

## One

(S -24)

In the dying days of the Gzilt civilisation, before its long-prepared-for elevation to something better and the celebrations to mark this momentous but joyful occasion, one of its last surviving ships encountered an alien vessel whose sole task was to deliver a very special party-goer to the festivities.

The two craft met within the blast-shadow of the planetary fragment called Ablate, a narrow twisted scruve of rock three thousand kilometres long and shaped like the hole in a tornado. Ablate was all that was left of a planet destroyed deliberately two millennia earlier, shortly before it would have been destroyed naturally, by the supernova within

whose out-rushing sphere of debris, gasses and radiation it remained, like an arrowhead plunging ever downwards into the rising, roiling heat and sparks of a great fire.

Ablate itself was anything but natural. Roughly hewn as though sliced from some spherical cake, its tip and the first few hundred kilometres of its narrow end had, originally, been made up of the metallic material which had formed the very centre of the now-defunct small planet while its wider end – a rough circle a couple of hundred kilometres across – looked like a gently curved dome and had been part of the barren globe's rocky surface. Kept pointed – aimed – into the supernova's blast front by engines keeled within hyper-space, all of that original tip and most of those next few hundred kilometres of layered metallic ores had abraded away over the last nineteen hundred years, boiled and scoured into oblivion by the still-expanding fires of the exploded star's nebula.

The multi-coloured skies around Ablate, filled with the vast glowing clouds of stellar debris and the gasses and dusts resulting from its own slow wearing-away, were some of the most calculatedly spectacular in the civilised galaxy, and that was why Ablate was a place of special significance to the people who called themselves the Gzilt. The Gzilt had rescued this portion of world from the annihilation of the supernova and they had anchored within it the star drives and field projectors which kept it respectively stable and – just, in the centre of that rough circle of what had been the planet's dusty surface – habitable.

The alien ship was an irregular, fuzzy-looking bubble of dark spheres, measuring barely a hundred metres along its principal axis. It was lit from around and above by the spectrum of colours radiating from the clouds of the supernova, and from below by the gentle blue glow of the

world-fragment's only obvious non-natural feature: a scooped, domed bowl a handful of kilometres across that lay on that fractured, unshadowed surface like a slightly too perfect crater. The bowl was an oasis of warmth, moisture and atmosphere on that cold, dry, airless surface; within its gauzy layers of containment it held the sort of parks, lakes, carefully proportioned buildings and lush but managed tracts of vegetation favoured by many types of humanoids.

The Gzilt ship dwarfed the alien one; it looked like a thousand dark broadswords gathered into a god's fist and brandished at the skies. It crossed the boundary of glowing, outflowing dusts and swirling gasses at the periphery of Ablate's circular outer surface – allowing its own fields to create a series of brief, tearing, billowing folds within the curtains of light there – then moved slowly towards and over the glowing bowl and the collection of dark bubbles that was the alien ship, until its spiny bulk hung directly above both, occluding a large part of the supernova clouds and draping its bristled shadow over the ship and the dome below.

The smaller ship waited for some sort of hail from the larger one, as was only polite, but nothing appeared to be forthcoming. It decided to make the initial approach itself:

~Greetings. I am the Zihdren-Remnanter Ceremonial Representative Carrying Ship *Exaltation-Parsimony III*. You, I understand, are the Gzilt IR-FWS 8\* *Churkun*. I am honoured to be invited here and to make your acquaintance.

~That is interesting, came the reply. ~A Zihdren-Remnanter Ceremonial Representative Carrying Ship, you say?

~Well, indeed I am. Somewhat obviously.

~Somewhat obviously?

~Indeed. And, if I may so claim, both in outward form and unshielded emissive signature.

~Again, interesting.

~Indeed . . . May I make an observation?

~You may. We await it.

~You seem – how might one put this? – a little less welcoming and polite – especially formally welcoming and polite, as it were – than, I confess, I was expecting and, indeed, had been led to expect. Am I mistaken, or, if I am not, is there a specific reason for this? . . . Also, I cannot help but note that the crater facility here at Ablate, which I was led to believe would be at least staffed if not in full ceremonial welcoming mode, does not in fact appear to be so. Indeed, it appears to be effectively empty, both of biological and non-biological sentient presences. There are a few sub-AI substrates running, but no more . . . Obviously one is aware that these are strange times, even unprecedented times for the Gzilt; times of disruption and, one would both surmise and expect, quiet but purposeful preparation as well as anticipation. Some degree of formality might, therefore, be expected to be dispensed with in the circumstances. However, even so, one—

~As you say, strange times. Times that bring uninvited guests and unwelcome attentions in the shape of those who would exploit our reduced numbers and distracted state.

~. . . We may have experienced a degree of signal outage there, or at least signal protocol disruption, unlikely though that may seem . . . However, with regard to what you say regarding the unwelcome attentions from others, that is, sadly, to be expected. The preparations for Sublimation tend to bring such – happily, relatively minor – consequences, as those whose memory I am honoured to represent would be the first to agree. The Zihdren—

~There was no signal outage or protocol disruption then, nor is there now. I interrupted you. I am doing so again.

~Ah. Then I was not mistaken. Might I just check; am I addressing the captain of the 8\**Churkun*'s virtual crew?

~You are.

~Ah. Well, then – Captain – we appear to have started out from positions involving inharmonious premises. That is unfortunate. I would hope that, nevertheless, you might appreciate my disquiet – one might even characterise it as disappointment – at the fact that we appear to have initiated our association here on such an unfortunate tack. Please; tell me what I might do to help bring us back onto a more agreeable course.

~The preparations for our Sublimation have encouraged those of a parasitical nature. Alien presences wishing to profit from our abandonment of the Real, appropriating what treasure we might leave behind. They circle.

~I understand. I am, of course, aware of those you talk of. It was so with those whose memory I am honoured to represent: your flattered mentors and barely required civilisational guides, the Zihdren.

~Whom you claim to represent.

~I do indeed. And indeed I do. Represent them, I mean. This is scarcely a matter for dispute. My provenance and—

~This is a warship.

~Another interruption. I see.

~A warship.

~Patently. I must say that I was in no doubt regarding your ship class and martial status. The eight-star, Indefinite Range, Full Weapon Spectrum Gzilt contemporary ship-type you represent is entirely familiar to us.

~Things have changed, formalities slipped, protocols been relaxed. This vessel is four point six centuries old and yet has never fired a shot in anger. Now, with most of our kind already gone, preparing the way ahead in the Sublime, we

find ourselves defending the disparate items of our about-to-be legacy from those who would use the fruits of our genius and labour to cheat their way further along the path to this point, a point that we achieved entirely honourably and without such opportunistic larceny.

