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WALKING TO ALDEBARAN



CHAPTER ONE

TODAY I FOUND something I could eat *and* something I could burn to keep back the darkness. That makes today a good day.

I don't know what it was or where it came from. Like me, it had been wandering the passageways of this crypt for who knows how long – and how long *has* it been, anyone? No day and no night and I've nothing left with power to tell the time, and so my life becomes one long greyness, punctuated by increasingly erratic periods of sleep. I don't need to sleep like I used to. Or I need to sleep in some other way, maybe some way that I can't achieve.

Every waking is building up a sleep-debt inside me that my poor human physiology can't satisfy. Maybe when I change my mind completely I'll be back in balance. For now: anxiety, tremors, mania, paranoia, hyperventilation. Or sometimes no ventilation. That's probably worse, but then the air in here is so variable. Seriously, you wouldn't want it in your lungs if you had any option.

But the thing, the thing I found that brightened my day and filled a hole: it was twice as long as me, but it had been dead a long time and that must have shrunk it a bit. The air in this part of the Crypts is very dry. Its outer layers had gone brittle and crispy and I thought there mightn't be anything of substance to it, but when I flaked them off, there was meat underneath, dry and chewy but meat nonetheless. It had a dozen many-jointed legs, and I snapped them off and piled them up, a camp fire just like my old scoutmaster taught me, and I used one of my shonky little jury-rigged pieces of nonsense to spark it into flames. The air here is dry, but it's short on oxygen too, I can feel it from the way I slow down: breathing, moving, thinking. Hard to get a fire lit. And it's so cold here, cold pretty much anywhere you go in the Crypts. I managed it, though. I got everything heated up enough that a guttering little flame caught, and then I huddled over it, trapping the fire between my body and the stone walls until a meagre ration of warmth had no choice but to leach into me.

The flesh of the creature tasted like sour dust. I was eating proteins evolved light years from Earth on some planet where twelve-legged, five-metre worm people live, but these days my microbiome is omnivorous to say the least. I twisted and groaned as all the little workers in my gut got to grips with the new repast. I used to be lactose intolerant, if you can believe it. I used to hurl if I ate cheese, and fart like a trooper if I had too much white bread as well. Now my diet is a catholic one, in the sense of 'all-embracing' rather than 'fish on Fridays.'

The outermost layer of the dead thing was a sheath that was made, not grown, though it was as disintegratingly friable as the skin within. I tried to ignore the fact. I tried to tell myself the creature was just one more animal denizen of the Crypts, another species seeded here, to evolve or die out. And plenty of them have evolved, believe me. The Crypts have been here for a long, long time – millions, billions of years. Things have grown to love it here. I am not one of those things, although it seems to me I have been here for a long time. In human terms, months is a long time to be somewhere as

terrible as this. I think it has been months. I hope it's not been years. But the lack of light and – well, I said about the sleeping, and I'm beginning to think that time is shonky here too. After all, some part of this godforsaken place is giving the laws of relativity a good shafting.

My name is Rendell; Gary Rendell. I'm an astronaut. When they asked me, as a kid, what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said, "astronaut, please!" all filled with thoughts of Aldrin and Tereshkova. And though space exploration had been the domain of machines for quite a while, we did have a new crop of astronauts now, off bleeding their lives into the red, red sands of Mars so that, in a generation's time, a cabal of rich guys could turn up and live off what they built. But that wasn't the astronaut I wanted to be. I wanted to go into *space*. I wanted to set foot on alien worlds.

And I have. I've done all that. I've met aliens, sentient aliens. I've seen spaceships. I've breathed the venomous air of a planet on the other side of the universe. I'm probably the most travelled human being in the history of human beings travelling, if indeed that category is still the appropriate one with which to conjure me. I just didn't think there would be so much getting lost and eating corpses. They never told me that at astronaut school. They never told seven-year-old Gary Rendell how he might be huddled in front of a fire that's dying for lack of O_2, gnawing on desiccated chunks of long-dead alien explorer. If they'd brought that up, I might have said "train driver" instead.

