

WATER

A Science-Fantasy Novel

Stuart A. Jackson

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Prologue

Manchester sat placidly on what appeared to be a large mat of dark moss, drinking strawberry tea in a Hub-generated Lifeswork. She was surrounded by a circle of bulbous Trees, distinctively cream and shot through with reds and golds and browns, sprouting up from the spongy main body of the choo machine living below. Dense green foliage created a fragrant, sappy haven all around her, quiet and very still, luxuriant with the smell of wild garlic. The Cardinal was meditating upon her inner breath, testing some new mnemonic triggers, when a rustle in the far side of the clearing caught her attention.

Two pin-pricks of light.

As she watched, the points moved. A small, dark object leapt from behind the spongy trunk of a Tree, and raced towards her. It came very quickly, and before she could even move it had leapt, landing on her shoulder and instantly burying itself in the hair at the nape of her neck, wriggling around to suckle at the lobe of her right ear. She smelt liquorice and pine, and felt a quick lick of moisture. She reached up and stroked the tiny machine, no bigger than a robin, its little body quivering.

What now?

The tiny choo machine was a messenger. The Cardinal's nchoi resource, nestled at the base of her interpretative cortex, quickly decoded the message coded in the machine's pseudo-saliva. An icon snicked open in the Cardinal's visual world and spun on an axis, pulsing gently: a standard request by the nchoi resource for access to the virtual Lifeswork, spoiling Manchester's mood.

She decided to ignore the message.

The icon vanished for all of ten seconds and then re-appeared: it even made a little sound, a pitiful mewling for attention over her auditory tap.

Shit.

Manchester sighed and instructed her resource to relay the recorded message. The molecular-sized nchoi machine enmeshed in her cortical tissue interfaced a portion of her optic nerve and the icon expanded into a momentarily black, virtual window, hanging to the left of her right hand. A face appeared. Fine, sandy hair and huge ears, large, droopy eyes the colour of wet slate above a large, ugly beak of a nose.

Lodz. I might have guessed.

'Manchester, how you have the nerve to call yourself a Cardinal I don't know. Where is the consideration? Where is the altruism? I really don't know what...'

Get to the point Lodz.

Manchester sneezed, startling the little messenger perched by her ear. The tiny machine wriggled and quivered and she reached up to calm it. Returning her attention to the window, Manchester scowled at the image of Lodz's face, and listened.

'...thing else altogether.' The simulated visage of the Cardinal Lodz narrowed its eyes and pursed its fat, pale lips. 'Manchester, you and I were supposed to

have been meeting today. I really do think that this reclusive business of yours is getting out of hand. Oh, what am I talking about? Becoming out of hand? It already is out of hand. And rude to boot.' Lodz's voice was dry and a little scratchy, a natural companion to his usual hostile pomposity.

Manchester stuck out her tongue and wagged it at him.

'But I will forgive you your disgraceful behaviour on this occasion. Myself, Chaiyaphum and Salisbury have a little job for you. We want you to accompany some Trippers. I know that you don't like playing the mystic, but you haven't actually accompanied a Trip now for...' Lodz paused, as if savouring the statistic. 'Some 57 years now Manchester.'

Well, I've been busy.

'According to Salisbury, one of the Trippers, a young female named Melie Inherdinia, has a Cascade signature that you might be interested in.' Manchester's interest piqued at this: the teleologic-symbolic, Third augmented consciousness of the Cardinal Salisbury was practically legendary in the Koyculture.

Interesting? How?

'There are two other Trippers. One is a male, a historian named Tennys Smolensky. He wants to know about the varieties of religious experience, and has expressed an interest in meeting you personally, though I can't imagine why.' Manchester bristled, making the sensitive little choo machine on her shoulder quiver. She reached up to soothe it.

Lodz, you are such a clod!

'The third Tripper is a mystery. Calls himself Flocanalog. Originally from Memecast, latterly Marineris. He had to disengage from a 20 year long Shell symbiosis just to be able to walk the green of Novagaia.'

Despite herself, Manchester was intrigued. She had never heard of any inhabitant of Marineris deliberately disengaging from a Shell symbiosis. Shells were magnetohydrodynamic choo machines. On Marineris, the human symbiont to which such machines were Host grew together as a result of experience of learning into a single entity. After a number of years, it became almost impossible to differentiate where choo machine ended and human machine began, both psychologically and physically. An enforced separation was a strange thing to initiate. This Flocanalog must have a very good reason for wanting to come to Novagaia.

'So there you are Manchester. Not much to ask, eh? If you have any questions, you know where to ask them.'

The image of Lodz froze for a second, and then the window snicked closed and iconised. Manchester instructed her resource to close the remaining icon and the tranquillity of the Lifework was restored. She looked around her, sighing.

A Trip. Why a Trip of all things? All that pretence! Welcome to the Novagaian ecopoiesis!

Stuff and nonsense.

Talk to a few Trees, play in a few fields, add a subtle on-line reconstruction of some internal resources, and bingo - enlightenment!

Manchester snorted derisively at the thought. It was not that she disliked humans: some of her best friends were human. Nor was it that she resented

playing up the Mystic: there was always opportunities for mischief in such situations. It was not even that she particularly resented having to spout all that pseudo-religious drivel about the Cascade that some Trippers wanted to hear, the old theosophy of Ushogbo that had served the Cardinals so well during the Great Dying. No, it was rather more that Manchester simply didn't like being told what to do.

She sighed again, realising that she would not be able to meditate. Lodz's message had irritated her past the point where she would be able to properly empty herself. She accessed her resource instead, and a series of options appeared - procurement, communications, Lifeswork - bright little icons hanging virtually in the air before her.

She touched the last intangible graphic and a second window appeared. She keyed a sequence, and the link between her internal resource and the powerful Hub machine maintaining the virtual Lifeswork was broken. The encircling Trees, the carpet of moss and the smell of wild garlic dissipated, leaving Manchester to slowly focus her eyes out on the view through the diamond transparency of the observation blister in which she sat.

The blister was perched at the very top of the Starboard Rim on the Novagaian orbital. Some 40,000 metres below, the immense wall of metal met the floor of Novagaia proper. Manchester looked to her left, leaning out into the centre of the diamond bubble. The Rim curved up and away, and drew her gaze even further out past the orbital confines to the dark, aquamarine bulk of Water hanging in the vacuum. All of a sudden, she shivered. She had not been there when the worst of the Great Dying had taken place, and for that she was glad. Water was no longer the place for either human or Cardinal, belonging now to the esoteric builders of the Koyculture.

Manchester drew a deep breath and brought her attention back to her immediate surroundings. *So, a Trip. Could be worse, I suppose.* Then she remembered what Lodz had told her, of the young woman's interesting Cascade signature, and her interest was re-piqued. *Hmm.*

Book One

The Koyculture

Chapter One

Tennys had had his doubts about his transport when it had arrived, and now it felt as if those doubts were justified. The Bus was falling out of the sky, completely out of control, its long legs dangling. To make matters worse, its belly had become transparent allowing him to see the toy landscape of Novagaia, upon which he was soon going to be a protein puree.

He screamed.



He had arrived at the Hub complex at the centre of the Novagaian orbital only an hour previously, aboard a small reaction shuttle from Memecast. The view of the approaching structure through the vehicle's imaging systems was spectacular.

The Novagaian Hub was ellipsoidal, 10 kilometres in length along its greatest axis. Innumerable docking spines sprouted from both ends of it, many more than a kilometre long. Looked at from directly above, the Hub was a spiky, squashed disc. Seen from the side, in line with the inner surface of Novagaia itself, it was a spiky, flattened lozenge, three kilometres thick, studded with ports, blisters, lights, windows and shadows. The volume above and below this central section was transparent, flecked with green and blue, apparently unprotected from vacuum.

After disembarking from the shuttle, his first proper look at Novagaia through the long transparent wall of the docking spine revealed a world not just ostensibly open to vacuum, but actually open to vacuum. Having been raised on a sealed Austerity micro-orbital, and being used to the closed environment of Memecast, the concept of living on such a potentially leaky structure alarmed him greatly.

He must have stood gawping for longer than he thought when he arrived because when he turned around at the sound of a noise behind him, he was alone. A hoop of striped black was rolling toward him. It stopped a few metres short. Ivory coloured graphics flowed across the thing's black surface.

I am Hub courtesy, the words spelt. Can I do anything for you? Secondary scrolling requested his preferred mode of access, while the machines grew flexible manipulators with small hands. The machine offered the hands, palms open, in a curiously polite gesture to accompany the silent graphics.

Ah, thought Tennys, a porter. He adopted his usual condescending tone when talking to constructs. 'Verbal access. I am Tennys Smolensky. Tell me how I get down to the orbital surface and how I find Chapel Halls.'

'A Bus can take you to Chapel Halls direct, Tennys Smolensky,' replied the machine smoothly. 'Hub courtesy will provide your internal resource with the necessary directions if you wish?'

'Yes. I do.'

‘Complying. Thank you.’

With that, the machine folded its hands quickly, in the manner of a ritual bow, its appendages intruded back into itself, and it rolled away. Tennys was left, his mouth hanging slightly open, staring after the machine as it moved around the curve of the corridor and disappeared. He was used to a little more deference from constructs. For a moment, he felt a little silly.

Tennys accessed his resource. It interfaced his visual cortex and a map appeared, apparently hanging in the air in front of him. Black and grey graphics wriggled into position showing him his position and route. He began walking and the map stayed with him, a little over 30 centimetres from his nose until he backgrounded it. His route took him, via a lift, to the other side of the Hub complex. He emerged into a wide, deserted corridor, very much like the one that he had left. Movement caught his eye as he was passing the big curved window.

Something was approaching the Hub.

Tennys was reminded of pictures he had seen, of the kinds of invertebrate insects that had abounded on Earth before Water. A dark, bulbous body trailed two enormous legs, monstrously thick where they joined the body, tapering to broad, flat feet. The thing was drifting in towards the Hub feet first, its legs slowly retracting, drawing into its body. When its feet touched the outer surface of the Hub wall, the strange form began to shuffle sideways towards an access port, whilst its body continued to move, its legs telescoping until it was squatting over the airlock blister. It extruded part of its belly, and smothered the port, and then was quiescent. Curious, Tennys queried his resource.

‘Comm, do you have access to the Hub?’

‘Yes,’ said his internal resource, tapping his auditory nerve.

