

BEYOND THE AQUILA RIFT

GRETA'S WITH me when I pull Suzy out of the surge tank .

"Why her?" Greta asks .

"Because I want her out first," I say, wondering if Greta's jealous. I don't blame her: Suzy's beautiful, but she's also smart. There isn't a better syntax runner in Ashanti Industrial .

"What happened?" Suzy asks, when she's over the grogginess. "Did we make it back?" I ask her to tell me the last thing she remembers .

"Customs," Suzy says. "Those pricks on Arkangel."

"And after that? Anything else? The runes? Do you remember casting them?"

"No," she says, then picks up something in my voice. The fact that I might not be telling the truth, or telling her all she needs to know. "Thom. I'll ask you again. Did we make it back?"

"Yeah," I say. "We made it back."

Suzy looks back at the starscape, airbrushed across her surge tank in luminous violet and yellow paint. She'd had it customized on Carillon. It was against regs: something about the paint clogging intake filters. Suzy didn't care. She told me it had cost her a week's pay, but it had been worth it to impose her own personality on the grey company architecture of the ship .

"Funny how I feel like I've been in that thing for months."

I shrug. "That's the way it feels sometimes."

"Then nothing went wrong?"

"Nothing at all."

Suzy looks at Greta. "Then who are you?" she asks .

Greta says nothing. She just looks at me expectantly. I start shaking, and realize I can't go through with this. Not yet .

"End it," I tell Greta .

Greta steps toward Suzy. Suzy reacts, but she isn't quick enough. Greta pulls something from her pocket and touches Suzy on the forearm. Suzy drops like a puppet, out cold. We put her back into the surge tank, plumb her back in and close the lid .

"She won't remember anything," Greta says. "The conversation never left her short-term memory."

"I don't know if I can go through with this," I say .

Greta touches me with her other hand. "No one ever said this was going to be easy."

"I was just trying to ease her into it gently. I didn't want to tell her the truth right out."

"I know," Greta says. "You're a kind man, Thom." Then she kisses me .

* * *

I REMEMBERED ARKANGEL as well. That was about where it all started to go wrong. We just didn't know it then.

We missed our first take-off slot when customs found a discrepancy in our cargo waybill. It wasn't serious, but it took them a while to realize their mistake. By the time they did, we knew we were going to be sitting on the ground for another eight hours, while inbound control processed a fleet of bulk carriers.

I told Suzy and Ray the news. Suzy took it pretty well, or about as well as Suzy ever took that kind of thing. I suggested she use the time to scour the docks for any hot syntax patches. Anything that might shave a day or two off our return trip.

“Company authorized?” she asked.

“I don’t care,” I said.

“What about Ray?” Suzy asked. “Is he going to sit here drinking tea while I work for my pay?”

I smiled. They had a bickering, love-hate thing going. “No, Ray can do something useful as well. He can take a look at the q-planes.”

“Nothing wrong with those planes,” Ray said.

I took off my old Ashanti Industrial bib cap, scratched my bald spot and turned to the jib man.

“Right. Then it won’t take you long to check them over, will it?”

“Whatever, Skip.”

The thing I liked about Ray was that he always knew when he’d lost an argument. He gathered his kit and went out to check over the planes. I watched him climb the jib ladder, tools hanging from his belt. Suzy got her facemask, long, black coat, and left, vanishing into the vapour haze of the docks, boot heels clicking into the distance long after she’d passed out of sight.

I left the *Blue Goose*, walking in the opposite direction to Suzy. Overhead, the bulk carriers slid in one after the other. You heard them long before you saw them. Mournful, cetacean moans cut down through the piss-yellow clouds over the port. When they emerged, you saw dark hulls scabbed and scarred by the blocky extrusions of syntax patterning, jibs and q-planes retracted for landing and undercarriages clutching down like talons. The carriers stopped over their allocated wells and lowered down on a scream of thrust. Docking gantries closed around them like grasping skeletal fingers. Cargo-handling ’saurs plodded out of their holding pens, some of them autonomous, some of them still being ridden by trainers. There was a shocking silence as the engines cut, until the next carrier began to approach through the clouds.

I always like watching ships coming and going, even when they’re holding my own ship on the ground. I couldn’t read the syntax, but I knew these ships had come in all the way from the Rift. The Aquila Rift is about as far out as anyone ever goes. At median tunnel speeds, it’s a year from the centre of the Local Bubble.

I’ve been out that way once in my life. I’ve seen the view from the near side of the Rift, like a good tourist. It was far enough for me.

When there was a lull in the landing pattern, I ducked into a bar and found an Aperture Authority booth that took Ashanti credit. I sat in the seat and recorded a thirty-second message to Katerina. I told her I was on my way back, but that we were stuck on Arkangel for another few hours. I warned her that the delay might cascade through to our tunnel routing, depending on how busy things were at the Authority’s end. Based on past experience, an eight-hour ground hold might become a two-day hold at the surge point. I told her I’d be back, but she shouldn’t worry if I was a few days late.

Outside a diplodocus slouched by with a freight container strapped between its legs.

I told Katerina I loved her and couldn’t wait to get back home.

While I walked back to the *Blue Goose*, I thought of the message racing ahead of me. Transmitted at light-speed up-system, then copied into the memory buffer of the next outgoing ship. Chances were, that particular ship wasn’t headed to Barranquilla or anywhere near it. The Aperture Authority would have to relay the message from ship to ship until it reached its destination. I might even reach Barranquilla ahead of it, but in all my years of delays that had only happened once. The system worked all right.

Overhead, a white passenger liner had been slotted in between the bulk carriers. I lifted up my mask to get a better look at it. I got a hit of ozone, fuel and dinosaur dung. That was Arkangel all right. You couldn't mistake it for any other place in the Bubble. There were four hundred worlds out there, up to a dozen surface ports on every planet, and none of them smelled bad in quite the same way.

"Thom?"

I followed the voice. It was Ray, standing by the dock.

"You finished checking those planes?" I asked.

Ray shook his head. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. They were a little off-alignment, so—seeing as we're going to be sitting here for eight hours—I decided to run a full recalibration."

I nodded. "That was the idea. So what's the prob?"

"The *prob* is a slot just opened up. Tower says we can lift in thirty minutes."

I shrugged. "Then we'll lift."

"I haven't finished the recal. As it is, things are worse than before I started. Lifting now would not be a good idea."

"You know how the tower works," I said. "Miss two offered slots, you could be on the ground for days."

"No one wants to get back home sooner than I do," Ray said.

"So cheer up."

"She'll be rough in the tunnel. It won't be a smooth ride home."

I shrugged. "Do we care? We'll be asleep."

"Well, it's academic. We can't leave without Suzy."

I heard boot heels clicking toward us. Suzy came out of the fog, tugging her own mask aside.

"No joy with the rune monkeys," she said. "Nothing they were selling I hadn't seen a million times before. Fucking cowboys."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "We're leaving anyway."

Ray swore. I pretended I hadn't heard him.

* * *

I WAS ALWAYS the last one into a surge tank. I never went under until I was sure we were about to get the green light. It gave me a chance to check things over. Things can always go wrong, no matter how good the crew.