The next day I move on, leaving my fellow explorer half-eaten behind me. I'm not sure what killed him. I call him 'him,' because that's the knee-jerk if you're a manly fellow like me. I call him Clive, in fact. Clive, of the species Clivus, from Clivesworld. Nobody else is here; I get the naming privileges. Clive wandered these passageways, lost like me. He had no breathing apparatus that I could see, although I'm only guessing at what part of him actually breathed. Possibly Clivesworld is somewhere nearby, some arid, low-oxygen world crawling with caterpillar-men who got out into space with some trick other than combustible fossil fuels and then found the Thing. The thing we found out past Neptune. The thing we all find, when we go far enough. The Crypts.

And Clive and his brood-mates or brethren or clone-kin were very excited, in their caterpillar way. They entered the Crypts just like we did, and maybe the rest of the Clives did better and found somewhere useful. Maybe they're living the high life with firm trading agreements with the Steves and

the Debbies from across the universe. But my Clive didn't have a good time. My Clive wandered off or got separated, went space-mad, or gave himself to the Crypt gods. He found a dry, dry corner and he coiled his bulk up and died, and sometime later an Earthman named Gary Rendell came along and ate quite a large chunk of him.

But I'm getting sentimental. This isn't anywhere useful to me. The atmosphere's wrong and, unless Clive wandered in from a different aerome, then Clivesworld is no fit destination for my fellow humans. So I head away, trekking the dark, constantly relighting the charcoal ends of Clive's limbs as the dead air snuffs them out, because the Crypts are cold and the Crypts are dark, although most everything else varies.

One day later – meaning: after I've slept again, although my personal sense of time suggests those periods are becoming more and more spaced out, but I will go quite mad if I cannot call things days and hours and minutes even if the words have no meaning outside my skull *and so* – one day later, I cross the invisible boundary into another aerome. The world smells faintly of something like lavender, and my lungs prick up their ears because the oxygen content is up, and also because there are several elements that humans would not normally want to be importing in bulk into the delicate, vulnerable linings of their pulmonary cavities. My lungs are omnivorous too, though. After all, what sort of a cautionary tale would *Der Fliegende Holländer* be if he could just *drown?*

I take a deep breath. I am a connoisseur of atmospheres. Oxygen, yes, mmm, good oxygen, a fine vintage. Nitrogen and methane, yes, very good, carbon monoxide slightly overdone, and I don't appreciate the sulphurous bouquet. I don't know about you, Toto, but this probably isn't contiguous with Earth, or anywhere that Dorothy might have gone. More suitable for the Tin Woodsman, but we have to keep going, don't we? I talk to Toto – if you hadn't guessed, you're Toto – I talk to you, Toto, because the Crypts are dark, like I said, and my own voice, croaky as it is, is soothing to me. When the echoes come back, I can pretend that I'm Toto and you're Gary Rendell, and we're having a fine old conversation.

I think I used to talk to you because it kept me sane, but we've rather moved past that stage in the relationship, don't you think?

But I've got a gut full of slowly digesting alien flesh and I can feel my metabolism shaking off the dust now I've got richer air to burn. And my eyes twitch and squint past the suddenly resurgent flame of my Clive-leg torch,

because there's light ahead, real light. Not starlight, not sunlight, not firelight, but actual light, such as is made by sentient entities with a sophisticated technology. Most of the Crypts are dark as midnight, a horror of endless cold corridors cut in the stone where every step could see you into a trap, a drop, some peculiarity of physics, a reversal of gravity, a sudden drop in pressure or a toxic aerome.

Or the maw of a monster.

Because it's like *Dungeons and Dragons* in here, and you ever know a crypt without monsters?

And we split the party, and that's where the trouble started.



CHAPTER TWO

THE KAVENEY PROBE was sent to look for planets.

What counts as a planet – what bits of dead cold rock out there are and aren't planets – is a topic that continually amuses astronomers and planetary geologists. Hours of fun. Is Pluto? Or is it just a dwarf planet, and therefore not eligible for club benefits? And if not Pluto, what is Planet Nine from Outer Space, and what about Planet Ten? The Newtonian dance of everything else says they're there, or maybe, probably, but you try finding even something as large as a planet in something as large as the outer solar system.