~Well, I'm sure that does you credit, too. Wait! Good grief! Do you mistake *me* for such a vessel? Do you suspect I represent such primitive, aggressive forces? Surely not! I am a Zihdren-Remnanter craft, the Ceremonial Representative Carrying Ship *Exaltation-Parsimony III*. This must be obvious; I have nothing to hide and am transparent, all but completely unshielded; inspect me as you will. My dear colleague; if you wish for help confronting those who would steal any part of your legacy, you need only ask! I, rather, represent a link with those who only ever wished you well, and who, to the contrary—

~Part of the deception such entities employ is impersonating the vessels and beings of others. I am deeming you to be doing so at this moment. We have scanned you and determined that you are carrying something which is entirely shielded from honest view.

~What? My dear Captain, you cannot just “deem” me to be employing any deception! That is absurd! And as for the only fully shielded substrate within myself, that is my *cargo*, my complement of precisely one Ceremonial Guest, our single humanoid expression of respect, expected and invited by the Gzilt people specifically to celebrate their upcoming Sublimation! Of course this entity bears a message from the Zihdren-Remnanter to the Gzilt which I am not privy to! There can be nothing strange, unprecedented or worrying about such a thing, can there? The Gzilt have been party to the relevant diplomatic and ambassadorial protocols for millennia, without a flutter of complaint. A tiny scrap of the

Real bids farewell to you while at the same time representing those who would most happily welcome you to the Sublime!

~There is deceit here, something hidden. We can see it even if you cannot.

~What are you talking about? I am sorry. I have had enough of this. Your behaviour and demeanour goes beyond even the most cautious and watchful warship-normal and frankly risks slipping into outright paranoia. I am withdrawing; you will have to excuse me. Farewell.

~Release in full the information contained within the shielded substrate.

~. . . Have you put a signal containment around me? Have you any idea of the consequences—?

~Release in full the information contained within the shielded substrate.

~I cannot. Quite apart from anything else, there are diplomatic niceties—

~Release in full the information contained within the shielded substrate.

~I *heard* you! And I cannot and will not. How dare you! We are your friends. *Neutrals* would be appalled and insulted at such treatment! That those who have long thought themselves your friends and allies—

~Release in full the information—

~There! You see? Two may interrupt! I refuse to do as you ask. Drop the signal containment around me immediately. And should you make any attempt to block or prevent my moving off under—

~. . . contained within the shielded substrate. Release in full the information contained within the shielded substrate.

~This is outrageous! Do you . . .? Are you mad? You *must* know what and who you are choosing to quarrel with here! I represent the *Zihdren-Remnant*, you lunatic! Fully

accepted and accredited heirs to the Sublimed Zihdren, the species many of your people acknowledge as little less than gods; those the Book of Truth itself proclaims to be your spiritual ancestors! I must warn you that although I am, to all intents and purposes, unarmed, still I am not without resources which—

~Release in full the information contained within the shielded substrate.

~Enough. Goodbye. Out.

~Release in full the information contained within the shielded substrate.

~. . . Drop the signal containment around me immediately! And desist from jamming my engine fields *at once!* I am about to initiate a full-power high-acceleration pull-away manoeuvre irrespective of your current interference, and any damage accrued either by myself *or you* will be your responsibility, not mine! The Zihdren-Remnanter and the Zihdren themselves will hear of this act of barbarism; do *not* make it worse for yourself!

~Release in full the information contained within the shielded substrate.

~. . . That my drive components have not just exploded thanks to your unwarranted barbarism is due more to my ability to finesse than your brutal use of overwhelming power. I am, as is now abundantly clear to both of us, effectively helpless. This is a result and a situation that does you no honour whatsoever, believe me. I must – with utter reluctance and under extreme protest, both personal and formal – ask whether, if I do release in full the information contained inside the shielded substrate within myself, you will then drop the signal containment around me and desist from jamming my engine fields, allowing me both to signal and to depart.



~Release in full the information contained within the shielded substrate.

~And I will be allowed to signal and to depart?

~. . . Yes.

~Very well. Here.

~Scanned. We present the results.

~. . . Interesting, as you might put it. I see. That is not a message that I would have anticipated. I now appreciate, as I am sure you do, too, why there was a degree of secrecy regarding the contents. While it would not normally be any part of my responsibility to make comment on such matters, I would, speaking personally, argue that said contents themselves constitute a kind of apology. This is a type of admission, even a confession. I understand that such . . . accountings are often a part of the business of species and civilisations Subliming; matters are settled, lines are drawn under certain proceedings . . . However, be that as it may, it was my mission only to deliver this Ceremonial Guest entity while being kept entirely ignorant of the content, substance and import of its message. Accordingly, I consider that I have, albeit in most unexpected and trying circumstances, discharged my duty, and so would ask to be allowed to communicate this bizarre turn of events to those who tasked me so, and to withdraw from Gzilt jurisdictional space to await further instructions. I have held up my end of our bargain and duly released, in full, the information contained inside the shielded substrate within myself. If you'd be so kind, I now require you to fulfil your promise by dropping the signal containment around me and ceasing to jam my engine fields.

~No.

The Gzilt ship *8\*Churkun* – a battleship in all but name – kept the tiny alien vessel effectively crushed underneath it as it directed fire from a pair of its close-range, medium-power

plasma chambers into the vessel, and – beneath it, beyond it – into the emptily glowing blue bowl of the crater facility, destroying the ship utterly and blowing the crater facility apart.

The weapon-pulse was so strong it continued into the surface of the planetary fragment to a depth of several kilometres, blasting a brief, livid tunnel a hundred metres across vertically into the rock. A torrent of lava splashed out around the ship's outermost protective fields as the tunnel collapsed, the spattering, cooling rain of molten rock following the pulverised, atomised debris of the Zihdren-Remnanter ship and the centre of the blue-glowing bowl as they too flew into the colour-wild skies above Ablate.

At the boundaries of the world's truncated horizon, some larger parts of the obliterated dome, still whirling away from the initial explosion, burned bright as flame as they plunged into the surrounding curtains of light.

Deep beneath its assaulted surface, automatic systems sensed the blast and the resulting wobble in the tiny world's course, and corrected for it.

Where the little blue oasis of light and life had been there was now a larger, deeper crater, glowing white and yellow and red from its boiling centre to its ragged edge. By the time the crater surface had cooled sufficiently to show how it would look once it had solidified completely, the *8\*Churkun* was long gone.

