



K-MACHINES

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GODPLAYERS 02

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CHAPTER ONE

August

"Name and date of birth."

"August Se—" I began.

"Name first." The overweight clerk was testy and trigger happy. She'd been sitting all summer morning on a sweating plastic seat at this counter, had probably munched a brown-bag lunch high on sugar out back in some cramped room filled with mops or dusty filing cabinets crammed with yellowing records that nobody ever looked at because it was all in the database, and now her blood sugar was plummeting perilously.

"My name," I said patiently, "is August. My birthday is—"

"Surname or given name? I haven't got all day."

Actually she did have all day. What else was she going to do except punch in this information that was already contained in the documents I'd handed her? She had pushed them to one side, naturally without a glance. I could have strung this game out for a while, for the amusement value. But when I turned my head a fraction, I saw the line of bored and irritated students snaking away behind me. I had been creeping forward in the same line myself, developing much the same mood, for about half an hour, after two hours first thing in the morning in another interview with the police concerning the disappearance of Great-aunt Tansy and the death of her friend Mrs. Sadie Abbott in the freakish accidental destruction of our Northcote house. They wanted to know where I was living now, and my current phone number, as did the insurance assessor, and I could hardly tell them that I was sleeping in a different universe where the phone company's service didn't yet extend. My temper was frayed.

"Listen to me carefully," I said. "My name is August Seebeck. I was born—"

"Zayback with a zed?"

"You spell my surname *s-e-e-b-e-c-k*. It's Estonian."

"Kid, I don't give a rat's ass if it's Lower Slobovian. D.O.B.?"

"My date of birth," I said automatically, as you do, "is also August, the—" I broke off, shook my head in confusion. What? *Wait* a minute. I flipped out last year's laminated student ID card. Back then I hadn't known I was a Player in the Contest of Worlds. It showed a slightly grim picture of me beetling my brows at the digital camera, above my name, spelled correctly for a change. The date embossed on the background security hologram was February 12. *What?* Seamlessly, then, as these things do and the rules change, the fact retrofitted itself into my memory. Hot high-summer Southern Hemisphere birthday parties, splashing in the plastic pool, laughing a lot as Aunt Tansy looked on from the shade of the veranda, shoving and hugging Dugald O'Brien the golden Lab who was...

Who was my father Dramen, actually, under a kind of disguise, but weeks earlier that ludicrous and impossible truth had worked its way neatly into remembrance past with no further bobbles or boggles, however dismaying it seemed. I pushed the card back in my pocket, a bit shaken by this different impossible thought. I'd started to tell her I was born in August, which was no part of any calendar I'd ever heard of until this moment when it tumbled out my mouth. It was ridiculous, like imagining a month called "Steve" or "Bruce." There were eleven months in the year, always had been. Ask anyone. Now there were twelve. Shit, they'd *squeezed in an entirely new month*. An extra month named after me. I shook my head, trying not to grin. Up came more facts, unbidden. On February 12, 1809, Charles Darwin had been born in this Earth, and a few thousand kilometers away, in Kentucky, so had Abraham Lincoln.

You know, Lune had said something along those lines. And I hadn't understood her. Who would?

was insane. More symmetrical that way, she'd said. Revise the Seebeck family rhyme, not mention... what, the seasons? Or had she said the calendar? And something more, something scary. Shit, my unconscious told me, scuttling away from it, eyes closed. Six doughty women—but I only had five sisters. I slammed the door shut on that before it got a foot in. All this in a long moment, with the clerk tapping her toe impatiently.

Okay, anyway, so that meant—given the precession of the equinoxes, the fact that the seasons were reversed here in Australia, so local February was the new astrological August—that I was now a Aquarius, perhaps the paradigmatic Aquarian, and so—

"Date. Of. *Birth*."

"Twelfth of February," I told the clerk, and added the late-twentieth-century birth year embossed on the ID card. Of course, who could possibly know if that year meant anything, truly had anything to do with my birth? As far as I could tell, I might indeed be twenty-something years old, which is how I looked and felt, or half a million. Half a trillion, maybe, long before this world's Sun had coalesced out of frigid interstellar gas, long, long before the planet under my feet accreted from cosmic leftovers and started spinning days solar and sidereal. I felt a jolt in my gloved right hand, shook my head, waited for my pulse to come back under control.

She was looking indignantly at the top sheet I'd passed her. "This says you've completed three years of your medical degree and now you want to change your major."

"I do."

"Damn it, you only have one more semester before you graduate as a Bachelor of Medicine. Six months. What's wrong with you kids today?"

"I don't seem to have the patience and human kindness to be a clerk, let alone a medico."

The clerk narrowed her eyes. Perhaps she detected some tincture of irony, or even of sarcasm. She gazed back blithely. She shook her head, clicked keys, peered at the flat screen.

"The philosophy courses you have listed here are all filled, you'll have to go back to the philosophy department and choose a different schedule. Next."

I stayed put. "Dr. Blackford has confirmed my standing with his graduate program. I'll be taking an accelerated bridging semester. His signature is on the second form."

"Philosophy! What sort of job do you think you're going to get with—All right, that's in order." She scribbled an initial, clicked more keys, stamped a form, passed it back to me. "Take this to room 102 and get two photographs. They'll prepare a card for you, Mr. Zay-back. And don't come back moaning to me when you're flipping burgers and watching all the young doctors cruise by in SUVs. Next."

I nodded to her with a certain sudden access of respect, taking my forms. Maybe she *did* care about her faceless, ever-changing temporary charges. Maybe her own heart's desire had been medical school, but she simply hadn't made the cut, hadn't scored highly enough on rigid tests designed, apparently, by nerd-clever Aspergers. Poor woman. Ah well, there were trillions more like her, breaking their hearts in menial jobs, grousing behind stained counters and eating themselves sick on a billion worlds, googolplex of worlds maybe, and all of them, when it came down to it, no more significant than scenery in the greater scheme of things. In the Contest.

Whatever that was.

Room 102 and its jaded photographer could wait. I went out into the blazing cloudless summer sun, looking for Lune.

She leaned against the bole of a tree in the courtyard, the milk coffee perfection of her skin

freckled by a thousand shady leaves. Lune seemed utterly relaxed, arms loose, hands clasped easily in front of her. ~~Another woman stood half in the sunlight, eyes squinted against brightness, speaking with an apparent urgency. I loped across the grass, glare from the Edward Kelly Law Library window spearing my eyes.~~

"Ah, the wonderboy." The woman seemed to be in her mid-thirties, mature but attractive, dressed for a day of the office, probably behind a large polished executive desk.

Lune lifted her right hand with a kind of carefree grace, took my left, aware of my sensitivity or more exactly, residual anxiety about my own gloved right hand. I squeezed her fingers. "Morgette, bureaucratic bullshit, and miles to go before I sleep," I told her. To the woman I said: "Hello, I'm August Seebeck."

"August, this is Morgette Smith's Daughter, the Custodial Superiore of the Ensemble. My boss would be the person you could say. Or my adoptive mother."

"How do you do?" When I extended my gloved hand, Morgette shook it firmly for the shortest possible time. Maybe she knew what it could do. "So you're the Mother Superior, so to speak?"

"We're hardly a celibate order of nuns," Lune said in mock reproach. "As you have reason to know." She sent me a dazzling smile. "Morgette is the founder of the Ensemble."

"Not exactly," the Player woman said. "That was the work of your young friend's sister, Superior Septima. A very long time ago, far before your time, child. Do you think we could get out of this wretched sun now?"

Septima? Did that ferocious old warrior Septimus, guardian of the hellmouth or Gehenna or whatever vile plenum of pain and horror it was, have a twin sister? Yet another member of my monstrous profligate family? A month ago I had supposed that I was an only child, an orphan, yet already I had collected more than a double handful of siblings, not to mention two recovered parents, now vanished again. What was another sister in that rowdy pack? The more the merrier. I put the question out of my mind for the time being.

"There is a coffee shop at the entrance to the student union building," I said. "Quite good latte, but that's your poison. Or iced tea, probably better in this weather."

