



WINNER OF **THE ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD**

PAUL MCAULEY
EVENING'S
EMPIRES

Paul McAuley

EVENING'S EMPIRES

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

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Dedication

To Georgina,
and to Jon Courtenay Grimwood

Epigraph

'In good times magicians are laughed at. They're a luxury of the spoiled wealthy few. But in bad times people sell their souls for magic cures and buy perpetual-motion machines to power their war rockets.'

Fritz Leiber, *Poor Superman*

'No thought can perish.'

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Power of Words*

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PART ONE

CHILDHOOD'S END

1

It was a remote and unremarkable C-type asteroid, a dark, dust-bound rock pile with a big dent smacked into its equator by some ancient impact. There were thousands like it in the Belt. Hundreds of thousands. It was mostly known by its original name, 207061 Themba, the name it had been given when it had been discovered in the long ago. It lacked significant deposits of metals or rare earths, and its eccentric orbit, skirting the outer edge of the Belt, didn't bring it within easy reach of any centre of civilisation. Even so, it had been touched by human history.

About a thousand years ago, for instance, towards the end of the Great Expansion, someone had seeded it with a dynamic ecology of vacuum organisms. Its undulating intercrater plains were mantled with pavements of crustose species; briar patches of tangled wires spread across the floors of many of its craters; tall spindly things a little like sunflowers stood on wrinkle ridges and crater walls. A cluster of sunflowers up on the rim of a large circular crater stirred now, the dishes of their solar collectors turning eastward as the horizon dropped away from the sun. Boulders scattered across the upper slopes of the crater threw long shadows. Sunlight starred the needle-point caps of a cluster of silvery spires and gleaming streaks shot down their tapering flanks as darkness drained away, shrugging to overlapping pools cast around their footings.

One spire near the edge of the little crowd had been painted black. A small movement twinkled at its base. A door dilating, a circle of weak yellow light framing a human shadow. The only inhabitant of these ruins, of this ordinary rock, stepping out into another day of silence and exile.

It was forty-two days after Gajananvihari Pilot had woken in a crippled lifepod on the cold hillsides of the crater's inner slope, one hundred and seventy-four days after he had escaped from the hijack *Pabuji's Gift*. He'd been aimed at the first of a chain of waypoints that would help him reach Tannhauser Gate, had been sinking into the deep sleep of hibernation, when the motor of his lifepod had suffered a near-catastrophic failure and lost most of its reaction mass. The lifepod's little mirror had recalculated its options, used the waypoint to change course and establish a minimum-energy trajectory to Themba.

Repair mites had patched up the motor while the lifepod was in transit, but the asteroid was a long way from anywhere else. Hari was grievously short of reaction mass, and couldn't call for help because the outer belt lacked a general commons, and a distress signal might attract the attention of the hijackers or some other villainous crew. Besides, he'd been taught to distrust everyone but his family. His father, his two brothers, Agrata. All most likely dead now. Murdered, as he would have been murdered if he hadn't escaped.

He was nineteen years old, alone for the first time in his life.

He'd channelled his grief and anger into a single-minded determination to save himself. He'd synched his internal clock to Themba's fourteen-hour day, established a strict routine. Waking just before dawn, drinking a protein shake while examining the latest products of the maker and checking his comms (picking up only the ticking of distant beacons; no general traffic, no threats or warnings from the hijackers). Hauling on his pressure suit and leaving his cosy little nest in the spire, climbing

a friction track laid down by the spire builders, following it over the crater's rim and through sunflower thickets to the plains beyond.

That day, like every other day, Hari paused at the far side of the sunflowers and used his pressure suit's radar and optical systems to survey each quarter of the visible sky. As usual, the p-suit's eidolon manifested beside him. A shadowy sketch of a slim young woman in a white one-piece bodysuit and an unlikely bubble helmet, her eyes smudged hollows in which faint stars twinkled.

'There appears to be nothing out there,' she said.

'Nothing but stars and planets and moons and rocks,' Hari said. 'Garden habitats. Various kinds of human civilisation. *Pabuji's Gift*, if the hijackers didn't destroy her.'

'No ships. No immediate danger.'

'No hope of rescue, either.'

It was more or less the same exchange they had every day. Like most QIs, the eidolon wasn't fully conscious. Her conversations were shaped by decision trees and phatic responses.

She said, as she'd said many times before, 'You will survive this, Gajananvihari. I have great faith in your resourcefulness and resolve.'

'Don't forget anger, suit.'

'Anger has no utility, Gajananvihari.'

'Anger is an energy. Anger feeds my resolve. Anger keeps me going.'

Hari was staring at a faint, fuzzy star above the western horizon. Jackson's Reef, where *Pabuji's Gift* had been hijacked. More than seventy million kilometres distant. He studied it every day, to renew his determination to escape and have his revenge on the criminals who'd murdered his family and stolen their ship and destroyed his life, and to search for the spark of a fusion motor. *Pabuji's Gift* or some other ship, come looking for him.

But that day, like every other day, there was no spark, no ship.

The floor, the surface of the asteroid, sloped away in every direction to the irregular circle of the horizon, still and quiet under the black sky. Vacuum-organism pavements stretched everywhere in patchwork blankets of big, irregular polygons in various shades of red or brown or black, outlined by pale necrotic borders where neighbouring species strove to overgrow each other, punctuated by the slumped bowls of small craters, spatters of debris, scattered boulders. Everything untagged, unaugmented, unadorned by overlays or indices. Naked. Unmapped. Hari had learned to read the contours and patterns of the landscape, but still felt a faint hum of caution when he set out across the surface. He was an intruder in this vast emptiness. A ghost in the desert of the real.