The *Blue Goose* had come to a stop near the AA beacon that marked the surge point. There were a few other ships ahead of us in the queue, plus the usual swarm of AA service craft. Through an observation blister I was able to watch the larger ships depart one by one. Accelerating at maximum power, they seemed to streak toward a completely featureless part of the sky. Their jibs were spread wide, and the smooth lines of their hulls were gnarled and disfigured with the cryptic alien runes of the routing syntax. At twenty gees it was as if a huge invisible hand snatched them away into the distance. Ninety seconds later, there'd be a pale green flash from a thousand kilometres away.

I twisted around in the blister. There were the foreshortened symbols of our routing syntax. Each rune of the script was formed from a matrix of millions of hexagonal platelets. The platelets were on motors so they could be pushed in or out from the hull.

Ask the Aperture Authority and they'll tell you that the syntax is now fully understood. This is true, but only up to a point. After two centuries of study, human machines can now construct and interpret the syntax with an acceptably low failure rate. Given a desired destination, they can assemble a string of runes that will almost always be accepted by the aperture's own machinery. Furthermore, they can almost always guarantee that the desired routing is the one that the aperture machinery will provide.

In short, you usually get where you want to go.

Take a simple point-to-point transfer, like the Hauraki run. In that case there is no real disadvantage in using automatic syntax generators. But for longer trajectories—those that may involve six or seven transits between aperture hubs—machines lose the edge. They find a solution, but usually it isn't the optimum one. That's where syntax runners come in. People like Suzy have an intuitive grasp of syntax solutions. They dream in runes. When they see a poorly constructed script, they feel it like toothache. It *affronts* them.

A good syntax runner can shave days off a route. For a company like Ashanti Industrial, that can make a lot of difference.

But I wasn't a syntax runner. I could tell when something had gone wrong with the platelets, but I had to trust that Suzy had done her job. I had no other choice.

But I knew Suzy wouldn't screw things up.

I twisted around and looked back the other way. Now that we were in space, the q-planes had deployed. They were swung out from the hull on triple hundred-metre-long jibs, like the arms of a grapple. I checked that they were locked in their fully extended positions and that the status lights were all in the green. The jibs were Ray's area. He'd been checking the alignment of the ski-shaped q-planes when I ordered him to close up ship and prepare to lift. I couldn't see any visible indication that they were out of alignment, but then again it wouldn't take much to make our trip home bumpier than usual. But as I'd told Ray, who cared? The *Blue Goose* could take a little tunnel turbulence. It was built to.

I checked the surge point again. Only three ships ahead of us.

I went back to the surge tanks and checked that Suzy and Ray were all right. Ray's tank had been customized at the same time that Suzy had had hers done. It was full of images of what Suzy called the BVM: the Blessed Virgin Mary. The BVM was always in a spacesuit, carrying a little spacesuited Jesus. Their helmets were airbrushed gold halos. The artwork had a cheap, hasty look to it. I assumed Ray hadn't spent as much as Suzy.

Quickly I stripped down to my underclothes. I plumbed into my own unpainted surge tank and closed the lid. The buffering gel sloshed in. Within about twenty seconds I was already feeling drowsy. By the time traffic control gave us the green light I'd be asleep.

I've done it a thousand times. There was no fear, no apprehension. Just a tiny flicker of regret.

I've never seen an aperture. Then again, very few people have.

Witnesses report a doughnut-shaped lump of dark chondrite asteroid, about two kilometres across. The entire middle section has been cored out, with the inner part of the ring faced by the quixotic-matter machinery of the aperture itself. They say the q-matter machinery twinkles and moves all the while, like the ticking innards of a very complicated clock. But the monitoring systems of the Aperture Authority detect no movement at all.

It's alien technology. We have no idea how it works, or even who made it. Maybe, in hindsight, it's better not to be able to see it.

It's enough to dream, and then awake, and know that you're somewhere else.

* * *

TRY A DIFFERENT approach, Greta says. Tell her the truth this time. Maybe she'll take it easier than you think .

"There's no way I can tell her the truth."

Greta leans one hip against the wall, one hand still in her pocket. "Then tell her something halfway truthful."

We un-plumb Suzy and haul her out of the surge tank .

"Where are we?" she asks. Then to Greta: "Who are you?"

I wonder if some of the last conversation did make it out of Suzy's short-term memory after all .

"Greta works here," I say .

"Where's here?"

I remember what Greta told me. "A station in Schedar sector."

"That's not where we're meant to be, Thom."

I nod. "I know. There was a mistake. A routing error."

Suzy's already shaking her head. "There was nothing wrong—"

"I know. It wasn't your fault." I help her into her ship clothes. She's still shivering, her muscles reacting to movement after so much time in the tank. "The syntax was good."

"Then what?"

"The system made a mistake, not you."

"Schedar sector..." Suzy says. "That would put us about ten days off our schedule, wouldn't it?"

I try and remember what Greta said to me the first time. I ought to know this stuff by heart, but Suzy's the routing expert, not me. "That sounds about right," I say .

But Suzy shakes her head. "Then we're not in Schedar sector."

I try to sound pleasantly surprised .

"We're not?"

"I've been in that tank for a lot longer than a few days, Thom. I know. I can feel it in every fucking bone in my body. So where are we?"

I turn to Greta. I can't believe this is happening again .

"End it," I say .

Greta steps toward Suzy .

* * *

YOU KNOW THAT "as soon as I awoke I knew everything was wrong" cliché? You've probably heard it a thousand times, in a thousand bars across the Bubble, wherever ship crews swap tall tales over flat, company-subsidized beer. The trouble is that sometimes that's exactly the way it happens. I never felt good after a period in the surge tank. But the only time I had ever come around feeling anywhere near this bad was after that trip I took to the edge of the Bubble.

Mulling this, but knowing there was nothing I could do about it until I was out of the tank, it took me half an hour of painful work to free myself from the connections. Every muscle fibre in my body felt like it had been shredded. Unfortunately, the sense of wrongness didn't end with

the tank. The *Blue Goose* was much too quiet. We should have been heading away from the last exit aperture after our routing. But the distant, comforting rumble of the fusion engines wasn't there at all. That meant we were in free-fall.

Not good.

I floated out of the tank, grabbed a handhold and levered myself around to view the other two tanks. Ray's largest BVM stared back radiantly from the cowl of his tank. The bio indices were all in the green. Ray was still unconscious, but there was nothing wrong with him. Same story with Suzy. Some automated system had decided I was the only one who needed waking.

A few minutes later I had made my way to the same observation blister I'd used to check the ship before the surge. I pushed my head into the scuffed glass half-dome and looked around.

We'd arrived somewhere. The *Blue Goose* was sitting in a huge, zero-gravity parking bay. The chamber was an elongated cylinder, hexagonal in cross section. The walls were a smear of service machinery: squat modules, snaking umbilical lines, the retracted cradles of unused docking berths. Whichever way I looked I saw other ships locked onto cradles. Every make and class you could think of, every possible configuration of hull design compatible with aperture transitions. Service lights threw a warm golden glow on the scene. Now and then the whole chamber was bathed in the stuttering violet flicker of a cutting torch.

It was a repair facility.

I was just starting to mull on that when I saw something extend itself from the wall of the chamber. It was a telescopic docking tunnel, groping toward our ship. Through the windows in the side of the tunnel I saw figures floating, pulling themselves along hand over hand.

I sighed and started making my way to the airlock.

* * *

BY THE TIME I reached the lock they were already through the first stage of the cycle. Nothing wrong with that—there was no good reason to prevent foreign parties boarding a vessel—but it *was* just a tiny bit impolite. But perhaps they'd assumed we were all asleep.