"Lay on, Macduff," Lune said. Morgette said, "You're training him quite nicely. I appreciate your thoughtfulness in a new Player." She strode along beside me and Lune, and I saw her frown. "I have to caution you against undue familiarity, Lune," she said. "It's obvious that you two are intimate; you must understand that I disapprove, although of course it's your own business."

I opened my mouth, closed it again. As usual, I knew too little to say anything sensible. Superior Morgette was getting under my skin, but there was little advantage in making this obvious to her.

With some asperity, Lune told her, "Butt out, Madam." She paused, a breath, added, "All due respect, and like that."

I held a smile from my lips, squeezed her hand. Morgette gave her a hard sidelong glance, flicked her eyes at me, burst out laughing. "Very well, you bad girl. I understand that the child has been promoted already, and at the hands of our Founder, no less?"

"Madame Morgette, I am not a child," I told her. "I am a stranger in a very large number of strange worlds, and probably many centuries younger than your good self—" I gave her a bland glance of my own. "Or am I being inexcusably rude in mentioning your age? I must say, you're very well preserved."

I pushed open the heavy glass door to the union building. A gust of cold conditioned air swirled past us, escaped into the sunlight. Several spotty students tripped over their own feet, instantly smitten. Lune smiled at them in a friendly and utterly sisterly manner, and followed me into a small space of Formica tables and steel and plastic chairs, redolent of third-rate coffee. Behind us, one of the young men dropped his pile of books. It must be like this when you stroll around in the company of

movie star or some radiant fashion model. The difference, thank God, was Lune's wondrous intelligence. I pulled out a chair for her, something I never would have dreamed of doing for a woman a month ago; but a month ago, I'd never have dreamed that someday I would meet a woman like Lune. For a moment, I stood there behind her, dazed by a rush of emotion.

"Charmed," the Ensemble woman said, an edge to her tone. She stood beside the square table. "You please."

"Oh. Sorry." I drew out another chair, settled her in place. Three or four younger academics watched us with guarded interest. A young woman student in what looked like a cheerleader's uniform, except that we didn't have cheerleaders in my version of Australia, stared at Lune with a kind of shameless envy. Once, I'd have stared at the cheerleader in her skimpy skirt and perky sports bra; no longer. "What can I get you both?"

By the time I returned with my laden tray, they were in some sort of voiceless standoff. I unloaded an iced tea for Morgette and two cans of frosty Dr. Pepper, plus a lamington on a paper plate for Lune. "It's probably stale," I said regretfully. Fresh and fluffy from a pastry chef's hands, layered with strawberry jam, coated in a soft surround of dark chocolate sprinkled with coconut flakes, a square block of lamington is the food of the gods, if we exclude the pavlova, another Australian confection. All crisp egg-white shell, whipped sugary cream innards, sliced strawberries and spooned passion fruit on top, the thought of it made me weak with yearning, with longing for my lost Great-aunt Tansy, the finest cook I knew, gone forever, never more than a mask for my hidden mother Angelina, she gone in her turn, once again, with my father Dramen. This particular lamington, I could tell, had not been fresh for several days. No doubt a fly or two had strolled upon its dried chocolate crust. I sighed, sat down, popped the tab on my soda.

"So how about them Bulldogs?" I said.

"Frivolity," the superiore said in a flat tone. "How refreshing."

I looked at Lune; she gave me a bland glance, and I felt my tightening muscles relax. There were plenty of ways to play this, although I felt like grabbing my beloved's hand and walking back out into the sunlight, or opening a Schwelle into a more hospitable world. That would leave the people idling away their noontime in the coffee shop in a state of shock, confusion, and disbelief, which would be unkind and quite possibly attract attention from those I was eager to avoid, so it didn't seem like the best plan. I let the fuzzy bubbles slosh around my mouth for a moment, then put down the can.

"I'm new at this game," I said. "Until last week, I didn't even know it was a game. That was before the de-formers killed me, of course." I could hear the brittle edge in my voice. It's no fun, remembering the vile moment of being torn into shreds and then reconstructed by an Angel from the Omega Point, even if you end up in better shape than you started, which maybe was the case, although I had my doubts. My right hand clenched inside its leather glove.

"New." Morgette regarded me steadily. "So I'm told. I find it hard to believe."

I laughed. Lune didn't seem interested in her lamington; I pulled the paper plate in front of me, and started to peel off pieces of coconut-sprinkled chocolatey cake, popped them in my mouth. I was right, it was stale. "Frankly my dear," I said, "I don't give a shit. Believe what you like. Lune, I hate to eat and run, but I think I'm wasting my time with this old harridan." I pushed back my chair, stood up. Someone screamed. Something tore like old canvas, noisily. Lots of people screamed. All this in the moment of my rising. It seemed a disproportionate response, somehow. As I turned, the heavy glass door to the coffee shop ripped away from its hinges, and a terrible thing came in to join us.

Lune kicked away her chair, became very still. Morgette, I saw from the corner of my eye, was reaching into her purse. Everyone else was yelping, crouching under tables, sitting frozen in disbelief. My right arm was instantly rigid, outthrust. A word of fire hung upon my tongue; I withheld it. Nothing would be gained in setting the union building ablaze with a lick of plasma from the edge

the Sun. There were more ways than one to skin a monster.

I muttered, "Hard wind." And instantly regretted it as the leather glove was torn off my hand by a blast of foul-smelling air stinking of sulfur, captured, as far as I knew, from the dense atmosphere of some nameless world in a galaxy far, far away. A millimeter wide at my palm, it was a hose-stream of force equal to a battering ram. It caught the creature in the center of its breast, where three or four crusty nipples stretched vertically, like buttons on a vest, from throat to thorax. The blow flung it back into the smashed doorway, where its bat wings tangled on the damaged aluminum frame. Its muscular tail thrashed, catching a bearded intellectual who held a copy of Derrida's final book before him like an amulet, laid him flat on the vinyl tiles. The dreadful scaled neck, cabled with muscle and sinew, flung forward the thing's vile head, all gaping jaws, snarling teeth like rusted knives, forked blue-grey snake tongue, eyes boiling in rage. It drew in its wings tight against its body and flung itself toward me.

A line of brilliant light stabbed across the room, cut a jagged, blood-gushing, instantly cauterized incision in the thing's breast, where my air blast had already broken ribs. The monster screamed, high pitched and ear-splitting as a factory whistle, hesitated only for a moment, crouched back upon its two great scaled legs, leapt again. Morgette's weapon fired a second time, but the thing was armored like a tank. Lune said in my ear, "Burn the fucker, August," so I did. No time for niceties. The back of my hand still stung where the glove had torn and blown away. At least the leather wouldn't catch fire and singe me. I spoke of sunfire to my Vorpäl implant. Plasma from the surface of the Sun scorched the air. Actinic radiance splashed back from the plate-glass windows. When you need a pair of Ray Bans you can never find them. I squinted, blinked, and saw the thing catch fire, the fat under its scales igniting. Bat wings frizzled, stinking like toenails dropped on coals.

Its screams were ghastly, set my teeth on edge. The slaying brought me no pleasure other than the satisfaction of not dying myself. I played flame upon its head, which exploded into steam and great smoke, putting an end to the racket. There'd been not the slightest sign of intelligence. Whatever it was, this was some adjacent world's version of a feral tiger, a Kodiak bear, a pack of pitbulls, dropped into this world to do harm to me, to my love, or for all I knew to Superiore Morgette. The fire went away from my hand. My arm was shaking, my whole body was shaking. I was drenched with sweat. I saw that Lune was safe, reached behind me for the chair, leaned on it a moment. Its rubber feet squeaked in the silence on the floor. I sat down at the table. The lamington was smeared across the Formica surface. I glanced at my left hand; chocolate and cake everywhere. I rubbed it off on my jeans. The Ensemble woman was tucking away her weapon. Not a hair out of place.

"Someone up there doesn't like us," I said. Around us, and outside in the lobby, people were starting to sob and mutter.

"The contest is hotting up," Lune said, "no pun intended. Thank you."

