

1: Year Zero Man

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As I fasten my crash webbing Sareena looks at me and shakes her head. "What is it?" I ask. She pauses as she pre-checks the heat shield: she looks embarrassed.

"Do you have any last wishes?" she asks, stumbling over her words. "I mean, do you want me to tell anyone if you ..?"

I grin up at her humourlessly. She's little more than a shadow cast by the glare of the floodlights, so I can't see her expression. "What do *you* think?" I ask, hoping for something to distract me from what's about to happen.

She straightens up and checks over the ejection rail another time. It's ancient, a history book nightmare. *Everything* on this station is ancient: the planetary colony abandoned space travel, along with most everything else, when they cut themselves off from contact centuries ago. Cold and dark, the station was mothballed for centuries, until the we beamed in and reactivated it. Now it has new owners, and a very different purpose to the one it was designed for. "Okay," she says calmly. "So if you don't come back, you don't want anyone to cry ..."

"Not for me," I say, jerking a thumb over my shoulder towards the sealed airlock bay doors, amber lights strobing across the danger zone to indicate pressure integrity. "But if I don't come back, you can cry for the natives. Nobody else will."

"Yeah, well. Looks like the heat shield's good for one more trip, at least." She finishes with her handheld scanner and hooks it to her utility belt, then turns and waves at the redlit Launch Control room, high among the skeletal girders above us. "Does your your life support integrity check out?"

"Check." A green helix coils slowly in the bottom left corner of my visual field, spiralling down the status reading on my suit; more head-up displays wind past my other eye in a ruby glare of countdown digits. The oxy pressure on my countercurrent infuser is fine but I have a tense feeling like an itch. I can't breathe with my lungs. Got to make this reentry drop immersed in a bubble of liquid. The deceleration on reentry is going to be ferocious.

The comm circuit comes to life: it's launch control. "Launch window opens in two hundred seconds. You should make your modified orbital perigee in two seven nine seconds at one-niner five kilometres. You'd better clear the bay, Sar."

"Okay." She shrugs. "Outer helmet?"

I nod clumsily and she lowers it into place over my head. I cut in my external sensors and sit tight in the frame of the drop capsule, webbed in by refrigerant feeds. The thick aerated liquid gurgles around my ears then begins to thicken into a gel. The pod's active stealth skin tests itself, flashing chameleon displays at the wall. "All systems go," I tell her, voice distorted by the gunk clogging my throat: "you tie one on for me, okay?" I smile, and she gives me a thumbs-up.

"You're go, Adjani," cuts in launch control; Helmut and Davud are in charge. We've been through this all before: they sound professionally bored.

"Pressure drop in one-forty seconds, re-entry window in one-ninety and counting. Repeat, Go for drop in two minutes."

"Check," Sareena calls over her shoulder, then stops for one last word. "Take care, Oshi," she says. "We'll miss you."

"So will I," I say, feeling like a hollow woman as the wise-crack comes out. She half-reaches out toward me, but doesn't quite make it: she pulls back instead, and jogs towards the access hatch. I track her with the capsule sensors, testing the image filters we yesterday. Seen by the light of radio emissions her skeleton is a hot synthetic pink overlaid with luminous green flesh and a thin blue spiderweb of nanotech implants just beneath the skin. *It could have been her*, I tell myself, trying to imagine myself retreating through that door and sealing it on her; *it didn't have to be me. All right, so I volunteered. So why have second thoughts at this stage? The Boss said it's important, so I suppose it must be. There's a very important job to be done and then I'm going to come back okay, no doubt about it. It's going to be good --*

"One minute, Adjani. Any last words?"

"Yeah," I say. Suddenly my mouth is dry. "This is --"

The lights on the bay wall flash into a blinding red glare and a spume of vapour forms whirlpools around the air vent: the clam-shell door is opening onto space, draining out the frail pool of air.

" Pulling sockets, Adjani. Good . . . "

I don't get to hear the rest. The launch rail kicks me in the small of the back and the head-up display blanks out the starscape in a blaze of tracking matrices. When my eyeballs unsquash I erase the unnecessary read-outs and take a look. The planet is a vast, ego-numbing blueness into which I'm falling. I re-run the mission profile as the orientation thrusters cut in, spinning the drop capsule so that I'm racing backwards into a sea of swirling gas at Mach thirty. The capsule is going to make an unpowered re-entry like a meteor; it's designed to pull fifty gees of deceleration on the way down (far more than any sane pilot would dream of), shedding fiery particles like a stone out of heaven. This is going to happen in about three minutes time.

I'm busy for a few seconds, heart in my mouth as I scan for search radar and missile launches, but no-one's detected me and by the time I can look up the black-surfaced station is invisible against the thin scattering of stars above me. I could almost be alone out here -- but I'm not, quite. Someone is down there: someone dangerous. Otherwise Distant Intervention wouldn't have seen fit to send a team through the system Gatecoder, fifteen light-years from anywhere else; otherwise it wouldn't have rated a visit of any kind, let alone the attention of a Superbright like the Boss. Because if nobody lives here, why the hell is it pumping out so many uploaded minds that it distorts Dreamtime processing throughout the entire sector?

A Year Zero event, that's what. I'm told we've run across this sort of thing before, but rarely, less than once a century in the whole wide spread of human settlement; and that's why I'm here.

That's why everyone's afraid I'm not coming back ...

From the second when the pod first drops below orbital velocity to the moment it penetrates the stratopause and deploys wings, there's not a lot for me to do. That's only about two minutes, but it feels like forever: I'm suspended in a tank of high pressure liquid, feeling my bones grate under the huge stresses of deceleration.

I run my test routines, muscles tensing, relaxing, counting down the milliseconds to landing: the green helix spins in my left eye, pacing out the moments. While my body is in spasm I call up the wisdom download they gave me, a huge database of predigested memories sitting in the implants that thread my brain. It's full of details about the planets population, and I go over them -- got to check my knowledge, even though I already know it a thousand times over -- as the first wisps of atmosphere tear at the rim of my heat shield. When I begin to feel heavy I switch off my inner ears and follow the g-forces on a display; New Salazar makes for daunting reading.

New Salazar:

Primary
G1 Dwarf

Distance
1.24 A.U.
Second planet of seven
none of rest habitable

Moons
None

Diameter
13,000 K.M.

Land area
68% of total surface

Colonised
Year 2427
Present **t** minus 709 years

Last update
t minus 231 years

Population
1,390,000,000 (last update)
Growth 1.2 % pa

Nations
214

Languages
4 (316 dialects)

Technology
Low => Moderate

Industrialization
(inferred; currently Moderate)

Ethnicity
Unrecorded

... It goes on from there. *Two hundred* nations? Double the land area of Terra? A population measured in billions? I could be hunting a needle in a haystack, except that Year Zero Man is hardly inconspicuous.

The rim of the heat shield glows a pleasant cherry red as the g's stack up then began to tail off again; first the sky turns ruddy orange, then the shell of the pod shrieks in protest when it drops through the highest reaches of the stratosphere. The plasma conic burns out. The plan was to head for the land mass with the highest rate of change of population density we could derive from Dreamtime transient loading ...

BANG!

I look up. The first aerobrake has deployed, detonating high overhead: I switch my peripheral nervous system back on and experience a shivery high of visceral fear. The sky is swinging back and forth above me like a pendulum as the machmeter drops towards One, and then I'm falling subsonic, altitude two thousand metres and the counter timing down to impact. There's a gurgle and my ears ring as the suspension gel liquifies and drains away.

-- *Three, two, one.* Suddenly a giant hand grabs me around the shoulders and buttocks. I'm flying high on a gossamer kite, wings outstretched above me. I look down and there's nothing under the capsule but a vast expanse of green, slashed in half by the ochre gash of a dirt trail. My stomach does a backflip as I reach out and grab the side-arm controller. Two heartbeats and the ground disappears behind a wisp of low cloud, but I've got no time to waste daydreaming: I'm gliding down to an alien forest and I've got just three minutes flying time left. The capsule handles like a brick; it's carrying enough fuel to make orbit.

Right, I think. Where do I land?

