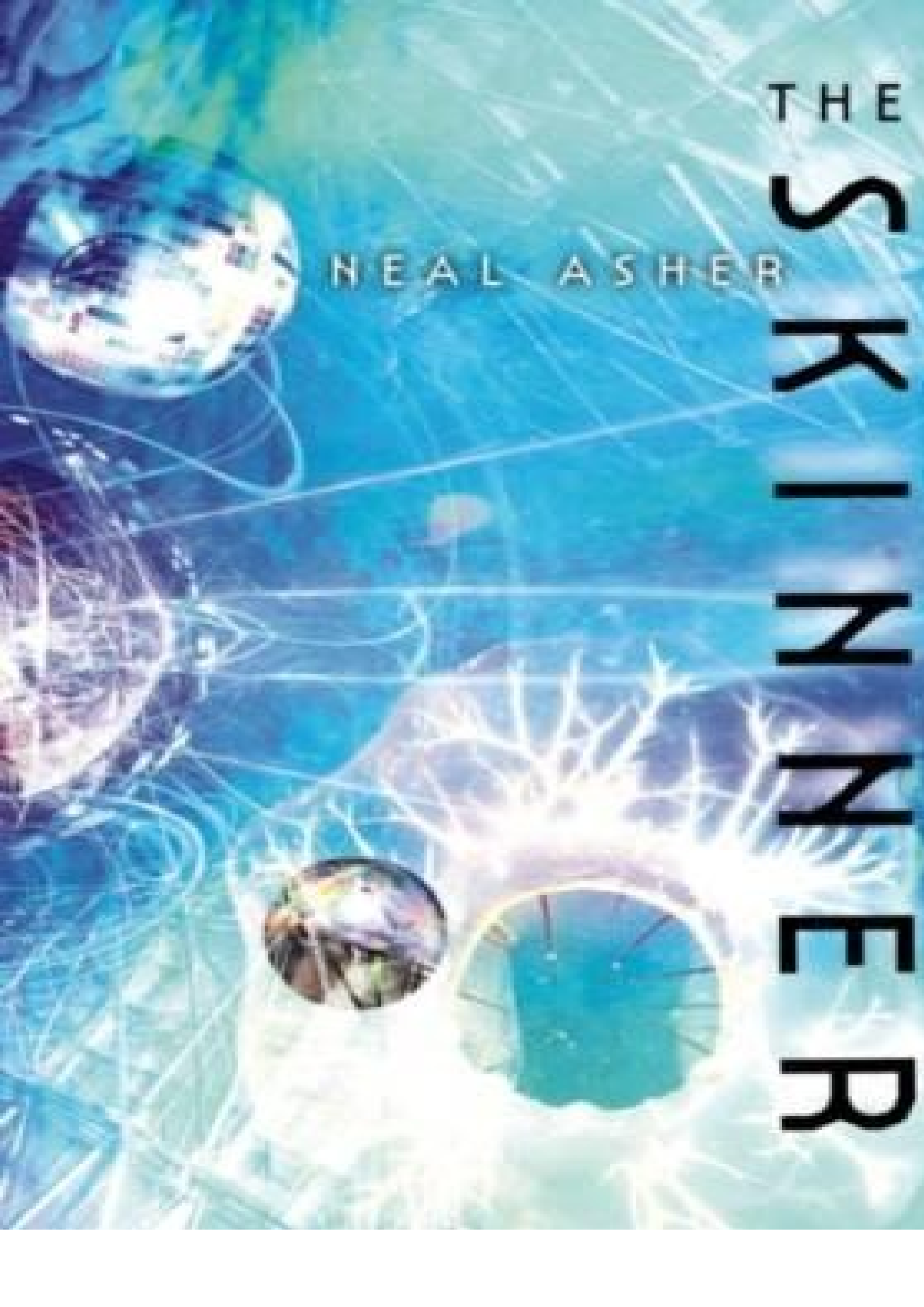


THE

SKILLMATTER

NEAL ASHER



The Skinner

[Spatterjay 01]

By Neal Asher

Scanned & Proofed By MadMaxAU

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1

In any living sea on any world there are always creatures whose fate is integral to the gastronomic delight of other . . . creatures. Boxies might more correctly be described as lunch-boxes, such was the purpose they served in the sea - and they knew it. Feeding upon occasional shoals of vicious plankton - which would make the experience of swimming for a human akin to bathing in ground glass - and the dispersing remains of those many other creatures which, at some point, always served as an entree, the boxies swam at high speed and with a kind of nervous determination. Only by keeping moving like this could they reduce the frequency of leech attacks on their nerveless outer bodies. Only swift movement kept them from the sickle-legs of prill and the serrated claws of glisters, or from the mouths of larger leeches, which would swallow them down whole. However, a successful survival strategy for a species was not always so successful for all of its individuals: a boxy shoal increased with each addition of fry from each hatching of eggs laid on the stalks of sea-cane and decreased with each attack upon it by a hungry predator, and therefore old age was not a common cause of death in it.

The reif sipped at his clear drink through a glass straw and seemed to have his attention focused beyond his companion, at somewhere in the middle of the opposite wall. Erlin supposed he must be drinking one of the many chemical preservatives he used to prevent his flesh falling from his bones. The man who had just joined the reif sat with his back to Erlin, who now noticed that he had something on his shoulder. When this something took off to do a circuit of the room, she was fascinated. It was an insect as large as a severed thumb and the drone of its wings was loud in the subdued atmosphere of the shuttle lounge. The man was obviously indentured to a Hive mind, for the flying creature had to be a hornet from Earth - the eyes of a Hive mind. What the hell could bring the reif and such a man here, together? Erlin picked up her coffee and began walking across to them, till the thickening of the air and a vague feeling of disorientation made her pause.

From taking one step to another, Erlin realized that the safety field had tripped: a rough entry into the atmosphere. But then, in her experience, things got steadily rougher from now on. She glanced to the windows that slanted out at forty-five degrees from the outer edge of the lounge. The shuttle was now circling above the honeycomb which was the Polity base on the island of Chel, and she observed how the sea surrounded the island in concentric rings of varying shades of green, as of split agate. The sea was calm down there, so what had tripped the safety field must be one of the many storms that ripped through the thick upper layers of cloud. Finally reaching their table, she turned her attention fully to the seated pair.

‘Mind if I join you?’ she asked.

There was little discernible reaction from the reif, but the man grinned at her and gestured to an empty seat. He wasn’t bad-looking, Erlin thought, and his manner was pleasant, but he was not *the* man. *He* was somewhere down on the sea below. She placed her coffee on the table, then pulled out the seat, turned it, and sat astride it with her forearms resting across its back.

‘I’m curious to know why a reification should want to come here, and why someone indentured to Hive mind,’ Erlin noticed the man frown, ‘should come here also.’ She looked with interest at each of them in turn, then glanced at the other passengers occupying the lander’s lounge. It was clear that fear or disgust had cleared a wide space around the reif and his companion, and embarrassment had cast a pall over general conversation. Many of them were now trying very hard to appear not to be listening. Erlin shook her head as she focused her attention on the reif. He was no cause for disgust. He didn’t stink, as reifs were popularly believed to, nor was he any cause for fear - some of the augmented types here in the lander could have torn him limb from limb. But to Erlin he was a source of almost painful interest. What purpose had driven this man to want to continue functioning after his own death?

‘I am *not* indentured,’ said the reif’s companion, then took up his drink from the table before him and sipped.

