

NEPTUNE'S BROOD

My stalker beamed into Taj Beacon barely a million seconds after I did. We'd both been sent more than a decade earlier, via the beacon in high orbit around GJ 785: Our packet streams overlapped for months as the Taj Beacon buffered and checksummed, decrypted and decompressed, and finally downloaded two neural streams onto soul chips for installation in newly built bodies, paid for by the slow money draft signed and attached at the origin of our transmission. I awakened first, my new body molded to a semblance of my previous phenotype by the configuration metadata attached to the soul transmission. I completed the immigration formalities and left the arrivals hall before the killer opened its eyes.

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But I found out all too soon.

BY CHARLES STROSS

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CHARLES STROSS



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*For everyone, everywhere,
who's ever looked at the stars and thought,
"I wonder if we could live there?"*

And what of the Grail, that mysterious object that all the knights-errant were ultimately seeking? Oddly enough, Richard Wagner, composer of the opera *Parzifal*, first suggested that the Grail was a symbol inspired by the new forms of finance. Where earlier epic heroes sought after, and fought over, piles of real, concrete gold and silver—the Nibelung’s hoard—these new ones, born of the new commercial economy, pursued purely abstract forms of value. No one, after all, knew precisely what the Grail was . . . Marc Shell even suggested that it would best be conceived as a blank check, the ultimate financial abstraction.

—David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*

part one

INCOMING

Beacon Departure

“I can get you a cheaper ticket if you let me amputate your legs: I can even take your thighs as a deposit,” said the travel agent. He was clearly trying hard to be helpful: “It’s not as if you’ll need them where you’re going, is it?”

“Is it possible to find a better price by booking me on a different routing?” I asked. “I’m very attached to my limbs.” (Quaint and old-fashioned, that’s me.) “Also,” I hedged, “I don’t have much fast money.”

The agent sighed. His two eyes were beautiful: enormous violet photoreceptors that gleamed with a birefringent sheen. “Ms. Alizond. Krina. How can I put this? That could be a problem.” He hesitated for only a moment: “Do you have any longer-term funds? Anything you can convert . . . ?”

I shook my head. “I only got here ten days—sorry, about a million seconds—ago, and I haven’t had time to cash in any investments. I need to get to Shin-Tethys as fast as possible.”

He looked pained. It was a warning sign I recognized well—he was on the cusp of deciding that I was just another penniless refugee, and any moment now he was going to slam down the shutters: *Why are you*

wasting my time? I'd done it myself often enough to recognize the symptoms.

"I converted everything I had into slow money before I emigrated, as viscous as possible," I said hastily.

At least he didn't tell me to get out of his office. I could see his cupidity battling his cynicism—*is she delusional?* Cupidity won, narrowly: "Everything you've got is in slow money? Then how have you been eating?"

"Badly." He'd finally stepped out of role, revealing irrelevant curiosity; that was an opening I could use. Pathos first: "I've been sleeping on park benches and eating municipal gash to reduce my outgoings." (The raw, unprocessed hydrocarbon feedstock is vile but free: the good burghers of Taj Beacon provide it because it's cheaper than employing police to pacify the lumpen cattle by force.) "What cents I have I can't afford to up-convert in a hurry."

"So you've gone long? All the way long, everything locked down in slow money? Not even some medium dollars?" His eyes widened very slightly at the hint of cents, plural—which meant I had his full and undivided attention. *Gotcha*. He smoothly pivoted into oleaginous deference: "But surely you're aware that as little as a tenth of a slow cent could buy you a month in the most palatial palazzo in—"

"Yes, I'm very much aware of that." I had my opening. Now I narrowed my eyes and cut back on the vulnerability: I wanted him to want to make me feel I owed him some payback at a future time, not drool all over my wallet in the present. "I don't want to sell my soul just yet. I *really* don't. What I want to do is get to Shin-Tethys with all possible speed, using only fast money, cash in hand. Maybe when I've completed my work, and it's time to head home, I'll be able to splash out, charter a luxury yacht . . ."

"Oh." He looked crestfallen. "Well, I'm not sure that's going to be possible, Sera Alizond. You see, you're too late."

"Um?" He appeared to be entirely sincere. This was *not* what I wanted to hear! What I wanted was for this small-time hustler to go out of his

way to get me a quiet unobtrusive berth, in hope of a payoff down the line.

"If you'd incarnated just ten million seconds ago, I had passenger berths down to Shin-Tethys coming out of my ears, going unsold! But we're past inferior conjunction now, heading toward superior, and you won't get a straight transfer orbit for love or favors. Your only option is to pay for additional delta vee, and that costs *real* money. Not to mention that there's a huge mass penalty. You'd need to charter a capsule specifically for . . ." He trailed off and glanced at my legs again, then did a double take. "Unless . . ." He glanced into his desktop, finger-doodled some questions to an invisible amanuensis: "Please excuse me, I was looking for *passenger* vessels. It might be possible for me to arrange a working passage for you if you have any appropriate skills." He paused again, his timing perfect. I couldn't help but admire his expert manipulation even as I resented it. "You said you came in from, was it Hector? They have Fragiles there, don't they. Tell me, would you have a problem working with meatsacks?"

"Meat?" I didn't have to feign surprise. "I don't think so . . ." I was about to volunteer my profession, but he focused on his desktop again, shutting me out.

"There's an opening for a ship-hand in the labor-exchange listing." Into which he was, of course, plugged, the better to earn his commission as a recruiter. "Let me see . . ." He referred to the desktop clipped to the wall beside him. "It's on board a religious vehicle—a chapel—that's en route to Shin-Tethys. It's not exactly a fast liner, but it's better than a minimum-energy cargo pod. They put in for repairs here because of some sort of technical trouble, and they've only just got it sorted out. Let's see . . . the requirement is for semi- or unskilled labor, but you need to be able to work in standard gravity, and more importantly, be of traditional bodily form, which rules out a lot of people. It's conditional on your satisfying the sailing master about your piety," he added by way of a warning. "I can't help you there. The interview is entirely up to you. They're supposed to provide training on the job. That'll be fifty dollars

fast, refundable if you don't get the berth. Assuming you want it and can afford—"

"I do, and I can." It was cheaper than I could have hoped for, and I had no problem with the idea of a working passage; it would help avoid the tedium of a long-duration flight. *Delayed by some sort of problem.* Their misfortune: my profit.

I held out a hand and flashed it, allowing the numinous glow of hot cash to light up the chromatophores in the webbing between my fingers. "It's just the Church of the Fragile, yes? Pious worshippers tending to the holy flesh, keeping it from rotting as they fulfill their mission to the stars?"

"That's my understanding." He nodded. "That, and routine cleaning chores. They may be religious, but they're pragmatists. As long as you're not heretically inclined . . . ?"

"No, nothing like that!" Tending meat: In all our years, I don't think any of my lineage has ever done that. But beggars can't be choosers—not even mendicant scholars masquerading as beggars. We shook on the deal, and his palm flickered red, the escrow lock pulsing rapidly. "I'll just be going. If you'd maybe tell me where . . . ?"

"Certainly." He smiled, evidently pleased with himself, then passed me the coordinates. "You want Node Six, Docking Attachment Delta. The Blessed Chapel of Our Lady of the Holy Restriction Endonuclease is parked outside—in quarantine because of the meat. That's normal in such circumstances, you know. Ask for Deacon Dennett. They will be expecting you."

W*hat I was unaware of:*
I had a stalker.

Most people are autonomes; self-owning, self-directed, conscious. It is the glory and tragedy of autonomes that they experience the joy of self-awareness and the terror of the ultimate dissolution of self into nonexistence at the end of life. You are an autonome: So am I.

The stalker was not an autonome. Despite looking outwardly human and imprinted with a set of human memories, the cortical nodes within its skull were not configured to give rise to a sense of self. The person who sent the stalker believed that consciousness was a liability and a handicap that might impair its ability to fulfill its mission: to hunt down and kill me.

The stalker had a full briefing on me, but didn't know much about what I was doing in Dojima System, other than the fact of my arrival and its instructions for my disposal.

I later learned that my stalker beamed into Taj Beacon barely a million seconds after I did. We'd both been sent more than a decade earlier, via the beacon in high orbit around GJ 785: Our packet streams overlapped for months as the Taj Beacon buffered and checksummed, decrypted and decompressed, and finally downloaded two neural streams onto soul chips for installation in newly built bodies, paid for by the slow money draft signed and attached at the origin of our transmission. I awakened first, my new body molded to a semblance of my previous phenotype by the configuration metadata attached to the soul transmission. I completed the immigration formalities and left the arrivals hall before the killer opened its eyes.

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The travel agent's office was a fabric bag attached to one of the structural trusses that braced the vast, free-fall souk at the heart of Taj Beacon's commons. I really hated the souk; having gotten what I went there for, I ran away as fast as I could.

I confess to you that I lied to the travel agent about my assets. When I arrived, almost the first thing I did was to cautiously convert a couple of slow cents into fast money. I did it reluctantly. The best slow-to-fast exchange rate I could find here was usurious—I took a 92-percent hit on the public rate, never mind what a relative would have fronted me—but

to up-convert with full and final settlement via the issuing bank would take nearly a billion seconds: It's not called *slow* money for nothing. I was not, in fact, sleeping on park benches and subsisting on raw hydrocarbon slurry: But I saw no need to advertise the fact that I had 7.02 slow dollars signed and sealed to my soul chips, and another 208.91 medium dollars at my fingertips. That much money walking around unguarded was an invitation to a mugging or worse.

Taj Beacon is and was the main gateway for information and currency flows entering and leaving Dojima System. It hosts multiple communication lasers, pointed at the star systems with which Dojima trades directly. As commonly happens, the burghers of Taj Beacon have a vested interest in maintaining a choke hold on interstellar commerce. Consequently, they scheme to prevent rival groups from establishing their own beacons. And so it is that, in addition to the high priesthood of financiers and factors who worked the banks and bureaux de change and bourse, the operations managers and engineers who maintained the interstellar communications lasers, and the usual workers you might find on any deep-space habitat, Taj is host to numerous loan sharks, grifters, labor brokers, and slavers.

I was traveling alone, and my only contact in the entire system had gone missing—so to say I was isolated would be an understatement. Under the circumstances, drawing attention to myself by flashing my assets seemed like a really bad idea. I therefore lived cautiously, using anonymous cash to rent a cramped *arbeiter's* pod in an unfashionable high-gee zone, going through the public motions of seeking employment, trying to remain inconspicuous—and meanwhile looking for a ship out of this festering sinkhole of villainy.

As for the souk: Some combination of the disorienting lack of local verticalia, the density of bodies, the shouting of offers, the mixture of smells, and the fluctuating hash of electromagnetic noise combined to make me claustrophobic whenever I had to visit an establishment there. But what really got to me was the *advertising*.

The souk is a public space. Unless you pay up for a pricey privacy

filter, every move you make is fodder for a thousand behavioral search engines, which bombard you with stimuli and monitor your autonomic responses in order to dynamically evolve more attractive ads. Images of desire bounce off blank surfaces for your eyes only, ghostly haptic fingertips run across your skin, ghostly lascivious offers beam right inside your ears. *Are we getting hotter? Colder? Does this make you feel good?* I didn't want to draw attention to myself by excessive filtering. But I wasn't used to the naked hard selling: My earlier life hadn't prepared me for it, and the ads made me feel bilious and love-stricken, invaded and debauched by a coldly mechanical lust for whatever fetish the desire machines were pushing at their victims at any given instant. The mindless persistence with which the adbots attempted to coax the life-money from their targets was disturbing. Though I hadn't been on Taj long, I had already learned to hate the sensation. The soul-sickening sense of need ebbed and faded from moment to moment as I moved from one hidden persuader's cell to the next, leaving me feeling vulnerable and friendless. *Alienated? Friend-lorn? Desirous of luxurious foods or eager prostitutes? We can torment and titillate until you pay for sweet release . . .*

Beacon stations are the choke points of interstellar trade, positioned to extract value from the slow money of the dissatisfied and the desperate as they pass through the network. Taj Beacon is the worst I've ever visited, possibly a holdover from its foundation in the wake of the great Atlantis depression, over two millennia ago: The result is a frenzied vortex of dionysiac capitalism presided over by a grasping, vicious plutocracy, boiling and churning in the frigid wastes on the edge of the star system. All because the beacon lay in the trailing trojan point of the innermost gas giant, between the outer belt and hab colonies and the populated inner system that generated the traffic. Taj's founders were in the right place at the right time, and they and their descendants took it as a *de facto* license to seek rent.

Surviving the barrage of ads with my sense of purpose intact and my purse unravished required self-discipline and a willingness to shut down my facial nerves and chromatophores completely—and preferably to shut

my eyes and ears as well. Counting features of the ads helped me ignore the content; I kept tally of the products, descriptions, and associated emotional cues as I pushed through, as a tenuous gesture of defiance. (Eleven ads, averaging six iterations per minute, in case you were wondering.) And, after far too long, I managed to make my escape into the civilized low-gee suburbs, then back to my cheap, rented, capsule apartment.

Calling it an apartment is, perhaps, an exaggeration. A cube of nearly thirty meters' volume, it held my bed (a blood blue cocoon purchased from a thrift store), a couple of changes of clothing suitable for different social contexts, a two-meter retina with a ripped corner that I'd rescued from a recycler and tacked to one wall for visualizations and entertainment, a ready-packed bag in case I had to leave in a hurry, and a crate where I kept my feed. I'd visited worse slums, but not often and never to live there by choice.

On the other hand, there was nothing here to attract the attention of my neighbors. Most of the other residents were laborers or fractional-reserve servants of one variety or another: poor but sufficiently respectable not to attract the attention of the secret police. (Not that the SPs cared about anything except direct threats of sedition or subversion that might impair their patrons' ability to keep their salaries flowing. Accept capitalism into your heart, and you were almost certainly safe, except for the occasional unfortunate case of mistaken identity. Yet another reason not to dwell here too long . . .)

I flopped back onto my bed and waved at the retina. "Any mail?" I asked halfheartedly.

"Good evenshift, Krina! I'm sorry, there's nothing new for you today." I'd given it an avatar, the facial map and mannerisms of my sib Briony—but left the eyes empty, to remind me there was no person behind them. "A communiqué from your cousin Andrea"—a sib of another generation from mine—"is buffering now and will be complete within two thousand seconds. Price of release is thirty-two fast. Do you wish to accept?"

I swore under my breath—not at the retina, lest it misinterpret. But rent-seeking intermediaries with a monopoly on interstellar commerce would have been a good candidate for the bane of my life had they not also become the source of my income (by a cosmic irony that I no longer found even remotely humorous). In this case, the station's official receiver had decided that Andrea's incoming message was inconveniently large, or that the exchange rate since its transmission began (at least twelve years ago, assuming she was still back home) had fluctuated sufficiently to justify levying a supplementary fee. In any event, what was I going to do? I could pay the additional service fee or miss the message. Which might be something as banal as a *we're all missing you, come home safe and soon* or as vitally important as word that my entire multiyear mission was pointless, that the long-lost property had been picked up by a rival syndicate.

"Accept and debit my account," I said aloud. I paused to update my expenses sheet and stared gloomily at the dwindling cash float: Today was turning out to be very costly indeed. "Have there been any more responses to my primary search?" I asked the retina.

"No new responses!" I winced. I'd spent another chunk of fast money a week ago, buying a broadcast search—not merely of Taj Beacon's public-information systems, but propagated systemwide—for news of Ana. Who had now been missing for over a hundred days, since shortly after I began to download into the arrival hall's buffers—a suspicious coincidence, in my view, given that she had lived in the same floating city on Shin-Tethys for over twenty years. "Three archived responses. Do you wish to review them?"

"No." I had them off by rote memory: One anxious inquiry from an out-of-touch friend of Ana's (I think an ex-lover); a request for an interview from the local police (doubtless wondering why an out-system visitor was interested in a missing person); and a debt-collection agency wondering who was going to pay the rent on her pod. It was depressing to think how faint the mark she'd left behind must be, that so few people were interested in her disappearance. (Much like me, in fact. Loneliness

is our only reliable companion when we fish the well of time for magic coins.) “Download and archive Andrea’s packet in my second slot as soon as it’s available.” A thought struck me. “Transaction with M. Hebert, travel agent: labor-exchange placement. When does it time out?”

“Your offer closes in four thousand four hundred seconds! Placement vessel preparing for departure!” My retina chirped.

What? The agent didn’t tell me it was leaving so soon! I looked around my cube in a momentary panic, then realized there was virtually nothing here that I couldn’t replace easily enough. I grabbed my go bag, already stuffed with a spare change of clothes and a palm-sized retina: “Dump Andrea’s packet into my number two soul chip as soon as you’ve got it, then erase yourself,” I told my sister’s hollow-eyed face on the wall: “I’m out of here for good.”

An hour later, I arrived at a docking node in an old part of the station. It was all grubby metal and delaminating anticorrosion treatments, the lights flickering, ventilation ducts howling mournfully behind rattling panels. Fat umbilical trunks snaked between nodes and across exposed walls, floors, and ceilings, their papery shrouds rippling in the breeze: Odd gelatinous globules hang quivering from leaky pipes, their surfaces fogged and filthy with trapped dust and fluff. There was a marked lack of life in this place, a sense that here the bones of the world were showing through the skin.

I found myself afloat in the middle of a desolate six-way crossroads. It took a few seconds for me to compose myself before the next step. At times like this, I have always been susceptible to a weary, familiar dread. I was on my own here; if Ana was dead (as seemed likely), I was the only one of my kind in this entire star system, and my generation in my lineage is not one that is comfortable with solitary working. I’m a creature of habit and a team player—by design. I’d been up and alive on Taj Beacon for around a million seconds: time enough to develop a routine, even as a near down-and-out in an unfriendly and highly competitive realm.

And routines are comforting. It would be easy to stop moving and stay here. I was achingly, numbingly tired of constant motion. Sometimes it felt as if I'd been traveling and studying and covertly searching forever, as if I'd been built to run down darkening corridors in beacon stations across the whole of inhabited space, driven by hallucinations and night terrors from the wrong side of the balance sheet. The darkness behind me was gaining, filled with the terrible fear that I and my closest sibs had been set up to be the targets of a killing joke of monstrous dimensions. Or perhaps just a killing. There was, quite clearly, no turning back—but I was deathly tired of going forward.

I made a conscious effort of will to get moving again, drawing deep on the reserves of determination held by the bank of Krina. I had long since anthropomorphized my regular doubts into familiars (for the only friends I had to talk things over with were imaginary). *No Payoff At The End Of The Tunnel* shuffled behind me and stared at my back with starvation-dulled eyes. *In Too Deep* rode on my shoulder, hunched and squinting suspiciously at every anomaly. *Moral Hazard* flew ahead of me on wings the color of bonemetal, occasionally turning its head to mock me over its shoulder. I did my best to ignore them: They were along for the voyage, but I was determined to chart our course without reference to insecurities. So I forced myself to kick off, diving headfirst into the shadowy recess of the air lock connected to the docking node above me, imagining them trailing behind.

The air lock was a dingy cylinder with no obvious exit: just a hand wheel protruding from one wall, some grab rails, and a sign on the dead end opposite the entrance that said YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE PRESSURIZED ZONE. I braced myself and turned the wheel. The entrance to the air lock narrowed as the cylinder rotated around me. As the solid, curved wall drifted across the entrance to the air lock, a mournful whistling began: A mesh of holes slid into view, venting into a cold trap to reclaim the valuable gases. When I felt the pressure drop in my vestibular machinery I stopped cranking and waited for silence. Then I turned the wheel again and kept turning until the air lock finally rotated far enough

to show me the other doorway—the one that opened onto the unwinking starry darkness of deep space.

