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PROLOGUE

The dead ship was a thing of obscene beauty.

Skade looped around it in a helical pseudo-orbit, her corvette's thrusters drumming a rapid tattoo of corrective bursts. The starscape wheeled behind the ship, the system's sun eclipsed and revealed with each loop of the helix. Skade's attention had lingered on the sun for a moment too long. She felt an ominous tightening in her throat, the onset of motion sickness.

It was not what she needed.

Irritated, Skade visualised her own brain in glassy three-dimensional complexity. As if peeling a fruit, she stripped away layers of neocortex and cortex, flinging aside the parts of her own mind that did not immediately interest her. The silvery loom of her implant web, topologically identical with her native synaptic network, shimmered with neural traffic, packets of information racing from neuron to neuron at a kilometre per second, ten times faster than the crawl of biological nerve signals. She could not actually perceive those signals moving—that would have required an accelerated rate of consciousness, which would have required even faster neural traffic—but the abstraction nonetheless revealed which parts of her augmented brain were the most active.

Skade zoomed in on a specific locus of brain function called the *Area Postrema*, an ancient tangle of neural circuitry that handled conflicts between vision and balance. Her inner ear felt only the steady pressure of her shuttle's acceleration, but her eyes saw a cyclically changing view as the background wheeled behind the ship. The ancient part of her brain could only reconcile that mismatch by assuming that Skade was hallucinating. It therefore sent a signal to another part of her brain that had evolved to protect the body from ingesting poisons.

Skade knew there was no point blaming her brain for making her feel nauseous. The hallucination/poison connection had

worked very well for millions of years, allowing her ancestors to experiment with a wider diet than would otherwise have been possible. It just had no place here and now, on the chill, dangerous edge of another solar system. She supposed it would have made sense to erase such features by deftly rewiring the basic topology, but that was a lot easier said than done. The brain was holographic and messy, like a hopelessly overcomplicated computer program. Skade knew, therefore, that by "switching off" the part of her brain that was making her feel nauseous, she was almost certainly affecting other areas of brain function that shared some of the same neural circuitry. But she could live with that; she had done something similar a thousand times before, and she had seldom experienced any cognitive side effects.

There. The culprit region pulsed pink and dropped off the network. The nausea vanished; she felt a great deal better.

What remained was anger at her own carelessness. When she had been a field operative, making frequent incursions into enemy territory, she would never have left it until now to make such a modest neural adjustment. She had become sloppy, and that was unforgivable. Especially now that the ship had returned: an event that might prove to be as significant to the Mother Nest as any of the war's recent campaigns.

She felt sharper now. The old Skade was still there; she just needed to be dusted off and honed now and then.

[Skade, you will be careful, won't you? It's clear that something very peculiar has happened to this ship.]

The voice she heard was quiet, feminine and confined entirely to her own skull. She answered it subvocally.

I know.

[Have you identified it? Do you know which of the two it is, or was?]

It's Galiana's.

Now that she had swept around it, a three-dimensional image of the ship formed in her visual cortex, bracketed in a loom of shifting eidetic annotation as more information was teased out of the hulk.

[Galiana's? The Galiana's? You're sure of that?]

Yes. There were some small design differences between the three that left together, and in as much as this matches either of the two that haven't come back yet, it matches hers.

The presence took a moment to respond, as it sometimes did. [That was our conclusion as well. But something has clearly happened to this ship since it left the Mother Nest, wouldn't you say?]

A lot of somethings, if you ask me.

[Let's begin at the front and work backwards. There is evidence of damage—considerable damage: lacerations and gouges, whole portions of the hull that appear to have been removed and discarded, like diseased tissue. Plague, do you think?]

Skade shook her head, remembering her recent trip to Chasm City. *I've seen the effects of the Melding Plague up close. This doesn't look like quite the same thing.*

[We agree. This is something different. Nonetheless, full plague quarantine precautions should be enforced; we might still be dealing with an infectious agent. Focus your attention towards the rear, will you?]

The voice, which was never quite like any of the other voices she heard from other Conjoiners, took on a needling, tutorial quality, as if it already knew the answers to the questions it posed. [What do you make of the regular structures embedded in the hull, Skade?]

Here and there, situated randomly, were clusters of black cubes of varying size and orientation. They appeared to have been pressed into the hull as if into wet clay, so that their faces were half-concealed by the hulk's hull material. They radiated curving tails of smaller cubes, whipping out in elegant fractal arcs.

I'd say those are what they were trying to cut out elsewhere. Obviously they weren't fast enough to get them all.

[We concur. Whatever they are, they should certainly be treated with the utmost caution, although they may very well be inactive now. Perhaps Galiana was able to stop them spreading. Her ship was able to make it this far, even if it returned home on autopilot. You are sure that no one is alive aboard it, Skade?]

No, and I won't be until we open her up. But it doesn't look promising. No movement inside, no obvious hot spots. The hull's too cold for any life-support processes to be operational unless they're carrying a cryo-arithmetic engine.