Erlin turned to study him. ‘What?’ she asked

‘I’m *not* indentured,’ he repeated succinctly, putting down his drink.

‘Oh, I see,’ said Erlin, inspecting him.

He wore jeans tucked into the hard-wearing boots of an environment suit, and a loose cloth shirt which was open at the neck to expose a Maori tiki charm. There was no visible sign of augmentation on him, but that did not mean he was without it. Below unruly blond hair, his features were handsome and hawkish, and Erlin thought it likely he’d had his face restructured in the past, but long in the past because character now showed through and had softened the aseptic beauty of the cosmetic job. In his left ear, he wore a single diamond stud - which was probably his Hive link transponder.

‘*Were* you indentured?’ she asked him.

‘Two years,’ he replied. ‘And those ended about twenty years ago.’

‘Two years . . . that’s the usual sentence for killing a hornet, isn’t it?’ said Erlin.

The man nodded and grinned, before reaching for his drink again. Erlin observed him for a moment longer, then curiosity drew her attention back to the man’s companion.

The reification was clad in a utilitarian monofilament overall of bland grey, and he had a smooth lozenge of metal hanging from a chain around his neck. He had obviously been a heavy-worlder when alive. Not only his muscles were stringy on his thick skeleton, his hands bony claws, and what was visible of his face under a half-helmet augmentation, was that of a grey mummy. Erlin next studied the aug: it was golden, had a cartouche inset into its surface, and had, extending from the inner side of it and curving round under the reif’s one visible eye, an irrigator fashioned in the shape of a cobra with its hood

spread. The reif's eye was blue, and it seemed to be the only part of him that was remotely alive.

Of course, she could see now what might have brought these two people together: the fear and disgust of the others here. Most people had yet to dispel their atavistic fear of large stinging insects, and most did not like to share the company of corpses, no matter how interesting the conversation might prove to be. More than anything else in any world, Erlin wanted something to maintain her interest. She wondered just what stories there might be here.

The reif dropped his glass straw back into his drink and, with slow precision, he leant back. As he turned his blue eye upon her now, Erlin imagined she could hear the creaking of his neck. There came a clicking gulp from deep in his throat, then he spoke in a surprisingly mild baritone, his words slightly out of sync with the movement of his mouth. But then, Erlin thought it unlikely that his vocal cords actually generated his voice.

'Many would seek immortality here,' he said, and deliberately tilted his head to peer at the circular blue scar on Erlin's forearm. It was an easy conversational gambit to turn attention away from himself. Erlin pretended no reaction to his words, but suddenly felt very hot and uncomfortable. The secret of Spatterjay had been out for many years, and immortality was a commodity in a buyer's market. Why did she feel guilty?

'Many would find it and wish they hadn't,' said Erlin. Just then, the hornet droned back from across the room and Erlin could not help but notice how the other passengers flinched away from it, though they tried to appear as if they had not. There was much nervous laughter in its wake. As it settled again on the man's shoulder he merely glanced at it, then reached into the top pocket of his shirt and removed a small vial. From this he tipped a puddle of syrup on to the tabletop. The insect launched from his shoulder to the table, where it landed with a noticeable rattle, then it walked stiff-legged to the puddle to sip. Erlin saw that the creature's thorax was painted with luminous intricate lines, as of a circular diagram. They must mean something to someone - but not necessarily anyone human. On the table also lay a shoulder carry-case for hornets. Inside the case was another hornet, still as if sealed in clear liquid plastic.

After a brief silence the man said, 'There's a place, you know, where people live in the bodies of giant snails which float in the sky suspended from gas-filled shells.'

Erlin absorbed the comment with almost a feeling of delight. At the sound of the next clicking gulp she turned back to the reification.

The reif said, 'On Tornos Nine, people live under the sea in giant mechanical lobsters. It's all for tourism, really. Every lobster contains its own hotel and restaurant. There are few private lobsters.'

The man laughed. Erlin switched her gaze between the two of them. She wondered if the reif would have smiled, if he could. She replied, 'On the ships here you have to wait for your mainsail to fly over you and take the mainmast. Through the mechanisms of the ship, it controls the fore and aft sails, and all you have to do is feed it. Every sail has the same name.'

The reif finally lifted the gaze of his one watery eye from its study of her scar.

'What name is that?' he asked

‘Windcatcher.’

‘You have been here before,’ he said. It wasn’t a question.

‘You know that.’

‘So have I, a very long time ago.’

With a deprecatory grin the man said, ‘I’ve never been here before.’ He held out his hand.

‘Janer.’

Erlin clasped the hand he offered.

‘Erlin,’ she said.

Janer nodded and smiled, and only reluctantly released her hand.

‘You’ll have to excuse me for a moment. I just want to see this.’

He stood and moved over to the slanting window, to watch as the shuttle finally came in to land. Erlin turned expectantly to the reef.

There was no clicking gulp this time before he spoke. ‘Keech,’ he said, and did not offer his hand, which, considering his condition, Erlin felt was only polite.

The hornet watched and listened.

* * * *

‘Land is at a premium here,’ said Erlin as the three of them later walked down the shuttle ramp to the curved walkway running parallel to a parking area around the edge of the landing pad. She felt buoyant now, though that was probably due to the higher oxygen content in the air and the low gravity she had felt immediately on stepping from the shuttle’s grav-plates. She scanned the distantly familiar surroundings. The sea made a continual sucking hiss underneath the huge floating structure upon which the gun-metal wing of the shuttle had settled, and the air was thick with the smells of cooling metal, decaying seaweed, and of virulent aquatic life.

‘Just islands and atolls, no continents, and no island bigger than, say, the Galapagos islands on Earth,’ said Janer.

‘Yes,’ said Erlin, ‘and there are other similarities too, though you’ll find the wildlife here somewhat wilder.’

‘Wilder?’ Janer echoed.

Erlin grimaced. ‘Well, it’s not so bad on the islands,’ she admitted.

‘But bad in the sea?’

‘Look at it this way: most Hoopers are sailors, but few of them can swim.’

‘Right,’ said Janer.

Rank upon rank of aircabs were parked here along the edge. Beyond them, the sea was heaving but not breaking, and underneath that surface Erlin knew the water would be writhing with leeches, hammerheads, whelks and rurbul, glisters and prill. And all of them would be hungry. She gazed up at the misty green sky and wondered at her foolishness in returning here, then she followed her two companions off the ramps, her obedient hover luggage trailing along behind.

Keech was intent on getting to the first cab before all the other passengers swarmed off the shuttle. When there came a hissing crack, followed by a stuttering as of an air compressor starting, Erlin noted how the reif snapped his head round and moved his hand to one of the many pockets of his overall. She and how Janer dropped into a semi-crouch. She studied them for a moment longer as they warily surveyed their surroundings, then they slowly relaxed.

‘Over here,’ she said, and led them to the rail along the seaward side of the parking area. Below the rail, the foamed-plascrete edge of the floating structure sloped steeply down into the sea. Erlin pointed to an object like a metre-long chrome mosquito that was walking along the plascrete, just above the waterline. She then pointed to a disturbance out in the water. Pieces of shell and gobbets of flesh were being pulled at and rabidly denuded by dark, unclearly seen, anguine shapes in the water.

‘Autogun,’ explained Keech. ‘What did it hit?’

‘Well, out there, probably a prill or a glistler. Most of the large lethal molluscs here are not swimmers,’ Erlin replied.

‘Charming,’ said Janer.

Keech stared for an interminable moment, but offered no further comment. Instead he turned around and continued on towards the nearest aircab.