‘Well then, could you find out what the hell that is?’ Tennys asked, pointing.

‘One moment.’

Tennys looked again at the thing suckling the airlock blister. It was mostly black, overlain with stripes and whorls of a lighter brown shading. It looked like it was made from dirty coal. Must be a construct of some sort, he thought but it did not look like any kind of machine that he had ever seen. An icon blinked in front of his nose.

‘Proceed.’

‘Summary: The construct is a choo machine, a species of organic, sentient agent unique to Novagaia, engineered by the orbital ecosphere. Its designated function is transportation within the confines of the orbital. This form is known colloquially as a Bus.’

Tennys absorbed this information for a moment and gave a little high-pitched harumph of pleased surprise. Then, belatedly, his mouth dropped open, and his eyes became a little wild. This was also his transportation!

‘Comm, confirm please: This particular Bus is here to take me to Chapel Halls?’

‘Confirm.’

Tennys reluctantly hoisted his bag onto his shoulder and walked toward the port. When the inner lock doors opened onto the interior of the Bus, the first thing that he noticed was the smell. Or rather the smells. He wrinkled his nose, trying to identify the spicy, unfamiliar scents of cinnamon and cloves and lime. He

selected a seat from the dozen or so spaced evenly in the fragrant belly of the machine and sat down tentatively, wondering if anyone else was catching this Bus. He smelt liquorice and pine - twice - quiet strongly, causing him to sneeze. Abruptly, the opening through which he had come closed and a portion of the wall to his left became transparent, allowing him to see the exterior of the Hub. He felt a trifle heavier for a moment, and the Hub wall began to fall away.

The Bus was in transit.

He sat and let his thoughts drift before asking: 'Comm, how long is this journey?'

'The journey will last just over 23 minutes.'

He stared out of the Bus window as the Hub slowly receded, resolving into a spiky ellipsoid.

'Comm, tell me about the Bus. What is it made of? How does it work?'

'The machine is composed of synthetically innervated carbonsponge,' replied the resource. 'Molecular pockets within the material are innervated by a network of viral nchoo agents with which the machine is infected. The nchoo are able to effect local expansions of these molecular pockets. The executive control of the nchoo infection belongs to the Bus's choo Host.'

He harumphed. 'I get it. The Host - that's the "brain" right? - sends a command to its "muscles" to flex, and it pushes away from the Hub, just like I would push away from the side of a swimming pool.'

'This resource believes your last statement to be a visually useful, but mechanically inaccurate, analogy.'

'So how does it get from being up here, to being down there? It just falls out of the sky, does it?' Tennys laughed at the thought.

Pause.

'Yes.'

'What?!'

'What?'

'It just falls to the surface? That's crazy! I'll die!'

The resource made no reply, its linguistic performance capacities stymied by irrationality. Tennys looked round the interior of the Bus wildly.

Wait a minute! This is a sentient construct. I can just talk to it.

'Uh, hello, uh Bus?' He cleared his throat. 'Bus, I am telling you to stop!' There was no response. 'Bus, turn around! Take me back to the Hub!' Nothing.

How can a construct be sentient if it can't fucking speak?

The Bus continued to give no indication that it heard or understood. Or had it?

The Hub appeared to be moving, sweeping away to his left. No, the Bus was turning. It was orientating itself, pointing its legs toward the surface of Novagaia.

How did it do that? It must have reaction mass! Enough to brake its fall?

'Comm, can you interface the Host? Ask it to turn around?'

'No. The Host and this resource speak different languages.'

Tennys groaned. He was only 21 years old. He didn't want to die, yet this smelly machine was about to impact the surface of the Novagaian orbital at some monstrous speed and splash him all over it. He wondered how fast he would be travelling when he died. He queried his resource, feeling slightly giddy.

'One moment.'

Tennys watched as more of Novagaia began to become visible, a broad swathe slicing across the Bus's transparent side from the upper left. He could make out patches of colour, browns and greens, through white, wispy clouds.

An icon winked. 'You will be travelling at...'

'Stop.' He had forgotten his macabre request. 'How much longer?'

'Is what?' whispered his resource, after a short pause.

'How much longer is this journey? And why are you being so dense all of a sudden Comm? Anaphoric processing is supposed to be one of your specialities isn't it?'

'Your journey will last another seven minutes.'

Pause.

'Comm, how come you and the Bus speak different languages?'

The icon winked open again. 'The Host of the Bus is choo. This resource is choi. These two different types of computational mechanism do not communicate easily. It may be possible for this resource to construct a rudimentary common working language, but that would take several days.'

He was about to frame another question when, abruptly and simultaneously, the walls of the Bus became opaque while the floor of the Bus became transparent.

He shrieked.

Through the transparent skin of the machine's belly, he could see the Bus's dangling legs trailing away into thickening vacuum directly below him. Far below, on the moist inner surface of Novagaia, distinguishable features were rapidly gaining in resolution. Hills and valleys, bodies of water, clusters of structures.

'How much longer Comm?'

'130 seconds.'

He let out a small wail.

'How much longer Comm?'

'110 seconds.'

He gave another small wail.

'How much longer Comm?'

'90 seconds.'

He began to feel strangely calm.

OK, so I won't get to meet any Cardinals. Never mind. Could be worse.

Then he thought again.

Yeah right, like dying a horrible impersonal death in the belly of a smelly machine.

He looked down. Beneath his feet he saw a circle of lumps with little blue lines wriggling around their bases. Hills and rivers. He saw structures and colours and little moving objects that he couldn't make out. His nose began to twitch as an incredible range of citrus, spicy smells began to assail his nostrils.

'60 seconds.'

The Bus grew flexible black restraints from the seat and strapped him in across his chest. He decided to close his eyes. The Bus lurched suddenly sideways so he snapped them open again. He looked down. The huge legs

hanging below him were attenuating quickly, stretching like hot toffee, the broad pads at the far end probing the air ahead of the descending Bus.

The surface of Novagaia was now so close that he could make out individual structures, and both it and they were getting bigger and flatter every second. He wailed again and began to feel sick. His stomach churned and his bowels began to loosen. He farted and whimpered and as he looked down, the surface of Novagaia rushed up to meet him at a hideously fast rate. He felt a scream begin in his throat, which warbled up to a full-throated roar as the Bus plummeted downwards towards destruction.

The huge feet-pads hit first.

Just before they did however, the machine's viral nchoo infection became active, expanding the carbonsponge in the lower portions of the legs at an enormous rate: for just an instant, the broad feet actually travelled faster than the rest of the Bus. The enormously attenuated legs of the machine - over 200 metres long at the end of its descent - damped the great velocity of the machine's descending mass. The viral nchoo agents effected the contraction in peristaltic waves. The previously thin appendages telescoped and grew into two enormous stanchions, whilst the bulbous body of the machine decelerated rapidly, and came to rest some 50 centimetres from the orbital surface, hanging between legs that were now 10 metres high, and six metres across at their lumpen top.

The Bus had landed.



Tennys only opened his eyes when he became aware of a change in the air. The spicy warmth of the machine's interior was being replaced by a green coolness wafting through the open hatch in the side of the Bus. He looked down. Two small vestigial horns on the arms of his seat were all that remained of his restraints. He looked around him. He was alive, though he didn't know how. He smiled, shook his head and then quickly paled. His hands flew down to his genitals. Finding them safe inside his trousers, he cuddled them ferociously. Next he checked his head, then his torso, and then his legs. He was intact.

'Comm, did you know that was going to happen?' He paused, frowned. 'In point of fact, what did happen?'

'The Bus landed.'

The Bus landed, he thought. Heavy shit.

The Bus was perched at the flat top of a conical hill. Perhaps half a kilometre away in either direction was another, identical hill, smooth and chopped off. And beyond that, another. And beyond that, another and another. They formed a line curving off into the distance.

Tennys invoked an optics tool and his apparent visual acuity leapt by a factor of 50. There, 20 kilometres away, he saw an identical truncated cone. Diminutive figures sat on an identical wall. He saw one of the figures point upwards with a matchstick arm. He looked up, past the boundaries of the acuity window and saw

a tiny black speck plummeting downwards, seconds away from impacting the top of the hill. He returned to the acuity window, re-focused on the matchstick figures climbing into the belly of the distant Bus. The side of the machine closed up and it vanished. With unaugmented eyes after the grid-work of the optics tool melted away, Tennys thought he glimpsed a black dot arching away from the distant hill, moving incredibly fast, before he lost it against the glare of the sky.

Bus stops.

A ring of them spaced equidistantly around the circumference of a 20 kilometre circle.

'Comm, where am I?'

'You are on the outer boundary of Chapel Halls.'

'You mean this is Chapel Halls?' Tennys swept his arm across the view. All he could see was thick wood. 'Where are the structures? Do the Cardinals live in the tress or something?' The thought struck him as funny, and he sniggered to himself. There was a pause as the resource searched the download it had received from Hub courtesy.

'There are structures within this valley but they are presumably hidden by the larger resident species of flora.'

'Oh right. So where do I want to go?'

'Is that an epistemological question?'

'What? No, it isn't. And just tell me how to find the Cardinals.'

'Following this path will take you to a significant population of Cardinals. Would you like a map?'

'No.'

He brusquely disabled the auditory tap and looked out across the landscape of greens and browns rolling away from him. He turned his head to the left. In the distance, he could see a large body of water, sparkling in the sun. He became drawn to the distance, and found that he had to raise his head to take it all in, his eyes having to constantly track somehow - curiously - upward, as if he were looking up the face of a mountain from its base. He did a double take, realising what he was seeing. He looked to his right. The same. Of course it was the same.

This was an orbital.

The inner surface of Novagaia rose away up into the sky, went up and up and over his head, going all the way around, and came back down on the other side. Tennys felt humbled all of a sudden.

How could Water possibly have built such a structure?

No one knew. No one knew anything about the builders of the Koyculture. Except the Cardinals.

And that's partly why I'm here.

He drew a large breath, and another, quietening his fearful exhilaration. Shouldering his bag, and with a last look at the unbroken expanse of green that stretched away from him, he turned and walked towards the gap in the wall. Halfway down the path, he stopped and knelt down to examine the surface. What he had thought was a chalky compaction was in fact a natural weave of fine branches, sprouting from roots at the edges of the path. Tennys realised that miniature tress, growing horizontally instead of vertically, were actually co-

operating in small scale civil engineering. He straightened and continued walking until he reached the outer margins of the greenery.