"My pleasure. I hope the vice chancellor doesn't send the insurance bill to us. My God, I'm famished." I licked my dry lips. "Fighting monsters certainly takes it out of a man."

"I don't think you should expect quick service today," Lune told me, glancing at the unattended counter. An open door showed that the serving staff, no fools they, had swiftly found discretion the better part of valor.

I really was abruptly very hungry. I sniffed, caught a tang of freshly cooked meat. I picked my way through broken glass to the fallen monster. Its flesh was charred, smoking still. One hefty thigh had a nicely glazed look to it. In a fit of silly bravado, aware of Morgette's gaze upon me, I seized the greasy three-taloned foot, jammed my boot against the fire-blackened breast, ripped. The cooked lining resisted at the joint. I twisted it, fingers sticky with monster juice, tore it free. It smelled okay, a bit gamy perhaps. I took a bite.

"Needs salt," I said.

The Ensemble woman regarded me with disgust. "That was a damn fool thing to do. You don't know where it's been. You don't know where it's come from. Its biochemistry could be enantiomorphic."
—"

"Here." Lune threw something; I caught it in my left hand. Salt cellar. I sprinkled some on the warm flesh, took a second bite.

"Thanks. Care for some? Breast or leg?"

"I think not," she said judiciously. "What's it taste like?"

I mused, flung the gnawed meat back on the carcass.

"Chicken." I grinned at her. "Tastes like chicken."

CHAPTER TWO

Exegetical Analects

There is one who asks: What is the document whose name is called *SgrA**, and how is its name properly pronounced?

One answers: We speak this name thus: "Sag-a-star." The multiform document, whose name is called thus, is the sacred Scripture more properly known as *Sagittarius A Star*, revealed in its infinite variations throughout the Many Worlds to the blessed and accursed human Eric Linkollew.

There is one who asks: Is this "Sagittarius A Star" a Revelation, an observed reality, a literary device? Is it animal, vegetable, or mineral? Is it bigger than a bread box?

One answers: O Fool! Read the Words and know Truth. All Knowledge is in *SgrA**.

CHAPTER THREE

SgrA: 1946, Two Years Old*

He runs across the room, short legs pumping, arms outstretched to the shiny pots inside the kitchen cabinet. He stumbles as he grabs at the open cabinet door, it swings shut, for a moment jams on his finger painfully. The impulse to scream pulls his mouth wide, draws in his furious breath, but wait, he jerks from the hurting thing, the door swings open in his grip, he totters backward, the door swings wider, he falls to the linoleum floor on his padded backside, and light gleams and beckons and shouts its joy. In go his hands, grasping the heavy, shining pot, pulling it onto the floor. The lid clatters wonderfully, slides free, bangs on the floor. He grabs at it, gets his fat fingers around the knob on top, strikes the pot with the singing lid, the sound of it, the cry of it, rings in his ears and dances in the bones of his arms. Rapture! He beats the pot, slam, bash, banging, crash! Holding the pot by its long handle, he stumbles to his feet, runs into the front room where Mummy is sitting in her big chair in her robe and nightie, asleep. But she is not asleep. She looks at him with wet eyes, without moving. She tells him to be quiet.

"No!"

He runs back into the kitchen, slamming his aluminum drum. The jagged clashing crash is pure happiness. "No!" he cries again. Bang, bang. He laughs and runs. Mummy stands in the doorway. She bends forward. "No! No! No!" Has she said it? Has he said it? She bends forward and puts her hands upon her belly, and goes to a chair beside the kitchen table, and puts her head on the table. Mummy is making a terrible sound. Mummy is crying. He drops the pot. He watches her, and feels hot tears burn from his own eyes. He clutches her knees in sorrow. Mummy draws him against her, lifts him up on her lap, rocks him.

"Don't cry, Mummy," he says in anguish. "I'll help. Where you hurt?"

She cries and cries, drenching his hair. "Your poor little sister," she says at last, muffled against his head. Her breath. He hasn't got a sister. Jealousy burns in him. He pulls away. Mummy says, "You would have had a little sister or brother."

CHAPTER FOUR

Jan

The small portholes in the control cabin of the vimana were annoyingly blurred, not quite translucent, like an out-of-focus lens. They were designed, of course, for the cryptic optical system ambulant vegetables, their Venusian designers and crew. Face pressed close to the damnable quarter, Jan Seebeck snarled under her breath, wishing for the intuitive interface of her dark energy craft, *The Hanged Man*. Soon enough, she assured herself, I'll be back in my own ship. It should have repaired itself by now.

She stepped back to the controls, which looked simple but were only marginally more intelligible. The flying saucer sauntered in its leisurely fashion toward the orbit of Mercury. She and a team of vegetable engineers had modified the vimana's operating system in a way she still didn't understand because really it had been *The Hanged Man's* suggestion that somehow rewrote elements of reality's core rules, briefly opening a Schwelle large enough and weird enough to let through a spaceship from the Venusian galaxy to this universe of Son o'Star and its riled inhabitants. The limitations were severe, though; they'd had to start from Venus, there was no way to jump straight from Earth to Mercury. The Shintoists must surely be in hot pursuit by now, but they were running very silent indeed.

"Two more hours," her tattoo told her. At the corner of her eye the fairy nudged itself free of her bare upper arm, luminous blue wings beating into a blur, hovered above the controls. At some level below her conscious awareness, the vimana's cybernetics were linking with Jan's Vorpall grammar. Thought control, in effect. She shrugged. Easier than trying to conn by hand while peering through what seemed to be the bottom of an old Coke bottle.

"Thanks, sweetie," she said. She settled uneasily on a stool designed for a calla lily with legs, so of, hitching up her short skirt. Sylvie floated across the panel, settled on a plastic nipple jutting from the surface, caked with dried ichor, bent as if to drink. "Honey, I don't think you'd like it. It's sort of plant fertilizer."

"Give me a break, Toots," the fairy told her, looking over a slender shoulder. "Not as if I'm really here, you know. We're both going cabin crazy." The psychonic projection bent its head again, sipped the foul stuff, or seemed to. Jan shuddered, squeezed her eyes tight. Her familiar was right; cruising from Venus to Mercury in a flying saucer that seemed to have been snipped out of sheet metal and soldered together by a class of incompetent slum technical school fourteen-year-olds was far less enthralling than screaming at close to the speed of light back to the Solar System from the enigmatic Xon star her family had once mistaken for the appalling black hole at the center of the galaxy *Sagittarius A**. At least then you had temporal dilation to help the time pass or at any rate to squeeze time into a smaller package. She sighed, put her head in her hands. Bristles stung her fingertips; her hair was growing out, and she didn't know what to do with it.

A rustle like dry leaves blown by a damp breeze, or perhaps wet leaves blown by a dry breeze brought her head up. The Venusian Stalwart entered from the cabin where it had been estivating. It had a certain military bearing unusual in a tuber. Jan gave a languid wave.

"Warrant Officer Pjilfplox," she acknowledged. "Had a nice rest? We're nearly there. Couple of hours at the most."

The faint smell of manure was stronger now, and she tried not to wrinkle her nose. One manure, she told herself. Still, it was unnerving; the thought of her sister Maybelline locked in sexual embrace with one of these creatures was positively disturbing. The fairy darted at her ear, whispered

"While we're doing clichés, live and let live, huh?"

~~"All right, all right, already, Sylvie," she muttered. Sometimes the psychonic projection was irritating as having a dime-store psychoanalyst perched on your shoulder.~~

"I am refreshed," the saucers pilot told her, the sibilant mushy. "Has your vessel communicated with you as yet, or you with it?"

"*Hang Dog* remains stealthed, as instructed," Jan said, slightly testy. "The last thing we need at this point is a squadron of Zealot warriors buzzing around us like wasps." She hopped off the stool, jiggled her gold Lurex tights, looked around for her jacket. "I hope the same proves to be true of the old tin bucket." The jacket, soft pale-blue baby Ichthyosaur leather scaled so finely it gleamed even under the saucer's dull light, lay wadded up as a pillow at one end of her inflated sleeping bag. She knew perfectly well that the vimana was undetectable by any technology likely to be available to the Bar Kokhba culture, but something perverse in her drove Jan to goad the plant when it went military on her ass. Turnips and asparagus in uniform, it was like something out of Charlie Dodgson, how could you take it seriously?