The vehicle was an old Skyrover Macrojet with a ridiculous and unnecessary airfoil attached, and its pilot was all Hooper in attitude and appearance.

‘The three of yah?’ he asked. He remained inside his cab as he cleaned his fingernails with a long, narrow knife that Erlin recognized as a skinning knife, and she tried not to inspect too closely the memories *that* evoked.

The Hooper’s skin was pale, and the circular scars on his arms and down the sides of his face were only just visible. She supposed that, like all Hoopers on the Polity base, he was on one of the Intertox family of drugs to keep the fibres of the Spatterjay virus in abeyance. Usually it was the bite of a leech that caused infection but, even though the virus could not survive for a long time outside of a body, no one was taking any chances. Polity scientists felt that, despite the so-far-discovered huge benefits of the virus, it might still be some kind of Trojan. Erlin herself had not been infected by the bite on her forearm. Like many other viruses, the Spatterjay virus could be transmitted by bodily fluids, and she knew precisely when she had contracted it.

‘All three,’ replied Keech to the Hooper.

The Hooper looked askance at him, then stabbed the knife into the dash of his vehicle. After a moment he transferred his attention to Janer, then to the hornets in the transparent box on Janer’s shoulder.

‘Can they get out?’ he asked.

‘Only if they want to,’ said Janer.

‘Look like nasty buggers.’

Erlin bit down on a burst of laughter. *That* from a Hooper on a world where just about every creature was a nasty bugger out for its plug of flesh.

‘I assure you they are harmless unless forced to defend themselves,’ said Janer.

The Hooper studied the hornets more closely. ‘They got brains then?’

How’s he going to explain the hive mind? Erlin wondered.

‘They are the eyes of the hive,’ said Janer.

‘Oh, them . . . hornets, ain’t they?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK, stick y’ luggage in the back and climb in. Y’want the Dome?’

‘Please,’ said Erlin as she stood aside to allow Keech to take his hover trunk around to the back of the cab. As he moved past, she caught a slight whiff of corruption. He glanced round at her, and perhaps it was her imagination that she was able to read a look of apology in what small movement his face managed. After dumping his backpack on top of Keech’s trunk, Janer went forward and quickly climbed into the front beside the driver. Erlin gazed around before stowing her own hover luggage. She was here now, and she would carry on through with her intention, though sometimes she felt simply like . . . stopping.

* * * *

‘Erlin Tazer Three Indomial,’ said Keech as the aircab rose and boosted over the pontoons and floating pads of the shuttle port.

Janer glanced over his shoulder. ‘I thought you looked familiar. You’re the one who opened that particular box of . . . leeches.’ He shrugged at his little joke.

The hornets, Erlin saw, scuttled about in their carry-case and moved tail to tail so as to take in every view.

Janer peered down at them in annoyance, then gazed ahead through the screen at the winged shape that glided in the haze over the island, like embers in jade smoke. He went on,

“There was quite an uproar after your studies were published and, as I recollect, the Warden here had to limit runcible transmissions. Big rush to come and live for ever.”

‘Big rush for an easier option, but there never is one of those,’ said Erlin. ‘Our technology can extend life indefinitely, but even now there are . . . drawbacks. The rush of people here was of those searching for something beyond life extension. They were searching for miracles.’ She noted how Keech, at the word ‘miracle’, reached up to rest his skeletal fingers against the lozenge resting on his chest. Perhaps it had some religious significance.

‘How does it operate here, then?’ Janer asked.

‘The bare facts?’ Erlin asked, sensing the man had more than an intellectual interest in the subject. He nodded and she went on, ‘The viral fibres bind every life form here . . . They’re the leeches’ way of maintaining their food supply. They are very efficient parasites, though it can be argued that what happens here is a perfect example of mutualism. Nothing dies unless severely injured, and I mean *severely*.’

‘It is . . . logical,’ said Keech.

Erlin had to agree.

‘Surely the death of the prey is preferable?’ said Janer, puzzled.

‘No,’ Erlin told him. ‘Isn’t it preferable for the leeches to be able to harvest their meat and keep the prey alive to be harvested again? Though they don’t suck blood, the leeches are aptly named.’

‘Why’ve you come back?’ Janer asked.

‘Just looking for someone: a Captain I knew. We have unfinished business.’

The Hooper turned and gave her a strange look but said nothing. The Captains were the weirdest Hoopers of them all.

‘Why are *you* here?’ Erlin asked Keech. The reif did not react for a moment, then he slowly shook his head. Erlin waited a little longer, then returned her attention to Janer as he now turned to inspect her over the back of his seat. She knew that look.

‘What about you?’ she asked.

‘I go where the mind directs. The ultimate tourist.’ He grinned.

‘No resentment?’ she asked.

‘Once - but only at the beginning.’

Erlin nodded. ‘You said you’d served out your indenture twenty years ago?’ She was curious: once people indentured to a Hive mind had served out their time, they were usually grateful to be rid of their little companions, particularly as those who made the mistake of killing a hornet usually possessed some deep-rooted aversion to the insects. Hive minds also had a reputation for sending the

human servants into some really sticky situations.

‘Why carry on?’ she asked.

‘Adventure. Money. In the last twenty years I’ve not often been bored, Erlin.’

She studied him more closely. He had originally struck her as being rather naive, perhaps not even of his first century. She decided to reassess that judgement. Once, disease and accident had been the greatest killers of humankind; now the greatest killer was boredom, usually leading to the latter of the first two causes. Perhaps Janer was much older than she had first thought; perhaps he had the same problem as herself.

‘Erlin?’ said the Hooper abruptly, the content of the conversation apparently only just penetrating. ‘Thought so . . . It’s the skin.’

Erlin smiled to herself at a remembered conversation aboard a Hooper sailing vessel called the *Treader*. Peck, the 180-year-old mechanic, had been attacked by a leech and it had unscrewed a fist-sized lump of flesh from his leg - a lump of flesh he had, after beating the leech to pulp, subsequently screwed back into place. The wound had healed in minutes.

‘Doesn’t that strike you as a little odd?’ Erlin had asked him.

‘Who you callin’ odd? At least I ain’t got skin the colour of burnt sugar. Bleedin’ Earthen, always callin’ us odd.’

Peck had been very odd after his second . . . accident, but Erlin, even now, didn’t like to think about that too much - and wasn’t even sure she believed it had really happened.

‘Do you know Ambel?’ Erlin asked the Hooper.

‘Who don’t?’ was his reply.

With a complicated manipulation of the airfoils, he put the aircab into a spiralling glide. The three passengers gazed down at the long, partially artificial island below them. Around the much larger central geodesic dome of the Polity base clustered many smaller ones - as if the island had been blowing bubbles in the sea. There were also a few smaller ones at the centre of the island’s widest stretch: transparent spheres dropped into the deep dingle that grew there. Erlin could just make out the groves of peartrunk trees speared with the occasional tall yanwood, and she reflexively rubbed at the scar on her forearm. A leech dropping from a peartrunk tree had been her first close encounter with the appetite of Spatterjay life forms. Later, Ambel had saved her from the persistent attentions of a creature innocuously called a frog whelk. Without his intervention, it would have taken her hand off. She gazed across the wide sea, remembering that other island where, if she could believe Ambel, the body of something which had once been a man was living an independent existence. It would apparently live well enough, but would have no intelligence. Ambel kept the Skinner’s head in a box.

‘The gating facility was closed, down here,’ said Keech.