He peered into a natural cathedral, vaulting 30 metres above his head. There was bird song, strange squeaks, whistles and clickings and dark forms moved in the higher reaches of the canopy. Breathing deeply, he felt cool, moisture laden air fill his lungs and he strolled into the outer margins of Chapel Halls.

The path turned lazily this way and that in the forest, the vegetation stopping short a uniform couple of metres from its borders, as if maintained by fastidious gardeners. He recognised none of the species that he saw. Which was no surprise, because he knew nothing about botany at all. His home for the last six years had been the closed, sterile torus of Memecast and his only other experience of natural flora had been the marsh grasses and gnarled ambiguous bushes that grew around his parents morose, windswept home on Austerity. Thoughts of his distant birthplace, always cold, mostly always raining, made Tennys shiver.

What a contrast to this!

The quality of the light around him changed as the path's variegated roof thinned. A faint spicy tang reached his nostrils, and he suddenly had the curious feeling that he was not alone. He fought an irrational desire to turn around and walk rapidly back the way he had come. He stood, uncertain how to proceed.

'Comm, access the milliradar. Is there anything ahead of me on this path?'

'One moment.'

The millimetre-wave radar and its micro-mesh antennae - one of the augmentations to his resource - sat unobtrusively behind the bone of his forehead.

'Millirader active. Object detected.'

He squeaked.

He accessed his resource and keyed for a graphics window. He looked at the ghostly see-through image from the radar. A tall, bulky shape stood 20 metres ahead around the next bend in the path. The wall of the forest next to the shape kept swaying violently, as the extension leant in toward it. Tennys watched as, again and again, the shape moved, and the forest wall quaked.

'Comm.' He backed away down the path. 'What is it?'

'What is what?'

Shit, this resource was being cranky!

He keyed the control window for the milliradar and the amorphous shape became outlined in thick yellow lines. 'Analysis! What is that?' He waited for machine to probe the image, swaying from foot to foot.

'Object not recognised.'

He snorted violently. 'Is whatever it is likely to want to eat me?'

'No.'

'So why didn't you say so before?'

'Is that a rhetorical question?'

He disabled the machine's auditory tap with disgust.

Well, it isn't going to eat me, but all the same...

He darted over to his left and fell into a semi-crouch. He made his way slowly along the path, hugging the forest wall. He could hear vegetation ripping and

rustling as he approached. Then the shape became visible. His eyes went wide and his jaw dropped.

It was a charcoal and mahogany-stripped giant, easily four times his height. It possessed three huge legs, a barrelled midsection, a flexible extensible neck and two bundles of appendages where arms might once have been. Tennys watched as the long neck extended and swayed in a small circle about the vertical, like a snake triangulating a petrified mouse. Then it reached up, stretching to almost the very roof of the artificial cathedral and pulled away some loose vegetation. It sank slowly back down and the monstrous legs shuffled the thing down the path.

Fastidious gardeners indeed.

It was a choo machine, another different species of organic Novagaian construct. Tennys laughed at his own timidity and shook his head.

The effect of so innocuous a sound was profound.

The neck of the machine whipped around and down toward him. He found himself looking into a serrated maw twice as big as his head from a distance of two metres away. Warm, sappy air assaulted his nose, carrying a sharp citrus tang. Then the long neck shot upwards and backwards and intruded into the machine's mid-section. The giant machine gave a mewling squeak of fright and ran off down the path, its huge legs moving incredibly quickly. In seconds it had disappeared, leaving Tennys alone, his heart thumping.

Fastidious gardeners who spook easily.

Someone laughed.

Tennys stopped, almost shocked. He stood in the middle of the path, listening. There it was again!

After walking for some minutes, he found the source of the laughter. It was coming from a strange pod-like structure floating in the middle of a small lake. Two people were splashing in the water next to it. A partly submerged platform was attached to the underside. He began walking around the lake. As he got closer, he could see where a portion of the far shore had an almost perfect hemisphere cut into the surrounding forest. Towards the front of the clearing was a squat cylinder, sprouting a thick arch that lead out to the floating pod.

As he approached, he heard a cry. Two small arms rose in greeting from the water. He waved back and saw the figures pull themselves onto the partly flooded platform and disappear inside.

Then the pod began to move.

He realised that it was not floating at all. It was suspended. He watched, astounded, as the cantilevered arm swung the pod round to bring it to rest hanging suspended over the solid ground of the lake-side clearing.

Amazing, he thought, marvelling at the simplicity. What a place to live. As he got closer, he realised that the pod was bigger than he had originally thought too: it was at least six or seven metres high and more like 20 metres long. The path ran straight up to the edge of the platform and then stopped.

'Hello.' The greeting came from the woman. She was leaning on the platform railing, drying her hair with a towel, wearing a fluffy cream-coloured robe. The man emerged from the insides of the pod behind her, identically dressed.

Tennys stopped at the foot of the platform, and stared up at the two people above him. The woman was the most beautiful person he had ever seen. The

man was the most beautiful person he had ever seen too. Yet he couldn't decide why he thought this. They were not youthful gods: the man particularly was greying, with a slight paunch. They did not have flawless features: the woman had a slightly crooked nose, and a huge mouth.

The woman stepped down from the platform. 'I'm Carys.' She smiled warmly.

Tennys felt as if the sun had come out and felt a stupid grin spread across his face.

'Tennys Smolensky.' He extended his hand, because he did not know what else to do. Carys' eyes crinkled in humour and she shook hands with a small laugh. At her touch, Tennys was acutely embarrassed to feel a surge of blood to his genitals.

'Welcome to Chapel Halls.' The man stepped down from behind Carys. Tennys watched, amazed, as his fingers were engulfed by a pair of the largest hands that he had ever seen. Despite their huge size, the hands clasped his in a firm, unthreatening embrace. 'My name is Brock. And welcome to Novagaia too, yes? You have the look of a new visitor.' Brock stood, clasping Tennys' hands, looking gravely down at him from a height advantage of at least 20 centimetres. Tennys felt an almost palpable energy radiating from the man through his hands, a relaxing, healing potential flowing into him in calming waves.

'Pleased to meet you Brock.' It felt like the most sincere thing he had ever said. 'And you're right, this is my first time here.'

The gravity of Brock's face vanished, his eyes twinkled like a small child's, and he grinned. Tennys had the curious feeling that a second sun had just come out, and he found himself grinning too.

'Splendid.' Brock dropped Tennys' hand. He became grave. 'Would you excuse me please, Tennys?' Tennys was surprised to note that he seemed genuinely interested in the possibility of an answer in the negative. 'Only I have some baked potatoes in the oven, you see, and I very much think if I don't rescue them soon, then all that we shall have to eat this evening is salad.' Brock smiled again, and rubbed his hands together briskly. 'Carys my love, would you take charge of our young traveller?' Brock seemed passionately interested in Carys' answer. His eyebrows arched up in twin questions and he reached out to stroke her bare elbows.

'It would be my pleasure.' Carys touched Brock's cheek with her hand.

'Splendid.' Brock then whooped, jumped into the air and ran back into the pod waving his arms, hooting furiously.

Carys and Tennys looked at each other. Tennys with a bemused look on his face, Carys smiling knowingly. She resumed rubbing her short black hair.

'My partner is a wonderful man Tennys, but he occasionally has unflattering pongid pretensions.'

Tennys reached up under his armpits with both arms, and scratched, letting off a few small exploratory whoops. He didn't usually indulge in play (he was too old for that kind of thing), but something about these people, or this place, suddenly made him feel that it was entirely appropriate. Carys' eyes went wide with surprise, and a belly laugh escaped her. Tennys could not help but join in, which only made Carys laugh even louder. Suddenly, the image of her in his mind

dissolved, as she jumped into a crouch, scratched her armpits and hooted at the sky. He was too astounded to be shocked and so he joined in. They stood there, the two of them, hooting and scratching and laughing until his ribs ached and his throat felt sore.

'I like you Tennys.' Carys rested her hands on her hips. 'You have a good aura.' Tennys felt the impact of her words as a sudden constriction in his throat: he was not used to people paying him compliments. At least, he supposed it was a compliment.

Aura? What's that?

'Umm... thanks. I like you too,' he felt obliged to add, and then felt embarrassed by the clumsy reciprocation. Carys sensed his discomfort, he felt sure, but chose to ignore it, for which he was glad.

'How about a cold drink?' she asked. 'We can swing the pod over the water if you like. It's really quite something.'

'Umm, yes. I think I would like that.' He allowed himself to be led up onto the pod's platform. 'Did you build this structure yourself, Carys? I mean, did you and Brock build it yourselves?'

'After a fashion. We helped to grow it really. Would you like alcohol in your cold drink, Tennys?'

Tennys considered it. 'Yes please.' He heard a roar from within the pod and an ominous crashing. He heard Carys' bubbling laugh and Brock's sonorous chuckle.

Carys reappeared shortly, with two tall glasses. 'Root beer.' She raised her glass. 'Cheers.'

Tennys sipped his drink. It was faintly sparkling, slightly bitter and utterly delicious. 'You said you grew this pod?'

'Uh huh. Took a lot of work too. But it was worth it.' She clenched the glass to her chest and breathed deeply. 'This place is beautiful isn't it?'

Tennys felt an overwhelming desire to answer her as honestly as he could. 'It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen.' He felt unfamiliar emotions course through him as he uttered the words. For him, aesthetics on Memecast had become an abstract adjunct to life, limited to contrived, mathematical sculpture, or the empty precision of holo-plants, no more and no less than that deemed necessary for psychological well-being, like exercise or food. He cleared his throat. 'So, how did you... grow all this?' He indicated the pod and its support, which had begun to swing out into the lake as he spoke.

Carys looked at him. 'Where are you from Tennys?'

'Memecast. But I was born on Austerity.'

'Memecast.' Carys looked thoughtful. 'Yes. I know it. Sterile place.' Carys breathed deeply before replying further. 'Well, Brock and I came to Chapel Halls 10 years ago. We wanted to build a life together, and both of us wanted to live the ecopoiesis. So we came to Novagaia, and we found this lake. There is a Tree copse just behind the clearing...' Carys pointed over her shoulder, at the forest wall receding behind the moving pod. 'We selected a Tree, and entered the consensorias. We gained its trust if you like, and asked it to help us. Took a long time, many months. We had to spend long sessions overseeing the construction in consensorias, watching as the Tree gestated the first choo machines that did

the building...' Carys paused and smiled, remembering. 'And this is the result.' She swept her hand around to indicate the pod.