I'm down to one thousand metres so I risk a quick flash on radar. There are no metal structures out there so I decide the road's as safe as anywhere -- this is rainforest country, my briefing whispers in my head, and I don't want the wingsail to get wrapped up in the trees. (A brief vision flashes before my eyes; a skeleton in a stealth capsule gently sways in the breeze beneath a canopy of tree bearing strange fruit, while Year Zero Man continues to play his deadly game and the distortions in the Dreamtime get worse.) Year Zero Man is a murderous bastard: killing so many people that - the activity surge in the Dreamtime was measurable at a range of fifteen light years --

The dusty road is coming up beneath me as I trigger the capsule motor (for just a tenth of a second -- I don't want to set fire to the forest) and dump the wingsail. It drifts gracefully away and the capsule drifts gently down between smoke-fumed tree trunks. I can see burning vegetation as there's a jarring thump from below. The rocket shuts off. *Quick!*

Move! The canopy retracts and the thermal tiles are still hot beneath my boots as I jump down and turn -- to see a large deadfall which, if I look at it carefully, might almost be the silhouette of a parked orbiter capsule.

I lumber through the undergrowth, out onto the road, trot along to the wingsail (which has come down right in the most visible damn spot in the forest). The fabric billows and it's obviously entangled in the undergrowth, but that's no problem. I duck down behind it, pull out a ring pull, and stand back. The sail begins to dissolve. I look round again, see a confused tangle of undergrowth and anonymous tree-trunks. It's going to be easy to lose the capsule here, so I gash the tree-trunk with an armoured finger and retreat about ten metres back from the road. Then I check the time. It's been eleven minutes since I left the station. That's too slow; if this was a network-ready world they'd have been all over me ten minutes ago. What's up with these people? How primitive are they?

As I wait for the soldiers to arrive, I strip off my suit and bury it. It takes a minute or two for the suit's sensitive control systems to disentangle themselves from my spinal cord and viscera, then the bolts begin to slide back into their sockets and the segments of armour begin to slough off like the skin of a ceramic snake. The jungle air is a rich compost smell overlaid with the acrid tang of the dissolving wingsail. Now I look at them, the plants are really strange. All their branches come in threes, and the leaves are more blue than green: something chitters in the undergrowth nearby and the insects rasp like a chorus of malfunctioning drones. I shrug out of my dismembered suit, stand bare-ass naked but for my built-in extras, and look around. There's no-one watching, so I disentangle my knapsack from the supply locker in the back of the life support unit. I open it and drag out a grey overall, rough-woven sandals, and a small moneybelt that bulges. I put them on, wearing the belt inside the suit. I don't know if I look like a native, but frankly I don't really care. What I care about is not looking like trouble, and the armour is more of a liability than anything else; its purpose is unmistakable.

It's been nearly two hundred and fifty years since anyone physically visited this world. Since then it's been out of touch except for the basic Dreamtime function, a one-way stream of emigré minds. People dying and being uploaded into the wider continuum supported by our insterstellar digital afterlife. The same people being shunted out across the interstellar gatecoder links, funnelled into whatever corner of the growing Dreamtime has room for the additional load, because they don't know how to work the system. Yes, this planet's on the net, but nobody here knows how to use it. There are more things to the Dreamtime net than interstellar travel and continued consciousness after death: but it takes a certain degree of knowledge to make use of them.

Burying the armour is hard work without power assistance, so I just dig a shallow trench and pull some loose undergrowth over it. Then I stare at the spot, and think hard; a sapphire triangle appears in my left eye as my inertial tracker locks on. Something grabs at my attention for a moment: a flashback to a childhood of darkness. I shiver, breathe

deeply and look round again. The colours -- that's what I can never get over. (The colours: try explaining them to a blind woman.)

... Or to a corpse. I hunker down and switch to infrared, and boost my ears so that the dull rumble of the engine coming up the road is overlaid with faint sounds of conversation from the driver's cab. It's a truck, I decide, and it's going to arrive here in less than half a minute. It looks like my wait is over. I check my chronograph again. It's been all of half an hour since I left the station.

The truck rumbles into view, spurting dusty blue fumes into the humid air. It's quite bulky, and looks very inefficient -- a huge engine cowling looms over great disc-wheels, a smokestack twice as high again protruding above it. It's dragging a wagon train on wheels, six creaking wooden trailers with sealed sides and roofs with small ventilation ducts on top. The whole thing is travelling not much faster than a brisk marching pace. Little nut-brown men and women with black hair cling to the sides; they're naked but for loin-cloths and all of them are carrying guns. As it trundles past my hiding-place, I see into the cab; a sweaty figure is shovelling something black into a furnace, and another man stands guard with rifle raised. It might be a trading caravan, but knowing what the Boss told me about Year Zero syndrome I doubt this. The squealing of axles and rattling of chains and pistons drowns out any noise from inside the sealed wagons.

It's so big that it takes a minute to pass my hiding place, and in that time I count eight guards. The only efficient-looking things in the whole convoy are their guns; black, polished, functional. The soldiers have that thousand yard stare, peering into the jungle with fingers loosely wrapped around the triggers of their weapons. I've seen that casual, sprawled-out pose among troops before, lying prone on their trailers or clinging to handholds with the gun half-slung in the crook of an arm. Don't be fooled: they're not laid-back. They can tear you up faster than the eye can see.

I wait until the last wagon has rumbled by, then I scramble on hands and knees to the edge of the road and peer after it. They missed the wingsail -- not surprising, even I can barely see its corroded wreckage and I know where to look -- and the tail guards aren't looking particularly closely at the side of the road. They seem to be looking at the sky: I squeeze my eyes shut and pay attention to the microwave sidebands. The webs of phased-array receiver cells implanted at the back of my eyes go to work. The world goes a dim fuzzy orange, and I can see through trees: the sky is a sodium-lit hell paraded by aurorae. But there's no sweep radar! I remember the guns. The projectiles they shoot are unguided, judging by the lack of sights. Do these people even *have* radar?

I hear a buzzing from the sky as I wait for the convoy to pass out of view. I itch in the damp heat, and the insects are trying to bite my face. This planet's been terraformed too well for my liking. I swat them away, watching the trail of reddish dust and blue smoke

diminishing into the distance as I listen: *what now?*

The buzzing gets louder. I peep for radar again but nobody's scanning, so I raise my head for an eyeball search; I see a dragonfly through the tangled branches, a dragonfly the size of the engine at the head of the road train. *Shit!* I hug the nearest tree trunk. One look tells all. The plane is primitive -- rotary airscrews and guy lines to hold the wings taut. Not so far advanced over the coal-burning crew up ahead. Speaking of whom --

Well, yes. I hear the crackle of small arms fire from the convoy. They're shooting at the dragonflyer, assault rifles against piston power. Quaint but deadly. That explains the look-outs. I squat, pull up the hood of my jumpsuit, then roll it right down across my forehead. I fasten it tight and adjust the eye-patches so I can see, then I pull on my gloves. Thunder rumbles off the baking road surface ahead. There's a switch in my right palm, and when I trigger it my hand shimmers and slowly dissolves into cyanic chaos against the vegetation. Wrapped head to foot in this suit I'm a chameleon: it's not a cloak of invisibility, exactly, but the next best thing. I step onto the road and jog towards the column of smoke. Which is no longer blue and ochre and dry, but black and oily and hot.

By the time I get close enough to see the wreckage the dragonflyer is long gone, vanished into the hazy skies like a lethal mirage. The smoke is dense, billowing in clouds from flames that lick eagerly at the engine and front carriage. The road train has jack-knifed into the trees that line the edge of the road. Two of the rear trailers are overturned. A thin keening noise rises from them, grating on my nerves; the sound of many voices crying out in fear. I know what's in them now, and why the pilot of the dragonflyer would strafe her own people on their transport to oblivion.

About a hundred metres from the wreckage I pass the first corpse. She's lying in a pool of her own blood, thrown there by the force of the blast. The flyer only carried small bombs: anything bigger would have annihilated the entire convoy. The fire is spreading fast so I don't bother looking too closely at the body -- I've got more important things to do.

