
Look To Windward (v1.1)
Iain M. Banks, 2000

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.
-- T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", IV

Prologue

Near the time we both knew I would have to leave him, it was hard to tell which flashes were lightning and which came from the energy weapons of the Invisibles.

A vast burst of blue-white light leapt across the sky, making an inverted landscape of the ragged clouds' undersurface and revealing through the rain the destruction all around us: the shell of a distant building, its interior scooped out by some earlier cataclysm, the tangled remains of rail pylons near the crater's lip, the fractured service pipes and tunnels the crater had exposed, and the massive, ruined body of the wrecked land destroyer lying half submerged in the pool of filthy water in the bottom of the hole. When the flare died it left only a memory in the eye and the dull flickering of the fire inside the destroyer's body.

Quilan gripped my hand still tighter. "You should go. Now, Worosei." Another, smaller flash lit his face and the oil-scummed mud around his waist where it disappeared under the war machine.

I made a show of consulting my helm's read-out. The ship's flyer was on its way back, alone. The display told me that no larger craft was accompanying it, while the lack of any communication on the open channel meant there was no good news to report. There would be no heavy lift, there would be no rescue. I flipped to the close-quarter tactical view. Nothing better to report there. The confused, pulsing schematics indicated there was great uncertainty in the representation (a bad enough sign in itself) but it looked like we were right in the line of the Invisibles' advance and we would soon be over-run. In ten minutes, maybe. Or fifteen. Or five. That uncertain. Still I smiled as best I could and tried to sound calm.

"I can't get to anywhere safer until the flyer gets here," I said quietly. "Neither of us can." I shifted on the muddy slope, trying to find a better footing. A series of booms shook the air. I crouched over Quilan, protecting his exposed head. I heard debris thudding onto the slope across from us, and something splashed into the water. I glanced at the level of the pool in the bottom of the crater as the waves slapped against the chisel shape of the land destroyer's fore armour and fell back again. At least the water didn't seem to be rising any more.

"Worosei," he said. "I don't think I'm going anywhere. Not with this thing on top of me. Please. I'm not trying to be heroic and neither should you. Just get out now. Go."

“There's still time,” I told him. “We'll get you out of there. You were always so impatient.” Light pulsed above us again, picking out each lancing drop of rain in the darkness.

“And you were-”

Whatever he was going to say was drowned out by another fusillade of sharp concussions; the noise rolled over us as though the very air was being torn apart.

“Loud night,” I said as I crouched over him again. My ears were ringing. More light flickered to one side and, close up, I could see the pain in his eyes. “Even the weather's against us, Quilan. Dreadful thunder.”

“That was not thunder.”

“Oh, it was! There! And that is lightning,” I said as I crouched further over him.

“Go. Now, Worosei,” he whispered. “You're being stupid.”

“I-” I began. Then my rifle slipped from my shoulder and the stock hit him on the forehead. “Ouch,” he said.

“Sorry.” I shouldered the weapon again.

“My fault for losing my helmet.”

“Still,” I slapped one of the sections of track above us, “you gained a land destroyer.”

He started to laugh, then winced. He forced a smile and rested one hand against the surface of one of the vehicle's guide wheels. “It's funny,” he said. “I'm not even sure if it's one of ours or one of theirs.”

“You know,” I said, “neither am I.” I looked up at its ruptured carcass. The fire inside seemed to be spreading; thin blue and yellow flames were starting to show in the hole where the main turret had been.

The crippled land destroyer had kept its tracks on this side as it had half trundled, half slid into the crater. On the far side, the stripped track lay flat on the crater's slope, a stride-wide strip of flat metal sections leading up like a ramshackle escalator almost to the hole's jagged lip. In front of us, huge guide wheels protruded from the war machine's hull; some supported the giant hinges of the tracks' upper course, others ran on the tracks beneath. Quilan was trapped beneath their lower level, squashed into the mud with only his upper torso free.

Our comrades were dead. There were only Quilan and me, and the pilot of the light flyer, returning to pick us up. The ship, just a couple of hundred kilometres above our heads, could not help.

I had tried pulling Quilan, ignoring his bitten-off moans, but he was held fast. I had burned out my suit's AG unit trying to shift the track sections trapping him, and cursed our supposedly wonderful nth generation projectile weapons; so good for killing our own species and penetrating armour, so useless for cutting through thick metal.

Noise crackled nearby; sparks flicked out of the fire in the turret aperture, rising and fading in the rain. I could feel the detonations through the ground, transmitted by the body of the wrecked machine.

“Ammunition, going off,” Quilan said, his voice strained. “Time you went.”

“No. I think whatever blew the turret off accounted for all the ammunition.”

“And I don't. It could still blow up. Get out.”

“No. I'm comfortable here.”

“You're what?”

“I'm comfortable here.”

“Now you’re being idiotic.”

“I am not being idiotic. Stop trying to get rid of me.”

“Why should I? You’re being idiotic.”

“Stop calling me idiotic, will you? You’re bickering.”

“I am not bickering. I’m trying to get you to behave rationally.”

“I am behaving rationally.”

“This doesn’t impress me, you know. It’s your duty to save yourself.”

“And yours not to despair.”

“Not despair? My comrade and mate is acting like an imbecile and I’ve got a-” Quilan’s eyes widened. “Up there!” he hissed, pointing behind me.

“What?” I twisted, bringing my rifle round and then going still.

The Invisible trooper was at the crater lip, peering down at the wreckage of the land destroyer. He had some sort of helmet on but it didn’t cover his eyes and probably wasn’t very sophisticated. I gazed up through the rain. He was lit by firelight from the burning land destroyer; we ought to be mostly in shadow. The trooper’s rifle was held in one hand, not both. I stayed very still.

Then he brought something up to his eyes, scanning. He stopped, looking straight at us. I had raised the rifle and fired by the time he’d let the night sight drop and begun to bring his weapon to bear. He exploded in light just as another flash erupted in the skies above. Most of his body tumbled and slipped down the slope towards us, shorn of one arm and his head.

“Suddenly you’re a half-decent shot,” Quilan said.

“I always was, dear,” I told him, patting his shoulder. “I just kept it quiet because I didn’t want to embarrass you.”

“Worosei,” he said, taking my hand again. “That one will not have been alone. Now really is the time to go.”

“I-” I began, then the hulk of the land destroyer and the crater around us shook as something exploded inside the wreck and glowing shrapnel whizzed out of the space where the turret had been. Quilan gasped with pain. Mud slides coasted down around us and the remains of the dead Invisible slid another few strides closer. His gun was still clutched in one armored glove. I glanced at my helm’s screen again. The flyer was almost here. My love was right, and it really was time to go.

I turned back to say something to him.

“Just fetch me that bastard’s rifle,” he said, nodding at the dead trooper. “See if I can’t take another one or two of them with me.”

“All right,” I said, and found myself scrambling up the mud and debris and grabbing the dead soldier’s rifle.

“And see if he has anything else!” Quilan shouted. “Grenades; anything!”

I slid back down, overshooting and getting both boots in the water. “All he had,” I said, handing him the rifle.

He checked it as best he could. “That’ll do.” He fitted the stock against his shoulder and twisted round as far as his trapped lower body would allow, settling into something approaching a firing position. “Now, go! Before I shoot you myself!” He had to raise his voice over the sound of more explosions tearing at the wreck of the land destroyer.

I fell forward and kissed him. “I’ll see you in heaven,” I said.

His face took on a look of tenderness just for a moment and he said something, but explosions shook the ground and I had to ask him to repeat what he'd said as the echoes died away and more lights strobed in the skies above us. A signal blinked urgently in my visor to tell me the flyer was immediately overhead.

"I said, there's no rush," he told me quietly, and smiled. "Just live, Worosei. Live for me. For both of us. Promise."