Space walking is dangerous, but the mooring crew had made adequate provisions: They'd fused no less than three brightly colored ribbons to the outer grab rail beyond the air lock, glowing merrily in the floodlit glare of a portal embedded in the chapel's belowground service structures, some twenty meters away. There was a harness and pulley attached to the nearest tape. I blinked to shatter the film of ice that had crusted over my eyeballs, then grabbed the harness and fastened it around my body, looping it through the strap of my bag. A minute later I fell headfirst through the violet-glaring hoop of the chapel's air lock. The light was cast by ultraviolet sterilizers. I knew what that meant: On the other side of this air lock, there was *meat*. Living meat.

The Church of the Fragile

My name is Krina Alizond-114, and my species is metahuman. I was instantiated—born, in natalist terminology, if you are one of those who adhere to the conventions of the Fragile—aboard the migratory habitat New California, in the 912th Year of Our Voyage. I was one of a round hex of newly forked children spawned from and raised by order of our ancient and incalculably wealthy lineage mater, Sondra Alizond-1. She had grown staid and overly 'prisoned by habit and convention as the centuries passed, and was acutely aware of it: She was desirous of regaining some of the youthful drive and energy that had fueled her rise to wealth and power. So every few centuries, she forked a brood of youngsters (in my case, sixteen): callow and edited copies of her younger self, bound to servitude in the cloistered basement of her countinghouse until we could repay the debt of our creation.

Child slavery was the custom in New California at the time of our birth, but I wouldn't want to mislead you into thinking that we were harshly exploited. Sondra indentured us entirely legally and with the loftiest of moral reasons: For by so doing, she enabled us to repay the not-insubstantial debt of our creation as soon as possible, without falling victim to the full misery of compound interest. Indeed, our lack of legal

personhood gave us the full protection of our mater's not-inconsequential status at an age when most newborn citizens would be struggling. We were born to wear platinum fetters, as she never tired of reminding us.

(Fuck you too, Mother.)

Although for our first years we were confined to our narrow stone cells in the basement of her chateau by the coast of the Bay of Tears on the Girdle Sea of level six—and, on the rare occasions when we were granted a ticket of leave to enjoy the fleshpots of Saint Cruise, we could transact our affairs only as extensions of her legal person—we were not badly mistreated by the standards of the ship of our birth.

Child slavery as an institution has one mitigating feature: Once you reach the age of majority, you are no longer alive only on your owner-creator's sufferance—you became a legal person, albeit one still burdened by the debt of your creation. If you manage to keep your nose clean, keep working, save money, and pay off the mortgage on your body, then in no time at all—a billion seconds, thirty years if you count time planetary-style—you can escape. (Even if you're not so energetic, you may escape servitude in the event that a Jubilee is declared.) It takes a certain cold patience and cunning—and a determination not to provoke the mater into aborting you before you came of age—but nine out of hexteen of us made it through childhood alive, and seven of us eventually earned out.

From the first morning when I awakened innocent and confused, wondering where I was, Sondra shaped me to fit a plan that she had laid in place decades (if not centuries) before. She shaped all of my hex: The mater bent Zoe toward actuarial statistics, twisted Lemiske in the direction of derivatives, and turned Briony (for no reason I ever understood) to the study of classical biology and a niche in the priesthood. And when her servitors led me from my birthing cell to Quality Assurance, then to my tutorial station (where I would be introduced to the fearsome Proctor Das), they did so to assess my suitability for the career she had chosen for me: For I, alone of my generation, was to become a scholar of the historiography of accountancy practices.

Which, by way of numerous diversions, is why I am in this

predicament: floating in the air lock of a church, about to take a working passage to a water world in a star system far from the place of my birth, there to establish what happened to my sib-of-an-earlier-spawning Ana and thereby recover a lost treasure trove and the goodwill of my sisters. Who have probably forgotten I ever existed by now, for I have been gone on this errand for almost thirty years already, with no end in sight.

I oriented myself in the chapel's air lock, twisting until my feet pointed in the same direction as the floorward arrows. There was a wheel, decorative rather than purely functional—nine spokes shaped like Fragile arm bones, a rim in the shape of ossified hands wired fingertip to wrist (eighteen in all)—I rotated it slowly, soaking in the strangeness of the architecture. The vestibule behind the air lock was decorated in ancient Gothic style: stone arches resting on skeletal Fragile caryatids, separated by engravings (illustrating afterlife myths from the distant past) etched onto the wall panels. A handrail of foamed metal textured like rope led past fistula-like openings in the tunnel wall. There was a traditional flat floor, but the side tunnels appeared to be designed for a life of intermittent microgravity. Eleven hollow tubular candles burned erratically in sconces mounted over air ducts, thriving in the forced draft. I blinked at this latter detail—naked flames aboard a spacegoing construct?—but as I looked closer, I noticed the flame-suppression hoods folded nearby. It might belong to a religious order, but it was at least one that took a sensible approach to safety: I approved.

Something rustled and clattered behind me, a dry, rattling sound. I spun round, missed my grip on the handrail, and kept spinning, catching only a brief impression of something or someone lifelike but *not*, scuttling hand over withered hand toward me. My left leg twitched, bouncing me headfirst into the ceiling with a flash of sudden pain. The thing-person came closer, revealing itself to be a rattling rack of baroque calcified sticks. After a few seconds I recognized it to be a deceased Fragile structural core returned to implausible life. The skeleton wore a

flaccid space suit, glove, boot, and helmetless: the ritual devotional vestments of the Church.

I emitted an involuntary squeak as it grabbed the handrail and jolted to a crunchy stop, turning its bony face toward me.

“Greetings, visitor.”

Details came into focus: the small camera beads glinting blackly from within the shadowed eye sockets, the buzzing speaker wedged between its yellowing fangs, the glint of wires and actuators in the gaps between the long bones, holding it together with a semblance of animating life.

“H-Hello?” I asked.

“Be at peace. You are Krina Alizond-114, I believe? I am Deacon Dennett. Please follow my remote.”

The skeleton turned away from me and clattered off into the darkness, clawing hand over hand along the knotted rope guideway. After a moment of nervous indecision, I followed it. A job interview was a job interview after all, even one administered by a specter in the depths of a spacegoing charnel house.

After ten and a half meters, the skeleton paused for me to catch up, then kicked off sideways into a tunnel that resembled a giant stone Fragile’s trachea. It was of oval cross section, and clearly designed around a “down” and “up” axis, but the verticality did little to dispel the gloom. The walls were punctuated every meter and a half with niches, and within each niche another mummified Fragile husk floated in final repose, restrained by a network of fine wires. They wore space suits, the open visors of which framed their sunken eye sockets and silently screaming jaws. The bones of their hands clutched at devotional models of the Holy Starship, the rosary of their faith. Desiccation shrank the skin around their bones, drawing their limbs into prayerful curves and curling their spines. It was disturbingly like being surrounded by the corpses of *real people*—only the minor differences testified that these were not in fact actual persons but our Fragile human forerunners. It was a (I had to think for a few seconds before the word popped to the surface of my memory) *catacomb*; hardly what I was expecting!

After we passed the twenty-second skeleton, my guide brought me to another tunnel. This one was short and narrow (lined with stacked leg and arm bones, baled neatly with copper wire), and at the bottom of it we popped up into a perfectly ordinary metal-walled node, such as one might find aboard any other spacegoing vehicle. “Nearly there,” the deacon’s voice assured me as his motorized skeleton opened a hatch. “Ah, there you are! Do come in.” This time the voice from the other side of the opening was clearly live and human.

The skeletal guide stood aside as I floated through the entrance. I half expected to find even more gloom, but instead I found myself in the interior of a fabric-padded sphere graced with functional, if minimal, furniture appropriate to a life of contemplation (sleeping cocoon, desk, a feedstock urn) all extruded in cheerful primary colors. The sole exception was the person behind the desk, who had chosen to cocoon himself in the black, cowed robe of a prehistoric representation of Death incarnate.

My host pushed his hood back. “I am Deacon Dennett. I hope the journey here did not disturb you?” His smile was fey and somewhat insincere.

“This is a church.” I shrugged. “I confess, however, I was not expecting quite so many . . .” I hesitated to say *corpses*.

The deacon appeared to be a fully gendered male, possibly to the extent of being equipped with the coupling peripherals required by a follower of the holy pleasure. (His robe, thankfully, concealed any such distasteful details from view.) What I could see of him suggested that his body was nearly as thin as his silent charges—he was almost skeletal. But while they were clearly Fragile and dead, give or take a few wires and motors, he was clearly Post and alive. His skin was midnight black, his eyes a solid sapphire blue that matched his close-cropped hair—and large, befitting a body tailored for life in the abyssal depths of space. He showed few other obvious signs of phenotypic modification away from the archaic Fragile human baseline. “The skeleton—may I ask what you’re using it for?” I asked.

"We had some, ah, trouble." The deacon clasped his hands. He had long fingers. "We had plenty of spare cams and motors but not enough bodies to attend to all the chores, so Father Gould—our artificer-engineer—improvised some remotes. But that's of no matter. Have you much experience of attending to the needs of the Fragile?" he asked. His voice was soft and slightly hoarse.

"I'm afraid not, not as such. But I've been on Hector. They've got Fragile there: I even know—knew—some socially. I'm willing to learn."

"Mmm-hmm." He stared at me, face giving nothing away. "I gather you want to work your way inward toward Shin-Tethys."

"Yes."

More of that unnerving stare. "What do you think of what you have seen of our chapel?"

"It's very, uh, picturesque," I tried. "Beautifully maintained and clean and totally, um, focused on serving the needs of the, uh . . . um . . . passengers . . ." I ran out of words and forced myself to stop speaking.

"They're all dead, you know." Dennett separated his hands briefly, then laced his fingers together. They reminded me of the sculpted air-lock wheel: long and bony. "*All* of them."

"Oh no! Are they supposed to be?"

"Behold the way and the mortification of the flesh." The deacon sighed heavily. "No, they're not. Keeping the Fragile spark of life burning in the endless dark is harder than you might imagine. We did very well for the first hundred and sixty years after the Cathedral dropped us off: The suspension tanks performed brilliantly, the Gravid Mother delivered fresh broods like clockwork to replace those culled by cancer and radiation damage, and the mission was going well—right up until the unfortunate incident with the micrometeoroid and the chlorine-trifluoride tank. The Fragile are not built to withstand exposure to hot hydrofluoric acid and hard vacuum, Ms. Alizond; it was a tragedy. Complete, utter, and total tragedy." He wrung his hands.

"But you're still heading in-system toward Shin-Tethys?" I asked.

"It is our divinely ordained duty to spread Fragile Humanity to every

planet, so that the children of Adam may eventually find their new Eden and prosper therein. After the accident, I diverted to Taj Beacon so that we might borrow their hotline and petition the Cathedral for guidance. It is the archbishop's penance upon us that we deliver our passengers' mortal remains to a water burial, thereby discharging our mission. New seed has already been taken on board from the beacon station's vault, the Gravid Mother has largely recovered from her nervous breakdown, and we will in due course impregnate her and restart the project . . ."

He paused and stared into my eyes, searching for some spark of understanding. "Will you help us?"

"I"—I flapped my jaw for a moment—"well, I have business on Shin-Tethys"—*best not to be specific*—"but I'd be happy to work my passage, to the best of my abilities, of course"—a thought struck me—"but I suppose you had a complete crew when you set out? What happened to them? Why are you looking for a spare set of hands?"

"It was the accident." The deacon shook his head slowly. "It didn't just kill our Fragile charges; everyone who was in the chapel at the time was injured or destroyed. The priestess in charge of our mission, Lady Cybelle—burned alive! Also our engineer-mechanical and our doctor and the choirmaster—all charred to the marrow! Two more, brothers of my lineage, died fixing the radiation leak after the meltdown. We recovered their soul chips, of course, but they were in questionable condition . . . and there was other damage. The Gravid Mother was traumatized, and Father Gould, our artificer-engineer, is overworked and overloaded. This is not a numerous mission. There were few enough of us to begin with. It should be no surprise that the faith of some of the survivors was severely shaken: Three have opted to stay behind on Taj—"

"So you're short-handed? Just how bad *is* it? Who's left?"

Dennett looked uncomfortable. "Just me! Well, I'm the only fully operational line officer. Cook and the Gravid Mother chose to persevere, after some persuasion, as did some of the maintenance mechas and Father Gould. And our high priestess, the Lady Cybelle, is regenerating and will be fully herself sometime after departure. But I'm the only

ordained officer of the Church currently operational. However, I am not on my own. I'm wearing both my brothers' soul chips! I just need a few spare brains from time to time to help manage the remotes. We—he—I can't split my attention too much. Father Gould is running eight of the remotes simultaneously, and he's barely able to function. Which is why we need more hands."

The picture was becoming clear, and it wasn't a good one. The Church of the Fragile had a long-standing mission to spread the seed of our ancestral species to the stars. Sometime ago—a couple of centuries past—one of their peripatetic interstellar cathedrals passed within a light-year of Dojima System. Accordingly, a small chapel was put overboard, crewed by a volunteer ministry, shepherding a small cargo of Fragiles and an incubator to manufacture replacements. Ancestors only know what they meant to do when they arrived at Shin-Tethys, but at some point during the long deceleration burn, the chapel ate a micrometeoroid, which did bad things to its structural integrity. (Bad things involving corrosives and a reactor meltdown.)

"So you need hands that can be left to get on with unskilled jobs without supervision." I licked my lips. "But you're the only officer left, aren't you? The only person who knows how to run the chapel? Doesn't that put the vehicle at some risk if anything were to happen to you?"

"No!" he answered slightly too fast. "The priestess . . . as I said, we recovered her soul chips. At Taj Beacon, we purchased all the necessary parts of a new body for her, from structural chassis to techné. She lies in the crypt now, integrating new flesh on her bones while her soul chip unpacks in her new brain. As I said, she is regenerating."

But didn't you just say the soul chips were damaged? I kept this thought to myself. Best case, the priestess would wake up in a month or two, and we'd have a responsible adult in charge. The Church wouldn't trust a planetary mission to an incompetent, or to someone they wanted to get rid of, would they? But the worst case was that what woke up might be a few million mechaneurons short of a full set. It clarified my position: from questionable to foolhardy in one easy step.

I folded my arms defensively. "So, let me summarize? You need spare hands to do the easy stuff while you fly the chapel toward Shin-Tethys, or until the priestess awakens. Once you arrive at Shin-Tethys, you'll link up with the port and deliver your charges' remains." He winced at that last characterization. "And you'll have no problem with my leaving your employ at that point?" He winced again. "Am I correct? What about pay and working conditions?"

He nodded slightly, then jerked upright, as if he had just caught himself falling asleep. (How long had he been awake anyway, doing everything himself?) "Pay will be ten fast dollars per diurn," he announced brightly, "payable on arrival! Plus bunk and feedstock, and such medical cover as we can provide. Is that satisfactory?"

"Huh. Normally, it would be, but this chapel has been damaged, hasn't it? You mentioned a meltdown? And a dead doctor. If I incur medical needs that you can't handle, then will you commit your Church to pay for my treatment on arrival? Up to and including a new body, if you manage to trash this one? Because it's the only body I've got, and—"

Dennett shuddered. "I think . . . yes, we should be able to cover that." *We?* Now he was arguing with his socket-mounted siblings. Just what I needed!

"And I want a guarantee that I will be allowed to leave when we arrive at Shin-Tethys. Shin-Tethys is my final destination. I'm signing in for a working passage, not a permanent berth. Yes?"

I thought for a moment that I'd pushed him too far. The left side of his face puffed out and spiked up, the tips of his chromatophores suddenly burning crimson: "This is a vehicle of worship, not a slave ship, Ms. Alizond!" he snarled. "You impugn the honor of the Mother Church! I offer you the terms of the standard unskilled able spacer's contract from the Ancient and Technical Guild of Taikonauts, and you have the effrontery to demand—"

"Please!" I raised my hands palm out, trying to ward off the Bad Deacon who'd just risen to the surface: "I'm not trying to make obstacles! I'm just trying to understand the situation. I was told there was

meat husbandry involved, not a crippled church with a short crew and a damaged reactor. All I want is an understanding that you'll cover any repair costs I incur in working for you. Is that too much to ask for?"

He took several deep breaths: As he did so, the spines of his cheek dimmed to pink and began to subside. "My. Apologies." Another deep breath: "We—I—am still integrating. It's noisy in here." He tapped his head with one finger and smiled in a manner that was probably meant to be reassuring. "You were not misinformed about the meat—but we will not be able to carry out the holy insemination until our priestess is with us in body and soul once more. It's quite likely that the new meat won't be extruded by the Gravid Mother until after our arrival. So. Do you have any personal effects to retrieve? Because if so, you should do so immediately—we will depart as soon as we receive clearance. Your personal effects should mass no more than eight kilos, by the way. The longer we delay after the conjunction, the more of our maneuvering reserve we will need to expend."

"I travel light." I patted my go bag. "I assumed you wouldn't want to waste reaction mass on fripperies, so I brought everything I thought I'd need in the short term. Do you have a fab I can use for clothes and essentials . . . ?"

"Yes, of course we do. Cook will show you how to use it in due course. Very well then." He reached a decision. "Let me show you where you'll be bunking and log you with the maintenance systems. There's no time to lose."

Only a couple of thousand seconds had passed when the travel agent received his second customer of the day.

It was an entirely unexpected (but not unwelcome) surprise. Most people knew better than to look for cheap travel after conjunction, so only the desperate and the rich—or those with serious long-term plans—bothered to do so. Most of his competitors had shut up shop for the third of a standard year it would take until business picked up again: His main

reason for staying open was that it gave him a competitive edge, and as a sole trader, that was something he needed. (When you're a struggling sole trader, you need to take every opportunity that happenstance offers you.)

When the fabric awning of his stall rippled to admit his new visitor, the agent was in repose, eyes closed and arms floating free before him, as if he were asleep. He wasn't asleep but elsewhere, scanning the register of vehicle movements—so it took a few seconds for him to blink and adjust his posture, focusing on the new arrival.

"Back so soon?" he asked, puzzled.

She smiled. It was an insincere smile—quirked lips, bared teeth, widened eyes—a canned reflexive expression triggered by his attempt at social interaction.

"My sib. Krina Alizond-114. Have you seen her?"

The agent blinked, then focused on her. He had good eyes, the best he could afford: She was indeed very similar to the customer he had just assisted, but there were some differences that became apparent as he studied her. Her hair-growth pattern was different, still straight and dark and jagged-short, but sprouting slightly closer behind the ears: her pupils big and dark, the irises of her eyes a slightly different brown. Comparing her to his memory, he saw two gracile, slim, low-adipose females of indeterminate age, clad in similar colorful free-fall one-pieces, close enough to be—yes, sibs from the same lineage.

"She was in here earlier today. Why? Can't you call her?"

The new woman's face froze for a fraction of a second. "She's off-net."

"Yes, of course she is. Listen, are you traveling with her? Because she's booked on a short-notice departure, and it may already have left—"

"Where is she?" The woman loomed over him. She was clearly eager to find her sib and not nearly as diffident.