Someone's moving up ahead. I trot forward, passing a puddle of burning oil here and a mass of crumpled metal there. One of the trailers has burst open, spilling human flesh like a twist of corruption across the pristine chaos of the jungle. Some of the flesh is moving. I jog past them: a mass of men and women, all naked and bloody, shaven scalps weirdly pale above their tanned bodies. Those who can crawl, crawl; those who can stand, stand. Their hands are upraised, and some of them appear to be looking up, searching for the signs of deliverance: but that's wrong, as I see when I get closer. My stomach gives an odd lurch, something I thought I'd gotten over long ago; The Year Zero Men responsible for this atrocity are nothing if not efficient.

All of them have recently had their eyes gouged out.

The bodies of the dead guards lie strewn around the sides of the road. Some of them lie like broken puppets, their limbs bent at odd angles, while others look perfectly healthy. A few have skin the consistency of a pulpy, rotten fruit, and tongues that bulge and glisten gruesomely. Hydrostatic shock kills in a myriad of ways, all of them final but some of them uglier than others. Listening in on the high frequency cellcom bands I can hear a raucous twittering, neural mapping data being uploaded into the invisible, omnipresent Dreamtime. At a conservative estimate, the convoy consisted of twelve guards ferrying five hundred prisoners; less than fifty will survive the wreck, and all will die before they reach civilisation. Which is a small mercy, I suppose, because those who reach what passes for civilisation on this planet will only take longer to die.

I spot what I'm looking for and give the escaping prisoners a wide berth as I sprint towards the head of the train. One of the guards there has been thrown clear. On infrared I can see the pulse in her throat, the warm breath rising unevenly from her mouth. If I can get to her before the prisoners stumble this far I may have a chance to save her.

First aid crowds out the questions that clamour in the shadows of my mind as I bend over the guard. She's still breathing raggedly, and appears to be unconscious, but I give her a quick scan with my eyes on active and she doesn't seem to have any broken bones. Possible concussion, then, and maybe some internal bleeding. Well, there's nothing I can do about that. She's almost as tall as I am, skin tanned and tattooed in strange designs -- vortices and death's heads and the more arcane geometries of soft tissue injuries -- and her hair is cropped into a narrow, spiky helmet. Her fatigues are stained and grimy and there's a knife at her belt. I ditch the toothpick and pick her up, somehow roll her across my shoulders, and head for the edge of the road.

Picking my way through trees and bushes carrying a woman who weighs nearly as much as I do is not exactly my idea of fun, but neither is getting a bullet in the back of the neck. It seems to go on forever, but my chronometer keeps me informed with merciless precision; I spend fifteen minutes and eight seconds pushing through a seething wall of turquoise-streaked khaki vegetation. Frond-like leaves brush my sweat-slick face, and thorny branches whip around after me or catch on my chameleon suit. There are strange rustlings in the undergrowth and all the while a chorus of beetles and arthropods covers the possible sound of pursuit.

I pitch her down at the foot of a forest giant and stop to breathe. Black spots swim before my eyes; I've pushed half a kilometre into this wilderness just to get away from that ochre killing-ground. The raw, eyeless sockets of the victims seem to stare at me through the jungle, accusing me of ... *shit*, I think, *why couldn't someone else have pulled this end of the stick? Mannanash, or Davud ... anyone? Anyone but me!* Maybe it was the Boss's decision. I've never trusted his sense of humour; it's as unhuman as He is. This is just the sort of assignment that would strike him as amusing.

I blink and tell my eyes to run their power-on self-test. They flash through it in two seconds, sequences of light shimmering on the inside of my eyelids to tell me that all's well and I can see as easily as anyone else. Twenty-two years I've had the ability to see; twenty-two years out of my thirty-four subjective. Distant Intervention gave me my eyes back when they recruited me. I open them and look about, then down at the body that's muttering incoherent gibberish. There's work to be done, I see; work to justify my vision. And yes ... it's going to be grim.

I slip my hand through my left pocket and unzip the inside lining, then open my belt pouch. There are a number of small items inside; I select the ring and slide it onto my index finger, then remove a couple of tiny cylinders. Then I seal the pouch and pocket, roll my hood back, and switch my suit to a dust-grey colour that is anything but invisible against the lunatic glare of the vegetation.

First cylinder. I peel back the tag and press it against the side of her neck; she sighs slightly and relaxes. "Tell me your name," I say.

"Ash fnargle ... " she swallows and twitches slightly. My mind goes a blank as *something* rams my tongue into gear, and my mouth makes strange noises. The culture of nanobots in the injector are making their way to her brain, linking up with and reprogramming the monitors that cluster thickly throughout her cerebral cortex. Soon they'll have her language centres downloading direct into my own head, ready for me to make use of their neural mappings. She makes some more inarticulate gargling sounds and coughs; my mouth writhes through glottal stops and half-swallowed vowels as my hijacked larynx shadows her vocalisation. The nanosensors that thread her brain, constantly transmitting her sensory encoded personality to the afterlife receivers, are amenable to some low level reprogramming; and she's undefended. Like everyone else on this world, she doesn't even know she's got them. (How much else have they lost? Or remembered?) For a minute longer she spouts gibberish; then, suddenly, everything seems to shift and clear, and it all makes perfect sense.

" ... Seventh special action team. Blasted Hv'ranth flyer picked us up on the run back home and ... here I am. Here you are too, I guess. Where's here? Who're you?"

"Never mind where we are," I say smoothly, "who are you? Tell me about yourself ..."

There are standard methods for lifting material out of brains. Everyone, everywhere in human space, is riddled with nanotech Dreamtime encoders. They're in the air, in the soil, in their cells and reproducing like bacteria. They constantly monitor cerebral activity, transmitting updates of their host personality to the encoders, that upload minds into the Dreamtime when their bodies cease to support them. It even makes a neat debriefing tool, if you have the equipment to interrogate the brain encoders directly. (Only Distant

Intervention, that I know of, is allowed to play with this kind of kit.)

I make fairly good time; it takes me about fifteen minutes to establish that she is second-sergeant Mavreen Tor'Jani -- or Tor'Jani Mavreen if you put the family name first as these people seem to -- and she's attached to one of the Year Zero meat convoys. A piece of luck: the target is on this continent. Tor'Jani's married -- polyandrous, three husbands -- no children -- just joined this unit so doesn't have any close friends here -- absolutely perfect. Year Zero Man has been strutting his bloody stuff for eight years and has conquered half the planet; the next continent over put up a spirited resistance and is now a steaming charnel house, while his own people have been slightly more lucky so far. Especially those who collaborate in the process, like this one. *Special Action Teams* ... murderers in bulk.

The more I hear the angrier I get. Year Zero Man is a woman this time; a charismatic leader called Marat Hree, some kind of jumped-up politician who appeared from nowhere and who is now running the standard course. A nation called the Kingdom of Alpagia was her springboard to empire. I don't get any more from Mavreen about the Compassionate Mother and Teacher, who is none of those, but then I don't really need to; she was on escort duty for one of the consignments to a local slaughterhouse and I might as well tag along for the ride. After a while I stop her in mid-spiel and ask her who I am. She looks up at me and tenses, and her eyes go wide just before I break her neck. Then I open my make-up kit and begin to reconstruct my face.

Second sergeant Tor'Jani Mavreen -- or a good likeness thereof -- stumbles out of the jungle half an hour later, a good hour after the attack on the train. She's dazed, and has a gigantic lump above her left eye; but for all that she's in better shape than the convoy. (She may even be a little taller, a trifle heavier than before; but there's a limit to what even nanotech restructuring can achieve in the way of instant plastic surgery.)

The convoy is an utter shambles. Four carriages are consumed by fire, along with the engine and seven of the guards: the cacophony from the surviving cargo is deafening, the drowning squeal of a sackful of kittens amplified a thousandfold. Mavreen grabs foreman Kaidmaan by the shoulder and demands to know what's going on, who's in charge; Kaidmaan shrugs numbly and looks at her. "You are," he says vaguely: "everyone else is dead. Brazzia radio'd for help and they said to wait here."

"Oh great," snarls Mavreen, surveying the wreckage of which she is now -- by default -- commander. "Who else is fighting fit, then?"