"I promise."

He nodded up the slope of the crater. "Good luck, Worosei."

I meant to say good luck in return, or just goodbye, but I found I could not say a thing. I just gazed hopelessly at him, looking upon my husband for that one last time, and then I turned and hauled myself upwards, slithering on the mud but pulling myself away from him, past the body of the Invisible I had killed, along the side of the burning machine's hull and traversing its rear beneath the barrels of its aft turret while more explosions sent flaming wreckage soaring into the rain-filled sky and splashing into the rising waters.

The sides of the crater were slick with mud and oils; I seemed to slip down more than I was able to climb up and for a few moments I believed I would never make my way out of that awful pit, until I slid and hauled myself over to the broad metal ribbon that was the stripped track of the land destroyer. What would kill my love saved me; I used the linked sections of the embedded track as a staircase, at the end almost running to the top. Beyond the lip, in the flame-lit distances between the ruined buildings and the squalls of rain, I could see the lumbering shapes of other great war machines, and the tiny, scurrying figures behind them, all moving this way.

The flyer swooped from the clouds; I threw myself aboard and we lifted immediately. I tried to turn and look back, but the doors slammed closed and I was thrown about the cramped interior while the tiny craft dodged rays and missiles aimed at it as it rose to the waiting ship Winter Storm.

The Light of Ancient Mistakes

The barges lay on the darkness of the still canal, their lines softened by the snow heaped in pillows and hummocks on their decks. The horizontal surfaces of the canal's paths, piers, bollards and lifting bridges bore the same full billowed weight of snow, and the tall buildings set back from the quaysides loomed over all, their windows, balconies and gutters each a line edged with white.

It was a quiet area of the city at almost any time, Kabe knew, but tonight it both seemed and was quieter still. He could hear his own footsteps as they sank into the untouched whiteness. Each step made a creaking noise. He stopped and lifted his head, sniffing at the air. Very still. He had never known the city so silent. The snow made it seem hushed, he supposed, muffling what little sound there was. Also tonight there was no appreciable wind at ground level, which meant that - in the absence of any traffic - the canal, though still free of ice, was perfectly still and soundless, with no slap of wave or gurgling surge. There were no lights nearby positioned to reflect from the canal's black surface, so that it seemed like nothing, like an absolute absence on which the barges appeared to be floating

unsupported. That was unusual too. The lights were out across the whole city, across almost all this side of the world.

He looked up. The snow was easing now. Spinwards, over the city centre and the still more distant mountains, the clouds were parting, revealing a few of the brighter stars as the weather system cleared. A thin, dimly glowing line directly above - coming and going as the clouds moved slowly overhead - was far-side light. No aircraft or ships that he could see. Even the birds of the air seemed to have stayed in their roosts.

And no music. Usually in Aquime City you could hear music coming from somewhere or other, if you listened hard enough (and he was good at listening hard). But this evening he couldn't hear any.

Subdued. That was the word. The place was subdued. This was a special, rather somber night ("Tonight you dance by the light of ancient mistakes!" Ziller had said in an interview that morning. With only a little too much relish) and the mood seemed to have infected all of the city, the whole of Xarawe Plate, indeed the entire Orbital of Masaq". And yet, even so, there seemed to be an extra stillness caused by the snow. Kabe stood for a moment longer, wondering exactly what might cause that additional hush. It was something that he had noticed before but never quite been bothered enough about to try and pin down. Something to do with the snow itself...

He looked back at his tracks in the snow covering the canal path. Three lines of footprints. He wondered what a human - what any bipedal - would make of such a trail. Probably, he suspected, they would not notice. Even if they did, they would just ask and instantly be told. Hub would tell them: those will be the tracks of our honored Homomdan guest Ambassador Kabe Ischloear.

Ah, so little mystery, these days. Kabe looked around, then quickly did a little hopping, shuffling dance, executing the steps with a delicacy belying his bulk and weight. He glanced about again, and was glad to have, apparently, escaped observation. He studied the pattern his dance had left in the snow. That was better ... But what had he been thinking of? The snow, and its silence.

Yes, that was it; it produced what seemed like a subtraction of noise, because one was used to sound accompanying weather; wind sighed or roared, rain drummed or hissed or - if it was mist and too light to produce noise directly - at least created drips and glugs. But snow falling with no wind to accompany it seemed to defy nature; it was like watching a screen with the sound off, it was like being deaf. That was it.

Satisfied, Kabe tramped on down the path, just as a whole sloped roof-load of snow fell with a muffled but distinct crump from a tall building onto ground nearby. He stopped, looked at the long ridge of whiteness the miniature avalanche had produced as a last few flakes fell swirling around it, and laughed.

Quietly, so as not to disturb the silence.

At last some lights, from a big barge four vessels away round the canal's gradual curve. And the hint of some music, too, from the same source. Gentle, undemanding music, but music nevertheless. Fill-in music; bidding music, as they sometimes called it. Not the recital itself.

A recital. Kabe wondered why he had been invited. The Contact drone E. H. Tersono had requested Kabe's presence there in a message delivered that afternoon. It had been written in ink, on card and delivered by a small drone. Well, a flying salver, really. The thing was, Kabe usually went to Tersono's Eighth-Day recital anyway. Making a point of

inviting him to it had to mean something. Was he being told that he was being in some way presumptuous, having come along on earlier occasions when he hadn't been specifically invited?

That would seem strange; in theory the event was open to all - what was not, in theory? - but the ways of Culture people, especially drones, and most especially old drones, like E. H. Tersono, could still surprise Kabe. No laws or written regulations at all, but so many little ... observances, sets of manners, ways of behaving politely. And fashions. They had fashions in so many things, from the most trivial to the most momentous.

Trivial: that paper message delivered on a salver; did that mean that everybody was going to start physically moving invitations and even day-to-day information from place to place, rather than have such things transmitted normally, communicated to one's house, familiar, drone, terminal or implant? What a preposterous and deeply tedious idea! And yet just the sort of retrospective affectation they might fall in love with, for a season or so (ha! At most).

Momentous: they lived or died by whim! A few of their more famous people announced they would live once and die forever, and billions did likewise; then a new trend would start amongst opinion-formers for people to back-up and have their bodies wholly renewed or new ones regrown, or to have their personalities transferred into android replicas or some other more bizarre design, or ... well, anything; there was really no limit, but the point was that people would start doing that sort of thing by the billion, too, just because it had become fashionable.

Was that the sort of behavior one ought to expect from a mature society? Mortality as a life-style choice? Kabe knew the answer his own people would give. It was madness, childishness, disrespectful of oneself and life itself; a kind of heresy. He, however, was not quite so sure, which either meant that he had been here too long, or that he was merely displaying the shockingly promiscuous empathy towards the Culture that had helped bring him here in the first place.

So, musing about silence, ceremony, fashion and his own place in society, Kabe arrived at the ornately carved gangway that led from the quayside into the gently lit extravagance in gilded wood that was the ancient ceremonial barge Soliton. The snow here had been tramped down by many feet, the trail leading to a nearby sub-trans access building. Obviously he was odd, enjoying walking in the snow. But then he didn't live in this mountain city; his own home here hardly ever experienced snow or ice, so it was a novelty for him.

Just before he went aboard, the Homomdan looked up into the night sky to watch a V-shaped flock of big, pure white birds fly silently overhead, just above the barge's signal rigging, heading inland from the High Salt Sea. He watched them disappear behind the buildings, then brushed the snow off his coat, shook his hat and went aboard.

"It's like holidays."

"Holidays?"

"Yes. Holidays. They used to mean the opposite of what they mean now. Almost the exact opposite."

"What do you mean?"

"Hey, is this edible?"

“What?”

“This.”

“I don’t know. Bite it and see.”