Skade hesitated, running a few more simulations in her head as background processes.

[Skade . . . ?]

There could be a small number of survivors, I admit—but the bulk of the crew can't be anything other than frozen corpses. We might be able to trawl a few memories, but even that's probably being optimistic.

[We're really only interested in one corpse, Skade.]

I don't even know if Galiana's aboard it. And even if she is . . . even if we directed all our efforts into bringing her back to the living . . . we might not succeed.

[We understand. These are difficult times, after all. While it would be glorious to succeed, failure would be worse than never having attempted it. At least in the eyes of the Mother Nest.]

Is that the Night Council's considered opinion?

[All our opinions are considered, Skade. Visible failure cannot be tolerated. But that doesn't mean we won't do our best. If Galiana is aboard, we will do what we can to bring her back to us. But it must be done in absolute secrecy.]

How absolute, precisely?

[Knowledge of the ship's return will be impossible to conceal from the rest of the Mother Nest. But we can spare them the torment of hope, Skade. It will be reported that she is dead, beyond hope of revival. Let our compatriots' grief be quick and bright, like a nova. It will only make their efforts against the enemy more strenuous. But in the meantime we will work on her with diligence and love. If we bring her back to the living, her return will be a miracle. We will be forgiven our bending of the truth here and now.]

Skade caught herself before she laughed aloud. *Bending of the truth? It sounds like an outright lie to me. And how are you going to ensure that Clavain sticks to your story?*

[Why do you imagine Clavain will be a problem, Skade?]

She answered the question with a question of her own. *Don't tell me you're planning on not telling him either?*

[This is war, Skade. There is an old aphorism concerning truth and casualty with which we will not presently detain you, but we're certain you grasp the point. Clavain is a major asset in our tactical armoury. His thinking is unlike any other Conjoiner's, and for that reason he gives us a constant edge against the enemy. He will grieve and grieve quickly, like the others, and it will be painful. But then he will be his old self again, just

when we need him the most. Better that, don't you think, than to inflict upon him some protracted period of hope and—likely—crushing disappointment?]

The voice shifted its tone, perhaps sensing that it still needed to make its point convincingly. [Clavain is an emotional man, Skade—more so than the rest of us. He was old when he came to us, older in neurological terms than any other recruit we have ever gained. His mind is still mired in old ways of thinking. We mustn't ever forget that. He is fragile and needs our care, like a delicate hothouse flower.]

But lying to him about Galiana . . .

[It may never come to that. We're getting ahead of ourselves. First we have to examine the ship—Galiana may not be aboard after all.]

Skade nodded. *That would be the best thing, wouldn't it? Then we'd know that she's still out there, somewhere.*

[Yes. But then we'd have to address the small matter of whatever happened to the third ship.]

In the ninety-five years since the onset of the Melding Plague, the Conjoiners had learned a great deal about contamination management. As one of the last human factions to retain an appreciable pre-plague technology, they took quarantine very seriously indeed. In peacetime the safest and easiest option would have been to examine the ship *in situ*, as it drifted through space on the system's edge. But there was too much risk of the Demarchists noticing such activity, so the investigations had to be conducted under cover of camouflage. The Mother Nest was already equipped to take contaminated craft, so it was the perfect destination.

But precautions still had to be taken, and that entailed a certain amount of work out in open space. First, servitors removed the engines, lasering through the spars that braced them on either side of the lighthugger's tapering conic hull. An engine malfunction could have destroyed the Mother Nest, and while such a thing was nearly unthinkable, Skade was determined to take no chances while the nature of what had happened to the ship remained mysterious. While that was going on, she ordered tractor rockets to haul slugs of black unsublimated cometary ice out to the drifter, which servitors then slathered on to the hull in a metre-thick caulk. The servitors completed their work quickly, without ever coming into direct contact with the

hull. The ship had been dark to begin with; now it became impossibly black.

Once that was done, Skade fired grapples into the ice, anchoring tractor rockets all around the hull. Since the ice would be bearing all the structural stress of moving the ship, she had to attach a thousand tractors to avoid fracturing any one part of the caulk. It was exquisitely beautiful when they all ignited: a thousand pinpricks of cold blue flame stabbing out from the black spirelike core of the drifter. She kept the acceleration slow, and her calculations had been so accurate that she needed only one small corrective burst before the final approach to the Mother Nest. Such bursts were timed to coincide with blind spots in the Demarchist's sensor coverage, blind spots which the Demarchists thought the Conjoiners knew nothing about.

Inside the Mother Nest, the hull was hauled into a five-kilometre-wide ceramic-lined docking bay. The bay had been designed specifically for handling plague ships and was just large enough to accommodate a lighthugger with its engines removed. The ceramic walls were thirty metres thick and every item of machinery inside the bay was hardened against known plague strains. The chamber was sealed once the ship was inside it, along with Skade's hand-picked examination team. Because the bay had only the most meagre data connections with the rest of the Mother Nest, the team had to be primed to deal with isolation from the million other Conjoiners in the Nest. That requirement made for operatives who were not always the most stable—but Skade could hardly complain. She was the rarest of all: a Conjoiner who could operate entirely alone, deep in enemy territory.