He moved with a sliding shuffle in the negligible gravity, using ski sticks to keep his balance while tethers whipped from his waist, gecko-pads at their tips slapping against the rock-hard surface of the vacuum-organism pavement, retracting, whipping out again. The eidolon drifted beside him. Hari had been born and raised in microgravity – *Pabuji's Gift* was thrifty with reaction mass and spent most of its time coasting in free fall – but he wasn't used to unbounded spaces and found it hard to keep a sense of orientation in the rolling landscape. Everything was either too far away or too close. Sometimes he seemed to be climbing a wall; sometimes he seemed to be descending a near-vertical ramp, moving faster and faster, feeling that he was about to fall away into the sky. Fall, and keep falling for ever. Then he'd stop and catch his breath before setting off again.

Jupiter's brilliant star rose in the east, chasing the sun towards zenith. Themba was small, with an average diameter of just six kilometres. Even at Hari's cautious pace, it was easy to outwalk the day.

His bright yellow p-suit was tanned to the hips with inground dust, and dust had worked into its joints, stiffening the left knee, limiting the rotation of the right shoulder. It had already reached the limits of self-repair. Hari hadn't been able to print new parts or adapt spares scavenged from the antique p-suits of Themba's dead, but he was determined to keep working until he had finished

refuelling the lifepod.

That day, like every day, he prospected for beads of water-ice, amino acids, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons extruded by the lobes and ruffles of the vacuum-organism pavements. He swept up the beads with a vacuum extension tool and dumped them into a bag hung from his waist; when the bag was full, he sealed it and headed towards a patch of vacuum organism he'd infected with a virus from the lifepod's library. This was a dark red crustose species with pillowy lobes at its margins which, after the virus had reprogrammed its metabolism, had begun to accumulate organic precursors and elements that the lifepod's hybrid motor could use to synthesise reaction mass. Clusters of flaky crystals glittered with green sparks in the beam of the p-suit's black-light lamp; Hari swept them up into a fresh bag. It was his second harvest from this patch, one of the first he'd turned. Synthesis was slow in the freezing vacuum, but he had over six hectares in production now. Pretty soon he'd have enough reaction mass to reach the nearest settlement, a trip of three hundred days or so. A long stretch in hibernation, but not impossible . . .

It was his only real hope of escaping Themba. Any ships the spire builders might have possessed were long gone, taken as trophies of war or claimed by scavengers, and the rock's most recent inhabitant, an ascetic hermit who had died long before Hari's arrival, must have hitched a ride to the surface with someone who'd traded the favour for good karma. Hari had searched long and hard in and around the spires and the crater, had probed permanent shadows in scores of crevasses and pits, but had found no trace of a lifepod or gig.

He moved on to another patch of modified vacuum organism, and another. Spiralling outwards, skirting a huge boulder socketed in a fat collar of vacuum-organism growth, climbing a wrinkle ridge, passing the slim black rectangle of the monolith set on top. A sect of philosopher-monks had planted them on asteroids across the Belt during the Great Expansion. They were different sizes, but all possessed the same proportions – 1:4:9 – and anyone who touched the black mirrors of their faces elicited a radio squeal aimed at the core of the galaxy. Some thought that it brought good luck, others that it touched a monolith. Others believed that their stuttering pulses might one day alert some vast, cool, implacably hostile intelligence, which was why only a few survived intact, usually on remote and untenantable rocks.

Themba's monolith was four times Hari's height. Jupiter's bright star hung above it. As usual, Hari gave it a wide berth. If he set it off, the hijackers or some wandering dacoit ship might detect the signal, would know at once that Themba was inhabited.

Sometimes, though, he was tempted to step up to the monolith and set his gloved hand against its black face and trigger its here-I-am squeal. Sometimes he hoped the hijackers would track him down. He had no defence against them except for a few simple traps and tricks, they'd almost certainly capture or kill him, but one way or another it would put an end to the torment and uncertainty of his exile. And perhaps he'd be able to take some of them with him before he was overwhelmed. He pictured them jerking in nets. Impaled by spikes. He pictured himself slashing at a horde of faceless figures with an incandescent energy beam. He pictured himself attacking them with fists and feet. He hadn't been able to take part in the fight to save the ship. He swore that he wouldn't miss his chance next time.

Early in his exile, still raw with grief and fear, he'd told the eidolon about these fantasies. 'Agrata should have given me weapons,' he'd said. 'Drones. Bomblets. A gauss rifle or a reaction pistol.'

'Agrata didn't want you to fight,' the eidolon had said. 'She wanted you to survive.'

She sometimes said something unexpected. Something that made Hari think. He'd thought about that remark for a long time, and it had strengthened his resolve to escape from Themba and reach Tannhauser Gate. But in spite of trying to fill his hours and days with routine and work and meticulous planning, he was sometimes overcome by a tremendous raging despair at the cosmic injustice of what

had happened to him, to his family. At how their future had been smashed, how he'd been left dazed and stranded in the wreckage. The awful details of the hijack lurked at the edge of his mind like one of the insanity memes that the True Empire had deployed against its enemies. A monstrous presence haunting the service levels of his mind, an ancient and insane bot raving against the limits of its protocols.

Anger was an energy, all right. If he wasn't careful, it would consume him.