Tennys didn't really understand what she was saying: Trees, gestation, consensorias. He was about to start asking more questions when Brock stepped onto the platform carrying two plates, each piled high with an enormous jacket potato and a multicoloured salad.

'Here we are Tennys,' he said.

'Thanks.' Tennys accepted the plate of food with relish. Brock handed the second to Carys and went back to fetch his own. When he returned, the three of them sat eating in silence for some moments.

The light faded abruptly, as if a line of night had been drawn over them, plunging them into darkness. The lake responded, becoming serene and still. Small lights, recessed in the platform railing, came on unbidden.

Tennys looked over at Carys and Brock. They had set down their plates and were standing, linked arm in arm, gazing out across the lake. For Tennys, the force of their bond was tangible, exciting the air and making it quiver.

Carys beckoned for him to join them. He set down his plate and went to stand by her side. They stood like that for many minutes, the three of them drinking in the silence.

Brock turned to Carys and kissed her tenderly on the lips then looked across at Tennys. 'Welcome to the good life,' he said, and his voice came from the living heart of Novagaia.

So it was that Tennys spent his first night on Novagaia, sleeping in a hammock on the platform of an improbable structure dangling centimetres above the waters of a lake in the outer margins of Chapel Halls.

It was a memory he would cherish for the rest of his life.

Chapter Two

From across the small square, Kirsty-Ann looked up at the big letters etched into the mock-stone above the dark entranceway of the bar. The Oil Burner. She grimaced. Surely Melie didn't mean that place? Kirsty-Ann wasn't sure. She could have checked the mail that she had received, but that would mean talking to the Ghost and Kirsty-Ann didn't really like having the Ghost talk to her. The machine thing whispering in her ear felt to Kirsty-Ann like she had a wasp trapped in her hair. She was sure that was the name though. The Oil Burner.

Kirsty-Ann walked across the square, weaving in and out of tables, carefully avoiding the predatory eyes that followed her, to the recessed entranceway to the bar. She peered inside, through the rents in the shredded piece of fabric hanging across the doorway.

Blackness.

The fabric was abruptly pulled aside. Two figures emerged, engrossed in conversation. The one nearest to Kirsty-Ann noticed her. He flicked his eyes, like busy flies, up and down her. He pulled aside the long overcoat he wore with one hand. He took a step toward her, emphasising his crotch from which hung a large, cybernetic phallus. He smiled at her, to reveal sharp yellow teeth. The phallus stirred.

'Farm girl looking for some fun?' He placed his hand on his thigh and licked his lips. He smelt of yeast and Weed.

'I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean,' stammered Kirsty-Ann. She attempted a smile, which died as the man's eyes became small and disinterested. He snapped the long coat closed, and swept up past her without another word.

Kirsty-Ann, like her sister Melie, had been brought up on the arboreal orbital of Sesquioia on the Newpageant oneil. She was 17 years old, and had only left her home once: this once, and already she was beginning to regret it.

Melie had said Godsfollicle was a good place. Or maybe she said it was a happening place? Are they the same things?

Kirsty-Ann blinked rapidly several times in the man's wake. She realised she was scared.

Right, that's it! I'm going to sit here until Melie turns up and apologises for bringing me to this horrible place!

Kirsty-Ann marched over to a nearby table. She was about to sit down when she saw the man that had come out of the Oil Burner sitting a couple of tables away. He was staring at her. He rose out of his seat, and began to come toward her. 'Oh my goodness.' Kirsty-Ann turned quickly around and almost ran into the entrance of the Oil Burner, flinging the tattered fabric aside and stumbling into the aromatic interior.

For a moment, she was blind. When her eyes had adjusted to the gloom, she found herself in a long, dark archway. A bar stretched the length of the cavern down its left side. She selected the nearest empty table and scuttled over to it,

sinking down behind its potential anonymity. She pulled out a book from her bag - Arboretum Design - and stuck it in front of her face, pretending to read.

'Customer.' A metallic voice startled her. Kirsty-Ann peered over the edge of her book and saw a machine standing by her table, dirty plastic appendages folded into a depression on its sides. 'Do you want a drink?'

The machine looked old and battered with a cylindrical body resting on a single smart-wheel. It exuded a faint tang of burnt rubber.

'A pineapple juice, please.' Kirsty-Ann returned to her book.

The machine appeared to deliberate for a moment. 'No.'

'Oh. Orange juice?'

'No.'

'Lemonade?'

'No.' The machine clacked internally.

Kirsty-Ann frowned. 'What do you have? Maybe then I can choose?'

'Menu. Yes.' A flat membrane folded out from the machine's cylindrical torso and became rigid. The screen fizzed white for a moment then a series of images flashed across it, too fast for Kirsty-Ann to make out. The sequence finished, and the membrane folded away. 'Customer. What do you want to drink?'

Now Kirsty-Ann was annoyed. 'A glass of water please. And hurry!'

The machine swivelled around on its single smart-wheel, clacked internally and wobbled away.

The people are nasty and the machines are stupid.

Kirsty-Ann would have a lot to tell her friends when she got back to Sesquoa. Thoughts of her forested home made Kirsty-Ann very homesick. She flexed her long arms, and felt her tail coil in response. Her thoughts drifted to her beloved forest and she imagined herself jumping through the upper reaches of a thick green canopy. She was so caught up in her daydream, that she didn't see the man approach her table and slide into the seat next to her.

She smelt him though.

'Excuse me?' She indicated the seat. 'That's taken.'

The man smiled a reptilian grin, and spread his arms along the back of the seat. He was chewing something black and sticky. Two irregular trails of it stained the front of his chin, dribbling from the corners of his mouth, like some bizarre, misplaced moustache.

'I don't see no one fem.' The man spread his hands open. He looked about him, his eyebrows raised. 'Your friend stood you up, huh?' He grinned again, showing brown stained teeth. His tongue shifted the sticky ball in his mouth from one side to the other. He stared at her and his nostrils flared. 'You look like you need some company. Pretty little thing like you.'

Kirsty-Ann was not quite sure what revolted her about the man most. She decided that it was his teeth.

What must his breath be like? Yuk.

'I would prefer to be alone, thank you.'

'Ho ho.' The man straightened his shoulders and cocked his head to one side. 'Listen to that pretty shit.' He scratched his nose with his hand, and pointed across the table at Kirsty-Ann's book. 'Hey, you read?'

'No.' said Kirsty-Ann, with all the sarcasm she could muster. 'I just look at the pictures.' She raised the book to obscure the man's face, which grew hard.

'Hey!' He snarled and pulled the book roughly away from her grasp. 'I'm talking to you. You don't want to talk to Vasili? Vasili could be good for you, little sister, you know what I mean?' The man's anger evaporated, and his face re-assumed its mask of geniality. He reached across the table and his fingers brushed away a strand of hair from Kirsty-Ann's face. She froze, spiders crawling up and down her back. She watched, locked rigid, as the man's hand dropped away. Leaning forward, his breath washed over her, sickly, like putrefied fruit. 'You want to earn some?' He showed rust streaked enamel in a lewd grin. Kirsty-Ann cringed and tried to wriggle away from him without actually moving. The man leant back in his seat, and flicked his eyes up and down her. 'You from Sesquoa, yes?'

'No. Yes. None of your business.' It sounded pathetic even to her.

'I heard you tree-huggers got tails in those woods, that right? Could give a lot of pleasure with one of them, no shit. People pay a lot for that. I could sort it. You like mals? Fems?'

Kirsty-Ann couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. Was he offering to buy my tail from me?

The man quickly slid round in the seat and attempted to put his arm around Kirsty-Ann's shoulders. She tried to slide away from him, her back to the Oil Burner's shrouded entrance, but he came after her. He grabbed her arm and held it pinned to his side. She felt hot breath on her neck, and a strained voice sounded in her ear. 'You gonna perform for me monkey girl, huh? You furry down here, huh?'

Kirsty-Ann felt a hand begin to slide up her leg and was about to scream when the man did something quite strange. All at the same time, he jerked his head back from her ear, buried his face in his chest, gurgled and began to rise out of his seat, clutching his head. Then he rose further and, while his free hand flew down to his crotch, began screaming. Kirsty-Ann screamed too and flew to the far side of the table, her eyes wide with fright. The background buzz of conversation in the bar dropped and faces turned to see what was going on.

The man was hanging, suspended in mid-air, screaming at the top of his lungs, hurling obscenities. Something stood behind him. Kirsty-Ann couldn't see it properly, because near to it, the light seemed to become confused about what it was reflecting from. Kirsty-Ann half glimpsed movement, but there was nothing to focus on.

'Fuckingbitchfuckyoucuntmonkeygirl...'

At the last component of the insult, the man actually seemed to bounce in mid-air and Kirsty-Ann saw the material of his trousers stretching tight across his crotch.

'That's my sister, arsehole,' said a voice. Kirsty-Ann's heart jumped in her chest.

That was Melie's voice!

The ambiguous space behind the man began to collapse in on itself. A figure became visible, tall and thin, arms, legs and torso covered with a thick black tracery. One of the figure's hands had grabbed a handful of the man's hair, and

the other was holding him between the legs. The man was crying like a baby. 'Go suck shit!'

The figure hoisted the whimpering man around, walked him towards the exit, and threw him through the door of the Oil Burner like a sack of old rubbish. The buzz of conversation resumed around the bar.

'Yo Melie.' A stocky woman in dungarees raised her hand. Melie slapped it. 'Good job.' The woman laughed wickedly. 'That Vasili is such a worm.'

'Alright Bea. Yeah. Slimemold was hitting on my sister.'

'Your sister? No shit.' Bea turned towards Kirsty-Ann. 'Hi girl.'

Kirsty-Ann was too stunned to either move or speak.

'Yo Cuty!' Melie sauntered over to the table. 'Sup fem?' She picked her sister up in a bear hug and span her around, laughing.

Kirsty-Ann laughed too, and she returned her sister's hug. 'Melie, how did you get so strong?' She gasped through her laughter. 'You threw that man like he was no heavier than a feather!' She banged on Melie's arms. 'Put me down!'

'Been working out. Hey it's good to see you Cuty.'

The machine that had taken Kirsty-Ann's order wheeled up to the table. One of its appendages held a grubby glass of water.

