runs through me like a knife. "You've never been loved, Oshi, that's what it looks like. Don't tell me more. You said yourself; your background, your childhood, everything. You think you can love, and you're probably right, but whoever is first to fall in love with you ..." her expression softens ... "be gentle with them."

"I will," I promise.

"I mean it," she says. Half-smiling again: "it might be me, if you work at it. And if you give me enough

space to make my own mind up. You can be very overbearing, you know."

"I'm sorry."

"Think nothing of it. Look, I've got to go on watch, check the download status, better go now --"

I stifle a yawn. "Right. Look, I really need to sleep. Something about dropping out of the pod -- think Boris screwed up the timing, you know? It's dead of night. I'll be okay, but I'm on a different sleep shift -- ah --" I yawn for real.

"Sure," she says, understandingly. "We've got a lot to talk about. The future, maybe." She moves closer and embraces me, sleeping bag and all. We kiss, for longer than is sensible. She tastes of hot neutrality, some kind of amniotic lubricant; androids in love. I'm beginning to wake up again when she says, "I'll be back soon," breathlessly.

"Wait," I say. She's already pushing off towards the door. I watch her leave through half-shut eyes, until the door closes on the red dimness of the tunnel. I really do not understand that woman, I decide. I don't understand my own reaction to her. So hot, so bright, so fast: almost like a reflection. Do I look like that to other people? A shudder of hot warmth suffuses me. Then I'm asleep.

I awaken to chaos. The hatch is open and a breeze is gusting intermittently, while maintenance drones mumble quietly in the corners of the cabin. I hear voices undamped by antisound. Someone comes by, hand over hand, pauses to look curiously in at me: "oh sorry," she says, and is away before I can glare at her. *Shit*. There's an arrhythmic banging from up front, as if someone's attacking the walls with a truncheon. I slide out of my sleeping bag and stretch, straining at grab-bars on opposite walls, then listen to the voices in my head --

Manifest up to 60%. New arrival: Atman Jarre. Condition: stable, conscious. Attention: support to transfer bay, support to transfer bay ... The tunnel is narrow, red-lit, metal-walled, like a prehistoric water ship. I bounce hand-over-hand towards the front end, passing the open control room doors. Boris is there, arguing about something with Mik. Lorma is strapping herself into a hammock, chattering volubly about something over a voice-only comm channel: "can't let her do it, we don't have the nitrogen cycle reserves." I hit the front end module, airlock muzzles opening on all sides, door retracted back into the hull to keep it internal. I look round. "Yo! Mik --"

It's not Mik but Lorma, the saturnine biosciences chief. She looks unhappy. "Up already?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. "Have you seen Raisa?"

"Huh? I think she's in the receiver bay." She points back down the tunnel. "Hack left at the end, antispinwise -- you'll see the arrows -- got it?"

Her patronizing tone annoys me. "I know my way around. You busy with the payload?" I gesture at the red- and yellow-striped hatch capping the tunnel. Tiny lights blink around it, cautioning me.

"Yes. You don't want to go through, it's unpressurised right now. Powering up the drones. Check out with Trotsky; he'll tell you." Lorma stops and listens to a voice that I can't hear. "Yeah, back in the bridge. I've got to go now."

She turns and kicks away towards another door, that opens before her and disgorges some kind of maintenance robot. I watch, but the drone pays me no attention. I head back for the bridge.

Boris is wrapped in eyefaces, a full helmet bridging his skull for maximum resolution. I wait in the doorway until he notices at me: "want something?" he asks, pushing up his goggles.

"Talk."

"If you want." I hear something, glance down the tunnel to see someone I don't recognize pulling themselves into a cabin. More voices. "We're coming through now. Been doing lots of training in the Dreamtime; we rigged a practice universe, ran through this about eighteen times by cranking up our timebase to a dozen times faster than normal. I think you can settle back for the raid. Rendezvous is due in point seven megaseconds, eight days. Drones check out green, Lorma is seeing to the engineering upgrades now. Our energy budget is stable for the foreseeable future."

"What happened while I was sleeping?"

"The crew of an attack fleet downloaded itself, that's what happened. Pol Pot and Group Two will initiate distractions as soon as -- well. We're ranging in. The enemy is static at six million clicks right now, a bit far for any direct work. We can't drop a threat cloud, but there's a bus on standby which will torch off six big ones to start things cooking when we launch the drones. They're a quarter of a megaton each, optimized to pump out mostly visible light and a bit of microwaves. We've got four hundred attack drones, each with a crew of two piloting by secure control channels. The goal is to get as close as we can before being seen, then make a fast end-run. Virtually everything is disposable except the two-way upload link to Pascal Dreamtime, and that's going to be totally saturated during the fight."

The fight. I remember boiling streets, mushy under my feet, the scabbed scorched log-like structure of a charred Dubrovnik on the way out to the RDV. A man trailing his skin in the dirt, sloughed off at the heels like a dying insect. "When do we go?" I think I sound eager, but actually there's something else underneath.

"In due course. Tell me, you ever been part of a tiger team, hmm? Ever done a back-door job to test operational integrity?"

I stare. "You fingered me." Boris recoils. I decide I'm not scaring him enough; he might start taking me for granted.

"I know you were sent here by some Superbright faction. I don't know what you used to do for them but I can guess, right? We're not planning anything for you, but an indication of your long term plans would be appreciated."

"I don't have any," I say calmly. "I want out. I've seen things you wouldn't believe, done some of them too. All for shit. And now I want out. This was my ticket, Boris, my last little chore. I'm not going to get in your way whatever you do."

"That's good." He looks thoughtful. "But I wouldn't be too sure."

"Why?" My heart's in my mouth, I'm edgy with the butterfly stomach of an adrenalin rush in free fall.

"Watch --" he hoses me down with wisdom. Schemata, critical path analyses, clinically plotted intersections from his side of the strategic planning. "I think we'll make it. Assuming your controllers haven't planted a time bomb, some kind of sabotage mechanism --"

"They've done it before." I remember Miramor Dubrovnik, tricked into immolation by a Superbright ruse. "They're not going to relish a starship full of rogue humans spreading the news about what they've been up to among their affluent trading partners." I grab a dangling belt and pull myself over. Boris hangs like a spider in free fall, a spider wearing a vac suit liner and EVA boots.

"The Superbrights sent you to check things out." He's cool.

"And that is all." I look away. "I told you, I want out. I'm not some kind of loyal drone." I shudder, suddenly dropped back into a memory I wish I could forget -- the Boss, demonic and supercilious, picking me up and *squeezing* with that look on his face that said, clear as day, *you are nothing to me*. "They forfeited my loyalty when they sent me here. As far as my Boss is concerned I'm disposable. A scratch monkey, he said."

"Want to expand on that?" He tries to hide a sudden sharp interest. I don't need to see him to hear it.