The door slid open.

"You're awake," a man said. "Captain Thomas Gundlupet of the *Blue Goose*, isn't it?"

"Guess so," I said.

"Mind if we come in?"

There were about half a dozen of them, and they were already coming in. They all wore slightly timeworn ochre overalls, flashed with too many company sigils. My hackles rose. I didn't really like the way they were barging in.

"What's up?" I said. "Where are we?"

"Where do you think?" the man said. He had a face full of stubble, with bad yellow teeth. I was impressed by that. Having bad teeth took a lot of work these days. It was years since I'd seen anyone who had the same dedication to the art.

"I'm really hoping you're not going to tell me we're still stuck in Arkangel system," I said.

"No, you made it through the gate."

"And?"

"There was a screw-up. Routing error. You didn't pop out of the right aperture."

"Oh, Christ." I took off my bib cap. "It never rains. Something went wrong with the insertion, right?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Who knows how these things happen? All we know is you aren't

supposed to be here.”

“Right. And where is ‘here’?”

“Saumlaki Station. Schedar sector.”

He said it as though he was already losing interest, as if this was a routine he went through several times a day.

He might have been losing interest. I wasn’t.

I’d never heard of Saumlaki Station, but I’d certainly heard of Schedar sector. Schedar was a K supergiant out toward the edge of the Local Bubble. It defined one of the seventy-odd navigational sectors across the whole Bubble.

Did I mention the Bubble already?

* * *

YOU KNOW HOW the Milky Way Galaxy looks; you’ve seen it a thousand times, in paintings and computer simulations. A bright central bulge at the galactic core, with lazily curved spiral arms flung out from that hub, each arm composed of hundreds of billions of stars, ranging from the dimmest, slow-burning dwarfs to the hottest supergiants teetering on the edge of supernova extinction.

Now zoom in on one arm of the Milky Way. There’s the sun, orange-yellow, about two-thirds out from the centre of the galaxy. Lanes and folds of dust swaddle the sun out to distances of tens of thousands of light-years. Yet the sun itself is sitting right in the middle of a four-hundred-light-year-wide hole in the dust, a bubble in which the density is about a twentieth of its average value.

That’s the Local Bubble. It’s as if God blew a hole in the dust just for us.

Except, of course, it wasn’t God. It was a supernova, about a million years ago.

Look further out, and there are more bubbles, their walls intersecting and merging, forming a vast froth-like structure tens of thousands of light-years across. There are the structures of Loop I and Loop II and the Lindblad Ring. There are even superdense knots where the dust is almost too thick to be seen through at all. Black cauls like the Taurus or Rho-Ophiuchi dark clouds, or the Aquila Rift itself.

Lying outside the Local Bubble, the Rift is the furthest point in the galaxy we’ve ever travelled to. It’s not a question of endurance or nerve. There simply isn’t a way to get beyond it, at least not within the faster-than-light network of the aperture links. The rabbit-warren of possible routes just doesn’t reach any further. Most destinations—including most of those on the *Blue Goose*’s itinerary—didn’t even get you beyond the Local Bubble.

For us, it didn’t matter. There’s still a lot of commerce you can do within a hundred light-years of Earth. But Schedar was right on the periphery of the Bubble, where dust density began to ramp up to normal galactic levels, two hundred and twenty-eight light-years from Mother Earth.

Again: not good.

“I know this is a shock for you,” another voice said. “But it’s not as bad as you think it is.”

* * *

I LOOKED AT the woman who had just spoken. Medium height, the kind of face they called ‘elfin’, with slanted, ash-gray eyes and a bob of shoulder-length, chrome-white hair.

The face achingly familiar.

“It isn’t?”

“I wouldn’t say so, Thom.” She smiled. “After all, it’s given us the chance to catch up on old times, hasn’t it?”

“Greta?” I asked, disbelievingly.

She nodded. “For my sins.”

“My God. It is you, isn’t it?”

“I wasn’t sure you’d recognize me. Especially after all this time.”

“You didn’t have much trouble recognizing me.”

“I didn’t have to. The moment you popped out we picked up your recovery transponder. Told us the name of your ship, who owned her, who was flying it, what you were carrying, where you were supposed to be headed. When I heard it was you, I made sure I was part of the reception team. But don’t worry. It’s not like you’ve changed all that much.”

“Well, you haven’t either,” I said.

It wasn’t quite true. But who honestly wants to hear that they look about ten years older than the last time you saw them, even if they still don’t look all that bad with it? I thought about how she had looked naked, memories that I’d kept buried for a decade spooling into daylight. It shamed me that they were still so vivid, as if some furtive part of my subconscious had been secretly hoarding them through years of marriage and fidelity.

Greta half-smiled. It was as if she knew exactly what I was thinking.

“You were never a good liar, Thom.”

“Yeah. Guess I need some practice.”

There was an awkward silence. Neither of us seemed to know what to say next. While we hesitated the others floated around us, saying nothing.

“Well,” I said. “Who’d have guessed we’d end up meeting like this?”

Greta nodded and offered the palms of her hands in a kind of apology.

“I’m just sorry we aren’t meeting under better circumstances,” she said. “But if it’s any consolation, what happened wasn’t at all your fault. We checked your syntax, and there wasn’t a mistake. It’s just that now and then the system throws a glitch.”

“Funny how no one likes to talk about that very much,” I said.

“Could have been worse, Thom. I remember what you used to tell me about space travel.”

“Yeah? Which particular pearl of wisdom would that have been?”

“If you’re in a position to moan about a situation, you’ve no right to be moaning.”

“Christ. Did I actually say that?”

“Mm. And I bet you’re regretting it now. But look, it really isn’t that bad. You’re only twenty days off-schedule.” Greta nodded toward the man who had the bad teeth. “Kolding says you’ll only need a day of damage repair before you can move off again, and then another twenty, twenty-five days before you reach your destination, depending on routing patterns. That’s less than six weeks. So you lose the bonus on this one. Big deal. You’re all in good shape, and your ship only needs a little work. Why don’t you just bite the bullet and sign the repair paperwork?”

“I’m not looking forward to another twenty days in the surge tank. There’s something else, as well.”

“Which is?”

I was about to tell her about Katerina, how she’d have been expecting me back already.

Instead I said: “I’m worried about the others. Suzy and Ray. They’ve got families expecting them. They’ll be worried.”

“I understand,” Greta said. “Suzy and Ray. They’re still asleep, aren’t they? Still in their surge tanks?”

“Yes,” I said, guardedly.

“Keep them that way until you’re on your way.” Greta smiled. “There’s no sense worrying them about their families, either. It’s kinder.”

“If you say so.”

“Trust me on this one, Thom. This isn’t the first time I’ve handled this kind of situation. Doubt it’ll be the last, either.”

* * *

I STAYED IN a hotel overnight, in another part of Saumlaki. The hotel was an echoing, multilevel prefab structure, sunk deep into bedrock. It must have had a capacity for hundreds of guests, but at the moment only a handful of the rooms seemed to be occupied. I slept fitfully and got up early. In the atrium, I saw a bib-capped worker in rubber gloves removing diseased carp from a small ornamental pond. Watching him pick out the ailing, metallic-orange fish, I had a flash of déjà vu. What was it about dismal hotels and dying carp?