At last he had collected his daily quota of beads, and headed home. Scooting in a straight line towards the crater, sunflowers suddenly bristling at the top of a long crest. Their black dishes were aimed west now, where the sun hung a handspan above the crater's floor. Hari found the friction track and followed it towards the cluster of spires at the bottom of the slope.

Once, the spire builders had spread across more than a third of the main belt, with outposts in the outer belt and the Hildas and Trojan groups, but like most clades it had overreached itself, splintering into sects that had fought bitter battles over minor differences in doctrine. The spire builders of Themba had been wiped out when their home had been struck by drones that shredded into expanding clouds of needles seconds before impact, perforating the spires and their unfortunate inhabitants. Centuries later, the ascetic hermit had settled there. He had removed the bodies of the spire builders and buried them in a common grave, carved a pocket habitat from the maze of little rooms in the base of one spire, pressurised it, and lit and warmed it using power drawn from the black paint he'd sprayed on its riddled skin. And then he'd stripped out another spire, and begun to decorate the interior of its shell with intricate murals that combined scenes and incidents from obscure poems, songs and stories with visions of a marriage between the physical world and the human mind.

The hermit had been working on one of these murals when he had returned to the Wheel. Although being an ascetic, he would not have thought of his death in that way. There were no heavens or hells according to them, no cycles of reincarnation. Hari had found him on a net strung between two beams, a shrivelled mummy kneeling in his pressure suit, his paint wand still clutched in his gloved hand.

According to a book that Hari had found in the shelter, the hermit's name had been Kinson Ib Kana and he had died twenty-eight years ago. Or at least, that was the last time he had opened the book. Hari had learned little else. Kinson Ib Kana's p-suit was as dead as its owner, and like all followers of his faith he lacked a bios. Hari didn't know why he'd settled on Themba, where he had come from, whether he had any family, or how old he'd been when he'd died.

He had wrapped Kinson Ib Kana's leathery corpse in its particoloured robe and laid it on the ground beyond the spires and covered it with rocks taken from the margins of the big cairn that marked the common grave of the spire builders. He stopped there now, and with the eidolon standing shadowlike at his back paid his respects to the dead man and told him about his day, then shuffled across the dusty slope to the blunt cone of his lifepod. He tipped the reaction-mass makings into the maw of its motor, skimmed down the slope to the spires, and cycled through the airlock into the pocket habitat. He stripped off his p-suit, tumbled his harvest of water-ice, amino acids and aromatics into the hopper of the hermit's maker. Shat, scrubbed himself clean, ate the ration of paste and pellets extruded by the maker, worked for a while on a dart thrower, read a story in the ascetic's book, and at last wrapped himself in the narrow hammock strung between two struts and told the lights to fade.

Another day gone. As always, he fell asleep while thinking about what he would do once he reached civilisation. He was supposed to make his way to Tannhauser Gate and, with the help of his family broker, contact the hijackers and offer to trade Dr Gagarian's head for the release of any hostages, and the ship. But he was late, so very late, and it was highly probable that only he had survived. Agrata had said as much. His father's viron had been erased; she had lost contact with his brothers and the bioses had fallen silent. It was possible that the hijackers had taken her alive, but when he'd left he

when he'd been shot out of the ship in the lifepod, she had been getting ready to fight them to the death. He'd get to Tannhauser Gate, he'd try to negotiate with the hijackers, but if there were no survivors, if they didn't want to give up the ship, he'd crack open the files cached in Dr Gagarian's head and sell them. He'd mine old databases, locate a trove of ancient treasures in the outer dark, and convince some freebooter to enter into a partnership and make his fortune. He'd pull off a coup in the city bourse, become the bodyguard of some rich trader and save her life, work ten or twenty years in the docks, do everything and anything he could to raise enough funds to hire a gang of reivers and track down the people who had murdered his family and wrecked his life. And then, oh then, he would have his revenge . . .

Another day passed, and another. Early one morning, he woke to find the eidolon bending over him, the twin stars of her eyes gleaming above the sketch of her smile.

'I have news, Gajananvihari! I have good news! It is Agrata! It is Agrata Konwas! She is alive! And I have a message from her!'

In the long ago, in their motherland on Earth, Gajananvihari Pilot's family would have been called kabadiwallahs. Junk peddlers. They located derelict gardens and settlements, salvaged machines that could be refurbished or repurposed, isolated and cultured novel vacuum organisms and biologicals, concentrated and refined rare earths and metals. They burrowed through the remains of grand schemes abandoned in place or wrecked by war. They ransacked homes and public spaces. They were not sentimental about their work. They were grateful to the dead, but did not try to appease them. The dead no longer had any claim over what they'd left behind, no longer needed it.

There were thousands of derelict settlements, gardens and habitats in the Belt, tens of thousands of abandoned way stations, refuges, supply dumps, observatories, quarries, strip mines, and refineries, but salvage was not an easy way of making a living. Most of the ruins whose orbits brought them close to the remaining cities and settlements had been stripped out long ago; those so far untouched traced distant or eccentric paths, and were often laced with lethal traps and unexpected dangers.

Forty years before Hari had been quickened, his mother, Mullai, had succumbed to a rogue prion that had infected her while she had been cataloguing the feral biosphere of an ancient garden, and converted her brain to tangles of pseudo-organic fibrils. His father, Aakash, after surviving radiative poisoning, six different cancers, and injuries caused by two serious accidents, had passed over fifteen years later, and migrated into a viron. And then Mullai and Aakash's first son, Rakesh, had been killed when he was caught up in riots sparked by one of the end-time cults.