“But it just moved.”

“It just moved? What, under its own power?”

“I think so.”

“Well now, there’s a thing. Evolve from a real predator like our friend Ziller and the instinctive answer’s probably yes, but-”

“What’s this about holidays?”

“Ziller was-”

“-What he was saying. Opposite meaning. Once, holidays meant the time when you went away.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I remember hearing that. Primitive stuff. Age of Scarcity.”

“People had to do all the work and create wealth for themselves and society and so they couldn’t afford to take very much time off. So they worked for, say, half the day, most days of the year and then had an allocation of days they could take off, having saved up enough exchange collateral-”

“Money. Technical term.”

“-In the meantime. So they took the time off and they went away.”

“Excuse me, are you edible?”

“Are you really talking to your food?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if it is food.”

“In very primitive societies there wasn’t even that; they got only a few days off each year!”

“But I thought primitive societies could be quite-”

“Primitive industrial, he meant. Take no notice. Will you stop poking that? You’ll bruise it.”

“But can you eat it?”

“You can eat anything you can get into your mouth and swallow.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Ask, you idiot!”

“I just did.”

“Not it! Grief, what are you glanding? Should you be out? Where’s your minder, terminal, whatever?”

“Well, I didn’t want to just-”

“Oh, I see. Did they all go away at once?”

“How could they? Things would stop working if they all did nothing at the same time.”

“Oh, of course.”

“But sometimes they had days when a sort of skeleton crew operated infrastructure. Otherwise, they staggered their time off. Varies from place to place and time to time, as you might expect.”

“Ah ha.”

“Whereas nowadays what we call holidays, or core time, is when you all stay home, because otherwise there’d be no period when you could all meet up. You wouldn’t know who your neighbors were.”

“Actually I’m not sure that I do.”
“Because we’re just so flighty.”
“One big holiday.”
“In the old sense.”
“And hedonistic.”
“Itchy feet.”
“Itchy feet, itchy paws, itchy flippers, itchy barbels-”
“Hub, can I eat this?”
“-Itchy gas sacs, itchy ribs, itchy wings, itchy pads-”
“Okay, I think we get the idea.”
“Hub? Hello?”
“-Itchy grippers, itchy slime cusps, itchy motile envelopes-”
“Will you shut up?”
“Hub? Come in? Hub? Shit, my terminal’s not working. Or Hub’s not answering.”
“Maybe it’s on holiday.”
“-Itchy swim bladders, itchy muscle frills, itchy - mmph! What? Was there something stuck in my teeth?”
“Yes, your foot.”
“I think that’s where we kicked off.”
“Appropriate.”
“Hub? Hub? Wow, this has never happened to me before ... “
“Ar Ischloear?”

“Hmm?” His name had been spoken. Kabe discovered that he must have gone into one of those strange, trance-like states he sometimes experienced at gatherings like this, when the conversation - or rather when several conversations at once - went zinging to and fro in a dizzying, alienly human sort of way and seemed to wash over him so that he found it difficult to follow who was saying what to whom and why.

He’d found that later he could often remember exactly the words that had been said, but he still had to work to determine the sense behind them. At the time he would just feel oddly detached. Until the spell was broken, as now, and he was awakened by his name. He was in the upper ballroom of the ceremonial barge Soliton with a few hundred other people, most of them human though not all in human form. The recital by the composer Ziller - on an antique Chelgrian mosaickey - had finished half an hour earlier. It had been a restrained, solemn piece, in keeping with the mood of the evening, though its performance had still been greeted with rapturous applause. Now people were eating and drinking. And talking.

He was standing with a group of men and women centered on one of the buffet tables. The air was warm, pleasantly perfumed and filled with soft music. A wood and glass canopy arced overhead, hung with some ancient form of lighting that was a long way from anybody’s full-spectrum but which made everything and everybody look agreeably warm.

His nose ring had spoken to him. When he had first arrived in the Culture he hadn’t liked the idea of having com equipment inserted into his skull (or anywhere else for that matter). His family nose ring was about the only thing he always carried with him, so they had made him a perfect replica that happened to be a communications terminal as well.

“Sorry to disturb you, Ambassador. Hub here. You’re closest; would you let Mr Olsule know he is speaking to an ordinary brooch, not his terminal?”

“Yes.” Kabe turned to a young man in a white suit who was holding a piece of jewelry in his hand and looking puzzled. “Ah, Mr. Olsule?”

“Yeah, I heard,” the man said, stepping back to look up at the Homomdan. He appeared surprised, and Kabe formed the impression that he had been mistaken for a sculpture or an article of monumental furniture. This happened fairly often. A function of scale and stillness, basically. It was one hazard of being a glisteningly black three-and-a-bit-meter-tall pyramidal triped in a society of slim, matte-skinned two-meter-tall bipeds. The young man squinted at the brooch again. “I could have sworn this ... “

“Sorry about that, Ambassador,” said the nose ring. “Thank you for your help.”

“Oh, you’re welcome.”

A gleaming, empty serving tray floated up to the young man, dipped its front in a sort of bow and said, “Hi. Hub again. What you have there, Mr. Olsule, is a piece of jet in the shape of a ceerevell, explosively inlaid with platinum and summitium. From the studio of Ms Xossin Nabbard, of Sintrier, after the Quarafyd school. A finely wrought work of substantial artistry. But unfortunately not a terminal.”

“Damn. Where is my terminal then?”

“You left all your terminal devices at home.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You asked me not to.”

“When?”

“One hundred and-”

“Oh, never mind. Well, replace that, umm ... change that instruction. Next time I leave home without a terminal ... get them to make a fuss or something.”

“Very well. It will be done.”

Mr. Olsule scratched his head. “Maybe I should get a lace. One of those implant things.”

“Undeniably, forgetting your head would pose considerable difficulties. In the meantime, I’ll second one of the barge’s remotes to accompany you for the rest of the evening, if you’d like.”

“Yeah, okay.” The young man put the brooch back on and turned to the laden buffet table. “So, anyway; can I eat this ... ? Oh. It’s gone.”

“Itchy motile envelope,” said the tray quietly, floating off.

“Eh?”

“Ah, Kabe, my dear friend. Here you are. Thank you so much for coming.”

Kabe swiveled to find the drone E. H. Tersono floating at his side at a level a little above head height for a human and a little below that of an Homomdan. The machine was a little less than a meter in height, and half that in width and depth. Its rounded-off rectangular casing was made of delicate pink porcelain held in a lattice of gently glowing blue lumenstone. Beyond the porcelain’s translucent surface, the drone’s internal components could just be made out; shadows beneath its thin ceramic skin. Its aura field, confined to a small volume directly underneath its flat base, was a soft blush of magenta, which, if Kabe recalled correctly, meant it was busy. Busy talking to him?

“Tersono,” he said. “Yes. Well, you did invite me.”

“Indeed I did. Do you know, it occurred to me only later that you might misinterpret my invitation as some sort of summons, even as an imperious demand. Of course, once these things are sent ... “

“Ho-ho. You mean it wasn’t a demand?”

“More of a petition. You see, I have a favor to ask you.”

“You do?” This was a first.

“Yes. I wonder if we might talk somewhere we’d have a little more privacy?”

Privacy, thought Kabe. That was a word you didn’t hear very often in the Culture.

Probably more used in a sexual context than any other. And not always even then.

“Of course,” he said. “Lead on.”

“Thank you,” the drone said, floating towards the stern and rising to look over the heads of the people gathered in the function space. The machine turned this way and that, making it clear it was looking for something or someone. “Actually,” it said quietly, “we are not yet quite quorate ... Ah. Here we are. Please; this way, Ar Ischloear.”