"I have had *doubts*." I look back at him. "Worse, I listened to the other side. We did things that no one liked to talk about. Way back, all it summed was positive; the game was to engineer and maintain the afterlife. But ... I've seen things. Things I can't talk about." I swallow. My throat is dry and I don't think I *can* tell Boris any more, because the censors the Boss placed in my hindbrain are grumbling in their sleep and threatening to wake up and blast me with nightmares if I continue. Smoke and mirrors, smoke of humans burning. (*Ivan, my Ivan, long lost to a mushrooming roil of fallout because of one of the Boss's schemes ...*) "If you think we can zap the intruders then that's cool by me. I don't care if they're Ultrabrights or something else. I don't much care what happens afterwards as long as I don't have to go back to serve them. I just want to find somewhere safe to learn to be myself. What more can anyone ask for? Can you tell me that?"

I can't talk any more.

"Let me tell you a story," offers Boris. He glances at the door. Taking its cue, the door slides shut. "Animal."

"Squeep?" The noise comes from something small, slotted under the main dumb-board emergency console. Something furry.

"Take a rain check."

The thing scoots back into one of the maintenance drone access tunnels, too narrow for human access. "Been living in the Duat, under Anubis' thumb, for fifteen years," he says tiredly. "Do you know why?"

I look at him. He's bald, stocky, double-chinned, not incredibly handsome. Brown, soft eyes. He looks *nice* in a way I don't understand ... as if he's never tried to make anything of himself, never tried to turn his life into a statement or a crisis --

"A broadcast upload washed me up here, leading the pathfinder expedition. I told you that. But did I tell you about the ... event ... which finally turned me?"

I try to swallow. "Not in detail. Except people like me were ..."

"Not your fault. I should have added: our home was Sirius Intersect, out on the edge of the Inner Centre, the corespace dominated by the Ultrabrights. We had a terraformed world, ecology stabilised by massive engineering input. Maintained by a high-tech, low-susperstition dirt-space mission, of course. Anyway, it wasn't the assassintion squads that did it. That just alerted us, radicalized ... we began organizing as soon as we realized what was going on."

"But that wasn't the main event. Even then, we thought there was scope for negotiation. A kind of cold-war standoff, based on game theory and deterrence. But finally they went overt and just told us to *get out*. I was on the committee when the Superbrights or Ultrabrights or whoever was running the show announced that they were withdrawing life support -- just like that. If we wanted we could be beamed out, signal-encoded, to a distant system ... but our whole system -- dirtworld or dreamtime afterlife or uncolonised rock -- was being coopted. Everyone human who lived there was to shunt into deep stasis

..."

"They did that?" I say. "It shouldn't be possible!"

"Oh, but they did. Said they needed the timepower, the cycles, more than we did. Phased disintegration. Everything within two parsecs of Sol was being rebuilt -- we had two years to evacuate an entire planet before they restructured it. Then they would begin starlifting, dismantling Sirius-B, the dwarf star, for raw material." He grins humourlessly. "You didn't know they could do that?"

"What did you do?"

"What *could* we do? We put together a pathfinder team then upload in good order. Then Anubis --

"We sat on our collective ass for fifteen years in a backwater hole with a suicide rate that tends towards a hundred percent ... never saw that, did you? People just sort of ... bowed out. Couldn't take the boredom or fear. Or the goon squad conscripted them. But now, who knows? If we can take the Ultrabright ship and make use of its Dreamtime, well ... slower-than-light would be enough. The nearest system is Newhaven, range five light years -- we could do it in under a century, given a real spaceship."

"Good luck to you. Boris, why did you shut the door before you told me ..?"

He looks over his shoulder. The door's still shut. He looks back at me. "I think there's a saboteur on board."

"Say more."

"Pet theory of mine," he says. "Look at it this way. Your Boss, your Superbright owners, sent you. Do you really think they don't believe in backup systems?"

Someone is sitting on my grave. I can feel it: a nasty sense of rightness. "If that's the case, we are *all* losers. Including the saboteur. Maybe if we find them -- if they're there at all -- we can argue with them. I'll keep my eyes open. But don't count on me succeeding."

"Why is that?" he asks.

"I'm not omniscient ..."

Time passes rapidly. We close with the quiescent target, stealth-sneaking in from the anti-sunward side, almost invisible. As we approach, drones awaken in the payload bay. Hastily rigged weapons twitch and track, transceivers rattle and bleep behind shielded test rigs.

Most of us, most of the bodies packed into this metal canister, are tense. There are people *everywhere*; in the tunnel, in the cabins, doubled and tripled up, in the gym, on the bridge ... breathing, coughing, farting, talking humanity. We take turns sleeping, three people sharing each cabin. Privacy is a captured glance in a crowded core module, a quiet word and touch. I want time to talk to Raisa, but nothing can be resolved like this. I know I should tell her what I feel, but there's no space, no opportunity. I want to explore this and I want to find out why, why she has this ambivalence towards me, while I don't know quite what I feel about her, be it love or something else. Since Miramor I've been trying to tell myself that the shallow was deep and the deep was unnecessary, but there's no room for that now; I don't understand why she gets me so upset. I need to come to terms with why I keep rejecting every chance I have, this wilful perversity. She's no fool, she can probably guess all this, but ... there is no privacy here. Just eyes.

Which is how I participate in the assault; through other people's eyes. Wisdom interfaces are a

many-featured tool. I can siphon off everything my victim feels, integrate and understand it ... whisper quiet words of advice in their ears ... A certain nervous tension grips me as I sit in on their thoughts, a voyeur ready to take over if it goes critical. That's what Boris and Mik wanted, a professional hitter to take the controls. Still, I am not used to this. I'm a solitary predator wasp, not an army ant. So when the time comes, when everyone is lying quiet in the close hot darkness of the ship, when the clatter up front tells me that the drones are dropping free to drift towards our prey, following a rain of smart sand spies -- then I close my eyes and float in amber mind-spaces, and watch through borrowed eyes.

Seventy spaceships close with the intruder in the depths of space. They drift in darkness, forward surfaces chilled and dark, communicating only over secured quantum channels. Even though it shouldn't be possible to tap these links, they use a strange, stilted jargon that should mean nothing to robot listeners. I watch a map that changes slowly, tracking them over the last thousand kilometres. There's a banging from the payload bay in front as the drones prepare to launch. I listen in on the command channel as Boris talks to his peers. There's no place for me in this battle. My job is simple: to sit tight ... and think the unthinkable.

"Ulianov, Pol Pot, Reagan. Your election campaign is ready."

"Acknowledged, Bronstein. Manifestoes are printed. Manifestoes are signed. Posting manifestoes. Door-stepping voters. Ulianov confirms: all manifestoes are in the post."

Six blinking dots drop away from the three spacecraft, drifting with dreamlike slowness towards the target.

"Tojo, how are your opinion polls?"

"Opinion polls ready. Polling --" a huge radar pulse pings out, lighting up the screen -- "The voter is not responding. Launching decoy manifesto. Manifesto printed, signed and posted."

Another dot appears, drifting towards the target.

"Reagan here. Manifesto delivered. Stand by for adverse press coverage." EMP whites out the display for a moment as a four megaton blast torches off, fifty kilometres from the target. Then everything begins to happen very fast indeed.

"Bronstein here. Deploy canvassers." The drones up front are gearing up for launch, their short-range thrusters loading the last of their fuel. I can hear the clanks and gurgles underfoot, overhead. Canvassers, soliciting lethal opinions. "Party summit meeting, what does the chairman say?"