Before breakfast—bleakly alert, even though I didn’t really feel as if I’d had a good night’s sleep—I visited Kolding and got a fresh update on the repair schedule.

“Two, three days,” he said.

“It was a day last night.”

Kolding shrugged. “You’ve got a problem with the service, find someone else to fix your ship.”

Then he stuck his little finger into the corner of his mouth and began to dig between his teeth.

“Nice to see someone who really enjoys his work,” I said.

I left Kolding before my mood worsened too much, making my way to a different part of the station.

Greta had suggested we meet for breakfast and catch up on old times. She was there when I arrived, sitting at a table in an “outdoor” terrace, under a red-and-white-striped canopy, sipping orange juice. Above us was a dome several hundred metres wide, projecting a cloudless holographic sky. It had the hard, enamelled blue of midsummer.

“How’s the hotel?” she asked after I’d ordered a coffee from the waiter.

“Not bad. No one seems very keen on conversation, though. Is it me or does that place have all the cheery ambience of a sinking ocean liner?”

“It’s just this place,” Greta said. “Everyone who comes here is pissed off about it. Either they got transferred here and they’re pissed off about *that*, or they ended up here by a routing error and they’re pissed off about that instead. Take your pick.”

“No one’s happy?”

“Only the ones who know they’re getting out of here soon.”

“Would that include you?”

“No,” she said. “I’m more or less stuck here. But I’m OK about it. I guess I’m the exception that proves the rule.”

The waiters were glass mannequins, the kind that had been fashionable in the core worlds about twenty years ago. One of them placed a croissant in front of me, then poured scalding black coffee into my cup.

“Well, it’s good to see you,” I said.

“You too, Thom.” Greta finished her orange juice and then took a corner of my croissant for herself, without asking. “I heard you got married.”

“Yes.”

“Well? Aren’t you going to tell me about her?”

I drank some of my coffee. “Her name’s Katerina.”

“Nice name.”

“She works in the department of bioremediation on Kagawa.”

“Kids?” Greta asked.

“Not yet. It wouldn’t be easy, the amount of time we both spend away from home.”

“Mm.” She had a mouthful of croissant. “But one day you might think about it.”

“Nothing’s ruled out,” I said. As flattered as I was that she was taking such an interest in me, the surgical precision of her questions left me slightly uncomfortable. There was no thrust and parry; no fishing for information. That kind of directness unnerved. But at least it allowed me to ask the same questions. “What about you, then?”

“Nothing very exciting. I got married a year or so after I last saw you. A man called Marcel.”

“Marcel,” I said, ruminatively, as if the name had cosmic significance. “Well, I’m happy for you. I take it he’s here, too?”

“No. Our work took us in different directions. We’re still married, but...” Greta left the sentence hanging.

“It can’t be easy,” I said.

“If it was meant to work, we’d have found a way. Anyway, don’t feel too sorry for either of us. We’ve both got our work. I wouldn’t say I was any less happy than the last time we met.”

“Well, that’s good,” I said.

Greta leaned over and touched my hand. Her fingernails were midnight black with a blue sheen.

“Look. This is really presumptuous of me. It’s one thing asking to meet up for breakfast. It would have been rude not to. But how would you like to meet again later? It’s really nice to eat here in the evening. They turn down the lights. The view through the dome is really something.”

I looked up into that endless holographic sky.

“I thought it was faked.”

“Oh, it is,” she said. “But don’t let that spoil it for you.”

* * *

I SETTLED IN front of the camera and started speaking.

“Katerina,” I said. “Hello. I hope you’re all right. By now I hope someone from the company will have been in touch. If they haven’t, I’m pretty sure you’ll have made your own enquiries. I’m not sure what they told you, but I promise you that we’re safe and sound and that we’re coming home. I’m calling from somewhere called Saumlaki Station, a repair facility on the edge of Scharar sector. It’s not much to look at: just a warren of tunnels and centrifuges dug into a pitch-black, D-type asteroid, about half a light-year from the nearest star. The only reason it’s here at all is because there happens to be an aperture next door. That’s how we got here in the first place. Somehow or other *Blue Goose* took a wrong turn in the network, what they call a routing error. The *Goose* came in last night, local time, and I’ve been in a hotel since then. I

didn't call last night because I was too tired and disorientated after coming out of the tank, and I didn't know how long we were going to be here. Seemed better to wait until morning, when we'd have a better idea of the damage to the ship. It's nothing serious—just a few bits and pieces buckled during the transit—but it means we're going to be here for another couple of days. Kolding—he's the repair chief—says three at the most. By the time we get back on course, however, we'll be about forty days behind schedule.”

I paused, eyeing the incrementing cost indicator. Before I sat down in the booth I always had an eloquent and economical speech queued up in my head, one that conveyed exactly what needed to be said, with the measure and grace of a soliloquy. But my mind always dried up as soon as I opened my mouth, and instead of an actor I ended up sounding like a small-time thief, concocting some fumbling alibi in the presence of quick-witted interrogators.

I smiled awkwardly and continued: “It kills me to think this message is going to take so long to get to you. But if there's a silver lining it's that I won't be far behind it. By the time you get this, I should be home only a couple of days later. So don't waste money replying to this, because by the time you get it I'll already have left Saumlaki Station. Just stay where you are and I promise I'll be home soon.”

That was it. There was nothing more I needed to say, other than: “I miss you.” Delivered after a moment's pause, I meant it to sound emphatic. But when I replayed the recording it sounded more like an afterthought.

I could have recorded it again, but I doubted that I would have been any happier. Instead I just committed the existing message for transmission and wondered how long it would have to wait before going on its way. Since it seemed unlikely that there was a vast flow of commerce in and out of Saumlaki, our ship might be the first suitable outbound vessel.

I emerged from the booth. For some reason I felt guilty, as if I had been in some way neglectful. It took me a while before I realized what was playing on my mind. I'd told Katerina about Saumlaki Station. I'd even told her about Kolding and the damage to the *Blue Goose*. But I hadn't told her about Greta.

* * *

IT'S NOT WORKING with Suzy .

She's too smart, too well attuned to the physiological correlatives of surge tank immersion. I can give her all the reassurances in the world, but she knows she's been under too long for this to be anything other than a truly epic screw-up. She knows that we aren't just talking weeks or even months of delay here. Every nerve in her body is screaming that message into her skull .

“I had dreams,” she says, when the grogginess fades .

“What kind?”

“Dreams that I kept waking. Dreams that you were pulling me out of the surge tank. You and someone else.”

I do my best to smile. I'm alone, but Greta isn't far away. The hypodermic's in my pocket now .

“I always get bad dreams coming out of the tank,” I say .

“These felt real. Your story kept changing, but you kept telling me we were somewhere...that we'd gone a little off course, but that it was nothing to worry about.”

So much for Greta's reassurance that Suzy will remember nothing after our aborted efforts at waking her. Seems that her short-term memory isn't quite as fallible as we'd like .

"It's funny you should say that," I tell her. "Because, actually, we are a little off course." She's sharper with every breath. Suzy was always the best of us at coming out of the tank.

"Tell me how far, Thom."

"Farther than I'd like."

She balls her fists. I can't tell if it's aggression, or some lingering neuromuscular effect of her time in the tank. "How far? Beyond the Bubble?"

"Beyond the Bubble, yes."

Her voice grows small and childlike.