Once the ship was secured, the chamber was pressurised with argon at two atmospheres. All but a fine layer of ice was removed from the ship by delicate ablation, with the final layer melted away over a period of six days. A flock of sensors hovered around the ship like gulls, sniffing the argon for any traces of foreign matter. But apart from chips of hull material nothing unusual was detected.

Skade bided her time, taking every possible precaution. She did not touch the ship until it was absolutely necessary. A hoop-shaped imaging gravitometer whirled along the ship, probing its internal structure, hinting at fuzzy interior details. Much of what Skade saw matched what she expected to see from the

blueprints, but there were strange things that should not have been there: elongated black masses which corkscrewed and bifurcated through the ship's interior. They reminded her of bullet trails in forensic images, or the patterns sub-atomic particles made when they passed through cloud chambers. Where the black masses reached the outer hull, Skade always found one of the half-buried cubic structures.

But there was still room in the ship for humans to have survived, even though all the indications were that none still lived. Neutrino radar and gamma-ray scans elucidated more of the structure, but still Skade could not see the crucial details. Reluctantly, she moved to the next phase of her investigation: physical contact. She attached dozens of mechanical jackhammers around the hull, along with hundreds of paste-on microphones. The hammers started up, thudding against the hull. She heard the din in her spacesuit, transmitted through the argon. It sounded like an army of metalsmiths working overtime in a distant foundry. The microphones listened for the metallic echoes as the acoustic waves propagated through the ship. One of Skade's older neural routines unravelled the information buried in the arrival times of the echoes; assembling a tomographic density profile of the ship.

Skade saw it all in ghostly grey-greens. It did not contradict anything that she had already learned, and improved her knowledge in several areas. But she could glean nothing further without going inside, and that would not be easy. All the airlocks had been sealed from inside with plugs of molten metal. She cut through them, slowly and nervously, with lasers and hyperdiamond-tipped drills, feeling the crew's fear and desperation. When she had the first lock open she sent in an exploratory detachment of hardened servitors, ceramic-shelled crabs equipped with just enough intelligence to get the job done. They fed images back into her skull.

What they found horrified Skade.

The crew had been butchered. Some had been ripped apart, squashed, dismembered, pulped, sliced, fragmented. Others had been burned or suffocated or frozen. The carnage had evidently not happened quickly. As Skade absorbed the details, she began to picture how it must have happened: a series of pitched battles and last stands in various parts of the ship, with the crew raising makeshift barricades against the invaders. The ship it-

self had done its desperate best to protect its human charges, rearranging interior partitions to keep the enemy at bay. It had tried to flood certain areas with coolant or high-pressure atmosphere, and in those cells Skade found the corpses of strange, ungainly machines—conglomerations of thousands of black geometric shapes.

She formed a hypothesis. It was not difficult. The cubes had glued themselves on to the outside of Galiana's ship. They had multiplied, growing as they absorbed and reprocessed the ship's integument. In that respect it was indeed a little plaguelike. But the plague was microscopic; one never saw the individual elements of the spore with the naked eye. This was more brutal and mechanistic, almost fascistic, in the way it replicated. The plague at least imbued transformed matter with something of its earlier characteristics, yielding chimeric phantasms of machine and flesh.

No, Skade told herself. She was certainly not dealing with the Melding Plague, as comforting as that might now have been.

The cubes had wormed into the ship and then formed attacking units—soldier conglomerations. These soldiers had done the killing, advancing slowly away from each infection point. Judging by the remains they were lumpy and asymmetric, more like dense swarms of hornets than individual entities. They must have been able to squirm through the tiniest opening, re-assembling on the other side. Nonetheless, the battle had taken time. By Skade's estimate, it might have taken many days for the whole ship to fall. Many weeks, even.

She shivered at the thought of it.

A day after they had first entered, her servitors found some human bodies that were nearly intact, except that their heads had been swallowed by black helmets of surrounding cubes. The alien machinery appeared inert. The servitors removed parts of the helmets and found that prongs of machine-growth reached into the corpses' skulls, through the eye sockets or the ears or the nasal cavity. Further study showed that the prongs had bifurcated many times, until they reached microscopic scale. They extended deep into the brains of the dead, establishing connections with their native Conjoiner implants.

But the machines, and their hosts, were now very much dead.

Skade tried to work out what had happened; the ship's records were thoroughly scrambled. It was obvious that Galiana had encountered something hostile, but why hadn't the cubes simply destroyed her ship in one go? The infiltration had been slow and painstaking, and it only made sense if the cubes wanted to keep the ship intact for as long as possible.

There had been another ship: two had gone on—what had happened to that one?

[Ideas, Skade?]

Yes. But nothing I like.

[You think the cubes wanted to learn as much as possible, don't you?]