Anyway, some jokers in ESAC, Madrid, and some other jokers in the British Space Agency, still gamely cooperating despite everything, reckoned there was something odd going on out in the Kuiper belt, on past Pluto where Planet Nine was supposed to go for its winter holidays. I remember sitting through the math later on, along with the other expedition hopefuls. Why put us through it when, by then, we had a good idea of what Kaveney had actually found, I don't know, but the ESA obviously wanted us to ace the theory part of the test later on. I understood it at the time and then it mostly fell out of my head the moment I left the room, because it was obviously yesterday's news. Can't remember the details now except that years of careful measurement had determined that the solar system's Newton's Cradle was swinging kind of funny out that way and the prime candidate was the orbit of one of those elusive far-out planets yanking gravity's chain.

So they proposed, and they got the funding, and they finally got a probe out, name of Kaveney, booted out of Earth's own gravity the old-fashioned way and then slung around the sun towards the far reaches of the solar system at speeds that would shame the old Voyager. Able to catch up to the poor, long-lost thing and say 'Hi,' in fact, had they sent it off on the right trajectory. And Voyager would have replied with some whalesong and *per aspera ad astra* in braille, which wouldn't have been terribly edifying.

Prescient, though. You'd be surprised how many alien species around here are big on touch, not sight. The Crypts hold one less terror for them, I guess, though still plenty terrors enough.

But let's get our feet back on the ground before we get our heads in the air. The Kaveney, zipping off past the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, spending another few years crossing the interplanetary gulf, cocking a snoot at Pluto, still sitting on the doorstep of the Planet Club with a tear in its eye as it holds its 'membership revoked' letter. And, because the people at the BSA and ESA and the lead team in Madrid were not fools and could do maths, eventually it got to where it was supposed to be and opened all its glittering eyes to the void to take a look.

I don't need to tell you, Toto, a lot happened back on Earth during the years the Kaveney was in transit. We nearly had a big war. Actually, we nearly had two. We were daggers drawn in Europe over bloody fish, if you can believe it. Then, just as things looked as though they were cooling and people were putting the death toys back in the box with the skull on it, everything kicked off in the US with the Neo-Apartheid crowd and all those

secessions that never quite happened. Scary AF both times, believe me. I was training in Poland when the European boom was going down and I remember being evacuated from Warsaw with a dozen other students, without warning, still in our dressing gowns and slippers. Because they thought that was going to be *It*, right then, and apparently someone's first thought was "Save the trainee astronauts!" And a lot of people died or lost their homes, some of them because of the actual war and others because the war was a useful excuse to go kick your neighbour for being gay or Jewish or Croatian or whatever issue your ancestors have traditionally kept the knife sharp for, but *It* never quite came. We kept going up to the rooftop and we kept getting talked down from it.

The Stateside business was scarier, even though it was Over There. Things kicked off all over, the way I heard: citizen militias, lynching, little towns and churches and cults just declaring they didn't recognise *anyone's* government, not one side nor the other, and everyone's got roomfuls of guns, so they were able to underline their political preferences with a lead pencil if they so chose. There's one Reuters report, you know the one, where Julia Habez just gets shot as she talks to us, and the last thing you see is her lying dead in the dropped camera's view as all hell cuts loose. And there was that base commander with the nukes, too, straight out of *Doctor Strangelove*, and we all held our breath. As though that would have helped.

And Mars One was rolling on, despite the kit that kept crapping out and that whole dome that just failed, and I remember thinking about what the Martian colonists must have thought, catching all that news fifteen minutes late and wondering if they were going to be the sole surviving representatives of mankind by the time the next bulletin came.

It's the Martian guys I feel sorry for, really. They put in so much damn work, risked their lives – *lost* their lives, nine of them – and none of them with much of a chance to ever get home again. And they were building the future, everyone on the project sincerely believed it. Except it was the wrong future. What Kaveney found would render all their toil pretty much obsolete.

But right then, those valiant Martians were our best shot at the future and, when Kaveney finally got all the way out, the response amongst its chief scientists was one of abject panic, because there was nothing there. Years in the making, years in the travelling, and nothing but comet dust and a faint cosmic whiff of disappointment. Three quarters of the team were convinced that their instruments, or Kaveney itself, were faulty. The remaining quarter,

who were mostly the senior scientific staff with long publication histories, decided that they had in fact made a bold new discovery: some dark matter maybe, or a new subatomic mass-related particle, the Higgs Midshipman. Anything to explain why everything was acting as though there was a planet-sized mass lurking out there, and Kaveney just *couldn't see it.*

That was the problem, of course: the Kaveney was looking for a *planet*, and even though space is very big, planets are still donkeys we expect to pin the tail on two times out of three, especially something reckoned to have ten times the mass of Earth. Or not, because the more they looked at their initial figures, the more nothing quite added up. I'm not saying it was brown-lab-coat time over in Madrid, but I reckon a lot of eminent astronomers were getting a collective sinking feeling in their stomach when they contemplated the next funding review.