"Tell me, Thom. Are we out beyond the Rift?"

I can hear the fear. I understand what she's going through. It's the nightmare that all ship crews live with on every trip. That something will go wrong with the routing, something so severe that they'll end up on the very edge of the network. That they'll end up so far from home that getting back will take years, not months. And that, of course, years will have already passed, even before they begin the return trip.

That loved ones will be years older when they reach home.

If they're still there. If they still remember you, or want to remember. If they're still recognizable, or alive.

Beyond the Aquila Rift. It's shorthand for the trip no one ever hopes to make by accident. The one that will screw up the rest of your life, the one that creates the ghosts you see haunting the shadows of company bars across the whole Bubble. Men and women ripped out of time, cut adrift from families and lovers by an accident of an alien technology we use but barely comprehend.

"Yes," I say. "We're beyond the Rift."

Suzy screams, knitting her face into a mask of anger and denial. My hand is cold around the hypodermic. I consider using it.

* * *

A NEW REPAIR estimate from Kolding. Five, six days.

This time I didn't even argue. I just shrugged and walked out, and wondered how long it would be next time.

That evening I sat down at the same table where Greta and I had met over breakfast. The dining area had been well lit before, but now the only illumination came from the table lamps and the subdued lighting panels set into the paving. In the distance, a glass mannequin cycled from empty table to empty table, playing "Asturias" on a glass guitar. There were no other patrons dining tonight.

I didn't have long to wait for Greta.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Thom."

I turned to her as she approached the table. I liked the way she walked in the low gravity of the station, the way the subdued lighting traced the arc of her hips and waist. She eased into her seat and leaned toward me in the manner of a conspirator. The lamp on the table threw red shadows and gold highlights across her face. It took ten years off her age.

"You aren't late," I said. "And anyway, I had the view."

"It's an improvement, isn't it?"

"That wouldn't be saying much," I said with a smile. "But yes, it's definitely an improvement."

“I could sit out here all night and just look at it. In fact sometimes that’s exactly what I do. Just me and a bottle of wine.”

“I don’t blame you.”

Instead of the holographic blue, the dome was now full of stars. It was like no view I’d ever seen from another station or ship. There were furious blue-white stars embedded in what looked like sheets of velvet. There were hard gold gems and soft red smears, like finger smears in pastel. There were streams and currents of fainter stars, like a myriad neon fish caught in a snapshot of frozen motion. There were vast billowing backdrops of red and green cloud, veined and flawed by filaments of cool black. There were bluffs and promontories of ochre dust, so rich in three-dimensional structure that they resembled an exuberant impasto of oil colours; contours light-years thick laid on with a trowel. Red or pink stars burned through the dust like lanterns. Orphaned worlds were caught erupting from the towers, little sperm-like shapes trailing viscera of dust. Here and there I saw the tiny eyelike knots of birthing solar systems. There were pulsars, flashing on and off like navigation beacons, their differing rhythms seeming to set a stately tempo for the entire scene, like a deathly slow waltz. There seemed too much detail for one view, an overwhelming abundance of richness, and yet no matter which direction I looked, there was yet more to see, as if the dome sensed my attention and concentrated its efforts on the spot where my gaze was directed. For a moment I felt a lurching sense of dizziness, and—though I tried to stop it before I made a fool of myself—I found myself grasping the side of the table, as if to prevent myself from falling into the infinite depths of the view.

“Yes, it has that effect on people,” Greta said.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“Do you mean beautiful, or terrifying?”

I realized I wasn’t sure. “It’s big,” was all I could offer.

“Of course, it’s faked,” Greta said, her voice soft now that she was leaning closer. “The glass in the dome is smart. It exaggerates the brightness of the stars, so that the human eye registers the differences between them. Otherwise the colours aren’t unrealistic. Everything else you see is also pretty accurate, if you accept that certain frequencies have been shifted into the visible band, and the scale of certain structures has been adjusted.” She pointed out features for my edification. “That’s the edge of the Taurus Dark Cloud, with the Pleiades just poking out. That’s a filament of the Local Bubble. You see that open cluster?”

She waited for me to answer. “Yes,” I said.

“That’s the Hyades. Over there you’ve got Betelgeuse and Bellatrix.”

“I’m impressed.”

“You should be. It cost a lot of money.” She leaned back a bit, so that the shadows dropped across her face again. “Are you all right, Thom? You seem a bit distracted.”

I sighed.

“I just got another prognosis from your friend Kolding. That’s enough to put a dent in anyone’s day.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“There’s something else, too,” I said. “Something that’s been bothering me since I came out of the tank.”

A mannequin came to take our order. I let Greta choose for me.

“You can talk to me about it, whatever it is,” she said, when the mannequin had gone.

“It isn’t easy.”

“Something personal, then? Is it about Katerina?” She bit her tongue. “No, sorry. I

shouldn't have said that."

"It's not about Katerina. Not exactly, anyway." But even as I said it, I knew that in a sense it *was* about Katerina, and how long it was going to be before we saw each other again.

"Go on, Thom."

"This is going to sound silly. But I wonder if everyone's being straight with me. It's not just Kolding. It's you as well. When I came out of that tank I felt the same way I felt when I'd been out to the Rift. Worse, if anything. I felt like I'd been in the tank for a long, long time."

"It feels that way sometimes."

"I know the difference, Greta. Trust me on this."

"So what are you saying?"

The problem was that I wasn't really sure. It was one thing to feel a vague sense of unease about how long I'd been in the tank. It was another to come out and accuse my host of lying. Especially when she had been so hospitable.

"Is there any reason you'd lie to me?"

"Come off it, Thom. What kind of a question is that?"

As soon as I had said it, it sounded absurd and offensive to me as well. I wished I could reverse time and start again, ignoring my misgivings.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Stupid. Just put it down to messed-up biorhythms, or something."

She reached across the table and took my hand, as she had done at breakfast. This time she continued to hold it.

"You really feel wrong, don't you?"

"Kolding's games aren't helping, that's for sure." The waiter brought our wine, setting it down, the bottle chinking against his delicately articulated glass fingers. The mannequin poured two glasses and I sampled mine. "Maybe if I had someone else from my crew to bitch about it all with, I wouldn't feel so bad. I know you said we shouldn't wake Suzy and Ray, but that was before a one-day stopover turned into a week."

Greta shrugged. "If you want to wake them, no one's going to stop you. But don't think about ship business now. Let's not spoil a perfect evening."

I looked up at the starscape. It was heightened, with the mad shimmering intensity of a Van Gogh nightscape.

It made one feel drunk and ecstatic just to look at it.

"What could possibly spoil it?" I asked.

* * *

WHAT HAPPENED IS that I drank too much wine and ended up sleeping with Greta. I'm not sure how much of a part the wine played in it for her. If her relationship with Marcel was in as much trouble as she'd made out, then obviously she had less to lose than I did. Yes, that made it all right, didn't it? She the seductress, her own marriage a wreck, me the hapless victim. I'd lapsed, yes, but it wasn't really my fault. I'd been alone, far from home, emotionally fragile, and she had exploited me. She had softened me up with a romantic meal, her trap already sprung.

Except all that was self-justifying bullshit, wasn't it? If my own marriage was in such great shape, why had I failed to mention Greta when I called home? At the time, I'd justified that omission as an act of kindness toward my wife. Katerina didn't know that Greta and I had ever been a couple. But why worry Katerina by mentioning another woman, even if I pretended that we'd never met before?

