

Zima Blue

ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

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Here's another story by Alastair Reynolds, whose "Beyond the Aquilla Rift" appears elsewhere in this anthology. In this one, he investigates a mysterious artist for whom no canvas is too big, and whose origins are unknown — perhaps even to himself.

After the first week people started drifting away from the island. The viewing stands around the pool became emptier by the day. The big tourist ships hauled back toward interstellar space. Art fiends, commentators and critics packed their bags in Venice. Their disappointment hung over the lagoon like a miasma.

I was one of the few who stayed on Murjek, returning to the stands each day. I'd watch for hours, squinting against the trembling blue light reflected from the surface of the water. Face down, Zima's pale shape moved so languidly from one end of the pool to the other that it could have been mistaken for a floating corpse. As he swam I wondered how I was going to tell his story, and who was going to buy it. I tried to remember the name of my first newspaper, back on Mars. They wouldn't pay as much as some of the bigger titles, but some part of me liked the idea of going back to the old place. It had been a long time... I queried the AM, wanting it to jog my memory about the name of the paper. There'd been so many since... hundreds, by my reckoning. But nothing came. It took me another yawning moment to remember that I'd dismissed the AM the day before.

"You're on your own, Carrie," I said. "Start getting used to it."

In the pool, the swimming figure ended a length and began to swim back toward me.

Two weeks earlier I'd been sitting in the Piazza San Marco at noon, watching white figurines glide against the white marble of the clock tower. The sky over Venice was jammed with ships parked hull-to-hull. Their bellies were quilted in vast glowing panels, tuned to match the real sky. The view reminded me of the work of a pre-Expansion artist who had specialised in eye-wrenching tricks of perspective and composition: endless waterfalls, interlocking lizards. I formed a mental image and queried the fluttering presence of the AM, but it couldn't retrieve the name.

I finished my coffee and steeled myself for the bill.

I'd come to this white marble version of Venice to witness the unveiling of Zima's final work of art. I'd had an interest in the artist for years, and I'd hoped I might be able to arrange an interview. Unfortunately several thousand other members of the in-crowd had come up with exactly the same idea. Not that it mattered what kind of competition I had anyway; Zima wasn't talking.

The waiter placed a folded piece of card on my table.

All we'd been told was to make our way to Murjek, a waterlogged world most of us had never heard of before. Murjek's only claim to fame was that it hosted the one hundred and seventy-first known duplicate of Venice, and one of only three Venices rendered entirely in white marble. Zima had chosen Murjek to host his final work of art, and to be the place where he would make his retirement from public life.

With a heavy heart I lifted the bill to inspect the damage. Instead of the expected bill there was a small

blue card, printed in fine gold italic lettering. The shade of blue was that precise, powdery, aquamarine that *Zima* had made his own. The card was addressed to me, Carrie Clay, and it said that Zima wanted to talk to me about the unveiling. If I was interested, I should report to the Rialto Bridge in exactly two hours.

If I was interested.

The note stipulated that no recording materials were to be brought, not even a pen and paper. As an afterthought, the card mentioned that the bill had been taken care of. I almost had the nerve to order another coffee and put it on the same tab. Almost, but not quite.

Zima's servant was there when I arrived early at the bridge. Intricate neon mechanisms pulsed behind the flexing glass of the robot's mannequin body. It bowed at the waist and spoke very softly. "Miss Clay? Since you're here, we might as well depart."

The robot escorted me to a flight of stairs that led to the waterside. My AM followed us, fluttering at my shoulder. A conveyor hovered in waiting, floating a metre above the water. The robot helped me into the rear compartment. The AM was about to follow me inside when the robot raised a warning hand.

"You'll have to leave that behind, I'm afraid: no recording materials, remember?"

I looked at the metallic green hummingbird, trying to remember the last time I had been out of its ever-watchful presence.

"Leave it behind?"

"It'll be quite safe here, and you can collect it again when you return after nightfall."

"If I say no?"

"Then I'm afraid there'll be no meeting with Zima."

I sensed that the robot wasn't going to hang around all afternoon waiting for my answer. The thought of being away from the AM made my blood run cold. But I wanted that interview so badly I was prepared to consider anything.

I told the AM to stay here until I returned.

The obedient machine reversed away from me in a flash of metallic green. It was like watching a part of myself drift away. The glass hull wrapped itself around me and I felt a surge of un-nulled acceleration.

Venice tilted below us, then streaked away to the horizon.

I formed a test query, asking the AM to name the planet where I'd celebrated my seven hundredth birthday. Nothing came: I was out of query range, with only my own age-saturated memory to rely on.

I leaned forward. "Are you authorised to tell me what this is about?"

"I'm afraid he didn't tell me," the robot said, making a face appear in the back of his head. "But if at any moment you feel uncomfortable, we can return to Venice."