This was several years after the Bright Moment, when everyone everywhere, awake or asleep, baseliner or posthuman, had been struck by the same brief vision: a man on a bicycle turning to look at the viewer as he glided away into a flare of light. It was generally agreed that this vision had been caused or created by an ancient gene wizard, Sri Hong-Owen. At the beginning of the Great Expansion she had left the Solar System in a ship fashioned from a fragment of one of Saturn's moons, and after a troubled voyage of more than fifteen hundred years had arrived in the middle of a war between colonists over control of Fomalhaut's gas-giant planet Cthuga, whose core was rumoured to be inhabited by a vast and ancient intelligence. Sri Hong-Owen's ship had plunged into Cthuga, and twenty years later something strange and wonderful had happened in the depths of the gas giant. Something that had kindled the Bright Moment.

Hundreds of sects, cults, and circles of magicians, hieratics, teleoethetics, psychomancers and idolaters had sprung up in its wake, like crystals condensing out of a shocked supersaturated solution. They believed that human history had been abruptly and utterly transformed, that the Bright Moment was the harbinger of a final reckoning in which only the elect would be saved, that it was a magical solution to the problems that oppressed their worlds: the static hierarchies that governed them; the centuries-long, belt-wide economic recession; reliance on ancient, half-understood machines and technologies; the lack of new political and philosophical ideas. Some broke away from established religions; others were founded by charismatic self-styled prophets or revelators. Some were violent and aggressive; others manifested an ethereal spirituality. Some believed that the Bright Moment

commemorated the vastening of an ascended god created by the fusion of Sri Hong-Owen's mind with Cthuga's alien intelligence, foreshadowing an age in which all of humanity would enter a new state of being; others preached that it was a sign that something inhuman and inimical had intruded into the universe, the beginning of a final war between good and evil. They squabbled over minor and major points of doctrine and interpretation, accused each other of heresy and apostasy, and fissioned into a bewildering variety of squabbling schismatic sects.

Only a few survived the first decade after the Bright Moment. Most were short-lived: brief, bright candles consumed by the fever-frenzy of their faith. Some imploded when their leaders were assassinated or arrested; some destroyed themselves in mass suicides, believing that death at an auspicious hour would allow them to ascend into the new heaven created by Sri Hong-Owen, or to create new heavens of their own; some were overthrown when they went to war against the governments and polis of their cities and settlements.

Rakesh was caught up in one of these insurrections. He was negotiating the sale of salvaged machinery in New Shetland when a radical cult, the Exaltation of the Free Mind, began to attack posthumans, accusing them of using memes implanted during the Bright Moment to control the thoughts and actions of baseliners. Riots broke out across the city; Rakesh was killed while trying to reach the elevators to the docks.

Hari was quickened soon afterwards, cloned from Rakesh's gene library. His childhood was tinted by the death of his predecessor and his father's forthright hatred of the Exaltation of the Free Mind and the rest of the end-time cults. According to him, they threatened to create an age of superstition and unreason worse than the tyranny of the True Empire. He was particularly exercised by claims that the Bright Moment was a miracle that circumvented or violated natural laws: an intervention by supernatural deity that stood outside the ordinary flow of events and could not be parsed by the ordinary human mind. The Bright Moment's challenge to our world-picture should stimulate our curiosity, Aakash said, not close it down. It was a question of epistemology, not eschatology.

Hari loved talking with his father, loved stepping through the translation frame into the viron where Aakash had made his home after he had passed over. It mirrored the desert homeland of one of the Pilot family's ancestors, on Earth. The blue and starless sky, dominated by the platinum coin of the sun. Red rocks and red sand studded with vegetation, stretching towards a flat horizon. Rugged cliffs rooted in talus slopes, a narrow path winding through boulder fields to the tall cave mouth where Aakash met his visitors. A magical place where even time was different. Sometimes Hari would emerge from the viron and discover that hours or days had flown by, out in the real world.

Sometimes he and his father would sit on slabs of warm sandstone outside the cave while they talked; sometimes they wandered through the desert. The old man bare-chested in a crisp white dhoti, stocky, broad-shouldered, a head shorter than Hari. His searching gaze and gentle voice. One hand combing the snowy flood of his beard while he anatomised some arcane nugget of philosophy or history.

Because Aakash believed that everything was connected to everything else, that every detail in the world's vast tapestry was significant, his conversations tended to veer in sudden and unexpected directions or lose themselves in digressions about the culture of ancient universities, the chemistry and manufacture of the oil paints used by Renaissance masters, the intractable problem of qualia, or some other topic suggested by what appeared to be random association. He'd always been like this, Agrata said, but his tendency to ramble far from his starting point had become more pronounced after he'd passed. He was no longer anchored to common clock time in his viron, and could extemporise for hours on any subject that caught and held his interest.

As Hari and his father followed long meandering paths through the desert, windows would pop open to illustrate a point Aakash was making, diagrams would scribble across the sand, equations would in-

themselves across the screen of the sky. The pocket universe of the viron was contiguous with Aakash's thoughts, an extension of his mind, but its detailed, self-consistent landscape was also interesting in its own right. An expression of an ancient, alien logic. Ripples of sand formed ridge cells like those Hari's tongue could parse on the roof of his mouth. Little crescent dunes were patched here and there, none higher than his knees. Scatterings of stones. Gravel pans. Interlocking circles. Thorny bushes. Palisades of spiny paddles. Lizards darting across bare rock like small green lightning. Small birds flicking between clumps of vegetation or hovering on a blur of wings as they inserted their hypodermic beaks into flowers. Larger birds tracing patient circles high above. All of this generated from rules that mimicked a place long ago lost under ice, on Earth.