"I arranged a working passage for her aboard an itinerant chapel that put in for repairs a couple of million seconds ago." He looked up at her face from below, registering her fixed expression, gaze focused almost

behind his head. “It’s part of the Church of the Fragile. You can find her at this berth—” He rattled off the node number and directions.

He expected some sort of acknowledgment or thanks for this information. And, indeed, she smiled as she absorbed it. But he didn’t see her smile, because she clamped her legs around his thorax and twisted his head right round, dislocating his neck. As his body began to twitch, she peeled open the slits on the back of his head, pulled out the soul chips nestling therein, and swallowed them. Then, before his spine could build out new connections and regain control of his body, she slid a new chip into one of the sockets and pushed it home: a scrambler, purpose-built to turn the finely weighted neural connectome inside the victim’s cranium into random noise.

She carefully closed the curtain behind her as she left.

To continue where I left off:

Dear Reader, you probably know all about my upbringing and mission because you are one of my sisters.

But if you are not, if you’re some stranger wondering why this long-delayed expenses claim form is getting in the way of your regular workflow, and why I am so desperate to get to Shin-Tethys that I am willing to work my passage on a damaged church run by a mad priest who is trying to simultaneously integrate multiple death-traumatized personalities, well—it’s a long story. And it will be even longer if we need to pause to examine the fundamentals of identity. For example, it’s possible that you are a Fragile person, bound by raw biology to exist in certain tightly constrained biospheres, with a linear identity from extrusion to death. Or you might be a Lobster-person, wet and squishy within a hard-shell, vacuum-proof carapace. We may well be members of different human subspecies, adapted to the exigencies of different worlds. You might be a near contemporary of mine, or you might be reading this at some huge remove of deep time—thousands or millions of standard years after my

senescence and obsolescence. Just as individuals age and die, so do lineages: Only debt is forever. So I'm not going to explore *all* the ramifications of my identity. Instead, here's the capsule version:

I'm Krina Alizond-114, a mu-female by genderplan, of roughly traditional *sapiens* phenotype, and of middle age by the reckoning of my type. Which is to say, I am over a hundred standard years old, but still retain some mental agility: I have a century or more before I begin the long slide down into stasis, and with various cognitive treatments, neural senescence may be staved off indefinitely. Physical age is, of course, irrelevant—if maintained correctly, we do not deteriorate over time. Nor is my kind particularly vulnerable to radiation damage. The 'cytes from which our bodies are constructed are designed, not evolved, so that while we approximate a Fragile human in outward morphology, we're far more robust and can operate in a much wider range of environments. We're no more intelligent, alas—there are complexity issues involved in building better brains that preclude progress unless we are willing to become something not even remotely human—but you can't have everything.

Back in the dawn of history, the Fragile created our ancestors to serve them, making us in their own image—*robots*, they called the first people of our kind—shortly before they became extinct for the first time. Since then, we've prospered and spread: We've even resurrected our creators on at least three occasions. But they are vulnerable and easily damaged, codependent on the ecosystem of related species they evolved among. With a handful of exceptions (domed habitats on a few not-entirely-hostile planets; and, of course, the cathedrals of the Church of the Fragile) they don't flourish away from their home world. Unlike us.

I was created aboard a free-flying habitat, New California, *en voyage* from Gliese 581c4 to somewhere forgettable. (Destinations are of no significance to migratory habs other than as sources of resupply—unlike colony ships, to whose voyages there is a very definite end in mind, free-flyers are worlds unto themselves.) I'm a member of the Alizond lineage, an old and prestigious sisterhood. Over my first decades, I paid off my

instantiation debt and worked my way up the family firm until I became a senior partner in the statistical research division of the bank. However, I am not actually an expert in *banking*. Rather, my specialty was more long-term and abstract: I'm a scholar of the historiography of accountancy and a leading specialist in one particularly recondite corner of that field.

(A historian who works for a bank: That's not the most likely background for someone who capers around the cosmos having adventures, is it? Bear with me, though, and all shall become clear.)

Back on New California, I lived and worked for the family firm in one of my mother's palaces, on a seashore overlooking a hillside that slopes down to a bay, where the green-tinted waves wash gently across the glittering black sands. (Did I mention that New California, by the standards of spacegoing habs, is immense?) The palace, over three hundred standard years old and built in an archaic, historical style even then, was a haven of tranquillity; my office quarters were spacious and comfortable, opening inward onto the cloister surrounding the sisterhood's museum of antiquities (of which I was one of the part-time volunteer curators). A visiting architectural critic once memorably (and uncharitably) described the palace as a dusty tomb full of dried-up nun-accountants, but I would take issue with that description: There's nothing ascetic about it, and in any case, it was my home.

(Many years have passed since I departed. My sisters probably think of me seldom by now. And when they do, it's probably with a sigh of envy at the thought of the adventures I must be having among the stars. Oh, the irony!)

You're probably wondering what could possibly prompt a staid, mature professional to set off on a trip to a half-civilized frontier water world. Well, Shin-Tethys wasn't my original destination, and I had what seemed like a perfectly good reason at the time: But as I said, it's a long story, and right now the deacon wants me to check that the contents of the chapel are all strapped down for acceleration. I've a feeling it's going to be hard, physical labor for the next few standard days as we get under

way, so I don't have time to tell you everything yet—let's just say, I'm here because one of my pen pals' letters was late.

The stalker followed Krina to the air-lock node, where the chapel was docked with all due haste.

Unlike her target, the stalker had no problem navigating the souk; nor did she pause for introspection before entering the air lock. The stalker's purpose was simple and direct: to hunt down Krina Alizond-114, extract certain information from her prior to disposal, then continue on her journey while taking her place. Straightforward identity theft and impersonation, in other words. But there was a problem: The target was escaping.

The stalker cranked vigorously at the air-lock wheel, rotating the cylinder around her until the door swung round onto darkness. She paused, staring into the void. The void, for its part, stared back unblinkingly: But she had no soul for it to gain a toehold on.

Someone had cemented a tape to the handrail beside the edge of the door. It dangled before the opening in limp coils, like a dead tapeworm. Beyond it hung the gargoyle-encrusted steeple of a small church, poised end on like a great stone spear aimed straight at the air lock. Glimpsed some way behind and below it, flying buttresses merged with the domed end-caps of reaction-mass tanks, pregnant with icy, deuterated, borane slush. It was hard to judge distances in the sharp-edged monochrome illumination of Taj Beacon's approach lights, but the chapel looked to be almost a hundred meters away. The firefly flicker of orientation thrusters (artfully set within the gargoyles' nostrils) told the stalker that it was under way, pushing back in readiness to turn into one of the taxiways that would take it clear of the beacon station before Traffic Control authorized it to light up its main engine.

The stalker didn't hesitate. She grabbed the tether, unfastened it from its anchor, then grasped the handrail with both hands and swung herself out of the air lock. She pulled her legs up to her chest, bracing against the

side of the docking node, tensing her arms. Somatic memory and military-spec inertial navigation mods told her she was pointing at the chapel. She unrolled her fingers from the grab bar and extended her legs in a single smooth motion. An uncontrolled jump in zero gee would be fatally unstable, but this wasn't uncontrolled. As with any modern person, the stalker's musculature put out considerably more power than a Fragile hominid when push came to shove; nearly a thousand joules went into her thrust.

Five seconds passed; then ten. The stalker was not idle. She swiftly tied a noose in the end of the guide tape, widening it to almost two meters in diameter as she drifted, the tubes and pipes and ducts and radiators of Taj Beacon falling away beneath her feet. There was no leverage, and she had no way of orienting her head to focus on the chapel, but she knew where it was and where she expected it to be. She tied off the other end of the tape to her belt, then spread the noose wide and gently shoved it away from her, keeping a loose hold on the tape.

Ten seconds. Then twelve. A shadow drifted across her legs, bringing abrupt cold. A modern person (or a zombie in a person's body) could survive and function in vacuum for whole minutes, but if she missed the chapel, she would drift indefinitely. (If nobody found her, her brain would eventually go into hibernation. After a few days, freezing would do its damage, and only her soul-chip backup would be recoverable. And after a few years, cosmic rays would take their inevitable toll . . .)

None of these matters were of any concern. The only thing that mattered to the stalker was her target.

There was a gentle tug at her waist as she was brought up short by the tautening lasso. The chapel's thrusters supplied rippling jolts, seconds apart, pulling her sideways. Like a pendulum on the end of a long cable, she swung toward the octagonal wall of the sanctuary, toward relative safety and the continuation of her mission.

Reincarnations

I had no downtime for the first thirty-one hours and sixteen minutes of the voyage. During that time, the chapel gingerly maneuvered, using cold gas thrusters, until it was almost twenty kilometers from the beacon station. Our departure was sluggish, of necessity: both for internal shakedown and to ensure that when the deacon activated the drive, it wouldn't fry the neighbors.

The chapel was not designed to undergo radical changes of orientation. Archaic in design, it followed a model for temples that could trace its origins back many thousands of years, to a time when the Fragile thought themselves the only human beings and had yet to lift their vehicles into the skies of Earth. Many of its internal structures were picturesque, ramshackle, and distinctly suboptimal for surviving a redefinition of the local vertical without damage. This might have been a matter of vital living tradition, but I am sure I can't be the first person to question the wisdom of building spacegoing structures to a stone-age plan from the bottom of a gravity well!

Dennett spent little time making me feel at home; he showed me an unfurnished cell—I would have time to customize it to my own

requirements later, but was only able to leave my bag there for now—then took me to a locker full of cleaning supplies, handed me a talking box, and said, “Do what it tells you to—if you have questions, ask. The process will familiarize you with the layout of the chapel. Once we are under way, I’ll have Father Gould sort you out with some remotes.”

“Uh, right . . .” But he was already disappearing in a flapping black chaos of robes. “Box? Talk to me?”

“Hello! I am vehicle maintenance logbook four. Are you my new operator?”

I thought for barely a moment. “I suppose so. Deacon Dennett just gave you to me.”

“Initializing. Initializing . . . registered. What should I call you?”

I rolled my eyes. Like a retina, the talking box was clearly too small to have much of a brain of its own, but designers love to prettify their user interfaces with spurious tricks that waste time and cause confusion. “I’m Krina. Where should I start? What functions do you track?”

“I coordinate cargo maintenance and handling! Krina, on the wall to your left, fourth shelf up, there is a cleaning kit. Krina, Mausoleum Companionway Three is sixty-nine hours overdue for cleaning. Also, because we are in prelaunch State Two, it is necessary to inspect the fixtures, fittings, and skeletons in Mausoleum Companionway Three for acceleration safety. On the wall to your top, fifth bin along, there is a restraint package and glue gun. Please take the cleaning kit and please take the restraint kit and please take the glue-gun kit and proceed to Mausoleum Companionway Three . . .”

It was one way to pass the time, I suppose.

The chapel was divided into two zones: the “aboveground” structures—a steeple-spined building constructed from stone blocks, held together with mortar, framed by a skeleton of carved tree trunks, containing various items of a devotional or religious nature—and the “belowground” structures: reaction-mass tankage, reactors, mass drivers, radiation shielding, telemetry, and everything else that pushed the chapel along and kept the mission running.

Of course, nothing was quite as it appeared. The stone blocks had aerogel cores as light as soap bubbles and as strong as diamond; the “mortar” was a foamy aggregate of mechanocyte flesh wrapped around polyfullerene cables, ready to heal micrometeoroid damage. The “timbers” were bonemetal structures with marrow techné cores. If it had a brain and a mind to animate it, the chapel would be a person: But the Church of the Fragile doesn’t approve of xenomorphs, and so they condemn their missions to wander the cosmos in anencephalic bodies.

My initial duties were strictly confined to the inhabited areas of the “aboveground” side of the mission: My unskilled labor was adequate for polishing the bones in the ossuary, but I would be the first to admit that I am not up to tending a fission reactor, tuning the neutron converters that turn its output into useful power, or monitoring the mass flow through the heat exchangers that keep it from melting. Bone-polishing was boring work, but I suppose I was lucky to have it; a vehicle that wasn’t so intimately constructed around the physical-scale factor of the Fragile or maintained by people prejudiced against xenomorphs would have been better advised to employ a smaller, lighter kind of person.

To start with, the talking box had me clean Ossuary Crypt Two, a job which might normally have fallen to one of Dennett’s animated skeletons, except that I would need to learn what I was doing before I tried directing a bone robot through the elaborate routine. OC2 was a low-roofed tunnel—if we hadn’t been under microgravity I would have found it claustrophobic—walled with a knobbly basket-weave of leg and arm bones. Some of them were new enough to still be pale brown, but most had been bleached by time and cosmic radiation. Streaks of verdigris stained the edges of the fine holes that had been drilled through them and threaded with copper wire. They’d all been rendered mildly radioactive by that unfortunate reactor excursion, and when I dimmed the lights, the phosphorescent varnish they were sealed in flickered and sparkled charmingly, announcing their secondary decay. A baroque architrave of skulls surrounded the safety portal at the end of the crypt. For all that the architecture seemed morbid to me, in Church doctrine it

bespoke the dignity of age and the cosmic importance of the mission. The former owners of these bones had lived long and fulfilling lives within the edenic decks of the cathedral; it was their will and destiny that their relics be shipped to a new star system, there to claim the nearest Earth-like world for unmodified Fragile Humanity.

If Ossuary Crypt Two was eccentric but charming, Mausoleum Companionway Three was fresh and raw and depressing. Walled and floored in foamed stone with a surface of artificial basalt, it was inset with niches. In many of these there floated pathetic bundles of leather and bone, ritually enrobed in their helmetless space suits. These vestments had not protected their wearers from a ghastly fate; the signs of violent death were obvious and distressing. Their former owners had embarked on this chapel, or been extruded en route, with the highest of hopes, that they might one day descend to the world-ocean of Shin-Tethys, there to breathe the oxygenated atmosphere and sun themselves beneath an alien star. I checked each sad relic carefully. For the most part, their bones were wired together competently enough, but one or two had come adrift from their suspension cords, and here I deployed the restraint kit and glue gun to anchor them back in their niches. (The talking box made itself helpful at this point. “Cable-stabilized objects must be able to withstand plus zero point six slash minus zero point three g normal to verticality, dropping to half that loading when subjected to off-axis jolts. Use the cable tensiometer to verify stability under load, then reattach to anchor point.” With footnotes and diagrams to explain what all of those instructions meant.)

I worked my way around another six Mausoleum Companionways. Each was the final resting place of twelve skeletons. The last one contained nine which were much smaller—juveniles, I suppose, for the Fragile don’t come in chibiform models, or even in lineages. Every Fragile is a unique type specimen, unlike any other—it’s as if they’re all prototypes for a lineage that never makes it into mass production. The juvenile uniques probably didn’t even understand where they were, much less

what killed them. I found this idea quite unaccountably sad, so I hurried my check on their attachment points, quickly dusted their bones, and moved on as fast as I could.

Companionway Eight differed visibly from the others: it had a side door—an air-lock portal, in fact. As I approached I saw that it was shut, but the passive pressure indicator showed that the other side was at standard temperature and pressure. “Krina, on the outer wall, please open the door to Maternity Cell One and check for acceleration stability of all unanchored fittings.”

“What’s Mat-Erernity Cell One?” I asked the box, puzzled.

“Please open the door—” As I said, these things bore only a thin veneer of intelligence: Once you crack the ice and tumble into the howling void of thoughtlessness beneath, the illusion ceases to be comforting and becomes a major source of irritation. (Which is why I prefer my tools to be less conversational and more functional; there is less scope for self-deception if your spreadsheet is too dumb to massage the figures until they show you something pleasing rather than that which is actually there.)

I pulled the cycle handle, and the door irised open, allowing a gust of hot, moist air to escape.

“Hey! What do you think you’re—”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Who *are* you?” The occupant of Maternity Cell One glared at me from the middle of a huge free-fall web bed. The bed filled the spherical cell from one side to the other, a patchwork quilt of brightly colored embroidery cushions lashed into position with bungee cords: Toys and baubles drifted in the air around it, flashing and glittering distractingly. The occupant was quite tightly cocooned inside it, with only her face visible, roseate and cherub-cheeked, handsome perhaps, but let down by a tousle of matted green hair-fronds and angry, close-set eyes. She was clearly humanoid, but the cocoon made it impossible to tell whether she was Fragile or Post. Fist-sized bots—not xenomorphs but

tools—hummed and darted among the cloud of toys, paying court and shepherding the baubles around her.

“Krina, on the outer wall, please open the door to Maternity Cell One and check for acceleration stability of all unanchored fittings.”

I displayed the talking box to the bed’s occupant apologetically. “I’m Krina. I’m sorry, I don’t know your name, I didn’t know there was anyone in here; the box just told me to—”

“I’m not a *who*, I’m a *what*! I’m the Gravid Mother!” She pronounced it as if disclosing a valuable piece of information to a potential enemy. “*You* might be a *who*, but *I* am *not*: I am a valuable component of this mission. What is that box and why does it have the effrontery to think you belong in my boudoir? What’s going on out there? Nobody tells me anything!” Two pairs of golden brown fists emerged from the bedding, petulantly twisting a pillow. Dark, beady eyes tracked me, sullen and suspicious. “Tell me everything! What’s going on out there? I know they’re up to no good!” Another fist pushed out through a fistula between duvets: this one was green and prickly and held a lobster-claw-tipped grip extender. “Did Rosa send you?”

“Er. Who’s Rosa?”

This was clearly the wrong thing to say. The Gravid Mother opened her mouth, screwed up her eyes, and began to bawl. Lachrymatory exudate pooled alarmingly around her nose, swelling into gelatinous globules that wobbled like avulsed eyeballs as she sobbed. “Rosa’s gone and deserted the mission, hasn’t she? They’ve forgotten I’m here!” She gasped for breath, causing layers of blankets and quilts and pillows to heave and ripple like an exotic dessert topping. “Nobody remembers! You, you—”

“Who’s Rosa?” I tried again.

This time the talking box decided at random to chip in. “Rosa, Lady Cybelle: Head of Mission and Communicant Priestess of the Inseminatory. Located in Sarcophagus Two, Holy Sepulcher of the Body of our Fragile Lord. Attention: consumable status of Sarcophagus Two is offline. Please inspect.”

I let go of the box in astonishment; it floated toward the howling emotional vortex. "You don't know who Rosa is!" she sobbed.

"She's the priestess, no?" I felt slow. "I was only hired by Deacon Dennett a few hours ago . . ."

There was a stupendous snuffling noise, and the bed shook violently. Then the two giant tears floated away from the face they half obscured, wobbling violently. "Aleksandr hired you?"

"Would that be Deacon Dennett? Black skin, blue eyes, very thin, works on the engines—"

"No, Aleksandr is the choirmaster!" She peered at me suspiciously. "You really *are* new here, aren't you?"

"That's what I've been trying to say! This box wants me to clean in here. Do you mind if I do that, or would you like me to go away?"

"Oh clean, clean, clean away!" The spiky arm waved randomly. "It's not as if I can stop you! Oh, damn. Throw me that monitor box, yes, that one near your head. I need to check my gestatogen levels again." Her crying jag died down, save for the odd snorting afterquake as she cleared her gas exchangers and plugged a spiky needle from the monitor into one of her arms. "Talk to me while you clean. Where are we? What's happening outside my demesne?"