"What do you mean?" asks Kaidmaan. "There's me, you --" he looks at her bleeding forehead dubiously "-- Brazzia, and, uh, Nord's arm is broken. That's *it*. Everyone else is *dead!*"

Mavreen shakes him hard. "Listen," she says, "you go to pieces on me and I'll have your balls for -- " She looks over her shoulder. "What's that?"

He cowers. "They're coming back!"

"Crap." She listens some more. "That's our aerovac, fool. Get the others moving! It's only eighty leagues to Radiant Progress Base Number Six, we can't leave these cattle here. I want those wagons unhitched; get us ready to roll as soon as they can get a new engine down here." Forceman Kaidmaan looks at her strangely, but scrambles to obey.

Mavreen looks at the sky and scowls, murderously angry over the loss of two-thirds of her cargo; the aerovac team is coming and when Highcom gets to know about the mess that's gone down here they're going to want to know *why*, and maybe some negligent eyes are going to get gouged. She gets a warm, weak feeling at the thought. Already she's formulating her account of the convoy. Damned partisans ...

Somewhere behind her face I'm grinning with rage.

Aerovac is a zeppelin, not a dragonflyer. A ribbed brown cylinder with bat-wings and carved wooden gondolas slung below it, it cruises silently above the forest trail. There are human skulls hanging from the command cabin, and seven-pointed iron stars and the other fetishes of an age of enlightenment turned bloody-dark by Year Zero. I muster my scanty forces, fingers curled loosely round the butt of my automatic rifle as Brazzia, the radioman, hunches over his sparking contraption and listens to the squeal of the airwaves. "Tell them we're okay but we need a new engine and driver to recover these jungle monkeys," I tell him. Nord looks at me with wide eyes, favouring her broken arm which Kaidmaan wrapped in cloth torn from the uniforms of our dead colleagues.

"We could use some ground support," I say, staring into the jungle; "if the sodding partisans are coordinating with the Hv'Ranth we could lose the lot of them." The words come easily but the meanings are more difficult; I take it that the Hv'Ranth are one of the remaining free nations of New Salazar, and the partisans are those subject peoples who rise up against the Enlightened New Empire of The Compassionate Mother and Teacher. Meanwhile I mouth the syllables, in search of deeper meaningful associations; the mutilated semiotics of ethnic cleansing make great fig-leaves for hypocritical righteousness.

"I'll tell them," mutters Brazzia; "I'll tell the bastards!" He taps away at his spark key as the green helix spins in the lower-left corner of my visual field, and information tools grind down data in the recesses of my skull. "Get us *out* of here!" he subvocalises, unaware that I can hear a pin drop at half a kilometre, should I choose to do so: "-- fucking bitch is going to get us all *killed* if we sit around here much longer!"

At which point I smile sharkishly and rub the butt of my stolen gun.

The great zeppelin swings low overhead, casting a shadow vaster than the road train. Land anchors drop and grind through the jungle canopy, pulling through trees in knots of shattered wood. I hear the throbbing of the diesel engines that power it, as the airscrews rotate to provide reverse thrust. How ponderous! I look around at the carnage I've inherited and shake my head as the first platoon of aeromarine abseil down the anchor cables from the air dreadnought.

They jog up the road towards us, fierce-faced soldiers in jungle camouflage suits with baroque helmet-masks. My shell-shocked survivors stiffen and assume a semblance of frightened order; I salute the commanding officer wearily as I meet his eyes. They are brown, almost muddy, and look right through me.

"Second-sergeant Tor'Jani Mavreen reporting, sir. We were strafed by a Hv'Ranth flyer which nailed the engine and first four trailers; we saved the rest, but hetman Enkali was killed in the blast, as were the remainder of our unit." I feel slightly uneasy before that penetrating gaze. My built-in wisdom database whispers in my head that this man wears a uniform derived from the elite force of Residents maintained by the Kingdom of Isoterra, two centuries ago. They were palace soldiers who lived among the nobility they guarded. He looks not so much cruel as absent-minded, as if he might accidentally misplace my life with a nod of his head and a flick of his swagger-stick.

"Very good, sergeant. You say you salvaged the surviving cargo? In those two trucks?"

"Yes sir," I say, sweating in the sticky heat of his gaze. My left thumb tightens on the ornate signet ring I wear on that index finger. I hope I don't have to use it. Targeting grids in my right eye track the pulse of his carotid vein.

"Good." He smiles, thin-lipped. "In that case ... " he waves over his sergeant. "You," he says; "wait here for the recovery wagon and ensure that none escape. Then continue to Radiant Progress Number Six Factory and turn them over for processing." He looks at me. "You'll come with me," he says: "I want to verify this. The Hv'Ranth were supposed to be cleared out of this district two weeks ago; Highcom will want to know how they got through."

I nod, and swallow. "Yes sir," I say. "The rest of my unit ..?"

He glances round. "They can travel with the convoy," he says, casually condemning them to three days of jungle rot and the excremental smell of the blinded prisoners on their way to Radiant Progress Number Six Factory. I relax slightly, removing my hand from my

stolen assault rifle. "You will probably face a court-martial."

Suddenly I go very cold. "On what charges?" I ask. "I was not in command of this convoy before the attack; in any case we had no air defence cover. Why me? Sir?"

He looks away. "Why anybody?" he says. "You survived. You should have ensured none of the cargo did. Calling a recovery truck for only two carriages is wasteful."

One of his aeromarine politely but insistently relieves me of my rifle.

Overhead, the zeppelin is turning. Its huge shadow races across the road, flooding us with darkness. The jungle life falls silent where the artificial nightfall passes, as if it understands what the presence of the elite force signifies. I look up at it and see that a gondola is slowly sinking towards us from the belly of the beast. It's the colour of old oak, carved into the strangest shapes; great wailing demons, eyeless skeletons eating the bodies of the living as they writhe in agony. It's almost -- I shudder -- like a death-cult; as if these people have forgotten their guaranteed afterlife. *But it would be*, I remind myself. *If they have ...*

The gondola lands on the road with a thump and squeal of rubber-tyred wheels, and a door at the rear slams down. "All aboard," shouts the aeromarine sergeant; "you too," he says to me, his expression curiously neutral. He waits for me to get in before he follows suit, and I notice his hand staying close by his gun: I step inside and look around.

The gondola is about the size of one of the trailers, but feels more spacious. The walls are thin sheets of curved metal, and the top is open at one end. There are only two small windows -- and they're for the two gunners who crouch behind them. I do what the other soldiers are doing, grab onto a ceiling-suspended rope, and wait.

The ground drops away and we're swinging high above the jungle on the end of a lift cable. I shut my eyes and mouth words silently, hoping they'll think I'm praying: my inertial tracker gives me a beautiful angle on their power sources.

There's a jolt that makes the entire gondola shudder, then a couple of latches slam home and we're swaying beneath the main command deck of the zeppelin. A rope ladder falls through the open end and the soldiers climb it, then it's my turn to stand on the lower deck of what must be a flying bomb, beneath half a million cubic metres of hydrogen, on a floor of polished ebony planks long enough to hold a formal ball.

"You will come this way," says the officer of the Residency. He strides away towards a raised dais at the forward end of the platform without looking back. I follow him.

The dais is a raised platform with a great wooden wheel on it; two aeromarine stand by, ready to turn the distant rudder at a spoken command. Behind them wait a trio of officers, obviously of relatively senior rank. They wear a uniform of black, with black boots and helmets that shadow their eyes. I come to attention and salute as best I can.

"Second-sergeant Tor'Jani Mavreen reporting, sirs. From the convoy."

"Ah. I see." The most high-ranking of the aeronauts, judging from the reaction of the officers to either side of her, is going to make her own mind up and not be hurried by my rescuer. "You were brought back up here by resident-lieutenant Qvartman?" She turns to look at him and he straightens up.

"Yes, captain," he says. "The sergeant failed to destroy the cargo; instead she salvaged some of it that was of dubious quality. I think a court martial --"

"I see." The captain stared at him. "Is it not true that the whole reason for these continued shipments to the Progress bases is because they are of no use if destroyed prematurely?"