As Hari grew older, his conversations with his father increasingly turned to the influence of cults on the politics of the surviving cities and settlements of the Belt and Mars and the moons of the outer planets, the personalities and backgrounds of key players, how various scenarios might be game, whether attempts to begin a dialogue with certain powers on Earth were useful or foolish, rumours about the suppression of philosophical explorations and research into the cause and nature of the Bright Moment, and so on, and so forth.

Nabhmani, who after Rakesh's death had taken charge of negotiations with politicians and officials in the cities and settlements visited by the ship, said that the old man had retreated into a fantasy world of conspiracies and hypotheses because he no longer had any traction or influence outside the little world of his ship. That was why he wouldn't allow Hari to explore any of *Pabuji's Gift's* ports of call, Nabhomani said. Not because Hari wasn't old enough to take care of himself, but because Aakash didn't want him exposed to inconvenient truths.

Agrata, as usual, took Aakash's side. The last of the original crew, tirelessly loyal, she had been on the ship ever since it had been refurbished and relaunched. She said that everything had been thrown into hazard by the shock of the Bright Moment. Old certainties were crumbling, political alliances were shifting, the influence of the end-time cults was spreading in strange and unpredictable ways.

'We must do our best to understand these changes if we are to survive,' she said.

'And this obsession with the Bright Moment?' Nabhomani said. 'How will that help us survive?'

'Aakash hopes to keep a little light of reason alive in a growing sea of darkness. I see no harm in it.'

'You can't reason with people whose beliefs are based on unreason,' Nabhomani said. 'I should know. I must deal with them at every port.'

Nabhoj, as usual, wouldn't be drawn into these arguments. He had a ship to run.

Nabhmani and Nabhoj were clones of Aakash, physically identical but with very different personalities. Nabhomani was affable, convivial, rakish, dressed in a vivid motley of fashions picked up from the cities and settlements he visited, loved gossip, and possessed a sharp eye for the affectations and foolishness of others. Nabhoj was a phlegmatic technician who rarely socialised with the passengers, and could sulk for days if he lost an argument about how best to solve a problem encountered during salvage work. Once, when Hari had been helping him try to free a recalcitrant pressure-hose coupling, he'd fetched a diamond knife and methodically hacked the coupling to a cloud of splinters. And then the fit had passed, and he'd given Hari one of his rare smiles and told him that although it wasn't a standard procedure it had solved the problem quite neatly.

Hari was schooled in every aspect of the family trade by Agrata and his two brothers, received a patchwork education in philosophical truths and methods from his father and various travelling scholars, and played with the children of passengers and specialists in the many disused volumes of his family's ship. It was a ring ship, *Pabuji's Gift*, a broad ribbon caught in a circle five hundred metres across, with a twist that turned it into the single continuous surface of a Möbius strip. The ship's motor hung from a web of tethers and spars at the centre of the ring; its hull was studded with the cubes and domes that contained workshops, utility bays, power units, an industrial maker, and the

giant centrifuges, light chromatographs, and cultures of half-life nematodes and tailored bacteria; its interior was partitioned into cargo holds, garages for gigs and the big machines used in salvage work and the lifsystem. Much of this space was unused. The ship could support more than a thousand people, but even when Hari's father had been alive it had never carried more than a tenth of that number.

Hari and the children of passengers and specialist crews had the run of the empty cargo holds, habitats and modules, the mazes of ducts and serviceways. A world parallel to the world of the adults, with a social structure equally complicated, possessing its own traditions and myths, rivalries and challenges, fads and fashions. Endless games of tig on one voyage; hide-and-seek on another. One year, Hari organised flyball matches inside a cylinder turfed with halflife grass; when interest in that began to wane, he divided the children into troops that fought each other for possession of tagged locations scattered through the ship.

He was fifteen then. Tall and slender, glossy black hair done up in corn rows woven with glass beads. Even though every adult – everyone over the age of twenty – still seemed impossibly old, adulthood was no longer mysterious and unattainable, but a condition he was advancing towards day by day. He knew that he would soon have to give up childish games and shoulder his share of the family's work. He was beginning to understand the limits of his life, beginning to realise how small his world really was, how little it counted in the grand scheme of things.

And then he fell in love for the first time.

Her name was Sora Exodus Adel. A passenger travelling with her brother and her mother between Tannhauser Gate (where *Pabuji's Gift* had unloaded most of the salvage from her last job) and Trantor (where she would unload the rest). Sora was a year older than Hari, languidly elegant, too old for the kind of games that Hari felt he was too old for now.

He couldn't tell Sora how he felt. He and his brothers were not allowed to have what Agrata called intimate relations with any of the passengers or specialists. Nabhoj was partnered to the ship, Nabhomani told Hari outrageous stories about debauchery with women and men he met during his negotiations in cities and settlements, promised to let Hari have a taste of the good life when Hari was at last allowed to go ashore. Hari could admire Sora Exodus Adel from a distance, engage in a little light banter, no more than that. Better to avoid her altogether, he thought. Find some work he could vanish into until the ship docked at Trantor and Sora disembarked. Then one of the other passengers, Jyotirmoy Hala, came up with a plan to put on a dance performance based on one of the stories about the parochial god from whom the ship had taken its name.