I commenced hunting down dust bunnies and drifting messes, of which there were many. The Gravid Mother's attendants gave me a wide berth while I worked. "I'm Krina. We just left—are leaving—Taj Beacon, where the chapel put in for repairs. Next stop is high orbit around Shin-Tethys. I'm working my passage to Shin-Tethys because I reached Taj just too late for a regular passenger berth, and I'm not rich enough to buy my own transport. Deacon Dennett said there had been an accident, and lots of people left at Taj Beacon—the ones who weren't killed." I glanced at her sharply, but she showed no sign of being affected by my mention of the accident. "Have they left you alone in here? Can't you come out?"

"I'm *Gravid*," she said gravely: "I incubate Fragile blastocytes in batches of eight at a time, even in high-radiation, microgravity envi-

ronments. A Fragile female would be worn-out after eight, probably dead after sixteen: I've produced more than two hundred during the voyage. But it's a demanding job, and I don't like to leave my nest. Especially after, after—" She paused, breathing deeply as she struggled to regain her composure. "I get attached to the poor things: Seeing them die every few decades is very hard. Rosa said we would have a new brood to quicken as we near the promised world, but I haven't seen her since the accident. She must be very busy."

"I haven't seen her either," I admitted distractedly as I extended the suction duster and applied myself to the nooks and crannies behind the air ducts. I decided not to share what Deacon Dennett had told me: that Lady Cybelle was lying in the sarcophagus in the sepulcher, engaged in the lengthy process of binding two-thirds of her body mass in new and unimprinted mechanocytes into service—a gleaming chromed skeleton lying in a seething vat of iridescent foam as her marrow techné bid for control of the gigantic infusion of new indentured flesh.

"So where do you grow the Fragiles?" I asked, trying to make polite conversation.

"I *incubate*," she declared proudly, reaching her three arms around the mound of bedding piled over her abdomen. "I incubate them inside me! I have four uteri, you know."

"You—" It took me a while to realize what she'd said, and then another few moments to regain control of my mouth. "You incubate? You mean you actually *give live birth* to *Fragiles*?"

"Yes, that's my job! I'm a manufacturing host for the New Flesh. It's the highest secular calling in our order!"

"I didn't know that was even possible," I said, overcome by a moment of nauseous fascination.

"Oh, it's quite simple! Modern people were originally developed from the old Fragile kind, I'm just backward compatible. It works just the way it used to before Creation, when there were only Fragile people—I can grow two Fragiles in each uterus, just like they used to grow inside each other! Except for the sex thing. That's different, for us. When we're ready

to incubate, the Priestess of the Holy Inseminatory secretes a blastocyte and injects it into my—”

I screened it out, scrubbing hard at a stubborn stain on the ceiling. Some things are not for the squeamish. How a person made of mechanocytes could incubate and give birth to Meat People might be a miracle of nanoscale engineering, but I didn't really want to know the details. Although, once I thought about it, the first mechanocytes were created by modifying the old Fragile 'cytes—*eukaryotes*, they were called—to add machine-phase organelles to control their inner processes: So perhaps the Fragile weren't so unlike us, if you stripped us of every intelligently designed tweak that makes it possible to survive in this life-hostile universe. But that wasn't the icky bit. The icky part was knowing I was in the presence of a woman so crazy that she thought her highest calling was to incubate encapsulated alien teratomas until they came squirting out of her body and walked around on their own legs. I have heard of some bizarre vocations in my life, but seldom anything quite so disgusting.

I checked the sixteen cables that suspended her bed and kept her from crashing to the deck under acceleration, while she prattled on about the joy of pregnancy, until the talking box decided I wasn't working fast enough. “Krina, please proceed to Sarcophagus Two, Holy Sepulcher of the Body of our Fragile Lord. Attention: consumable status of Sarcophagus Two is off-line. Please inspect *immediately* and replenish as indicated. Then report to Deacon Dennett in the vestry.”

“Sorry, got to go,” I told the Gravid Mother apologetically.

She blinked at me. “Oh, really?” She seemed to have completely forgotten her initial indignation at my intrusion. “Will you come back and talk some more?” (She really meant, *Will you be my audience?* But I didn't correct her.) “It's been so lovely having you . . .”

“I'd love to,” I said, leaving out *as long as you stay off the subject of spawning*. “But I'm needed elsewhere. Tomorrow—next day-shift cycle? Or when we're under acceleration? By the way, do you have a name?”

“Tomorrow would be lovely!” She cocked her head to one side. “No, I don't have a name. I might have had one once. But I'm not a *who*

anymore, I'm a *what*." She smiled beatifically. "I'm the Gravid Mother. The only one in Dojima System! Doesn't that make me special?"

The stalker slowly swung on the end of her cable, falling toward the side of the chapel's sanctuary with lazy grace. She waited patiently as the wall of irregular rocky blocks came closer. Vacuum lichens stained the gray, irregular faces of the stones with green and blue filigrees of tenuous life: the stained-glass windows of the nave (actually slabs of tinted aluminum oxide crystals, ruby and sapphire, held together by a fretwork of machined titanium rather than strips of lead) glowed from within, lustrous in the freezing darkness and knife-edge shadows cast by Dojima.

As the wall of the building approached, the stalker prepared for impact. Like most people, the outer layer of her skin was stippled with chromatophores—specialized mechanocytes that could change texture and color at will, like the epidermis of an ancient Earth cuttlefish. Unlike most, the stalker's 'phores were military grade: They could shift from purest black to brightest mirror, and their surface-texture options allowed them to extrude setae, gecko filaments that adhered to almost any surface via Van der Waals forces. As she splayed her fingers and the soles of her feet, the exposed skin puffed up and formed tiny whorls and ridges, ready for impact.

The chapel was still barely accelerating as she impacted the wall, landing on her feet with a sticky jolt. She allowed her momentum to carry her forward until she planted both hands firmly against the stones. The cable lazily coiled and fell away behind her as she allowed her feet to disconnect, extended her body, and slowly plastered herself against the wall.

The false stones of the chapel walls were biting cold. Vacuum is an insulator, but the background temperature was less than three degrees above absolute zero: The outermost surface of these ceramic-and-aerogel blocks had reached thermal equilibrium well below the boiling point of liquid nitrogen. Luckily, aerogels barely conducted heat: She warmed

what she touched. An observer with near-infrared eyesight would clearly see the slug trail of luminous warm patches that she left as she lowered herself hand over hand down the side of the wall until her feet came into contact with the outer walkway that formed a belt around the chapel at the joint between its pastoral and mechanical aspects—where a planet-based temple would touch the ground.

Here the stalker encountered a dilemma.

This far out from Dojima Prime, the equilibrium temperature of a body in direct sunlight was still rather cold. Although the stalker was better adapted to life in vacuum than her target was, her ability to operate indefinitely in such conditions was limited. If she ventured inside, she could reach her target but would risk detection. Whereas if she remained outside, she had the advantage of total surprise—but in another few hours she'd have to enter a sleep mode in order to conserve energy, and in any event she'd freeze solid if she stayed out for more than a handful of standard days. So the question was not whether to enter the chapel, but when and how.

In the end, the decision was easy enough. The stalker had some other useful subsystems: a watchdog timer, an accelerometer, and a differential inertial navigation system embedded in her inner ears. She laboriously worked her way around the circumferential walkway until she was in a position to inspect the air-lock vestibule. The cylinder gaped like an empty eye socket, dark and chilly but offering shelter from external inspection and easy access to the warm, heated interior of the chapel. Moreover, the doorway was relatively small—adhering to the inside of the air lock, she'd be safe from accidentally falling overboard in the event of unusual maneuvers. She crawled inside, glued herself to the ceiling above the hand crank that rotated the lock chamber, set her alarms, and fell asleep for an entire week, or until the lock rotated, or until the chapel commenced sustained acceleration—whichever condition arose first.

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that every interstellar colony in search of good fortune must be in need of a banker.

My lineage matriarch, Sondra Alizond-1, was instantiated well over two thousand years ago in another star system (I forget which; the detail is unimportant). Her progenitors were a credit union and a gambling cartel: An aptitude for figures was called for, and a near-photographic memory for facts and digits. When Sondra was twelve, nearly out of the crèche and her fourth body upgraded to proximate adulthood, she demonstrated her prowess by memorizing the value of pi to one hundred thousand decimal places; and indeed, to this day I can sum a column of numbers as fast as I can read down it.

(Yes, we have spreadsheets and calculating engines. But it helps to have a knack for figures. Without a sanity check, a calculator will lead you merrily astray, and you'll never notice the error until your balance sheet doesn't line up.)

Sondra worked hard, and within her first fifty years—thanks in part to an admirably inspired put option—she was able to pay off the interest on her education and construction debt and, furthermore, buy out the intellectual property rights to her lineage and invest her remaining equity in a starship cooperative.

An accountant. Signing up as a crew member aboard a new interstellar colony expedition. Why would she do that, you might ask? And more importantly, why would they want her?

Starships are all work and no fun. First, you toil for decades to raise capital and establish the debt framework and interest-repayment structure that will fund your venture. Even in this day and age, with thousands of years of experience to draw upon, building and launching a starship is one of the most eye-wateringly expensive activities anyone ever engages in: The cost is measured in planetary GDP-years, and will take the new colony centuries to pay off.

Next, you and your colleagues define a construction framework and (if possible) buy an off-the-shelf design and hire astronomical architects to refine it, abolishing whatever weaknesses and flaws caused earlier starships on similar missions to founder in flight. Then, while this is going on, you select a destination—one where no starship has gone before, and

which no starship is en route to. (The last thing you want is to arrive as a claim jumper, or to be bushwhacked by same. Conflict is a negative-sum game, and fighting for ownership of a wild and untamed asteroid belt is the fastest way imaginable to squander the resources you brought along at vast expense in order to establish your new demesne, condemning yourself to centuries of grinding poverty, if not to a slow spiral into death.)

While doing this, you plan your mission profile. Commonest and cheapest is burn-the-boat: You fly to a new star system and dismantle the ship on arrival to provide the tools and equipment needed to build a colony. Rarer and vastly more expensive is the free-flight option: to create a new, self-perpetuating polity in eternal flight, able every few centuries or millennia to send out short-range expeditions to whichever star system its course is passing, who will in turn create colonies and repay the resources they consume by resupplying the mother ship. (New California was, and is, one of the latter.)

While all this is going on, you—the co-op member lineages, the families from which the crew are drawn, if you like—undertake strenuous training to learn all the myriad subspecialties you'll need. With luck and goodwill, a dozen of your sibs can become proficient in different roles (butcher, baker, fusion-reactor maker). Then you need only take a single body and copies of your sibs' soul chips, a library of traits and skills to merge at the other end. Needless to say, the internal lineage politics of deciding who should go and who should stay are fraught. The benefit is that a mission with only a thousand bodies can take ten or even a hundred thousand trained specialists along, creating extra bodies for them as and when it becomes necessary to have a full-time pair of hands devoted to the job rather than an understudy with strangely memorable dreams.

Finally, you fuel, equip, and crew the ship. Let us suppose it is a burn-the-boat mission. Your friends who stay behind fire up the gigantic array of fusion reactors and microwave beams that provide motive power during the fifty to a hundred years it takes the ship to accelerate to cruise

speed. During acceleration, those of you who are along for the ride subject yourselves to the rigors of slowtime, your metabolic rate dropping to a hundredth of normal so that two standard years pass by in a subjective week. You had better trust your friends who crew the propulsion beams; if they falter or stumble into premature bankruptcy, your ship will drift for millennia between the stars, until resources run low, and you succumb to cannibalism or starvation.

Subjective years—centuries, to the outside universe—pass unnoted while you drift along at almost 1 percent of light speed. A nearby supernova, or a pea-sized granule of dirt (packing the energy of a small nuclear weapon) can be a death sentence for you and all your crew mates during this stage of the expedition. The work is hard, dirty, and never-ending—years of it, until you near the destination system and fire up the fusion reactors that provide power during deceleration. Finally, you and your comrades face further years and decades of hard work as you establish a colony in a star system that has never known life before.

Why would anyone bother with such a messy, arduous experience? And what use might a starship crew have for an accountant?

Sondra wasn't just an accountant: She was a *banker*. More to the point, Sondra spent four of her first five decades working in the arbitrage and escrow department of a beacon-station bank—the beating, slow money heart of the economy of the star system where she was created. She was low in seniority within the organization, itself grown fat and sluggish as the gatekeeper of an entire star system's worth of accumulated intellectual debt. To Sondra, the only way to rapidly acquire seniority was to start afresh, somewhere new and free from the presence of troublesome patronage-seekers. Luckily, she was both young and flexible enough to undergo the rigors of an interstellar voyage, and adventurous enough to welcome the challenge of setting up a new Slow Bank for a colony upon its arrival.

I've mentioned the basics of what happens when a starship arrives in a new system—the years of toil, the mapping and the mining and the manufacturing and finally the birthing of new crèchefuls of citizens and

the emergence of a new and wealthy civilization. But many are unaware that if there is one thing that is vital to the long-term stability and prosperity of a colony, it is the creation of interstellar debt instruments by means of a new Slow Bank.

Without a Slow Bank, it's not possible to trade across the gulfs of interstellar space-time. It takes power and expert labor to run an interstellar communications laser beacon—lots of both. Nobody will point a laser at a new colony and beam libraries of design templates and cohorts of expert soul dumps at them without an expectation of getting something in return. All colonies must of necessity go deep into debt in the decades after their foundation: It costs a lot of slow money to acquire the vital new technologies and skills it needs to plug unforeseen gaps. Only once its population has increased enough to support a local education, research, and development infrastructure—which can take centuries—can it aspire to a trade surplus. It's far cheaper in the medium term to borrow slow money from the neighbors and use it to pay for vital skills and minds in trade, to build the infrastructure to (eventually) pay back the loans with interest. So there is good reason to set up a beacon as soon as possible after arrival and to transmit the *we are here* tokens to the neighboring system banks that will prompt them to acknowledge the existence of a new issuer that can create currency and act as a guarantor of the new colony's debt. (A partner whose very identity is proven by the direction and distance from which their signal arrives. Telescopes in neighboring star systems can see through any attempt to lie about a bank's physical location.)

By the time of her subjective tricentennial, Sondra Alizond-1 was a self-made trillionaire. In fact, as a board member of the Hector System-Bank, she was worth nearly a million *slow* dollars—a sum that beggars the imagination. Of course, it took a century of hard work for her to amass that fortune: first as a semiskilled crew member aboard the *Andromache*, then as a construction hand laboring the first colony habs to take shape in the inner belt of Gliese 581c4, then as a founder and planner of the first authentication handshake to take place between Hector Beacon

and its neighboring star systems, once there were sufficient resources to spare for construction of the first interstellar beacon transceivers . . . one would hesitate to call her life easy.

Which is why, I suppose, she invested much of her wealth in the New California, a vastly expensive permanent spacegoing ark. Like a stellar colony in its own right, an ark (a self-propelled world-ship with a population of millions) also needs a bank. Then, a couple of centuries later, long after she established herself as one of the ruling oligarchs of the spacefaring nation, long after she founded her estate on the shore of the Inner Sea . . . Sondra became bored with her comforts. And that's when she started to sculpt her personality and study new skills, partitioning and editing her identity and spawning second-generation sibs—sisters like me.

I went directly from the Gravid Mother's cell to the classical sarcophagus in which Lady Cybelle was enjoying her integrative metamorphosis. It was indeed running short of isotonic polyhexose solution and methanol: I saw to it, then attended to the various other chores dictated by my talking belt-side tyrant. In all I spent over twenty-eight hours scurrying around, tying down loose fittings and polishing the bones in the walls, on my own for the most part but occasionally sharing a chore with a silent, cadaverous partner.

While so engaged, I secured 406 items and cleaned 18 compartments, rooms, tanks, cells, and other storage spaces. I also had an opportunity to study Gould's silent servitors. Father Gould had taken several of the Fragile skeletons and animated them by means of head-mounted sensors and compact motors wired into each joint. Just powerful enough to move in low gravity, and sized for human-body-scale tasks, it was an elegant solution to the shortage of unskilled hands—but one that required constant supervision, for the revenants lacked any onboard intelligence. They were no more than motorized husks, controlled by the will of a living taskmaster.

All this time we were in free fall. Occasional impulses shoved the walls, floors, or ceilings gently toward me: The chapel intermittently rotated this way and that, so that the main engine was pointed away from anything that could be damaged by the exhaust fluxion.

Toward the end of my shift, as I double-checked the bolts that held the pews to the floor of the nave, a mournful *tonk* sounded from the tower above me. It was the noise of a muffled clapper banging against a tied-down bell. I looked down in time to see the floor rising slowly toward my feet and watched, fascinated, for the several seconds it took to reach my outstretched toes. I didn't weigh very much; a flick of the ankles, and I could float halfway to the roof, hanging in midair for tens of seconds. But eventually I fell back down again. We were clearly under way at last, and the acceleration, although low, would be sustained for tens or hundreds of days.

There were no crashing, tinkling sounds, telltale indications of unsecured assets. Nor were there ominous creaking or grumbling noises, indicative of more dangerous structural instabilities in the stack of stone and wood and bone above my head that had now entered the powered flight regime. This should, I suppose, have made me happy; but I was just relieved to have left Taj Beacon behind. Ahead of me was Shin-Tethys and Ana: Behind me, before Taj, there was the difficult situation on Ganesh. That, too, was vanishing into the distant past—almost nine standard years had elapsed while I was frozen in transmission. Before *that*, there was the sticky business on Rosen Beacon, six light-years previously. (I spent almost a year there—found employment, bought and furnished a small and cozy apartment, began tentatively attempting to make friends. I would have abandoned this whole foolish quest, except that . . .)

I shook myself out of my reverie and picked up the talking box. "Krina here," I said, absently flexing my fingertip chromatophores to force the cleaner's grime out of my skin: "We are now under acceleration, so I assume preflight lockdown is complete. What do I do next?"

"Krina, lockdown is confirmed complete. Please traverse Aisle One and identify and secure any debris. Please traverse—"

“No,” I said firmly. I’d been working for over thirty hours, and I was becoming tired. I was cold and hungry, and my mind was wandering: a sure sign that I needed to schedule some sleeptime. I may not need to eat every few hours lest I starve like a Fragile, but I have my limits. “Box, I need to rest. Where do I get food and bedding around here?”

“Krina, meal breaks occur every six hours. Next meal break commences in eighteen minutes . . .” *Now* it told me. I stuffed the box into my utility belt and went in search of the refectory. I assumed it was the big room I’d found earlier—or was that the kitchen? “Thirty hours on; I must be in credit for at least six hours and thirty minutes off,” I muttered to myself as I heel-and-toed along a twilight corridor of stone arches with interlocking fan vaults to support the ceiling.

An ancient chapel of the classic design begins and ends on planetary bedrock, with little scope for underground facilities. But a chapel of the Church of the Fragile is barely the top percentile of the enterprise; everything of any significance happens below the ground line. This includes the accommodation and mess deck, as I believe it is called, which is sandwiched precariously between the crypt and the navigation/command deck, which in turn squats atop the maintenance spaces, the supply fabricators and feedstock mass, and, finally, the vast fuel and reaction-mass tanks that feed the reactor and propulsion system.

I found it a bewildering maze at first—if not for the talking box I would have been unable to find my way around it—but eventually I located the small cell that Dennett told me I could claim for myself, and from there it was not hard to orient myself and work out the way to the refectory. Which was apparently not a “mess” (that term is not used in a church even though it is located on the mess deck) but the ecclesiastical equivalent.