Except—now—I could see that I'd failed to mention Greta for another reason entirely. Because in the back of my mind, even then, there had been the possibility that we might end up sleeping together.

I was already covering myself when I called Katerina. Already making sure there wouldn't be any awkward questions when I got home. As if I not only knew what was going to happen but secretly yearned for it.

The only problem was that Greta had something else in mind.

* * *

"THOM," GRETA SAID, nudging me toward wakefulness. She was lying naked next to me, leaning on one elbow, with the sheets crumpled down around her hips. The light in her room turned her into an abstraction of milky blue curves and deep violet shadows. With one black-nailed finger she traced a line down my chest and said: "There's something you need to know."

"What?" I asked.

"I lied. Kolding lied. We all lied."

I was too drowsy for her words to have much more than a vaguely troubling effect. All I could say, again, was: "What?"

"You're not in Saumlaki Station. You're not in Schedar sector."

I started waking up properly. "Say that again."

"The routing error was more severe than you were led to believe. It took you far beyond the Local Bubble."

I groped for anger, even resentment, but all I felt was a dizzying sensation of falling. "How far out?"

"Further than you thought possible."

The next question was obvious.

"Beyond the Rift?"

"Yes," she said, with the faintest of smiles, as if humouring me in a game whose rules and objectives she found ultimately demeaning. "Beyond the Aquila Rift. A long, long way beyond it."

"I need to know, Greta."

She pushed herself from the bed, reached for a gown. "Then get dressed. I'll show you."

* * *

I FOLLOWED GRETA in a daze.

She took me to the dome again. It was dark, just as it had been the night before, with only the lamp-lit tables to act as beacons. I supposed that the illumination throughout Saumlaki Station (or wherever this was) was at the whim of its occupants, and didn't necessarily have to follow any recognizable diurnal cycle. Nonetheless it was still unsettling to find it changed so arbitrarily. Even if Greta had the authority to turn out the lights when she wanted to, didn't anyone else object?

But I didn't see anyone else *to* object. There was no one else around; only a glass mannequin standing at attention with a napkin over one arm.

She sat us at a table. "Do you want a drink, Thom?"

“No, thanks. For some reason I’m not quite in the mood.”

She touched my wrist. “Don’t hate me for lying to you. It was done out of kindness. I couldn’t break the truth to you in one go.”

Sharply I withdrew my hand. “Shouldn’t I be the judge of that? So what is the truth, exactly?”

“It’s not good, Thom.”

“Tell me, then I’ll decide.”

I didn’t see her do anything, but suddenly the dome was filled with stars again, just as it had been the night before.

The view lurched, zooming outward. Stars flowed by from all sides, like white sleet. Nebulae ghosted past in spectral wisps. The sense of motion was so compelling that I found myself gripping the table, seized by vertigo.

“Easy, Thom,” Greta whispered.

The view lurched, swerved, contracted. A solid wall of gas slammed past. Now, suddenly, I had the sense that we were outside something—that we had punched beyond some containing sphere, defined only in vague arcs and knots of curdled gas, where the interstellar gas density increased sharply.

Of course. It was obvious. We were beyond the Local Bubble.

And we were still receding. I watched the Bubble itself contract, becoming just one member in the larger froth of voids. Instead of individual stars, I saw only smudges and motes, aggregations of hundreds of thousands of suns. It was like pulling back from a close-up view of a forest. I could still see clearings, but the individual trees had vanished into an amorphous mass.

We kept pulling back. Then the expansion slowed and froze. I could still make out the Local Bubble, but only because I had been concentrating on it all the way out. Otherwise, there was nothing to distinguish it from the dozens of surrounding voids.

“Is that how far out we’ve come?” I asked.

Greta shook her head. “Let me show you something.”

Again, she did nothing that I was aware of. But the Bubble I had been looking at was suddenly filled with a skein of red lines, like a child’s scribble.

“Aperture connections,” I said.

As shocked as I was by the fact that she had lied to me—and as fearful as I was about what the truth might hold—I couldn’t turn off the professional part of me, the part that took pride in recognizing such things.

Greta nodded. “Those are the main commerce routes, the well-mapped connections between large colonies and major trading hubs. Now I’ll add all mapped connections, including those that have only ever been traversed by accident.”

The scribble did not change dramatically. It gained a few more wild loops and hairpins, including one that reached beyond the wall of the Bubble to touch the sunward end of the Aquila Rift. One or two other additions pierced the wall in different directions, but none of them reached as far as the Rift.

“Where are we?”

“We’re at one end of one of those connections. You can’t see it because it’s pointing directly toward you.” She smiled slightly. “I needed to establish the scale that we’re dealing with. How wide is the Local Bubble, Thom? Four hundred light-years, give or take?”

My patience was wearing thin. But I was still curious.

“About right.”

“And while I know that aperture travel times vary from point to point, with factors depending on network topology and syntax optimization, isn’t it the case that the average speed is about one thousand times faster than light?”

“Give or take.”

“So a journey from one side of the Bubble might take—what, half a year? Say five or six months? A year to the Aquila Rift?”

“You know that already, Greta. We both know it.”

“All right. Then consider this.” And the view contracted again, the Bubble dwindling, a succession of overlaying structures concealing it, darkness coming into view on either side, and then the familiar spiral swirl of the Milky Way Galaxy looming large.

Hundreds of billions of stars, packed together into foaming white lanes of sea spume.

“This is the view,” Greta said. “Enhanced of course, brightened and filtered for human consumption—but if you had eyes with near-perfect quantum efficiency, and if they happened to be about a metre wide, this is more or less what you’d see if you stepped outside the station.”

“I don’t believe you.”

What I meant was I didn’t *want* to believe her.

“Get used to it, Thom. You’re a long way out. The station’s orbiting a brown dwarf star in the Large Magellanic Cloud. You’re one hundred and fifty thousand light-years from home.”

“No,” I said, my voice little more than a moan of abject, childlike denial.

“You felt as though you’d spent a long time in the tank. You were dead right. Subjective time? I don’t know. Years, easily. Maybe a decade. But objective time—the time that passed back home—is a lot clearer. It took *Blue Goose* one hundred and fifty years to reach us. Even if you turned back now, you’d have been away for three hundred years, Thom.”

“Katerina,” I said, her name like an invocation.

“Katerina’s dead,” Greta told me. “She’s already been dead a century.”

* * *

HOW DO YOU adjust to something like that? The answer is that you can’t count on adjusting to it at all. Not everyone does. Greta told me that she had seen just about every possible reaction in the spectrum, and the one thing she had learned was that it was next to impossible to predict how a given individual would take the news. She had seen people adjust to the revelation with little more than a world-weary shrug, as if this were merely the latest in a line of galling surprises life had thrown at them, no worse in its way than illness or bereavement or any number of personal setbacks. She had seen others walk away and kill themselves half an hour later.

But the majority, she said, did eventually come to some kind of accommodation with the truth, however faltering and painful the process.

“Trust me, Thom,” she said. “I know you now. I know you have the emotional strength to get through this. I know you can learn to live with it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me straight away, as soon as I came out of the tank?”

“Because I didn’t know if you were going to be able to take it.”

“You waited until after you knew I had a wife.”

“No,” Greta said. “I waited until after we’d made love. Because then I knew Katerina couldn’t mean that much to you.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck me? Yes, you did. That’s the point.”