'Water. Pay now.'



The Oil Burner was situated in one of the oldest parts of Godsfollicle. If Kirsty-Ann had taken the time, she would have seen imprinted into the mock-stone, in much smaller letters below the name of the place, the legend, Est. 35 AK.. Melie had chosen the Oil Burner for her meet with Kirsty-Ann simply because it was the closest place she knew to the reaction shuttle terminus, and she hadn't wanted her little sister to get lost: Godsfollicle was not the kind of place that you bought maps for. Besides, the Weed you could get in the Oil Burner was just amazing, and Melie wanted to stock up before she went to Novagaia.

Godsfollicle was the smallest, ugliest, most dilapidated of the structures making up the Koyculture, unique in being almost entirely human-constructed. Godsfollicle was not a neat, tidy place, more a chaotic agglomeration. Like a chocolate truffle rolled across a plate of drawing pins, cubes, globes, ziggurats and rings sprouted in all directions from the mountain of reconstructed lunar material.

The earliest structures, adhering like clams to the stony tip, had been added to over the centuries since, sprouting improbable forms on flimsy metallic fronds. These in turn had spawned their own peculiar progeny. Like some monstrous plastic and ceramic coral, Godsfollicle had grown with a bewildering diversity, slowly expanding to accommodate the hordes of people which had flocked to it after the metacetaceans of Water retreated behind their wall of silence, 450 years ago.

Godsfollicle was also the geosynchronous tether for the monstrous thread that dangled from it, the 70,000 kilometre long Hair of God.

To many of the first dispossessed citizens of the Koyculture, the Hair of God was a potent symbol, representing the only remaining, tangible connection with humanity's old home. Godsfollicle attracted the kind of person who was not yet willing, even after four centuries, to believe that Earth was gone, and that Water had taken her place. Maybe they thought that if they sat at the top of the Gaian gravity well long enough, they might be there when the wrath of Water cooled and the oceans retreated. Maybe they thought that they would live to see Earth live again, coughing the saline from her lungs and accepting her banished children back into their garden. They had been waiting four and a half centuries for this resurrection, and would wait another four, if necessary, but deep down, everyone in the Koyculture knew that their patience was in vain.

Earth was dead, and drowned.

Her death had been slow and remorseless. During it, human kind could only watch as the metacetaceans of Water gouged at her protective epidermis, peeling it away like so much blubber, leaving her to blister and burn in the harsh UV. They could do nothing as Earth wrinkled and shrivelled and her breathing became more and more laboured. They could only watch helplessly as her two frozen mammaries of saline warmed and pooled and began to fill her lungs with fluid, drowning her from within. They could do nothing as Earth become spiteful, spurning those of her children who tried futilely to help her, sending storms to batter and torment them. And finally, impotent and unable to intervene, they could only look on as Earth moaned in despair and sank slowly out of sight beneath the encroaching oceans.

The Gaian mother, suffocated by the liquid embrace of Water.

As the garden was slowly inundated, human kind scuttled to higher ground. From there they witnessed 200 years and more of magical construction as the fragile forms of the Koyculture took form above their heads. Earth's lunar companion became smaller and more jagged as mysterious metacetacean forces took it apart and re-assembled it in new forms. Orbitals, tori, spinning oneils and crazy, architectural clouds of structures blossomed in the vacuum and the impossible thread, the Hair of God, dropped slowly out of the sky towards the Himalayan plateau.

In the end there was little choice.

Like ants climbing a blade of grass to escape the rain, humanity began the long climb up this improbable cable. Escaping the Gaian mother's fierce embrace they emerged, blinking and uncertain into the sparkling new worlds built by the metacetacean builders of Water.

The remnants of humanity left alive after the metacetacean cull, after centuries of sterility, watched the final death throes of the planetary mother from the lip of her gravity well, peering down at her from their new home of the Koyculture. The usurper metacetacean race might have murdered the mother, but it kept her children alive, for what reason no one knew, except the Cardinals possibly, but they weren't saying.

The name, the Oil Burner, was a relic of the older, more embittered generation that had watched from Godsfollicle, when it was little more than a pimpled lump of rock, as Earth had spluttered and died. This generation had mourned the loss of the Earth mother with angry resentment toward her murderers, but they could

do nothing. Insults were their only weapon. Naming a bar the Oil Burner was kind of like the verbal equivalent of sticking two fingers up to Water.

Fuck you!

The name was a reference to the time when the incomprehensible minds of the metacetacean citizenry were trapped in handleless, streamlined bodies, and they were speared from the sea with steam propelled harpoons. To the times when the great ancestors of the new metacetaceans were skinned alive and peeled like a fruit, helpless with wretched agony, forced to experience the ablation of their own tissues by cruel, snickering things with long knives. To the times when their warm blubber was scythed from their living sides, boiled in vats to provide oil, and then burnt for light.



‘Golly,’ said Kirsty-Ann, when Melie had finished telling her the aetiology of the Oil Burner’s name. Kirsty-Ann didn’t know much about history. Ask her which species of arboreal monkey gestated its young for the longest, and she was right on the button, but history?

Wasn’t history what they kept on Novagaia?

‘That’s the Histories, bimbo.’

‘Oh!’ Kirsty-Ann giggled into the pineapple juice that Melie had procured for her. All of that stuff about Water and Earth being drowned had happened centuries before she had been born. Nonetheless, Kirsty-Ann felt a sympathetic sorrow when she tried to imagine what it must have been like for all those people in fear and pain. And what used to be done to those poor Water people!

‘Piss on that! Those fucking fish destroyed the whole fucking Earth! Drowned it. Turned into one big fucking lake. Spearing a few of them out of the water is no reason for genocide, is it?’ Kirsty-Ann grudgingly accepted that it was probably not. ‘And then they disappear, and you don’t hear so much as a squeak out of them again, for the best part of 400 years! Kirsty-Ann agreed this was impolite. ‘Impolite? Ha!’ Melie drew a deep breath. ‘But anyway, anyway, I didn’t come here to talk about the name of a bar...’ Melie reached out and placed her hand fondly on her sister’s arm. She smiled sweetly. ‘I’ve come to see my favourite little sister!’

‘No you haven’t Melie!’ Kirsty-Ann’s eyes widened in exasperation and surprise. She set her glass. ‘I’ve come all the way from my forest to see my rebellious older sister, who just happened to get thrown off Newpageant by...’

‘I wasn’t thrown off. I was asked to leave.’

‘...for burning down a sacred birch grove single-handedly, and no-one still knows why or how and who hasn’t been heard from in over four years Melie!’ Kirsty-Ann finished on a decisive, triumphant squeal.

‘I think that’s the most I’ve ever heard you say in one go?’

‘Oh. Oh... Oh you pig, Melie!’ Kirsty-Ann burst into tears. She had been only 13 when Melie left Sesquoia, and at the time, couldn’t understand why her sister

would desert her. Kirsty-Ann had cried herself to sleep for weeks, desperately lonely without her big, rough and tumble older sister there to coax and guide her through.

'Hey.' Melie was suddenly appalled by her sister's tears. 'Oh, hey, come here Cuty, don't cry.' Melie slid around the table, and hugged her sister to her, stroking her hair.

'You left me, Melie. All alone with Sally. Why did you leave me?'

'I didn't want to, Cuty but they forced me to. Said I was a filthy arsonist, with no respect for life.'

That wasn't entirely true. Melie had wanted to get away from Sesquoa. She had had a belly full of other people telling her what she should believe and how she should live her life.

Plus, there was the Blit, but Melie didn't like thinking about that.

'I missed you so much!' said Kirsty-Ann, snuffling through tears. She rubbed the back of her hand roughly across her wet cheeks. She burst into tears again. 'Oh Melie, it's so good to see you.'

'Doesn't look like it to me. Look, you've blubbed all over your book.' Kirsty-Ann laughed despite herself. 'Listen, how about if I tell you a story, like I used to, yeah?'

'I'm not a child you know.' Kirsty-Ann wiped at the wet end of her nose.

'I know, I know, but this is a good one. D'you want another drink?'

'Yes please.'

Melie moved to get up from the table. She paused and looked down at her sister. 'You OK?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

'Back in a tick.' Melie sauntered over to the bar.

Kirsty-Ann looked at her sister as she leant against the thick plastic counter. No senile machine is going to serve my sister anything to drink, Melie had said when the service machine had presented Kirsty-Ann with that grubby glass of water. Melie had sat Kirsty-Ann down, and stomped over to the bar, and proceeded to hammer on the dark, slippery top until a fat woman with enormous breasts and a huge mane of frizzy hair had emerged from a recessed doorway, and demanded to know what Melie thought she was doing. Melie had leant across the counter, and whispered something to the woman. The woman had initially shook her head, but eventually smiled, and wobbled away back into the door behind the counter. She had re-appeared moments later, with a carafe of pineapple juice, and a small package, which Melie pocketed quickly.

Kirsty-Ann watched a replica of the scene again now, and this time, the woman greeted Melie like an old friend. 'Do you know her?' she asked when Melie had returned with a fresh carafe.

'Not really. Well, sort of. Nice enough fem. Anyway, I was going to tell you a story.'

'Yes!' Kirsty-Ann leant forward eagerly in her seat.

'OK.' Melie sat back in her chair, collecting her thoughts. 'Well, I've been working recently with a bunch of mals who take a show around Koy in a couple of old reaction shuttles. We do tricks and do tightrope walking, that kind of stuff. The outfit is called, get this, the Cunnycarnival.'

Kirsty-Ann's eyes went wide. 'Really?'

'Yeah, and they were looking for someone to come in on a high-wire act, you know, and they were well impressed with my tail too, as you can imagine.'

Kirsty-Ann thought back to the man, Vasili, who Melie had thrown out, and she nodded her agreement.

'So I'd been working with these mals for a while, and it was alright. Except for this really fucking odd bossman actually, this huge neomorph, but you know, I could handle that. But the weird thing was, like, that not one of them had come on to me at all, you know? It wasn't like I was really into any of them or anything, but it just would have been nice. So, anyway, I was just finishing up a practice session one night with these two mal, Jurgen and Fist - should have figured it out with names like that - and we were all hot and sweaty after pounding wires, and Jurgen and Fist took off for the showers. I must have forgotten something, or something, and anyway, I doubled back, and walked in on Jurgen going down on Fist like there was no tomorrow!'