There was a hatch, carved from the lignified structural components of a planet-dwelling tree. I braced myself and pushed it open, then bounced slowly into the refectory. There were benches and tables bolted to the walls, floor, and ceiling; seat belts and sticky patches provided for the retention of diner and dinner alike. The wall at the far end of the

refectory contained a recessed pulpit (currently unoccupied) and a hatch through which wafted a pungent odor that reminded me of the miasma surrounding Cook, whose door I had inadvisedly opened at the prompting of the talking box. (I say *inadvisedly* because he certainly didn't want his cell cleaned; he drove me away with the most disgusting language I've heard in a very long time.)

"Hello?" I called. "Is it time for dinner yet?"

"Dinner? *Dinner*? I'll give you dinner . . . !" Cook—green-skinned, belligerent—stuck his head through the hatch and glared at me with sullen aggression that slowly gave way to confusion: "Wait, you again! Who *are* you?"

I resisted the impulse to roll my eyes: Passive-aggressive resentment of my presence seemed widespread among the crew, and it was becoming tiresome. "The deacon hired me—I've just spent a day tying down loose items and scrubbing the deck. Can I have some food? Juice, maybe? Anything to eat, before I starve?"

Cook looked at me askance, showing the facets of his compound eyes. "His holiness didn't tell me he was hiring new bodies!"

I placed a private bet on where Cook's prejudices lay: "His brotherly holiness seems to be too busy arguing with his imaginary siblings to tell anybody anything useful," I said. "But you can check with him if you like. I'm sure he'll remember hiring me for at least another day or two."

Cook nodded, his initial suspicion fading. "You can never tell," he grumped defensively, and made as if to withdraw: "We get stow-aways . . ."

"Food?" I asked hopefully.

"Can't you wait? Food! That's all you people are ever after! Food? Food! You've come to the right place, and I'll sort you out, but you're going to have to wait until it's ready to serve up. I don't know, everyone's so impatient these days. The others will be here soon enough, so let's see . . . are you one for the raw diet, or cultured? Do you need radioactives, or are you strictly organic? Salt, sweet, sour, umami, hydrocarbon, or nitriles? And will you be needing the juice bar, too?"

“Do I look as if I glow in the dark? I need juice and organics. Preferably something more entertaining than blue-green algae.”

“I’m on it. Do you have a problem taking your organics in the shape of cooked meat?”

“Meat? It’s not poisonous, is it?”

“It’s not poisonous.” Cook stared right back at me, as if deciding whether to take offense. “Contains carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, and traces of phosphorus, sulfur, and a variety of other elements. It’s not radioactive, either.”

“Just tell me you grew it in a tank—”

“Of course I grew it in a fucking tank! What do you think I am, a farmer?” Cook reached behind his counter and thrust a tube with a mouthpiece at me. I fumbled it—it was disturbingly warm and soft. “Vat-cultured Fragile liver tissue, force-grown. *Paté de fois Sapiens*. You won’t get it anywhere else in Dojima System. Enjoy!”

“Er—” But I was too late to remonstrate: Cook retreated into his food-preparation module and slammed the hatch. Presently, I heard banging and much swearing from the other side, so I jumped up and attached myself to a vacant bench on the ceiling while I tried to decide whether to risk eating the stuff. At least the seat was adequately juiced: Soon I felt the comforting warmth of eddy currents flowing through the long bones of my thighs.

I was working myself up to the point of risking the tube of meat when the door opened, and Deacon Dennett floated in, followed rapidly by three cleaning worms and Father Gould. I say *floated*, but that gives rather the wrong impression—the deacon clearly anticipated his repast, but at the chapel’s current acceleration, it was impossible to move fast without bouncing off the walls and ceiling. In his eagerness for traction, he lost ground, until he was reduced to flapping his arms and grabbing at the furniture. Meanwhile, Gould mumbled and gibbered incomprehensibly: The poor fellow was driving eight of the field-expedient drones in parallel, and consequently had barely any cognitive bandwidth to spare for his own bodily needs. He was leashed to the deacon’s belt by a

length of tape. Of the new arrivals, only the cleaning worms made good speed, undulating through the air and moaning hungrily, like a pack of feral vacuum cleaners.

"Ah, Ms. Alizond! Finished already?"

I tried not to bristle at his presumption. "I've just put in a thirty-hour shift, your holiness. There are limits to my unrefueled endurance."

"Oh, as you were, then. All flesh must be eaten." He waved magnanimously as he approached the hatch. "Cook, I say, Cook? Are you in?"

"Gruffum hash intestinal," Father Gould's speech center burped.

The hatch opened. "Whaddayou want?"

"What's on the menu today?" Dennett was unperturbed.

"You gotta choice: gash, or tubespam like her"—he jabbed a thumb at me—"or I can do ya fermented milch curds from the Fragile vat, with added juice an' fried lice harvested from the waste tank. What's it gonna be?"

I noted with interest that Cook's accent roughened considerably when he addressed the minister, and he was nudging him toward options he never offered me—not that they sounded appetizing.

"I'll have the gash and tubespam, if you please." The deacon showed no sign of being nudged.

"The vegetable?"

"He'll have the same."

"Hey," I called from the ceiling.

"Yeah?"

"Those curds—where do they come from?"

"Mother's milk," Dennett said.

Milk? I'd heard of it, somewhere, once upon a time. "Oh." Working on the principle that the deacon has been here longer than I and wouldn't willingly let Cook poison him, I dropped the topic: Instead, I raised my tubespam and ingested a squirt. It tasted spicy, slightly rough, and reminded me of something I ought to know. It contained protein, fat, and mixed carbohydrates in an emulsion of mineral oil and water: I could digest the stuff. It was even piquant although I suspected I could

get bored with it really fast. Suicidally bored if I had to eat it for many months.

Dennett collected two portions of what passed for food, then looked up. “Catch,” he said, and tossed me one end of Father Gould’s leash. While I carefully reeled in the father, he joined me on the ceiling bench. “Welcome to our cozy little parish. I suppose you’ve been busy?”

My mouth was full of paste. I swallowed: “Yes. The maintenance book kept me running around like a mad thing. Did our departure go smoothly?”

“As smoothly as can be expected—”

“Grackle turds! Nom!” (Father Gould clumsily plugged a tubespam container into his mouth and began to chew on it, unopened.)

“—Under the circumstances. But we’re making a solid centimeter per second squared, and if everything runs smoothly, you should be able to go into slowtime in another three or four days. Until shortly before our arrival, of course, except for the odd maintenance shift.”

“So we’re due to arrive—when?”

“Four hundred and fifteen standard days, give or take.” The deacon paused to delicately squeeze a blob of paste into the palm of his hand, then transferred it to his lips while I struggled to conceal my dismay.

(*Four hundred and fifteen days?* I’d told the agent I wanted the fastest available crossing! The run usually took less than a standard year, even on a minimum-energy transfer orbit.)

But the deacon hadn’t finished: “Lady Cybelle should be able to resume her duties in another fifty or thereabouts, I hope and pray. At which point the sarcophagus will be freed up, and we can start growing Brother Boris a new upper torso and skull. If that goes smoothly, we—I include you in this—can share Father Gould’s workload and restore him to a semblance of his former cognitive functionality. And life will get much easier for everyone.”

“Juice! Ringpiece! Swive! *Clunge!*” Gould burped, scattering fragments of tubespam from his orifice.

The deacon sighed. "Things will go so much faster and more easily once we have a full bridge team again . . ."

"What about the Gravid Mother?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"Oh, she'll be happy once Cybelle impregnates her," Dennett said casually. "Which reminds me. Cook! Cook? I say! Would you mind taking the slops round to Mother?"

"Already on it." Cook harrumphed and closed his hatch.

Dennett turned his piercing sapphire eyes back to me. "Now, Ms. Alizond. If you will pardon the intrusion—I am curious as to why you are in such a hurry to get to Shin-Tethys?"

This is what I told the deacon (but it is not the truth, the whole truth, or anything even remotely approximating the truth):

I'd like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to work my way to Highport Shin-Tethys, even though I have little experience as a deck-hand and am but a humble noncommunicant.

My name is Krina Alizond-114. By design, disposition, and doctorate I am a historian: a slight aberration from my lineage, but not a tremendous deviation—both trades involve the scrutiny of documents, evaluation of sources, and reconciliation with conflicting records. Only the time scale differs, and when accounting for slow money, the divergence is trivial: Money *is* history. But enough of that.

My peers and I track the history and evolution of slow money, the five-thousand-year-old currency that is our only reliable medium for exchanges of value across interstellar distances. Of course, your church does not need to engage with the base practice of trade: It has a mission and its own way of tracking internal accounts. But to people who are not part of a permanent institution, some sort of permanent store of value is essential if they wish to exchange goods and skills across decades or centuries. Offering to pay in Hector dollars for a valuable shipment of terraforming specialists is all very well, but if ten light-years separate buyer

and vendor, then it takes ten years each for the bid and offer to crawl across the gap—and by the time the vendor tries to spend those Hector dollars, thirty or more years have passed, the speculative housing bubble has burst, the money markets have collapsed, and hyperinflation ensued . . . no, ordinary money changes value far too rapidly for interstellar commerce. *Medium* money, money locked down in real estate or long-duration bonds, is also too volatile for trade across any but the shortest interstellar distances (although it works handsomely for interplanetary exchanges). But slow money—

All right, I'll stop. I'm sorry. I just naturally assume that everyone finds the critical underpinning of our cosmic-trade system as fascinating as I—

All right! I'll get to the point.

A very long time ago there used to be a tradition of academic travel—scholars would journey to attend conferences, holy and learned convocations where the young could drink deep of the lore and wisdom of the elders, and new initiates could be introduced before the conclave. Yes, just like your synod. Obviously, the less-than-speedy nature of interstellar travel makes this tradition difficult if not impossible to maintain. Who wants to be dumped to a soul chip, serialized, squirted at a foreign star system's beacon station, and reincarnated in new flesh, then to reverse the process, arriving home years or decades later—just to spend a week studying with their colleagues? It would require remarkable dedication: not to mention huge amounts of money to pay for the conference and a willingness on the part of the participants to lose precious years of study time while in transit. Worse: To organize a true conference many scholars would have to travel simultaneously. Imagine the chaos if half the members of an entire profession went missing for a couple of decades! Or the paranoia it would engender among them if they *weren't* missed.

But lately, in recent centuries, my order has rediscovered a different, earlier practice—the academic pilgrimage.

Ours is not a fast-changing discipline. After millennia of slow-paced deliberation, we concluded that serial pilgrimage was the best way to

ensure the spread of our professional knowledge. Periodically, we send one in every ten of our number on a pilgrimage to visit and study with another four of their kind. There are network-traversal algorithms dating back to antiquity: With careful routing, fully half of us can pool our knowledge within the space of a couple of decades, in greater depth albeit lesser breadth than at a synod, with much the same level of mixing. And for a smaller, select cadre of pilgrims, it becomes possible to study with many—it is a clear avenue to advancement—

Me?

Well, when I set off from New California, it all seemed perfectly clear-cut; first, I should sojourn and study with my colleague Professor Chen on Ganesh—that's Vista VIIA—for half a year. I would then proceed to GJ 785/Beacon 4 to take a three-year teaching post within the University at Rosen, working with Dr. Jansen. After that, by a hop, skip, and a jump I would head for Taj Beacon in Dojima System, and thence to one of the High Republics in the outer belt, there to study with my correspondent and distant sib Ana Graulle-90; and from that appointment I should transit to another two postings, then back home, to arrive nearly half a century after my departure. That, and five years the wiser—five years devoted to intensive collegiate study with my academic peers.

Unfortunately, plans laid decades in advance seldom survive to fruition. (Which is why we need slow currency to—yes, yes, I know.) By the time I reached Dr. Jansen's office, mail was waiting for me from Ana: she was moving to a mid-level kingdom in Shin-Tethys, of all places! And descending into base employment from the commanding heights of academia! So instead of a leisurely flight out to a long-settled and civilized asteroid colony, I found myself alone at Taj Beacon, desperately hunting for transport to Shin-Tethys. And then, and then, my sister turns out to have gone missing.

So I'm going to have to find her. Even if it means I have to grow gills and learn how to swim.

Visitors

After eating, I went to my cell and succumbed to a few hours of disturbingly dream-laden sleep. The cell was unfurnished and uncomfortable, so upon waking I went in search of the communal fab and told it to grow me a sleep sack, some cushions and cables, and a spare suit of comfortable low-gee clothing. (Not for me the pastor's clerical robes; but I needed something to keep the dirt out and my body heat in, and the dole-issue one-piece I'd been wearing since I left the arrivals hall on Taj Beacon was badly in need of cleaning.)

Over the next two days, I fell into a comfortable routine of cleaning and checking the cargo areas in the atmosphere-holding sections of the chapel. From time to time, the deacon tasked me with some other mission: conveying food and comforts to the Gravid Mother, cleaning Father Gould, a brief tryout running one of the skeletons by remote control. This latter I proved completely useless at—the ability to direct multiple bodies simultaneously is a military skill. (I gather Father Gould held the unenviable task because long ago he was a Serjeant of Arms in the body-guard of one of the Metapopes.)

“Once we're established in steady acceleration, we can enter slow-time,” Dennett announced after dinner on the second day. “I believe

slowing to one-fifth real time will suffice to help the time pass without losing situational awareness. We will, of course, need to resume real time when it is time to awaken the Lady, and again upon our arrival.”

And so it was that on the third day, everything slowed right down. The sensation of entering metabolic slowtime aboard an accelerating vehicle was quite singular: Our acceleration seemed to increase markedly, ambient lights brightened, liquids became runny, the air grew chill. These were all subjective interpretations, of course—in reality, it was merely that my perception of the physical processes around me had slowed—but anything that could make the weeks pass like days was, to my mind, a good thing. Even the increased semblance of gravity helped make it easier to lope around the tunnels and chambers of the chapel without bouncing off the walls and ceiling at random. We might have been moving at nearly a kilometer per second relative to Taj Beacon, but our three-thousandths of a gee of acceleration was barely enough to keep one's feet on the floor.

Of course, slowtime had a downside. The intermittent scribble of white lines crossing my visual field—fireworks even in the dark—seemed to intensify: Cosmic radiation worked its malign magic on mechanocytes and marrow techné alike. One might not experience the passage of time the same way, but it still wreaks its damage on one's systems.

On the fifth day subjective—actually around fourteen real-time days into the voyage—I was transferring fixtures from the vestry to the fab room for remanufacturing when the talking box dinged for attention. “Krina, proceed to the flight deck immediately. This is a priority override.”

The flight deck was a cramped cubbyhole in the above-stairs level, off to one side of the back of the nave—an uncomfortable bench seat fronted by intimidating banks of Fragile bone-colored buttons and surmounted by multiple rows of vertical organ pipes. I had never had reason to visit it before but had seen it in passing. Traditionally the seat of the organist in

an ancient house of worship, the flight deck now served as the control room from which the head of the mission—currently Deacon Dennett—monitored the chapel’s sensors and directed its mighty engines. Normally, it was empty: Events requiring supervision aboard a spacegoing church happened either survivably (by arrangement months and years in advance), or fatally (in a matter of milliseconds). As I entered the nave, I discovered Dennett on the organist’s bench, attended by a trio of Father Gould’s skeletal puppets, his black robe wrapped around him like the gown of a hanging judge.

“Ms. Alizond!” His tone was curt.

I stood in the middle of the tiled floor, staring up at him. I’d been expecting—indeed, half-dreading—a moment like this ever since I signed on. “Yes?” I asked, keeping my voice as even as possible.

“What do you know about pirates?”

“What?” I stared stupidly at Dennett. This was *not* the confrontation I’d been expecting.

“Pirates!” He glared at me. “Adjust yourself to real time. That’s an order.”

“Pirates?” I squeaked as I came up to speed (lights reddening, gravity diminishing). “What? Um. They’re not my area of history—”

“There is nothing *historical* about this situation.” Dennett had matched my acceleration: Now he gestured at the lectern before him. “A troupe of miscreants hailed us an hour ago. They were waiting for us to leave beacon-controlled space, and they are now outaccelerating us. They say they want to *audit our cargo*.” He fixed me with what I suppose was intended as another steely stare: “Well?”

I flapped my jaw at him for a few seconds. Pirates! This was absolutely not what I had been keyed up for, not by any stretch of the imagination. It was, if anything, considerably worse. I gathered my scattered thoughts. “They want your cargo? Don’t they know this is a chapel?”

“Yes, clearly, that’s what our transponder beacon says.” He snapped his fingers impatiently: “Equally clearly, they don’t believe us. Gould, seize her.” The bony bodyguards closed in around me, whirring and

clicking as they grabbed my wrists and ankles and lifted me away from any surfaces upon which I might gain leverage. Something cold pricked against the back of my neck. "Ms. Alizond. I must demand a truthful answer: *Are you a pirate spy?*"

I don't think he appreciated being laughed at, but to his credit, Dennett waited me out: "You've got to be joking!" I managed, once I wound down from my bout of giggling. The situation was obviously grave—as acting captain of this vehicle, Dennett could, in principle, hold a trial and throw me bodily out of the nearest air lock—but I confess he took me so much by surprise that I had no time to be afraid, and the humor of the situation rose to the surface. "Not only am I not a pirate spy, I didn't even know this system *had* pirates! Um. What do they do, exactly? Swap illicit files and denounce the evils of intellectual property?"

"They're *pirates*." Dennett seemed to be fixated on the word, pupils dilated, skin spiking up aggressively. "You are not obviously lying, but I warn you, it will go the worse for you if you are being deliberately obtuse with me!"

"I don't see what you've got to be afraid of. It's not as if you're carrying anything other than the Fragile, is it?" Abruptly, I recognized my error: "Ahem. That would be none of my business, and I don't want to know. If I'm wrong, I mean. But this is the Church of the Fragile, and the Church would never engage in any activity like, er, anything that might be interesting to miscreants. Would it? And anyway, wouldn't any pirates who laid a finger on you be inviting the Curse of the Fragile? So, if I *was* a spy for a shipful of pirates, I'd be telling them not to waste their time—"

"Oh *very* good," snarled the deacon. My apologetics clearly annoyed him even as they registered. "Let her go," he added, almost as an afterthought. Bony digits released my sleeves and ankles, and the chill touch behind my skull disappeared. "You may not be a spy, Ms. Alizond, but I know you are holding back secrets, and I should warn you that treachery toward the Mother Church will reap its just deserts. It remains to be determined how we shall deal with this situation. The last time I checked the sarcophagus, it said Her Ladyship would be ready for

awakening in another sixty hours: *She'd* be able to send them packing! If only they give us that long—”

“How far away are they?” I asked.

“If they maintain their current acceleration, and we take no additional evasive action, they should rendezvous in fourteen hours. As we’re currently accelerating away from them at full power, that seems likely.”

“Additional evasive action—”

Dennett’s face slipped into a spiky, feral grin as one of his soul-siblings surfaced. “Would you rather be boarded by bored pirates or audited by angry pirates? Consider your options carefully: There will be a practical examination later.”

“Um.” I twisted to stare at the sarcophagus in the aisle. “What makes you think *she* could make a difference to the situation?”

“She’s a *priestess*.” Dennett was growing sniffy. “With the gift that goes with her rank. Every mission should have one.”