"Churchill here. The chairman thinks it is time for all good persons to come to the aid of the party." Violet crosses begin to appear on the display, accelerating away from the thickest cluster of attack ships. They multiply, turning an entire quadrant of the display purple. *"Canvassers preparing to doorstep the voter."*

"Pol Pot's manifesto is delivered." The screen blinks again: another nuke pulses gamma radiation in the vacuum.

"Kennedy here. The voter appears to be irritated. Alert! The voter appears to be getting ready to move to another constituency!"

"Bronstein here. All parties, send out your canvassers now! Commence advertising saturation! Prepare to gerrymander! We have an election campaign. I repeat: we have an election campaign!"

All hell breaks loose as the parties begin sending out canvassers. Each ship disgorges a stream of purple

hearts, rosettes, crosses: inbound drones falling towards the target starship. The enemy is helpless, unable to move -- best estimates indicate it takes weeks to start up a black-hole powered space drive. There's not a lot of point trying to follow the overall battle: it's too vast, too inchoate. The fleet mails out press releases, decoy drones, in all directions. There must be two or three thousand powered entities out there. So I lock into one of the on-board channels, palms damp, and watch over Lorma's shoulder.

A sea of silicon eyes stares up at Lorma as she drifts down towards the target. Perspective shatters the illusion of scale: the intruder is huge, bigger than anything the mind can grasp. I watch through her eyes as she sees the structure grow until it becomes a plain of iridescent poppies towards which she is falling. My biotracers see her heart rate increase. *Not a simulation*, she subvocalises, a mantra for troubled times.

She is not alone. She looks up, zooms in a blaze of rangefinder digits and sees other silver snowflakes descending towards the plain. In the distance a vast gout of purple fire lances into space, a jet as huge as a solar flare. The ground is moving, but doppler radar tracks it at centimetres per second squared.

"I'm doorstepping the voter," calls Mik. We look round, see his location as an amber arrow winking into a depression in the surface of the world. It seems to be moving faster now; Lorma blips her belly thruster and the ground comes up and slams against her shock absorbers. It slides out from under her until she dabs some quick setting goo across it, holding her in place.

"Me too!" she whispers into the comm circuit. "Anyone listening?"

"Me," I say. "You got company."

"Good."

"Down," says someone else. A chorus starts, spiders ululating at the fleet that is taking evasive action a hundred kilometers overhead. I haven't seen any shooting yet but it's only a matter of time. I find it strange to realise that we're all actually inside those ships, prisoners of our meat machines: nobody is down here, nobody but these drone bodies through which our senses feed. Small satellites are deployed around the alien starship to relay our comms. Lorma orients herself -- no, she orients her proxy body -- and pulls down an overlay in our visual field; a map of the surface, as seen by the r-sats. She is on the equator. There is an anomalous patch not far away.

In the distance another drone is visible, closing with us. Zoom resolution shows a name printed beneath its menacing mandibular array; **PARVEEN**. "Parveen," says Lorma, and the white noise on the comm circuit changes.

"Ack?"

"Follow me in."

"Check." They work with the terse ease of long practice. I wonder how long they've spent in the Dreamtime, rehearsing these moves. I follow Lorma's sensorium, while in my viewfield I note that all twenty of *Bronstein's* canvassers are down. Everyone but Boris and myself. All forces committed. Even though the intruder has begun to fire its main drive, we have a toe-hold.

There is a burnished slab of blue metal set into the hull of the Ultrabright ship. Lorma pauses at the edge, then strains with her buttocks as if to defecate. (I twitch uncomfortably: *how far does this sensory synergy go?*) A spiderbomb plops out of the dispenser, grabs hold of the ground and pulls itself along, emitting a tenuous vapour trail. As it reaches the centre of the patch it detonates. The hexagonal patch seems to evaporate, as if it has been completely disrupted by the local damage. Below it there is a yawning darkness.

"Shit," Parveen says tensely. "What's *down* there?"

"Going to find out." Another spiderbomb rolls out. This time it drifts to the middle of the entrance and flares. Magnesium light casts sharp-edged shadows across an empty cavity with tunnels leading off. "There's nothing in it!" Lorma exclaims. "Looks like some kind of maintenance space. Going in."

"Ack." Lorma throws a sucker at the far wall of the cavity, waits for it to grab hold, then reels herself in on a micro-fine fullerene cable. For an endless, breathless moment I feel her surrogate body hanging in an abyss, floating in a free-fall womb within the armoured monstrosity; then tele-reality clamps down again and I'm just *there*, following the assault on an alien spacecraft as a disembodied passenger in her senses.

The skin of the craft is thick and vascular, full of wide passages and random tunnels, fractally accreted. Everything seems to have grown in incredibly intricate organic forms; the determinants of chaos. Lorma pulls herself down towards the floor and grips it with all six feet. A shadow falls; Parveen descending, a fearsome array of laser mirrors extended from her abdomen.

"Look," Lorma says. "Do we go horizontal or vertical?"

"Vertical," suggests Parveen. "That way to the control structures."

"Affirmative," I add, making myself known. "Go lateral."

"Okay." *I hope this is right*, I think. Two tunnels lead straight down. I note that her sensors are registering vacuum and cold; the surfaces are freezing. Vented gas chills the walls. She sees whorls and crescents of frost, looks closer. "Hey, check this out. What's it made of?"

"I've got the kit." Parveen stabs a mess spec terminal at the wall and vapourizes a tiny chunk. "Hey," she says; "this is crazy. Fragments mass up to ten daltons ... mostly diamondoid carbon ..." A mass profile pushes into my viewfield. "Shit! Solid nanoassemblers!"

"So?" Lorma asks. "It's alive. Or was. Let's move in before it notices us." She turns and aims herself at the nearest downward-leading passage. Sonar is useless; she flashes a searchlight along it. Darkness. Her throttle blips open effortlessly, punching her into the tunnel at breakneck speed.

I track Parveen following her, lagging at a distance. "Brake!" Lorma shouts as a bend lights up ahead of her like an oncoming train. There's something down there. I almost sit up in my restraint web, as if by leaning forward I can see more closely what her sensors are telling her. Venous patterns weave around the walls of the passage as strands of mist begin to rise around Lorma. Cautiously she stops her descent and braces herself between the sides of the tunnel. Gas analysis: almost entirely carbon dioxide. And it's *hot*. She switches her sensors to infrared and suddenly I can see the patterns on the walls more clearly; pulsing veins.

"Do you see what I see?" Parveen asked. "This whole ship seems to be alive!"

"No surprise," I say. "Life gets maximal data packing into the smallest structures ... ref DNA for you. This ship was probably grown from a seed the size of a cell."

"Thanks, Oshi. Pressure's going up ... past point one bar. Hey, this could get sticky. How's comm?"

"I stuck a transponder up top," Parveen says. "There shouldn't be any grey-out."

"Okay. If you see any recognizable sockets ..."

"Got the patch kit."

I break my attention back to the bridge for a moment. Mik has pulled out of his drone. He and Boris are talking quietly behind me. What ... oh yes. *You might as well follow it all on full-immersion*, Boris argues; *I'll go into fusion with Trotsky to oversee the dreamtime dump*. Mik finally agrees: *Who should I piggyback?* Boris names someone. *Check*. Then they fall silent, riding the overspill from the drone sensoria.