"This humble vessel," said the Venusian warrior reproachfully, "is a state-of-the-art war machine. It is true that our methods of construction are not as—"

"Now look what you've done," Sylvie said. The tattoo settled on the console, and folded her head under her wings, as if embarrassed.

"Oh, shut up." But Pjilfplox could not see the fairy, except as a motionless tattoo on Jan's arm, and was now doubly affronted. "No, no, not you, sorry, look I'll just go away and have something to drink until we get there. Give me a yell, okay?"

"But there is nowhere to go outside this cabin," the warrant officer said. Clearly there was more she would have liked to have said, but it was unused to civilians. It blustered on: "And it would not be wise to partake of intoxicating—"

Jan put her hands over her ears, pulled a face, and took herself off to the sleeping bag. It was maddening beyond measure to have Schwellen closed to her, but what could you do? Try to open a doorway to another world this far into empty space, and the unimpeded Xon radiation flooding from the direction of *SgrA** would block your effort like a palm shoved in your face. You can't get there anywhere, from here, that was the rule. Generally speaking, anyway. She'd done it once, somehow utterly mysteriously, escaping to Juni's nano-encrusted retreat from a previous engagement in the Solar System with the children of the Bar Kokhba civilization that had built her dark energy starship and then, frightened out of their wits at her return, had tried to nuke her into oblivion. Sometimes she wished she were clever, like that Lune girl. One of these days, she'd have to find out how that had worked. Maybe good old *Hang Dog* had been thinking about the problem, whiling away the boring hours on orbit near Mercury. Or maybe that kid August would provide some fancy answer. She snorted, face turned to the hull, eyes closed. Fat chance, the boy was green as a spring apple. But cute. Very cute.

From her shoulder, the fairy Sylvie said: "Bad girl. He's your brother."

"Nag, nag, nag," Jan murmured, drifting already into the sleep of the terminally bored. "So I *claims*. Never heard such a whopper..." Her whisper faded into silence and the rustle of leaves going about their business.

Something wet and rather disgusting brushed her ear. Jan jolted up.

"Kindly attend," the vegetable said diffidently. "Our craft is under attack."

"Oh goodie." She struggled to her feet, recoiled instantly from the manure-scented damp of the

deck, scuffed the soles of her tights on the sleeping bag, and jammed her toes into her boots. Pret boots, but perhaps not ideal for combat. Still, it was all in the wrist these days, machine against machine, nothing to do but watch, half the time. "Action at last," she said anyway, just to suit the mood of the moment. "Have we heard from the *Hanger* yet?"

"The ship is probably masked by Mercury, perhaps at the libration point. To be short: might be unable to see us."

Something smacked the vimana hard, like a firm clip over the ear from an old-school disciplinarian. There'd been plenty of them plying their trade in the yeshivas last time she visited the Messianic Shintoists of this universe. No reason to suppose they'd have mended their ways in a mere two or three generations; these guys were traditionalists to a fault. The sleeping bag skidded away around the curve of the cabin. Jan and the warrant officer tottered, managed to remain upright without clutching at each other, to Jan's considerable relief. The psychonic fairy came off her shoulder and hovered in her left visual field.

"The old bucket won't last ten minutes with the stuff they're throwing at us," Sylvie informed her, patched into the control system of the Venusian flying saucer. Of course Jan could have bypassed the interface, plugged her own Vorpal grammar directly into the system, but she hated to have other people's software squirming around her brain stem. Especially when the other people were alien. Friendly aliens, true; allies in the Contest, standing shoulder to shoulder, or shoulder to pistol, or whatever, against the K-machines and their presumptive gamemasters or mistresses or whatever the hell—

"Well, come on, *show me!*" All Jan could see projected in the three-dimensional bubble that now filled half the cabin was a blur of scribbles, something a child might have done with crayon, a whole box of them. The visual system of the tubers operated by different rules. Presumably all this was a magnificent tactical and strategic map laid out for the benefit of the warrant officer. If so, that worth was instructing its craft by more subtle means than speech. Or speech that she could understand. The bubble seemed to clear as Sylvie performed prodigies of transformation in the map state-space. The saucer icon hung in the center of the display, surrounded by grid lines, astronomical reference points, indices of the planets and moons and asteroids and dust lanes of the Solar System, with a muted icon showing the Sun altogether too close for comfort. Five attack craft moved on vectors that were not all encouraging. A list of the weapons being deployed snapped down as Jan ran her eye from one enemy vessel to the next. Particle beams, lasers, rail-gun bombardment (that had been the impact, she saw, deflected at some cost by the vimana's mercury-orichalcum defense field array), maybe even the craft themselves if they were in suicide-martyr mode. Shit, surely it hadn't come to that. But they had been pretty pissed when she stole their Kabbalah ship and took off for a little trip to investigate the Xon star.

The charged particle beam locked on to the saucer and would not be shaken off. In the display the saucer tilted; despite gravity adjustment, Jan tottered. A line suddenly joined her borrowed craft and one of the enemy: she knew the great crystal at the base of the saucer, between the three landing balls, was blazing its terrible weapon. The red enemy ship jerked visibly, could not evade the beam. Abruptly, it was gone. Jan felt sick. She was glad the display was decently schematic, that the portholes did not show her the destroyed vessel, the expanding shell of gas that had been human lives. Yes, they were trying to kill her, but really they had every reason to be pissed. Four lines struck from the remaining war craft, touched the icon at the center of the display. Instantly, the wall of the hub began to glow: dull red, crimson, yellow, white. It started to dribble, blazing droplets splattering on the moist deck. Jan gave a yelp, flung herself into complete registration with her psychonic projection and through Sylvie with the saucer's communication and command structures. The pilot was there already, of course; she apologized hastily, stepped sideways in the virtual command tangle, sent out

shout at the speed of light for *The Hanged Man*.

The hole in the hull went violet, burning her out of focus, wide open eyes, and peeled in blackness. Air rushed out with a whistle, then a whine, then a howl. Even in her distraction, Jan's habits reached again and again for a Schwelle, an opening into one of the infinite number of universes where she was not under attack. Nothing happened. She shook her head like a small dog savaged by a large dog. Light-years distant, unmasked by a planet's bulk and atmosphere, the uncanny radiance of the Xon star clamped its prohibition upon her.

"Trapped me, eh, you motherfuckers? We'll see about that." She clung to the crystal pole in the center of the flying saucer, gasping for breath as air rushed into vacuum. Frantically, she sought for emergency life support. Nothing, not even a glass bubble to pull over her head or a brass bra and panties to keep the airlessness at bay. Her shout to her starship continued in a roar of radio frequencies and modulated light. The illumination inside the vimana, always dim, wavered and seemed to fade. No, she thought, that's just me.

"On his way," the fairy told her, and folded up limply into a tattoo on her arm.

Light exploded inside the display bubble. Mother Angelina, she thought, the bastards are hitting us with everything they've got. No quarter given. Who needs K-machines with refusnik allies like this?

She lurched away from the crystal pole, eyes streaming and bulging, chest aching, wrapped her arms around the startled warrant officer. "It's been fun, toots," she said. Her voice sounded thin and unconvincing in the thin and almost unbreathable partial pressure. "Too bad we—"

Four red stars bloomed and went out. The great light flared a second time. Something struck the flying saucer hull, which rang like a great bell. The deck jolted, throwing Jan to her knees.

you appear to be having some difficulties, the voice of her Kabbalah ship said inside her skull. *i am bringing you aboard*.

"You do that, you great lug," Jan said. "I hope you haven't been wasting your time out here. I expect a full report on the Xon—"

In the display bubble, *The Hanged Man* floated above them like an elaborate golden Menorah ablaze with candles, or a Tree of Life. It wrapped arms about them.

Jan allowed herself to pass out.