I can't think of any other reason. They put taps into their minds, reading their neural machinery. They were intelligence-gathering.

[Yes. We agree. The cubes must have learned a great deal about us. We have to consider them a threat, even if we don't yet know where Galiana was when they found her. But there is a glimmer of hope, wouldn't you say?]

Skade failed to see what that glimmer could possibly be. Humanity had been searching for an unambiguous alien intelligence for centuries. All they had found so far had been tantalising leads—the Pattern Jugglers, the Shrouders, the archaeological remains of another eight or nine dead cultures. They had never encountered another extant machine-using intelligence, nothing to measure themselves against.

Until now.

And what this machine-using intelligence did, so it seemed, was stalk, infiltrate and slaughter, and then invade skulls.

It was not, Skade conceded, the most fruitful of first encounters.

Hope? Are you serious?

[Yes, Skade, because we don't know that the cubes were ever able to transmit that knowledge back to whatever it was that sent them. Galiana's ship made it back home, after all. She must have steered it here, and she would not have done that if she thought there was any danger of leading the enemy back to us. Clavain would be proud, I think. She was still thinking of us; still thinking of the Mother Nest.]

But she ran the risk . . .

The voice of the Night Council cut her off sharply. [The ship

is a warning, Skade. That is what Galiana intended and that is how we must read it.]

A warning?

[That we must be ready. They are still out there, and one way or another we will meet them again.]

You almost sound as if you were expecting them to arrive.

But the Night Council said nothing.

It was another week before they found Galiana, for the ship was vast and there had been many changes to its interior that prohibited a rapid search. Skade had gone inside it herself, along with other sweep teams. They wore heavy ceramic armour over their pressure suits, oiled carapacial plaques that made movement awkward unless one exercised great care and forethought. After several minutes of fumbling and locking herself into postures that could only be got out of by laborious back-tracking, Skade wrote a hasty body image/motion patch and assigned it to run on a clump of idle neural circuits. Things became easier then, though she had the unpleasant feeling that a shadowy counterpart of herself was driving her. Skade made a mental note to revise the script later, so that the movement routines would feel totally voluntary no matter how illusory that might be.

By then the servitors had done about all they were able. They had secured large volumes of the ship, spraying diamond-fibred epoxy over the ruins of the alien machines, and they had DNA-sampled most of the corpses in the explored zones. Every individual sample of genetic material had been identified against the crew manifests in the Mother Nest, preserved since the departure of the exploratory fleet, but there were many names on the list that had yet to be matched to DNA samples.

There were bound to be names Skade would never match. When the first ship had returned home, the one carrying Clavain, the Mother Nest had learned that there had been a decision in deep space, dozens of light-years out, to split the expedition. One party wanted to come back home, having heard rumours of war against the Demarchists. They also felt that it was time to deliver the data they had already accrued—far too much to be transmitted home.

The separation had not been acrimonious. There had been regret, and sadness, but no real sense of disunity. After the usual

period of debate typical of any Conjoiner decision-making process, the split came to be viewed as the most logical course of action. It allowed the expedition to continue, while safeguarding the return of what had already been learned. But while Skade knew exactly who had chosen to stay out there in deep space, she had no way of knowing what had happened subsequently. She could only guess at the exchanges that had taken place between the remaining two ships. The fact that this was Galiana's ship did not mean that she had to be on it, so Skade readied herself for the inevitable disappointment should that prove to be the case.

More than that, it would be a disappointment for the entire Mother Nest. Galiana was their figurehead, after all. She was the woman who had created the Conjoiners in the first place, four hundred years ago and eleven light-years away, in a huddle of labs beneath the surface of Mars. She had been away for nearly two centuries; long enough to assume the mythic stature that she had always resisted during her time amongst them. And she had returned—if she was indeed aboard this ship—on Skade's watch. It hardly mattered that she was very likely dead, along with all the others. For Skade, it would be enough to bring home her remains.

But she found more than remains.

Galiana's resting place, if it could be called that, was a long way from the central core of the ship. She had secured herself behind armoured barricades, well away from the others. Careful forensic study showed that the data links between Galiana's resting place and the remainder of the ship had been deliberately severed from within. She had obviously tried to isolate herself, cutting her mind off from the other Conjoiners on the ship.

Self-sacrifice or self-preservation? Skade wondered.

Galiana was in reefersleep, cooled down to a point where all metabolic processes were arrested. But the black machines had still reached her. They had smashed through the armour of the reefersleep casket, cramming themselves into the space between Galiana and the casket's interior surface. When the casket was dismantled, the machines formed a mummylike shell of pure black around Galiana. There was no doubt that it was she: scans peering through the cocoon picked out bone structure, which matched Galiana's perfectly. The body within appeared

to have suffered no damage or decay during the flight, and the sensors were even able to pick up weak signals from Galiana's implant web. Although the signals were too faint to allow mind-to-mind linkage, it was clear that something inside the cocoon was still capable of thought, and was still reaching out.