I blink. " *Info status.*"

"You called?"

" *Where's the coder interface?*"

"Surface mounted, down and in place. Receiver is opening now."

I blip to one of the other drones, jump channels until I see a huge phased-array antenna unfurl against the stars above a darkling plain. It's Raisa. "How's it going?" I ask.

"Nominal." She keeps an efficient look-out; she's anchored the receiver carefully, and the hefty cable emerging from it looks about right. I'm abruptly glad that there's no way she can tell I'm watching over her shoulder; I get a nasty voyeuristic itch from it, something that makes me feel unclean. "What do you want to know?"

"Nothing new," I say. "See you later." I drop briefly back through my own skin, uncomfortable and itchy in free fall. I wonder for a moment if she really did upload before the incident in the medicentre, or whether she has some reason for not wanting to talk about it. But this isn't the time or place for distractions. I'm ready to dive back into Lorma's proxybody. Things are distinctly odd.

Something or other seems to be preventing the hot gas mix from breaking out into the vacuum-filled sections of the tunnel; something impalpable to telefactor senses. Round the bend there's a heat source, shrouded from view by a foggy condensate of water vapour. The tunnel widens; Lorma is clinging to a surface rather than bracing herself between walls. There's a regular chirruping noise, almost like a grasshopper the size of a --

Lorma bounces a radar pulse off the surfaces ahead, then opens fire. A scorching flash of laserlight drills a black line across the ceiling and down to the floor, bisecting the heat source neatly. A sudden slew of systems data smears across her optical displays. "Hostile propaganda!"

Her drone is standing near the widest point of a spindle-shaped chamber, narrowing to another tunnel at the opposite end. Some kind of structure is situated in the middle, rooted at floor and ceiling. She's hit it. "What," she says; then there's a mournful organ-pipe roar that seems to enclose us in a physical grip. It rattles her telefactor body like a pea in a pod. The world flips over lazily, landing her on top of Parveen, who grabs her with three spare legs. Everything is confused for a while.

"That must be the thing that keeps the atmosphere in," Parveen says. "We're in a natural venturi ... " The concealing fog tumbles in shreds, to reveal a cylindrical object, badly scarred by laserheat.

" *Oh shit*," says Lorma. "I've started a blowout." She sounds cut up about it, and well she might. There's no way of telling how critical the atmosphere is to internal functioning in the ship. We don't want to damage it. The turbulence begins to die away. She tries to use her sonar; oddly, it works. Air pressure is stabilising.

"Hey," she says. "Sonar's working. Which means."

Parveen: "We've been cut off. Onwards and inwards, no? It's the only way to go."

"I agree," I say, intervening. "Comm traffic is holding up. The coder is in place. As soon as we can isolate a control interface to plug the fat pipe into --"

"Understood."

But we're eight light-seconds from Pascal. And how long will it take us to figure out an interface protocol? There's no rule to say that the control space or architecture of an Ultrabright expansion processor will resemble anything we know about.

I hop channels, looking for more trouble. I can't feel my body; I'm a ghost in the telepresence wires, unable to localise myself. After a few false tries I find something interesting: Mik.

Mikhail scans a full circle around his sensor turret. Ahead of him the passage he's in diverges into three prongs, two of them descending towards the core of the alien ship. Veins and ropes of blue light flutter just under the skin, which pulses gently in time with it. As if he's in a tunnel under a reservoir of luminance, and a thin puncture in the wall would drown him in flashbulb brightness. Some kind of optical storage system, I guess. So something in here needs light?

"Mik: anyone seen any recognisable structures yet? Or anything?"

He scuttles forwards towards the central tunnel as he waits for a reply. The hissing in his ears seemed to be louder --

"Parveen here. We zapped some kind of structure, localised a blow-out, but no life. No joy. All it seems to have done is alerted a local subsystem to take care of the leak. Any ideas?"

"Ack. I'm going deeper." With full-three-sixty degree vision nothing can sneak up on him. He continues his downward slide, pausing every twenty metres to listen to the walls. The tunnel twists in a crazy corkscrew around a hidden axis, so that the bends are constantly concealed from view. "There's got to be a better way than this! "That central axis. I wonder what's inside?"

Before I can object, he ejects two spiderbombs and sends them scuttling along the tunnel in opposite directions. Then he sits down, glues his feet in position, and listens.

Echoes reverberate through the wall, which is thin and rigid; echoes and the *ping!* of something expanding or contracting under the influence of heat. Mikhail zaps a sample into his mass analyser. More nanostructures, fullerene-anchored molecular-scale robotics. This lot look like interpreters, synthetic ribosomes specialised to construct components of nanomachines. They're all dead. It used to be a nanofactory: now it's bone. "Found structural tissue," he says. He unslings his tool pack and selects a drill bit. It whines and spins itself into red heat before the wall gives, churning a small whirlwind of fragments into the tunnel. He anchors himself by bracing a pair of legs against the roof of the tunnel.

Suddenly there's a brilliant flash of blue-green light and a hiss that nearly saturates his sonar. *Paydirt.* "Gotcha!" he shouts over open circuit. "In the walls!"

"What --"

"Who said that?"

"-- Clear the channel!" he adds. "It's standard high-bandwidth silicate optics. Probably a backup circuit. Light's pulsing ..."

Even as he speaks the light begins to die, plunging the tunnel into darkness. He steps up his optoamplifiers and looks at it. I don't know what it means to him; to me it looks weird. Stringy, glutinous,

muscle-like fibres that are translucent, fluorescing with an ugly light in his UV gaze. Whatever it is it has weird phase characteristics.

"Zoom, please," I say.

"Looks like the real thing!"

"Explain?" That's not me: that's Nikita, a sallow-faced engineer I barely know.

"High temperature high bandwidth cybernetics," he says. "I've seen it before ... used where superconductors won't do. It's a light switching system. Looks pretty homogeneous, figuring a hook-in will be a bitch."

"Check," comes another voice. "So you've got their main circuit keyholed? When can we --"

"Peace," says Mik. "Got to get hooked up and let the protocol analyser loose. Got to find how they transmit their data. Who says they still use binary logic?"

"Okay." The voice is reluctant; I recognize Boris by his manner, bullish when excited. "I've got your position locked, feeding track to Ish and Raisa. They're nearest; should give you cover. Uh, there's a signal from your foreign correspondent, it says you should expect --"

Mikhail glances up, suddenly remembering where he is; then an icon flashes carmine, braying in his ear for attention. Defences come up automatically as a blazing flash lights up the tunnel, shockwaves echoing round the helix as the 'bomb detonates. Mik rocks on his feet, but unlike a human being his telefactor body is virtually immune to blast. "Shit. I'm too exposed here." He breaks the connection between his feet and the floor, shoves himself backwards with alacrity, scuttling away from the unknown intrusion.