Kirsty-Ann looked at her sister blankly. Melie explained. Kirsty-Ann blushed deeply and Melie laughed. 'Goodness,' said Kirsty-Ann. 'What did you do?'

'Well, I just kind of backed out of the room real quietly - the guys were really into it, and didn't notice me at all. But I tell you what, seeing that got me feeling a bit horny you know, all juiced up!'

Kirsty-Ann squeaked excitedly, nodding her head. 'Then what happened?'

'Well, I cruised out of there, feeling all tingly and kind of nice you know and came down here for a juice and something to eat.' Melie indicated the Oil Burner's gloomy interior. 'Well, I was just sitting, kind of minding my own business, when I felt these eyes on me.' Melie paused to take a sip of her juice. 'I was looking around and saw these two mal sitting a couple of tables away, all done out in these big flowing robes, with their hair tied back in pigtails, yeah? One of them looked a little older than the other, more ugly, but the other one! Melie whistled, and rolled her eyes.

Kirsty-Ann grinned at her sister. 'Then what happened?'

'Well, I was just sitting starting on some bean salad, when these two mal started really shouting at each other, right? The older one got really angry, right, shaking his fists, and looking over at me, and pointing. Then he stormed out, and gave me the nastiest look as he passed. Well, I thought, "Huh, Jurgen and Fist all over again", else why would he have looked at me like that, yeah? and I just stared back at him sweetly. Then the other one comes over. He's maybe ten cees smaller than me, oval faced with all this black hair and these sweet brown eyes but he looks really nervous. He looks down at me, and I can see he's pretty scared. And then guess what?'

'What?'

'He sits down, and looks at me, and says, "Hello, my name is Gervane. I'm being taken to Austerity". And he's twisting his hands like he wants to pull his fingers off, and he doesn't want to look at me. "Hi" I say, "I'm Melie". He smiles at me, and suddenly, it's like his whole face changes. I was thinking that maybe the mal wants to hit on me, but when he smiled, it was like he was saying, "I want to be your friend". Does that sound weird?'

'In this place, yes!' The two sisters laughed. 'But anyway, this Gervane had just smiled at you?'

'Oh yeah.' Melie sipped her juice again, recollecting her thoughts. 'Right, so I was there, you know, thinking, "What is this mal about?", when he suddenly slides round in the seat, and kind of cuddles against me, like a little mouse or something!'

'No!'

'Yeah. You know, normally if a mal did that, I would break his fingers, but there was something about this one which made me stop.'

'Maybe his eyes. Nice mal have nice eyes, don't they?'

Melie looked at her younger sister with a sudden insight. 'Yes, they do don't they? Umm. Where was I?'

'Gervane was nestling up to you.'

'Oh yeah, right. Well, I'm just sitting there, when this mal sits right up straight, and takes my hands and says, "I'm going to Austerity". I don't know what the mal is talking about, so I say, "That's nice". "No, I don't think so." he says, and his little face all creases up, and he looks like he's going to cry or something. "I think I will hate Austerity, Melie." he says. "I've heard they sit and eat soy porridge all day, wearing long scratchy robes and you can never..." and then he trails off, like he's embarrassed or something, and looks up at me with those brown eyes. Then I get what his problem is: no fems! Like I reckoned he was going into a fucking church or something you know, being forced to spend the rest of his life using his hands.'

'Oh how terrible for him! What did you do?'

'Well, you know what I'm like, sucker for a sweet face. I took his hands, and said: "Gervane, tell me what you want". And he goes all embarrassed again, and won't look at me, and kind of mumbles into his hands. And this is all very sweet, I'm thinking, but sometimes you kind of want the mal to do some of the work at least, so I get a little stern, and say, "Gervane, tell me now!". And he does, stuttering and mumbling, but he does.'

'What did he want?'

'What do you think? He wanted to taste the real honey!'

'Oh!'

'Now usually, you know, a mal like this just turns me right off. But there was something about this one...'

'His eyes?'

'More like his hands, I think,' said Melie, after a moment's reflection. 'Really fine and long, like they could be really gentle, you know? And you know how good gentle feels Cuty.'

Kirsty-Ann dropped her head a little and grinned, looking up at her sister over the rim of her glass. 'Don't know what you mean Mel.'

Melie laughed, 'So anyway, this mal Gervane, once he susses that I'm not going to laugh at him or anything, gets a little bit more forceful, which I kind of liked. He says that he is staying in a place nearby and he starts pleading with me to go with him. "This is more like it" I thought, and play the tart a bit, stringing him along, and he gets really excited about that.'

'Did you go with him?'

'Yeah!' Melie gave a wicked grin. 'And oh wow, the mal was just amazing! There was I thinking that he would be like, a little unsubtle, you know, like all young mals, but he wasn't at all.'

'Goodness.'

'And before I knew it, there I was, with this mal's hair spread all over my tummy - his hair was longer than mine you know - with his tongue doing the most incredible things.'

Kirsty-Ann tried to picture the scene: her own experience was not extensive, but she had a good imagination. 'Ooo! Was it nice?'

'Oh Cuty!' Melie wriggled on her seat. 'Nice is not the word fem! You want to try it with your mal on Sesquoa. And don't be embarrassed to ask him either. And if he's not into it, find someone who is.'

Kirsty-Ann grinned at her sister, and did a little shimmy, smoothing her hands down over her small breasts. 'Yo. I hear what you're saying.' They both laughed. 'But then what happened?'

'Now we come to the scary part. Gervane was doing all these incredible things to me, and I was just in bliss, when suddenly, the door to his little room crashed open, and there was this huge mal standing there, looking at Gervane's naked bum wriggling between my legs. I don't know who was more shocked, him or us!'

Kirsty-Ann burst out laughing at the picture that Melie was drawing for her. 'What did you do?' she asked.

'I did what anyone would have done! I started screaming, at the top of my lungs, like the fucking world was ending or something. The big mal picked Gervane up by his hair, and began slapping at his tool, you know, which was deflating pretty quickly by this time, as you might imagine, and started saying all these weird things about mills and duty and stars and stuff. Gervane started screaming back and punching at the big mal's stomach. I kind of figured that maybe this was Gervane's father or something, right, the one that wanted him to sit in a cell on Austerity and masturbate for the rest of his life? Not a person that I would like to sit and have a chat with, 'specially not after having his precious son between my legs. So I kinda snatched up my clothes, and tried to squeeze past them. I was mostly there, too, when the big mal suddenly broke off from slapping Gervane's tool, and grabbed me by the arm. "You cannot leave," he said, in this really creepy voice, like he was enjoying himself but angry at the same time. "Watch me." I said, and landed him one between the legs and just fucking ran, pulling on my clothes as I got outside. I ducked into this doorway as the big mal came storming out. He didn't see me and went back inside, so I took myself home for a hot shower and a smoke.' Melie took a long swig from her juice. 'Speaking of which.' She took the package out of her pocket. She unwrapped it, and peeled off some dry green leaves, which she packed into the bowl of a small pipe, and then lit. Green, aromatic smoke drifted over the table.

'Goodness, Melie!' Kirsty-Ann had become more and more alarmed as the story had unfolded. 'That must have been really scary.'

'It was. I was just about to come too.'

'But have you seen Gervane again? Or that horrible mal? Was he Gervane's father, do you think?'

'Dunno.' Melie gestured towards Kirsty-Ann with the pipe. 'Want some?'

'No,' said Kirsty-Ann automatically, then: 'Yes.' She took the pipe and sweet, almond-scented smoke filled her nostrils. She felt a warmth spread across her face. She coughed, but only a little. 'Hmm. That's nice.'

'I'll get you some before you go. When are you going anyway? We've just got to do some stuff together before you go back to Sesquoia, yeah?'

'Oh yes!' Kirsty-Ann became excited at the thought of spending some time with her big sister again after so many years. 'When are you going to Novagaia?'

'Don't know really. Whenever. Supposed to be there in a couple of days, I suppose.'

'Why are you going there Melie? For a holiday?'

Melie's face, usually so open and friendly, became a little closed, a little hard. Most people wouldn't even have noticed it, but Kirsty-Ann did. She was Melie's sister, after all, and she knew her very well, even after a separation of four years.

'No.' Melie dropped her head a little, scratching behind her ear. 'Not a holiday.'

'Oh. What then?'

Melie was silent for a while. 'Listen Cuty,' she said slowly, and when she looked up, her eyes were hooded. She was scared.

'Melie! What's wrong?'

'Nothing. Listen, I can't really talk about it, alright? I don't want you to worry, but I can't talk about it, OK?'

'Can't talk about what?' Kirsty-Ann became a little scared herself.

Melie desperately wanted to tell her sister why she was going to Novagaia.

The Blit.

But how do you explain something like the Blit? Melie didn't even know what it was. All she knew was that, every once in a while, more frequently recently, something happened to her.

She Blitted.

It was her own private name. Like everyone in the Koyculture, Melie had her own resource and so was familiar with the disorientation that using the nchoi machines could sometimes effect. But the Blit was something else. She had no control over it. She could not tell when it would happen. It was simply that, every so often, she would suddenly see things that weren't there, and hear things that weren't noises, and... she couldn't even describe it. When the Blit happened, it was not really like seeing, exactly, nor like hearing either. If she looked at something, she could see it as it was, or as it was going to be, or what it might be, was that it? Things became different somehow, that's all she knew: Fucking really different. She knew no more than that. She had told no one about the Blit, because they would probably laugh at her, or worse, and because she couldn't even describe what it was that did happen to her. Melie did know one thing though: the Blit, when it happened, scared her shitless.

'Melie!' Melie heard Kirsty-Ann's concerned voice, and it broke her reverie. She saw her sister's lower lip tremble slightly. 'You're shutting me out again, aren't you Melie? Just like on Sesquoia, when you left. Shutting me out.'

Melie became irritated. 'Listen!' She saw Kirsty-Ann recoil from the harshness in her voice. 'I did, am doing, nothing of the kind.' A sudden frost developed between the two sisters. Kirsty-Ann's face became hard, set in a frown, and she pouted angrily. Melie was suddenly inspired. 'OK, OK, don't get all upset on me

again. Thing is, I've got a disease. No one knows what it is, or how to cure it. Some weird kind of virus or something, but I reckon that the Cardinals will be able to help me, OK? That's why I'm going to Novagaia.' The best lie was the lie that was half-true.