They approached a group of humans centered on the Mahrai Ziller. The Chelgrian was nearly as long as Kabe was tall, and covered in fur that varied from white around his face to dark brown on his back. He had a predator’s build, with large forward-facing eyes set in a big, broad-jawed head. His rear legs were long and powerful; a striped tail, woven about with silver chain, curved between them. Where his distant ancestors would have had two middle-legs, Ziller had a single broad midlimb, partially covered by a dark waistcoat. His arms were much like a human’s, though covered in golden fur and ending in broad, six-digit hands more like paws.

Almost as soon as he and Tersono joined the group around Ziller, Kabe found himself engulfed by another confusing babble of conversation.

“-of course you don’t know what I mean. You have no context.”

“Preposterous. Everybody has a context.”

“No. You have a situation, an environment. That is not the same thing. You exist. I would hardly deny you that.”

“Well, thanks.”

“Yeah. Otherwise you’d be talking to yourself.”

“You’re saying we don’t really live, is that it?”

“That depends what you mean by live. But let’s say yes.”

“How fascinating, my dear Ziller,” E. H. Tersono said. “I wonder-”

“Because we don’t suffer.”

“Because you scarcely seem capable of suffering.”

“Well said! Now, Ziller-”

“Oh, this is such an ancient argument ... “

“But it’s only the ability to suffer that-”

“Hey! I’ve suffered! Lemil Kimp broke my heart.”

“Shut up, Tulyi.”

“-you know, that makes you sentient, or whatever. It’s not actually suffering.”

“But she did!”

“An ancient argument, you said, Ms Sippens?”

“Yes.”

“Ancient meaning bad?”

“Ancient meaning discredited.”

“Discredited? By whom?”

“Not whom. What.”

“And that what would be ... ?”

“Statistics.”

“So there we are. Statistics. Now then, Ziller, my dear friend-”

“You are not serious.”

“I think she thinks she is more serious than you, Zil.”

“Suffering demeans more than it ennobles.”

“And this is a statement derived wholly from these statistics?”

“No. I think you’ll find a moral intelligence is required as well.”

“A prerequisite in polite society, I’m sure we’d all agree. Now, Ziller-”

“A moral intelligence which instructs us that all suffering is bad.”

“No. A moral intelligence which will incline to treat suffering as bad until proved good.”

“Ah! So you admit that suffering can be good.”

“Exceptionally.”

“Ha.”

“Oh, nice.”

“What?”

“Did you know that works in several different languages?”

“What? What does?”

“Tersono,” Ziller said, turning at last to the drone, which had lowered itself to his shoulder level and edged closer and closer as it had tried to attract the Chelgrian’s attention over the past few moments, during which time its aura field had just started to shade into the blue-grey of politely held-in-check frustration.

Mahrai Ziller, composer, half outcast, half exile, rose from his crouch and balanced on his rear haunches. His midlimb made a shelf briefly and he put his drink down on the smoothly furred surface while he used his forelimbs to straighten his waistcoat and comb his brows. “Help me,” he said to the drone. “I am trying to make a serious point and your compatriot indulges in word play.”

“Then I suggest you fall back and regroup and hope to catch her again later when she is in a less trenchantly flippant mood. You’ve met Ar Kabe Ischloear?”

“I have. We are old acquaintances. Ambassador.”

“You dignify me, sir,” the Homomdan rumbled. “I am more of a journalist.”

“Yes, they do tend to call us all ambassadors, don’t they? I’m sure it’s meant to be flattering.”

“No doubt. They mean well.”

“They mean ambiguously, sometimes,” Ziller said, turning briefly to the woman he had been talking to. She raised her glass and bowed her head a fraction.

“When you two have entirely finished criticizing your determinedly generous hosts ... “ Tersono said.

“This would be the private word you mentioned, would it?” Ziller asked.

“Precisely. Indulge an eccentric drone.”

“Very well.”

“This way.”

The drone continued past the line of food tables towards the stern of the barge. Ziller followed the machine, seeming to flow along the polished deck, lithely graceful on his

single broad midlimb and two strong rear legs. The composer still had his crystal full of wine balanced effortlessly in one hand, Kabe noticed. Ziller used his other hand to wave at a couple of people who nodded to or greeted him as they passed.

Kabe felt very heavy and lumbering in comparison. He tried drawing himself up to his full height so as to appear less stockily massive, but nearly collided with a very old and complicated light fitting hanging from the ceiling.

The three sat in a cabin which extended from the stern of the great barge, looking out over the ink-dark waters of the canal. Ziller had folded himself onto a low table, Kabe squatted comfortably on some cushions on the deck and Tersono rested on a delicate-looking and apparently very old webwood chair. Kabe had known the drone Tersono for all the ten years he had spent on Masaq” Orbital, and had noticed early on that it liked to surround itself with old things; this antique barge, for example, and the ancient furniture and fittings it contained.

Even the machine’s physical make-up spoke of a sort of antiquarianism. It was a generally reliable rule that the bigger a Culture drone appeared, the older it was. The first examples, dating from eight or nine thousand years ago, had been the size of a bulky human. Subsequent models had gradually shrunk until the most advanced drones had, for some time, been small enough to slip into a pocket. Tersono’s meter-tall body might have suggested that it had been constructed millennia ago when in fact it was only a few centuries old, and the extra space it took up was accounted for by the separation of its internal components, the better to exhibit the fine translucency of its unorthodox ceramic shell.

Ziller finished his drink and took a pipe from his waistcoat. He sucked on it until a little smoke rose from the bowl while the drone exchanged pleasantries with the Homomdan. The composer was still trying to blow smoke rings when Tersono finally said, “... which brings me to my motive in asking you both here.”

“And what would that be?” Ziller asked.

“We are expecting a guest, Composer Ziller.”

Ziller gazed levelly at the drone. He looked round the broad cabin and stared at the door.

“What, now? Who?”

“Not now. In about thirty or forty days. I’m afraid we don’t know exactly who quite yet. But it will be one of your people, Ziller. Someone from Chel. A Chelgrian.”

Ziller’s face consisted of a furred dome with two large, black, almost semicircular eyes positioned above a grey-pink, furless nasal area and a large, partially prehensile mouth. There was an expression on it now that Kabe had never seen before, though admittedly he had known the Chelgrian only casually and for less than a year. “Coming here?” Ziller asked. His voice was ... icy, was the word, decided Kabe.

“Indeed. To this Orbital, possibly to this Plate.”

Ziller’s mouth worked. “Caste?” he said. The word was more spat than pronounced.

“One of the ... Tacted? Possibly a Given,” Tersono said smoothly.

Of course. Their caste system. At least part of the reason that Ziller was here and not there. Ziller studied his pipe and blew more smoke. “Possibly a Given, eh?” he muttered. “My, you are honored. Hope you get your etiquette exquisitely correct. You’d better start practicing now.”

“We believe this person may be coming here to see you,” the drone said. It turned frictionlessly in the webwood seat and extended a maniple field to work the cords which lowered the gold cloth drapes over the windows, cutting off the view to the dark canal and the snow-enfolded quays.

Ziller tapped the bowl of his pipe, frowning at it. “Really?” he said. “Oh dear. What a shame. I was thinking of embarking on a cruise before then. Deep space. For at least half a year. Perhaps longer. In fact I had quite decided upon it. You will convey my apologies to whatever simpering diplomat or supercilious noble they’re sending. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

The drone dropped its voice. “I’m sure they won’t.”

“Me too. I was being ironic. But I’m serious about the cruise.”

“Ziller,” the drone said quietly. “They want to meet with you. Even if you did leave on a cruise, they would doubtless attempt to follow you and meet up on the cruise ship.”

“And of course you wouldn’t try to stop them.”

“How could we?”

Ziller sucked on his pipe for a moment. “I suppose they want me to go back. Do they?”

The drone’s gunmetal aura indicated puzzlement. “We don’t know.”