"I'm fine for now. Who else got the blue card treatment?"

"Only you, to the best of my knowledge."

"And if I'd declined? Were you supposed to ask someone else?"

"No," the robot said. "But let's face it, Miss Clay. You weren't very likely to turn him down."

As we flew on, the conveyor's shock wave gouged a foaming channel in the sea behind it. I thought of a brush drawn through wet paint on marble, exposing the white surface beneath. I took out Zima's invitation and held it against the horizon ahead of us, trying to decide whether the blue was a closer match to the sky or the sea. Against these two possibilities the card seemed to flicker indeterminately.

Zima Blue. It was an exact thing, specified scientifically in terms of angstroms and intensities. If you were an artist, you could have a batch of it mixed up according to that specification. But no one ever used Zima Blue unless they were making a calculated statement about Zima himself.

Zima was already unique by the time he emerged into the public eye. He had undergone radical procedures to enable him to tolerate extreme environments without the burden of a protective suit. Zima had the appearance of a well-built man wearing a tight body stocking, until you were close and you realised that this was actually his skin. Covering his entire form, it was a synthetic material that could be tuned to different colours and textures depending on his mood and surroundings. It could approximate clothing if the social circumstances demanded it. The skin could contain pressure when he wished to experience vacuum, and stiffen to protect him against the crush of a gas giant planet. Despite these refinements the skin conveyed a full range of sensory impressions to his mind. He had no need to breathe, since his entire cardiovascular system had been replaced by closed-cycle life-support mechanisms. He had no need to eat or drink; no need to dispose of bodily waste. Tiny repair machines swarmed through his body, allowing him to tolerate radiation doses that would have killed an ordinary man in minutes.

With his body thus armoured against environmental extremes, Zima was free to seek inspiration where he wanted. He could drift free in space, staring into the face of a star, or wander the searing canyons of a planet where metals ran like lava. His eyes had been replaced by cameras sensitive to a huge swathe of the electromagnetic spectrum, wired into his brain via complex processing modules. A synaesthesia bridge allowed him to hear visual data as a kind of music; to see sounds as a symphony of startling colours. His skin functioned as a kind of antenna, giving him sensitivity to electrical field changes. When that wasn't sufficient, he could tap into the data feeds of any number of accompanying machines.

Given all this, Zima's art couldn't help but be original and attention-grabbing. His landscapes and starfields had a heightened, ecstatic quality about them, awash in luminous, jarring colours and eye-wrenching tricks of perspective. Painted in traditional materials but on a huge scale, they quickly attracted a core of serious buyers. Some found their way into private collections, but Zima murals also started popping up in public spaces all over the Galaxy. Tens of metres across, the murals were nonetheless detailed down to the limits of vision. Most had been painted in one session. Zima had no need for sleep, so he worked uninterrupted until a piece was complete.

The murals were undeniably impressive. From a standpoint of composition and technique they were unquestionably brilliant. But there was also something bleak and chilling about them. They were landscapes without a human presence, save for the implied viewpoint of the artist himself.

Put it this way: they were nice to look at, but I wouldn't have hung one in my home.

Not everyone agreed, obviously, or else Zima wouldn't have sold as many works as he had. But I couldn't help wondering how many people were buying the pictures because of what they knew about the artist, rather than because of any intrinsic merit in the works themselves.

That was how things stood when I first paid attention to Zima. I filed him away as interesting but kitschy: maybe worth a story if something else happened to either him or his art.

Something did, but it took a while for anyone—including me—to notice.

One day—after a longer than usual gestation period—Zima unveiled a mural that had something different about it. It was a picture of a swirling, star-pocked nebula, from the vantage point of an airless rock. Perched on the rim of a crater in the middle distance, blocking off part of the nebula, was a tiny blue square. At first glance it looked as if the canvas had been washed blue and Zima had simply left a small area unpainted. There was no solidity to the square; no detail or suggestion of how it related to the landscape or the backdrop. It cast no shadow and had no tonal influence on the surrounding colours. But the square was deliberate: close examination showed that it had indeed been overpainted over the rocky lip of the crater. It meant something.

The square was just the beginning. Thereafter, every mural that Zima released to the outside world contained a similar geometric shape: a square, triangle, oblong or some similar form embedded somewhere in the composition. It was a long time before anyone noticed that the shade of blue was the same from picture to picture.

It was Zima Blue: the same shade of blue as on the gold-lettered card.

Over the next decade or so, the abstract shapes became more dominant, squeezing out the other elements of each composition. The cosmic vistas ended up as narrow borders, framing blank circles, triangles, rectangles. Where his earlier work had been characterised by exuberant brushwork and thick layers of paint, the blue forms were rendered with mirror-smoothness.

Intimidated by the intrusion of the abstract blue forms, casual buyers turned away from Zima. Before very long Zima unveiled the first of his entirely blue murals. Large enough to cover the side of a thousand-storey building, the mural was considered by many to be as far as Zima could take things.