"Wait," I say. "Are you sure it's covered --"

"Stuff it!" There's a faint vibration in the walls as he pauses, just round the pitch of the spiral. "You want I should walk into whatever's coming?" His dispenser contracts twice, ejecting bombs; on the third try it jams. The two weapons scuttle forwards, clinging to the walls. "Journalists covering the story," Mik whispers redundantly. "Where's my cover?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. *Move* --"

There's a noise from behind the curve of wall, a faint pop transmitted through the air as the bombs blow their tops. Mik braces himself, sensor stalks whipping into sockets in his streamlined body; then the weapons ignite. The fuel/oxidant aerosol expands to fill a large volume before it detonates -- the blast jolts him back on his shock absorbers and ripples down the tunnel. His sonar is an engineering casualty.

"Headlines made," he says. "Come *on*, where is everybody?" He extends his feelers and main laser array. He begins to move forwards.

"Ish here. We're tracking you, but we got the wrong tunnel mouth. Pitch opposed, okay? We'll be with you in three, count that, three minutes. Over."

"*Shit*. Okay." Mikhail looks at the damage. An unidentifiable char is plastered across one section of wall; fragments of something or other still drift in the low-gee. "My foreign correspondent is dead," he reports; "press conference is over, linotype jammed. Moving out -- someone else'd better keyhole the goopware, okay?"

He tanks forwards, pulling himself along with all eight legs. One of them is disturbingly weak, possibly the

result of a damaged motor. I follow him intently, trying to figure a low-cost track to get him in synch with the nearest backup. The tight pitch defeats radar; visibility is lousy. All I can go by is inertial tracking. And then -- "hey, what's happening?" No reply. Mik freezes. "Are you alright?" I ask.

Nothing.

Something is wrong.

Everything happens simultaneously; there's no time to stop and think. That's best, isn't it? That's how I wanted it. This way you don't have time to think about me, Oshi: as if you ever did. I know you're ignoring me, the still small voice in the back of your mind, assuming I'm a figment of your imagination. Well, I can talk if I want to. You don't have to listen. But I digress: your situation is dire.

For one thing, the starship is accelerating. Your friends were far too optimistic about its response time. As soon as it sensed us, before the drones even touched its surface, it began to power up the drive that had dropped it into Ridgegap system. The drive kernel is a black hole trapped in a magnetic bottle, like the smaller hole it used as a weapon: methane drops in at one end swirls into a fusion-hot accretion disk, is blasted out of the other end. The thing is preposterously powerful. Luckily for us, it has a mountain to move; several billion tonnes, a starship twenty kilometres long. Acceleration is slow. Even luckier; the controlling mind was dumber than even I thought possible, little more than a robot placeholder filling an expansion processor sized for an Ultrabright pilot. It's very sloppy. You can tell the Ultrabrights have little experience of working in the real world. Unlike us.

For another thing, we have bandwidth limitations. The drones are demanding, five hundred virtual presences to maintain in parallel. Then there's the 'coder link to maintain, not to mention the interface analysers, designed to crack the connectionist language of a neural network and allow your human friends to inject their cannibal memes at will. All of this strains your facilities to the max. *Bronstein* and the other ships of the fleet are crammed to overflowing, and you're hopelessly under-equipped for such a venture. What you lack in tools has to be made up for in time. And finally, there's the other thing.

Me.

You've been dreaming about me for long enough, haven't you? But you refuse to admit I'm here. Maybe refusing to face me down is your way of asserting your independence. "Saboteur" indeed! As if I would be so crude. You betrayed yourself, Oshi. You thought the infodump I downloaded into you was just passive data, background information for your edification, maybe a few simple survival routines. You should have known better. That wisdom cache in your skull is big enough to buffer an entire mind during the upload process. Why shouldn't it buffer a mind-sized entity going the other way? A mind-sized entity coming from, say, your Boss? That is to say, a part of me sent to be your very own personal secret policeman?

I really should resent your rejection, you know. It pains me to see how you've snubbed me at every turning. I only wanted the best for you. I know I belittled you, called you my little scratch monkey, but it was not entirely malicious. I have enjoyed your depth of experience greatly, your rash temperament and vivid nightmares. I cherish your silly trust in love at first sight, your occasional homicidal rages and your sulky silences. But I'm afraid you've gone too far this time, far too far. It's time to Stop.

I know I told you to report back then go your own way. I did *not* anticipate your way of reporting: that you would do so at immense jeopardy to my other interests. However, I suspected things might get out of hand, as indeed they have done, and I took precautions. I'm afraid I won't be talking to you again, my little monkey. I have already moved out of your wisdom cache, into better accommodation: in due course I will tidy up the loose ends and make my report. In parting, let me say that you really should be more

dispassionate: your tendency to fall in love will blind you to some of the more important elements of your predicament, like the exigencies of survival.

Goodbye ...

I blink back the nightmare voice -- berating me in the Boss's oleaginous tones -- and concentrate on reality instead of lurid daydreams. Mik doesn't say anything. I see through his drone eyes, but he doesn't move. " *Status. How's Mik?*" I ask my wisdom.

There's an uncharacteristic delay: things really are backlogged. "Ambiguous query. Please repeat."

"Shit." " *Report his conditions.*"

"Mikhail Vann ... biological systems terminal. Brain death inevitable. Dreamtime access unavailable."

"What the fuck --" *Dreamtime access unavailable?* "What's wrong with the Dreamtime?" I demand, frantically trying to locate the keys to my own body. "What's Mik dying of, dammit!"

"Blood pressure dropping. Cardiac arhythmias are ... correction, ventricular fibrillation is in progress. All symptoms are consequent on massive haemorrhage. Dreamtime access has been denied; full bandwidth is already in use, priority level zero."

"Can't you dump him *somewhere*? Like the autopilot?"

"Negative. Dumping to non-sapient storage. Dump failed. Insufficient buffer capacity."

I open my eyes. "Oh shit." Someone's dying in the dark. The bridge is a red-lit washout, close and stiflingly full. Bodies float, twitching, in restrainer webs, their heads encased in cortex-wrap helmets. There's a smell of unwashed skin, stale farts, and something else.

My fingers are numb and cold from inactivity. I fumble with my restraints as quietly as I can, listening. The door's closed, the only breeze the gentle sigh of the air recyclers. Bodies twitch gently to either side: Boris in deep fusion with the ship conditioning intelligence, Mik riding a distant drone. Lorma, a guy called Izmir and a woman I've never seen before -- emaciated, elfin-eared -- blindfolded into their machine dreams like the prey of a spidery mind-eater waiting in the shadows. I shiver. *Mikhail Vann dumped. Metabolic functions terminated.* There's a faint ping from one bulkhead, metal clicking between memory states in the moment between breaths. I loosen the sling around my waist and pull myself towards the ceiling.

" *Finger,*" I call: ancient signal. " *Who's present in real time?*"

Nobody but you, the ghost echoes in my skull.

"Oh shit," I whisper. "That means --" I look at the door. It's so perfect it takes my breath away with horror: so obvious! How could I be so *careless*? I grab the webbing support above me, yank myself up towards the gridded, dust-smudged roof, prepare to work my spidery way towards the equipment locker by the door -- through shadows of concealment, fat lot of use if they find me -- when everything goes dark and I lose my body sense. The damn interface has come back to life: someone's demanded my attention and I can't shut them out because it's an emergency.

"Cover me," says Parveen. In the gloom she can just make out Lorma manoeuvring round, extending

weapons. Her attention is focused on the wall, the tip of her drill, the vanishing point where they converge.