“Really?”

“Cr Ziller, I am being perfectly open with you.”

“Really. Well, can you think of another reason for this expedition?”

“Many, my dear friend, but none of them are especially likely. As I said, we don’t know. However, if I was forced to speculate, I’d tend to agree with you that requesting your return to Chel is probably the main reason for the impending visit.”

Ziller chewed on his pipe stem. Kabe wondered if it would break. “You can’t force me to go back.”

“My dear Ziller, we wouldn’t even think of suggesting to you that you do,” the drone said. “This emissary may wish do so, but the decision is entirely yours. You are an honored and respected guest, Ziller. Culture citizenship, to the extent that such a thing really exists with any degree of formality, would be yours by assumption. Your many admirers, amongst whose number I count myself, would long ago have made it yours by acclamation, if only that would not have seemed presumptuous.”

Ziller nodded thoughtfully. Kabe wondered if this was a natural expression for a Chelgrian, or a learned, translated one. “Very flattering,” Ziller said. Kabe had the impression the creature was genuinely trying to sound gracious. “However I am still Chelgrian. Not quite naturalized yet.”

“Of course. Your presence is trophy enough. To declare this your home would be-”

“Excessive,” Ziller said pointedly. The drone’s aura field flushed a sort of muddy cream color to indicate embarrassment, though a few flecks of red indicated it was hardly acute. Kabe cleared his throat. The drone turned to him.

“Tersono,” the Homomdan said. “I’m not entirely sure why I’m here, but may I just ask whether, in all this, you are talking as a representative of Contact?”

“Of course you may. Yes, I am speaking on behalf of the Contact section. And with the full co-operation of Masaq” Hub.”

“I am not without friends, admirers,” Ziller said suddenly, staring at the drone.

“Without?” Tersono said, field glowing a ruddy orange. “Why, as I say, you have almost nothing but-”

“I mean amongst some of your Minds; your ships, Tersono the Contact drone,” Ziller said coldly. The machine rocked back in its chair. A little melodramatic, thought Kabe. Ziller went on, “I might well be able to persuade one of them to accommodate me and provide me with my own private cruise. One which this emissary might find much more difficult to intrude upon.”

The drone’s aura lapsed back to purple. It wobbled minutely in the chair. “You are welcome to try, my dear Ziller. However that might be taken as a terrible insult.”

“Fuck them.”

“Yes, well. But I meant by us. A terrible insult on our part. An insult so terrible that in the very sad and regrettable circumstances-”

“Oh, spare me.” Ziller looked away.

Ah yes, the war, thought Kabe. And the responsibility for it. Contact would regard this as all very delicate.

The drone, misted in purple, went quiet for a moment. Kabe shifted on his cushions. “The point is,” Tersono continued, “that even the most willful and, ah, characterful of ships might not accede to the sort of request you have indicated you might make. In fact I’d wager quite heavily on it that they wouldn’t.”

Ziller chewed some more on his pipe. It had gone out. “Which means that Contact has already fixed this, doesn’t it?”

Tersono wobbled again. “Let’s just say that the wind has been tested.”

“Yes, let’s. Of course, this is always assuming that none of your ship Minds were lying.”

“Oh, they never lie. They dissemble, evade, prevaricate, confound, confuse, distract, obscure, subtly misrepresent and willfully misunderstand with what often appears to be a positively gleeful relish and are generally perfectly capable of contriving to give one an utterly unambiguous impression of their future course of action while in fact intending to do exactly the opposite, but they never lie. Perish the thought.”

Ziller did a good stare, Kabe decided. He was quite glad that those big, dark eyes were not directed at him. Though, certainly, the drone seemed impervious.

“I see,” the composer said. “Well then, I suppose I might as well just stay put. I imagine I could just refuse to leave my apartment.”

“Why, of course. Not very dignified, perhaps, but that would be your prerogative.”

“Quite. But if I’m given no choice don’t expect me to be welcoming, or even polite.” He inspected the bowl of his pipe.

“That is why I asked Kabe to be here.” The drone turned to the Homomdan. “Kabe, we would be so grateful if you’d agree to help play host to our guest Chelgrian when he or she appears. You would be half of a double act with me, possibly with some assistance from Hub, if that’s acceptable. We don’t yet know how much time this will take up on a daily basis, or how long the visit will last, but obviously if it proved to be extended we would make additional arrangements.” The machine’s body tipped a few degrees to one side in the webwood chair. “Would you do this? I know it is a lot to ask and you indent give a definitive answer quite yet; sleep on it if you please and ask for any further information you’d like. But you would be doing us a great favor, given Cr Ziller’s perfectly understandable reticence.”

Kabe sat back on his cushions. He blinked a few times. “Oh, I can tell you now. I’d be happy to be of help.” He looked at Ziller. “Of course, I wouldn’t want to distress Mahrai Ziller ... “

“I shall remain undistressed, depend on it,” Ziller told him. “If you can distract this bile-purse they’re sending you’ll be doing me a favor, too.”

The drone made a sighing noise, rising and falling fractionally above the seat. “Well, that is ... satisfactory, then. Kabe, can we talk more tomorrow? We’d like to brief you over the next few days. Nothing too intense, but, considering the unfortunate circumstances of our relationship with the Chelgrians over recent years, obviously we don’t want to upset our guest through any lack of knowledge of their affairs and manners.”

Ziller made a noise like a snarled “Huh!”

“Of course,” Kabe told Tersono. “I understand.” Kabe spread all three of his arms. “My time is yours.”

“And our gratitude yours. Now,” the machine said, rising into the air. “I’m afraid I’ve kept us chattering in here for so long we’ve missed Hub’s avatar’s little speech and if we don’t hurry we’ll be late for the main, if rather sad, event of the evening.”

“That time already?” Kabe said, rising too. Ziller snapped the cap shut on his pipe and replaced it in his waistcoat. He unfolded himself from the table and the three returned to the main ballroom as the lights were going out and the roof was rumbling and rolling back to reveal a sky of a few thin, ragged clouds, multitudinous stars and the bright thread of the Orbital’s far side. On a small stage at the forward end of the ballroom, the Hub’s avatar - in the shape of a thin, silver-skinned human - stood, head bowed. Cold air flowed in around the assembled humans and varied other guests. All, save for the avatar, gazed up at the sky. Kabe wondered in how many other places within the city, across the Plate and along this whole side of the great bracelet world similar scenes were taking place.

Kabe tilted his massive head and stared up too. He knew roughly where to look; Mاساق” Hub had been quietly persistent in its pre-publicity over the last fifty days or so.

Silence.

Then a few people muttered something and a number of tiny chimes sounded from personal terminals distributed throughout the huge, open space.

And a new star blazed in the heavens. There was just the hint of a flicker at first, then the tiny point of light grew brighter and brighter, exactly as though it was a lamp on which somebody was turning up a dimmer switch. Stars nearby began to disappear, their feeble twinklings drowned out by the torrent of radiation pouring from the newcomer. In a few moments the star had settled to a steady, barely wavering grey-blue glare, almost outshining the glowing string of Mاساق’s far-side plates.

Kabe heard one or two breaths nearby, and a few brief cries. “Oh, grief,” a woman said quietly. Someone sobbed.

“Not even particularly pretty,” Ziller muttered, so softly that Kabe suspected only he and the drone had heard.

They all watched for a few more moments. Then the silver-skinned, dark-suited avatar said, “Thank you,” in that hollow, not loud but deep and carrying voice that avatars seemed to favor. It stepped down from the stage and walked away, leaving the opened room and heading for the quayside.

“Oh, we had a real one,” Ziller said. “I thought we’d have an image.” He looked at Tersono, which allowed itself a faint glow of aquamarine modesty.