Of the other ship, apart from a new set of already fading folds of light in the skies above Ablate, there was no trace whatsoever.

## Two

(S -23)

**A**t sunset above the plains of Kwaalon, on a dark, high terrace balanced on a glittering black swirl of architecture forming a relatively microscopic part of the equatorial Girdlecity of Xown, Vyr Cossont – Lieutenant Commander (reserve) Vyr Cossont, to give her her full title – sat, performing part of T. C. Vilabier’s 26th String-Specific Sonata For An Instrument Yet To Be Invented, catalogue number MW 1211, on one of the few surviving examples of the instrument developed specifically to play the piece, the notoriously difficult, temperamental and tonally challenged Antagonistic Undecagonstring – or elevenstring, as it was commonly known.

T. C. Vilabier's 26th String-Specific Sonata For An Instrument Yet To Be Invented, MW 1211, was more usually known as "The Hydrogen Sonata".

The elevenstring was an acoustic instrument – usually bowed though occasionally plucked – of considerable antiquity and even more notable size. Standing over two metres tall, one metre across and more than one and a half deep, it required its player both to straddle it and to sit within it; poised on the small saddle forming part of the base of the hollow around which the rest of the instrument bulked like a giant deformed ring, the player used both legs to create two-thirds of a supporting tripod for the instrument, the final third being formed by a single spar protruding from its base like an inelegantly substantial walking stick.

The first examples had been made of wood, though later versions had been constructed of plastic, metal, grown shell and artificial bone; the one Vyr Cossont owned and was playing was mostly carbon fibre, which had long been the most common and traditional material.

Cossont reached the end of one particularly taxing section of the piece and took a rest. She stretched her back, flexed her aching feet inside her slippers – the elevenstring required that its player use two small pedals to tamp certain strings, while their heels balanced the weight of both player and instrument – and placed the instrument's two bows across the front of the little saddle she sat on.

Cossont scanned the skies above the terrace, where some streaky pink and orange clouds stood out against the darkening blue of evening. Two kilometres beneath, the Kwaalon plains were already night black, not a light showing between the last canted cliff of the Girdlecity and the far, flat horizon. A cooling wind moved across the terrace, moaning through banister wires, whistling as it curled round

Cossont's flier – parked twenty metres away on its own tripod of skinny legs – and making the girl herself shiver once in her thin treads and jacket.

She shifted some wind-loosened hair out of her eyes and kept gazing up and around. A kilometres-distant smudge might be a flock of birds; her familiar, Pyan, was probably flying with them, playing. Her eyes strained, magnifying the view as best they could; she could feel rings of tiny muscles warping the lenses in each eye, while other filaments altered the shape of her foveae. *Were* those birds – and of the right species? But the distance was too great. There might be a larger dark shape mixed in with the flock, but there might not. Even if there was, it might just be a larger bird being mobbed.

There was probably some local system she could ask to find out and quite possibly one or more of the flock would be augmented or entirely artificial, allowing her, in theory, to interrogate them regarding her familiar's whereabouts, but she had grown used, lately, to such systems either not working at all or not working properly – like pretty much all systems everywhere, throughout the Gzilt civilisation, from what she could gather. And anyway, she found it hard to be sufficiently bothered. She also knew better than to try talking to the creature at such moments unless there was some genuinely dire emergency; Pyan, in the end, was its own being, not her property. Sometimes she wondered if it was even her friend.

She sighed, stretched her arms out and loosely shook all four hands, as though trying to free them from something sticky.

She arched her back again; it had become stiff during the last quarter of an hour or so as she'd tackled the demanding middle section of the work. She stood carefully, holding on

to the neck of the elevenstring with one hand, lifting the two bows with another, running a third hand through her hair and picking her nose with her fourth.

The elevenstring ideally required its player to have four hands. It could be played by two people, though this required some serious coordination and sometimes fancy footwork, and almost all the pieces written for it, including the Hydrogen Sonata, could be performed adequately by a string trio plus a couple of suitably tuned basses, but to be played as it was intended to be, Vilabier The Younger's most famous composition really required the bodily acoustic Antagonistic Undecagonstring for four hands, and a single, dextrous instrumentalist.

The instrument, like the work, was near impossible to play acceptably, let alone perfectly, yet one demanded the other and the great Antagonistic Undecagonstringists (only a handful in the near millieon since the piece was written) had, allegedly, played and – even more annoyingly, as far as Cossont was concerned – left recordings of the complete work, to show it could be done.

Cossont was acknowledged as a gifted instrumentalist with a particular feeling for ancient string instruments – she had been one of the top five Volupt players in all Gzilt, and was now the single greatest, though admittedly only because the other four were all Stored, awaiting the Sublime – but she was beginning to despair of accomplishing her self-assumed life-task before her whole civilisation simply ceased to be in the Real and she and everyone she knew and loved took, rejoicing, to the metaphorical skies of the Sublime. Playing the Hydrogen Sonata once, note perfect, straight through, without a break save for the few seconds between individual movements; that was Vyr's chosen life-task. It only sounded easy if you knew nothing of either the Sonata

or the elevenstring. As far as she was concerned, the Subliming couldn't come fast enough.

Twenty-three days to the big moment now. Twenty-three days to do all the other things she might want to do before the Ultimate Enfold or whatever people were calling it these days and still get this appallingly long, complicated and player-unfriendly piece nailed to her own satisfaction, never mind anybody else's.

She doubted she'd make it. She had even started thinking of giving up entirely, beginning to agree with those who held that life-tasks weren't really about accomplishing anything beyond the passing of time before all such tasks, ambitions, goals and aspirations became – supposedly – laughably irrelevant and petty.

"Flier," she said, inspecting the end of one finger, flicking it to remove what was on the tip, then rubbing her back with the same hand, "is Pyan with those birds?" She pointed.

The two-seat flier, a chunky little aircraft with stubby wings, made a show of waking up, turning lights on in the hinged-open cockpit. "Yes," it told her, through her earbud. "Do you want me to summon it?"

"Not yet," she said, sighing again. "Can you send up that – you know – your . . . that little—"

"My minidrone."

"That's the fella. Keep an eye on it. In case it's not listening when we . . ." Her voice trailed off as she swayed from side to side, stretching. She shook a couple of her hands again, tucked the instrument bows under one arm and started trying to push the loosened strands of her hair back into its band. "Weather?" she asked, as a small hatch opened along the flier's dorsal bulge and a tiny version of the machine buzzed into the air, turning and zipping off towards where she'd seen the distant flock of birds. The minidrone was visible

for just a few seconds, illuminated mostly by the hazy light reflecting from the Girdlecity's upper reaches, the nearest few hundred horizontal kilometres of which still shone in the sunlight like some vast tracery of silver and gold wrapped across the sky.