They couldn't have been more wrong.

I felt the conveyor slowing as we neared a small island, the only feature in any direction.

"You're the first to see this," the robot said. "There's a distortion screen blocking the view from space."

The island was about a kilometre across: low and turtle-shaped, ringed by a narrow collar of pale sand. Near the middle it rose to a shallow plateau, on which vegetation had been cleared in a roughly rectangular area. I made out a small panel of reflective blue set flat against the ground, surrounded by what appeared to be a set of tiered viewing stands.

The conveyor shed altitude and speed, bobbing down until it stopped just outside the area enclosed by the viewing stands. It came to rest next to a low white pebble-dash chalet I hadn't noticed during our approach.

The robot stepped out and helped me from the conveyor.

"Zima will be here in a moment," it said, before returning to the conveyor and vanishing back into the sky.

Suddenly I felt very alone and very vulnerable. A breeze came in from the sea, blowing sand into my eyes. The sun was creeping down toward the horizon and soon it would be getting chilly. Just when I was beginning to feel the itch of panic, a man emerged from the chalet, rubbing his hands briskly. He walked toward me, following a path of paved stones.

"Glad you could make it, Carrie."

It was Zima, of course, and in a flash I felt foolish for doubting that he would show his face.

"Hi," I said lamely.

Zima offered his hand. I shook it, feeling the slightly plastic texture of his artificial skin. Today it was a dull pewter-grey.

"Let's go and sit on the balcony. It's nice to watch the sunset, isn't it?"

"Nice," I agreed.

He turned his back to me and set off in the direction of the chalet. As he walked, his muscles flexed and bulged beneath the pewter flesh. There were scale-like glints in the skin on his back, as if it had been set with a mosaic of reflective chips. He was beautiful like a statue, muscular like a panther. He was a handsome man, even after all his transformations, but I had never heard of him taking a lover, or having any kind of a private life at all. His art was everything.

I followed him, feeling awkward and tongue-tied. Zima led me into the chalet, through an old-fashioned kitchen and an old-fashioned lounge, full of thousand-year-old furniture and ornaments.

"How was the flight?"

"Fine."

He stopped suddenly and turned to face me. "I forgot to check... did the robot insist that you leave behind your *Aide Memoire*?"

"Yes."

"Good. It was you I wanted to talk to, Carrie, not some surrogate recording device."

"Me?"

The pewter mask of his face formed a quizzical expression. "Do you do multisyllables, or are you still working up to that?"

"Er..."

"Relax," he said. "I'm not here to test you, or humiliate you, or anything like that. This isn't a trap, and you're not in any danger. You'll be back in Venice by midnight."

"I'm okay," I managed. "Just a bit starstruck."

"Well, you shouldn't be. I'm hardly the first celebrity you've met, am I?"

"Well, no, but..."

"People find me intimidating," he said. "They get over it eventually, and then wonder what all the fuss was about."

"Why me?"

"Because you kept asking nicely," Zima said.

"Be serious."

"All right. There's a bit more to it than that, although you *did* ask nicely. I've enjoyed much of your work over the years. People have often trusted you to set the record straight: especially near the ends of their

lives."

"You talked about retiring, not dying."

"Either way, it would still be a withdrawal from public life. Your work has always seemed truthful to me, Carrie. I'm not aware of anyone claiming misrepresentation through your writing."

"It happens now and then," I said. "That's why I always make sure there's an AM on hand so no one can dispute what was said."

"That won't matter with my story," Zima said.

I looked at him shrewdly. "There's something else, isn't there? Some other reason you pulled my name out of the hat."

"I'd like to help you," he said.

When most people speak about his Blue Period they mean the era of the truly huge murals. By huge I do mean *huge*. Soon they had become large enough to dwarf buildings and civic spaces; large enough to be visible from orbit. Across the Galaxy twenty-kilometre-high sheets of blue towered over private islands or rose from storm-wracked seas. Expense was never a problem, since Zima had many rival sponsors who competed to host his latest and biggest creation. The panels kept on growing, until they required complex, Sloth-tech machinery to hold them aloft against gravity and weather. They pierced the tops of planetary atmospheres, jutting into space. They glowed with their own soft light. They curved around in arcs and fans, so that the viewer's entire visual field was saturated with blue.

By now Zima was hugely famous, even to people who had no particular interest in art. He was the weird cyborg celebrity who made huge blue structures; the man who never gave interviews or hinted at the private significance of his art.

But that was a hundred years ago. Zima wasn't even remotely done.

Eventually the structures became too unwieldy to be hosted on planets. Blithely Zima moved into interplanetary space, forging vast free-floating sheets of blue ten thousand kilometres across. Now he worked not with brushes and paint, but with fleets of mining robots, tearing apart asteroids to make the raw material for his creations. Now it was entire stellar economies that competed with each other to host Zima's work.