Then Kaveney began sending back pictures all by itself.

Of course, the idea had been for the probe to take images of Planet Nine (unless it was Planet Ten) in due course, but those initial images had shown that there was no planet out there, and so they'd stopped taking pictures and started testing for errors in the code. They almost missed the new images when they came in. It was only because the Supermassive Array picked up some anomalies during a test sweep that anyone realised that Kaveney was trying to tell everyone something.

You've all seen the images, or at least the most spectacular ones. Right then, there was a lot of noise and relatively little data. Everyone was just baffled because nobody had told Kaveney to start taking new holiday snaps. And they kept coming, and all the signals telling the probe to knock it off were having no effect at all. "It started getting creepy," is how Janette Naish described it to me after she left the Madrid lab to come brief us astronauts. Naish was one of the lead researchers on the Kaveney project, a Scottish boffin who called the Oort Cloud the "Oowert Clide" and wore a *Doctor Who* scarf for press conferences. Once the news broke, she went on to elbow out all the others for the chief spot on the manned mission, the one I signed up for.

It wasn't her who actually made sense of the new pictures, or at least the ones that showed anything at all. In amongst all that contradictory spectroscopy, gravitic data and actual visuals was the thing that was going to change everything, hidden in the data, dark against the dark of space. One more piece of clutter in the outer solar system, amidst the comets and the

dust.

Enrico Lossa was the very junior member of the Madrid team who spent weeks cleaning up the images until he found himself confronted with *it.* Then everyone else spent weeks trying to reinterpret what Kaveney's instruments had detected to make it something mundane and uninteresting, because that's how science works, and none of them wanted to turn up on TV saying "Aliens!" like a maniac and get laughed out of the discipline. So they did their level best not to see what they were seeing, and they got in other scientists to prove them wrong, and only then, when all other options had been exhausted, did they go public with it.

The conspiracy theorists had a field day, of course, but right then, there really was no piece of batshit paranoid craziness they could think up that was weirder than what was actually out there.

It wasn't actually a face. That was just everyone's pareidolia kicking in. We had not, as a matter of fact, found the sacred effigy of the Galactic Frog God. But it did look sort of froggy, so I can understand the confusion.

Mostly it was that colossal orifice that made up the front and centre of what we were seeing, a circular hole the size of the Moon facing directly, somewhat too conveniently, towards Kaveney, rimmed with what looked like black basalt, except of course the freezing reaches of the outer solar system are not known for their igneous volcanism. On either side, left and right, were what might be parsed as eyes, smaller holes set in their own dark, smooth sockets, but each one still most of the size of southern France. Around these there was some sort of fuzz of additional structure visible, and Kaveney's amateur photography showed a maddening suggestion of detail – carvings, or vast figures or the like – but the resolution was just not good enough. The artefact was huge – bigger than the Moon, smaller than the Earth but punching way above its apparent size in terms of gravitational disturbance – but it was still a long way from Kaveney.

There was a lot of discussion right then, not just the Madrid team but a whole raft of the world's keenest minds. The consensus was to repurpose the baby probe Kaveney was carrying, which had been intended to split off and dive into Planet Nine, collecting valuable data all the way down to its fatal crash landing. They downloaded a fairly significant patch to the thing's software and sent it hurtling off towards the object.

I should say, the manned mission was already being planned. We knew we'd have to go there. We were looking at something *made*, and made on a

planetary scale. It was the most significant discovery in the history of history and every astronaut and scientist on the planet wanted to be on the ship when it took off. I thought I was so lucky, when I made the grade. So lucky.

So.

So.

Lucky.



CHAPTER THREE

IT'S NOT EARTHLIGHT, the light I've found, but it's made-light. There are things like flowers, radially symmetrical petalled extrusions budding from the walls, but they're made of what looks like glass and copper.