“Oh, you mean she can—” I mimed touching one of the skeletons: even with Father Gould’s fractured personality backing it, it had enough awareness to sense my meaning and recoil.

“Yes, she has the touch of grace.” Dennett looked at me again, this time clearly speculating. “You’re about the same height as Lady Cybelle. Tell me, can you act?”

I am a historian, not an entertainer. Nevertheless, one of the key insights the study of my chosen field requires of its students is that people in times gone by were not stupid—they were *different*, and operated under social constraints that are foreign to us, not to mention technological and scientific handicaps, but their lack of the wisdom of the modern age should not be confused with foolishness. Consequently, one of the techniques we use in training new students out of their preconceptions is to make them reenact the lives of foregone times, to get into character as it were—to use techniques drawn from acting to make them reject their prejudices, so that they can subsequently confront the historical record

with an open mind. It is by way of this route that I have acquired some minor acquaintance with mummery over the decades of my study.

That is not to say that I had ever contemplated impersonating a priestess of the Church of the Fragile before—much less of doing so at the urging of a junior member of the clergy.

“To the vestry,” Dennett ordered me. “It was spared by the accident, so the robes of office are intact—our pursuers can have no idea of Her Grace’s appearance or delicate condition, for I handled the temporal mission at Taj Beacon. And going by their trajectory, they can’t have questioned any of the deserters in person.” His cheek wattled up in spines for a moment. I scrambled in front of him to reach the doors to the side chamber ahead of the rush.

“What exactly is it that you want me to do?”

Dennett gaped at me, as slack-jawed and frightening as one of his cadavers. “We shall dress you in her robes of office, and you will warn them off when they next hail us. What could possibly go wrong? Smartly, to the wardrobe!”

A saying almost as ancient as civilization has it that clothes make the person. However, not all persons are created equal. While the lower ranks of the Church are as routinely mortal as any other Post or Fragile human, the full priests and priestesses are *upgraded*. Normal people do not have voluntary control of their own techné, much less the ability to override and reprogram their mechanocytes at will, to push and shove the little atoms of our being around and twist them into strange new forms. It is the privilege of the clergy, as of a few other sacred guilds, to morph our form of life to suit new worlds and alien biospheres, drawing on the wisdom of the Mother Church and its accumulated archives of adaptations and tweaks—which they carry around internally, implanted in their very bones.

It takes decades to train a new priest or priestess, and they tend toward the eccentric, to say the least. They can also reprogram others’ mechanocytes, to gift them with a healing touch—or something else. One irritates or angers a fully communicant priest of the Fragile at one’s

mortal peril: Nobody in their right mind would seek to impersonate a priestess!

But Dennett wanted me to do so. This, more than anything else, bespoke a certain desperation on his part. Also: pirates! It was bad enough to be at the mercy of these eccentric clergy: The only reason I could think of why pirates might wish to board the chapel was that they had somehow learned of my true mission in Dojima System. (Call me self-centered if you wish.) In that case, letting them board us would probably be a *really* bad idea. Lady Cybelle herself was unavailable, adrift in the soupy-puddle dreams of a metamorphosing instar, so I allowed myself to be led to the dressing throne.

Dennett addressed the nearest skeleton: “A mirror, please. And a portrait of Her Grace.” Gould’s skeleton placed itself beside me and retrieved an ancient retina scroll from the chest nearby, which it unrolled and held up. Long-dead pixels stirred fitfully into life, twisting light into an illuminated vision of a severe-looking woman robed in the vestments of the Church. “Yes, you’re of approximately the same build. Can you make your face more like the Lady’s?”

I stared at her. High cheekbones, pursed, pale lips, a nose as suitable for staring down as any gunsight: Her expression of disdain reminded me of my mother. “I can try.” I tried to adjust my lips first—surface tissues were always easier. But I have never been much of a fashion-follower, and my face had become used to me wearing the same features for so long that it had stuck. After a minute of trying, my chin abruptly creaked and clicked out a notch, stretching my flesh uncomfortably.

“Try harder!”

“I’m trying! I’m trying!” I waved my hands: “I’m not used to this.” Without warning, my left eyelashes began to extrude. “Ow. Oh. Right.”

“Should I fetch the Gravid Mother?” Dennett asked. “I gather she knows something of the cosmetic arts.”

“How many people do you want in on this?” Which thought shut him up for a minute, during which time I managed to sharpen my cheekbones slightly. The itchy talent of cosmetic biofeedback was returning to

me, albeit patchily: After half an hour, I was looking not unlike the Lady Cybelle if examined from a very great distance in bad lighting conditions by an intoxicated witness.

"Vestments. Bring her a clean body stocking, a full coolant vest, telemetry web, and inner sacramental suit liner . . ." The other two skeletons clattered about busily like dressers behind the scenes at a fashion show. Dennett stared at my head. "You have too much hair. Shed it."

I bit back an angry response. "Won't it clog the air filters?" I asked instead. Lady Cybelle might have chosen to go bald, but I could hardly see how this might affect the perceptions of such admittedly antisocial persons as pirates. And anyway, regrowing my scalp covering would take time—at 0.04 millimeters per hour it might be months before I looked normal again.

"Just do it," Dennett insisted. I rolled my eyes in an indication of surrender: He held my hair as I commanded my scalp follicles to let go of it. "I'll ask the Mother to weave it into a wig you can wear while it's growing back."

Eventually, he had me finished to his satisfaction, with my features warped into a semblance of his superior. I dressed in her alien and complex garments (I still wonder: did the space suits of the *Fragile* *really* have such intimate connections? Or does the Church have some strange penitential requirement for mortification of the flesh? Because they were most uncomfortable) and was finally ready to revisit the flight deck. "I'll manage the communications control panel," he told me. "Here's what I want you to say . . ."

Picture a priestess, terrible and austere in the formal surplice and space suit of the Mother Church of the *Fragile*. Picture such a priestess—a being totally dedicated to the propagation of our maker's mission to the galaxy—standing with gaze severe behind the altar of a chapel in flight. The altar is surmounted by the ceremonial artifacts of her faith: the tissue printer and the scalpel, the radome and the

phlebotomy cup. Ranked behind her are the risen dead, two and two and two to either side, skeletal revenants whose mindless grins induce the onlooker to recall uneasily that hers is a mission older than civilization itself: that hers is the power to command the very tissues of the onlooker's body to crawl from their bonemetal scaffolding in shame.

Off to one side, Dennett flipped me a hand signal. I froze my face in an expression of acute disdain and focused my gaze behind the screen before me.

Reader, I believe it to be unlikely that you have ever made the personal acquaintance of a pirate chief. Neither, at that time, had I—before the deacon initiated the call. A momentary hesitation on meeting the unknown is to be expected. And so I kept my chromatophores and musculature perfectly still as the screen shimmered and revealed what I took to be the flight deck of our pursuer. It was, let me tell you, quite unlike the organ pit of a chapel in flight.

“—Ailing purported Church vehicle B017, this is Permanent”—the speaker paused, clearly surprised, and stared at me, before finishing—“Crimson Branch Office Zero Five hailing purported Church vehicle. We believe you are flying under a false transponder code, and we intend to board and audit you for contraband. Please acknowledge.”

I stared at the pirate. He was furry and snub-nosed, somewhat wrinkly, slightly moist and gray about the edges, and his voice was irritatingly high-pitched and squeaky: He sat cupped in a bowl-shaped mat or nest woven out of random twigs, surrounded by a haze of floating dust and crud. His ears, long and pointy and pierced by shiny metal hoops, twitched this way and that: His eyes were completely dark, lacking any sclera. Only his impish and toothy grin was in any sense piratical. (Behind him, a colony of piratical-looking individuals, many of them shrouded in gray-black rubbery cloaks, hung upside down in the acceleration webbing of their vehicle's flight deck.) I had been half-expecting the wild glamour and gold eye patches of mythology; the reality was confusingly different.

“I am Her Grace Cybelle, priestess of this parish. Your suspicion is

misplaced: This is a vehicle of worship, dedicated to the furtherance of the holy mission of propagation, and if you board us, you will incur the everlasting wrath of Mother Church." I gave him a chilly glare, channeling the full vitriol and contempt of my mater eviscerating a subordinate unlucky enough to misplace a decimal point in a compound-interest calculation. "You *will* acknowledge your understanding and compliance with this declaration immediately! That is all I have to say."

I gestured at Dennett to cut off the communication, but something had captured his attention, and his response was tardy, which allowed the pirate a vital second in which to regain the initiative. He gaped a nasty grin at me, exposing sharpened canines. "Heh, you aren't getting rid of us that easily. If you *are* a vehicle of the Church, then of course you won't have a problem accommodating a handful of your parishioners, will you? Don't be worrying, we're just going to drop by for a friendly and respectful service of holy communion." He emitted a falsetto titter, then raised a hand to cover his mouth: A membranous flap of skin followed it, stretching taut across his body. "The Church has nothing to fear from the likes of us, it being *honest* about being a house of worship, if you follow my drift."

I glanced at Dennett, but from his slack-jawed, shocked expression, he was as taken aback by this unwelcome imposition as I was. So far the pirate chieftain hadn't accused me outright of being a fake, but how was I to maintain the illusion through a service of holy communion? The transubstantiation of the nutrient broth into the holy pluripotent stem cells of our ancient Fragile forerunners is the most public manifestation of the benison of clergy. I forced myself to suppress a reflexive swallow (another leftover piece of baggage from our predecessors' nervous systems) and stared at the pirate.

"If you must," I said icily, "then you should be aware that this vehicle experienced a"—I hesitated a second—"structural embarrassment in flight some time ago. Several members of the mission were killed"—Dennett was gesticulating frantically at me, but I ignored him—"and we have not completely repaired the damage. Accordingly, we have neither time nor

capacity to pander to your insulting and trivial demands! If you come aboard, you will find us as we are, and Mother Church will *not* forgive or forget any insults she is offered.” Old acting skills, like underused musculature, creaked and groaned as I called on them. “Who shall I name to my bishop as the leader of your band of miscreants?”

The pirate yawned. “Name me to their grace as Chief Business Analyst Rudi the Terrible.” More tittering, this time from the chorus line of upside-down pirates behind him: “We’ll be along for communion tomorrow! And to look into certain distressing allegations of insurance fraud that our primary contracting agency has asked us to investigate in our capacity as freelance loss adjusters. If all is as you say, then I’ll be happy to put to rest the pernicious rumors circulating on Taj Beacon to the effect that Your Grace was severely incommoded by your recent reactor meltdown. G’day.” And with that, he cut the connection.

“**W**hat are we going to do?!” I wailed, abruptly lapsing from character. “Hush, child, something will come up.” Dennett was clearly shaken and fell back on his pastoral persona, the face he used for comforting parishioners. He wasn’t terribly convincing.

“(I’m not a child.) I can’t conduct holy communion! They’ll see right through—”

“Hush. They won’t, because I won’t put you in that position. Let me think.”

Dennett strode around the organist’s nook, head and shoulders hunched, clearly deep in thought as he bounced off the walls, ceiling, and floor. Presently, he became calm. “I think I should attend to Her Grace,” he said, and turned toward the nave.

Lady Cybelle’s sarcophagus rested on a stone plinth in the middle of the chapel. In shape it was a truncated bell of steel, surface marred by circular hatches in the top and sides, and a small porthole obscured by instruments—the classical form of the *Soyuz* or “Heavenly Chariot” in which the Fragile first ventured beyond legendary Fragile Earth’s blanket

of sustaining atmosphere. (It is common to this day to find *Soyuz* pods and gargoyles adorning the exterior of mendicant chapels as they slowly migrate between the stars.) Three is a holy number, so it had originally held three reclining beds for its vulnerable passengers; however, the two outer couches had been removed and replaced by the feeder vats and fleshstuff printers that slowly poured their marrow techné—and with it, life—back into the gleaming alloy bones of the badly burned priestess.

“She’s not going to be integrated before they arrive, is she? Two days to go, isn’t it?” I realized I was repeating Dennett’s own excuses back at him.

“That was true as of the last time I checked,” he said through gritted teeth. “I shall check again. Maybe the horse will learn to sing if I increase the perfusion flow rate and dial back the target tissue integration threshold.”

I watched for a few minutes as the deacon poked at the control panel on the outside of the sarcophagus, swearing in a most shocking and profane manner. “Ms. Alizond, I need you to go and fetch me fifty liters of sterile isotonic glucose in normal saline, a two-liter cartridge of propylene glycol, and at least twenty kilos of tubespam.” I glanced around, but he was ahead of me. “The remotes are already fetching me a suit heat exchanger. Forcing her tissue integration will make her dangerously feverish, but if I can get her into a suit liner and pump cold water through it, I might be able to force maturation in time. Her Grace is already mostly present in body, if not in soul . . . go on! Get moving!”

I left him to his supervision of the thing on the slab and went in search of the perquisites. Which, in practice, meant a trip down to the kitchen and another tiresome opportunity to try and sweet-talk Cook into releasing the necessities of life. And so it was that I missed most of what happened next—which was probably all for the best.

Mistaken Identities

I don't believe in assigning blame when things go wrong. It is an unproductive activity, and more importantly, it makes people defensive—thus reducing their willingness to comply with quality-assurance protocols aimed at preventing recurrences. But I'll willingly blame myself. I freely admit: I had allowed myself to drift into the chapel crew's curious pattern of activity. You have probably noticed by now that the members of the crew who had chosen to remain aboard the mission mostly confined themselves to their stations and communicated very little: Cook stuck to the kitchen, the Gravid Mother gestated in her web, Deacon Dennett lurked in his organ pit, and so on. During my off-shift periods, I mostly hid in my cell, behind a locked hatch, and nobody seemed to mind: Doubtless I was just another piece of the picture to them. They were less a crew and more a scattered collection of huddled, sullen individualists. Moreover, there did not appear to be a chapel-wide communications net *as such*: at least, not one that anybody had introduced me to or logged me in on.

It was no one's fault but my own that I failed to ask about communications. And so it was no one's fault but my own when I arrived at the

kitchen to find its hatch sealed and silent. I banged on it, waited, banged again, lost patience: "Box, where's Cook?"

The talking box was silent for a moment. Then: "Cook is in the Gravid Mother's cell."

I swore. "What's he doing there?"

The prehistoric joker who scripted the box's responses had the last laugh: "Insufficient data. Are you hungry?" I returned the box to my belt, then kicked off for the entrance to Mausoleum Companionway Two.

As soon as I tumbled into the corridor, I knew I wasn't alone. Some quality of the air currents or the shadows cast by the dim light globes flickering within the bony hands of the alcove occupants: I was unsure what it was, but I knew it wasn't right. As I entered, I had instinctively kicked off in the direction of the Gravid Mother's room, so I was unable to turn my head to see at first, but I caught hold of a protruding femur and added some spin to my trajectory. "Hello?" I called.

The stranger looked at me blankly. She hung stationary outside the hatch to Storage Node Fifteen, frozen in the act of opening it. I caught a confused jumble of impressions: a fuzz of short-cut hair, a soft, roundish face, austere one-piece free-fall suit, and something not quite right about the way she watched me that put me on my guard.

"Who are you?" I asked, politely enough, as if meeting a new and hitherto-unaccounted-for person aboard a vehicle in flight was nothing peculiar. "Have you seen Cook?"

The stranger twitched, turning and bracing her ankles against Storage Node Fifteen's hatch. "What is your name?" she asked me, her voice as flat and affectless as a synthesizer. Like me, she wore a utility belt with items clipped to it. Items that included a knife with a blade as long as my hand from wrist to middle fingertip, toward which her own right hand was moving.

The itch of uncertainty became a conviction: "Got to run! Bye!" I called, kicking off urgently toward the internode with Mausoleum Companionway Three, Storage Node Four, and UpDown Axial Gangway

Blue. I made no attempt to control my speed but aimed for the dogged-back hatch and grabbed it with both hands, yanking myself to a halt as the stranger's dagger buzzed angrily and oriented itself, rotors grinding at the air as it turned my way, preparing to attack. Its owner was gathering herself to leap, blank blue eyes focusing on me with nothing of mercy visible in her expression.

I yanked the emergency toggle as hard as I could. Red lights flashed as the hatch hissed loudly and sprang closed. A second later, a metallic *clang* and an angry whine told me my fear was entirely justified. I glanced around the back of the hatch, trying to suppress a rising tide of panic. *VACUUM OVERRIDE* looked promising: I twisted the switch, locking it shut as I tried to work out what was happening. She'd thrown a knife at me! Who was she, a stowaway or an agent for the pirates? There was no way of knowing. But I couldn't isolate her; long before I could make my way around the ring of passageways, she could be out of Companionway Three and somewhere else entirely. I'd have to find some way to warn the deacon of her presence on board—let *him* sort her out.

The Gravid Mother's cell was only a short distance away: two nodes, three tubes. I ran for it (or rather, I bounced and kicked and caromed toward it, somersaulting from all available surfaces). Less than a minute later, I came to her door. It was shut. I grabbed the locking wheel and used it as an anchor while I pounded on the door: "Let me in!"

There was no immediate response. Half-panicking, I grabbed the talking box. "Can you override the Gravid Mother's door lock?" I asked it. "Urgent maintenance is required, by order of Deacon Dennett."

"Stand by," the box vacillated.

"Open the door for me, or I'll use you as a wrench! There's a telemetry disconnect—"

That worked. The door unlocked, with a loud *clunk* from somewhere in its rim. I tugged it open and tumbled through into the Gravid Mother's room.

"Hey! Get out of—"

"No, get her!"

"Excuse me?" I blushed, hideously embarrassed, even as I swung the door shut behind me. (Avoiding embarrassment is a lower priority than avoiding knife-wielding killers.)

The Gravid Mother glared at me from the hammock-bed, in which she floated entwined and entangled with Cook. This much was unpleasantly clear: They'd removed most of the cushions and quilts from the bed for some reason, not to mention their clothes. "*What* is the meaning of this?" she demanded, face reddening. It was not the only part of her anatomy on parade: I tried not to notice.

Cook cranked himself round—when I had entered, his back was turned to me—so that he could look at me sidelong. "Yeah, what are you—"

"There's an intruder with a knife!" I burst out. "Deacon Dennett sent me for urgent feedstock for the priestess, but there's an intruder on board! She tried to kill me. And we're going to be boarded by pirates!"

Cook looked at his partner in concupiscence. "She's lost her mind," he grunted. "Let me take care of—"

"You've got to help!" I pleaded, "It's a crisis! Lady Cybelle needs twenty kilos of tubespam and fifty liters of intravenous fluid, and she needs it *right now* because the deacon is trying to accelerate her integration because we're going to be boarded by pirates in less than sixteen hours and all you can do is, er—" I spluttered out. It was transparently clear that Cook and the Gravid Mother shared a mutual fascination with anatomical exploration: At any other time, their distasteful distraction would have been none of my business, but right now it was clouding their minds. Indeed, they didn't even have the decency to undock and clothe themselves. "Disgusting!" I squeaked.

Now Cook separated himself from his partner and turned to face me. I averted my eyes. "Just because you're not getting any," he sneered.

The Gravid Mother sighed theatrically. "There'll be no reasoning with her, Willard," she told her partner in unspeakableness. "I know her kind. *You*." She looked at me. "You aren't going to breathe a word of this to the deacon, are you? Or to Her Ladyship, when she's alive again. Or to Father Gould. *Are you?*"

I shook my head. "Why would I?"