That was about the time that I renewed my interest in Zima. I attended one of his "moonwrappings": the enclosure of an entire celestial body in a lidded blue container, like a hat going into a box. Two months later he stained the entire equatorial belt of a gas giant blue, and I had a ringside seat for that as well. Six months later he altered the surface chemistry of a sun-grazing comet so that it daubed a Zima Blue tail across an entire solar system. But I was no closer to a story. I kept asking for an interview and kept being turned down. All I knew was that there had to be more to Zima's obsession with blue than a mere artistic whim. Without an understanding of that obsession, there was no story: just anecdote.

I didn't do anecdote.

So I waited, and waited. And then—like millions of others—I heard about Zima's final work of art, and made my way to the fake Venice on Murjek. I wasn't expecting an interview, or any new insights. I just had to be there.

We stepped through sliding glass doors out onto the balcony. Two simple white chairs sat either side of a white table. The table was set with drinks and a bowl of fruit. Beyond the unfenced balcony, arid land

sloped steeply away, offering an uninterrupted view of the sea. The water was calm and inviting, with the lowering sun reflected like a silver coin.

Zima indicated that I should take one of the seats. His hand dithered over two bottles of wine.

"Red or white, Carrie?"

I opened my mouth as if to answer him, but nothing came. Normally, in that instant between the question and the response, the AM would have silently directed my choice to one of the two options. Not having the AM's prompt felt like a mental stall in my thoughts.

"Red, I think," Zima said. "Unless you have strong objections."

"It's not that I can't decide these things for myself," I said.

Zima poured me a glass of red, then held it up to the sky to inspect its clarity. "Of course not," he said.

"It's just that this is a little strange for me."

"It shouldn't be strange," he said. "This is the way you've lived your life for hundreds of years."

"The natural way, you mean?"

Zima poured himself a glass of the red wine, but instead of drinking it he merely sniffed the bouquet.

"Yes."

"But there isn't anything natural about being alive a thousand years after I was born," I said. "My organic memory reached saturation point about seven hundred years ago. My head's like a house with too much furniture. Move something in, you have to move something out."

"Let's go back to the wine for a moment," Zima said. "Normally, you'd have relied on the advice of the AM, wouldn't you?"

I shrugged. "Yes."

"Would the AM always suggest one of the two possibilities? Always red wine, or always white wine, for instance?"

"It's not that simplistic," I said. "If I had a strong preference for one over the other, then, yes, the AM would always recommend one wine over the other. But I don't. I like red wine sometimes and white wine other times. Sometimes I don't want any kind of wine." I hoped my frustration wasn't obvious. But after the elaborate charade with the blue card, the robot and the conveyor, the last thing I wanted to be discussing with Zima was my own imperfect recall.

"Then it's random?" he asked. "The AM would have been just as likely to say red as white?"

"No, it's not like that either. The AM's been following me around for hundreds of years. It's seen me drink wine a few hundred thousand times, under a few hundred thousand different circumstances. It knows, with a high degree of reliability, what my best choice of wine would be given any set of parameters."

"And you follow that advice unquestioningly?"

I sipped at the red. "Of course. Wouldn't it be a little childish to go against it just to make a point about free will? After all, I'm more likely to be satisfied with the choice it suggests."

"But unless you ignore that suggestion now and then, won't your whole life become a set of predictable responses?"

"Maybe," I said. "But is that so very bad? If I'm happy, what do I care?"

"I'm not criticising you," Zima said. He smiled and leaned back in his seat, defusing some of the tension caused by his line of questioning. "Not many people have an AM these days, do they?"

"I wouldn't know," I said.

"Less than one percent of the entire Galactic population." Zima sniffed his wine and looked through the glass at the sky. "Almost everyone else out there has accepted the inevitable."

"It takes machines to manage a thousand years of memory. So what?"

"But a different order of machine," Zima said. "Neural implants; fully integrated into the participant's sense of self. Indistinguishable from biological memory. You wouldn't need to query the AM about your choice of wine; you wouldn't need to wait for that confirmatory whisper. You'd just know it."

"Where's the difference? I allow my experiences to be recorded by a machine that accompanies me everywhere I go. The machine misses nothing, and it's so efficient at anticipating my queries that I barely have to ask it anything."

"The machine is vulnerable."

"It's backed up at regular intervals. And it's no more vulnerable than a cluster of implants inside my head. Sorry, but that just isn't a reasonable objection."

"You're right, of course. But there's *a* deeper argument against the AM. It's too perfect. It doesn't know how to distort or forget."

"Isn't that the point?"

"Not exactly. When you recall something—this conversation, perhaps, a hundred years from now—there will be things about it that you misremember. Yet those misremembered details will themselves become part of your memory, gaining solidity and texture with each instance of recall. A thousand years from now, your memory of this conversation might bear little resemblance with reality. Yet you'd swear your recollection was accurate."