Does that mean they can't be living things as well? No, it does not. I have walked in the company of a creature that looked as though it didn't have an atom of carbon in its entire structure, and yet didn't look like a machine. Didn't register my presence either, just plodded on through the Crypts with all the verve and enthusiasm of a condemned man on the way to the gallows.

I was too ephemeral for it, made of airy stuff like hydrocarbons and water. Or else it didn't like me and was hoping I'd go away. I didn't go away but I did need to sleep, and by the time I woke up it was long gone. But I digress.

The flower lights are too regular: each identical to its neighbour, and strung in a pattern – not a straight line like I'd have done it, but a sine wave that either serves some opaque engineering function or else was aesthetically pleasant to the makers. At the near end of the waveform there is a new flower growing, a tiny replica of its full-size siblings, suggesting that whoever set up these lamps intended them to grow throughout the Crypts eventually, which is a nice thought and shows both more altruism and longer-termism than humans would traditionally be guilty of. It also means that whoever I might meet in this lighted section is likely not the light-makers. We all live in the corpses of each others' expeditions here. The Crypts are very, very old, and most of the aeromes provide an environment where decay happens slowly, if at all. Clive might have lain slowly desiccating for centuries before I snacked on him.

I proceed into the lit area, keeping my ears pricked for sounds of locals. Or not locals, not really. There *are* locals, the aforementioned fauna that has adapted to this most challenging of all environments save space itself, but what I'm more likely to find here are fellow travellers. Some species with a visual sense, perhaps, that values the free sensory lunch the little flowers bring. These passageways are likely to be a favoured thoroughfare for things perhaps not wholly unlike me. Being able to see, after all, must bring some sort of common worldview, at least as close as me and a cat, say. Me and a shark? A horsefly? Ah, but there's more to it than that. Exceptions abound, but most wanderers in the Crypts are species that have developed a certain level of technology, which implies an understanding of the mechanics of the universe, which are more or less universal after all, or why do we call it 'the universe'? Except, of course, that the rule is most severely proved by the exception of the Crypts themselves – proved in the sense of 'tested until it breaks' – because the Crypt-builders made physics their bitch.

But there are lights here, and so I press on in the hope that I might meet something I can look in the eye and call brother.

You might wonder why I'm not more careful about these first contact situations, Toto. Have I never watched *Alien*, you ask? What about the Prime Directive? Well, Toto, I'm an old hand at these close encounters by now. And it's true, some of those encounters went straight to the fourth kind, and I

still have the scars of alien weapons on my poor abused hide, but the loneliness is worse, Toto. The loneliness is what killed Clive, I think, and has done for so many others. And I'm an open-minded guy. I can take third eyes and extra elbows; just make them a *little* like me, enough that I can feel like I'm getting somewhere close. Because somewhere in the Crypts, somewhere in all these twists and turns, there are other humans, and humans like light and one atmosphere of pressure and Earth standard gravity and an oxygen-rich atmosphere, albeit maybe not one so viciously toxic as the one I'm currently coughing my way through. Just a polite little cough, you understand, because toxicity isn't the problem it used to be for me. Just the sort of cough you'd use to indicate to your racist uncle that he should stop telling that anecdote at Sunday dinner. But a cough nonetheless.

Then I hear the patter of feet from up ahead. I go through the equivalent of smoothing my hair and shooting my cuffs, standing out in the open in a nice non-threatening pose, although doubtless there are species around here for which standing upright on two legs triggers some uncontrollable fight-or-flight response. *Just let them be like me*, I think. *I'll even let them shoot me a bit, just as long as they've got fingers to pull the trigger.*

My ears are already giving the lie to all these fond fancies when they appear ahead of me at the far end of this corridor. There's a T-junction there, lit both ways, and I hear way too many feet that tap far too lightly on the stone floor. I brace myself for the invasion of the centipede monsters, but instead I get something indeterminate. I don't know if I'm looking at the living or at their mechanical servants.

There are about a dozen of them, all identical by any examination I can make of them, all some way short of my waist as far as height is concerned. They are eggs; metal and synthetic eggs tip-tappering along on four jointed legs that stick straight out from some sort of hub on their underside before arching down like fingers. Tucked underneath and slightly towards the front, there is a symmetrical array of folded arms, big ones on the outside and progressively smaller towards the centre-line, like someone unpacked a cybernetic Matryoshka. My eyes are good, but I get the sense the arms go smaller than I can see. Perhaps there are atomic-scale ones in the centre, able to fabricate artisanal molecules like the ultimate hipsters.