Jyotirmoy was three years older than Hari, the only child of two philosophers who were studying the topology of the space-time distortions around the seraphs, and expected their son to take up the work. Jyotirmoy did not argue with his parents. He simply refused to listen to them. He spent a dozen hours a day practising dance and the art of gesture. The only way to be good at something, he told Hari, was to let it take over your life. To dedicate yourself to it. You had to practise an elevation or gesture over and over until you had it right. Or at least, until you stopped making obvious mistakes. And then you could get down to the serious work. Then you could think about making something new.

Agrata approved of Jyotirmoy's idea, and Hari found himself helping to put a troupe selected from the younger passengers, including Sora, through twenty days of rehearsals. Jyotirmoy plotted the choreography, chose the music from the ship's library, and supervised the design and manufacture of costumes and masks; Hari spent as much time as he could with Sora. He learned that she and her brother had been born on Mars but for most of their lives had been travelling with their mother, a musician who played ancient symphonies using an orchestra thing controlled by the play of her hands through columns of light. Sora maintained the orchestra thing; her brother organised events and arranged travel. She liked the gypsy life, she said, but she wouldn't work for her mother for ever.

she'd settle down eventually, design gardens, and raise children. She and Hari talked about the places she had visited, the people who lived there. Admirers of her mother's work. Collaborators. Other artists. Hari was still young enough to believe that the world was sensitive to his emotions and mood, that everyone was a player in the drama of his life. It gave him an odd, lonesome feeling to think of Sora leaving the ship, travelling on without him to places he'd never see, the precious time they had together dwindling to an anecdote, a memory.

Sora said that she found it odd that Hari had never gone ashore at any of the cities and settlements *Pabuji's Gift* had visited, said that his life and his family were very strange.

'Really?'

'You don't see it because you don't know anything else,' Sora said. 'But in all the cities and settlements I've visited, all the ships I've travelled on, I've never before met someone like you.'

'We're just ordinary people, trying to get by.'

'Don't you think it's the tiniest bit weird, being born after your parents died?'

Hari loved Sora's bold, straightforward manner. Her candid gaze. She had a way, while talking, of running a hand through the cloud of her hair and twisting a clump of it in her fingers and turning it in and fro, as if trying to tune into stray thoughts. She had long, dexterous fingers. Her fingernails were tinted dark green, with mica flecks.

Hari said, 'My father passed over. He isn't exactly dead.'

'What's the difference?'

'You could ask him.'

'He is like a ghost. A haunt who manifests himself in the drones and manikins. Can he really operate several of them at once?'

'Of course. He assigns their addresses to temporary sub-selves, and reintegrates when he's finished.'

'You think that is ordinary?'

He loved the little uptick in the corner of her smile. A sly little warp, a playful complicity. There were five different shades of gold in her eyes.

He said, 'It's just what he does.'

Sora said, 'Many of the passengers are scared of him.'

'Are you scared?'

'Of course not. Well, just a tiny bit. Actually, Agrata scares me more. I don't think she likes me.'

'Agrata can be . . . abrupt, I suppose. It's hard to know what she likes and doesn't like, but I bet she'd like you, once she got to know you.'

'That's sweet of you, Hari.'

Hari loved Sora's small kindnesses, her unaffected sophistication, was jealous when she paid attention to anyone else, envious of the easy way Jyotirmoy talked with her about details of the performance, of the way the two of them hung close together, studying sketches for costumes, watching recordings of rehearsals, discussing staging and the movements of performers, where they should start and where they should come to rest, and half a hundred other things whose significance Hari barely understood. For the first time, he saw himself as others might see him. An outsider. An awkward, peculiar kid who knew everything about his ship and his family's trade, and almost nothing about anything that really mattered.

But when Jyotirmoy at last led his crew into the hollow sphere of the stage, with the adult passengers hung all around its perimeter, Hari dissolved into his role and the gestalt of the performance. Costumed in fluttering silks, faces painted white, lips tinted black, eyes emphasised by red and gold make-up, he and the other players flitted through the web of ratlines and perches, through washes of light and music, like the little birds in Aakash's viron. Breaking into freefall dance

freezing in tableaux when one of the principals performed a solo part. Jyotirmoy played Pabuji; Hari played Pabuji's friend, the snake god Gogaji; Sora played Gogaji's bride and Pabuji's niece, Kelam; Sora's brother, Jubilee, played Ravana the Demon King, from whom Pabuji stole the she-camels he gave as a wedding present to Gogaji and Kelam; the other children doubled as wedding guests and the she-camels.

Hari inhabited the intricate sequence of his role with a kind of exalted serenity. Every move, every pose, sprang from memories laid down in his bios and muscles during the painstaking rehearsals, a single thread in the weave of the whole. Coming together, spinning apart. His concentration broke only once. Moving out of the dance in which he and Sora mirrored each other's gestures and poses as an expression of joyful fidelity, he overshot the perch where he would rest in shadow while Pabuji, with comically elaborate caution, stalked the she-camels. Jyotirmoy caught his arm and halted and turned him, and their gazes met. A strange moment of doubling, seeing Jyotirmoy's concern flash in Pabuji's mask. And then Hari was in the correct position, and Pabuji soared away into a cone of light and Hari was caught up again in the flow of the dance and the unfolding dream logic of the story, waking at the end of it, dazed and happy and exhausted, to the audience's applause.