‘Heat pollution,’ Erlin told him. ‘The Warden had it moved to Coram after an explosion in the hammer-whelk population around the deepwater heat sinks.’ She also remembered that Coram, the

moon they had so recently quit, by shuttle, had been named by the runcible AI - an artificial intelligence which was also the planetary Warden. 'Coram' was actually short for

'coram judice', which, it turned out, meant 'in the presence of the judge' in some ancient Earth language. It was a name she supposed indicative of Warden's opinion of itself.

'They had a gate here, then?' said Janer distractedly.

'It was established on-planet when the Polity arrived here. They had it here for about fifty solstan years before moving it. That was two hundred solstan years ago,' she replied.

In the roof of one of the largest dome, a hatch irised open and the Hooper brought his cab down through it. Earth light illuminated the inside, stark in contrast to the soft green light of Spatterjack Forests and crops grew in neat patterns around a small city of processing plants and a single sprawling arcology like a giant plascrete fungus seemingly nailed to the ground by gleaming hotel towers. 'Dome-grown food' the Hoopers called what was produced in the fields here. It was what, if they did not have access to Intertox, stopped them becoming more like the Skinner.

With a cycling down drone of thrusters, the Hooper landed his aircab on a neatly mown lawn, near the edge of the arcology, and the three disembarked.

'How much?' Erlin asked, leaning into the open window.

The Hooper paused for a moment as he calculated how much he might get away with asking for. Erlin groped in the pocket of her jacket and pulled out a wad of New Carth shillings. The two notes she proffered he quickly took and, obviously pleased, he got out of his cab to unload their luggage. Janer appeared bemused and Keech, of course, had no expression at all. Erlin understood that the both of them hadn't realized they might need hard currency. She felt they had a lot to learn about this place and was about to comment on this when Janer beat her to it.

'Perhaps we need a little guidance here,' he said, glancing at the reef. Keech showed no reaction to this either. Erlin was quick to reply; she had nothing to lose by being helpful.

'I have to do what I have to do here, but you're more than welcome to accompany me until you find your feet,' she said, turning to study them. Keech gave a brief nod in reply and Janer grinned at her. Feeling slightly uncomfortable, she turned away from that grin.

'You know that Polity law does not apply outside the main dome,' she said.

'It should do,' said Keech.

'Sometimes,' added Janer.

Erlin continued, 'Try defining assault or murder to a Hooper. They just laugh at all our rules. The way it works here is that the older a Hooper is, the more authority he has. This by dint of the fact that he knows so much more than you and that if you disagree with him he could probably tear your arms off. Ambel, the man I've come here to find, is old. I once saw him tow a deepsea-fishing ship with just a rowing boat. His boat was specially strengthened, and the oars made of ceramal composite.'

‘How old is he?’ asked Keech.

‘Seven centuries, minimum. He said he came here just after the war, but I wonder about that. Some of the early Hoopers are reticent about their pasts, and the viral fibres were very advanced in him.’

‘Yeah,’ said Janer, grinning. ‘I’ve heard plenty of stories like that.’

Not looking at him, Erlin went on, ‘His skin is mottled with leech scars overlaid one on the other. He’s so packed with fibre it’s impossible to take blood samples from him. I frankly doubt he even has any blood inside him. If ever he’s wounded, the wounds close just like that.’ She held up her hand and snapped it shut into a fist.

‘You believe him?’ asked Janer.

‘At first I didn’t, but I was with him for a number of years and I eventually ceased to doubt.’

‘Perhaps . . . Hoop is still alive?’ said Keech.

Erlin thought about the head kept in a box on the *Treader* and refrained from comment.

‘That’s it then,’ said the Hooper, standing next to their pile of luggage.

‘Thank you,’ said Erlin. She clicked her fingers and her hover trunk separated itself out from the pile of luggage and moved obediently to her side. It had surprised her that Janer used merely a backpack but now she realized he must be a seasoned traveller and so only carried a few essentials. Keech, however, could not possibly have carried his trunk very far, it being the size of a sea-chest.

‘Luck,’ said the Hooper, climbing back into his cab.

‘Wait.’ Erlin turned back to him and he paused at the door. ‘Do you know where I can find Ambel?’

‘On the *Treader*.’

‘Where is the *Treader*?’

The Hooper shrugged. ‘Nort Sea and the Skinner’s Islands. Sou’ at the atolls. East in the Sargassum. West over the Blue Wells. Bugged if I know.’

It was not the answer Erlin would have liked but it was the kind she expected of a Hooper.

‘Thanks for your help,’ she said dryly.

‘This Ambel,’ said Janer as the cab rose into the air above them and tilted towards the hole in the Dome, ‘something more than clinical interest?’

‘You could say that,’ said Erlin. ‘We go this way now.’

She led them down paved walkways from the lawns, through neatly laid-out rose gardens, towards the looming metallic wall of the arcology. Daffodils bloomed in bunches, neatly circumnavigated by

robot mowers that munched their way across the grass like iron beetles. Some of these flowers were old-Earth yellow, but the rest were blue and violet. Ahead, wide arcades and boulevards cut into the wall of the arcology, and here there were more gardens and lawns, from which sprang coconut and fishtail palms, fuchsia bushes and the occasional pineapple plant - this diversity of life, as Erlin well knew, genetically adapted to survive the odd conditions inside the Dome.

‘I thought you said land was at a premium here,’ said Janer, scanning about himself.

‘It is,’ Erlin replied. ‘All of this,’ she gestured ahead of them, ‘is sitting on ten metres of foamed plascrete, which in turn is sitting on a thousand metres of sea-water.’

‘Ah,’ said Janer then, ‘busy little raft they have here.’

Amongst these gardens strolled all manner of people: seasoned travellers who lived only to use the runcibles and briefly see new worlds; altered humans - catadapts and ophids and the like; and Hooper nervous in these garden surroundings, with the rolling gait of those more used to having a deck under their feet.

Erlin said, ‘A lot of the people who come to see this world get no farther than this. Many come here not realizing that Polity law doesn’t extend outside the Dome itself. They come here for the immortality you mentioned, and discover that they feel very mortal once they step out into the Hooper’s world.’

‘*You* did,’ Keech reminded her.

‘I like new worlds, new experiences. You gain nothing without risking something.’

‘Trite,’ said Keech. ‘There should always be law.’

Erlin glanced at him as they moved into one of the boulevards, and then she gestured to a pyramidical metrotel entrance situated near the end of it.

‘I’m staying here for tonight. Unless you have other plans, I suggest you stay here as well. Tomorrow if you like, we can get equipped. It would be a good idea if you both bought some hard currency, and you won’t get far here without it.’

‘Which is preferred?’ asked Keech.

‘New Carth shillings or New yen. Don’t bother with the Spatterjay skind - the exchange rate for it goes up every day.’

‘How quaint,’ said Janer.

Once they had entered the pyramidal metrotel Janer insisted on paying for all their rooms, by smart card at the automated check-in desk. Erlin reached down to her hover trunk and, into its miniconsol punched one of the room codes the screen showed them - slaving the trunk to the hotel AI. For a moment she watched while it trundled off, then she checked her watch.

‘Down here at about nine, then, solstan?’ she suggested.

‘Definitely,’ replied Janer, and Keech gave his characteristic sharp nod.

Without further pause, Erlin headed for the room the hotel AI had allocated her.

‘Don’t forget that currency,’ she said, glancing over her shoulder. As she entered a lift, she wondered what had possessed her to take up with these two. Loneliness, maybe? When she reached the entrance to her room, her trunk was there ahead of her. She followed it in through the door, then slumped on the large bed provided. Tucking her hands behind her head, she stared at the ceiling and said, ‘AI, I like some information about reifications’.