Attention shifted to the cocoon itself. Chemical analysis of the cubes drew a blank: they appeared not to be "made" of anything, or to possess any kind of atomic granularity. The faces of the cubes were simply blank walls of sheer force, transparent to certain forms of radiation. They were very cold—still active in a way that none of the other machines had been so far. But the individual cubes did not resist being prised away from the larger mass, and once they were separated they shrunk rapidly, dwindling down to microscopic size. Skade's team attempted to focus scanners on the cubes themselves, trying to glimpse anything buried beneath the facets, but they were never quick enough. Where the cubes had been they found only a few micrograms of smouldering ashes. Presumably there were mechanisms at the heart of the cubes that were programmed to self-destruct under certain circumstances.

Once Skade's team had removed most of the surrounding plaque, they took Galiana to a dedicated room nestling in one wall of the spacecraft bay. They worked in extreme cold, determined not to inflict more damage than had already been done. Then, with immense care and patience, they began to peel away the final layer of alien machinery.

Now that they had less obstructive matter to peer through, they began to get a clearer impression of what had happened to Galiana. The black machines had indeed forced their way into her head, but the accommodation appeared more benign than had been the case with any of her crew. Her own implants had been partly dismantled to make way for the invading machines, but there was no sign that any major brain structures had been harmed. Skade had the impression that the cubes had been learning how to invade skulls until then, but that with Galiana they had finally found out how to do it without hurting the host.

And now Skade felt an optimistic rush. The black structures were concentrated and inert. With the right medicines it would be possible—trivial, even—to dismantle them, ripping them out cube by cube.

We can do it. We can bring her back, as she was.

[Be careful, Skade. We're not home and dry just yet.]

The Night Council, as it transpired, was right to be cautious. Skade's team began removing the final layer of cubes, beginning at Galiana's feet; they were pleased when they found that the underlying tissue was largely undamaged, and continued to work upwards until they reached her neck. They were confident that she could be warmed back to body temperature, even if it would be a more difficult exercise than a normal reefersleep revival. But when they began to expose her face, they learned that their work was far from over.

The cubes moved, slithering without warning. Sliding and tumbling over each other, contracting in nauseating waves, the final part of the cocoon oozed into Galiana like a living oil slick. The black tide sucked itself into her mouth, her nose, her ears and her eye-sockets, flowing around her eyeballs.

She looked the way Skade had hoped she would: a radiant homecoming queen. Even her long black hair was intact, frozen and fragile now, but exactly as it had been when she had left them. But the black machinery had reestablished itself inside her head, augmenting the formations that were already present. Scans showed that there was still little displacement of her own brain tissue, but more of her implant loom had been dismantled to make way for the invader. The black parasite had a crablike aspect, extending clawed filaments into different parts of her brain.

Slowly, over many days, they brought Galiana back to just below normal body temperature. All the while Skade's team monitored the invader, but it never changed, not even as Galiana's remaining implants began to warm and re-interface with her thawing brain tissue.

Perhaps, Skade dared to wonder, they might still win?

She was, it turned out, almost right.

She heard a voice. It was a human voice, feminine, lacking the timbre—or the strange Godlike absence of timbre—that ordinarily meant that the voice was originating inside her skull. This was a voice that had been shaped in a human larynx and propagated through metres of air before being decoded by a human auditory system, accumulating all manner of subtle imperfections along the way. It was the sort of voice that she had not heard in a very long time.

The voice said, "Hello, Galiana."

Where am I?

There was no answer. After a few moments the voice added kindly, "You'll have to speak as well, if you can. It's not necessary to do more than attempt to make the sound shapes; the trawl will do the rest, picking up the intention to send electrical signals to your larynx. But simply thinking your response won't work, I'm afraid—there are no direct links between your mind and mine."

The words seemed to take an eternity to arrive. Spoken language was horridly slow and linear after centuries of neural linkage, even if the syntax and grammar were familiar.

She made the intention to speak, and heard her own amplified voice ring out. "Why?"

"We'll come to that."

"Where am I? Who are you?"

"You're safe and sound. You're home; back in the Mother Nest. We recovered your ship and revived you. My name's Skade."

Galiana had been aware only of dim shapes looming around her, but now the room brightened. She was lying on her back, canted at an angle to the horizontal. She was inside a casket very much like a reefersleep casket but with no lid, so that she was exposed to the air. She saw things in her peripheral vision, but she could not move any part of her body, not even her eyes. A blurred figure came into focus before her, leaning over the open maw of the casket.

"Skade? I don't remember you."

"You wouldn't," the stranger replied. "I didn't become one of the Conjoined until after your departure."

There were questions—thousands of questions—that needed to be asked. But she could not ask all of them at once, most especially not via this clumsy old way of communicating. So she had to begin somewhere. "How long have I been away?"

"One hundred and ninety years, almost to the month. You left in . . ."

"2415," Galiana said promptly.

" . . . Yes. And the present date is 2605."