At the party after the performance, still wearing Gogaji's green tunic and trousers, Hari dared to ask Sora if she wanted to see his favourite place on the ship, a diamond composite blister where you could switch off all the lights and lose yourself in the rapture of the starry dark. And was amazed, even though he'd so often imagined floating in the small intimate space with her, her warmth, her touch when she smiled and said why not? It was as if he still inhabited the dream reality of the play. Anything seemed possible. But when they started across the crowded space Agrata materialised out of the throng and told Hari that Sora's mother wanted to congratulate him on his performance. And Agrata's look told Hari that she knew. She knew all about his plan, his private fantasy.

He submitted, of course. He didn't know what else to do. Following Agrata, smiling and nodding while Sora's mother talked, hardly hearing what she said to him or what he said to her, Sora somewhere else in the big, crowded, noisy volume, the moment lost. And that was that. The next day *Pabuji's Gift* docked at Trantor, unloaded its cargo of refined rare earths, let off a few passengers and took on a few more. Sora and her family were among those who disembarked. And Jyotirmoy vanished. Abandoned his parents and jumped ship.

Agrata didn't say anything about Jyotirmoy's defection or Hari's unrequited love for Sora, but one day, during a discussion about reconfiguring passenger accommodation, she began to talk about the early days of the ship.

'There wasn't much to it,' she said. 'Just two modules powered and pressurised, one for crew, one for the farm that fed the crew. A handful of gigs, most of them still in need of complete overhaul. Very little in the way of equipment. Your father refurbished it himself, with the help of a small crew he recruited from people who answered a note he'd posted in the commons. We were idealists, but we were not daydreamers or utopians. We knew what was possible and what was not. We were practical. We made plans and we worked together to make those plans possible. We were all like your father, in short. As he was then.'

'He changed, and you didn't,' Hari said.

'I've told you this many times before, I know. Yes, he changed. There were just ten of us, when the ship set out on its maiden voyage. Nominally, we were a collective, but Aakash was in charge. A benevolent despot who ruled by charisma and an intimidating intellect. No one could argue with him because he had an answer to every question, every objection. I remember when he tried to introduce democracy to our little crew. One of his enthusiasms. He had so many, in those days. It was part of his charm, and bled off his excess energy. Like most of them, democracy did not last, but it was fun when it did. Now we're all bound by custom. Even your father. We do things in a certain way because that

the way we do things.'

~~They were sitting in the omphalos, at the heart of the passengers' quarters. Pale walls of architectural weave wrapped around an open cylindrical core lightly webbed by walkways and ziplines. The architectural weave knotted at various levels into platforms, like the one on which Hari and Agrata sat, or thickened into suites of rooms. Only a few people were about. Hari usually liked the drowsy peace of the omphalos, but now it seemed to close in on him like a helmet filled with stale rebreathed air.~~

He said, 'I'd like to take this ship to new places. Places people don't go any more. To Neptune's Trojans. To the Centaurs, and the scattered disc. To the Kuiper belt. There are all kinds of places out there, places no one has visited for centuries. Who knows what we might find?'

Agrata said, 'You want to shake things up.'

'Why not?'

'Yes, why not? The family needs to be challenged if it is to stay strong. But I don't think you're telling me what you want to do,' Agrata said. 'I think you're really telling me what you don't want to do.'

'You think I should do what I'm told. Even though I think it's wrong.'

'Rakesh once said more or less the same thing. He was about your age, as I recall.'

'I suppose we've all done the same things or wanted the same things,' Hari said.

Sometimes he felt that every thought, every idea, was an echo of the thoughts and ideas of his brothers and his father. That everything that happened to him had already happened to them. That there were no new stories.

Agrata studied him. She was more than a century old, and because she lacked every trace of vanity and because it gave her authority with the passengers, she let her age show. Her face was creased and lined; her skin was freckled with pale spots where viral treatment had removed incipient carcinoma; her coarse grey hair was brushed back from her forehead and braided into a long rope coiled at her back.

She said, 'You feel sorry for yourself. Hard done by.'

'Rakesh didn't have to deal with Aakash's fantasies about the Bright Moment and the cults and all the rest.'

'Now you sound like Nabhomani.'

'Perhaps Nabhomani is right.'

'You should talk to your father about your ideas. Argue with him. Start to take the initiative. The worst that can happen is that he won't listen to you.'

Hari tried his best. And at first Aakash seemed to take note of his comments. At least, he did not dismiss them immediately.

'You've been taking advice from the old woman,' he said.

Hari admitted it.

His father was amused. 'We've been together a long time. She knows how I think; I know how she thinks. She believes that I can't change. What about you?'

They were sitting cross-legged on a slab of warm sandstone at the entrance to the cave, in the shadow of the cliffs.

Hari said, 'I think you want what you think is best for the ship.'

'A diplomat's answer. Maybe you're learning something. I want what's best for you, too. You may not think it, but I do. You'll see how it all works out.'

How it worked out, a little over a year after Hari started to push back against his father's ideas, after he had for the first time left the ship to observe how Nabhomani negotiated with officials on Sugar Mountain and had, not very seriously and for only a few hours, run away, Aakash announced that the

family would suspend its salvage work for a while. They were going to try a new direction, he said. ~~They were going to help a very good friend of his complete his research into the nature of the Brig~~ Moment.

Some fifty days later, *Pabuji's Gift* reached Ceres and the tick-tock philosopher Dr Gagarian came aboard, and everything changed.

3

The pressure suit's eidolon possessed a childlike naivety. Usually, her unaffected optimism and innocence was charming. Playful. But sometimes, as when Hari tried to explain the hijacker's subterfuge, why he knew that Agrata wasn't really Agrata, it seemed like wilful obstinacy, capricious refusal to acknowledge unpalatable facts.