"But if the AM had accompanied me, I'd have a flawless record of how things really were."

"You would," Zima said. "But that isn't living memory. It's photography; a mechanical recording process. It freezes out the imagination; leaves no scope for details to be selectively misremembered." He paused long enough to top up my glass. "Imagine that on nearly every occasion when you had cause to sit outside on an afternoon like this you had chosen red wine over white, and generally had no reason to regret that choice. But on one occasion, for one reason or another, you were persuaded to choose white —against the judgement of the AM—and it was wonderful. Everything came together magically: the company, the conversation, the late afternoon ambience, the splendid view, the euphoric rush of being slightly drunk. A perfect afternoon turned into a perfect evening."

"It might not have had anything to do with my choice of wine," I said.

"No," Zima agreed. "And the AM certainly wouldn't attach any significance to that one happy combination of circumstances. A single deviation wouldn't affect its predictive model to any significant degree. It would still say 'red wine' the next time you asked."

I felt an uncomfortable tingle of understanding. "But human memory wouldn't work that way."

"No. It would latch onto that one exception and attach undue significance to it. It would amplify the attractive parts of the memory of that afternoon and suppress the less pleasant parts: the fly that kept buzzing in your face, your anxiety about catching the boat home, and the birthday present you knew you had to buy in the morning. All you'd remember was that golden glow of well-being. The next time, you might well choose white, and the time after. An entire pattern of behaviour would have been altered by one instance of deviation. The AM would never tolerate that. You'd have to go against its advice many, many times before it grudgingly updated its model and started suggesting white rather than red."

"All right," I said, still wishing we could talk about Zima rather than me. "But what practical difference does it make whether the artificial memory is inside my head or outside?"

"All the difference in the world," Zima said. "The memories stored in the AM are fixed for eternity. You can query it as often as you like, but it will never enhance or omit a single detail. But the implants work differently. They're designed to integrate seamlessly with biological memory, to the point where the recipient can't tell the difference. For that very reason they're necessarily plastic, malleable, subject to error and distortion."

"Fallible," I said.

"But without fallibility there is no art. And without art there is no truth."

"Fallibility leads to truth? That's a good one."

"I mean truth in the higher, metaphoric sense. That golden afternoon? That was the truth. Remembering the fly wouldn't have added to it in any material sense. It would have detracted it from it."

"There was no afternoon, there was no fly," I said. Finally, my patience had reached breaking point. "Look, I'm grateful to have been invited here. But I thought there might be a little more to this than a lecture about the way I choose to manage my own memories."

"Actually," Zima said, "there was a point to this after all. And it is about me, but it's also about you." He put down the glass. "Shall we take a little walk? I'd like to show you the swimming pool."

"The sun hasn't gone down yet," I said.

Zima smiled. "There'll always be another one."

He took me on a different route through the house, leaving by a different door than the one we'd come in by. A meandering path climbed gradually between white stone walls, bathed now in gold from the lowering sun. Presently we reached the flat plateau I'd seen on my approach in the conveyor. The things I'd thought were viewing stands were exactly that: terraced structures about thirty metres high, with staircases at the back leading to the different levels. Zima led me into the darkening shadow under the nearest stand, then through a private door that led into the enclosed area. The blue panel I'd seen during the approach turned out to be a modest rectangular swimming pool, drained of water.

Zima led me to the edge.

"A swimming pool," I said. "You weren't kidding. Is this what the stands are all about?"

"This is where it will happen," Zima said. "The unveiling of my final work of art, and my retirement from public life."

The pool wasn't quite finished. In the far corner, a small yellow robot glued ceramic tiles into place. The

part near us was fully tiled, but I couldn't help noticing that the tiles were chipped and cracked in places. The afternoon light made it hard to be sure—we were in deep shadow now—but their colour looked to be very close to Zima Blue.

"After painting entire planets, isn't this a bit of a letdown?" I asked.

"Not for me," Zima said. "For me this is where the quest ends. This is what it was all leading up to."

"A shabby-looking swimming pool?"

"It's not just any old swimming pool," he said.

He walked me around the island, as the sun slipped under the sea and the colours turned ashen.

"The old murals came from the heart," Zima said. "I painted on a huge scale because that was what the subject matter seemed to demand."

"It was good work," I said.

"It was hack work. Huge, loud, demanding, popular, but ultimately soulless. Just because it came from the heart didn't make it good."

I said nothing. That was the way I'd always felt about his work as well: that it was as vast and inhuman as its inspiration, and only Zima's cyborg modifications lent his art any kind of uniqueness. It was like praising a painting because it had been done by someone holding a brush between their teeth.