CHAPTER FIVE

August

Ensemble Superiore Morgette Smith's Daughter scowled, took a small vanity mirror from her shoulder purse, propped it on the table, muttered. The mirror curdled. Something unnerving happened. Here I was in the room of hysterical people crouched under tipped tabletops, weeping, gasping, or cold, with the doorway blocked by a large smoldering heap of scorched Chicken McNuggets, redolent of frizzled bat wings, and really that was nothing special, just a ferocious carnivore of unknown species put out of its misery in double-quick time, but what set my teeth on edge and raised the hackles of my neck was a blunt-fingered hand, nails not especially clean, poking up out of the mirror and reaching around like Thing in the Addams Family. It's strange, in retrospect; I'd seen people come through mirrors before, I'd done it myself for that matter, but this was utterly out of context. This could have been a place you dropped into for a quick Dr. Pepper and a lamington.

Before I could utter a moan, Morgette had hold of the fingers, gave them a tug, seized the emerging wrist with her left hand, and put her back into it. An entire arm jerked forward across the table, jammed at the shoulder, and then did the thing that actually freaked me out. Somehow without the frame of the mirror changing its dimensions, the shoulder came through, an ear, part of a bald unshaven chin, and now there was the whole head, neck, shoulder, arm, cloth cap jammed down over the eyes. The hand pulled free, reached up blindly, pushed the cap back, and a pair of whimsical eyes regarded us.

"Come now, this ain't very comfortable," said James Cooper Fenimore, the Disposal Man. He caught sight of me with my mouth gaping. "Ah, the Seebeck lad. I was sorry to hear about your great aunt's demise but cheered by the return of your parents. Always a silver lining, eh? Now come along if you please, there's work to be done."

Doubting my own sanity, I grabbed the machine under the arm and helped Morgette haul him into the coffee shop. At the interface with the mirror, his torso distorted like an image in a different sort of mirror, the kind they used to have in funhouse tents, according to Aunt Tansy, who was old enough to remember such antiquities, except that she wasn't, she'd never really existed, she was some sort of imposture, a mask my mother had worn in her period of hiding from the deformed, as my father's Dramen absurdly wore the implausible likeness of a gruff old Labrador dog. The Fenimore caught for a moment at the hips, gave a wriggle, popped out and slid across the Formica table, much heavier than a man of his size, and crashed to the floor. Morgette put away her mirror. The machine got to his feet, straightened his cap once more, made us a bow.

"Another fine mess, eh?" He cast a swift look around the room, took in the pile of cooked offal, drew a familiar gadget from one baggy pocket. "Nothing we can't set right in a jiffy," he told me reassuringly.

"You're rather quick to assign blame," I said irritably. The few remaining customers were clambering over tumbled chairs and tables, past the counter with coffee machine and stale treats, headed for the staff exit. I wondered why campus security wasn't here already, sticking their noses in. The hubbub grew louder in the foyer. "It's not as if I invited the damned thing in."

"As to that," the superiore said with a sniff, "I rather think that's exactly what you did. Rumor abound, young man. You're making rather a name for yourself as a troublemaker."

I stared at her. "Good God, Madam," I said. "If you cast your mind back thirty or forty seconds, I think you'll find that I was the one who just saved you from being eaten by that thing."

"Jammervoch," the disposer said, whatever that meant. He sounded like a man with a cold clearing

his throat. Yammervogk? "You'll find the beastie had *you* on its menu, 'less I miss my mark." He did a little hop, touched his cap, muttered, "~~Beggin' your pardon and all.~~" He fired up his gadget, which this time emitted a harsh red beam. With practiced ease, his hand played the beam back and forth, up and down, paring the remains into seething blocks of muscle, melted and concealed fat, bone blackened to the marrow, scaly pelt peeling and worthless.

"Why don't you just, I don't know, make it disappear? Haven't you got a ray for that? Something green or indigo perhaps?"

"All in good time, sar," the machine said, patient as ever. "Neatly done is how it's done."

"*Bewahre doch vor Jammervoch!*" Lune said in a sepulchral tone, eyes dancing. "*Die Zähne knirschen, Krallen kratzen!* Good advice at any time, August, but you seem to have done just fine without any tips from us." She took up my left hand, the one still sticky with chocolate, and licked it clean, while the Ensemble woman turned away with an air of unendurable tedium. I felt my heart melt and had to force a certain gruffness into my tone.

"You're talking nonsense, love. Unless that's Russian. I speak Australian and a word or two of American, but no Russian." I knew as the words came out of my mouth that I was the one talking nonsense. The Vorpall grammar that suffused my nervous system had been my on-board Babelfish in more than one alien and indescribable universe. It was all too new. We put up barriers of inattention and denial when shock grows too grievous. I knew that was what I was doing now; something in me sensed the need to distance myself in facetiousness. Lune responded to my mood.

"It's not Russian, you fool, it's Estonian. I thought your family were Estonian aristocrats back in the day?"

"Peasants, I reckon. Piss-ants. Not a president among them." But that was the old August's history, the tissue of lies that had wrapped me safely for two decades in a grimy Melbourne suburb at the top of the hill in an old house where sometimes, in the evening or the dark of the night, people like Lune and my sister Maybelline lugged dead bodies of machines somewhat like James Cooper Fenimore but less polite and far less agreeable, and left them in my great-aunt's bathroom. I sighed.

"Allow the mirror again, would y' kindly?"

Morgette fetched it out again with an ill grace. "I don't want it covered with blood," she said.

Coop shoveled the seeping stuff, bit by bit, through the mirror and into some other universe. I couldn't work out why he didn't open a large Schwelle in the floor and kick it in. I could probably have done it for him if he'd asked. The situation was beyond me. I watched the machine push the last of the guts into the mirror, handed him a paper napkin to clean the glass and the plastic rim. His hands were bloody up to the elbow. Out from the anodized tube burst another handy ray, slurping away the sticky mess from his fake skin, then the disposer was spraying the floor and walls. Where the beam bathed the remains of the Jammervoch, an invisible brush seemed to paint the last of the flesh, blood, and lard into nonexistence, like a wonderful household detergent as advertised on TV. I'd seen it before; still didn't believe it. Weary enough to tumble straight into bed and sleep for a day, I watched blue light play over the smashed and splintered door, repairing it like a double exposure. I took Lune by the hand, pushed open the repaired door, pulled her after me into the lobby, where, for some reason, everyone stood or sat in a sort of unattending daze. I knew that when the machine was done, none of them would remember anything of their fright, the monstrous thing that had walked among them, the still more monstrous beings who had confronted it. The green ray would see to that. They were pieces in the game, nothing more. I refused to accept that. A month earlier, that had been me. I felt sick, and it wasn't from the meat of the Jammervoch.

"I have to spend time by myself," I told Lune.

What were my emotions? I could not have told you. A mixture of anger without a target, vexation, frustration, bafflement to the very edge of a nervous breakdown, maybe. I loved her wildly, I knew

that much, she was the center of my life, somehow, and I had to be apart from her, at least for a time.

"Let's meet at Toby's," I said. My brother Toby—part of me knew, shiveringly—had died, as had my brother Marchmain, as had Lune and my father Dramen and my mother Angelina, yet now they lived, somewhere, enigmatic as ever. I had been the target of deformer malice, yet they had died, as had died, in dreadful pain, and then been snatched back from death. So now I proposed airily to meet up with a dead man and a dead woman, this dead woman in front of me, alive with a brilliant joy. It was impossible. It was the case. "Give me an hour. Or two."

The beautiful woman kissed me lightly on the lips, her fragrance in my nostrils dizzying. "Okay, my best beloved," she said, not looking a whit put out. "I'll make sure his back garden is clear of termagants."

CHAPTER SIX

SgrA: 1956, Aged Twelve*

August rain slaps the louvered windows of his back veranda sleep-out, cold Melbourne winter wind bangs at the tiles on the roof, slips chilly tendrils through the edges of the rippled pebble-glass louvers. He has jammed them as tightly closed as possible, pushing the flat aluminum levers, but they are not designed to be airtight. Not like a spaceship air lock, he thinks.