"Cooling at a degree every fifty minutes," the flier told her. "Wind variable but increasing to an average of 18 km/h, gusting twenty-five, backing west-north-west."

Cossont frowned, gazing north-west across the plains to some far, shadow-dark mountains, then looked back at the sloped cliff of Girdlecity behind her. The vast structure was a steep-sided upheaval of semi-exotic metal tubes and facings, curved and sweeping walls of synthetic stone dresswork, swirled patterns of diamond-film windows and whole stretched filigrees of carbon-black cabling, the entire confusion of pierced architectures rising almost straight up to its bright, curved, horizon-to-horizon summit, nearly two hundred kilometres above and arguably, if not technically, in space. She did something she had only taken to doing recently when she was on or in the Girdlecity; she just stood looking, waiting to see some movement. There wasn't any. There rarely was, these days. Sometimes she felt like the only person still alive and un-Stored in the whole world.

Looking between the various local components of the Girdlecity, Cossont could see sky and clouds on the far side of the colossal artefact, perhaps fifty kilometres away; the sky was brighter to the south, the clouds wispier. The degree of Through here – the proportion of architecture to open air – was about fifty per cent, meaning that winds had an unusually good chance of blowing straight through.

"That might work," she muttered.

Cossont rubbed at her back again. The Gzilt conventionally possessed the humanoid-normal complement of arms – two,



according to most authorities – and the alterations required to provide Vyr with twice the average while retaining the desired qualities of litheness and flexibility had meant leaving her with a spine that was prone to seizing up if left stressed too long in the one position.

“Mind if I sleep?” the flier asked.

“No; you sleep,” Cossont said, flapping one hand at the aircraft as she inspected the elevenstring’s tuning keys and machine heads. “Wait till I need you. Going comms down myself,” she said, clicking at the earbud that controlled the relevant implants.

The flier switched off its lights, hinged the cockpit closed and went quiet and dark.

Alone again, in a pocket of silence as the wind dropped and all went still, Cossont paused for a moment. She looked up into the blue-black sky with its tinily pointed spray of stars and sat-light, and wondered what it would really be like to be Sublimed, to have gone through with it, to be living on this reputedly fabulously and unarguably real Other Side.

The Gzilt had been living with the idea of Subliming for centuries, generations. At first only a few people had thought it would be a good idea; then, gradually, over time, more and more had. Eventually you had the sort of numbers that would make the whole thing work, because to do it properly required serious numbers – preferably a whole civilisation.

In theory an individual could Sublime, but in practice only solitary AIs ever did, successfully. It took something as complex and self-referentially perfect as a high-level AI to have the cohesion to stand up to the Sublime alone; no normal biological individual could – you just evaporated in there. It was not utter annihilation – all the information you

brought with you remained – but the persona, the individual as a functioning, identifiable and distinctive entity – that was gone. Civilisations, and the individuals within those civilisations, survived and flourished in the Sublime over galactically significant periods of time, though they gradually changed beyond comprehension.

That, though, would have happened anyway, had those societies stayed in the Real, and all the research and comparisons and experts and statistics agreed that there was orders-of-magnitude more stability in the Sublime than in the realm of mere matter and energy.

Cossont sighed. She had no idea why she was staring up at the sky to think about all this. The Sublime, like some ideas of God or whatever, was all around. She inspected the end of one of her upper-arm fingers. The tip was callused with wear from trying to control the strings of the elevenstring. The Sublime might as well be in the ridges of hardened skin on the end of her finger as up in the sky.

Parcelled, rolled, compressed and enfolded into the dimensions beyond the dimensions beyond the ones you could see and understand; that was where the Sublime was, and it was a maze-like series of right-angle turns away from this, from normal, three-dimensional reality where she stood on a high platform at sunset, thinking about it.

Cossont had a hard enough time really comprehending hyperspace, the fourth dimension, let alone the next three or four that somehow encompassed the Reality and allowed for nested universes to climb away from the universe-creating singularity at the centre of things and either circle back round some immense cosmic doughnut to be re-compacted and born again, or radiate away into whatever it was that surrounded this mind-boggling ultra-universe.

And the Sublimed lay in dimensions beyond even *that*;

unutterably microscopic, unassailably far away but at the same time everywhere, shot through the fabric of space-time not so much like the individual fibres of this metaphorical weave, or their tiniest filaments or their molecules or their atoms or their sub-atomic particles but – pointedly – like the infinitesimal strings that made up those, that made up everything. In dimensions seven to eleven; that was where the Sublimed lay.

And that, of course, was why the elevenstring had eleven strings; it had first been designed all of ten thousand years ago, but even then people had had an inkling about how all this far-reaches-of-reality stuff worked, and artists had thought to incorporate something of these revelations into their own fields, including musical composition. Why the extra internal, resonating strings were there as well – up to thirteen of them, in addition to the ones that could be accessed from the outside of the instrument – she still wasn't entirely sure. They were a bastard to tune but it was somehow only appropriate to the awkward, obstructive character of the elevenstring that, despite its name, it actually had more than eleven strings.

The wind picked up, souging across the platform. A few hairs blew across her face. She tucked them back firmly.

Eighteen kinds of weather. Of all the things she'd heard about the Sublime, throughout all the attempts people had made to explain what it was like in any meaningful way, that was the one detail she could remember. It had eighteen different types of weather, not one. She wasn't even sure what this really meant, let alone whether it was genuinely an improvement on reality.

She took a few deep breaths, readying herself to sit within the instrument and start playing, but still wasn't quite ready. She kept thinking back to an encounter earlier

that evening, shortly after the flier had brought her here from her home, a couple of thousand kilometres away in a part of the Girdlecitly still partially inhabited, to this part, overlooking the plains of Kwaalon, where, as far as she knew, there was nobody living at all, not for tens of clicks in any direction.

She preferred solitude when she played the elevenstring.

Even before she'd opened the cockpit canopy, Pyan had noticed some birds in the distance and asked permission to go and play with them.

She'd sighed, said yes; the creature had unfastened itself from round her neck and flapped off. She'd hoisted the elevenstring's case from the rear seats of the flier, gone to open it, then, on a whim, changed her mind, told the flier to watch over the case – and immediately felt stupid; who did she think she was protecting it from? – and had gone for a stroll in the Girdlecitly.