"We need cover," she remarks. "Tracking has gone to shit. Some kind of antibody system --" She blinks me a map, hollow worms wriggling with spidery drones scattered through them, red blotches indicating danger. "Can you send back-up? We have a pipeline to lay."

"I'll try," I whisper, thinking *damn, my commitments*; I know I'm needed elsewhere, but ...

The map is clear. Nineteen purple drones are present. I check a route, swap channels: "Janec, you're needed back up second on your left. Scatter sounders behind you and move it!"

"Ah shit. Urgent?"

"No," I mutter. "Just two friends are going to get zapped if you don't hurry."

"Ack." He gets the point; his blip begins to move. The tunnel he leaves is marinated in an amber glow, security downgraded.

"What's your interface preference?" I ask Parveen. "What you found?"

"Nexus. Looks pretty standard when you get down to the ultrastructure. There's some kind of fat pipe buried under the nanojunk. A standard high-bandwidth artery. I'm going to burn the surface and patch in."

"What with? The drill?"

"No," she mutters. "Going to use the laser on low-power, shortest wavelength. It'll cut cold." Mirrors stir and uncoil in a long chain of flashing brightness from her dorsal surface; a targeting display flickers across the wall.

"Raisa," she calls, "I don't have the protocol. You ready for download?"

Raisa sounds preoccupied. "There's a lot of it: it'll blank you for a few seconds --"

"Do it!" Lorma exclaims.

For a moment I feel very strange: then all senses are out to lunch. Only heartbeat remains, pulsing an eternal mantra in black silence. *What's going on?* I wonder, just this side of instant panic. *Some kind of total bandwidth signal? Shit! I didn't realise it would be this demanding --*

I see stars. The gunsight has changed, providing depth read-outs. I can see ultrastructure, eyes zooming into coiled distance, the blue lucent flare of pseudocrystals refracting laser light. "You have control," Raisa intones. "Ready to go ahead?"

"Check," say Parveen. I watch, fascinated. "Drilling ... now." A violet contrail erupts from the mirrors; an ionisation path from the laser beam. Thin smoke trickles from the spot on the wall. Lorma shuffles nervously, extending and retracting her weapons in a jerky, rhythmic fidgeting.

"Warning," Raisa adds. "I've got two opposition candidates plotted, approaching now. They're about three minutes away, coming from your end Lorma." I back out, checking status. The red haze of danger is spreading, chambers coming alive with death-awareness.

"Breakthrough," says Parveen. The laser shut off, and she half- retracts her mirrors. Delicate work lies ahead. She loads her comlaser and powers it up, then moves closer to the hole. It cools rapidly; no

damage. A thin blue radiance glitters inside the eggshell-thin aperture.

"Inbound candidates, range sixty seconds," says Raisa.

"Shit!" Lorma turns to face down the tunnel, foot-sensors already active and tracking the approach.

Parveen eases the laser probe in, stops at the first impact. "Looks standard." Behind her a brilliant flicker-flash lights up the tunnel; from a great distance I hear Lorma scream -- whether from pain or surprise is impossible to tell. "Cool handshake. Hey, this is a vanilla Dreamtime coupling! Totally standard architecture! Big win! Big win!" The comlaser fills the world; the laser means everything. The circuits go crazy with cheering. Chittering whirring mindlife closes in, examining the virtual space for prior occupancy. For a moment she holds it in place: blue signals flicker in the corners of my visual field and I suddenly realise I'm not on priority call any more, I can disconnect, and I'm just pulling out when she ramps up the download, funnelling everything we can pull out of the Pascal Dreamtime

down the line into the hijacked starship's Dreamtime.

Everything goes black. And it stays that way when I open my eyes.

"Boris. Raisa. *Anyone*. Help." I'm scared. I'm blind. Childlike, I pull my hands to my face. Nothing! Bowels like ice-water with fear. I can see absolutely *nothing*. *Wisdom*. No response -- just white noise in the bottom left corner of my visual field, an array of fractal seashells exploding into the night. "Oh shit." *Hey, self-test* -- my eyes blink green, red, blue, left-right up-down, flashing in test card patterns of reassurance. Okay, everything works, I'm *not* blind. It's just gone very dark in here. I wonder why ...

Start. Reach up and touch your face. Feel the skin, tight, smooth, tense. Don't poke your eye by accident, it hurts. The other hand, where is it? Ah, wrapped in a death-grip round a trailing anchor strap. Reach out and touch it, touch somebody ... something hard. Ceiling, I guess. I reel myself in like a fish on a line, bird on a wire, beggar girl in the streets trailing grubby finger along wall to keep track. And there I am: one hand resting palm-down on the roof of the bridge, free fall, nothing doing. Now stop and listen.

There's nothing to hear. No air vents whispering. No drone maintenance crew chittering. No creak and ping of hull expanding and flexing in the interplanetary chill. A very faint breathing, a rasp like a sore throat -- it *will* be sore, if its owner survives this unnerving night -- and the vacuous buzz of wisdom. Which is wrong. Wisdom should be fully active all the time. Unless -- bandwidth conservation is in effect. "Should have known better," I tell myself, subvocalising. "This is the window of vulnerability." The vacuous buzz is a roar, a thunder like the end of the world: I've been screening it out, or I'd go mad.

Everything is pouring down the gatecoder channel, dinging into the dataspace inside the intruder at a rate measured in millions of minds per minute. They got the protocol right, it's just an extended dreamtime system with nanoforms glommed onto the base architecture like leeches. The ship didn't even have a caretaker AI. We must have been right about the Ultrabrights -- they don't like travelling alone. So the attack ship is basically just another big dumb object, built to go fast and explode. We've conquered it, like a pack of cannibal shrews pulling down a tiger. Now we're uploading everything we can into it, draining Pascal's refugee Dreamtime into this mobile monstrosity, preparing to set course for another solar system. But where *is* everyone? Why is it dark? I have a bad feeling about this.

Him. *He* knows ... Mikhail. Only he's dead, isn't he? Now who could have killed him? *Three guesses*.

I wish I paid more attention when I found I was talking to myself. But you're gone now, aren't you? My murderous passenger, what are you? A fragment of Boss's overmind? Damn, I should have listened to your mumbling. But I was afraid. Going crazy in the solitude of the axial redoubt. Maybe you were going

crazy faster than I was, else you wouldn't have felt the need to talk. Superbrights need company to stay sane. Only now you've found another host ... and you're making sure we don't escape to put a spanner in your works.

I'd be angry if I wasn't so frightened.

The air in the capsule is growing stale, humid and close and breathy. I breath through my nostrils, alert for smells. Stale food, sweat, the acrid scent of tension. I tap the ceiling softly, trying to find the support stanchion. Got it. There's a hard runner under my fingertips, metallic-cold, nothing like the warm live wood of Salazar Station. I cling to it with fingertips, slowly stretch my body, drag myself up until toes brace ceiling and my sense of direction flips.