They see me. I don't know what part of them has eyes, but they stop and tilt a bit to get a good look. They don't all stop in unison either, each one coming to its own individual halt, which makes them more relatable. I look

right back, trying to work out if they're machines, or little vehicles with miniature Crypt-onauts inside. Maybe the innards reflect the outwards and they're eggs in eggs. Maybe if I opened them up, I'd just find more layers of shell, eggs all the way down. But I'm not going to open them up. Plenty of bad news in this place without going stirring up more of it.

I am disappointed, though. They're not exactly the humanoid aliens all the SF shows taught you to expect, and frankly the philanthropic principle can go take a flying leap. I've seen a fair cross-section of species that have made it as far as the Crypts (and often, like Clive, no further) and there's no galactic God out there making all life in His image.

The Egg Men tap forward cautiously, no doubt scanning me with ranked arrays of instruments built into their shells. They are not natives to this aerome; they've thought Crypt-delving through, or at least their makers have. They take their own environment with them, not just in a flimsy suit but in comfy vehicles that do their walking for them. I wonder about opening them up again, though just idly. Maybe they're aquatic, goldfish bowls on legs out to explore the universe. Maybe they're colonies of hive-creatures. Maybe inside each egg is a crunched up human-like alien after all, like some spacefaring embryo or medieval homunculus. I'm not going to open them up. It might cause offence. I'll just have to live with my curiosity.

No, seriously, Toto, I'm not.

After our mutual eyeballing, one of them comes forward and flashes some lights at me, and I wave back and say "Hi" and give them my name. I don't understand them. They don't understand me. At the same time, we both understand each other. The Egg Men and me, we've been around the block a few times. We know the deal with the Crypts. They recognise me as a fellow traveller, and I return the courtesy. When they set off – down the branch of the T that neither they nor I came from – I follow them, my big lazy strides keeping up with the frenetic little tinkling of their tiny feets. Probably they are gossiping about their new travelling companion through some medium I can't pick up, even though I strain all my senses.

They work to some rest cycle far quicker than mine. Every few hours, at my best guess, they're stopping, organising themselves into a perfect circle, half facing in, half facing out. I assume this is some carefully-worked-out process to allow some of them to rest while the others stand watch. Alternatively, maybe it passes for Egg Men Fun Time, and I'm seriously missing out on the thrilling possibilities of standing around in a circle. Maybe

they’re all curled up in their shells reciting epic poetry to each other or watching Egg-porn. I try to catch a nap while they’re still, but they never stay still for long and I don’t want to get left behind.

Then we go out of the lit area, outpacing the growth of the star-flowers, and I realise they didn’t have to be visual creatures at all. They might not even have known they were passing through a lit area. Most things I’ve met have eyes of some sort – after all, eyes evolved independently maybe twenty times just on Earth alone, so they’re obviously a Good Thing. If there’s light, there’s likely eyes, unless your basic bodyform just doesn’t have anything it can convert into photoreceptors. But some places, there’s no light. There are dark worlds out there. There are thriving civilizations that have evolved in the depths of crushing, lightless seas.

But then the Egg Men put on their torches, each one throwing clear white light in all directions, and it’s obvious they like light even more than I do. I end up striding along in the middle of them, something they plainly prefer because it means I’m not casting a great shadow into their field of view. They are constantly almost underfoot, but they’re nimble and their reactions seem faster than mine, even now, and they seem to like huddling close. Rather late, I realise that my sheer size – to them I’m a giant – is valuable to them. I’m a huge bipedal monster, but I’m *their* bipedal monster. We have achieved a weird sort of symbiosis. They bring the light and I, Gary Rendell of Earth, bring the muscle. Two-fisted space action!

From a dark corridor, we come to a dark chamber, a huge empty box of poison air within the stone into which a dozen different passageways feed. The lamps of the Egg Men venture forth into the dust-glittering air and fail to make much of the far side.