There was much that Galiana did not properly remember, and much that she did not think she wanted to remember. But the essentials were clear enough. She had led a trio of ships

away from the Mother Nest, into deep space. The intention was to probe beyond the well-mapped frontier of human space, exploring previously unvisited worlds, looking for complex alien life. When rumours of war reached the three vessels, one ship had turned back home. But the other two had carried on, looping through many more solar systems.

As much as she wanted to, she could not quite recall what had happened to the other ship that had continued the search. She felt only a shocking sense of loss, a screaming vacuum inside her head that should have been filled with voices.

"My crew?"

"We'll come to that," Skade said again.

"And Clavain and Felka? Did they make it back, after all? We said goodbye to them in deep space; they were supposed to return to the Mother Nest."

There was a terrible, terrible pause before Skade answered. "They made it back."

Galiana would have sighed if sighing were possible. The feeling of relief was startling; she had not realised how tense she had been until she learned that her loved ones were safe.

In the calm, blissful moments that followed, Galiana looked more closely at Skade. In certain respects she looked exactly like a Conjoiner from Galiana's era. She wore a plain outfit of pyjama-like black trousers and loosely cinched black jacket, fashioned from something like silk and devoid of either ornamentation or any indication of allegiance. She was ascetically thin and pale, to the point where she looked on the ravenous edge of starvation. Her facial tone was waxy and smooth—not unattractive, but lacking the lines and creases of habitual expression. And she had no hair on either her scalp or her face, lending her the look of an unfinished doll. So far, at least, she was indistinguishable from thousands of other Conjoiners: without mind-to-mind linkage, and devoid of the usual cloud of projected phantasms that lent them individuality, they could be difficult to tell apart.

But Galiana had never seen a Conjoiner who looked anything like Skade. Skade had a crest—a stiff, narrow structure that began to emerge from her brow an inch above her nose, before curving back along the midline of her scalp. The narrow upper surface of the crest was hard and bony, but the sides were rilled with beautifully fine vertical striations. They shimmered

with diffraction patterns: electric blues and sparkling oranges, a cascade of rainbow shades that shifted with the tiniest movement of Skade's head. There was more to it than that, however: Galiana saw fluidlike waves of different colours pump along the crest even when there was no change in its angle.

She asked, "Were you always like that, Skade?"

Skade touched her crest gently. "No. This is a Conjoiner augmentation, Galiana. Things have changed since you left us. The best of us think faster than you imagined possible."

"The best of you?"

"I didn't mean to put it quite that way. It's just that some of us have hit the limitations of the basic human bodyplan. The implants in our heads enable us to think ten or fifteen times faster than normal, all the time, but at the cost of increased thermal dissipation requirements. My blood is pumped through my crest, and then into the network of rills, where it throws off heat. The rills are optimised for maximum surface area, and they ripple to circulate air currents. The effect is visually pleasing, I'm told, but that's entirely accidental. We learned the trick from the dinosaurs, actually. They weren't as stupid as you'd think." Skade stroked her crest again. "It shouldn't alarm you, Galiana. Not everything has changed."

"We heard there'd been a war," Galiana said. "We were fifteen light-years out when we picked up the reports. First there was the plague, of course . . . and then the war. The reports didn't make any sense. They said we were going to war against the Demarchists, our old allies."

"The reports were true," Skade said, with a trace of regret.

"In God's name, why?"

"It was the plague. It demolished Demarchist society, throwing open a massive power vacuum around Yellowstone. At their request, we moved in to establish an interim government, running Chasm City and its satellite communities. Better us than another faction, was the reasoning. Can you imagine the mess that the Ultras or the Skyjacks would have made? Well, it worked for a few years, but then the Demarchists started regaining some of their old power. They didn't like the way we'd usurped control of the system, and they weren't prepared to negotiate a peaceful return to Demarchist control. So we went to war. They started it; everyone agrees about that."

Galiana felt some of her elation slipping away. She had

hoped that the rumours would turn out to be exaggerations. "But we won, evidently," she said.

" . . . No. Not as such. The war's still happening, you see."

"But it's been . . ."

"Fifty-four years." Skade nodded. "Yes. I know. Of course, there've been lapses and lulls, cease-fires and brief interludes of détente. But they haven't lasted. The old ideological schisms have opened up again, like raw wounds. At heart they've never trusted us, and we've always regarded them as reactionary Ludites, unwilling to face the next phase of human transcendence."

Galiana felt, for the first time since waking, an odd migrainous pressure somewhere behind her eyes. With the pressure came a squall of primal emotions, howling up from the oldest part of her mammalian brain. It was the awful fear of being pursued, of sensing a host of dark predators coming closer.

Machines, said a memory. Machines like wolves, which came out of interstellar space and locked on to your exhaust flame.

You called them wolves, Galiana.

Them.

Us.

The odd moment abated.

"But we worked together so well, for so long," Galiana said. "Surely we can find common ground again. There are more things to worry about than some petty power struggle over who gets to run a single system."