The roof started to roll back, gently shaking the deck beneath Kabe’s trio of feet as though the old barge’s **engines** had woken again. The lights brightened fractionally; the

light of the newly bright star continued to pour through the gap between the halves of the closing roof, then through the glass after the segments had met and locked again. The room was much darker than it had been before, but people could see well enough. They look like ghosts, thought Kabe, gazing round the humans. Many were still staring up at the star. Some were heading outside, to the open deck. A few couples and larger groups were huddled together, individuals comforting one another. I didn't think it would affect so many so deeply, the Homomdan thought. I thought they might almost laugh it off. I still don't really know them. Even after all this time.

"This is morbid," Ziller said, drawing himself up. "I'm going home. I have work to do. Not that tonight's news has exactly been conducive to inspiration or motivation."

"Yes," Tersono said. "Forgive a rude and impatient drone, but might I ask what you've been working on lately, Cr Ziller? You haven't published anything for a while but you do seem to have been very busy."

Ziller smiled broadly. "Actually, it's a commissioned piece."

"Really?" the drone's aura rainbowed with brief surprise. "For whom?"

Kabe saw the Chelgrian's gaze flick briefly towards the stage where the avatar had stood earlier. "All in due course, Tersono," Ziller said. "But it's a biggish piece and it'll be a while yet before its first performance."

"Ah. Most mysterious."

Ziller stretched, putting one long furred leg out behind him and tensing before relaxing. He looked at Kabe. "Yes, and if I don't get back to work on it, it'll be late." He turned back to Tersono. "You'll keep me informed about this wretched emissary?"

"You will have full access to all we know."

"Right. Good night, Tersono." The Chelgrian nodded to Kabe. "Ambassador."

Kabe bowed. The drone dipped. Ziller went softly bounding through the thinning crowd. Kabe looked back up at the nova, thinking.

Eight-hundred-and-three-year-old light shone steadily down.

The light of ancient mistakes, he thought. That was what Ziller had called it, on the interview Kabe had heard just that morning. "Tonight you dance by the light of ancient mistakes!" Except that no one was dancing.

It had been one of the last great battles of the Idiran war, and one of the most ferocious, one of the least restrained, as the Idirans risked everything, including the opprobrium even of those they regarded as friends and allies, in a series of desperate, wildly destructive and brutal attempts to alter the increasingly obvious likely outcome of the war. Only (if that was a word one could ever use in such a context) six stars had been destroyed during the nearly fifty years the war had raged. This single battle for a tendril of galactic limb, lasting less than a hundred days, had accounted for two of them as the suns Portisia and Junce had been induced to explode.

It had become known as the Twin Novae Battle, but really what had been done to each of the suns had generated something more like a supernova on each. Neither star had shone upon a barren system. Worlds had died, entire biospheres had been snuffed out and billions of sentient creatures had suffered - albeit briefly - and perished in these twin catastrophes.

The Idirans had committed the acts, the gigadeathcrimes - their monstrous weaponry, not that of the Culture, had been directed first at one star, then the other - yet still, arguably, the Culture might have prevented what had happened. The Idirans had attempted to sue

for peace several times before the battle started, but the Culture had continued to insist on unconditional surrender, and so the war had ground onwards and the stars had died. It was long over. The war had ended nearly eight hundred years ago and life had gone on. Still, the real space light had been crawling across the intervening distance for all these centuries, and by its relativistic standard it was only now that those stars blew up, and just at this moment that those billions died, as the out rushing shell of light swept over and through the Masaq” system.

The Mind that was Masaq” Orbital Hub had its own reasons for wanting to commemorate the Twin Novae Battle and had asked the indulgence of its inhabitants, announcing that for the interval between the first nova and the second it would be observing its own private term of mourning, although without affecting the execution of its duties. It had intimated there would be some sort of more upbeat event to mark the end of this period, though exactly what form this would take it hadn’t yet revealed.

Kabe suspected he knew, now. He found himself glancing involuntarily in the direction Ziller had taken, just as the Chelgrian’s gaze had strayed towards the stage earlier, when he’d been asked who had commissioned whatever he was working on.

All in due course, Kabe thought. As Ziller had said.

For tonight, all Hub had wanted was that people look up and see the sudden, silent light, and think; perhaps contemplate a little. Kabe had half expected the locals to take no notice whatsoever and just carry on with their busy little one-long-party lives as usual; however it appeared that, here at least, the Hub Mind’s wish had been granted.

“All very regrettable,” the drone E. H. Tersono said at Kabe’s side, and made a sighing sound. Kabe thought it probably meant to sound sincere.

“Salutary, for all of us,” Kabe agreed. His own ancestors had been the Idirans” mentors, and fought alongside the Idirans in the early stages of the ancient war. The Homomda felt the weight of their own responsibilities as keenly as the Culture did its.

“We try to learn,” Tersono said quietly. “But still we make mistakes.”

It was talking now about Chel, the Chelgrians and the Caste War, Kabe knew. He turned and looked at the machine as the people moved away in the steady, ghostly light.

“You could always do nothing, Tersono,” he told it. “Though such a course usually brings its own regrets.”

I am too glib, sometimes, Kabe thought, I tell them too exactly what they want to hear. The drone tipped back to make clear that it was looking up at the Homomdan, but said nothing.

Winter Storm

The hull of the ruined ship bowed away on all sides, curving out and then back, arcing overhead. They had fitted lights in the centre of what had become the ceiling, directly above the curious, glazed-looking floor; reflections glowed from the glassily swirled, distorted surface itself, and from the few stumps of unidentifiable equipment that protruded above it.

Quilan tried to find a place to stand where he thought he could distinguish what it was he was standing on, then switched off the suit’s field pack and let his feet touch the surface.

It was hard to tell through his boots, but the floor seemed to have the feel of what it looked like; glass. The spin they'd given the hull produced what felt like about a quarter gravity. He patted the fastenings securing his bulky backpack.

He looked up and around. The hull's interior surface looked hardly damaged. There were various indentations and a scattering of holes, some circular and some elliptical, but all quite symmetrical and smooth and part of the design; none went all the way through the hull material and none looked ragged. The only aperture which led to the outside was right in the nose of the craft, seventy meters away from where he stood, more or less in the centre of the spoon-shaped mass of floor. That two-meter-wide hole had been cut in the hull weeks ago to gain access after the hulk had been located and secured. That was how he had gained entry.

He could see various discolored patches on the hull's surface that didn't look right, and a few small dangling tubes and wires, up near the newly emplaced lights. Part of him wondered why they had bothered with the lights. The hull's interior was evacuated, open to space; nobody would be coming in here without a full suit, so they would have the concomitant sensory equipment that made lights unnecessary. He looked down at the floor. Maybe the technicians had been superstitious, or just emotional. The lights made the place seem a little less forbidding less haunted.

He could understand that wandering around in here with only ambient radiations to impinge upon the augmented senses might well induce terror if you were of a sensitive nature. They'd found much of what they'd hoped to find; enough for his mission, sufficient to save a thousand or so other souls. Almost certainly not enough to fulfill his hopes. He looked about. It appeared they had removed all the sensory and monitoring equipment they'd been using to inspect the wreck of the privateer Winter Storm.

He felt a shudder through his boots. He glanced up to the side, as the sliced-off bow of the ship was put back in place. Enclosed, in this ship of the dead. At last.

~ Isolation established, it says, said a voice in his head. The machine in his backpack produced a faint vibration.

~ It says the proximity of the suit's systems is interfering with its instruments. You'll have to switch your com off. Now it's saying, Please remove the pack from your back.

~ Will we still be able to talk?

~ You and I will be able to talk to each other, and it'll be able to talk to me.

~ All right, he said, slipping the pack off. ~ The lights are all right? He asked.

~ They're just lights, nothing else.