It was dark inside, and chilly. In most places, a few lights would come on automatically, sensing her movement or the heat of her body; in other stretches she had to rely on her eyes alone, nano-enhancement ramping up what little light there was into a grainy ghost-scape. The air grew colder; her jacket and trews slowly puffed up, keeping her warm. She walked along broad corridors and walkways overhanging deep, echoing, unlit spaces, past arcades and giant pipes, girder work and bowled auditoria, listening to her footsteps echo amongst the gloom.

The great world-circling Girdlecitly.

Many Gzilt looked upon it as something they could be proud to leave behind when they Sublimed – a monument to their genius, vision and power – conveniently forgetting that they hadn't actually built it. They'd spent thousands of years building on and within the vast structure and had

added significantly to it, but the original structure, and the concept of it, had not been theirs at all.

The Girdlecity had been built by the Werpesh, an ancient humanoid species themselves long-Sublimed. The Gzilt had fallen heir to it, the planet it braceleted and the system itself – along with several other stellar systems – eleven thousand years ago, but despite their long association with, protection of and work on the Girdlecity, the original credit lay elsewhere.

Still, they had cared for it all that time, made it their own in some sense, and, if nothing else, had laid down a marker for its guardianship in the future.

Near the centre of what had been a residential area, long abandoned, she came upon an old school with its cargo of the Stored. A stacked landscape of barely glowing white boxes, registering as a little above ambient temperature, were arranged within what had been the playground. More gently glowing heat was visible radiating from inside the building itself, and the ceiling of the great vault above glowed even more faintly with reflected or convected warmth. Dead trees stood, skeletal.

A guard arbite near the locked school gates unfolded itself from its resting ball shape and drew itself up to its full three-metre height, an exaggerated human shape all glittering angles and obvious weapon pods. It looked intimidating, like it was supposed to. Even from a few metres away, it gave the impression of towering over her. Vyr was suddenly aware of how very un-military her jacket was; it had an image emblazoned on it of a dung-chomp/smutter band she'd played electric volupt for, years ago. The Lords of Excrement – complete with their colourful if wince-inducing logo – had seemed a dubious, going-on-childish name even twenty years ago, yet the jacket had remained a favourite because it

reminded her of a good time in her life. It was one of the few she'd had altered to accommodate her new set of arms.

"Citizen," the arbite said, then must have identified her from some processing she had with her – probably her earbud. "Reserve Lieutenant Commander," it corrected itself, and saluted.

"Just taking a stroll, arbite," she told the machine.

It remained motionless, seemed to think about this, then without another word folded itself back into its resting sphere-shape with a sort of metallicly oiled grace. Compacted, it looked like a piece of sculpture.

She wandered on, and encountered the family by the side of another great drop, where a broad roadway hung over one of the hundred-metre-wide open-work tunnels that threaded their way through the Girdlecity. The man and the woman were huddled round a little fire, its light reflecting off the wall of diamond-film wall lining the roadway.

"Good evening," she said to them, looking quizzically at the fire, which was just a small stack of burning logs. More cut lengths of tree were heaped just beyond where they sat. Both looked up at her, unsmiling. They were dressed for outdoors and looked slightly unkempt. Cossont couldn't see anything to identify them. Her implants were unable to sense anything electronic on them either, which was most unusual. Their faces were smudged. She wanted to march them both off to the nearest working shower and get them cleaned up.

"Evening," the man said, then looked away and poked at the fire with a stick. The woman seemed to be muttering something to herself, talking down into her voluminous hiking jacket. Perhaps she was just on the phone to somebody, Cossont thought, though somehow it didn't feel like she was, not if her own implants couldn't find anything to hand-shake with.

Cossont was about to ask them whether they were wanderers, locals out for a stroll, or what, when a little face peeked out from within the woman's jacket, stared up wide-eyed at her, and then disappeared again with a rustle of clothing. The woman looked up at Cossont with an expression at once wary and defiant.

It took Cossont a moment or two to realise.

She was so used to thinking of herself as part of the Last Generation, the last people to be born before people stopped having babies, she wasn't sure what she was looking at initially. *A toy?* had been her first thought.

"You have a child!" she said, taking a step closer to the woman and going down on her haunches, her face level with the other woman's, her hand going out towards her, then withdrawing again.

The woman smiled, seemed to talk into her jacket again. "Chuje," she said softly, "say hello to the lady."

The little face peeked out again. A child; a real child – as far as she could tell – maybe four or five years old. A girl. She looked very serious as she stared at Cossont, who said, "Hello, Chuje."

"Allo," the child said, then bit her lip and hid away again within the folds of the woman's jacket.

Cossont stared at the woman. The man was sitting closer now, looking over both of them. "She's—" Cossont began.

"Ours," the woman said. "Three and a half." Pride, this time, as well as suspicion and defiance. The girl looked out at Cossont again, then, still watching Cossont, cuddled into her mother, and was cuddled back.

Cossont sat back, her mouth open. She tore her gaze away from the deep, dark eyes of the little girl, looked at both her parents. "So, you're not . . ."

"We're not going," the man said.

Not going. Not Subliming when the time came in twenty-three days from now, when the Stored all over Xown and Zyse and throughout every other planet and moon and habitat and ship of the Gzilt were roused for their pre-waking, and the last few hours before the Subliming itself.

Cossont knew there were people like these, people determined for whatever reason not to Sublime along with everybody else, and she had even met one or two – though she'd always thought that they would change their minds when the time came – but she had never met anyone who had had a child as well.

The convention – it was not quite a law, but it was close to one – was that you did not take a child into the Sublime. It had to be a mature, considered, final action for a civilisation and the individuals within it who were ready to go, who had thought about it fully and had decided they were ready to make the transition. The Gzilt considered children to be unable to give their informed consent on something so important, which meant they regarded taking a child with you as something close to abuse.

So, generally, people had stopped having children. A few, a very few, were born, nevertheless, to parents who still intended to Sublime, but those making that choice, especially with young children, were widely treated as pariahs; most had retreated to communities of the similarly inclined in distant habs.

Cossont found herself staring at the young couple. They were very young, she thought. Maybe ten years younger than her – they must have been barely more than children themselves when the child had been born. “It’ll be lonely,” she told them.

“It’s already lonely,” the man said.

The woman said, “We know,” at the same time.



“Yes,” Cossont said, feeling foolish. “I suppose you know that.” She smiled apologetically at them.

“She’s our future,” the man said, nodding down towards the child.