I wanted to strike out against her. But what I was angry at was not her insinuation but the cold-hearted truth of it. She was right, and I knew it. I just didn't want to deal with that, any more than I wanted to deal with the here and now.

I waited for the anger to subside.

"You say we're not the first?" I said.

"No. We were the first, I suppose—the ship I came in. Luckily it was well equipped. After the routing error, we had enough supplies to set up a self-sustaining station on the nearest rock. We knew there was no going back, but at least we could make some kind of life for ourselves here."

"And after that?"

"We had enough to do just keeping ourselves alive, the first few years. But then another ship came through the aperture. Damaged, drifting, much like *Blue Goose*. We hauled her in, warmed her crew, broke the news to them."

"How'd they take it?"

"About as well as you'd expect." Greta laughed hollowly to herself. "A couple of them went mad. Another killed herself. But at least a dozen of them are still here. In all honesty, it was good for us that another ship came through. Not just because they had supplies we could use, but because it helped us to help them. Took our minds off our own self-pity. It made us realize how far we'd come, and how much help these newcomers needed to make the same transition. That wasn't the last ship, either. We've gone through the same process with eight or nine others, since then." Greta looked at me, her head cocked against her hand. "There's a thought for you, Thom."

"There is?"

She nodded. "It's difficult for you now, I know. And it'll be difficult for you for some time to come. But it can help to have someone else to care about. It can smooth the transition."

"Like who?" I asked.

"Like one of your other crew members," Greta said. "You could try waking one of them, now."

* * *

GRETA'S WITH me when I pull Suzy out of the surge tank .

"Why her?" Greta asks .

"Because I want her out first," I say, wondering if Greta's jealous. I don't blame her: Suzy's beautiful, but she's also smart. There isn't a better syntax runner in Ashanti Industrial .

"What happened?" Suzy asks, when she's over the grogginess. "Did we make it back?"

I ask her to tell me the last thing she remembers .

"Customs," Suzy says. "Those pricks on Arkangel."

"And after that? Anything else? The runes? Do you remember casting them?"

"No," she says, then picks up something in my voice. The fact that I might not be telling the truth, or telling her all she needs to know. "Thom. I'll ask you again. Did we make it back?"

A minute later we're putting Suzy back into the tank .

It hasn't worked first time. Maybe next try .

* * *

BUT IT KEPT not working with Suzy. She was always cleverer and quicker than me; she

always had been. As soon as she came out of the tank, she knew that we'd come a lot further than Schedar sector. She was always ahead of my lies and excuses.

"It was different when it happened to me," I told Greta, when we were lying next to each other again, days later, with Suzy still in the tank. "I had all the nagging doubts she has, I think. But as soon as I saw you standing there, I forgot all about that stuff."

Greta nodded. Her hair fell across her face in dishevelled, sleep-matted curtains. She had a strand of it between her lips.

"It helped, seeing a friendly face?"

"Took my mind off the problem, that's for sure."

"You'll get there in the end," she said. "Anyway, from Suzy's point of view, aren't you a friendly face as well?"

"Maybe," I said. "But she'd been expecting me. You were the last person in the world I expected to see standing there."

Greta touched her knuckle against the side of my face. Her smooth skin slid against stubble. "It's getting easier for you, isn't it?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You're a strong man, Thom. I knew you'd come through this."

"I haven't come through it yet," I said. I felt like a tightrope walker halfway across Niagara Falls. It was a miracle I'd made it as far as I had. But that didn't mean I was home and dry.

Still, Greta was right. There was hope. I'd felt no crushing spasms of grief over Katerina's death, or enforced absence, or however you wanted to put it. All I felt was a bittersweet regret, the way one might feel about a broken heirloom or long-lost pet. I felt no animosity toward Katerina, and I was sorry that I would never see her again. But I was sorry about not seeing a lot of things. Maybe it would become worse in the days ahead. Maybe I was just postponing a breakdown.

I didn't think so.

In the meantime, I continued trying to find a way to deal with Suzy. She had become a puzzle that I couldn't leave unsolved. I could have just woken her up and let her deal with the news as best as she could, but that seemed cruel and unsatisfactory. Greta had broken it to me gently, giving me time to settle into my new surroundings and take that necessary step away from Katerina. When she finally broke the news, as shocking as it was, it didn't shatter me. I'd already been primed for it, the sting taken out of the surprise. Sleeping with Greta obviously helped. I couldn't offer Suzy the same solace, but I was sure that there was a way for us to coax Suzy to the same state of near-acceptance.

Time after time we woke her and tried a different approach. Greta said there was a window of a few minutes before the events she was experiencing began to transfer into long-term memory. If we knocked her out, the buffer of memories in short-term storage was wiped before it ever crossed the hippocampus into long-term recall. Within that window, we could wake her up as many times as we liked, trying endless permutations of the revival scenario.

At least that was what Greta told me.

"We can't keep doing this indefinitely," I said.

"Why not?"

"Isn't she going to remember *something*?"

Greta shrugged. "Maybe. But I doubt that she'll attach any significance to those memories. Haven't you ever had vague feelings of déjàvu coming out of the surge tank?"

"Sometimes," I admitted.

“Then don’t sweat about it. She’ll be all right. I promise you.”

“Perhaps we should just keep her awake, after all.”

“That would be cruel.”

“It’s cruel to keep waking her up and shutting her down, like a toy doll.”

There was a catch in her voice when she answered me.

“Keep at it, Thom. I’m sure you’re close to finding a way, in the end. It’s helping you, focusing on Suzy. I always knew it would.”

I started to say something, but Greta pressed a finger to my lips.

* * *

GRETA WAS RIGHT about Suzy. The challenge helped me, taking my mind off my own predicament. I remembered what Greta had said about dealing with other crews in the same situation, before *Blue Goose* put in. Clearly she had learned many psychological tricks: gambits and short cuts to assist the transition to mental well-being. I felt a slight resentment at being manipulated so effectively. But at the same time I couldn’t deny that worrying about another human being had helped me with my own adjustment. When, days later, I stepped back from the immediate problem of Suzy, I realized that something was different. I didn’t feel far from home. I felt, in an odd way, privileged. I’d come further than almost anyone in history. I was still alive, and there were still people around to provide love and partnership and a web of social relations. Not just Greta, but all the other unlucky souls who had ended up at the station.

If anything, there appeared to be more of them than when I had first arrived. The corridors—sparsely populated at first—were increasingly busy, and when we ate under the dome—under the Milky Way—we were not the only diners. I studied their lamp-lit faces, comforted by their vague familiarity, wondering what kinds of stories they had to tell; where they’d come from, who they had left behind, how they had adjusted to life here. There was time enough to get to know them all. And the place would never become boring, for at any time—as Greta had intimated—we could always expect another lost ship to drop through the aperture. Tragedy for the crew, but fresh challenges, fresh faces, fresh news from home, for us.

All in all, it wasn’t really so bad.

Then it clicked.

It was the man cleaning out the fish that did it, in the lobby of the hotel. It wasn’t just the familiarity of the process, but the man himself.

I’d seen him before. Another pond full of diseased carp. Another hotel.

Then I remembered Kolding’s bad teeth, and recalled how they’d reminded me of another man I’d met long before. Except it wasn’t another man at all. Different name, different context, but everything else the same. And when I looked at the other diners, really looked at them, there was no one I couldn’t swear I hadn’t seen before. No single face that hit me with the force of utter unfamiliarity.