Skade shook her head. "It's too late, I'm afraid. There have been too many deaths, too many broken promises, too many atrocities. The conflict has spread to other systems, wherever there are Conjoiners and Demarchists." She smiled, though the smile looked forced, as if her face would instantly spring back to its neutral state the moment she relaxed her muscles. "Things aren't quite as desperate as you'd imagine. The war is turning in our favour, slowly but surely. Clavain returned twenty-two years ago, and immediately began to make a difference. Until his return we had been on the defensive, falling into the trap of acting like a true hive mind. That made our movements very easy for the enemy to predict. Clavain snapped us out of that prison."

Galiana tried to force the memory of the wolves from her mind, thinking back to the time she had first met Clavain. It had been on Mars, when he had been fighting against her, a soldier in the Coalition for Neural Purity. The Coalition opposed her

mind-augmenting experiments and saw the utter annihilation of the Conjoiners as the only tolerable outcome.

But Clavain had seen the larger picture. First, as her prisoner, he had made her realise how terrifying her experiments had seemed to the rest of the system. She had never really grasped that until Clavain patiently explained it to her, over many months of incarceration. Later, when he had been freed and terms of cease-fire were being negotiated, it was Clavain who had brought in the Demarchists to act as a neutral third party. The Demarchists had drawn up the cease-fire document and Clavain had pushed Galiana until she signed it. It had been a masterstroke, cementing an alliance between the Demarchists and the Conjoiners that would endure for centuries, until the Coalition for Neural Purity barely merited a footnote in history. Conjoiners continued with their neurological experiments, which were tolerated and even encouraged provided they made no attempts to absorb other cultures. Demarchists made use of their technologies, brokering them to other human factions.

Everyone was happy.

But at heart, Skade was right: the union had always been an uneasy one. A war, at some point, was almost inevitable—especially when something like the Melding Plague came along.

But fifty-four damned years? Clavain would never have tolerated that, she thought. He would have seen the terrible waste in human effort that such a war entailed. He would either have found a way to end it decisively, or he would have sought a permanent cease-fire.

The migrainelike pressure was still with her, now a little more intense than before. Galiana had the disturbing sense that something was peering through her eyes from inside her skull, as if she was not its only tenant.

We narrowed the distance to your two ships, with the unhurried lope of ancient killers who had no racial memory of failure. You sensed our minds: bleak intellects poised on the dangerous verge of intelligence, as old and cold as the dust between the stars.

You sensed our hunger.

"But Clavain . . ." she said.

"What about Clavain?"

"He would have found a way to end this, Skade, one way or another. Why hasn't he?"

Skade looked away for an instant, so that her crest was a narrow ridge turned edge-on. When she turned back she was attempting to shape a very odd expression on to her face.

You saw us take your first ship, smothering it in a caulk of inquisitive black machines. The machines gnawed the ship apart. You saw it detonate: the explosion etched a pink swan-shape on to your retina, and you felt a net of minds being ripped away, like the loss of a thousand children.

You tried to get farther away, but by then it was too late.

When we reached your ship we were more careful.

"This isn't easy, Galiana."

"What isn't?"

"It's about Clavain."

"You said he returned."

"He did. And so did Felka. But I'm sorry to tell you that they both died." The words arrived one after another, slow as breaths. "It was eleven years ago. There was a Demarchist attack, a lucky strike against the Nest, and they both died."

There was only one rational response: denial. "No!"

"I'm sorry. I wish there was some other way . . ." Skade's crest flashed ultramarine. "I wish it had never happened. They were valuable assets to us . . ."

"Assets'?"

Skade must have sensed Galiana's fury. "I mean they were loved. We grieved their loss, Galiana. All of us."

"Then show me. Open your mind. Drop the barricades. I want to see into it."

Skade lingered near the side of the casket. "Why, Galiana?"

"Because until I can see into it, I won't know whether you're telling the truth."

"I'm not lying," Skade said softly. "But I can't allow our minds to talk. There is something inside your head, you see. Something we don't understand, other than that it is probably alien and probably hostile."

"I don't believe . . ."

But the pressure behind her eyes suddenly became acute. Galiana experienced a vile sense of being shoved aside, usurped, crushed into a small ineffectual corner of her own skull. Something inexpressibly sinister and ancient now had immediate tenancy, squatting behind her eyes.

She heard herself speak again.

"Me, do you mean?"

Skade seemed only mildly taken aback. Galiana admired the other Conjoiner her nerve.

"Perhaps. Who would you be, exactly?"

"I don't have a name other than the one she gave me."

"She'?" Skade asked amusedly. But her crest was flickering with nervous pale greens, showing terror even though her voice was calm.

"Galiana," the entity replied. "Before I took her over. She called us—my mind—the wolves. We reached and infiltrated her ship, after we had destroyed the other. We didn't understand much of what they were at first. But then we opened their skulls and absorbed their central nervous systems. We learned much more then. How they thought; how they communicated; what they had done to their minds."