'Oh Melie, why didn't you say so? Is it, you know...?' Kirsty-Ann indicated down, towards her crotch.

'No it fucking isn't!' Melie didn't have to fake her indignation.

'I'm sorry, I just thought that...'

'You just thought what?'

'I'm sorry!' cried Kirsty-Ann. 'So I'm stupid, I know that. Everyone tells me I'm stupid, always putting my foot in it, always missing the jokes. Even you think I'm stupid.' Kirsty-Ann pouted and scowled disconsolately into her pineapple juice.

'Oh Cuty!' Melie's antagonism fell away. 'I don't think you're stupid. You're a wonderful person and I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get angry. Please, let's not argue, not now.'

Kirsty-Ann harumphed. 'OK, we won't argue. But you've got a disease Melie, you might die!' Kirsty-Ann wailed and tears appeared in her eyes.

Shit, thought Melie. She had forgotten her convenient falsehood.

'Listen, I'm going to be fine. I'll go to Novagaia, and see a Cardinal, and they'll cure me. It's no big deal. Honest.' Melie looked at Kirsty-Ann, and felt a sudden wave of affection for her sister. She's only worried about me, she thought. Been a while since anyone did that. 'Hey, what about if when I come back, I visit you on Sesquoaia, huh?'

Kirsty-Ann immediately brightened. 'Would you? I would really like that Melie.'

'Yeah, I'll see if I can steal that young mal away from you, yeah?'

Kirsty-Ann's brow furrowed. 'You are horrible to me sometimes, Melie.'

'Only because I love you. Right, shall we make a move? We can go visit a little market I know if you like, sells some really beautiful stuff.'

'Yeah, OK.' Kirsty-Ann finished off the rest of her juice in a gulp. 'All set!' She laughed and stood up. As she did so, Melie saw past her to the shrouded entranceway of the Oil Burner.

A huge, dark form stood peering around in the gloom.

'O-oh.' Melie pulled Kirsty-Ann back down into her seat.

'Melie! What you doing?'

At the sound of her name, the head on top of the huge form snapped around, searching for the source. It put his hand ominously into his jacket, and began walking slowly into the Oil Burner's smoky depths, coming towards the two sister's slowly.

Shit, shit, shit!

'Cuty!' Melie sank lower in her seat. 'That's him!'

'That's who?'

'That mal Gervane's pervert father!'

'Oh my goodness!' Kirsty-Ann went a little pale. 'What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to get the fuck out of here is what I'm going to do!' Melie looked around her quickly. 'Hey Bea! Bea, you fat bimbo!'

The stocky woman who had congratulated Melie earlier swivelled round in her seat two tables away, and glared around for the source of the insult. 'What?'

'Bea! Over here!'

The huge mal had gone over to the bar near the entrance, his back to them: the woman with the frizzy mane of hair was wobbling over to him. Bea came over to the two sisters' table.

'What're doing slouched down like that? Piles givin' you grief?' She guffawed.

'Shut up! This is Kirsty-Ann, my sister. Anything happens to her, I'll sew up your fanny with a blunt needle. Make sure she gets safely on the next shuttle back to Sesquoia.'

'Seeing's how you asked so nicely...' Bea replied, '...it'd be my pleasure.'

Kirsty-Ann began to protest. 'No, you can't let that nasty man bully you Melie. And I'm not going back to Sesquoia either.'

At that moment, the mal turned round from the bar after conversing briefly with the large women and saw Melie. The pale, lumpen face did not register shock or surprise but he reached ominously into his pocket.

'Shit!' Melie quickly accessed her resource. An icon appeared, a tiny billowing cloak. She stabbed at it and pulled the hood of her short jacket up over her head as the nchoi machine activated the camouflage polymers enmeshed in her clothing. She became an ambiguous chameleon-figure, the camouflage polymers straining to make her appear like her surroundings. She dived under the table, a ghostly ripple.

'Heavy shit.' Bea's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

'Goodness!'

The large mal pulled a wispy microfactory weapon from concealment and fired. The portion of the seat that Melie had just vacated erupted in a shower of foam and plastic.

'Melie,' cried Kirsty-Ann. 'Melie!'

'Yo.' The small voice came from the ambiguous emptiness, which was emerging from under the table. 'Relax, he won't be able to see me now.'

The mal pointed the microfactory weapon downwards and fired again. The base of the table collapsed, sending its top spinning up into the air in a fountain of debris.

Bitch, Melie thought, he's got to have some kind of optics tool on-line. He can see me! Fortunately, Melie had a few tricks of her own up her sleeve. One of which was Bea. The stocky woman had cowered from the mal's first shot, and screamed, like she was really scared. Keeping her head low, she ran past him waving her arms. Then, when she got past him, she stopped screaming, took a small blade from a sheath on her arm, and plunged it up into the mal's back, aiming for his kidneys. The knife penetrated the loose fabric, and then slipped on something hard just underneath it, cutting a twenty-centimetre vertical rent in the material, to the top of the mal's neck. There the blade drew a small glob of blood.

Bea tried to alter her grip on the knife for another attempt, but was a fraction too slow. The mal turned, and back slapped her across the bar, turned back quickly to where Melie had been.

But Bea's assault had given Melie the time that she needed. The black tracery that she wore was not cosmetic. It was a micro-hydraulic exoskeleton: The Cunyncarnival used them for loading and unloading their circus equipment. When

it was active, like it was now, she could haul five hundred kilo crates around like they were so much cotton wool.

Melie had rolled away from the table, and ended up crouching next to the bar, hidden temporarily by the legs of the stools clustered around her. The Oil Burner was undergoing riot. People were screaming and crying, and the air smelled sharp and acrid. Melie's eyes stung.

Alright needleprick! This is for Bea. And Gervane.

She braced her legs against the base of the stool behind her, and tucked herself into a ball. Then she jumped, the micro-hydraulic exoskeleton propelling her in a flat parabola at thirty kilometres an hour. Melie hit the mal's midsection, and heard things snapping as he flew backward under the force of the impact. Melie felt a blinding pain stab her in the neck, and she cried out, rolling away, the camouflage polymers in her clothing cycling quickly through a chaos of colours before they gave out.

The mal was on his back, blood coming from his mouth, and Melie gave a grimace of satisfaction. Then he raised and twisted his head, saw her, and without moving, fired the weapon that he was still clutching in his hand. The noise was ominously muted.

Fuck this for a game of squikeys,

Melie staggered to her feet and headed for the exit. A portion of the wall next to the door exploded in a cloud of stone debris as she dove through it and out into the small square. She regained her feet quickly, and used the exoskeleton to propel her at a supra-human pace, leaping over tables and astonished people as she turned to look behind her briefly.

The mal was still after her.

Not for long.

She ducked into a little alley, plastered herself to the wall and then edged herself up to the corner, risking a small peek. The mal was moving along the corridor, holding his stomach, curiously mechanical in his movements, his face a blank. As he was about to pass the alley, Melie locked her hands together, and stepping out, swung both arms as fast as the exoskeleton would drive them, up and into the mal's face. Melie felt pain explode in her shoulders and arms, felt blood and spittle spray her on the cheek. The mal's head snapped up and backwards, his nose smashed, slivers of bone penetrating through to the softer neural tissues behind. For a moment, the mal was horizontal in mid-air, then he crashed to the floor on his back, his face ruined.

Have I killed him?

One part of her wished she had, another part wished she hadn't. She stood over the comatose form, uncertain how to proceed, when the mal raised an arm, a wiry, globular thing attached to his hand. Melie flung herself backwards, but too slow to stop her already painful shoulder being violently jerked back and up by an incredibly powerful force, lifting her off her feet and propelling her backwards. She landed on her back, and grunted, her hand flying to her shoulder, pulling away thick, crimson blood. A figure materialised out of the red haze of pain that passed for her sight. She was jerked upright, and she smelt sour breath in her face.

'You have violated the venerable Millstar.'

'Fuck you.' Melie tried to spit but her mouth was dry.

A bright red smear appeared in the middle of the huge mal's forehead. He gurgled and tightened his hold on the front of Melie's shirt. Then he fell forward and to the side and lay still, face down with the back of his head missing.

With all the rest of the energy that she could muster, Melie raised her head and saw the woman from the bar. She held a weapon almost as big as she was, and it squashed one breast as she lowered it from her shoulder.

'Fucking Austerity fish!' She hurried over to where Melie lay spread-eagled on her back. 'No respect for us fems.'

Chapter Three

In the dream, he was standing at the top of a small cliff, sloping down in a wash of loose gravel to a wide beach, of the same, black gritty rock. There was no wind, and the sun shone strongly out of a clear sky. He looked about him, and all around it was the same: the shallow even drop of the cliff, the green water, the dark, crystalline rock. He took a step forward, and the ground underneath his feet crunched and popped, little sparkling shards flying up around his feet. He became aware of someone behind him, speaking in a low voice. He turned but there was no one there. The voice continued, behind him still. He frowned, and turned again, but there was only the rock, and the sun and the water. The voice was insistent. He must. He must. A wind sprang up, bringing with it a sharp, iodine smell. Now, you must go now. You know you must. His frown deepened, and he pursed his lips. He began walking down the cliff face, slipping and sliding over the pulverised rock. He reached the beach, and began walking toward the water. The ground became hot under his feet, and he felt the first hollow emptiness of fear, like hunger, gnaw at his insides. He looked around him, and called out. The slope had got steeper. It didn't seem possible now that he could have climbed down it. He saw a figure at the top of the cliff, a stick like thing, jumping and screaming, pointing at him. He called out, but his voice was a whisper, and it carried no distance. The stick like figure at the top of the cliff bent down, and lifted a portion of the cliff, and snapped it down. Like a wave travelling along a rope, a portion of the cliff came away as a solid sheet, folding down and collapsing onto the beach. He cried out, and felt the ground under his feet shift horribly. He fell, and tasted the black gravel of the beach in his mouth. He looked up, and saw a naked figure. She was rolling in the sand a couple of metres away, and he could see black crystals gathering in the crease of her buttocks. He cried out to her, warning her, and she turned dark, dancing eyes on him. The ground trembled again, and he saw the figure unrolling another portion of the cliff, saw its solid wave come toward him. The ground grew hotter still, and he struggled to rise, but it was like walking on water. The woman had disappeared. He retained an image of her eyes laughing at him, and felt his mouth begin to fill with a gritty, earthy taste. The wave of gravel was travelling slowly towards him, sucking the ground ahead of it, and him, down and then up. The wave of gravel was about to engulf him, when he found his strangled voice, and shrieked in fear and bafflement.