"My work said nothing about the cosmos that the cosmos wasn't already capable of saying for itself. More importantly, it said nothing about me. So what if I walked in vacuum, or swam in seas of liquid nitrogen? So what if I could see ultraviolet photons, or taste electrical fields? The modifications I inflicted upon myself were gruesome and extreme. But they gave me nothing that a good telepresence drone couldn't offer any artist."

"I think you're being a little harsh on yourself," I said.

"Not at all. I can say this now because I know that I did eventually create something worthwhile. But when it happened it was completely unplanned."

"You mean the blue stuff?"

"The blue stuff," he said, nodding. "It began by accident: a misapplication of colour on a nearly-finished canvas. A smudge of pale, aquamarine blue against near-black. The effect was electric. It was as if I had achieved a short-circuit to some intense, primal memory, a realm of experience where that colour was the most important thing in my world."

"What was that memory?"

"I didn't know. All I knew was the way that colour spoke to me, as if I'd been waiting my whole life to find it, to set it free." He thought for a moment. "There's always been something about blue. A thousand years ago Yves Klein said it was the essence of colour itself: the colour that stood for all other colours. A man once spent his entire life searching for a particular shade of blue that he remembered encountering in childhood. He began to despair of ever finding it, thinking he must have imagined that precise shade, that it could not possibly exist in nature. Then one day he chanced upon it. It was the colour of a beetle in a museum of natural history. He wept for joy."

"What is Zima Blue?" I asked. "Is it the colour of a beetle?"

"No," he said. "It's not a beetle. But I had to know the answer, no matter where it took me. I had to know why that colour meant so much to me, and why it was taking over my art."

"You allowed it to take over," I said.

"I had no choice. As the blue became more intense, more dominant, I felt I was closer to an answer. I felt that if only I could immerse myself in that colour, then I would know everything I desired to know. I would understand myself as an artist."

"And? Did you?"

"I understood myself," Zima said. "But it wasn't what I expected."

"What did you learn?"

Zima was a long time answering me. We walked on slowly, me lagging slightly behind his prowling muscular form. It was getting cooler now and I began to wish I'd had the foresight to bring a coat. I thought of asking Zima if he could lend me one, but I was concerned not to derail his thoughts from wherever they were headed. Keeping my mouth shut had always been the toughest part of the job.

"We talked about the fallibility of memory," he said.

"Yes."

"My own memory was incomplete. Since the implants were installed I remembered everything, but that only accounted for the last three hundred years of my life. I knew myself to be much older, but of my life before the implants I recalled only fragments; shattered pieces that I did not quite know how to reassemble." He slowed and turned back to me, the dulling orange light on the horizon catching the side of his face. "I knew I had to dig back into that past, if I was to ever understand the significance of Zima Blue."

"How far back did you get?"

"It was like archaeology," he said. "I followed the trail of my memories back to the earliest reliable event, which occurred shortly after the installation of the implants. This took me to Kharkov 8, a world in the Garlin Bight, about nineteen thousand light-years from here. All I remembered was the name of a man I had known there, called Cobargo."

Cobargo meant nothing to me, but even without the AM I knew something of the Garlin Bight. It was a region of the Galaxy encompassing six hundred habitable systems, squeezed between three major economic powers. In the Garlin Bight normal interstellar law did not apply. It was fugitive territory.

"Kharkov 8 specialised in a certain kind of product," Zima said. "The entire planet was geared up to provide medical services of a kind unavailable elsewhere. Illicit cybernetic modifications, that kind of thing."

"Is that where..." I left the sentence unfinished.

"That is where I became what I am," Zima said. "Of course, I made further changes to myself after my time on Kharkov 8—improving my tolerance to extreme environments, improving my sensory capabilities—but the essence of what I am was laid down under the knife, in Cobargo's clinic."

"So before you arrived on Kharkov 8 you were a normal man?" I asked.

"This is where it gets difficult," Zima said, picking his way carefully along the trail. "Upon my return I naturally tried to locate Cobargo. With his help, I assumed I would be able to make sense of the memory fragments I carried in my head. But Cobargo was gone; vanished elsewhere into the Bight. The clinic remained, but now his grandson was running it."

"I bet he wasn't keen on talking."

"No; he took some persuading. Thankfully, I had means. A little bribery, a little coercion." He smiled slightly at that. "Eventually he agreed to open the clinic records and examine his grandfather's log of my visit."

We turned a corner. The sea and the sky were now the same inseparable grey, with no trace of blue remaining.

"What happened?"

"The records say that I was never a man," Zima said. He paused a while before continuing, leaving no doubt as to what he had said. "Zima never existed before my arrival in the clinic."

What I wouldn't have done for a recording drone, or—failing that—a plain old notebook and pen. I frowned, as if that might make my memory work just that little bit harder.

"Then who were you?"

"A machine," he said. "A complex robot; an autonomous artificial intelligence. I was already centuries old when I arrived on Kharkov 8, with full legal independence."