‘Can you be more specific than that?’ the hotel AI asked her.

‘Well . . . didn’t the practice originate from some sort of religious sect?’

‘It originated from the Cult of Anubis Arisen. It was their conjecture that souls do not exist, and that there is nothing more sacred than the body. They hung on to life for as long as they possibly could, then, when they died, had themselves preserved and kept moving by use of the cyber technology of the time.’

Erlin recalled the decidedly Egyptian design of Keech’s aug and eye irrigator. ‘They were brain-dead though, and Keech is sentient,’ she said.

There came no reply then from the AI, as its privacy restraints had cut in. It could not discuss other hotel guests with her.

‘Reifs nowadays are often sentient - to all intents alive,’ she persisted.

‘The cult of Anubis Arisen is still extant, and now has access to mind-recording and mimetic computers. Some of those who have been technically dead can be repaired and brought to life using some of the newer nano-technologies.’

‘With those mind recordings and mimetics . . . are they alive?’

‘The contention of most is that they have become AI. The lines become blurred and the argument heated when reifs with partial use of their organic brains are discussed. On the whole, reifs are uncommon. Most physical damage to human beings can be repaired, and most humans with mind recorders choose memplantation in an android chassis.’

‘How do you explain Keech then?’

The AI didn’t.

* * * *

Once alone in his room, Keech opened his trunk and removed a clean pair of monofilament overalls which he laid across his bed. Almost reverently, he removed his lozenge pendant and placed it on top of them. Then, moving with great care, he took off his used overalls and dropped them on the floor before turning to a mirror on the nearby wall and inspecting his grey and golden reflection. As well as the half-helmet augmentation over his face, an area from under his armpit to his waist and then h

groin was also enclosed in golden metal. This metal was deeply intagliated with Egyptian hieroglyphs. He stood perfectly still as he studied them, until his irrigator sprayed his right eye. He did not blink but turned back to the trunk. Now he removed a golden case made in the shape of a small sarcophagus, closed the lid of the trunk, and placed the case upon it. In the surface of this case was an indentation ideal for accommodating the lozenge he had placed on the bed. He ignored this, though, and instead freed two nozzles, which came away trailing coiled tails of clear tubing. These nozzles he plugged into two sockets in the metal covering his side. Through his aug, he sent the activation signal to this device that really kept him from rotting away: his cleansing unit.

One of the coiled tubes turned dirty blue as the unit drew preservative fluid from his vascular system, filtered out a sludge of dead bacteria and rotifers, corrected certain chemical imbalances, then pumped the fluid back into him. The fluid in the return pipe was liquid sapphire. After a few minutes, a row of red-lit hieroglyphs on the unit began, one at a time, to flick to green. When the last glyph changed, the tubes cleared of liquid and he detached them and returned them to the unit itself. Next, he turned a disk on the unit and withdrew a cylindrical container filled with the same blue fluid. He turned to the mirror again and, using a swab that detached from the head of the container, he wiped himself from head to foot, at the last partially detaching his aug to swab at the skin concealed underneath. The now exposed left half of his face was ruin eaten back to bone, and set into that bone was a ring of triangular copper-coloured contacts.

Keech stared for a moment at the wound that had killed him before snicking his aug back into place with a wet click, then reaching down to press some pads on the metal enclosing his side. This shell lifted with a slight hiss and he detached it completely and put it on top of his trunk. The side of his body now exposed was mostly transparent synthetic skin under which could be seen organs repaired with synthetics, a network of blue tubes spreading from the two nozzle orifices, and rib bones that had been burnt black. After a brief visual inspection, he swabbed this area down too. When he had finished, he replaced the metal shell, then returned to the bed to don the clean overalls and his lozenge pendant. After yet another inspection of himself in the mirror, there sounded that dry click from his throat, and he spoke.

‘Hotel AI, I wish to take a sum of a thousand New Carth shillings from my account, in hard currency. Do you have this facility?’

‘I do,’ replied the hotel. ‘There is an auto till in the wall to your left. You are aware that a thousand shillings may be much more than you will require here. The exchange rate against the Spatterjay skin is very high.’

‘I am aware,’ said Keech, ‘but I may be here some time.’ He took a smart card from his pocket and inserted it into the slot in the wall. A hatch immediately slid open and the auto till poked his card back out at him. Behind the hatch rested a stack of hundred-, fifty- and ten-shilling notes. There was also a cloth bag containing coins. He opened this and took out one transparent octagonal coin, which he brought up to his eye. In an approximation of surprise, he raised the brow of this eye. He hadn’t seen one-shilling pieces in a very long time - centuries in fact.

* * * *

Janer lay back on his bed with hands folded comfortably behind his head. He thought about Erlin and felt a vaguely pleasurable buzz at the prospect of getting to know her. She was classically and

strangely beautiful, with her white hair, black skin, and blue eyes, yet Janer felt sure her appearance was not due to cosmetic alteration. These combined features were too much at odds with each other to be anyone's natural choice. In his experience cosmetic alteration fell into two camps: the extreme one, where people went all the way into something like catadaption or ophidaption, or the subtle one, where they just had some small alteration made to their appearance to make it more pleasing. More likely, he suspected, her appearance was the result of a past genetic alteration in her family line, as no doubt with her intelligence. This was how it was for most people now. He closed his eyes and summoned up an image of her to contemplate. This didn't last though, and his mind began to wander.

Nothing from the link at the moment - which meant that the Hive mind was preoccupied. That was good, as he didn't feel much like talking. There had been no communication from it for a number of hours now, but that was nothing unusual. The mind controlled a huge conjoined hive of something like a billion individuals, so it had plenty of other tasks on which to focus its attention. Janer considered how things had changed since the days of paper nests and maybe just a few hundred hornets.

Back then it had come as one shock in many when arrogant humanity had discovered it wasn't the only sentient race on Earth. It was just the loudest and most destructive. Dolphins and whales had always been candidates because of their aesthetic appeal and cute stories of rescued swimmers. Research in that area had soon cleared things up: dolphins couldn't tell the difference between a human swimmer and a sick fellow dolphin, and were substantially more stupid than the farm animals humans had been turning into bacon on a regular basis. As for whales, they had the intelligence of the average cow. When a hornet had first built its nest in a VR suit and lodged its protests on the Internet, it had taken a long time for anyone to believe what was happening. They were stinging things, creepy crawlies, so how could they possibly be intelligent? At ten thousand years of age, the youngest Hive mind eventually showed them. The subsequent investigation had proven, beyond doubt, that groups of nests thought as a single mind, not with the speed of synapses, but with the speed of slow pheromone transfer. The nest in the VR suit had been linked, at that rate, to many other nests. It had communicated using the anosmic receptors inside the suit, and this had taken it many months. Now every hornet carried a micro-transmitter, and the speed of Hive-mind thought had become very fast indeed.

Of course, immediately after this revelation, there had been a scramble to find more of the like, and all the other social insects of Earth were intensively studied. Disappointment after disappointment finally brought home the fact that hornets, like humans, were a bit of an oddity. The only social insects that came close to them were the wasps, but they came in at the level of a chimpanzee compared to a human. Bees, it turned out, did have Hive minds, but they were alien beyond the interpretation of the most powerful computers; their communication was limited to the 'now' - the concepts of past and future being beyond them. Ants had no Hive minds at all.