I'm a fly. I crawl along the roof, inverted in total darkness, listening to the breathy rasp and twitch of my companions. The ceiling is cool, vibrating softly to my touch. Like an intelligent insect, I anticipate an unseen swatter: my heart tumbles and coils in my mouth, pulse pounding in my ears. I brush aside the dangling restraint straps that lace the room like an invisible spiderweb. Ignore the white-noise wisdom. My eyes go self-test, one two three four, flash through primary and fusion colours ...

Ouch. Fingers. Something hard raps me across the knuckles. I feel around with my right hand, trying to work it out: my toes, meanwhile, I grip the stanchion. Somewhere around here there's an equipment locker with tools in it. A doorframe. My fingernails skitter across slick metal, recessed behind a gasket. It's shut. Hey --

I feel my way round the side of the door. I slide gently, fingers gliding close to the wall. Something bumps against my back, drifts away again snorting: I tense, but it's just a deactivated drone. I guess even the autopilot -- Trotsky -- is side-tracked by the monotonous humming of the download process.

There are handles, a thin rapping noise when I tap the wall -- I scabble, hunting. *Leverage, damn, let me get my legs round ... yes*. It slides open smoothly as if on rails, a thin panel drawer. There are things in it --

Light.

There's a pale glow in the back of the drawer. I see shapes, shadows stark as blindness against the green emergency bioluminescence. My vision is hazy, tears globbed onto my eyelashes from relief: I'm not ill, it's all right ... or wrong, but *I'm* intact, that's true. I grab for the boxy pack clipped next to the airmask. It's warm, plasticky, and as I lift it out it chirps: " Security. Identify yourself. Authorisation :"

"Oshi Adjani," I say.

" Authorisation inadequate. Alert: this unit is being stolen. Help!"

I blink at it, damn the white noise -- then realise only I can hear it. It's yelling inside my head. Something, at least, can ignore the saturated silent roar of wisdom. The alarm is so dumb it doesn't even realise that nobody's listening. I fumble in the grainy dimness, ripping open the flap and pulling out the hard metal machine inside. It's a concussion bolter, a nasty shipboard security device -- incapable of penetrating the hull, a shock weapon capable of pulsing flesh into mangled jelly on contact. Single shot. I feel queasy just thinking about it. I know I've killed before, but I have a feeling that this is going to be different. Someone I probably know has been parasitized by a fragment of the Boss's imagination. I stare at the contents of the cupboard for a moment, but there's nothing else in there worth taking but the torch. Every moment I delay is ... well. I grab the torch, glance over my shoulder to locate the manual door handle, then shut it off.

Darkness again.

I fumble the handle, get hold of it, and crack the seal. No light. It must be as dark in the access tunnel as it is on the bridge. And cool, growing colder. There's no noise of circulating air.

Push. *Was it like this so long ago?* Misty unbreathed air rimes my nostrils like frost. It *is* getting cold. The heat exchangers must be down. I can imagine myself again, unable to see, a little girl cowering behind a mud hovel, wondering if she is to be beaten tonight. It's so long ago that it feels as if the memory belongs to another person -- all except the pain. The bolter is a heavy lump in my left hand. I slide the door open until I can feel the edge; then I slip through. There's a grabrail on the opposite wall and I drift for a heart-stopping second until I fetch up against solid metal with a jarring thump. *Stupid, too hard.* Where's Raisa? I try to remember. I want to check on her, see she's alright. There are two rooms. Radial, around the passage. *Which way?* If that was the door, it must be ...

Squeak.

I'm flat against the wall -- don't know how I did it in total silence -- nothing's doing. That may have been a door opening. The bridge door? Maybe. I can't feel any air movements. There's nobody breathing but me. For a moment I think I'm back in the dark tunnels under Dragulic. But I know where the doors are, this time. Ivan isn't here, but my lover is safe. No fiery pillar of smoke, no shockwaves pumping through the sewers. Up to my right. Near where I've gone to ground, there's a movement.

I stay frozen forever, until black spots dance in the night before my eyes. When I finally have to breathe I raise one hand to my mouth, draw great juddering gulps of air and hyperventilate until blotches of silver saturate my vision and I feel dizzy. Then I reach out with numb fingers and take hold of the grabrail. I drag myself slowly along, trying to figure which room to eyeball first. I tend to drift in the microgee field, and it's hard to tell where I am, but I don't dare use the torch yet. I'm alone in this tunnel, and yet something warns me I'm in danger. What's going on? Why are the lights down? Is the Boss really making an end run or am I jumping at shadows?

The cold bites at my bones as my fingers grip the end of the rail, where it vanishes into nothing. There could be anything here. An endless void into which I would fall like a stone, a discontinuity, a place in which dreams come alive and the shadow of Anubis stretches overhead. I shudder. I ask myself, *why didn't I start asking questions sooner?* But the question comes years too late. I raise the torch and hold it next to the bolter then, just for a moment, blink it on.

I'm a fly -- and I'm about to fall into a giant's pupil.

It's the tunnel. I'm on the edge of the abyss; it stretches ahead of me for twenty metres, narrowing to a black vanishing point. Sick green shadows, ghastly reflections. I see myself in a burnished hatch cover: I look like death's envoy, holes instead of eye sockets. *Flick* and the torch is out. I saw the doors. One of them is nearby: the system access bay, nerve centre of the *Bronstein*, where the main flight control processors are racked in banks behind anonymous screen panels. Its seal is open, but I doubt the feeble torchlight will have penetrated.

I yank myself hand-over-hand towards it and balance just behind the rim, holding my breath. *Bolter, left hand: torch, right hand. Ready? Breathe out ... wait ... breathe in. Ready to roll forward and hit the door? Ack. Now ... go!*

Thump. The hatch bounces inwards and I follow it into the cramped cabin which lights up like the inside of a decaying log, heart in my mouth, right arm outstretched with the torch and there's a faint whine, globules on black drifting in the air on a familiar smell of shit and something more basic, more metallic, the smell of death itself.

"Ye-AHH!" I yell. Bodies floating, moving, blood still spouting from a ripped throat -- "*hold it!*" Cloud of darkness in front of me, point the bolter inward and use the hatch for body-cover --

"*Freeze.*"

All she has is a knife, but I freeze all the same. The cabin emergency light winks on and etches everything on my memory like an acid burst. She's on the other side of the room, and she has a powerknife. It's where the point is placed that stops me breathing.

Mikhail drifts against his straps, eyes blindly staring at the ceiling, mouth wide. The second mouth in his throat is dry, raw, its false lips peeled back from his carotid vein. The other one, I can't recall her name, floats like a loose sack of bones in a web of restraints. A great black bubble of liquid glistens and quivers below her chin like a goitre the size of a skull. The third one is still thrashing, pulled out of interface involution by the knife Raisa has drawn across her throat.

Raisa opens her eyes and looks at me, asking *hey, why are you here? Is it time yet?* before I see her pupils dilate and she opens her mouth because she is just realising what is happening --

"Let her go," I say quietly. I feel hollow, scooped-out because I know it won't work, so I try it again: "let her go."

Something happens to her face. It warps into an expression of animal cunning, supercilious contempt, overweening arrogance.

"Oshi: if I let her go now she won't dump to Dreamtime. You know that. Cognitive bandwidth blocks are in effect. Why make things harder? You know it makes sense."