~ Where shall I put- he started to say, but then the pack went light in his hands and began to tug away from him.

~ It wants us to know it has its own motive power; the voice in his head informed him.

~ Oh, yes, of course. Ask it to work fast, would you? Tell it we're pressed for time because there's a Culture warship braking towards our position as we speak, coming to-

~ Think that'll make any difference, Major?

~ I don't know. Tell it to be thorough, too.

~ Quilan, I think it'll just do what it has to do, but if you really want me to-

~ No. No, sorry. Sorry, don't.

~ Look, I know this is hard on you, Quit. I'll leave you alone for a bit, okay?

~ Yes, thanks.

Huyler's voice went off-line. It was as though a hiss right on the boundary of hearing had suddenly been removed.

He watched the Navy drone for a moment. The machine was silvery grey and nondescript, like the pack from an ancient space suit. It floated silently across the near-flat floor, keeping about a meter off its surface, heading for the near, bow end of the ship to start its search pattern.

It would be too much to ask, he thought to himself. The chances are too remote. It was a small miracle we discovered anything at all in here, that we are able to rescue those souls from such destruction a second time. To ask for more ... was probably pointless, but no more than natural.

What intelligent creature possessed of wit and feeling could do otherwise? We always want more, he thought, we always take our past successes for granted and assume they but point the way to future triumphs. But the universe does not have our own best interests at heart, and to assume for a moment that it does, ever did or ever might is to make the most calamitous and hubristic of mistakes.

To hope as he was hoping, hoping against likelihood, against statistical probability, in that sense against the universe itself, was only to be expected, but it was also almost certainly forlorn. The animal in him craved something that his higher brain knew was not going to happen. That was the point he was impaled upon, the front on which he suffered; that struggle of the lower brain's almost chemical simplicities of yearning pitched against the withering realities revealed and comprehended by consciousness. Neither could give up, and neither could give way. The heat of their battle burned in his mind.

He wondered if, despite what he'd been told, Huyler could hear any hint of it.

~ All our tests confirm that the construct has been fully recovered. All error-checks have been completed. The construct is now available for interaction and downloading, the sister technician announced in his head. She seemed to be trying to sound more like a machine than machines ever did.

He opened his eyes and blinked into the light for a moment. The headset he wore was just visible from the corners of his eyes. The reclined couch he lay on felt firm but comfortable. He was in the medical facility of the Mendicant Sisters' temple ship Piety. Across the racks of gleaming, spotless medical gear, near the side of a stained, battered-looking thing about the size of a domestic chill cabinet, the sister technician talking to him was a youngster with a severe expression, dark brown fur and a head which had been partially shaved.

~ I'll download it now, she continued. ~ Do you wish to interact with it immediately?

~ Yes, I do.

~ A moment, please.

~ Wait, what will it - will he - experience?

~ Awareness. Sight, in the form of a human-compensated feed from this camera. She tapped a tiny wand protruding from the headset she wore. ~ Hearing, in the form of your voice. Continue?

~ Yes.

There was the very faintest impression of a hiss, and then a sleepy-sounding, deeply male voice saying,

~ ... seven, eight ... nine ... Hello? What? Where is this? What is this? Where-? What's happened?

It was a voice that went from slurred sleepiness to suddenly fearful confusion and then on to a degree of control within just a few words. The voice sounded younger than he'd been expecting. He supposed there was no need for it to sound old.

~ Sholan Hades Huyler, he responded calmly. ~ Welcome back.

~ Who is that? I can't move. There was still a trace of uncertainty and anxiety in the voice. ~ This isn't ... the beyond. Is it?

~ My name is Called-to-Arms-from-Given Major Quilan IV of Itirewein. I'm sorry you can't move but please don't worry; your personality construct is currently still inside the substrate you were originally stored within, in the Military Technology Institute, Cravinyr, on Aorme. At the moment the substrate you're inside is aboard the temple ship Piety. It's in orbit around a moon of the planet Reshref Four, in the constellation of the Bow, along with the hulk of the star cruiser Winter Storm.

~ There you are. Ah. You say you're a major. I was an admiral-general. I outrank you. The voice was perfectly under control now; still deep, but clipped and crisp. The voice of somebody used to giving orders.

~ Your rank when you died was greater than mine now, certainly, sir.

The sister technician adjusted something on the console in front of her.

~ Whose are those hands? They look female.

~ Those belong to the sister technician who is looking after us, sir. Your point of view is from a headset she's wearing.

~ Can she hear me?

~ No, sir.

~ Ask her to take the headset off and show me what she looks like.

~ Sir, are you-?

~ Major, if you would.

Quilan felt himself sigh. ~ Sister technician, he thought. He asked her to do as Huyler had asked. She did, but looked annoyed about it.

~ Sour-looking, frankly. Wish I hadn't bothered. So, what has been happening, Major? What am I doing here?

~ A great deal has been happening, sir. You'll be given a full historical briefing in due course.

~ Date?

~ It is the ninth of spring, 3455.

~ Just eighty-six years? I expected more, somehow. So, Major, why have I been resurrected?

~ Frankly, sir, I do not entirely know myself.

~ Then, frankly, Major, I think you'd better rapidly put me in touch with somebody who does know.

~ There has been a war, sir.

~ A war? Who with?

~ With ourselves, sir; a civil war.

~ This some sort of caste thing?

~ Yes, sir.

~ I suppose it was always coming. So, am I being conscripted? Are the dead being used as the reserves?

~ No, sir. The war is over. We are at peace again, though there will be changes. There was an attempt to rescue you and the other stored personalities from the substrate in the Military Institute during the war - an attempt I was involved in - but it was only partially successful. Until a few days ago we thought it had been completely unsuccessful.

~ So; am I being brought back to life to appreciate the manifest glories of the new order? To be re-educated? Tried for past incorrectness? What?

~ Our superiors think that you may be able to help with a mission that lies before both of us.

~ Before both of us? Uh-huh. And what exactly would that mission be, Major?

~ I can't tell you that at the moment, sir.

~ You seem worryingly ignorant to be the one who's pulling all the strings here, Major.

~ I'm sorry, sir. I believe that my current lack of knowledge may be a safety procedure. But I would guess that your expertise regarding the Culture could be of some help.

~ My thoughts on the Culture proved politically unpopular when I was alive, Major; that's one of the reasons I took the offer of being put into storage on Aorme, rather than either die and go to heaven or keep banging my head against a wall in Combined Forces Intelligence. Are you telling me the top brass have come round to my point of view?

~ Perhaps, sir. Perhaps just your knowledge of the Culture would prove useful.

~ Even if it's eight-and-a-half decades old?

Quilan paused, and then expressed something he'd been preparing for some days, since they'd rediscovered the substrate.

~ Sir, considerable thought and great effort went into both retrieving you and preparing me for my mission. I would hope that no part of that thought or effort was either wasted or without point.

Huyler was silent for a moment. ~ There were about five hundred others besides me in that machine in the Institute. Did they all get out, too?

~ The final figure for those stored was nearer a thousand, but yes, sir, they all appear to have come through, though only you've been revived so far.

~ All right then, soldier, perhaps you should start by telling me what you do know about this mission.

~ I know only what you might call our cover story, sir. I've been induced to forget the real mission goal for the time being.

~ What?

~ It's a security measure, sir. You'll be briefed with the full mission details and you won't forget them. I ought to remember gradually what my mission is anyway, but in the event that something goes wrong, you'll be the back-up.

~ They frightened somebody might read your mind, Major?

~ I imagine so, sir.

~ Though, of course, the Culture doesn't do that.

~ So we're told.

~ Extra precaution, eh? Must be an important mission. But if you can still remember that you have a secret mission in the first place...

~ I am reliably informed that in a day or two I'll even forget that as well.