The walls are carved, as they often are in these chambers. The carvings aren’t all the same, in different rooms, but I’ve seen this style before, most certainly I have. It’s the style I think of as the Makers. I’ve no evidence these carvings were actually incised by the unimaginable hands that created the Crypts, but... my gut says so. Not a scientific appraisal, nothing that Doctor Naish would approve of, but it’s become almost an article of faith. The carvings are sinuous, floriate, branching but not uniform. Everywhere you look it’s plain you’re seeing some part of a larger whole, except you can never appreciate the whole – it’s never quite there, as though even the entire room is just a fragment of some huge image, and if we could just see it in its entirety, Toto, we’d understand it all.

The Egg Men begin crossing the chamber, and this is where the Crypts start messing with us, because the gravity in there is about half what it was in the passageway, and the aerome changes too – more oxygen and a crapton of methane, the sort of volatile mix that puts you off smoking. I have to take a few deep breaths before I got the fart smell out of my nose, and by that time the Egg Men are halfway down the wall, taking deliberate single steps and clinging on like flies somehow. I just jump down, and that turns out to be a mistake, because there's an environmental boundary about halfway so that one moment I'm floating down like Alice down the rabbit hole, and the next I'm yanked sideways at what feels like 0.75G to crash into the far wall, which is now a floor. The Egg Men stop their careful descent, probably grateful that the Big Dumb Alien has just given them advance warning of some physics assholery ahead. I pick myself up and check that nothing's broken.

The Egg Men are going to rappel it, apparently. They dig little hooks into the wall and then leap out into space until the gravity shift catches them, then just descend down their lines like silver spiders. They get most of the way down when the local resident wakes up to their presence and decides to have a go.

I see it unfold itself from the far wall. Most of the Crypt fauna are low-energy ambush predators, capable of lying dormant a long time between meals. This one had been camouflaged amongst the carvings, long worm body clutched to the wall, terminating in a horrifying assemblage of hooked arms about a saw-edged mouth. I see no sensory organs at all, but it plainly knows exactly where everything is and fancies eggs for dinner.

I holler like a madman, but the Eggs don't react, and possibly they don't actually *hear* things at all. So I end up legging it along the floor, wincing already because somewhere there's a gravity break that is going to faceplant me into the far wall. My running around gets the Egg Men on high alert and some of them obviously see the worm thing as it uncoils towards them. The ones closest to the ground cut their lines and drop, trusting to their cradle of metal legs to cushion the wall. Others just speed up, spinning and jolting on their lines.

The worm thing strikes, long before I can get anywhere useful. One of the Eggs disappears into that clutch of arms, and I think for a moment the metal shell will defeat the beast. The crack of the casing sounds like a gunshot, though, and a moment later the worm is shedding jagged sections of

Egg-shell as its smaller arms clear out whatever was inside. They are organic, those Egg Men. I never do get a good view of them or see what shape they were, but the worm obviously relishes the taste, because it's back for more almost immediately.

But I have got close by then, and some new sense tells me I'm about to cross over. I turn it into a jump, aiming to strike the thing's bloated body just behind the head. My personal maths is way off, though, and I ended up landing hard next to its tail. The worm reaches for another Egg Man, which is spinning madly on the end of its thread. In response, the Egg goes on fire, a crackling red nimbus dancing across its shell to ward the monster off. The worm doesn't care, crunching the luckless Egg Man up as though the energy discharge is nothing more than a piquant little mustard on top.

I am not a brutal man. Fit, yes – you don't get to be an astronaut without being in shape, and since the Crypts got hold of me I've become considerably more robust than any number of gym hours could have made me. I never went in for martial arts or boxing or any of that stuff, though. I'd have said I was a pacifist, in fact.

But now there is a monster eating my Egg-friends and I'm not having it. I shimmy up that worm's body like a monkey, shouting every obscenity I can think of, because a man's got to have a war cry, and because I'm scared out of my wits. Those arms could tear me into confetti in moments, and I'm only lucky that the thing apparently prefers Eggs.

I have a knife. It wasn't intended as a knife, but it's a sharp shard of metal about forty centimetres long and I've wrapped some plasticky stuff about one end to hold it with.

Out comes that knife when I get towards the worm's head end. In goes the knife, slicing into that pallid sac of a body.