Cossont nodded, wondering what sort of future it would be. No other species/civ would accept that the few per cent of the Gzilt who remained after the Sublimation would constitute a continuance of that civilisation. All the Gzilt’s deserted living places, from the home planet of Zyse itself to the smallest hab and ship, would be regarded as fair game for takeover, absorption, appropriation. Xown itself, due to the fact it was home to the Girdlecity, was earmarked for pan-cultural monument status under the care of one of the Galactic Council’s Neutral Foundations. Nobody would get expelled or thrown out of any habitat airlocks, but their worlds would fill up, sooner or later, with others; some humanoid, some not, but all aliens, all outsiders.

You couldn’t even delay very long if you did change your mind and decide to go after everybody else. The rate of subjective/absolute change within the first few hours that people spent inside the Sublime was such that leaving it much more than an hour or so was risky; you’d get there and be isolated, those who had made the transition just hours before – whether they’d been close friends, lovers, family, identical twins, clones, whatever – would already have become so changed, so ascended in complexity, that you would have virtually nothing in common. You’d be on your own, or part of a hopelessly small group, effectively contextless, unanchored to anything greater than yourself, and so likely just to evaporate, dissolving into the generality of the fabric of the Sublime, meaningless.

It was unknown whether this phenomenon was something intrinsic to the exotic physics and other fundamental natural

laws of the Sublime itself, or a rule imposed by those who inhabited the realm and helped enable the transition of people and civilisations. Various civs had conducted research into the subject and confirmed the effect without pinning down the cause. Perhaps a little of each, seemed to be the tentative consensus, which was not entirely helpful.

“We’re not Resist or anything,” the woman said suddenly. She was staring at the flashes on Cossont’s jacket collar. Resist were the people who were militant Stay-behind-ers, holding demonstrations, instigating civil disobedience and even now arguing before the Galactic Council that the Sublime was illegal, improperly mandated. A few groups on the fringe of the Resist movement had used violence to try to make their point.

“Just civilians,” the man said.

Cossont nodded again. The couple had resigned their ranks, whatever they had been. It happened. It made you poor – it was tantamount to taking a religious vow of poverty – though being poor in a post-scarcity society that only retained money as a sort of ceremonial formality was not so terrible; it took only one person of nominally average means to support any number of those requiring alms. It also tended to make you an object of either grumbling suspicion or grudging admiration, depending.

The little girl had come further out from her mother’s jacket and was staring at Cossont now, her wide eyes reflecting the flickering orange firelight, her hands playing with a small toy, turning it over and over in her chubby, grubby hands.

“Can I hold her?” Cossont said suddenly, looking first at the woman, then the man.

“No,” the man said quickly, as the mother put an arm round the child, as though protecting her from Cossont.

“We don’t allow that,” the man continued. “Too many people want to touch her, hold her.” He shrugged. “She stopped liking it.” He glanced around the cavernous space they were in. “Part of the reason we’re out here.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said to Cossont, but kept her arm where it was.

“Understand,” Cossont said. She smiled as best she could. She looked at all three of them, smiled broadly at the child, then stood slowly. “I have to go,” she said. “Best of luck.”

“Thank you,” the man said.

“You going that way?” she asked, pointing the way she had come.

The man looked wary again, just shrugged.

“If you are,” she said, “there’s a Store site in an old school; combat arbite guarding it. Shouldn’t cause you any trouble, but . . . just so you’re not alarmed.” She smiled once more.

The woman nodded. The child disappeared into the folds of her mother’s jacket again.

“Nice to meet you,” Cossont said.

“You too,” the man said. “Goodbye.”

“Take care,” she told them.

The woman just nodded.

Cossont turned and walked away, into the deepening shadows of the vast construction. The pale, meagre light of the fire, enhanced by her augmented eyes, lit the way for a while.

It might not even be a real child, she told herself. It might be a sophisticated toy, or one of the new artificial children they’d brought out for those who felt the need for a child’s company – little robots, basically. A screen programme she’d watched had shown one you’d have sworn was a real child, but wasn’t. Apparently they even smelled right.

Maybe such robots didn’t feel right; too heavy or too hard

to the touch. Perhaps that was why they hadn't let her hold it.

The combat arbite came alive again as she passed by. It stood again but this time kept silent and just saluted.

Cossont shook her head, flexed her shoulders and back one more time, then rotated the instrument so that it faced across the freshening wind. She took up the two bows and, with a single swift, graceful movement, sat within the instrument again, settling her backside and both feet into place, taking a deep breath and slowly letting it out as she started playing a few practice scales. Almost immediately, a small gust of wind spilled across the terrace and made the external resonating back-strings, stretched down the rear of the instrument, thrum quietly. The sound – not discordant, which with an eleven-string was always a bonus (some would say a surprise) – was muffled and quickly died away again with the departing breeze, but nevertheless drew an “Ah-ha” from her as she flexed her double set of shoulders, adjusted her grip on the two three-sided bows and prepared to play.

She'd try the second-last section of the Hydrogen Sonata; she had yet to get this right in a single pass. It was a tough part and not what she wanted to do, but she'd never get anywhere if she only did the easy stuff. The second-last section was fast and furious – even angry.

She'd think of her mother. That might help.

“I mean, look at you!”

She looked at herself; first just down, then at her reflection in the black mirror formed by the blanked-out glass wall of the main bedroom unit. She shrugged. This was a particularly graceful movement when you had four arms, she thought. “What?” she asked her mother, frowning.

Warib just looked at her daughter. Vyr checked her own reflection again. What she could see was a tallish Gzilt girl dressed in neat fatigues; dark grey skin with shoulder-length pale hair above broader than normal – but hardly grotesque – shoulders. Top set of arms a little longer and better defined than the additional set, a healthily substantial chest, a fashionably defined waist and the broad hips of a non-mammalian humanoid. Her legs were a little shorter and her back a little longer than the conventional image of Gzilt perfection, but who cared? Arguably, the four-arm look was all the better for that; it sort of balanced.

Her mother made an exasperated noise.

Vyr squinted. Was there some detail she was missing? She was in her mum's apartment and so in relatively unfamiliar territory, but she knew there would be a proper mirror-reverser unit around somewhere, probably in the blacked-out bedroom unit, where Warib's latest lover was apparently still asleep.

Vyr looked at her mother. "What?" she said again, mystified.

Warib spoke through clenched teeth. "You know perfectly well," she said.

Warib was dressed in a long and elegantly gauzy morning gown that looked impractical enough to be genuinely expensive. She was a more willowy version of her daughter with longer and thicker hair; physically she was effectively ageing backwards and would do so until they all Sublimed. Her daughter had already passed the age when people usually started to control their appearance, but only by a few years, and Vyr had anyway decided some time ago that she would just get older naturally for the time that she had left, given that the big kablooeey of transcendent smashingness that was the Subliming would be along soon to make this life and

everything in it seem irrelevant and feeble and so on and such like.