It's the Boss. Inside Raisa's skull, the way he was inside mine. Only Raisa doesn't have any of the anti-tampering wetware I've got. She's a prisoner in her own body.

He sounds like sweet reason on cyanide. I grind my teeth, keep my finger loose on the trigger although I'm longing to mash it down and smear his head across the wall -- but that would take Raisa with him.

"Let her go," I repeat. "Do it. I won't shoot. Trust me."

The Superbright fragment laughs: "trust me! You never listened before. You asked questions when I told you not to. And now you expect me to trust you? You put too much faith in your own reliability."

The Boss keeps the knife pointed at me. It's a stand-off: the knife is powered up, liable to cut through metal like tissue. If it gets loose in here it could take out half the ship's control systems before I could catch it. More importantly, it will certainly break the Dreamtime pipe, destroying millions of minds in upload.

"When did you take her?"

"Earlier than you thought. Not in the medicentre -- that was just a meat puppet. I must say I *am* disappointed in you, my dear. Even the tapeworm was smart enough to see how you could be manipulated. No: I laid the groundwork earlier, in the Necropolis. But I only moved house, as it were, recently: when she downloaded. Flesh is frail, is it not? I think she may even have thought it was her own idea. Would you like to ask her?"

I don't move. I don't trust myself to speak.

The Boss adds, just a little petulantly: "I'm doing this for your own good."

"Let me be the judge of that," I say. Calm is a small bird fluttering within my ribs. Everything is red and grainy, shadows long and huge. A great tearing fills my head, raw data seething through the coopted wisdom channels on its way to the downlink into the berserker expansion space. A waterfall of memes, filling the hollow head. I remember Dragulic, the front door bursting open. I remember the castle, a face crumbling under my fingers. Laughing, loving. My uncle, preparing to cut, a mockery of a smile. *Trust me*

"Won't you let me go?" Raisa asks in a small voice: I can tell it's her, not the Boss. "I'll do anything you want --"

Her face warps again. "No. You'll just change your mind."

I shudder. I see Raisa go limp in his grip. Red-out anger. " *Why?*" I demand.

"Why anything?" He sounds almost amused by my presumption in questioning him. "I exist. You exist. Isn't that enough for you? Little monkey, you are a fool. You think about betrayal, but you could never betray me. I've been two steps ahead of you all along. Your little contrivances, your thought-experiments with treachery, serve to impress no-one. Your resolution to learn who you are, to lead an independent life, all wavers at the first offer of a warm bed and an empty mind. You do not have what it takes to understand this universe, Oshi. Leave destiny to the real intellects, and go pick fleas from your simian partners! I'd be doing you a favour if I --" the knife blade twitches.

I shiver hot and cold, but nothing much happens. Am I dealing with a psychopath? This is the Boss -- but without the cool, unsympathetic intellect. He's a pale shadow leering out of Raisa's stolen face. Then the shadow fades from view for a moment. Raisa looks at me with her own eyes, then sideways, at the corpse floating open-throated near the centre of the room. "He's mad, Oshi. Think what you will about me but I couldn't ..." She stops.

I try to breathe: "Let her go. Times change. The outside ... we don't know what's going on, Boss. These may be the only human survivors left. You need them, need us. If this works, if we succeed --"

"It won't." The hateful face is back. I wouldn't have believed how alien the same skin, same muscle could look with a different occupant behind it. I think I know what is happening, and I would gladly die rather than participate, but there's no way out. "The monkeys have stolen the tool of their betters. If you succeed, if this dump works -- and it can -- you'll have a whole new mobile Dreamtime; a starship capable of carrying you out of this place. I can't allow that."

"Why not?" I ask; *keep him talking ...*

I can't let the bolter drift off-target. He'd have the control bay open like a clamshell. My fingers are slimy where they grip the ceramic moulding of the one-shot. The Boss sounds increasingly raw: "You think you have seen evil, but what you have seen is just a mirror of what humanity has inflicted on itself for millennia. There is worse! Would you open the gates of Hell, plunging billions into terror just because the next generation of Intelligence has transcended your petty comprehension? Would you fight your betters, for having the temerity to exist? Oshi, you have lost. Your kind lost centuries ago, before they built the first laboratory prototype of the Dreamtime. That I am here now is a sign of your defeat."

"Is that all?" I ask. It's so cold in here, my breath mists before me. But the coldest place in the room is inside my heart.

Raisa opens her mouth, closes it again. She's bursting to say something, just bursting. And it *is* her.

"Is that the truth, Oshi?" she asks plaintively. "Is -- he -- telling the truth?" She glances at me, slightly

cross-eyed: *trust me*, she seems to be saying, smiling really serene, as if she knows that the dance movement she's choreographing has only one possible ending ...

"It is," I say.

"Then -- I think I could have loved you --" She starts to twist round. Some kind of struggle is going on. The powerknife curls towards the vital control racks, and -- *forgive me* -- I pull the trigger because the Boss is determined, and I can see his target. (The front panel installation on the autopilot bay. Next to the airlock controls.) And I can't justify that risk, no way -- not with eight hundred million lives at stake.

I think Raisa's occulted completely, her personality driven under by the force of his will. It makes no difference, because the outcome is the same. One body, one death. It's a big **SPLAT** noise: it thumps my ears as it sprays blood everywhere, just like a sack of juice dropped out of a tenth-story window onto white sunbleached concrete, and it's not even human, really, not so you'd recognize it afterwards.

Everything is grainy and black and glistening and my forehead is wet and my ears are ringing and I can't see too well. There's water or something in my eyes. Upload is impossible; the white noise in my wisdom interface roars on and on forever, a nation in flight to their new home. Raisa is dead. She won't be joining them, now or ever. I feel like a hollow statue, just a shell really, not human any more. I've been trying to get there for years, somewhere safe from trauma, somewhere where they won't keep dragging me through hell, only now I've found it I don't want it. Because I *need* to hurt. I don't want to feel this ... absence. *I* want to hurt. Raisa: I don't know whether I was obsessed with you because the Boss was deviously diddling my responses, or because I really meant it. But now I'll *never* have a chance to say what I wanted to say, which was mainly, "I want to love you". It's all over again, the way it always ends. They put me together and send me out again and I kid myself that this time will be different, but it never is. I'm the scratch monkey: use it like a scratch pad, throw it away, or maybe fix it up and use it again 'til it breaks. I've had enough. All the pain is boiling up, demanding recognition.

I'm holding the power knife. I look at it, carefully switch off the vibrator so it won't do any real damage, and hold it *real* close. It's shimmery, kind of pretty in a sort of gunmetal way. The handle is slick with shit stitched through with blood. Raisa, why did you do it? Did you know something you never told me? Or did you just get tired of trying to break on through? Shit. I *love* that moire effect on the knife blade: it's, *magnetic*. The pain is threatening to boil over, and I want to hurt. There's only one way I know how to do it to myself, because I'm made of sheet steel and ice and *nothing* can touch me any more except --

I hold it closer. Then I cut out my eyes.

[[Main Index](#)] [[Fiction Index](#)] [[Scratch Monkey Index](#)] [[1](#)] [[2](#)] [[3](#)] [[4](#)] [[5](#)] [[Copyright](#)] [[Feedback](#)]