In his woolen pajamas, snuggled under sheet and blankets, he leafs again and again with unbelieving joy through the pages of his birthday present. He'd asked for it by name, knowing there was almost no chance they'd buy it for him, despite his artful mention of the title at key moments of opportunity. He turns swiftly past the opening pages with their boring chapters and drawings of ancient war rockets fired by absurdly clad Chinese and Indian soldiers from ships and boats crewed by men in mad squashed hats, past the chapter on jet cars and Robert Goddard's liquid-fuel rocket, past the rocket launchers slamming into Nazi tanks and U-boats, the V-1 flying bomb streaking across an English town, modified to become the U.S. Navy "Loon" hurtling like a fat bird from the deck of a ship, and finally, finally the marvelous V-2 rocket, blazing fuel, tearing into the sky. And then, flip, flip, the Moon!

A great winged spaceship braking in flame and debris upon the Moon's scarred surface. A spherical space station hanging above the mighty curve of the cloudy Earth. Rapturous joy, the incredible spaceship canted on its landing props upon the ruptured surface of Phobos, the immense glowing peach globe of Mars filling a third of the sky, vast blurry dull-green webwork of canals, small men in space suits setting up their instruments. What a spaceship! Like an Aussie Rules football, double-pointed oval but with the ends squared off, a rocket engine at each end for ease of maneuvering, four great landing legs tipped with shock absorbers. It was like nothing you had ever seen.

And at last, explorers laden with equipment treading into the frozen methane of the moon Titan. Saturn and his tilted rings glow like gold in the green sky, three quarters of a million miles away. He closes the book, closes his eyes, draws in a deep, cold, winter breath. That's where he is going.

How many more years before he can grow up and become a spaceman, before we'll have the great ships? Ten? Twenty? What if he must wait until the year 2000? Impossible! Almost half a century off in the future. He'd be an old man. He'd be... fifty-six years old. For a moment, the pressure of that thought seizes him. He clutches the book, at its stiff cardboard cover. How old is Grandpa? A hundred as fifty-six years? Mummy is... thirty-six this year, so Nana and Grandpa must be even older than fifty-six. It is impossible to imagine them wrapped tight in glass-fiber spacesuits. Impossible to see them on the icy-cold surface of Titan. It will happen sooner than that. It must happen sooner than that.

The wind rises outside, pulling at the empty branches of the fruit trees, knocking them against the wooden fence. When he was a little kid, he thought that sound was ghosts or monsters. He'd hidden under the sheet, pulled up the blankets around his head, breathed his own hot breath into the safe, dark space between his chest and the bedclothes. He'd muttered prayers to ward off those menacing creatures. When he made the mistake of mentioning this, they'd taken his comics away. *Superman*, *Batman*, *Strange Adventures*—thrown into the garbage bin, they'd rot his mind, they'd make him nervous, maybe it was true, after all, he did have nightmares, he did fear the things under the bed.

So now he kept his favorite comics hidden away in the narrow space between the top of his wall-mounted cabinet and the low roof of the sleep-out. He could push his treasures back out of sight, and only his own small hand, reaching in carefully, fingers extended, could hook them out.

He opened the cabinet door, carefully put away his birthday copy of *Rockets, Jets, Guided Missiles*

and Space Ships. He listened keenly; no voices in the kitchen. He drew out his stolen copies of *Brick Bradford*. It made him guilty to pilfer them from newspaper stores all along the tram track from school to home, although he made sure to replace all the other stolen comics within a day or so, read so carefully, never bent, that nobody would know they were not brand new. The newspaper store really lost nothing, he'd worked it out in careful detail, except for these ones that he could not bear to replace.

Suppose some other kid came in wanting the latest *Superman* comic, and it wasn't there because the day before he'd slid it into his bag. Well, true, the man lost that sale, so it looked like his sin of theft had hurt the newspaper seller, stolen his profit. But wait a moment. There were always other kids coming into the shop, and who was to say that this second kid, the next day, two days later, wouldn't be just as anxious to buy the copy just returned? Newspaper sellers only ever ordered one or two copies of any single issue, so if someone *had* bought that copy, if he hadn't stolen it the first day, the other kid would've just gone to a different shop to buy his copy. It all worked out, as long as you read it and returned it very quickly, before it was out of date.

He teased out his six or seven guiltily prized but truly thieved, unreplaced, copies of *Brick Bradford Adventures—The Greatest Adventurer in All Space!* He'd already read these same stories in the newspaper, where you only got one strip each day, alongside Dagwood and the others, and he had carefully scissored them out and glued them into a large scrapbook, making his own comic. But sometimes the newspaper wasn't brought home, or the comics page was used to wrap up vegetable peeling despite his stricken cries, and sometimes his scissors slipped and made a bad cut, or glue leaked out from one edge and stuck the pages together, so they tore when he opened it next.

No, there was nothing like the real thing, page after page of beautifully printed pictures and words—the dream of flying the Time Top from star to star, world to world, flinging the great, red, whirling spaceship forward into the future or backward in time, or maybe into worlds that went sideways. Brick had a young friend on his adventures, a stowaway kid called Cricket, a bit of an idiot really, but about his own age. So it was possible. You could go into the Chronosphere—that was the correct scientific name chosen by the inventor of the Time Top, Dr. Horatio Southern and his daughter April—and leave everything familiar behind you.

He spread the comics out across his bed, pulse beating. The wind clattering at the louvers were the time winds. Here was "The Monsters of Planet Plattner," with a dreadful creature displayed in the great, spherical visiplat, above the levers and dials of the controls. Here was a thrilling underwater realm of aqua people with fins and gills, riding great fish. Here was a cover and story that truly had terrified his nightmare mind: "The Quest for Crystal Q," with its little oriental men rising out of the stark landscape inside hidden glass-and-steel watch-towers that resembled mushrooms, their great sucker weapons flung out to capture Brick, snapping on to his back and clinging like those leeches in the warm summer dam water, ugh. "The Prince of the Black Planet." The world of pirates, where one entire continent on an alien world stared blindly out at space like a skull, with islands below it shaped like crossed bones.

And most dizzying and delicious of all, "The Sargasso of Space," an astonishing and dismal place where spaceships and jet jalopies of dozens or hundreds of different worlds had become trapped by the flat gravity of two competing stars, unable to break free. And yet you could fly there, light as a butterfly. See, there was Cricket on the cover, arms extended, zooming above the access deck of the Time Top, weightless, delighted, astonishing Brick. I could do that, he thought. I could fly in space. Well, in fact, anyone could, without gravity. That was the trouble with comics, they weren't really accurate. Those controls, those levers—would they really work?

His movie projector hadn't worked, not the way he planned. He thought of the convalescence hospital where they put him because of the polio scare when he was five years old, after his tonsils

were taken out, he turned six while he was there, no school for months, wow, that was exactly half his life ago, he was way behind in reading when he got back, didn't really understand what they were doing in add-ups. He hated it. He hated being there. They made you wear a sort of dress or nightie, not even pajamas, except for the older boys. Nobody came to see him, it was too hard to reach, the train didn't run that far, they had to wait for Grandpa to drive them in the car he used for work. One of the older boys wrote a letter for him, because he didn't know how to do writing yet. *BRUNG mE a KA*. They came on his sixth birthday and gave him a beautiful, red, tin, double-decker bus with real wheels that turned, and one of the big kids grabbed it the moment the visitors left and used it as a skate, so it got all crushed down and bent and the wheels were broken, and everyone screamed laughing. Things like that always happened, and they did rude things to each other's bottoms, and the nurses didn't even notice.