Resident-lieutenant Qvartman almost squirmed; I looked at him out of the corner of one eye. "That is true," he admitted, "but the chances of economically recovering --"

"-- Depend entirely upon the recovery team, and on how well we can wipe out the nest of dragons that burned this convoy," interrupts the captain. She smiles, a pleasant, middle-aged matron with a lead-weighted fist in her glove. "Sergeant Tor'Jani is not to blame for enemy attacks, lieutenant," she says, insulting him carefully by omitting the greater part of his title. "You would do better to persecute the enemy than our own loyal soldiers." She looks at me, instead, and I let a flush of pride wash through me, the pride that Mavreen herself would have felt if I hadn't so abruptly kidnapped her identity -- there's more to a disguise than mere facial features, after all. "We will be heading into Radiant Progress Number Six this evening," she says. "We'll drop you there to rendezvous with your unit, sergeant. Now get yourself to the sick bay and get your head looked at."

I turn and walk away hastily, listening to the sounds of Qvartman arguing with the captain, who is obviously in total control of this zeppelin; I think there are precedents for this. Elite forces working independently from the regular militia, and singularly ruthless into the bargain, *always* appear when a Year Zero Man starts to ply his (or her) evil trade. I shiver at the thought of how close I came to landing in one of those trucks myself. And for a reason that I couldn't be held responsible for missing! *Why did it have to be me who landed in this mess?* I wonder as I look for the sick bay with an appropriately dazed expression on my face. But my all-seeing eyes and Superbright-processed wisdom database don't hold an answer to my problem. For that I have to look to the Dreamtime.

The Dreamtime: Distant Intervention: life after death ... where to start explaining? To understand what I was doing on New Salazar you'll have to cut deep, deep into the layers that hold human civilization together across a gulf of light-centuries. So let me start by telling you what I'm talking about.

The Dreamtime is, quite simply, the afterlife. It's the biggest virtual reality of all time, distributed across planet-sized processors in different solar systems. By default, everyone goes there when they die; the nanoscale monitors are ubiquitous, stitched into our brain cells along with the organic components we evolved with. They feed labelled packets of data about the brain and body they're embedded in to cellular transceivers, a network that repairs itself constantly and funnels the information up to the big extraplanetary expansion processors where the Dreamtime runs. At death, your point of presence is transferred to that other universe automatically: your personality, that is the software that defines you, is saved from dissolution. But that's just the beginning of the story. There are other services. Wisdom: direct memories and knowledge piped into our brains, the ultimate in decision support systems. Magic: the ability to bias sensory inputs, to control machines by thought. And reincarnation: expensive, but available to the citizens of the wealthier worlds, the most practical way of evading death and the uncertainty of a Dreamtime existence.

The Dreamtime is the uppermost layer on a cake of information as deep as human history. The same mechanisms support the afterlife and the tools of interstellar commerce, the Gatecoders. Uploaded minds and their associated physical parameters can be transmitted between Gatecoders in different star systems at the speed of light. Once present they are funnelled through the local Dreamtime, reincarnated, and downloaded into cloned bodies: which is how I got here in the first place. At least, that's part of the picture.

Actually I couldn't have got here if the system had not been visited, centuries ago, by a seeder probe; a self-replicating robot factory that built the Expansion Processor and Gatecoder, then moved on to colonize other systems. I couldn't have got here without The Boss, either. The Boss, like all the controlling intelligences of Distant Intervention, is a Superbright: an artificial intelligence vastly more complex than any human mind. Travel through the Dreamtime is hazardous for unaccompanied humans. We are no longer the only minds in this creation, and not all the others are friendly.

Nevertheless, I'm here. The people I work with -- Distant Intervention -- are behind me. We're troubleshooters. We look after the links, even when the local colony world chooses to ignore the vast network they are connected to. It's in everyone's interests to keep travel convenient, to keep the afterlife running, to make sure that the multiplicity of services the Dreamtime provides are available at all times. Sometimes people want to interfere with the system for their own reasons. Sometimes, as with Year Zero Man, the interference is malign beyond belief.

Tell the truth, it's hard to explain some of the jobs we do to keep the Dreamtime running. The system is so big that it defies description. I leave understanding it to Superbright intelligences like The Boss. The Boss can encompass concepts that no human mind can grasp. I may not like what he says, some of the time -- much of the time, these days -- but there's some comfort in knowing that at least someone knows what's going on. After all, without guidance the net would eventually deteriorate into chaos. And events like the ones on New Salazar would be even more common.

I'm sitting on a bunk in the sick bay of the zeppelin. I grit my jaw as the surgeon lays a stinging poultice across my forehead. It's noisome and dark in here; the floor and walls creak and throb with the vibration of the engines, and one of the other occupants is groaning repetitively: "uh, uh, uh ..."

I swallow. The surgeon grips my hand unsympathetically. "Is burning?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, flexing my fingers as he drops some more caustic onto the pad he holds to my forehead.

"Good," he says. "That means you were infected. The burning is a good sensation."

I don't tell him *what* burns. It's not my forehead, scraped in my hurry to return to the burning convoy. It's the strength of my new-found desire, since I saw the prisoners trapped in a hell I was rescued from by the recruiting team so many years ago. I want Year Zero Man; I want her so badly I could cry. I want to kill her.

Some hours later the zeppelin is no longer cruising over jungle. We have come to a cleared zone, where the stumps of trees still smoulder and the logging teams are slaving to clear the site for the purpose of some alien design. I look down over the edge of the deck and see encampments ringed with fences that glint ominously in the evening light, hemmed in by watchtowers. Long, low huts fill the sprawling enclosures. The entire landscape seethes with a corrupt activity, like an anthill that's been set on fire; but the ants are people. I feel numb as I stare down at the zone from one side of the main gondola. It's too vast to grasp: a concentration camp almost thirty kilometres across.

Orders come across the crude loudspeaker system, and the crew move to their landing stations. I skulk in the shadows, trying to decide what to do next. I could take over the identity of a senior officer, I think, but that's a risk factor. Senior officers are expected to *know* things; they have too many contacts. There's insufficient time to do another deep debrief. A member of the Residential guard? I don't know enough about their duties. The shadow of the zeppelin crosses a square between huts where a platoon of bodies dangle from a huge gallows. The dust beneath them is the colour of dried blood. We're flying towards a mooring mast at the centre of a field where other zeppelins lie in various states

of airworthiness. I blink, watching the endless whirling of the green helix in the bottom of my left eye: it's a comforting reminder of sanity and purpose somewhere in the universe.

The airship comes about with a grinding of propellers, and we head straight for the mooring mast at little more than walking pace. It's strange to be moving so slowly after my meteoritic arrival; if I'd known that for the most part they were so backward I wouldn't have bothered with a stealth capsule. As we nose forward, a trumpet sounds a flat note -- and then we're locked to the mast and the ladders are secured for disembarkation.

At the foot of the meshwork tower there's a low building for soldiers to rendezvous and military police to wait. Four guards are waiting to meet me: I walk towards them confidently, trying to mask my growing unease. "Sergeant Tor'Jani?" one of them asks, holding a clipboard.

"That's me," I say.

He looks at me. "We need to confirm that. Would you just look into this for a moment?" he asks, and my guts freeze: but his colleagues are pointing their guns at me as he holds up a smooth plastic box with two eye-pieces sticking out of it. I bend over it and a magnesium flare seems to go off inside, throwing the dark shadows of the false veins in my bionic retinas across my field of vision.

"Grab her," says the policeman, and I barely struggle as four strong arms lock me into a pair of manacles because I realise just how stupid I've been. But where the hell did they get a retinal scanner from?

My guts lurch. I'm in for a rough ride ahead.

They take me to a small, whitewashed room that smells of disinfectant and fear. They search me and find my body-belt. They go through it looking for incriminating objects and they're not disappointed -- a small comms booster and some coins that belong in a museum judging by their reaction. "Smuggling contraband?" asks the short one with the piggy eyes who's been elected to play Bad Cop; "or spying?" His eyes glisten wetly as he back-hands me across the face. My cheek and left shoulder go numb as pain-suppressants cut in, but I can feel the trickle of blood as they pull me off the floor. They take my ring when they strip-search me. Then they tie me to a chair. I feel dizzy and breathless, high on endorphins from my metabolic controller. They don't seem very satisfied.