Galiana tried to move, even though Skade had already placed her in a state of paralysis. She tried to scream, but the Wolf—for that was exactly what she had called it—had complete control of her voice.

It was all coming back now.

"Why didn't you kill her?" Skade said.

"It wasn't like that," the Wolf chided. "The question you should be asking is a different one: why didn't she kill herself before it came to this? She could have, you know; it was within her power to destroy her entire ship and everyone inside it simply by willing it."

"So why didn't she?"

"We came to an arrangement, after we had killed her crew and left her alone. She would not kill herself provided we allowed her to return home. She knew what it meant: I would invade her skull, rummage through her memories."

"Why her?"

"She was your queen, Skade. As soon as we read the minds of her crew, we knew she was the one we really needed."

Skade was silent. Aquamarines and jades chased each other in slow waves from brow to nape. "She would never have risked leading you here."

"She would, provided she thought the risk was outweighed by the benefit of an early warning. It was an accommodation, you see. She gave us time to learn, and the hope of learning more. Which we have, Skade."

Skade touched a finger to her upper lip and then held it before her as if testing the direction of the wind. "If you truly are a superior alien intelligence, and you knew where we were, you'd already have come to us."

"Very good, Skade. And you're right, in a sense. We don't know exactly where Galiana has brought us. I know, but I can't communicate that knowledge to my fellows. But that won't matter. You are a starfaring culture—fragmented into different factions, it is true—but from our perspective those distinctions do not matter. From the memories we drank, and the memories in which we still swim, we know the approximate locus of space that you inhabit. You are expanding, and the surface area of your expansion envelope grows geometrically, always increasing the likelihood of an encounter between us. It has already happened once, and it may have happened elsewhere, at other points on the sphere's boundary."

"Why are you telling me this?" Skade asked.

"To frighten you. Why else?"

But Skade was too clever for that. "No. There's got to be another reason. You want to make me think you might be useful, don't you?"

"How so?" the voice of the Wolf purred amusedly.

"I could kill you here and now. After all, the warning has already been delivered."

Had Galiana been able to move, or even just blink, she would have signalled an emphatic "yes." She did want to die. What else had she to live for, now? Clavain was gone. Felka was gone. She was sure of that, as sure as she was that no amount of Conjoiner ingenuity would ever free her of the thing inside her head.

Skade was right. She had served her purpose, performed her final duty to the Mother Nest. It knew that the wolves were out there, were, in all likelihood, creeping closer, scenting human blood.

There was no reason to keep her alive a moment longer. The Wolf would always be looking for a chance to escape her head, no matter how vigilant Skade was. The Mother Nest might learn something from it, some marginal hint of a motive or a weakness, but against that had to be set the awful consequences of its escape.

Galiana knew. Just as the Wolf had access to her memories,

so, by some faint and perhaps deliberate process of back-contamination, she sensed some of its own history. There was nothing concrete; almost nothing that she could actually put into words. But what she sensed was an aeons-old litany of surgical xenocide; of a dreadful process of cleansing waged upon emergent sentient species. The memories had been preserved with grim bureaucratic exactitude across hundreds of millions of years of Galactic time, each new extinction merely an entry in the ledger. She sensed the occasional frenzied cleansing—a cull that had been initiated later than was desirable. She even sensed the rare instance of brutal intercession where an earlier cull had not been performed satisfactorily.

But what she did not sense, ever, was ultimate failure.

Suddenly, shockingly, the Wolf eased aside. It was letting her speak.

"Skade," Galiana said.

"What is it?"

"Kill me, please. Kill me now."

ONE

Antoinette Bax watched the police proxy unfold itself from the airlock. The machine was all planar black armour and sharp articulated limbs, like a sculpture made from many pairs of scissors. It was deathly cold, for it had been clamped to the outside of one of the three police cutters which now pinned her ship. A rime of urine-coloured propellant frost boiled off it in pretty little whorls and helices.

"Please stand back," the proxy said. "Physical contact is not advised."

The propellant cloud smelt toxic. She slammed down her visor as the proxy scuttled by.

"I don't know what you're hoping to find," she said, following at a discreet distance.

"I won't know until I find it," the proxy said. It had already identified the frequency for her suit radio.

"Hey, look. I'm not into smuggling. I like not being dead too much."

"That's what they all say."

"Why would anyone smuggle something to Hospice Idlewild? They're a bunch of ascetic religious nuts, not contraband fiends."

"Know a thing or two about contraband, do you?"

"I never said . . ."

"Never mind. The point is, Miss Bax, this is war. I'd say nothing's ruled out."

The proxy halted and flexed, large flakes of yellow ice cracking away from its articulation points. The machine's body was a flanged black egg from which sprouted numerous limbs, manipulators and weapons. There was no room for the pilot in there, just enough space for the machinery needed to keep the proxy in contact with the pilot. The pilot was still inside one of the three cutters, stripped of nonessential organs and jammed into a life-support canister.