He got them to move him into the next room when a kid in there got better and went home. He was tired of being in a cot with barred sides that pulled up, like a baby, and wanted a real bed. Finally they let him switch rooms, but two strong nurses came in and pushed him in his old cot into the new room where some other kid had taken the spare bed already. So now he had to make all new friends, and he was still in the cot. But he did get one of the nurses to help him build a movie projector, because he had designed it and he really, really wanted to try and see if it would work. First he had to get some paper you could shine the light through, and all they had was this thin, gray, waxed-paper stuff, so he cut a long strip of that and drew stick figures one after the other down the length of it, each one slightly different, and he got an empty bathroom tissue roll, and then he had to get the nurse to bring him a lightbulb on a cord, and she said he was a silly thing, but he said the light would go through the paper and down the tube and out onto the wall, but they'd have to do it when it was getting dark, and she brought the lamp in and they set it up while all the other kids peered at him, and he dragged his drawings down in front of the light, and all you saw was a stupid blur. Oh well, said the nurse, I never thought it would work. It should have done, he was sure.

Now that he thought about it, he felt embarrassed. How stupid. Obviously, he needed a lens to focus the light, and a shutter, and transparent stuff to draw on, and probably other stuff. But he'd only been six, after all. He had much better ideas now. Him and some other kids had worked out how you could build a gun and get your enemies without anyone knowing. You made this thing sort of like a slingshot, but it would have magnets all the way along, electromagnets that only went on when you connected up the battery and pushed a button, and the magnets would drag a metal nail along a groove faster and faster, and then the magnetism would switch off when the nail got to the end, and the point of the nail would shoot away without any noise and get your enemy. First of all, they had to get some wire and some batteries. Next week.

Footsteps in the kitchen. He scooped together his comics, jumped up at the foot of the bed, pushed them into their hiding place, skinned back under the sheet as the door opened and Mum said, "What's this light doing on? You're meant to be asleep. You have school tomorrow. Don't think you can stay home because you're too sleepy, either." But she gave him a quick kiss, tousled his hair, flicked off the light, shut the door.

In the darkness, he wished he had a little radio. A crystal set. There was a place in the vacant lot where you could dig down and make a tunnel, and nobody would know it was there, and you could imprison your enemies. You probably needed concrete, because otherwise the tunnel might collapse, but one of the kids said his dad had some in bags, you just had to mix it with water, so that would be easy. When you had your enemies down there, you could try shooting them with your gun.

CHAPTER SEVEN

August

Early February afternoon sun was broiling hot, as you'd expect, and I found myself wishing for a straw hat of the sort common in bush paintings of the Heidelberg School. I was quickly sweating under my dark shirt and jeans. Goth black is stylish enough, but not especially adapted to Melbourne summer. I found a shady tree beside the South Lawn greensward that covered the staff parking lot, sat on a handy chunky hewn stone, pulled off my shoes and socks, dumped my feet in the recirculating channel of faintly chlorinated water. The cool ripples soothed me.

Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, or so an overweight old vet named Mike had told me in Chicago during my year of high school there. But three times, he said, index finger pressed knowingly against the side of his nose, is enemy action.

Yes.

"Enough," I said. "Enough already."

I raised one bare foot, placed it against the hot, rough stone, gripping its pitted surface with my toes and hiding the sigil impressed into the flesh of the sole, propped my right elbow on my knee, my chin on the knuckles of my gloveless hand. Auguste Rodin's *Thinker*. Enough-ish thought.

A native bird was making a noise above me, shaking the leaves. I scarcely heard a note, then noticed the fact. I snorted at that reflection; it seemed to me that I'd been doing a lot of that lately, ignoring things, putting aside all the absurdities great and small, the glitches, the changes that snuck past me (dear God, a whole new month, named after me), everything except Lune and me, in bed and out of it, walking the worlds just for the fun of it, in love for the first time, for me, at any rate, shoving it all into the too-hard basket.

An epithalamium forbidding sadness, Lune had told me one day in a sweetly melancholy mood that somewhat undercut her meaning. I didn't actually take her meaning at the time, having no idea all what an "epithalamium" might be. Medical studies were rather narrow in my time and place. I looked it up later, of course, yahoogled it off the Net: a rather recondite wordplay on a couple of poems common to my world and one at least of hers. ("A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" by John Donne and a wedding poem for some chums by any number of old dudes from Sappho and Catullus to Edmund Spenser, if you must know, and I'm damned if I'm going to quote any of them now. Well, maybe a piece or two from Donne. "So let us melt, and make no noise," was sort of our motto during those horny, besotted days, except for the part about making no noise. He had some other wise words that seemed freakily appropriate to our peculiar situation as Players in the Contest of World. "Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears; Men reckon what it did, and meant; But trepidation of the spheres, Though greater far, is innocent." The earth moved all right, and not just under whatever be of opportunity we found ourselves hot and sweaty and languorous within, atop, beside. Every choice to be made, it seemed to me in my fright, shook an earthquake or tsunami through the very spheres of heaven, innocent or otherwise, that all-but-infinite plenum choking the four Tegmark levels of reality with their seething abundance of life, of suffering, of joy. End of parenthetical aside.) Once the epithalamium had just about run its course, it suddenly seemed to me. The verse was broken. The gaps in the logic were showing through. For a ferocious moment, I felt like finding Lune, grabbing her by the shoulders, and giving her a good shaking.

"Something funny, lad?" A shadow fell on me in the mottled shadows of the tree's leaves. I looked up, still chuckling.

"Just imagining myself covered in bruises, Coop," I said.

The machine regarded me without further comment. A human might have asked for elucidation or embarrassed, changed the subject. James Cooper Fenimore, by profession a disposer of slaughter machines, or so I'd understood from the little I had seen of his work, stood in the hot sunlight in companionable silence. After a time, he plucked out a stinking old briar, thumbed in a plug of his rare tobacco, snapped a match against his thumbnail, fired up blue smoke. One or two students sunning themselves on the grass a good dozen meters away wrinkled up their noses and stared angrily. Coop was blithe. I choked a little myself, withdrew my hand from my chin and waved uselessly at the polluted air. Just another absurdity, a machine sucking down the poisons and stimulants of a drug designed for organisms. But then, what did I know about the internal workings of a mechanical being like Coop? I'd seen part of the robot guts of a flayed despoiler stretched on an autopsy table in my sister Ruth's mad-scientist laboratory, and the thing seemed a blend of subtle mechanism and flesh and bone, blood: an android, perhaps, as they use the word in TV shows. A K-machine, I had been informed. The foe. Maybe the Red or Black team in the Contest, if we were the White pieces. That was what it was, the dead thing Lune and Maybelline had dumped in my aunt's bathroom for disposal by Coop—a K-machine, or at any rate that's what it was called. My ignorance was all but universal. Here was the chance to remedy at least part of my defective understanding of the many worlds.

"Coop, what's the *K* stand for?"

Instantly, the machine told me, knowing exactly what I meant: "Killer. Killing machines. For all things."

"Hmm." It seemed unlikely, somehow. Too easy. Like a children's cartoon. A shiver went through me, despite the sweaty heat. That was pretty much exactly how my own life had been turning out. Deliberately, I turned my thoughts away from that direction. A melodious note rang out overhead. I glanced at the golden sandstone pinnacle of the clock tower above a heavy, granite, Gothic cloister built in, oh, 1930. One o'clock. Hickory dickory dock. The clock struck one, I thought inanely, and down it run. I shivered again, and another little convulsion went through me. There it was again: I was nothing better than a mouse, a blind mouse, on the run, and the farmer's wife was running after me, menacing and terrifying and not at all comical, waving her sharpened knife.

"So was that Yammer thing one of them? I didn't see any—"

"No, sar. Wild beast from an ugly world, 'tis all."

"So someone picked it up and put it down next to me, next to Lune, just to be a nuisance?"

Acrid smoke billowed about us, trapped by the leaves overhead. Coop regarded me with a friendly eye, fake teeth clenched on the meerschaum pipe's stem, said nothing. All hints and no substance, like some sort of damned programmed learning course in how to fight demons.