Janer considered how he himself had been plunged into this strange world: his payment his service to this mind - for killing a hornet that had tried to settle on his shoulder in a crowded ringball stadium. He had been tired, that hornet, searching for somewhere to land and take a rest, tempted by the beaker of Coke Janer had been drinking. His reaction had been instinctive; the phobic horror of insects had risen up inside him and he had knocked the hornet to the ground and stamped on it. The court judgement had come through the following day, and not having the funds to pay a fine, he had signed up for two years' indenture. Killing a hornet was not precisely murder, as each creature was just one very small part of the mind. There were stiff penalties, though.

Janer sat up, swung his legs off the bed, then stood and moved over to the window of his room. The view was a mildly interesting one, between tower blocks and across crop fields and hydroponic houses, towards the wall of the Dome. It wasn't the view he wanted, though. Now he wanted to see *outside* the Dome, now he wanted something of more interest. In his two years of being indentured there had been no shortage of that, and it was the main reason he had gone directly from indentured ship to paid service for this particular Hive mind.

'What's out there?' he asked.

When there came no response from his Hive link, he shrugged and returned to his bed. He knew something about what lay beyond the Dome itself, and anything else there was to know he would find out soon enough.

* * * *

2

The others, clustering like sheep on the small islet, fed by leaping into the sea and sinking through passing shoals of boxies, snapping up one or two of the creatures during the descent, but that was not enough for this particular whelk. Perhaps more intelligent and adventurous than its fellows, it had found an excellent feeding-ground some distance from the islet. Here, opposing faces of rock walled a passage through a n undersea ridge, and the whelk had learnt that at certain times this passage swarmed with shoals of boxies. It did not know anything about tides or how it was that, when the moon was not in the sky, the apex of the ridge broke the surface so it acted as a barrier to the eternal migration of the strange little fish. Nor did it understand that the passage was the only way through the ridge. All it did know was that if it waited for long enough on one of the rock faces, there would be a cornucopia of mobile dinners just about when it was beginning to feel hungry again. It also found that by leaping from face to face through passing shoals, it could gobble up many more boxies - before it reached the bottom —

than by simply falling through a shoal. Of course there is no such thing as a free lunch - someone is keeping a tab. The whelk grew faster than its own shell, and soon its tender pink body was bulging out around the lid-like clypeus that had otherwise kept it safe. A small leech, which had also discovered the bounty of the passing boxy shoals, eventually dropped on to the dispeptic whelk, wound around its shell and, extruding mouth-parts like the head of a rock drill, reamed in through tender flesh and fed

Ambel had nightmares of a sea of shifting leeches, and dreams of a thousand years of better days. The wind from Deep-sea bulged the sail, and the sail was content with the lumps of rhinoworm it had eaten that evening. Dawn's green light threw those lumps into silhouette, where they were being digested in the sail's transparent gut, and it brought Peck hammering at Ambel's door.

'There's turbul coming under! Turbul coming under!'

Ambel sat upright and distinguished the distinctive thumping coming from the hull, as the shoal turbul passed under it, from the usual ratchet and clack of the ship's mechanisms. In something of a daze, he gazed around his cabin and inspected the meagre requisites of his existence. His blunderbuss was secured with hide straps in one corner, next to the cupboard containing powder, shot, and the extensive toolkit for the weapon's maintenance. A narrow wardrobe contained his plasmesh shirt

trousers, and reinforced boots - the only clothing that satisfied his requirements of durability. Below the oval brass-rimmed portal was a shelf on which he had stuck a few ornaments with clam glue: an ancient piece of re-entry screen polished like a gem, a miniature human skull of faceted flint, and a cut slave collar. His gaze slid across his desk strewn with maps held down with a satlink position finder fashioned in the shape of a preruncible calculator, and came to rest on his sea-chest. So easy to accumulate so much in the course of a long life. He stared long and hard at the chest then gave a half shrug as he tossed his covers back.

‘Turbul!’ shouted Peck again. ‘Turbul!’

‘One moment,’ Ambel replied.

He put his feet over the side of his bunk, stood and walked to the wardrobe to take out his neatly folded clothing. Back at the bed, he dressed, then sat down and carefully pulled on and laced up his boots. Standing once again, he walked to the door and carefully opened it. He had to do *everything* carefully, did Ambel. A moment’s inattention could have him inadvertently ripping off someone’s arm or putting his elbow through the ship’s hull.

Peck was hopping from foot to foot in his excitement to get back to the lines. He had a piece of rhinoworm in one hand and a bait-plug cutter in the other. Purple blood was dribbling from the meat and in his agitation he was spattering his long hide coat, canvas trousers, and the surrounding woodwork. Ambel gestured for him to get on. Peck eagerly nodded his bald head, a crazy look in his greenish eyes, and then he turned back to his fellow crewmen on the deck. Here there was much yelling and swearing, and there were many heavy wet creatures thrashing about. Ambel looked past Peck just as Pland hauled in a turbul the size of a canoe and leapt on top of it to stop it from flicking itself over the side again. The turbul was much the shape of a canoe, in fact. Its head was the head of a caiman, and all around its dark-green body, bright-blue fins seemed to have been scattered at random. Its tail was a whip ending in a fin that resembled a hatchet.

‘Yahoo!’ yelled Pland as the turbul bucked underneath him and tried to throw him off, then, ‘Keep still, yer bugger.’ He was indifferent to the wide gash the turbul had opened in his back with the lashing of its tail. Ambel stepped over and caught hold of the turbul’s snapping jaws in one hand, the other with his other hand reached over and flicked it firmly between the eyes with his forefinger. There was a dull thud as of an iron bar hitting a log. The turbul’s eyes crossed and its body went limp.

‘Thank you, Captain,’ said Pland as he dismounted. ‘Reckon you can pull this’n? He’s a bit big for me.’

Ambel shrugged, took a firmer grip on the turbul’s jaws with his right hand and put his left hand on the flesh behind its head. He pulled, and with a ripping sound the head pulled out of its socket with the spine following. As he continued to pull, the tail and fins drew into the turbul’s body, finally to disappear. When Ambel repositioned his grip halfway down the turbul’s spine for one last heave, the creature’s flesh came off like an old sock, leaving him holding a straggly mess of head, spine, a baggy sack of internal organs, and the fins and tail - all still joined. He held this up in front of himself for a moment and gave it a couple of shakes. The eyes uncrossed and the spine, fins and tail began to writhe. The end of the tail whipped at Ambel’s face but he easily caught it.

‘Naughty,’ he said, then tossed the turbul over the side. In the water the skeletal creature swam around

for a moment before sticking its head out above the surface and issuing a noisy, snorting neighing. then dived and swam onwards with the rest of its shoal.

‘Remember, lads, we only need enough for fifty pickle barrels!’ Ambel shouted to the rest of his crew as they hauled in smaller turbul and pulled them similarly. One after another, stripped turbul swam away making those indignant snorting noises. Soon the deck was scattered with slippery tubes of meat sliding about on the acrid turbul chyme. While baiting a gleaming hook Ambel contemplated how so very slowly Polity technology was filtering into their lives. Ceramal hooks that never seemed to grow blunt now, when he could remember the days of carving them out of bone. At least the bladder floats were still the same. Stepping back a little so that he had room to cast his line out, he nearly tripped over on a sliding turbul body.

‘Anne! Barrels and vinegar!’ he bellowed - but not too annoyed as he knew his crew tended to get distracted at moments like this.