"No," I said, shaking my head. "You're a man with machine parts, not a machine."

"The clinic records were very clear. I had arrived as a robot. An androform robot, certainly—but an obvious machine nonetheless. I was dismantled and my core cognitive functions were integrated into a vat-grown biological host body." With one finger he tapped the pewter side of his skull. "There's a lot of organic material in here, and a lot of cybernetic machinery. It's difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends. Even harder to tell which is the master, and which is the slave."

I looked at the figure standing next to me, trying to make the mental leap needed to view him as a machine —albeit a machine with soft, cellular components —rather than a man. I couldn't; not yet.

I stalled. "The clinic could have lied to you."

"I don't think so. They would have been far happier had I not known."

"All right," I said. "Just for the sake of argument..."

"Those were the facts. They were easily verified. I examined the customs records for Kharkov 8 and found that an *autonomos robot entity* had entered the planet's airspace a few months before the medical procedure."

"Not necessarily you."

"No other robot entity had come near the world for decades. It had to be me. More than that, the records also showed the robot's port of origin."

"Which was?"

"A world beyond the Bight. Lintan 3, in the Muara Archipelago."

The AM's absence was like a missing tooth. "I don't know if I know it."

"You probably don't. It's no kind of world you'd ever visit by choice. The scheduled lightbreakers don't go there. My only purpose in visiting the place seemed to me..."

"You went there?"

"Twice. Once before the procedure on Kharkov 8, and again recently, to establish where I'd been before Lintan 3. The evidence trail was beginning to get muddy, to say the least... but I asked the right kinds of questions, poked at the right kinds of database, and finally found out where I'd come from. But that still wasn't the final answer. There were many worlds, and the chain was fainter which each that I visited. But I had persistence on my side."

"And money."

"And money," Zima said, acknowledging my remark with a polite little nod. "That helped incalculably."

"So what did you find, in the end?"

"I followed the trail back to the beginning. On Kharkov 8 I was a quick-thinking machine with human-level intelligence. But I hadn't always been that clever, that complex. I'd been augmented in steps, as time and circumstances allowed."

"By yourself?"

"Eventually, yes. That was when I had autonomy; legal independence. But I had to reach a certain level of intelligence before I was allowed that freedom. Before that, I was a simpler machine... like an heirloom or a pet. I was passed from one owner to the next, between generations. They added things to me. They made me cleverer."

"How did you begin?"

"As a project," he said.

Zima led me back to the swimming pool. Equatorial night had arrived quickly, and the pool was bathed now in artificial light from the many floods arrayed above the viewing stands. Since we had last seen the pool the robot had finished glueing the last of the tiles in place.

"It's ready now," Zima said. "Tomorrow it will be sealed, and the day after it will be flooded with water. I'll cycle the water until it attains the necessary clarity."

"And then?"

"I prepare myself for my performance."

On the way to the swimming pool he had told me as much as he knew about his origin. Zima had begun his existence on Earth, before I was even born. He had been assembled by a hobbyist, a talented young man with an interest in practical robotics. In those days, the man had been one of many groups and individuals groping toward the hard problem of artificial intelligence.

Perception, navigation and autonomous problem-solving were the three things that most interested the young man. He had created many robots, tinkering them together from kits, broken toys and spare parts. Their minds — if they could be dignified with such a term—were cobbled from the innards of junked computers, with their simple programs bulging at the limits of memory and processor speed.

The young man filled his house with these simple machines, designing each for a particular task. One robot was a sticky-limbed spider that climbed around the walls of his house, dusting the frames of pictures. Another lay in wait for flies and cockroaches. It caught and digested them, using the energy from the chemical breakdown of their biomass to drive itself to another place in the house. Another robot busied itself by repainting the walls of the house over and over, so that the colours matched the changing of the seasons.

Another robot lived in his swimming pool.

It toiled endlessly up and down and along the ceramic sides of the pool, scrubbing them clean. The young man could have bought a cheap swimming pool cleaner from a mail-order company, but it amused him to design the robot from scratch, according to his own eccentric design principles. He gave the robot a full-colour vision system and a brain large enough to process the visual data into a model of its surroundings. He allowed the robot to make its own decisions about the best strategy for cleaning the pool. He allowed it to choose when it cleaned and when it surfaced to recharge its batteries via the solar panels grouped on its back. He imbued it with a primitive notion of reward.

The little pool cleaner taught the young man a great deal about the fundamentals of robotics design. Those lessons were incorporated into the other household robots, until one of them—a simple household cleaner—became sufficiently robust and autonomous that the young man began to offer it as a kit, via mail-order. The kit sold well, and a year later the young man offered it as a pre-assembled domestic robot. The robot was a runaway success, and the young man's firm soon became the market leader in domestic robots.