Which left Greta.

I said to her, over wine, under the Milky Way: “Nothing here is real, is it?”

She looked at me with infinite sadness and shook her head.

“What about Suzy?” I asked her.

“Suzy’s dead. Ray is dead. They died in their surge tanks.”

“How? Why them, and not me?”

“Something about particles of paint blocking intake filters. Not enough to make a

difference over short distances, but enough to kill them on the trip out here.”

I think some part of me had always suspected. It felt less like shock than brutal disappointment.

“But Suzy seemed so real,” I said. “Even the way she had doubts about how long she’d been in the tank...even the way she remembered previous attempts to wake her.”

The glass mannequin approached our table. Greta waved him away.

“I made her convincing, the way she would have acted.”

“You *made* her?”

“You’re not really awake, Thom. You’re being fed data. This entire station is being simulated.”

I sipped my wine. I expected it to taste suddenly thin and synthetic, but it still tasted like pretty good wine.

“Then I’m dead as well?”

“No. You’re alive. Still in your surge tank. But I haven’t brought you to full consciousness yet.”

“All right. The truth this time. I can take it. How much is real? Does the station exist? Are we really as far out as you said?”

“Yes,” she said. “The station exists, just as I said it does. It just looks... different. And it *is* orbiting a brown dwarf star.”

“Can you show me the station as it is?”

“I could. But I don’t think you’re ready for it. I think you’d find it difficult to adjust.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Even after what I’ve already adjusted to?”

“You’ve only made half the journey, Thom.”

“But you made it.”

“I did, Thom. But for me it was different.” Greta smiled. “For me, everything was different.”

Then she made the light show change again. None of the other diners appeared to notice as we began to zoom in toward the Milky Way, crashing toward the spiral, ramming through shoals of outlying stars and gas clouds. The familiar landscape of the Local Bubble loomed large.

The image froze, the Bubble one amongst many such structures.

Again it filled with the violent red scribble of the aperture network. But now the network wasn’t the only one. It was merely one ball of red yarn amongst many, spaced out across tens of thousands of light-years. None of the scribbles touched each other, yet—in the way they were shaped, in the way they almost abutted against each other, it was possible to imagine that they had once been connected. They were like the shapes of continents on a world with tectonic drift.

“It used to span the galaxy,” Greta said. “Then something happened. Something catastrophic, which I still don’t understand. A shattering, into vastly smaller domains. Typically a few hundred light-years across.”

“Who made it?”

“I don’t know. No one knows. They probably aren’t around any more. Maybe that was why it shattered, out of neglect.”

“But we found it,” I said. “The part of it near us still worked.”

“All the disconnected elements still function,” Greta said. “You can’t cross from domain to domain, but otherwise the apertures work as they were designed to. Barring, of course, the occasional routing error.”

“All right,” I said. “If you can’t cross from domain to domain, how did *Blue Goose* get

this far out? We've come a lot further than a few hundred light-years."

"You're right. But then such a long-distance connection might have been engineered differently from the others. It appears that the links to the Magellanic Cloud were more resilient. When the domains shattered from each other, the connections reaching beyond the galaxy remained intact."

"In which case you *can* cross from domain to domain," I said. "But you have to come all the way out here first."

"The trouble is, not many want to continue the journey at this point. No one comes here deliberately, Thom."

"I still don't get it. What does it matter to me if there are other domains? Those regions of the galaxy are thousands of light-years from Earth, and without the apertures we'd have no way of reaching them. They don't matter. There's no one there to use them."

Greta's smile was coquettish, knowing.

"What makes you so certain?"

"Because if there were, wouldn't there be alien ships popping out of the aperture here? You've told me *Blue Goose* wasn't the first through. But our domain—the one in the Local Bubble—must be outnumbered hundreds to one by all the others. If there are alien cultures out there, each stumbling on their own local domain, why haven't any of them ever come through the aperture, the way we did?"

Again that smile. But this time it chilled my blood.

"What makes you think they haven't, Thom?"

I reached out and took her hand, the way she had taken mine. I took it without force, without malice, but with the assurance that this time I really, sincerely meant what I was about to say.

Her fingers tightened around mine.

"Show me," I said. "I want to see things as they really are. Not just the station. You as well."

Because by then I'd realized. Greta hadn't just lied to me about Suzy and Ray. She'd lied to me about the *Blue Goose* as well. Because we were not the latest human ship to come through.

We were the first.

"You want to see it?" she asked.

"Yes. All of it."

"You won't like it."

"I'll be the judge of that."

"All right, Thom. But understand this. I've been here before. I've done this a million times. I care for all the lost souls. And I know how it works. You won't be able to take the raw reality of what's happened to you. You'll shrivel away from it. You'll go mad, unless I substitute a calming fiction, a happy ending."

"Why tell me that now?"

"Because you don't have to see it. You can stop now, where you are, with an idea of the truth. An inkling. But you don't have to open your eyes."

"Do it," I said.

Greta shrugged. She poured herself another measure of wine, then made sure my own glass was charged.

"You asked for it," she said.

We were still holding hands, two lovers sharing an intimacy. Then everything changed.

It was just a flash, just a glimpse. Like the view of an unfamiliar room if you turn the lights on for an instant. Shapes and forms, relationships between things. I saw caverns, wormed-out and linked, and things moving through those caverns, bustling along with the frantic industry of moles or termites. The things were seldom alike, even in the most superficial sense. Some moved via propulsive waves of multiple clawed limbs. Some wriggled, smooth plaques of carapace grinding against the glassy rock of the tunnels.

The things moved between caves in which lay the hulks of ships, almost all too strange to describe.

And somewhere distant, somewhere near the heart of the rock, in a matriarchal chamber all of its own, something drummed out messages to its companions and helpers, stiffly articulated, antler-like forelimbs beating against stretched tympana of finely veined skin, something that had been waiting here for eternities, something that wanted nothing more than to care for the souls of the lost.

* * *

KATERINA'S WITH SUZY when they pull me out of the surge tank.

It's bad—one of the worst revivals I've ever gone through. I feel as if every vein in my body has been filled with finely powdered glass. For a moment, a long moment, even the idea of breathing seems insurmountably difficult, too hard, too painful even to contemplate.

But it passes, as it always passes.

After a while I can not only breathe, I can move and talk.

"Where—"

"Easy, Skip," Suzy says. She leans over the tank and starts unplugging me. I can't help but smile. Suzy's smart—there isn't a better syntax runner in Ashanti Industrial—but she's also beautiful. It's like being nursed by an angel.

I wonder if Katerina's jealous.

"Where are we?" I try again. "Feels like I was in that thing for an eternity. Did something go wrong?"

"Minor routing error," Suzy says. "We took some damage and they decided to wake me first. But don't sweat about it. At least we're in one piece."

Routing errors. You hear about them, but you hope they're never going to happen to you.

"What kind of delay?"

"Forty days. Sorry, Thom. Bang goes our bonus."

In anger, I hammer the side of the surge tank. But Katerina steps toward me and places a calming hand on my shoulder.

"It's all right," she says. "You're home and dry. That's all that matters."

I look at her and for a moment remember someone else, someone I haven't thought about in years. I almost remember her name, and then the moment passes.

I nod. "Home and dry."