He was working while he talked to her, inside the spire that the ascetic hermit, Kinson Ib Kana, had hollowed out and decorated with murals. Checking his traps, greasing pawls and ratchets, making sure that lines were strung tight, bladders containing his special chemical mix hadn't hardened off, and nets were packed just so. Working as steadily as he could, despite tremors in his fingers and the soured taste of mercury and molten poison cooking in his bowels.

'I've known her all my life,' he told the eidolon. 'We talked every day. And the person I talked to isn't that person.'

'Did she give the wrong answers to your questions?'

The eidolon was perched on the intersection of two crossbeams. Her eyes gleaming in the shadows.

'Not at all. She knew everything. They'd done their research. But Agrata – the real Agrata – wouldn't have tried to answer those questions.'

No, she would have told him to stop being so silly. She would have told him to be sensible. That was one of her favourite words. Sensible. Also trust, pride, loyalty, duty. Hari desperately wanted it to be Agrata come to rescue him, to take him home, but he knew that it was his duty to keep Idris Gagarian's head safe and reach Tannhauser Gate and begin negotiations with the hijackers. It was his duty to make sure that his heart did not overrule his judgement.

'I suppose there is a small chance that Agrata might be a prisoner. Saying whatever the hijackers tell her to say because they are holding hostages they have promised to hurt or kill if she does not cooperate. But I don't think she is a prisoner,' Hari said, and felt a freezing pinch in his heart again. 'I think she's a djinn, probably generated from her bios. It is a good copy, but not quite good enough.'

He was trying to quantify an instinctive feeling of wrongness, searching for an explanation for something deeper than reason. Because what is the mass of a feeling? What is its wavelength, its position on the electromagnetic spectrum?

'But if it's really the hijackers,' the eidolon said, 'why would they want to talk to you? Why would they warn you that they were coming here?'

Hari had to remind himself that this artless simplicity was a feature of her mindscape, not a bug.

'They spotted the lifepod, and knew I was here. And they also knew that they were within range of the lifepod's radar. They knew I would know they were approaching Themba. So they tried to convince me that I was going to be rescued rather than be captured or killed. Because if they stayed silent, I would know at once that I was in danger.'

Hari had finished checking the alignment of the last of the traps; now he pushed off towards the floor. Picts flared as he dropped past murals, wrapping him in momentary sensations of colour and movement, triggering fleeting emotions he couldn't quite name. Strange cousins of wonder and awe.

and agape. Nostalgia for things he'd never seen or experienced. A profound and disorientating déjà vu. He hoped the murals would distract his enemies. If they did, he'd build a shrine to honour the memory of Kinson Ib Kana.

He hit the floor, swaying as his boots stuck and waist tethers shot out and anchored him, and the eidolon appeared at his side, saying, 'Isn't that why you made all this? Because you knew you were in danger?'

Hari watched the glow of the murals die back into darkness. Scattered lamps shone out of the shadows around him. He could see the wires and rigging of the traps around the hatch, told himself that he could see them because he knew where to look. Told himself that even if the hijackers spotted them, they would think they were part of the spire's internal construction.

Now he knew that they were coming for him, he was excited and scared. Excited because he would soon have a chance to confront them. Scared because he might fail. This was this, as Professor Aluthgamage had liked to say. There were a trillion trillion trillion alternate versions of the universe, a trillion trillion trillion realities, but this was the only one Hari inhabited, the only one he knew. And his only defence against his enemies was a handful of childish tricks and traps built from junk.

'I wasn't one hundred per cent certain that they would find me,' he said. 'I hoped that they wouldn't. I really did. But it made sense to prepare a little welcoming party just in case. And besides, it kept me busy. It passed the time.'

The eidolon shrugged. An unsettlingly human gesture. 'You will look foolish if you are wrong, and you will catch Agrata in your traps.'

'I will be dead if I'm right, and don't do anything.'

Hari ducked out of the hatch at the base of the spire, and shuffled across the dusty ground towards the lifepod. Jupiter was following the sun down towards the western horizon. The spark of the hijacker's ship hung high above. It was one of the brightest stars in the sky now. It would reach Themba in a little under three hours.

The eidolon drifted beside him, saying, 'Are you are planning to escape? I thought that the lifepod lacked sufficient reaction mass.'

'I have another use for it,' Hari said.

He reached into the hard-code matrix of the lifepod, reconfigured its proximity and navigation protocols, and began to write the first of two short command strings. He'd been working for ten minutes when the eidolon spoke. Saying that Agrata wanted to talk to him again.

'She says she will be with you soon. She says she looks forward to embracing you and telling you everything.'

'Don't reply,' Hari said. 'The hijackers are wondering what I'm doing. Let them.'

'I'm scared, Gajananvihari.'

'Me too.'

'I'm scared that you may be right. And if you are right, if the ship is piloted by the hijackers, if they are trying to fool you with a copy of Agrata, shouldn't you reply? Otherwise, they will realise that you know that she is not who she claims to be.'

It was a good point.

Hari thought for a moment, then told the eidolon to open the channel. At once, Agrata's face appeared in a small window. It looked exactly like her. Her grey hair brushed back from her forehead. The wrinkles at the corners of her eyes deepening when she smiled and asked him what he was doing.

'Packing up.'

'There's nothing you need in that little capsule.'

The hijackers were watching him. Of course they were.

He stepped on his anger and fear and said, 'I'm salvaging a few things.'

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