~ Well, all very interesting. So, what would that cover story be?

~ I will be on a cultural diplomatic mission to a world of the Culture.

~ A Cultural cultural mission?

~ In a sense, sir.

~ Just an old soldier's lame joke, son. Relax that frozen sphincter a bit, won't you?

~ I'm sorry, sir. I need to have your agreement both to undertake the mission and to be transferred into another substrate within myself. That process may take a little time.

~ Did you say another machine inside you?

~ Yes, sir. There is a device inside my skull, designed to look like an ordinary Soulkeeper, but able to accommodate your personality as well.

~ You don't look that much of a fat-head, Major.

~ The device is no larger than a small finger, sir.

~ And what about your Soulkeeper?

~ The same device functions as my Soulkeeper too, sir.

~ They can make something that clever that small?

~ Yes, sir, they can. There probably isn't time to go into all the technical details.

~ Well I beg your pardon, Major, but take it from an old soldier that war in general, and limited personnel missions in particular, are often all about the technical details. Plus, you're rushing me, son. You have the advantage of being at the controls here. I've got eighty-six years of catching up to do. I don't even know that you're telling me the truth about any of this. It all sounds suspicious as hell so far. And about this being transferred inside you. You trying to tell me I don't even get my own god-damned body?

~ I'm sorry there wasn't more time to brief you, sir. We thought we had lost you. Twice, in a sense. When we discovered that your substrate had survived, my mission had already been decided on. And yes, your consciousness would be transferred entirely into the substrate within my body; you would have access to all my senses and we would be able to communicate, though you would not be able to control my body unless I became deeply unconscious or suffered brain death. The only technical detail I know is that the device is a crystalline nanofoam matrix with links to my brain.

~ So I'd just be along for the ride? What son of itch-shit mission profile is that? Who's putting you up to this, Major?

~ It would be a novel experience for both of us, sir, and one that I would consider a privilege. It is believed that your presence and advice would increase the likelihood of the mission's success. As to who put me up to it, I was trained and briefed by a team under the command of Estodien Visquile.

~ Visquile? Is that old horror still alive? And made it to Estodien, too. I'll be damned.

~ He sends his regards, sir. I carry a personal and private communication from him addressed to you.

~ Let me hear it, Major.

~ Sir, we thought you might like a little more time to-

~ Major Quilan, I'm mightily suspicious that I'm being shoveled into something pretty damn dubious here. I'll be honest with you, youngster; it's not very likely that I'm going to agree to take part in your unknown mission even after I've heard Visquile's message, but I'm sure as shit not going willingly through your ears, up your ass, or anywhere else unless I do hear what that old whoreboy's got to say, and I might as well hear it now as later. Making myself clear here?

~ Very, sir. Sister technician; please replay the message from Estodien Visquile to Hadesh Huyler.

~ Proceeding, said the female.

Quilan was left alone with his thoughts. He realized how tense he had become communicating with the ghost of Hadesh Huyler, and deliberately relaxed his body, easing his muscles and straightening his back. Again, his gaze swept over the gleaming surfaces of the medical facility, but what he was seeing was the interior of the hull of the ship they were floating alongside, the privateer cruiser Winter Storm.

He had been aboard the wreck once so far, while they were still trying to locate and extract Huyler's soul from the thousand or so others stored within the rescued substrate, which they'd located in the wreck with a specially adapted Navy drone. He had been promised that later, if there was time, he would be allowed to go back to the wreck with that drone and attempt to discover any other souls the original sweeps had missed.

Time was running out, though. It had taken time to get permission for what he wanted to do, and it was taking time for the Navy technical people to adjust the machine.

Meanwhile they'd been told that the Culture warship was on its way, just a few days out.

At the moment the techs were pessimistic that they'd get the drone finished in time.

The image of the wrecked ship's scooped-out hull seemed fixed in his brain.

~ Major Quilan?

~ Sir?

~ Reporting for duty, Major. Permission to come aboard.

~ Just so, sir. Sister technician? Transfer Hadesh Huyler into the substrate within my body.

~ Directly, the female said. ~ Proceeding.

He had wondered if he'd feel anything. He did: a tingling, then a warmth in a small area on the nape of his neck. The sister technician kept him informed; the transfer went well and took about two minutes. Checking it had gone perfectly took twice that time.

What bizarre fates our technologies dream up for us, he thought as he lay there. Here I am, a male, becoming pregnant with the ghost of an old dead soldier, to travel beyond the bounds of light older than our civilization and carry out some task I have spent the best part of a year training for but of which I presently have no real knowledge whatsoever. The spot on his neck was cooling. He thought his head felt very slightly warmer than it had before. He might have been imagining it.

You lose your love, your heart, your very soul, he thought, and gain - "a land destroyer!" he heard her say, so falsely, bravely cheerful in his mind, while the rain-filled sky flashed above her and the vast weight pinned him utterly. Some memory of that pain and despair squeezed tears from his eyes.

~ Complete.

~ Testing, testing, said the dry, laconic voice of Hadesh Huyler.

~ Hello, sir.

~ You okay, son?

~ I'm fine, sir.

~ Did that hurt you there, Major? You seem a little ... distressed.

~ No, sir. Just an old memory. How do you feel?

~ Pretty damn strange. I dare say I'll get used to it. Looks like everything checks out. Shit, that female techie doesn't look any better through a male's eyes than she does

through a camera. Of course; what he could see, Huyler could see. Before he could reply, Huyler added, You sure you're okay?
~ Positive, sir. I'm fine.

He stood within the hulk of the Winter Storm. The Navy drone went back and forth across the strange, almost flat floor of the wreck, searching in a grid pattern. It passed the hole in the floor where the substrate from Aorme had been wrenched out.

In the two days since they'd found the substrate, Quilan had persuaded the techs that it was worth recalibrating the drone to look for substrates much smaller than the one Huyler had been in, substrates the size of a Soulkeeper, in fact. They had already performed a standard search, but he got them at least to try and look more closely. The Mendicant Sisters on the temple ship had helped with the persuading; any chance to rescue a soul had to be pursued to the utmost.

By the time the drone was ready, though, the Culture ship which would take him on the first leg of his journey was already starting to decelerate. The Navy drone would have time for one sweep and one sweep only.

He watched it make its passes, following its own unseen grid across the flat floor. He looked up and round the gaping shell of the ship's hull.

He tried to recreate in his mind the interior of the vessel as it had been when it had been intact, and wondered in what part of it she had stayed, where she had moved and where she had laid her head to sleep in the ship's false night.

The main drive units might be up there, filling half the ship, the flyer hangar was there, in the stern, the decks would spread here and here; individual cabins would have been over there, or over there.

Maybe, he thought, maybe there was still a chance, maybe the techs had been wrong and there was still something left to find. The hull only held because it was energized somehow. They still didn't understand everything about these great, gifted ships. Perhaps somewhere within the hull itself...

The machine floated up to him, clicking, ceiling lights glittering across its metallic carapace. He looked at it.

~ Sorry to break in, Quil, but it wants you to get the hell out the way.

~ Of course. Sorry. Quilan stepped to one side. Not too clumsily, he hoped. It had been a while since he'd worn a suit.

~ I'll leave you alone again.

~ No, it's all right. Talk if you want to talk.

~ Hmm. Okay. I've been wondering.

~ What?

~ We've spent so much time doing technical, calibrating stuff, but we haven't touched on some of the basic assumptions being made here, like is it really true we can hear each other when we talk like this but not when we think? Seems a damn fine distinction to me.

~ Well, that's what we've been told. Why, have you had any hint of-?

~ No, it's just that when you look at something through another person's eyes and you think something, after a while you start to wonder if it's really what you think or some sort of bleed-over from what they're thinking.

~ I think I see what you mean.

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