Really, I knew nothing about my foes other than scraps and hints. No killing machine had presented itself to me like some two-handed engine from a special effects movie or the pulp magazines. Something had smashed Tansy's house, the sweet center of a turning world to which I returned again and again, growing up, after my parents had died in Thailand. Except that they hadn't. A snare and a delusion. But something had broken that house open and slaughtered Sadie Abbott, an innocent woman I'd once suspected of being just such a foe. Instead, she'd been nothing more than what the theater students call a spear-carrier. A placeholder. A Pawn or less than a Pawn in the Contest of Worlds. Except that, again, she wasn't; she was a human being, with memories, grouches, devotion to her silly church, and to my aunt. And someone or something had swatted her like a fly off a kitchen table, no, worse than that, had killed her without noticing, without caring, without pity, without anger as far as I could tell. And yet they thought of themselves as exquisitely emotional beings, more so than humans.

As an afterthought they'd killed my faithful old dog, Dugald O'Brien, dear faithful Do Good, and then I'd—and then I'd—brought him back to life. The least an honorable son could do for his father

And a while later I'd blown a dreadnought crew of the bastards out of the sky. Presumably. I never saw them, just the boiling mist of volatilized metal. In a different sky. A sky of a variant Earth where the Players of the Contest of Worlds, as far as I could tell, went to school under the tutelage of an artificial intelligence called the Good Machine which once had done genocide upon all the humans on its own world, Ember's home page, so to speak. My mind jumped away from the lunacy of it all.

I glanced up at Coop, standing placidly in the sun. What's a nice machine like you, I thought, doing in a place like this? I remembered Ruthie's derelict factory full of odd robots like lethal toys in which seemed to be a deserted city in a recently deserted world where the wind blew old newspapers and candy wrappers in the dusty streets beyond the grimy windows. And understood in a moment with shocked clarity that the disposer device standing before me was no construction of Ruth's nor the work of any member of my family, despite the fact that the Good Machine was the evolved fruit of my brother Ember's reckless research in manufactured minds. If so—the implication caught me like a blow to the belly. I hunched for a moment, pressed my forearms to the muscled flesh under my ribs and drew in a gasping breath. I wanted to run away, run away.

"You were one of them," I said. My tone sounded flat in my own ears, not accusatory, not terrified. "You were a K-machine. Whatever the fuck that is. And my family turned you."

For a moment Coop stood silently. He knocked out his dottle, then, on the lawn beside the cooling flowing water, trod out its coals with his heel, replaced the pipe in his pocket.

"I don't remember, young fella." He started to walk away from me across the grass, jerked his head in an invitation to me to follow. My feet had dried in the sun; I dragged on my socks, slipped on my boots, followed him down the steps to the library. Maybe he meant to show me some ancient manuscript that would explain it all. Or perhaps he was heading for the lavatory, where he'd find a mirror large enough to walk through without needing someone to lever him. I caught up in the main Ned Kelly lobby, where jaded legal students sat at catalog terminals and a fat librarian in a Simpson T-shirt scanned bar codes and stamped out unreadable tomes. Coop set himself in front of a monitor, placed one small, strong hand on the keyboard, and did invisible electrical stuff that made the screen forget it was part of a library. Images came and went on the flat screen, vividly colorful geometric shapes like the noise you see if you press your thumb into your eyeball. I watched over his shoulder, forcing patience upon myself.

I was teetering on the soggy end of a diving platform that seemed to be about one hundred meters above a handkerchief-sized bright-blue swimming pool full of screaming, hooting, riotous children who splashed, dunked each other, dive-bombed from the edge, while one or two adults in rubber hair restraints swam doggedly up and down the center lanes and a bored safety officer in a bright-yellow cap sat in a plastic chair and did nothing to quell the bad behavior. I squeezed my eyes shut, opened them again. In actuality, the water was probably no more than five meters below me, but from here it looked like the wet, open mouth of hell. When I turned my head, someone was standing directly behind me.

"Come on, numb-nuts," a boy's voice rasped. I lowered my eyes automatically to meet his, found myself staring instead at a pouty navel. What the hell? I swayed, sense of perspective completely shattered. I raised my eyes to the horizontal and found myself staring at James Davenport, who was about twelve years old. He waved his arms in front of my face in a derisive gesture, and my hands came up automatically to fend him off. They were a child's hands. I went stock-still, air cold on my wet body.

"You've gotta be fuckin' kidding," I said. My voice was eerie, high-pitched, trembling.

"Hey Miss," Jamie piped, mockery rich in his tone, "August said a bad word. It's all because I wouldn't wear his uniform, don'cha know."

This isn't happening, I told myself. I'm in the Kelly law library. It's all the fault of that—I couldn't decide whose fault it was. Law library? What was that?

"Kick the little pussy off," said the kid at the top of the ladder behind James. His voice broke at the end, cracking into a laughable squeak. He flushed. I recognized him: a fourteen year old, in the class year ahead of us, Bruce something. He was a nasty shit, and sometime soon, it came to me, he was going to chase Davers around the playground because Davers was wearing his sister's tutu and pigtails and pom-poms in a gesture of solidarity with my refusal to wear the school uniform. My head spun. Stupid. Hadn't happened yet. So how could I know about it?

Davers muttered quietly, "Come on, August, it's no big deal. Just shut your eyes and jump. We don't want that Brucester prick on our tails."

It came to me as well, then, standing beside the computer monitor, that I love diving, that I spent hours beside the pool in Chicago, and before that in Adelaide, or was it in Melbourne, day after day during school holidays, learning the mass and balance of my growing flesh and bone, the springy bounce of the board, the magic lift into air, body jackknifing, head down, arms like wings or thrusters, going ahead like a plow, flying without wings, eyes open, watching the blue, slicing into water, swallowed up by its womb, pressure in the ears, pressure on the pent lungs, delicious joy, kicking like a frog, bursting upward into air, stale wind gusted out, sweet fresh air drawn in, buoyant in water, stroking effortlessly to the pool's edge with newly strong muscles already starting their growth spurt in adolescence, vaulting up and over, quick, hot-soled, bare steps back to the foot of the concrete and steel diving board installation, waiting my turn with a sort of relaxed eagerness, climbing back into the air, into the sky, into the expectation of joy. It had happened, it was part of me, part of my sine wave, part of my very self, it hadn't happened yet, it would happen, I knew precisely what to do. I gave Davers a thumbs-up and a wink, turned to face the water, saw nobody in the water beneath me, bounced in the perfect moment on my toes against the unyielding platform, soared, turned upon my own axis, fell like a bullet, went into the blue. Hardly a splash. Maybe not a perfect ten, but pretty good for a kid having an insane hallucination.

I came up out of the water into my adult body, shaking imaginary or remembered wetness out of my hair, staring at the darting sigils on the monitor screen. My ears still rang with the slight pressure change. Now I recalled that first astonishing, life-altering dive from the high platform into the municipal pool. It had seemed at the time as if I'd been gifted with some peculiar grace, some awareness of the body and its powers attained without learning, maybe somehow just by watching as the experts do their stuff at the pool and on TV. Certainly our swimming coach was taken aback and wanted me to start training in earnest. Mention was made of Olympic prospects. It excited me a little but my parents told me, regretfully, it was out of the question. I guess they didn't want me to draw any additional attention to myself. When you're flying through the air like a blend of Superman without cape and Aquaman without the scales, and photographers are taking happy snaps, it's hard to hide or disguise the silvery hieroglyphs that have always pierced the bottom of your foot. Swimming, even diving, at the local pool were okay; gladiator sports were *verboden*. It turned me inward a little, I guess, as loneliness will, but then again, I don't suppose the obsessional life of a career athlete is necessarily a barrel of laughs. And with swimmers, it's a career that runs out of puff long before you reach your full maturity. So I'd had to settle for being whatever I was, I thought with a snort. Shapes twined, spun, danced like a Rucker animation of creatures from the fifth dimension. Maybe that was me, too. A Vorpul homunculus, Lune and my siblings had called me. Whatever the fuck that was.

I still couldn't see what this had to do with the K-machines. I bent down to lean across Coop's shoulder, and a fizzywig of light burst across the center of the screen and took me into a dark, dark place.

Wasn't as dark as I'd thought. The huge movie-ratio flat-screen TV display was showing a sitcom or series drama, and I slouched back in a comfortable leather chair with something cold in my hand. It was a beer, I saw, in a pop-top can. I brought it closer in the dim room, identified it as a Foster's Li

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