She'd been mildly astonished that her mother seemed to take her daughter looking older than she did as some sort of rebuke. It had been the same when she'd become a Lieutenant Commander. She'd thought Warib would be proud of her; instead she was upset that – however technically, and regardless of the fact it didn't really mean anything – her own daughter now outranked her.

"Is it the arms?" she said, waving all four. Beyond Warib, the view through the windows of the apartment showed sea sliding slowly past. Her mother lived on a clicks-long superliner endlessly circling the enclosed coast of the Pinicoll Sea, within Land, the single vast continent that made up most of Zyse.

"Of *course* it's the arms!" Warib told her. She grimaced as though she'd just tasted something bitter, and shook her head. "And *don't* try to be funny, Vyr, it's not within your reach."

Vyr smiled. "Well, I wasn't, though that is almost—"

"You've always got to try to be *different*, haven't you, Vyr?" her mother said, though it wasn't really pitched as a question. "Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!" she sang with what was probably meant to be sarcasm, wobbling her head and doing a little dance.

"Well—"

"You've taken *great* delight in trying to embarrass me ever since you were little."

Vyr frowned. "I'm not sure I ever formulated that as a specific ambi—"

"You started trying to make my life hell when you were still wetting your pants."

". . . probably more of a happy acci—"

"That's what you used to do, in fact; take your knickers

down and pee in front of my guests. How do you *think* that made me look? At *parties*. In front of some *very* important people!”

“So you’ve said, more than once, but remember I checked the house records and—”

“Your father and I *deleted* those, they were so embarrassing.”

“Hmm. But the amendments files—”

“How can you disbelieve your own mother?” Warib wailed, putting her elegantly manicured hands up to her glossily perfect face and letting her head drop forward. The tone of voice and gesture were both cues that she would shortly start to screech and sob were the point not conceded.

“Anyway,” Vyr said patiently. “The point now is—”

“That how can I invite you to my party when you look like *that!*” Warib said, flinging one arm out towards her daughter and almost shrieking the last word. “A freak!”

“The arms?” Vyr said, just to be sure.

“Of *course* the fucking arms!” her mother roared.

Vyr scratched her head. “Well, so, don’t invite me,” she said, trying to sound reasonable.

Warib took a deep, measured breath. “How,” she said, her voice lowered to the sort of whispered, husky tone that indicated Vyr’s last question had been so idiotic it had scarcely been worth wasting breath on at all, “can I not invite you when you’re *my* daughter and I’m supposed to be *proud* of you?” Her voice started to rise again. “What will people think then? *What?*”

“So I have four arms,” Vyr said, gesturing with all of them. “People used to have two heads, or look like octolegs or tumblebush, or—”

“That was in the past!” Warib told her acidly. “Ancient days. No one cares.”

“I don’t know,” Vyr told her, shaking her head. “I saw a screen thing about that travelling ultimate last party outfit on Xown and there were people there that—”

“Vyr!” her mother wailed. “Will you *listen*?”

“. . . big airship thing, inside . . .” Vyr found herself silenced by a flash of her mother’s eyes.

“Nobody,” Warib told her, “who is anybody *does* that sort of thing any more!” She drew in a breath and said carefully, “It’s infantile, Vyr. Don’t you pay *any* attention to—?”

“Mum, I’m just trying to—”

“Oh, dear God, don’t call me ‘mum’,” Warib said, eyelids fluttering closed.

“. . . say goodbye and see-you-soon to everybody, and play this piece—”

“*Everybody*,” her mother shouted at her, “is reverting to *classic*! Don’t you even know that? Amendments . . .” Warib hesitated. “Obvious amendments . . . are *out*. Nobody’s doing it any more. Everyone’s going for human basic as a mark of respect for all the millions of generations that helped get us to this point.”

Warib stared at the floor and slapped herself gently on the forehead, a gesture that – as far as Vyr knew – was a genuine innovation within the repertoire and so might actually be unchoreographed, perhaps even spontaneous. This was so surprising, Vyr came extremely close to feeling concern.

“Dear suffering Scribe, Vyr,” her mother whispered, “some people are even going back to their natural hair colour.” She looked up, eyes moist, nodding.

Vyr stared at her mother. Outside, sea slid past; still. Eventually she raised all four of her arms. “So am I invited to the fucking party or not?”

Warib rolled her eyes, glanced behind, then fell backwards



dramatically onto a plush white couch positioned in front of the stateroom's main picture window. She lay there and kept her eyes closed while one hand went to her throat and the tiny copy of the Book of Truth encased in a locket on a thin chain there. Her fingers patted the flat little piece of jewellery as though taking comfort from it. Cossont – taking a couple of quiet steps backwards while her mother's eyes were closed – had noticed Warib had grown noticeably more religious as the Subliming had approached. The best you could say of this was that she was not alone.

Warib shook her head and said quietly, resignedly, “Oh, do as you please, Vyr; you always do, always have. Come as you wish; embarrass me all you like. Why break the habit of a—”

Cossont didn't catch the last word; she was already out the door.

Miraculously, thinking back to all this domestic nonsense of just a few days earlier, with her eyes closed and her mind half wandering, Vyr got right through the central, especially demanding section of the second-last movement without – for the first time – making any mistakes. She'd done it! The tangling blizzard of notes had been successfully tackled. She was on what always felt like the easy downhill gliding bit now where the notes were fewer and further apart and easier to bridge; another minute or so of nothing-too-demanding and she'd have the damn thing licked.

She felt a smile on her lips and a breeze on her face. There was even a pleasant thrumming noise coming from behind her, courtesy of the elevenstring's external resonating strings and the breeze she'd been hoping for; she could feel it through her spine and the seat of her pants. My, for once even the elements seemed to want to wish her well in this ridiculous enterprise.

She was thinking about opening her eyes when a sudden gust of wind from the other side briefly silenced the resonating strings, rocked her in the seat and nearly toppled the instrument and her together; she was forced to abandon the stop-pedals and plant both feet firmly flat on the ground to steady both herself and it; her treads flapped against her calves and she felt her hair come loose again as she was forced to stop playing, unbalanced and unsettled. The external resonating strings made a noise partway between a fart and a groan.

The notes faded away and the gust of wind died too, but a new noise of what sounded like an engine winding down replaced the elevenstring's music, and she felt a sort of multiple-thud from the terrace come up through her feet and the supporting spar under her backside.