Anne shot him an irritated look, reeled in her line and hung it on a hook fixed to the rail, then called a few of the junior crew to join her. Hopping over turbul bodies, she led them to the hatch leading to the rear hold, slid it aside then swiftly climbed down. Two others followed her down into the hold, and two remained on deck to swing across a winch arm and feed the rope down.

‘Reckon that’s it,’ said Pland, holding up his latest catch. This turbul was long and thin, its body pocked with leech holes. The thumping against the hull of the ship was abating now and becoming difficult to distinguish from the clunking of the mast chains. Ambel pulled up his own latest catch, inspected it for a moment, then unhooked it and tossed it back.

‘End of the main shoal now,’ he said. ‘Just the leech-hit.’

Peck reluctantly pulled in his own line and coiled it, then, from a locker below the rail where most of the ship’s hunting gear was stored, he removed a long and lethally sharp panga. Ambel moved over to join the juniors and help them swing across the barrels Anne and the others had loaded into a cargo net. Once the net was on the deck, they rolled the empties to one side. Ambel then broke open a sealed barrel and the rich smell of spiced vinegar wafted out, almost drowning the acrid smell of turbul. Meanwhile, Peck had started cutting the turbul tubes into neat rings of flesh.

‘Good run,’ he said, sawing away enthusiastically.

‘Good run,’ agreed Ambel, taking up the lacework of rhinoworm steak, which was all that remained of their bait, and heading towards his cabin. Peck watched him go, his knuckles whitening around the handle of the panga. When he returned his attention to the turbul meat, he hacked at it savagely.

* * * *

The line, in this case, was a glassite strip set in the ground, running across under the arched exit from the Dome. Janer had a puzzled expression as he stood staring at this strip, his identification card held loosely in his hand.

‘No real barrier here, nor any form of customs. All that was at the runcible installation on Coram,’ said Keech.

‘But what about the other side - the Spatterjay side?’

‘The Hoopers don’t give a shit about things like that,’ said Erlin.

On the Polity side of the Line, a neatly slabbed path ran between fields of giant maize and plantations of pomegranate trees. Janer looked round at the trees, then down at the line again. On the black earth of the Spatterjay side lay the burnt husks of this planet’s equivalent of vermin: the stinking remains of some kind of bird, a spiral shell the size of a man’s head, and some flat decaying remains the size of a man’s leg, which had to be one of the famous leeches. Janer took this all in. He glanced up at the small laser mounted in the apex of the arch, then at the hornets in their carry-case on his shoulder.

‘It’s monitored,’ said Erlin. ‘I don’t think an AI would like to end up indentured to a Hive mind, do you?’

‘The mind has never viewed this world before,’ said Janer. ‘Its worry was not about its units crossing the Line now, with me, but about them returning across it, should the mind wish to send one back alone.’

‘I would think the automatics could distinguish, but you can ask at the gate. There’s sure to be one of the Warden’s subminds in attendance.’ Erlin gestured to the side of the arch as the three of them advanced. At the gate itself, Janer looked up in the air, as most people did instinctively when addressing a non-visible AI.

‘Warden, my Hive mind has expressed some reservations about your automatic bug-zapper. Will it distinguish between hornets and Spatterjay life forms?’ he asked.

‘Of course it will,’ replied a somewhat irritated voice. ‘Only humans make that mistake.’

Janer muttered something obscene and stepped out of the Polity. With her amusement barely concealed, Erlin followed him. Keech had no expression on his half face, even when the laser and attached eye swivelled to follow his progress.

Beyond the gate was a wide street lined with peak-roofed wooden buildings, many of which were shops and drinking dens. A market sprawled across the earth road, and Hoopers were enthusiastically hawking their wares to other Hoopers, and to the Polity citizens who had dared to come across the Line. Erlin gestured to a stall where wide green-glass terrariums contained the writhing and glistening shapes of leeches.

‘You can buy the bite of a leech there for a few shillings. Cheap immortality you’d think, but a bit of a rip-off when all you have to do is walk into the dingle and stand under a peartrunk tree for a while.’ She glanced round at Keech. ‘I don’t suppose it would work for you though.’

Keech clicked dryly for a moment before speaking. ‘That is debatable,’ he said.

‘Would you try it?’ asked Janer. He was giving the stall a strange look.

‘To become immortal I would first have to become alive,’ Keech replied.

Janer glanced round at him again and wondered what he meant by that, but of course the reif s fa

was unreadable. Erlin led them on.

‘That’s the place we want,’ she said, pointing at the plate-glass window of a shop set between a butcher and a cooper’s establishment almost concealed behind the stacked barrels. Over the window of the middle shop was mounted a long barbed harpoon.

‘Big fish they’ve got round here,’ observed Janer.

‘You could say that,’ said Erlin, pausing at the shop entrance. As she pushed open the door, a dull bell clanked and two Hoopers inspecting something in a glass cabinet glanced up before turning back to each other and continuing their conversation.

‘You can pay in stages, Armel,’ said one. ‘I’ll trust y’ on a ship oath.’

‘I’ll think ‘bout it,’ replied Armel, and with one last wistful glance at the case he hurried past the three newcomers and out of the shop. The shopkeeper rubbed his hands on his shirtfront before coming over to them. He grinned widely.

‘Polity?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Erlin cautiously, ‘but we’ve been here for some time.’

The man’s grin lost some of its exuberance at this.

‘How can I help?’ he asked.

Janer surveyed the wares in the shop. In the glass case was a neat selection of projectile guns the likes of which he had only ever seen in museums. Around the walls were also sharp-edged weapons of every description. There was enough armament here to equip a small medieval army.

‘Stun guns and lasers,’ said Erlin.

The shopkeeper’s grin widened again and he gestured to the back of the shop.

‘Are you sure we need this?’ asked Janer.

‘You saw that shell at the gate?’ Erlin asked him.

‘Yes . . .’

‘It was the shell of a frog whelk. One of those sees you, it’ll try to take a chunk out of you. It could take your hand off with one bite. Hoopers view them as amusing little pests. And there’s much worse.’

From a locked cabinet the shopkeeper produced three hand weapons with belts and holsters.

‘Y’ can have lasers and stunners separate, but I got these,’ he said.

Erlin picked up one of the weapons and inspected it dubiously. Keech stepped beside her and took up another weapon. He knocked back a slide control, opened the bottom of the handle and peered inside.

then slammed it shut.

‘QC laser with slow burn, wide burst . . . the lot,’ he said. He glanced at Erlin. ‘These’ll do all you need.’

‘QC?’ Janer queried.

‘Quantum cascade; standard solid-state,’ Keech replied.

‘What about stun?’

Keech tapped the stubby barrel set below - and off-centre of - the main mirrored barrel.

‘Ionic burst - good for up to about five metres,’ he said. ‘And,’ he studied the three weapons, ‘J will not be requiring one of these.’

Erlin eyed him thoughtfully for a moment before turning back to the shopkeeper.

‘How much?’

‘Two hundred shillings each.’

Janer thought he must have got it wrong: surely he meant two thousand shillings?

‘You’re a robber and a thief,’ said Erlin. ‘I’ll give you two hundred for two of them.’

‘*I’m a thief! I’m a thief!* One seventy-five each, with the belts and holsters.’

‘Seventy-five each and I’ll tell no one how you robbed us.’

‘One hundred and fifty each, and for that I make no profit at all.’

‘One hundred, and may the Old Captains forgive you.’

‘I have a family! I have mouths to feed!’

‘One hundred.’