"Who sent you?" spits piggy-face, glaring at me.

"There must have been some mix-up," I mumble through lips like putty. "The records --"

He hits me again. Good Cop -- who has not yet spoken -- is looking at the comms booster closely.

"What language is this?" he asks idly, and I tense myself. There's *one* way to get what I want, I realise; it's kind of risky, but --

"Standard," I say, in Standard. "I wouldn't open that if I were you."

"What does it mean?" he asks idly; "speak alpagian." Bad Cop gives himself away by staying silent.

"Contains no user-servicable parts," I say. "What are you going to do with me now?"

Bad Cop looks as if he's about to hit me again but holds himself back. "What now?" asks Good Cop; "well, it looks like we were wrong, doesn't it? You're not a spy -- you're a lunatic." He smiles at me then looks at his colleague. "Chuck her in the pen for processing," he says casually.

Bad Cop pauses. "Not yet," he says. "What was that memo?"

Good Cop snorts. "Other worlds my arse," he says; "there's no such thing."

My mouth is wet and salty with blood. "Oh yes there are," I say. Bad Cop hits me again, but with no real force.

"She's mad," remarks Good Cop. "Tell you what, though, let's sort her out before we send her over to HQ. They'd do it on retrieval anyway, so --"

"Okay."

My heart is suddenly in my throat: there's an acrid taste in my mouth as my guts loosen in fear. They pick me up by the chair and carry me through the door, and breathing heavily, drop me down in front of some kind of bulky metal-box contraption and turn their backs. I try to look away but the box glares at me with two huge, violet laser eyes that suddenly grow brighter and brighter. I hear a sickening popping noise through the bones of my skull and --

I'm a child again.

When I was three years old my uncle cut out my eyes. I remember the raw, shrieking pain, the burning fire beneath my eyelids that wouldn't go away: the total red-hot darkness that

dawned that morning and didn't set for ten years.

The reason he did it was to make me a more successful beggar. We were extremely poor, and after my father died he had his sister -- my mother -- to look after, as well as his own family. So he blinded me, and stationed me on the streets of the bazaar.

I was successful at my trade, and even more successful at another; people do not expect a blind beggar child to be a pickpocket. I wasn't a very good pick-pocket, but if they caught me they usually did no worse than slap me hard; my mutilation was a passport to security, at least in public. In private, in the shack that passed for a home for us, it merely made me more vulnerable to his cruelties. Escape was impossible: where was there for me to go? My mother never seemed to care much, and cared even less for me after he beat her and forced her to watch him pay his attentions to me. They were invariably conceived of as mercies, for some reason: everything had to be *good*. He thought of it as a kindness, the way he introduced me to my profession: and that I should be grateful, and that such gratitude should extend to the kind of sexual favours that only a blind person can provide. He kissed my face, licked the scars clean afterwards. I became so terrified of his kindness, of the kindness of men, that I was relieved in a bizarre kind of way, when I finally tried to pick the wrong merchant's pocket and was caught.

The only thing in the pocket was a hand, which gripped my wrist tightly. The only person in the garment was a Distant Intervention agent, who took me away from the bazaar -- and, eventually, the planet. My uncle never saw me again, however often I saw him in my dreams.

My new owners introduced me to many new ways of seeing. First they showed me how to read expressions by touch; then how to listen for the sound of a falling leaf in a forest, to identify volatile organics by scent, to taste the breath of fear. Only when I was proficient at the use of my other senses did they finally grow me a fresh pair of eyes.

I'm blind again. A haze of burning smoke shrouds the world from me; the laser has burned out my retinas and I might as well finish the job by just switching off -- nothing works any more except my Dreamtime feeds. Everything is blood-red dark, laced with the hazy nothingness of a blind spot, the scotoma. I feel a hysterical laugh building up inside. Everything seems to be very loud and I can feel the coarse ropes acutely where they cut off the circulation in my wrists. If I let myself die now, I can continue living a bit longer ... can't I? But I'll have failed, utterly. The Boss does not appreciate failures. These monsters are very good at dealing with prisoners. How can I escape, blinded in a foreign country occupied by hostile soldiers? I carefully turn my head, trying to map the room with my ears. It's hard. It's been a long time since I was blind.

"Clear now," says the voice of the Good Cop; "let's get her on the wagon for Congress,

right?"

"Check," says Bad Cop. Together they lift me and my chair -- dripping wet, because I soiled myself as they blinded me -- and carry me into a confusing domain of strange echoing conversations and rude mechanical noises. I keep my head down and my eyes shut, and sob quietly.

"Shut up," says Bad Cop quietly. "You want we should have given you the normal treatment?" I shut up. Evidently only spies rate the laser: I remember the convoy, crowds of agonised, wounded faces, and shudder. I don't know whether to be pleased or horrified. It's not the damage to my sight that fills me with fear -- I've been here before, and been cured, too. It's what goes with it: a certain loss of control. I spit out a mouthful of blood. When Bad Cop hit me he cut open my cheek. *Just leave me alone with you for an hour with the tables turned, I wish. Just one hour!*

Eventually they leave me alone. There's the rattle of a chain, then they thrust me into a drafty room too small for echoes. It seems to be an outhouse in the middle of the camp. They untie me from the chair and free my hands, although they tether my ankles to the floor. But it's not until the small room begins to sway and creak that I realise I'm in a sealed compartment on a road train; and that I'm bound for Congress House.

After about six hours I discover that I must be a privileged prisoner. The train stops and someone comes in to feed me. They force me to my knees and then a bowl appears in my lap; the smell is delicious because I'm starving, even though it's just some kind of bitter-tasting gruel. Someone else comes in and dumps something that clatters, and they hose me down with cold water and throw something made of rough cloth at me. The door slams shut, and I fumble over what seems to be a towel and a thin pyjama-suit. I guess I must be privileged prisoner to be accorded such luxuries. Halfway through, I kick something over; when I reach out for it, I feel the rough glazed curve of a chamber pot. The guards aren't wilfully cruel; it's just that, as far as they're concerned, I don't exist. When I lost my eyes I lost my humanity. So I carefully clothe myself with many false starts, as my face and body slowly lose any trace of Second-sergeant Tor'Jani Mavreen and revert to my old appearance.

We stop again about a day later, five hundred and eighteen kilometres away if my inertial tracker is still in synch. I look round when the door opens but all I get is a sigh of indrawn-breath. Evidently my transformation is not something they're accustomed to. They shut the door and I hear quite an interesting debate before they open it again to feed me and slop out.

Finally, a day later -- now a thousand kilometres from where I touched down, and I don't flatter myself that they've come all this way just for me -- there's a new sound beneath the

wheels. Instead of the jounce and sway of the endless dirt tracks there's the hollow booming of a true road, and then we're sliding downhill at a positively reckless speed. I smell smoke through the slats of the floor as the train screeches to a halt outside some kind of checkpoint, and boots patrol slowly down the carriages. Bolts slam home and doors open: many feet pass my refuge.

The door opens and admits a draft of musty-smelling air. "Alien spy," says a presence in the doorway; "you will come with us." I cast about, trying to sense where he is by the rustling of the creases in his uniform.

"Where?" I ask. "I can't see."

"Bloody mess," says someone else. "Damned butchers couldn't find their brains with a spoon --"

"-- Probably didn't get the orders," says another voice quietly. "Okay, get her out of there."

Two of them get in and untie me from the floor; then they pick me up lightly and carry me to the edge of the door. When they put me down I freeze, listening for movement. It's eerie, like being a child again. Then two of them take me by the arms and lead me slowly into the complex.

When nobody is taking any notice, I turn my head about. The train has come to a standstill in a vast underground space; I can hear the dank sound of water dripping somewhere distant, the echo of footsteps on slime-encrusted stone or concrete. A cold draft blows down from above, hinting at distant caverns.

My escorts steer me past walls of metal and wood (other vehicles, perhaps) towards a doorway. Suddenly the sounds from behind are cut off, as if we've entered a tunnel. It's cold in here, and it smells of the bitter rock beneath a mountain; the clack of their boots on the smooth stone floor is the only noise. We come to a guard post where they pause, restraining me, while someone rubs a pole-like device that emits a brief humming noise all over my body. Then we're going down a tunnel, past numerous openings from which blow turbulent currents of air. We make so many turns that even with my inertial tracker I'll never get out of here unaided. We come to a door in the wall, and they push me through it and shut it behind me.