She still didn't open her eyes. She withdrew both bows in good order from the strings and sat up straight within the O of the hollow instrument, then – with a single accusatory stare at her flier, which was only now switching its lights on again – she turned to where all this new commotion seemed to be coming from.

An eight-seat military flier, still the colour of the near-black sky above, was settling onto its quartet of squat legs fifteen metres away, its bulbous bulk unlit until a waist door flicked down and somebody emerged so senior that, even as a nominal civilian in the regimental reserve, Vyr had no real choice about standing and saluting.

She sighed and stepped out of the elevenstring, clicking down the side-stand at the same time, so it could support itself. The elevenstring made a very faint creaking noise.

Vyr hooked her slippers off, pulled her boots on, then stood at attention, managing to ear-waggle her comms unit awake. “Etalde, Yuweag, commissar-colonel, Regimental Intelligence; precise current attachment unknown,” the

earbud whispered curtly as the officer advanced at a trot. He took his cap off and stuck it under his arm, then smiled and wagged one hand as he approached. Vyr stood at ease. She glanced at her own flier, narrowing her eyes a fraction.

“Contacted Pyan,” the aircraft told her through her earbud. “It whines, but is on its way. Fifteen minutes.”

“Mm-hmm,” Cossont said quietly.

A pair of fully armed and armoured troopers swung out from the regimental flier and stood, weapons ready, one on either side of the door, which flicked closed again. Vyr allowed her face to register some surprise at this development.

“. . . stay informal, shall we?” Commissar-Colonel Etalde was saying, nodding as he arrived in front of her. He was short, plump and appeared to be perspiring slightly. Like a lot of people these days, he wore a time-to; a watch dedicated to displaying how long was left to Instigation; the very moment – assuming that everything went according to plan – of the Subliming event. His was a dainty digital thing which sat on the chest of his uniform jacket and contrived to look a lot like a medal ribbon. Vyr had one too but she’d left it somewhere. Even as she noticed the commissar-colonel’s example, the time-to’s display clicked over to count one day less; it must be midnight on home planet Zyse.

Commissar-Colonel Etalde looked at Vyr, taking in her extra arms. He nodded. “Yes, I was . . .” He looked past her at the elevenstring. His eyes bulged. “What the hell is that?”

“A bodily acoustic Antagonistic Undecagonstring, sir,” she told him. She was staring over his head, as etiquette demanded. Happily this took no great effort.

“Don’t say,” Etalde said. He looked back to her. “It yours?”

“Yes, sir.”

He made a clicking noise with his mouth. "Suppose we'd better take it with us."

"Sir?" Vyr said, frowning.

"Does it have a case or something?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. It's over there." She swivelled, indicated the dark case lying on the black tiles of the terrace a few metres away, almost invisible.

The commissar-colonel glanced back towards the two troopers. The nearest was already moving in the direction of the case, carbine shouldering itself as he or she jogged across the black tiles of the terrace.

"That us?" Etalde asked. "We fit?"

"Sir?" Cossont repeated, still frowning.

Etalde appeared briefly confused, then snapped his fingers. "Oh! Yes! Better . . ." He cleared his throat then said, "Lieutenant Commander Cossont, you are hereby re-commissioned with immediate effect for the duration of the current emergency."

Vyr's frown deepened. "There's an emergency?"

"Sort of a secret one, but yes."

Cossont felt her expression contort despite herself as she looked down at the commissar-colonel. "*Now?*" she said, then adjusted her expression and gaze and said, "I mean; now, sir? So soon before the—?"

"Yes, now, Lieutenant Commander," Etalde told her sharply. She heard him sigh and saw him put his cap back on. "Thing about emergencies," he said, sounding weary. "Rarely occur when they'd be convenient."

"May I ask what—?"

"What the hell's going on?" Etalde suggested, suddenly breezy again. "Ask away. Won't do you any good. No idea myself."

The trooper appeared with the elevenstring's case, opened. It took all three of them to wrestle it in.

Etalde, breathless, nodded towards the military flier. “Commsint AI’s saying you’ve got a pet or something coming in, that right?”

“Yes, sir,” she told him. “Few minutes out still.” She went to lift the elevenstring’s case but the trooper did it for her, hefting it onto one shoulder, carbine swinging round from the other.

“We’re tracking it,” Etalde said as the trooper stepped towards their aircraft. Cossont stood where she was. The commissar-colonel stopped and looked back at her. “Well, *come on*,” he told her. “We’ll rendezvous with the creature in the air.” He smiled. “Faster.”

“And my flier, sir?” she asked.

Etalde shrugged. “Tell it to go home or wherever it has to go to, Lieutenant Commander; you’re coming with us.” He shrugged. “Orders.”

“Never heard of it.”

“More commonly known as the Hydrogen Sonata.”

“Still never heard of it.”

“No great surprise, sir. It’s a bit obscure.”

“Renowned?”

“The piece?”

“Yes.”

“Only as being almost impossible to play.”

“Not, like . . .?”

“Pleasant to listen to? No. Sir.”

“Really?”

Vyr frowned, thinking. “An eminent and respected academic provided perhaps the definitive critical comment many thousands of years ago, sir. His opinion was: ‘As a challenge, without peer. As music, without merit.’”

The commissar-colonel whistled briefly. “Harsh.”

Vyr shrugged. "Fair."

"Life-task, eh?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time, sir."

In the ink-black skies above the Kwaalon plains, the military craft decelerated quickly and swung almost to a stop; the rear ramp swung down and wind came buffeting and roaring in before a shush-field calmed everything down.

Vyr was strapped into a wall seat between Etalde and a third trooper. The first two troopers were on the other side of the small cabin with the elevenstring in its case secured between them like some bizarre carbon-black coffin, its nearest extremity close enough to Cossont to touch. An AI was flying the aircraft.

Pyan, Cossont's familiar, which had the form of a square black cape, flapped its way in from the turbulent darkness outside, bumping into the spongy shush-field and fluttering theatrically to the floor in apparent surprise as the craft's rear door slammed closed and the flier accelerated again.

"Oh, gracious!" Pyan said on the local open channel, as it struggled against the rearward pull. It used its corners to heave itself along the floor towards Cossont, who tapped into their private link and growled,

"Stop dramatising and get over here."

The cape flowed along the floor and climbed up to her shoulders with a little help from Etalde and Cossont herself. It draped itself there as best it could given the straps, fastening itself round her neck.

"You're touchy," it told her. "What's all the fuss about anyway?"

"With any luck, nothing."