The shopkeeper’s expression was one of outrage, but that expression swiftly disappeared when Erlin turned to leave. He caught hold of her arm and she turned back to him.

‘One hundred and twenty-five and you must tell no one how you have robbed *me*,’ he said.

‘Agreed,’ said Erlin with a smile.

Janer opened his wallet, but before he could remove any money, Keech laid one bony hand over it. ‘You neglected to mention the required power cells. Does your price include them as well?’ he asked.

‘You are all thieves!’ shouted the shopkeeper.

Keech stepped back and left the bargaining to Erlin.

* * * *

With the door to his cabin firmly closed, Ambel sat on his bed and stared over at his sea-chest, the bait meat held in his right hand like a bloody handkerchief. He tilted his head as if listening to something, then shook it in annoyance, before abruptly rising and stepping across his cabin to stand before the chest itself. With his free hand he opened the lid and took out an oblong box a metre long and a third of that wide and deep. This he placed on his table then took a key for the lock from his top pocket. After unlocking the box, he returned the key to his pocket, then stepped back a bit before flipping up the lid. The thing inside did not leap out, though there were signs of movement.

It was blue and filled the box. It was a head. Once it had been a human head, but now it was horribly enlarged, stretched out and distorted that it was difficult to recognize it as such. It was more like the head of some bastard offspring of a baboon and a warthog. Ambel stood and glowered at it. It shifted in its box, and one of its insane black eyes blinked open and returned his look. It was still alive, and he questioned the impulse that made him keep it so. That the historian, Olian Tay, had offered him a fortune for it, he now knew as incidental - he wasn't keeping it for her. Perhaps he kept it out of sadism. No one could be more deserving of punishment than this . . . individual. Ambel dropped the piece of bait meat in the box and slammed the lid shut. Next time he looked, he knew the meat would be gone, as the Skinner retained a tenacity for life. After wiping his hand, Ambel locked the box then placed it back in his sea-chest before slamming and locking the lid of that. He left his cabin speedily, as one glad to be away from some unpleasant but necessary task. Peck was standing just outside, gazing at him strangely. He held the panga in his right hand and was splattered with purple blood and flecks of turbul meat. Even to Ambel he was a disquieting sight.

'Turbul all chopped, Peck?' Ambel asked.

The crewman took a moment to reply. 'How ... is the bugger?' he asked.

'Alive,' said Ambel. 'Still alive.'

Peck nodded slowly. 'Can still hear 'im muttering,' he said.

'We'll always hear that,' said Ambel, reaching out and carefully slapping Peck on the shoulder. 'Let's get that turbul pickled and stowed, man.'

As Ambel walked past Peck, the crewman stared at the door to the cabin with his face screwed up in an expression that might have been remembered pain or might have been longing.

'How many barrels?' Ambel asked Anne as she lowered a full net down to the hive of activity in the hold.

'Twelve in all, with enough spare to do us for a week or so. Good run,' she added.

Ambel studied her face. The leech scars there had not detracted from her rugged attractiveness, and her long black hair showed not a speck of grey despite her many years. The virus affected different people in different ways. Some became wrinkled prunes with grizzled hair; some, like Anne, stayed

their peak; others lost all their hair and sometimes their teeth too. Ambel himself had been like Ann long in the past. Over the numerous years since, he had, like many of the Old Captains, incrementally increased his muscular bulk. Now he had cropped white hair, a young-looking but wide face, and the overall appearance of someone who could snap deck timbers between his fingers - and it wasn't a deceptive appearance.

'We going after another run?' Boris asked from below.

'Nope, lad,' said Ambel. 'It's a night moon and we've still got time to get to the sands. I don't want *all* our barrels filled with turbul. It only pulls down a few skind and the market'll be flooded.' He looked up. 'We go east,' he spoke loudly so the sail could hear him.

'Amberclams?' asked Pland, picking bait meat from under his fingernails with a skinning knife.

'Amberclams,' Ambel confirmed.

'That's a relief,' he said. 'I thought you were thinking of a hunt.'

Ambel grinned at him, then went below to help Boris and the juniors stow the barrels.

* * * *

The voice from his Hive link had a hint of buzzing behind it but Janer reckoned that was just showmanship. Hornets did not communicate by buzzing, and Hive minds certainly did not. He suspected that this ersatz buzzing was the mind's idea of a joke.

'I would like you to travel with this Erlin. I find her interesting,' the mind told him.

It wasn't an instruction any more. The mind had ceased to issue instructions when his indenture had run out two decades back. The request, though, was backed by the promise of unlimited credit, travel, and lack of boredom, and for Janer boredom could be a problem, as it was for so many Polity citizens now.

'I thought you wanted me to stick with the reif,' he whispered, conscious of the people all around him.

'The reification, I suspect, will go with her. If he does not, he will find her again in the future. Her story and hers connect.'

'You haven't told me his story yet.'

'In good time, in good time. Let us watch this fight for the present.'

The two Hoopers facing each other in the dirt ring had stripped naked and oiled themselves from head to foot. The crowd was baying for blood, yet there seemed an insincerity about their shouting.

'You note that they strip off their clothing first,' said the mind.

'So?' said Janer.

'Their bodies repair themselves. Clothing has to be repaired.'

Janer absorbed that and nodded to himself. A passing tout assumed the nod was for him and he turned to Janer.

'Domby or Forlam? Shillings, yen, dollars - or skind if you have to. What bet?'

The man was short and powerfully built. He seemed to have none of those distinctive Hooper leech marks visible on him. Janer recognized his accent as off-world.

'What are the odds?'

'Domby's a three-fifty and Forlam a one-fifty, with an impressive list of recent wins. Thirteen to one on Domby for an E, and ten to one on Forlam for a pop. Either of them drops from a vaso, and you lose. The fight is two hours limited.'

'I'll put ten shillings on Domby for an E,' said Janer.

'Very good, sir.' The tout looked worried as he wrote out a betting slip and accepted Janer's ten-shilling note. Others in the crowd were eyeing Janer speculatively.

'That was a high bet here,' said the mind. *'Your average Hooper would have to work half a year for such a sum.'*

'Really. If you know that much, perhaps you can tell me what Es, pops and vasos are,'

said Janer.

'An E is an evisceration and a pop is a burst eye. A vaso is when one or both of the contestants collapse through loss of blood,' the mind replied succinctly.

'Oh, very nice. What are my chances of winning?'

'You heard the odds.'

Janer glowered at the two hornets in their case then returned his attention to the fight. Domby, who Janer presumed to be the one showing the most leech scars, had stepped into the ring with a long curved dagger in each hand. Forlam then stepped in to face him. His weapons consisted of a stiletto and something that looked like an ice-axe. As soon as they were face to face, someone rang a dull sounding bell. The volume of the shouting immediately increased as the opponents began to circle and feint. Domby was the first to get a hit. He opened Forlam's arm through to the bone, and blood jetted for a moment before abruptly ceasing to flow. Forlam backed away then leapt forward to jam his stiletto in Domby's stomach. In reply, Domby cut Forlam's ear so it was hanging by a thread. Forlam managed a low blow that cut Domby's scrotum in half. Five or six more blows followed before the two parted and circled again. Janer stood with his mouth open and a sick feeling in his gut as he watched Forlam shake his head in irritation and with his forearm press his ear back into place. When the Hooper moved his arm away, the ear remained in position again, if slightly askew. On the other side of this dusty arena, the crowd had parted round an off-worlder who was spewing vomit on to the dirt. Janer was a little harder than that. He'd seen some horrible things in his time, but this . . .

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