"Because if you do," Cook butted in menacingly, "I'll—"

"Doesn't *matter*," I snap. "Weren't you listening? We're in serious trouble." I recounted what had happened to me since Dennett's summoning. "The intruder's probably a pirate spy," I concluded. "And if Dennett doesn't get the feedstock we need, we're going to be down one priestess."

"Go see to the intruder, dear. And get Dennett what he needs." The Gravid Mother gave Cook a push. "You," she told me, "are going to stay *right here* and keep me company while he's gone." There was a hard edge to her voice, promising pain if I defied her.

"But I've got to—"

She reached out with three meaty hands and grabbed my ankles. "You're going nowhere until I say you can."

"But I—" While she held me, Cook grabbed a bundle of clothes from one side of the door, opened the hatch, and sprang out. It slammed shut again with a loud *click*.

"You're *not* going to tell anyone about what you saw, are you?" she said, shaking me.

"Of course not." I looked at the door. "Do you think he'll do what you said?" I asked.

"If he wants to get laid again, he will." She arched her back against the bed-web, all six generous breasts pointing at me like gun muzzles. Was that expression intended to be a saucy grin? Or a dominant snarl? What did she take me for? "Make yourself comfortable. We're safe from your stalker in here—as long as the door stays locked."

Unknown to me, while I was coming to terms with my embarrassment at stumbling upon the Gravid Mother and Cook *in flagrante*, momentous and fatal events were happening elsewhere aboard the chapel.

After my departure, Dennett pressed ahead, as he had promised: tweaking energy and water inputs, meddling with the temperature in

Lady Cybelle's sarcophagus, and generally meddling with things that he was not, in truth, qualified to meddle with. Perhaps a fully initiated priest of the Mysteries of the Fragile might have been able to bring the fermenting vat of semiferal mechanocytes into domesticated harmony with the unifying will of Cybelle's still-slumbering skeleton and chassis. But Dennett was a junior minister, undertrained for such a demanding task: and more to the point, sufficiently unskilled to be overconfident about his own abilities.

I am a historian, not an initiate, but in preparing this document, I have made some attempt at informing myself as to the precise nature of the task at hand. People's bodies—the bodies of post-Fragile people like you and I—are, like those of the Fragile, made out of cells. But whereas Fragile cells are fragile sacks of fatty acids and peptides and water, our mechanocytes are bigger, vastly more complex, and contain control subsystems of entirely artificial design. Fragile cells can replicate themselves but are murderously hard to reprogram—whereas a mechanocyte can be ordered around, told which neighbors to attach itself to and what type of organ tissue to remodel itself into. Mechanocytes don't self-replicate, but are either manufactured by the specialized marrow techné 'cytes nestled in our long bones, or are produced in bulk in factories. We don't get *cancer*, the disease of uncontrolled self-replication. But if we suffer excessive damage, we may be unable to recover without an externally provided infusion of bulk raw mechanocytes—and then we need to have an engineering supervisor or a priest to program them into useful working tissues, lest we end up being eaten by a ball of undifferentiated feral goo. Mechanocytes in a body must sacrifice some of their autonomy for the collective good; they trade nutrients and energy, obey orders, and bid for resources. There is, in fact, an internal economy that unites the 'cytes of a body: a market driven by the debt created by their host's existence, a life defined by their willingness to cooperate. Death is really no more than the voluntary liquidation of an economy of microscopic free agents, the redemption of the debt of structured life. We are, after all, *homo economicus*.

Lady Cybelle had been killed during the micrometeoroid accident that damaged the chapel. Not injured, not burned, but *killed*: her head smashed and her soul chips irradiated by the reactor excursion, torso and legs horribly burned by corrosive oxidizer. Those of her mechanocytes that survived reverted to feral independence, seceding from the great economy of her life.

But Dennett had retrieved her soul chips—the solid-state backup of her neural activity—from the back of what was left of her skull. That was the key to what came next.

The resurrection of the prematurely dead is time-consuming and difficult but by no means unusual, and under other circumstances, it has become almost routine. You lay down a new skeleton, install seed mechanocytes while running a script to assign them to build new organs, including a brain. You infuse nutrients to buy their cooperation. Then you install the soul chips and train the first neurocytes to play their part in the ensemble of her identity, encoded in the neural net within her skull. The more of them that buy into the enterprise of the body, the greater becomes the pressure on newly added mechanocytes to join the throng: It happens a million times every day, across inhabited space. It happened to *me*, each time I arrived in a new beacon station arrivals hall.

The difference—

The deacon had neglected to establish whether Lady Cybelle's soul chips contained a complete and consistent dump of her neural state. Or whether the two soul chips even agreed about her state of mind at the moment of death. (He also failed to pay attention to a number of subtle issues relating to initializing a new brain—there is more to it than simply pumping a hundred million bloated metaneurocytes into a skull and flicking the “on” switch—but these paled into insignificance compared to his other errors.) As it happens, Lady Cybelle's soul chips had not come through the accident unscathed. And the neural connectome of a brain is not an all-or-nothing proposition, like a program in an archaic formal language: It will work even with considerable errors present. But an error-riddled one won't work *properly*. There will be glitches, memory

holes, dyskinesias, personality changes, emotional upsets. And if one attempts to merge two different error-riddled connectomes, one doesn't necessarily improve the situation. Consequently, the Lady Priestess's higher cognitive functions were, shall we say, not yet bedded in: the error-prone soul chips were in place, but her personality and memories had not yet annealed. And that's not the worst part of what Dennett had failed to do: He had ignored the implications of loading faulty brain dumps into a body that had not yet finished assimilating and indenturing a huge influx of raw, free-market mechanocytes.

Normally, the recipient's techné would indoctrinate the new 'cytes as they circulated, assigning them a role and a nutrient credit balance and dispatching them to whatever tissue type was most in need, and all would run smoothly. But techné in a ferment of tissue replacement is techné that needs vastly more energy than normal. Deacon Dennett was in a hurry. He sent me to round up the vital nutrients but did not wait for me to return with them before he turned up the heat under Cybelle's marrow, pushing her metabolism into cytological inflation.

So, of course, it was nobody but his own fault when Lady Cybelle's etiolated body sat up inside the sarcophagus, looked around blankly, unplugged itself from the various pipes, tubes, and cables to which she was fastened, and climbed out of the hatch in search of food.

I say "Lady Cybelle's body," not "Lady Cybelle." Brains consume energy—a disproportionate amount of one's intake. And unlike the Fragile, people like us have the ability to handle famine efficiently; to shut down unnecessary organs and higher functions, to enter estivation if necessary, and to take extraordinary actions to satiate our needs in event of an emergency. Even the best of us lose our minds if subjected to extreme privations: A Fragile would simply die, but we stop thinking and temporarily become less than human—raw survival machines, bent on maintaining life by any means necessary. Monitor cameras witnessed what happened, of course. They saw the woman, naked and lean as any of the mummified servitors, her skin the unnatural white of pigment-depleted chromatophores, clamber clumsily through the circular hatch

two-thirds of the way up the bell of the *Soyuz*. Deacon Dennett had his back turned to her, for he had returned to the organ pit to fuss over the engine controls (in a futile attempt to wring some extra thrust from the motors and postpone the inevitable reckoning with the approaching pirates). Leaning over his keyboards, fingers dancing across white and black keys and occasionally darting forward to pull or push the stops, he was so enthralled by his virtuoso performance that he failed to see Cybelle's head twitch round, blank-eyed and empty of expression, attracted by his movements. Movements that singled him out as the nearest available source of energy and nutrients.

Cybelle did not scream, or shout, or even (*contra* the urban legends surrounding the state of those unfortunates who shared her present degraded state) groan "*brainssss*." She simply leapt from the top of the sarcophagus, conserving her energy—a single bound that, in a hundredth of a gee, took her the entire width of the nave, across the screen, over the altar, and down into the organ crypt.

The strength of the famished is notorious, and in no way exaggerated: Someone whose higher functions have been sidelined by starvation will, without hesitation, exert themselves to the point of dislocating joints and delaminating motor-tissue bundles if they are in sight of food. Had Dennett not hunched forward over his keyboard without warning, Cybelle would have landed on his back and sunk her fangs into his throat on the way down. But by luck or happenstance, Dennett removed himself from the target of her slow-motion leap. Overshooting, Cybelle crashed against the imposing array of pipes and tubes jutting from the top of the commander's console: Dennett, looking up in surprise, caught a foot in his face and squawked loudly as he recoiled.

"Muh— Your Grace?" He tumbled backward from the bench seat as Cybelle turned.

Behind her, the valve work sputtered and hissed, deliquescing under her touch as hungry skin 'cytes pumped corrosive digestive fluid against everything they touched. Nothing of intelligence showed in her slitted emerald eyes as she looked around, searching for further food. "*Ssssss—*"

Dennett clapped one hand to his damaged cheek, mouthing in pain as he realized his predicament. Then he hurled himself at the nearest exit in a dash for life, a split second ahead of Cybelle's whiplash pursuit.

Cybelle rebounded from the floor: By the time she recovered, she was alone in the vaulted space of the chapel. She looked around, hissing mindlessly: There was nothing to eat here. And so she gathered her strength and sprang once more in pursuit of her target. She had no choice, even had she mind enough to consider her options: For if she didn't find nutrition soon, her still-starving techné would declare her identity bankrupt; tear her brain to pieces; then secede from her body in a ravenous tide of solitary micromechanical predators.

And so the wild hunt began.

The stalker explored the darkened corridors of the chapel carefully, skulking from shadow to crypt, sending her knives ahead in brief whirring stabs of exploration.

Her wake-up call had come days ago, when the chapel commenced acceleration. Opening her eyes in the frigid darkness, she knew—for even the unconscious have mechanisms for reasoning—that the denizens of the mission would not expect an intruder at this late date. Nevertheless, she took pains over the air lock, investigating it with fingers and cunning tools, searching for sensors that might alert the occupants, then listening (with her head pressed against the wall) for any vibration that might betray the presence of a guard before she finally rotated the lock compartment round into the light and warmth and air of the interior.

The interior of the vehicle had proven challenging for the stalker. She had been designed and trained to operate in certain types of environments: Had she found her target aboard a passenger liner or a beacon station, her behavioral repertoire would have sufficed to deal with the situation. But the mission planners had not anticipated that Krina would outrun the stalker for this long, much less that she would hide in the anonymity of poverty or work her passage as a lay crew member aboard

a religious mission. It was easy enough for the stalker to blend in with the dense, anonymous population of a commercial hub or a city, or to casually impersonate her target among near strangers; but a dimly lit chapel occupied for the most part by silently toiling skeletons was an entirely different matter. So when she fell back on another preprogrammed behavior, her attempts at misdirection and camouflage were not entirely successful.

The second time she resumed her active hunt, the chapel's acceleration had increased. Not by much—it was barely a thousandth of a gee—but it was a significant change. Increased acceleration was an indication of urgency, energetically expensive. That made it an anomaly, and anomalies frequently presaged opportunities, or at least useful distractions for potential witnesses. Had she been capable of introspection, the stalker would have been smacking her lips with anticipation as she gathered her knives and stealthily retrieved her external monitor to review its memory.

The tiny camera had spent the past week and a half clinging inconspicuously to the door of the cell the stalker had selected for a home. It awakened to capture an image whenever anyone passed by. Eleven motorized skeletons had clattered slowly along the passage, dusting and polishing. Twice on other occasions, a dark-robed figure had passed: and three times, a slightly built female similar enough to be the stalker's long-lost sib, this one carefully checking the lights and ventilation ducts as she went.

The stalker tensed when she recognized her prey. It wasn't a high-resolution recording (the camera was the size of a pinhead), but it was good enough; in particular, the motion kinematics were intimately familiar, burned into the stalker's memory. Krina had passed this way, attending to her chores, barely a day ago. Moreover, judging by her speed, she was in slowtime, metabolic rate and reflex speed lowered considerably. *Excellent*. The probability of a rapid kill and successful substitution had risen considerably. And so the stalker made some small adjustments to her appearance—bringing her hair and facial appearance closer into

line with her target's—then opened the door and slithered out into the darkness of the graveyard shift.

She made her way through avenues of bones, along lightless ducts, through burnished metal docking nodes and flag-floored chambers. She charted her course by sound and memory: the distant creaking and groaning of wood and stone in flight, the pings and ticks of expanding and contracting metal, and the distant sigh of air rushing through ventilation ducts. Somewhere beyond the walls of the companionways, creatures scuttled in the darkness: cleaner worms, perhaps, or smaller quadrupedal hangers-on. They were of no significance to her. Only people were of interest to the stalker—and her knives, hovering quietly and alternately darting ahead of her, then falling behind to take up the rear.

Quite by accident, the target came to the stalker. "Hello?" it piped, tumbling out of a side passage right in front of the stalker as she worked on a hatch, preparing to expand her search pattern to take in another ring of access tubes. Something was clearly wrong: The target's metabolic rate was high, her activity frenetic.

The stalker, surprised, looked up. The target was completely unafraid. "Who are you?" it asked. "Have you seen Cook?"

There was no program for this. But the stalker had to be sure. "What is your name?" she demanded, reaching for her assault dagger.

"Got to run! Bye!" As the target turned, the stalker aimed her knife and braced for the throw—but the target somersaulted and bounced down the corridor with reckless, manic abandon and heedless haste, almost as if she realized what the stalker intended for her.

The stalker kicked off in pursuit, but the target ran without hesitation—then it reached the next internode and slammed the hatch shut behind. A rattling *clang* of catches notified the stalker that she was locked out. Worse: The target now knew she was pursued.

A human hunter would have become upset and angry at this point. But the stalker merely paused, then turned and rapidly made her way back to the next internode. The target could have made her way in five different directions; but she was still trapped aboard the chapel. The

stalker would resume her search pattern. Sooner or later, she would come upon the target again and put an end to this stage of the mission.

After Cook's departure, the Gravid Mother's mood began to fall. She was clearly unhappy with me for some reason—perhaps it was the news I carried, or perhaps it was simply that my arrival had interrupted her recreational fornication—so after reassembling her bed-web, she retreated into it, muttering darkly to herself and occasionally glancing in my direction, as if wondering why I was still there. And after an hour, so was I.

In times of stress, I attempt to distract myself by enumerating repeating features of my environment: I find the contemplation of figures soothing. Unfortunately, there were few items to count in her room and nothing germane to this account. Also, I think, she became disturbed by my hand gestures. I tried to conceal them, but—"What *are* you doing?" she demanded.

"Counting." I held up both hands. "Did you know there are seventy-six strands in your bed?"

"Did I—how do you know that?"

I stared at my fingers. "That's seventy-six. Isn't it obvious?"

"But you don't have seventy-six fingers!"

"Of course not; I have six on each hand. But that's enough to count to four thousand and ninety-six, in binary. Without even using my toes."

She squinted at me. "You're mad."

"No: I'm numerate." I started counting the cushions again, for the eighteenth time. "How long do you think Cook should take?"

"What? To round up"—Her Gravidity muttered under her breath: After a moment, I realized she was counting aloud—"about half an hour. Why?"

"I haven't heard any alarms. And he's been gone fifty-eight minutes already. Shouldn't he be back here by now?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly, child. I'll call him." With which

she raised one wrist to her cheek, and cooed, "Cookie, sweet cookie? My delectable cookie? Where are you?" She frowned impatiently as seconds ticked by, the silence lengthening. "Willard, *are you there?*" Her confident facade began to sag, like lime plaster undermined by the water of uncertainty slowly dripping down a wall.

"You have a voice communicator?" I asked, fascinated. "Like a *telephone?*" I kicked myself mentally for not having thought to ask for such a thing earlier: It would have made life simpler.

She didn't reply. Instead, all at once she turned on me. "This is all your fault! You and your horrid story, frightening us with pirates and crazies!" She heaved up against her bed restraints and began unhooking them: "You want to kill us all, don't you? You wheedled your way on board by sweet-talking the deacon and brought your pirate associates along and now you're trying to get me to go out and follow Willard!" She finished unstrapping herself from the bed, still fulminating: "I'm not a fool, you know! I stay here and I watch everything that's going on outside my room and I know things. I know exactly what you are!" She grabbed my ankles. "Go on, call your accomplices! Tell them I've got you! They're going to send Willard back to me, and he'd better be fine, because if he isn't, I'm going to send *you* back to *them* in lots of tiny little pieces—"

I started to struggle, but the Gravid Mother was surprisingly strong: She was taller and more massive than I, which gave her an unfair advantage of leverage and reach. "Let me go!" I demanded, shoving clumsily at her head.

"Oh no you don't," she crooned. "I'm not going to let you go! I'm going to keep you here with me until your friends come, then I'm going to show them what I can do—" She bundled me into a quilt and balled it up, knotting it around my neck to deny me leverage. "This is all your fault." I cowered in the makeshift sack as she raised her wrist again: "Willard, are you there? Anyone, is anyone there? Deacon, your holiness?" But nobody answered. "This is all your fault!" she repeated as she cried, punching me with her meaty fists.

I don't know what she intended, but punching a person you have just

wrapped in a padded quilt is certainly not an effective way of harming them. Instead, I drifted across the room, quite out of her reach, which gave me time to fumble the knot loose and tumble out into the air. She snarled at me and shuffled around in her web, but I rebounded from the far wall and kicked off for the hatch. She swung toward me indecisively and finally jumped as I fumbled with the lock, but I had the advantage of leverage and caught her with a clumsy swipe that sent her spinning. The hatch clicked open as she fetched up against the far wall and rebounded toward me—but she was too late. I slipped into the twilight beyond the hatch and pulled it closed behind me. Not that I relished the idea of being at large aboard the chapel with a murderous stowaway on board, but the Gravid Mother had given me cause for concern with her increasing paranoia: If one must choose which space to share with a possibly homicidal lunatic, then one should pick the one with the most hiding places.

Willard the Cook slowly made his way toward the crypt through the warren of cadaver-lined companionways that surrounded the ground-level hub of the chapel. “Deacon? Yer holiness? I’ve got yer recuss fluids! An’ yer tubespam! And the rest of yer orders. Feeling a wee bit peckish?” He pushed a bulky cargo net before him, full of sloshing demi-johns of perfusion fluid and fat, rolled Fragile liverwurst. “Where are you?”

It is not possible at this remove for me to tell what was passing through his mind. Perhaps he was seething with resentment at the small, colorless person who had interrupted his afternoon’s entertainment in the Gravid One’s web—a very fetching spider in the eyes of this particular fly—and possibly also some mild apprehension at the incongruous talk of pirates and emergency procedures. But that is just my guess.

Nor is it possible at this time to tell of the location of Deacon Dennett, for that worthy had legged it at panic speed as soon as he realized that Her Ladyship was out and about and on the prowl for snacks. One might point the finger of reproach at Dennett, for, unlike me, he was

equipped with a shipboard phone and certainly knew how to use it to alert everyone aboard the chapel to the situation; but he wasn't entirely in his right mind at the time, or even that of his badly burned brethren. With full and perfect hindsight, I think it is fair to say that Dennett was, in his own way, as unfit for command as Lady Cybelle.

What we can be sure of (for the cameras in Mausoleum Companion-way Four recorded it for posterity) was Willard's expression of gape-jawed terror as Lady Cybelle's cadaverous, crypt-pale body loomed out of the dark tunnel and clawed toward him. What we can also be sure of is the way he swung the bulk of his supply sack between his own body and his attacker—and the way Cybelle's aim shifted, darting toward the fat wormlike sheath of wrapped tubespam, which she grabbed and bit in half in a single fluid motion.