Within ten years, the world swarmed with his bright, eager machines.

He never forgot the little pool cleaner. Time and again he used it as a test-bed for new hardware, new software. By turns it became the cleverest of all his creations, and the only one that he refused to strip down and cannibalise.

When he died, the pool cleaner passed to his daughter. She continued the family tradition, adding cleverness to the little machine. When she died, she passed it to the young man's grandson, who happened to live on Mars.

"This is the original pool," Zima said. "If you hadn't already guessed."

"After all this time?" I asked.

"It's very old. But ceramics endure. The hardest part was finding it in the first place. I had to dig through two metres of topsoil. It was in a place they used to call Silicon Valley."

"These tiles are coloured Zima Blue," I said.

"Zima Blue is the colour of the tiles," he correctly gently. "It just happened to be the shade that the young man used for his swimming pool tiles."

"Then some part of you remembered."

"This was where I began. A crude little machine with barely enough intelligence to steer itself around a swimming pool. But it was my world. It was all I knew; all I needed to know."

"And now?" I asked, already fearing the answer.

"Now I'm going home."

I was there when he did it. By then the stands were full of people who had arrived to watch the performance, and the sky over the island was a mosaic of tight-packed hovering ships. The distortion screen had been turned off, and the viewing platforms on the ships thronged with hundreds of thousands of distant witnesses. They could see the swimming pool by then, its water mirror-flat and gin-clear. They could see Zima standing at the edge, with the solar patches on his back glinting like snake scales. None of the viewers had any idea of what was about to happen, or its significance. They were expecting something—the public unveiling of a work that would presumably trump everything Zima had created before then—but they could only stare in puzzled concern at the pool, wondering how it could possibly measure up to those atmosphere-piercing canvases, or those entire worlds wrapped in shrouds of blue. They kept thinking that the pool had to be a diversion. The real work of art—the piece that would herald his retirement—must be somewhere else, as yet unseen, waiting to be revealed in all its immensity.

That was what they thought.

But I knew the truth. I knew it as I watched Zima stand at the edge of the pool and surrender himself to the blue. He'd told me exactly how it would happen: the slow, methodical shutting down of higher-brain functions. It hardly mattered that it was all irreversible: there wouldn't be enough of him left to regret what he had lost.

But something would remain: a little kernel of being; enough of a mind to recognise its own existence. Enough of a mind to appreciate its surroundings, and to extract some trickle of pleasure and contentment from the execution of a task, no matter how purposeless. He wouldn't ever need to leave the pool. The solar patches would provide him with all the energy he needed. He would never age, never grow ill. Other machines would take care of his island, protecting the pool and its silent slow swimmer from the ravages of weather and time.

Centuries would pass.

Thousands of years, and then millions.

Beyond that, it was anyone's guess. But the one thing I knew was that Zima would never tire of his task. There was no capacity left in his mind for boredom. He had become pure experience. If he experienced any kind of joy in the swimming of the pool, it was the near-mindless euphoria of a pollinating insect. That was enough for him. It had been enough for him in that pool in California, and it was enough for him now, a thousand years later, in the same pool but on another world, around another sun, in a distant part of the same Galaxy.

As for me...

It turned out that I remembered more of our meeting on the island than I had any right to. Make of that what you will, but it seemed I didn't need the mental crutch of my AM quite as much as I'd always imagined. Zima was right: I'd allowed my life to become scripted, laid out like a blueprint. It was always red wine with sunsets, never the white. Aboard the outbound lightbreaker a clinic installed a set of neural memory extensions that should serve me well for the next four or five hundred years. One day I'll need another solution, but I'll cross that particular mnemonic bridge when I get there. My last act, before dismissing the AM, was to transfer its observations into the echoey new spaces of my enlarged memory. The events still don't feel quite like they ever happened to me, but they settle in a little bit better with each act of recall. They change and soften, and the highlights glow a little brighter. I guess they become a little less accurate with each instance of recall, but like Zima said: perhaps that's the point.

I know now why he spoke to me. It wasn't just my way with a biographical story. It was his desire to help someone move on, before he did the same.

I did eventually find a way to write his story, and I sold it back to my old newspaper, the *Martian Chronicle*. It was good to visit the old planet again, especially now that they've moved it into a warmer orbit.

That was a long time ago. But I'm still not done with Zima, odd as it seems.

Every couple of decades, I still hop a lightbreaker to Murjek, descend to the streets of that gleaming white avatar of Venice, take a conveyor to the island and join the handful of other dogged witnesses scattered across the stands. Those that come, like me, must still feel that the artist has something else in store... one last surprise. They've read my article now, most of them, so they know what that slowly swimming figure means... but they still don't come in droves. The stands are always a little echoey and sad, even on a good day. But I've never seen them completely empty, which I suppose is some kind of testament. Some people get it. Most people never will.

But that's art.