Floccanalog awoke, his heart clamouring in his chest, and gave a long, trembling breath, feeling the medical emulsion in his lungs bubble. The viscous medical gel around him flowed turgidly as he squirmed and tried to sit up. Always the same. He relaxed, knowing he couldn't move, and felt the nightmare horror begin to fade.

He was surrounded by a low, ambient lighting, filtered ambiguously through the pale blue of the medical emulsion. The soft whisperings of the Transition facility reached his ears distantly. He tried to move again, unconsciously sending motor commands through now defunct pathways to the Shell's magnetohydrodynamic limbs. A spiked ball appeared in his vision, pulsed twice, and vanished.

Interdiction.

He felt a great despair well up inside him, familiar, like an old friend's hand on his brow. He had been warned that the transition from the Shell would be a physically and emotionally draining process. He thought he had been prepared, but the reality was far worse than he could have imagined. Detached from his symbiosis with the choo Host of the Shell, he felt amputated, as if he had lost parts of himself. Which was true.

Amputation.

He could think of no other word more fitting.

Floccanalog had arrived at the Transition facility two weeks ago, and for many hours, had swam back and forth in front of the access gate to the facility pool, open to the ocean, reluctant now that he had come this far to take the final step. He could sense the agitation of the Shell: the Host of the machine knew what was coming, and its fear and trepidation were palpable. Finally, he had swam inside, and been taken from the ocean pool, from his home and his life, and put in a fresh water holding tank.

Over a course of four days, the medical facility bled a steady stream of molecular machines into the tank, infecting him with a variety of medical nchoi. The tiny machines spread throughout the Shell, forming interfaces with the choo Host. They had then moved deeper, and recognising his distinctive physiology, grown new strains of themselves, slipping through his skin, passing through subcutaneous fat, seeking out arterial highways for their commerce. Burrowing their way into his flesh, they quickly infected the tissues of his brain and central nervous system, setting up temporary buffers and connections. The preliminaries accomplished smoothly, the nchoi had then set about cutting and dismantling the myriad of connections from his own primary and secondary neural systems with the choo Host of the Shell.

He had gone blind first.

Circling slowly in the holding tank, he had felt his perception grow dim and grainy. Encased in the carbonsponge body of the Shell, free living in the oceans of Marineris, he had once had access to the senses of the machine: the machine's eyes were his eyes, the machine's ears were his ears. The information from the machine's senses was synthesised in his re-wired, marine-adapted

visual cortex, enabling him to perceive the beauty of Marineris like no human ever could.

For Flocanalog and all the other symbionts of Marineris, an analytic separation of language and perception quickly became otiose by necessity. No longer was the environment perceived, and then described: perception and description blurred, and became part of a grander cognition. Losing his sight for Flocanalog was thus more traumatic than for a human, because he lost his means of describing the world also. As the medical nchoi dismantled the neural pathways linking the primary visual cortex to the Shell's senses, so they also spread to his interpretative cortex, chopping minutely at Broca's area, Wernicke's area and the arcuate fasciculus. Flocanalog found himself in the grip of a remorseless, encroaching aphasia, and his conceptual understanding of his world began to fail.

He became paraplegic next.

The medical nchoi moved to other regions of his brain, infecting the motor cortex, sinking lower into the cerebellum and basal ganglia, fastidiously dismantling the motor pathways linking him to the magnetohydrodynamic limbs of the Shell. It all happened slowly, and painlessly. Physically that is. Flocanalog had steeled himself for the experience, but was unable to fight off the feeling that he was losing himself, piece by piece. He had felt control over his body, which was the Shell, falter and slide away. Conceptual understanding became difficult: thoughts became absurd.

After seven days, the medical nchoi withdrew, their task done, and Flocanalog was left, a disembodied, mutilated consciousness floating in a dimension-less void, without perception or motion or volition. He had cried non-existent tears, torn out non-existent hair. He had moaned and wailed without noise, a mind without a body, and felt hot needles of desire lancing through him: not a physical lust, but an emotional need so strong it felt like he would die without it being satiated.

Let me go back! Oh, let me back!

After the first wave of nchoi had withdrawn, Flocanalog was cut physically loose from the Shell's carbonsponge body. The Host of the machine had acquiesced to his wishes for the forced separation, and was decanted into the facilities resident choo resource, where it would remain, sharing the machine-dreamtime, until such time as Flocanalog would return, and they would be rejoined, once more becoming a single individual. Mercifully, he had been spared the pain of that separation: he could no longer understand the alien mind of his symbiont, and he had been deaf to its forlorn, imploring cry. He did not need to hear it, though, because he knew. He retreated inside himself, grief and fear and confusion threatening to overwhelm him.

The Transition facility extracted his pasty white body from the fatty interior of the Shell, slicing away at the thin tendrils of carbonsponge, ablating those areas where it had grown and fused with his own tissues. In places, the carbonsponge had replaced several centimetres of skin and fat. Despite best efforts at anaesthesia, Flocanalog had felt the hot touch of the coherent light as it burned his skin, and had shrieked in silent, incommunicable agony.

His limp, raw body had been immersed in a tank of an oxygenated polyfluorocarbon emulsion. Nchoi introduced into the emulsion had then set about breaking down the organic component of the gel, using liberated proteins and fats to rebuild Floccanalogue's atrophied musculature. Under the direction of the facilities sentient resource, the delicate task of regenerating long dormant perceptual and motor pathways began, in an attempt to re-calibrate the neural machinery for function in a non-aquatic environment.

The regeneration of Floccanalogue's language capacities was more tricky still: immersed in the oxygenated emulsion, he had heard ghost-whispers in his ears, felt his tongue and throat contract and move without his consent. Strange, half-remembered concepts began to fill his mind, structures and processes he had not used for twenty years.

Slowly and surely, guided by the Transition facilities machine sentience, the efforts of the molecular-sized nchoi machines reconstituted Floccanalogue as an air-breathing, gravity-sustainable, bipedal life-form. Throughout, Floccanalogue cried silently in the empty loneliness of his own mind, trying to flex magnetohydrodynamic limbs that weren't there any more, straining to see with senses that delivered information he no longer had the necessary neural machinery to understand. He ached for the fluid joy of a language he could no longer speak. He vocalised with bursts of coherent sound that would have emerged from the Shell, if it had still been there, calling his wife, his friends, anyone that would hear. But there was only silence, and darkness and crushing grief.

He thought of his wife often, but the images he could recall seemed remote. Stapjeekha, forgive me. She had been unable to understand why he had chosen his course at first. He remembered that they had made love for the last time, twisting and rising through two thousand metres of ocean, her Shell dancing with light, reds and blues and greens pulsing in a dizzying kaleidoscope, as the sensitive exterior of the Shell, her skin, responded to his caresses. He had entered her, and she had entered him, the bodies of the Shells folding into one another, and he had felt the touch throughout his whole being. Where his physical body stopped and the interface with the Shell's Host stopped was not possible to distinguish: all was pleasure and a sharp sense of urgency. They had ridden the high plateau of sensation, circling up and up towards the distant ceiling of light, climaxing again and again, and broke the surface of the water, eight metric tonnes of symbiotic human and machine, pressed together in desperate, glorious release. If his original body responded with an ejaculation of salt water, Floccanalogue did not know. For a moment he wished would go on forever, he and his wife were one being, with each other and with existence. There was nothing else.

Then the little death had passed, and they had sunk slowly down in the water, still enfolded in each other.

'Why Floc?' she had asked him, a quick sweep of sonar brushing his Shell, and he had looked at her. She had asked him many times, and he had struggled to explain. 'Why must you do this?' She pushed herself away from him a little. The vibrant pulsing crimsons and oranges of her Shell had faded in the fall away from bliss, and she was languorous, spots of jade circling slowly around her

circumference. She spoke briefly, but it was not in any human language, it made use of no referent that Homo sapien would be able to recover. She described/saw their life together for him, drawing a picture in sound. It was beautiful, peaceful, centred.

'You know why love,' he had replied. She knew why, but wanted him to explain again. She was in pain, and it was because of him. She pulsed a harsh yellow, and a furious soundworldpicture arose around him, full of monsters and cruel stick things.

This is what you have chosen!

She disengaged and flew away from him. He rocked in the fierce backwash from her and felt himself tear a little inside. He sent a burst of sonar after her, an imploring sequence of clicks and whistles, painting soundworldpictures of his return, but she was not listening. He watched through the augmented senses of the Shell as she plummeted away from him, falling through layers of water, sinking down the temperature well, until she was lost from sight.

He had not seen her again.

Now, Flocanalog was almost whole again. Whatever that meant. The nchoi had done their job, the resource sentience was satisfied that the regeneration of the appropriate neural machinery was complete, and so he waited for the oxygenated emulsion to be drained from his lungs and to be birthed again to the world of air and earth. He suddenly felt a rush of revulsion for the clumsy, limited body that he would have to call his own for the duration of his trip to Novagaia. He thought back to his youth on Memecast, another life, 20 and more years ago. Trapped in a Simian shell, fighting every second against the monstrous pull of the simulated gravity of the orbital. His revulsion turned into despair, and he cried again inside, feeling pins and needles all over his reconstituted body.

New sensations, but his body remembered.

He thought back to the encounter with the Old One, trying to recall details of the enormous, fluked shape that had loomed out of the darkness to address him. He could not. But he remembered the soundworldpicture that had held him enthralled and exhilarated and entranced. It was no dream, he was sure, but he was not convinced that it was entirely real either.

How could I have met an Old One? On Marineris? Impossible.

But real enough.

Else why am I here?

He felt the injustice of his situation like a sudden weight of rock collapsing on top of him. All his life he had sought the answers that the Old One had hinted would be his.

If.

If he gave up the Shell and walked the green of Novagaia. There had been no answer to his question of why. Why must he do this thing, so repugnant and painful?

A course has been set. Maybe now, at last, I shall find answers.

He drew a deep breath, feeling the emulsion flow into his lungs. He tried flexing a magnetohydrodynamic limb, knowing it was useless, waiting for the spiky interdiction icon to appear. None did, and instead he felt an alien movement as his hand clenched into a fist.

His hand!

He recalled the dream and relived the moment when the curtain of solid gravel had overarched him, sucking him up into its belly, wondering what it meant.