I freeze, listening carefully. It smells close. There's a lingering odour of stale urine and despair, a miasma of decay that seems to hang in the frigid underground air so that I expect at any moment to put my foot into a nest of mummified bones. I shuffle forwards and carefully stretch my hands out in front of me; I reach the wall unexpectedly soon. It's

chilly and rough, hewn from stone blocks. I trace the grooves between them with a fingertip. Strange marks are cut into the surface. Perhaps they're graffiti from long-dead prisoners; it doesn't matter to me. I can't see to read them. Even if I had eyes I probably couldn't read them. The script is as alien as my situation.

I map out the boundaries of my prison with a growing sense of bleak despair. The floor and ceiling are as rough as the walls, the only difference being that the flagstones are larger; there is no window, and when I work my way back round to the door I run my hands over it. It takes me a few minutes to realise that the bars curve together in the strange geometry of a human rib cage; I am, indeed, in the belly of a beast.

Presently I sit down and bury my face in my hands. An iron ring digs sharply into my thighs, but I can't be bothered to move. Why should I? I can see no way out; I can see -- nothing. And without sight, in this dungeon, I might as well be dead.

A few hours later the door squeals open. There are two jailers, one of them quite unfit judging by the laboured breathing. They pick me up and lead me into the corridor. I flinch, and they grip my arms tightly as they lead me deeper into the stone tunnels of the catacomb. We must be in a different section now, for the texture of the floor is subtly changed. We walk on mosaics, feet brushing across screaming faces: even the dungeons must be decorative here, in the decaying wreckage of a murdered civilisation. They walk me down a spiral of stone stairs and along more corridors, where I feel the heat of naked flames on my skin.

"Where are we going?" I ask anxiously, but the guards don't say anything. I'm left to decode the rhythm of their breathing, the long silences that stream away in the echoing darkness. It's the silence of men who know there is nothing more to say. I'm an un-person, and I know what comes next. I wish they'd get it over with.

We come to doors that block the passage. They clatter as one of the guards fumbles with a key, then they grate open across rough stones very unlike the tiled mosaic my feet have just been walking on.

"Go forward," says the guard, "just two paces. Mind the step." I move hesitantly, shuffle forward and take a step down until I'm standing on a floor of cold, smooth metal that is strangely seamed; then I hear the door shut behind me. My footsteps echo from a bell-like void, so perfect that even the faint rustle of my pyjama-suit returns to my ears. *Odd* -- I keel down and run my fingers along the narrow groove in the floor, just as a band of molten steel seems to clamp itself down around my forehead.

I scream and collapse, unable even to switch off my pain response; I lie on my back, and it seems to me as I stare sightlessly at the ceiling that I can see a strange, bluish eruption

coming at me out of nowhere. It's roughly lenticular in shape, and I quiver with terror as I realise that it and the pain around my head are connected: it triggers strange effects in my damaged nerves. I stare at it as it seems to expand, my eyes twitching sightlessly even as it floods a shimmering glare into my dead visual centre until it fills the universe. My extremities twitch uncontrollably and my head feels like a ripe fruit beneath an axe -- then, as suddenly as it began, the pain vanishes.

I wish they'd simply hanged me, because this is an order of magnitude worse. Big electromagnets, or something similar embedded in the wall of the chamber, zapped my upload transceivers, deranging the nanotech implants that are needed to upload my identity into the Dreamtime when I die. My basic controls are still responding, but the deep structures -- the important stuff -- is gone. If they kill me now, Distant Intervention won't be able to restore my personality. This is a kind of death I've never expected. I've bitten my cheek again and I roll over. Then I stand up, slowly. I'm not alone.

"Bravo!" calls a loud voice from the other side of the domed room. "An astonishing performance! Such immediacy, such feeling!" A pair of hands claps, shockingly. I carefully turn around, listening for the noise of the other persons breathing.

"Who is it?" I call. There's someone there, but I can't tell how far away they are.

"Who do you think?"

I guess. "Not Marat Hree?" I ask unsteadily. "Come to do the honours in person?"

She laughs again, humourlessly. "Don't honour yourself. You're very tenacious, you know. I've survived local assassins before, but if you're typical of the variety Distant Intervention sends -- " again, I feel a caress of molten steel around my forehead, but it relaxes before I can flinch at the anticipated agony -- "please remember that I have integral defences. I can kill you with a thought."

I nod, too resigned to feel terror. "Why am I still alive?" I ask.

She steps into the room and I listen carefully. There's a swish of fabric across the metal floor; light silk or cotton, perhaps. There's a noise of hair brushing on her collar, the creak of sandals flexing slightly as she walks -- I turn my entire anatomy into an ear, listening to the roaring sounds of silence.

"I want you to carry a message," she says. "That's why you're alive. Need I say any more?" Her voice is warm, intimate, and chillingly detached from reality.

I think, briefly. "No," I say. "Is that thing up there designed to fry nanocircuitry?"

"Yes," she says. "It's one of several I brought with me. I lifted the design from a badly secured system out near Beta Lyrae Internode." She laughs musically and stretches -- I can hear her arms sliding in her sleeves. I can hear *everything*; terror hones my senses to a knife-edge. "Can you guess what I am?"

My mouth goes dry. "Yes," I say. "You're not a native, are you? You found a way to break their quarantine. For your own reasons." I stay where I am, rooted to the spot, as she walks towards the geometric centre of the room, where all the echoes converge.

"More or less," she says. "How could they ever expect to succeed on their own terms, with the threat of the Dreamtime's owners hanging over them? If you understand what this is really about ... working for *them* is not the greatest of your crimes, but it's probably the most pernicious." Her voice sounds as if she ought to be frowning. "I'm not going to kill you, but I would like it if you would accompany me, and talk."

I swallow. She walks closer to me and I catch a faint impression of scent; she uses something rough and heady, something wild that hints at the darkness she walks in. The thing is, everything around her is dark, even at noon; none of her victims can ever see what she does to them because she works under the shadow of blindness. Like a spider lurking in a web at the end of a tunnel. "Your followers flash-burned my eyes," I say. "I can't see where I'm going."

She laughs again and claps her hands. "Very well," she says. "Place your trust in me ..."

I feel my legs begin to move without my willing them; her integral defence system is interfacing with what's left of my peripheral nanotechs and driving my body by remote control. I jitter on the edge of panic for a moment until I realise that I can shut off any peripheral nerve trunk in my body -- I can play a neural shell game with her if I have to. My legs are weak with a fear that I don't let myself acknowledge: the body knows what the mind denies.

A dry hand slips itself over my wrist, and I try not to flinch away. My arm is as sensitive to her touch as to a lover's. Her skin is dehydrated, as if all the blood she's shed has come from her own body, leaving her a creature of ashes and salt. I think she's prematurely aged -- or her intensity is eating her up at least as fast as she is using it. "Come this way," she says, oppressively close to my ear. "I'll tell you what I want you to do when I send you back. I wish those fools in intelligence had picked you up earlier."

"Why?" I ask. "Why should I?"

She sighs. "I would have thought it was obvious. These people never asked to be farmed

by your superbrights! I'm going to free them. This current generation is damned -- the nanotech uploaders are pervasive -- but if I can raise the children, cleansed at birth ..."

"How?" I ask; "I mean, why are you doing this?"

She lets go of my hand. I feel a breeze as the door opens; we're standing in a tunnel, I decide, or a lift shaft. "For love of the people," she says quietly. "The afterlife your sponsors claim to protect is a cruel lie. I come to free them from the cannibal tyranny of those who eat minds. If you don't believe me, go ask your masters. They aren't human, and their agenda is inhuman. Or did you think people were still afraid of death and upload for nothing? Step forward now." I obey, stumbling slightly on the edge, and she's behind me: the door closes and we begin to rise.

We ascend for an eternity, and then the lift stops. I hear the door open, and then another set of doors open; "step forward another three paces," she says.