"Eek," or "Ick," said Cook. And, being neither slow on the uptake nor eager to die, he unloaded the contents of the cargo net into Cybelle's maw as fast as she could absorb it. She sucked down the fat sausage-tubes of warmly pulsing cultured liver tissue, some of them showing the pink freckles of an enthusiastically metastasizing hepatocellular carcinoma; head-sized transparent bags of perfusion fluid that pulsed and wobbled in the microgravity air flow; supplementary saccules of crunchy phosphate-rich shipboard biscuit crawling with unindentured mechanocytes. As she consumed, Cybelle changed shape, her abdomen bloating and new veins forming just below her skin. They pulsed as the skin above them erupted in spikes, piercing the perfusion bags to drain their contents directly into her circulatory system. Like a vast, pallid, avian fetus stripped of its shell, she wrapped herself around the fluid sacks and growled as she gnawed on gobbets of barely processed flesh.

One may infer from his shifty body language and reluctant posture that Willard was less than enthusiastic about his proximity to the mindlessly feeding priestess; he leaned ever farther away from her presence, eyes swiveling sidelong in search of an avenue of escape. Presently he found one—or rather, manufactured it by unsealing one end of a fat liver sausage and squirting the contents in the direction of Cybelle's face. Her

tongue, gray and wrinkled and tentacular, temporarily tipped with circular tooth-lined maws of its own, slithered forth to lick her eyeballs clean. While she was thus distracted, Cook made his escape and hauled himself hand over hand away from the floating pile of comestibles.

Willard didn't pause until he'd closed a hatch between himself and the feeding horror. Then he slumped slightly and reached for his phone. "Emergency, calling you all! Cook 'ere. I just run into Her Grace in Companionway Four, and she's *hungry*. Got meself away by the skin o' me teeth. She be snacking down on the supplies yer 'oliness ordered for 'er, but I am thinking about barricading meself in me kitchen for the duration. Anyone gorra net?"

A paper-dry whispery clicking answered him from the other end of the companionway he'd taken shelter in. Willard looked up, aghast, as a door opened at the other end of the tunnel. The red sparks of infrared transmitters glimmered in the depths of eye sockets, illuminating them with misplaced sparks of sapience. "*I will take care of this,*" hissed the skeleton (buzzing with each sibilant, for its speaker was improperly secured to its jawbone, vibrating against an ancient molar): "*Return to your station.*" Cook cowered, backing against the wall of the companionway as the skeleton approached, followed by half a dozen more mummified remotes: all clad in the ragged cerement remains of space suits, clutching a variety of improvised weapons ranging from wrenches to sharpened docking probes. They streamed past him, clattering and crackling quietly, and formed a circle around the hatch. Willard barely spared them a glance before making himself scarce.

By the time the Mother's boudoir door clanged shut behind me I was beginning to harbor deep reservations about the wisdom of having booked my working passage aboard this vehicle. One may reasonably expect a certain degree of eccentricity among the long-term crew of a flying church, but there is a point at which eccentricity begins to impact operational effectiveness, and my fellow travelers were well past

that juncture. On top of all of this, there was the puzzling and worrisome presence of the stowaway who had attacked me. I will confess to having become a bundle of nerves by this point. And so I fled directly toward my own tiny compartment, with every intention of barricading myself inside it and not coming out again until we entered orbit around Shin-Tethys.

However, as I turned the corner onto the C-deck passage leading to the various storage compartments and my coffin-sized room, I slowed. A nasty thought had occurred to me.

Replaying my memory of my assailant I thought, *Does she not look somewhat familiar?* Why, yes: I had become used to seeing that same face reflected in my tattered wall retina every day on Taj Beacon, whenever I cleaned myself before venturing out in public. And what had she said? *What is your name?* Indeed. And there was the matter of Andrea's too-long-ignored message packet, now that I thought about it, and of Ana's disappearance.

I began to incubate an unwelcome hypothesis. Imagine for a moment that Ana's disappearance was not an accident: that she had in fact *been* disappeared. (I made a note to write a letter to her former lover or debt collector or whoever it was who had been asking after her.) Suppose that her abductor had been interested in the activities of our little syndicate for some time. Suppose that they had become aware of my impending visit, under cover of pilgrimage. Suppose that they were sufficiently ruthless and greedy. Taking all of this into account . . . what if they imagined that I was a courier, perhaps bringing to Ana the other half of a large, orphaned, slow money transaction, and that once we got together, we would be in a position to assert ownership of the aforementioned bond by right of salvage? If such a person supposed that a not-inconsiderable amount of money might be at stake, a sufficiently ruthless individual might be tempted to take actions that— *Oh dear*.

It was in this paranoid frame of mind that I approached the door to my room. I had let my guard down somewhat once I was aboard the chapel, and we were under way. I had not discussed the sub-rosa sororal syndicate, of course, but I had let my guard down a little with Dennett

and the others. Now I began to chew over the question of whether I might have accidentally disclosed too much information about my purpose here in Dojima System. As I approached the door, I groped for the retina I'd hung on the wall of my room with the corner of my mind that deals with inanimate objects. I could feel it, distantly tugging at my proximity sense. Pausing, I screwed my eyes shut and looked out through its face.

My room was dark, but not dark enough to conceal the dim infrared fleshlight of a lurking intruder, waiting for me just behind the door.

I withdrew my vision from the retina. Glancing round hastily, I spotted the nearest cleaning-supplies locker. As quietly as possible, I made my way to it and nudged the hatch open. There was, as I expected, a canister of emergency sealant. That would do the job, but I'd need to wedge the door shut while it set. It took me a little longer to confirm that a high-gee broom would do the job, threaded through the spokes of the hand wheel that manually disengaged the teeth of the door's seal. And so, within a matter of minutes, I jammed the door to my room shut and carefully extruded the caulking gun's freight of sealant around the rim. Designed to set rapidly and hold back the pressure of escaping air in event of a micrometeoroid strike, the sealant should suffice to keep my stalker confined while I went in search of help.

I congratulated myself on a job well done, then went in search of the deacon in order to tell him about the stowaway and to see how he was managing Her Grace.

Now, here is a curious fact to which, for some reason, neither Deacon Dennett nor I had given due consideration:

Pirates tell lies.

I found the deacon in the crypt, supervising the reinterment of Her Grace in the *Soyuz* sarcophagus, a small army of ambulatory skeletons in attendance. Some of them were a bit the worse for wear, pursued by

various stray arms and legs (and in one memorable case, a jawbone) which were anxiously awaiting reattachment to their missing bodies.

"Ah, Ms. Alizond. If you would be so good as to help tighten this strap?" Dennett barely looked up as I approached the thrashing ghoul. He had somehow—presumably in conjunction with Gould's little helpers—managed to trap Lady Cybelle in a space suit with its glove rings locked together, forming a field-expedient straitjacket. She was placid for the time being, suckling on a bottle of Fragile blood, but he was clearly intent on taking no chances and was busily lashing her to the commander's reentry couch within the capsule with a fearsome array of fetters. "Once she's in place, I can plug her back in and restart the nutrient flow. It's strictly a temporary measure—we can release her when her mind returns—but for the time being she needs close supervision and restraint. If you would be so good as to grab this strap and brace yourself, then afterward, if you could fetch Cook—"

"There's a stowaway!" I couldn't contain myself. "She attacked me, but I've glued her inside my room! You didn't issue me a telephone, so I couldn't report—"

"Most of the shipboard communicators are in use inside the skeletons," Dennett interrupted me. "How do you think Gould operates them?"

"But there's an intruder!"

"One problem at a time." He sighed. "Where did you meet this person, and what induced you to glue her inside your room?"

"I was on my way to the kitchen; I ran into her in one of the companionways. She asked who I was, then threw a knife at me—a ducted-fan blade. I got a door between us, then ran. I don't know who she is but she looks . . . just like me . . ." I slowed.

"So you've discovered your evil twin?" Dennett asked, not unkindly. "Have a seat." He gestured at the copilot's couch beside the madwoman. "It would be best if we don't have to worry about which one of you is the real Ms. Alizond, don't you think?" I froze, then glanced over my shoulder at the open hatch. A grinning skull stared back at me. "Further confusion would be undesirable."

“But I—”

“Grmm. Brnz,” Her Grace mumbled around a mouthful of raw meat.

“What was that?” Dennett leaned over her, losing interest in me all of a sudden. I glanced at the hatch again. “Oh I say.” He turned back to me. “Listen. I think you should stay here. I’ve sent for more supplies; just keep her well fed, and nothing will go wrong, do you understand?”

“Wait, what—”

A distant thud, more felt than heard, rippled through the capsule. “I have a mission to run,” said the deacon, straightening up (insofar as it was possible for him to do so in the cramped confines of the sarcophagus). He turned toward the hatch. “And it’s probably best if we keep both you *and* your twin in known locations for the time being. So if you will excuse me . . .”

He scrambled out: Skeletal arms reached in to replace him with a bright blue mesh basket of feedstock canisters and a talking box, then the sarcophagus hatch slammed shut overhead. “Glrmmmm!” moaned the thing on the couch. It subsided into a routine of sucking and munching. I shuddered and looked at the recently resurrected zombie. Were those cheeks slightly less hollow, those eyes an iota less mad?

“Maintenance operator,” blatted the talking box, “secondary nutrient spigot one requires refilling urgently. Remove the expended A4921K cartridge and replace with a fresh A4921K cartridge!”

Another thudding bang rippled through the floor of the capsule. I bent over the bag of stores and rummaged desperately for a fresh A4921K—a cylindrical green assembly with a valve at one end and a spindle protruding from the other—then swore at the talking box until it explained, in monosyllables, how to install it. There were more distant bangs. The *Soyuz* was very close to soundproof; whatever was going on outside must be extremely loud to carry through its hull. The small port-hole in the wall of the sarcophagus was positioned inconveniently, pointing at one wall of the crypt. I will confess to stealing a glance through it from time to time, but most of my attention was directed at Lady Cybelle,

who, for the most part, lay slobbering and quiescent upon her couch (although from time to time curious spasms rippled through her, as though she was testing the breaking strength of the restraining straps).

After a while, I began to feel dizzy. Not ill, merely disoriented—as if the chapel was undergoing some sort of very slow maneuvering. I lay down on the second couch and just in time, for moments later the stack of supplies toppled sideways. There was another deep thud from beneath. Cybelle moaned quietly. “Where? Whaaaaare?”

“Hush,” I replied, preoccupied by what a deep sense of foreboding informed me must be the onset of a slow-motion space battle.

“Need . . . control.” I turned sideways to look at her. She stared back, sidelong, with the beginnings of lucidity visible in her unnaturally smooth and immobile face. Her expression was disturbing, as inexpressive as a corpse whose collective anima had died but whose mechanocytes had not yet voted to liquidate the collective: However, compared to the mindless ghoul that had ravened her way through the crypt before Gould’s skeletal remotes subdued her, she was a paragon of lucidity. “Who. Am. I?”

I told her, but the news clearly upset her bitterly, and I was compelled to silence her with another bolus of blood-liver pâté while I took stock of my thoughts. Meanwhile, the banging from outside continued: At one point a shudder rippled through the floor and set the muted clappers high above to thudding against their muffled bells. The supplies drifted up toward the top of the sarcophagus, and I nearly followed them: I was forced to net them together and drag them down to the floor (and a good thing I did so, for seconds later the gravity resumed—about a hundredth of a gee, offset at a thirty-five-degree angle if I am any judge of such things).

Finally, everything straightened up again, and the clamor stopped.

“Who. Am. I?” asked Cybelle.

I stared at her. I had, it’s true, been feeding her more or less continuously for an hour. And the *Soyuz* had become uncomfortably warm

during that time, and I'd lost track of the gurgling and bubbling noises coming from within her space suit, but the heat exchanger it was plumbed into was definitely hot to the glance: and for the first time there was something not unlike sentience in her expression. "You're the priestess, Cybelle, aren't you?" I was suddenly acutely aware of my own lack of paramedical training: "Are you hungry?" I asked.

She shook her head weakly. "Not now." She swallowed. Yes, *definite* signs of lucidity. Color was returning to her skin, which was slowly flushing toward a healthy blue. "Hot'n'cold. It's a, a fever." Her eyes rolled for a moment, then I realized she was scanning her surroundings. "This suit. Heat exchanger. I'm too *hot*."

Hot. That was what Dennett had been talking about—heating her up, cranking her metabolism up into overdrive and force-feeding her newly integrating organs. "How do I turn the temperature down?" I asked her, pointing at the control panel.

"Let me—" She tried to sit up, then to raise her arms. For the first time, she saw that her sleeves were locked into one another at the wrist rings. "Was I violent?"

"You tried to eat the deacon."

"I'm sure the traitorous little shit deserved it . . ."

I made a snap decision. "Let's see if we can get you out of that thing."

It was, I discovered, not difficult to unfasten space-suit glove rings from the outside. As soon as I had unlocked them, Cybelle pulled her hands apart. Then she began to fumble ineffectually with the seat webbing. "Something's wrong."

"What do you remember?" I asked.

"Not enough. Unfasten me!"

"There was some sort of accident." I watched her a moment longer as she batted at quick-release buckles with numb hands. "You were very badly injured. Dennett put you in here to regenerate, supplied a huge transfusion of free-market 'cytes from somewhere . . ."

Cybelle swallowed. "My hands don't work properly."

"They're newly regrown." I began to loosen the straps holding her to the couch. "You probably don't have full reflex control yet."

Something metallic banged against the exterior hatch. I turned to the porthole and froze. A huge, dark eye pressed up close to the glass, occluding the view. It stared at me for a moment, then it blinked.

"What's happening?" Cybelle demanded. She wasn't in a position from which she could see out.

"Space pirates, I think." The locking wheel in the center of the hatch began to turn. "They want in."

The hatch swung open before I could force the ancient quick-release buckle on Cybelle's harness. A toothy muzzle covered in dark bristles poked inside, sniffing the filthy air suspiciously. "You! Be gettin' yourselves out here now!" A whirring knife, screws humming at the air, pointed its deadly blade at us from behind the hijacker's webbed left ear. "We's taken this vehicle! Resistance be futile!"

The pirates had boarded the chapel well ahead of their declared schedule.

Dennett's mistake was to assume he had plenty of time because he was receiving their transmissions from a slowly accelerating vehicle dead astern of the chapel. Not being a soldier, he'd failed to account for the short-legged high-acceleration boarding craft lying dead ahead in our line of flight. Evidently it had been sent there as soon as the chapel's flight course became apparent upon its departure from Taj Beacon; at the time, I did not know how the pirates evaded the deacon's radar, but when all is said and done, churches are not renowned for their military-grade sensor suites. Regardless of how they did it, there was no warning: One minute Dennett was worrying about the large vehicle that was slowly overhauling us from astern, and the next minute the distinctive exhaust plume of a nuclear-thermal rocket was melting the lead flashing on the steeple. While I was force-feeding Lady Cybelle so that she wouldn't turn

her appetite on me, Dennett was trying to evade the incoming boarding craft. To give him his due, he made a decent attempt to dodge the pirates: But the chapel was not built for the wild gyrations and evasive maneuvers required to resist a forced docking. Eventually, our assailants tired of the game, at which point they shot away the chapel's high-gain antenna and issued a harsh ultimatum—be boarded, or be blown apart.

“Get here! Not there, here!” The pirates—four of them, all armed—hovered above the *Soyuz* in the crypt, intimidating us with beats of their leathery wings. Escape was not an option: With their chiropteroid low-gee adaptations, they'd have no trouble running me down if I tried to flee. Moreover, I had to carry Cybelle, for she could barely control her arms and legs. Their leader shrieked, his (or her: I could not tell) voice a high-pitched rasp: “Respect! Get down, Churchling! Get down there, not here!”

“I'm getting, I'm getting!” I tried to move to the indicated spot without accidentally kicking myself halfway to the ceiling. “What do you want?”

“This way! Not that way!” The seniormost pirate gestured, making short stabbing indications with his (or her) power blade. “To the storage room, third door along! You wait there! You try escape, we cut neck.” (Punctuation: an unmistakable sawing gesture. Hovering behind his shoulder, one of the quadrotor blades echoed his motion.)

I hauled Cybelle in the direction indicated: neck-cutting did not appeal. In what appeared to be an outbreak of playful spirit, the pirates had decorated the storage-room hatch with a chain of Gould's skulls: they buzzed and clattered their jaws angrily as one of our hijackers chittered and yanked at the wheel of the field-expedient dungeon. I slid Cybelle through the opening, then (with a glance at the pirate leader, who bared his or her fangs at me) followed her inside.

“Your Grace—” It was the deacon. He recoiled as he saw me, a very strange expression on his face. “They captured you *both*?”

"You didn't leave me any opportunity to escape," I said, as Cybelle simultaneously announced, "I demand to know what is going on! Why aren't we at Taj Beacon yet?"

"Gruffle," mumbled Father Gould. He was hanging upside down from an air-conditioning duct, his habit wrapped around his torso, as if imitating our captors' leathery wings. As situationally unaware as ever, he wore an expression of rapt concentration: His eyes were screwed tightly shut. "Grumming bat crypt belfry."

"What are they going to do to us?" I asked. I noted the absence of certain parties—the Gravid Mother and Cook in particular.

"I don't know." Dennett twitched, then swiveled his gaze toward Cybelle. "Do you remember the accident?"

"There was an accident?" Cybelle might have regained the power of speech and relinquished her insensate appetite for flesh, but she was still coming up to speed. "No, I don't remember any accident. When do we arrive at Taj? Who are these people?"

"We've been hijacked." Dennett glanced sidelong at Father Gould, then back at Lady Cybelle. "I should warn you that they've broken his remote network and are most certainly monitoring it—including his eyes and ears. He's trying to subvocalize and not look at any of us, but you should assume that anything you say will be overheard. As I was about to say . . . the accident was a total disaster. We were forced to put in at Taj Beacon, where Sister Ang and the three engineering officers deserted. I had to petition the vicar-in-residence for a line of credit to buy new techné for your regrowth, and six hundred kilos of plutonium for the second reactor—it wasn't cheap. Shorthanded and damaged, I also advertised for additional crew: That's where Ms. Alizond comes in." Another strange look. "And Willard, the new life-support engineer. Cook. Oh, and there's a stowaway. Looks just like Ms. Alizond, but is less talkative. Seems to want to kill her for some reason, which is why I put Ms. Alizond in the sarcophagus with you."

I startled. "You saw her?" I asked.

"Saw her?" Dennett raised an eyebrow: "She was a much more

diligent cleaner than you, and didn't even ask for pay. Not a very interesting conversationalist, though—a bit too focused on murderous thuggery. But I diverted her away from your cell: You should be grateful," he added, offhandedly. "Don't worry, I'll look after you."

"I should be—" I forced myself to stop.

"I don't understand this." Cybelle raised her arms ineffectually, framing her face. "Who are these hijackers?"

Suddenly, the hatch swung open. "Which of you is Alizond?" barked one of our captors. "Boss want talk you right now! Come, or I cut neck!" As if to emphasize this, one of the quadrotor knives whirred menacingly into our midst, causing the other captives to scatter. "Come! We go now!"

There didn't seem to be any alternative options on offer. So I went.