I do what she wants and almost walk into a railing. I can feel a steady breeze, the warm glow of sunlight on the skin of my face, a cool metal rail beneath my hands. The stones beneath my bare feet are warmed by the invisible sun. "Steady now," she says. "You're looking out across my personal spaceport. There are two shuttles on the field; my resource base is in deep orbit, where it can out-build your weapons systems before you can find it. Your Superbrights masters would never let us live in peace, you see," she says; "it's not in their interests to let human beings learn the truth about the Dreamtime. So I had to either go outside the Dreamtime, beyond all human settlement, or destabilize it locally to disrupt their feeding patterns. The former was impossible, but the latter ... all it takes is a little leverage..."

"That's it!" I say. "You're blinding and killing people in bulk, to overload the local Dreamtime substrate. Is that true? So that eventually their children can live without hope of an afterlife, of a second chance when this life is over? You blind and kill *how many* people a day?"

I can hear birds singing in the distance. I realise that I may never hear them again. I'm probably grinning like a corpse but I don't care -- she must know by now that blind people often smile. It's easier to grin than to frown; the facial muscles contract into a smirk more easily. Even when you're about to die.

"It takes a lot of stress to unbalance a network processor the size of a small moon," she replies calmly; "it shows a remarkable degree of fault tolerance. As for physical assault, the automatic defences are still armed ... as they always have been. So If we want to take it for ourselves, we must overwhelm it by frontal assault, sending uploaded minds out into the simulation space until it overloads and drops into NP-stasis. They do that if you feed

them faster than they can transfer capacity elsewhere, you know. It's happened before, and it's what the Superbrights are most afraid of. A Dreamtime they lose contact with means a human world that will not succumb to their domination again. Only then will we be safe. The superbrights need uploaded minds, you see. Their intelligence needs so much input that they consume human personalities or they go insane from memetic deprivation. Overloading the Dreamtime ... you wouldn't believe how many of them it takes." She falls silent for a moment, and I focus on the sound of her breathing. It's noisy -- perhaps a touch of asthma in this tropical climate? I hear, again, the rustle of her garment as she turns her head towards me.

"But what have the superbrights done to you?" I ask, not quite believing that I can talk. I feel dizzy. Weak, too. She's completely crazy but there's a power in her voice that overwhelms me, driving me mad with something like a lust for blood. "All they do is stabilize the Dreamtime for everybody's benefit."

"If only you'd listen ..." she stops. I hear her swallow. *Deep emotion*; I've hit some kind of sensitive spot. She believes what she's saying, however warped and mad it sounds. If I had nothing worse to fear it would give me pause for thought. What if there's a germ of truth in it? "It's for their own benefit. They eat human minds! Like demons! -- but everything they've taught you contradicts that. They're benefactors, to you. You look after their interests, which superficially look beneficent. But they aren't, not really. If you don't believe me, ask your owner! We know the truth --"

She pauses. The manic urgency leaves her voice. She continues: "I want you to take a message to your controller in Distant Intervention. I don't intend to take action against the rest of the Dreamtime network, but they must recognise that we do not want the Dreamtime here in this system." She pauses for effect. "Either you shut down the local expansion processor, or ... I have lots of weapons left."

"That is the total content of your message?" I ask. I can feel the fresh wind blowing across my face; I think I'm high above the ground, looking out from a balcony in the turret of a castle ... but I can't tell for sure. That's the curse of blindness, the uncertainty. I'm locked into my childhood hell; all I can do to resist is to try to revert to the time when my entire body was an ear, to the time when the noise of sunlight falling on water was as loud as thunder. I feel as if I should be weaker, smaller, than I am. *I have my ears*, I tell myself.

"Yes," she says. "That's what I want from you. This attempt to assassinate me is futile -- why can't the Superbrights just leave us alone? We represent no threat! They don't have to prey on us. They can eat dreams as well as minds." There's anger in her voice, and a sense of churning menace that makes my blood run cold; I don't doubt that if she wanted to she could blot out my consciousness like a gnat. "I am loyal to my species," she insists, almost petulantly. "It's your freedom I'm fighting for! The superbrights -- they treat us like

animals! Without the freedom to suffer and die, what are we?"

"How do you know they eat us?" I ask. "The network is expanding. New worlds are added. Uploads could just be being shunted over the local event horizon, to even up the load on new processor sites. Colonizing space --"

"They're not," she says dogmatically. "That's a lie the Superbrights promote for their own purposes. Do you really think they'd tell you the truth if they knew it would make you question their motives?"

"I don't know," I say diplomatically, biting back the rage building up inside me. "Maybe we need to live on the edge of existence in order to prove to ourselves that we exist; maybe --" I shrug, unable to express what I'm feeling. *They gave me eyes again, and you took them away.* My guts are burning now. I know what I've got to do: I'm tense with anticipation.

"Come, then," she says. "I'll put you on board one of the shuttles. Then you can rendezvous with your station and give them my message. It's not such a terrible thing, is it?"

She guides me back towards the lift, not bothering to warn me that she's taking control of my legs again.

"Your minions took my sight," I remind her.

"They're brainburned fools. Ignorant. Why do you think I'm dealing with you directly?" The lift doors close and we drop a few floors. "You should consider yourself lucky to be alive."

The doors open and she guides me forwards. I walk forever across a causeway of rock delimited by touch; nothing exists outside of that narrow track except the steady breeze and the slap of her sandals on stone. I sense something nearby that blocks the sun, then she stops me with a touch on my shoulder that feels like a bundle of bones bound together in parchment. "We'll go aboard in a minute," she says. "The ship is ready. You have a call sign for rendezvous? An orbital element set?"

"Yes. I came in by drop capsule, but --"

"Good. Just one last thing now, then you can go."

I feel that itching again, at the sides of my head. "What is it?" I demand. "What are you doing?" I strain with every nerve to *feel* her presence, to hear the shifting of her robe in the

wind, to imagine this remarkable woman in such perfect detail that my imagination becomes one with the real. I see her leaning on a cane beside the airlock of a battered shuttle, perhaps a metre away from me; her long, steel-gray hair is braided down her back. Her expression is stony and harsh. I paint the heraldic trappings of genocide in the background; barbed wire fences and watchtowers with searchlights. And then, tense as a live wire, I *listen*.

"I'm going to have to program you," she says. "You've got a strong will and I don't trust you without MilSpec control -- " she pauses, alerted by her defences. "You can still see!" she says.

I feel the band of molten steel clamp down around my forehead, her built-in smart weaponry turning up the pressure on my implants, but I'm ready for it this time. I twist and listen for the faint soughing noise of her heavy braided hair sliding across her collar as she turns her head. "Yes, I can see," I say, excited now, locking onto just where her eyes must be: "I can see!"

I lunge, and feel a moment of warm release as I ram my stiffened fingertips into her eyes and twist in the damp softness.

The band of agony lightens almost as rapidly as it descended -- pain confuses her, blocks access to her built-in arsenal.

She stops screaming and whimpers quietly. "Why?" she asks, voice breaking. "Why can't you understand? Why can't you leave us alone?"

I look round blindly, across the field; I can hear boots racing towards us but they're too far away to open fire yet with me so close to their leader. She treated me with the over-confidence of the one-eyed among the blind. I run my hand along the side of the shuttle until I feel the raised edge of the airlock door. "You want to live without interference," I say, "and maybe you're strong enough to rule this world on your own." I turn back to her, listening to her rasping breath; and now it's simply one blind woman against another. "But there's a problem."

She must be standing around, trying to make her systems regenerate traumatised optic nerves so she can see me; a fatal mistake because she doesn't realise how fast I can move, even blind. "What's that?" she asks, playing for time.

I pinpoint her position and reach out for her tenderly, gathering her to my shoulder; I shiver with release as I twist her neck until it crackles. "These people didn't even *know* there was an afterlife: and you never asked for their opinion," I breathe in her ear. Dropping her, I fumble my way into the airlock and tell the ship to take off; it agrees

readily. The door shuts behind me with a hiss of gaskets, and the drive rumbles into life and vomits me at the stars.

Meanwhile, on the war-shattered planet below me, the clock strikes one.

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