I think I go a bit mad, then, Toto. I honestly think the strain of wandering alone in these Crypts is getting to me, and sometimes an outlet for your frustrations comes along, and sometimes that outlet is a gigantic worm monster, and you just *go for it.*

Later, and we're camped on the floor of the big chamber. The Egg Men are doing something complex, passing pieces of the shells of their dead friends around. It's not hard to overlay a human interpretation of grief or remembrance onto it, and there's no behaviourist here to tell me not to anthropomorphise, so that's what I'll call it. They pass bits to me and I try to handle them with the same thoughtful reverence before passing them back.

I’m still covered in worm-entrails, because it’ll be a while before I find a decent shower in this place. The worm’s body is strewn weirdly across two gravity planes. I’m eating some of it.

Not bad, actually. Goes down very smoothly.

A few Egg-rests later and we reach a corridor that ends in a wall of water. The Egg Men and I are parting company. It’s not that I can’t follow: the only reason humans can’t breathe water is there’s bugger-all oxygen in it compared to the air, and we got lazy as we evolved away from fish; and maybe this water is super-oxygenated, or maybe it has no oxygen at all. There are things living in the water, and I guess there’s probably an exit somewhere, perhaps even an on-planet one whose natives didn’t even need to get out of orbit to reach the Crypts. But this isn’t a place I’ll find humans. This isn’t a place that will lead home for me. You and me, Toto, we need to find Kansas, or at least the solar system that, *inter alia*, Kansas resides in.

The Egg Men pause when they realise I’m not following. I wave, and they flash some lights at me, and we go our separate ways.



CHAPTER FOUR

KAVENEY'S LITTLE SISTER was Mara, now reprogrammed from its original planet-crashing role to something a little less cataclysmic. By this time, the live expedition was already well into planning, and several private space-ex teams were working on converting existing tech to take human lives further than we'd ever gone before, and building all the new bits we hadn't known we'd needed. NASA, Roscosmos and the ESA were jostling elbows as each tried to publicly look as cooperative and nation-speaks-peace-unto-nation as possible, while behind the scenes an almighty shit-show of demarcation was

going on as to who got to make what decisions and who got the credit if things went well. A side effect of this departmental flag- and dick-waving meant that the "live team," as we were known, got picked out early, meaning we all got to sit through very long lectures about Kaveney's original purpose, among other things. We didn't know we'd actually be going up, of course. Half of us – the older hands mostly – were constantly expecting the whole thing to be cancelled the moment public interest waned. The rest of us were still very aware that the live team was three times the size it needed to be, so most of us would get all the fun of the training without the tedious chore of actually making history out in space.

But I made the grade, obviously. See all those *lucky mes* from before.

And we were all watching when Mara kicked off from Kaveney to go take a look-see. We got daily updates. We got to see a lot of the raw data, the images before they were prettied up for the consumption of the wider public. And we shared in the horror and panic of the Madrid team when it looked as though Mara's reprogramming had completely screwed things, because the images were nonsense.

Actual hands-on control of Mara was impossible, of course, what with the enormous radio delay, so Mara's onboard computer was left to get on with things. It should certainly have been capable of the first task, which was an orbit of the artefact so we could get a look at the backside of the Frog God. Except the spectroscopy and other metrics were just plain bonkers, devoid of any consistent narrative at all, and the camera images just showed that goggling face, which increasingly seemed to be laughing at us, and…

The problem was that all the feedback suggested Mara had indeed completed a circuit. So perhaps it was a camera error; perhaps we were just getting the same picture over and over. Except examination of the images showed movement of other objects, including Kaveney, with the artefact itself as the sole unchanging point.

Enrico Lossa, image analyst extraordinaire, decided he would shoot his career in the foot by announcing that what we were seeing was in fact an anomalous property of the object itself. Doctor Naish did her best to keep that one off the news websites, and to be honest it was an order of magnitude weirder than even the conspiracy theorists could deal with. Most conspiracies, after all, seem weird on the surface but are really an attempt to drag things down to a human scale: a flat Earth instead of the immensity of the cosmos, shadowy illuminati instead of a chaotic mess of chance,

incompetence and greed.

The artefact was… well, I was about to say the artefact was not a thing on the human scale, but that's not true, is it? I'm wandering around inside it right now (spoiler alert) and some of it's small and some of it's large, but overall I reckon humans are well within tolerance for what it's designed to accommodate. But at the same time it does things with the fundamental laws of the universe like you wouldn't believe.

Then Mara, in the firm belief it had carried out the first part of its mission, spent some more of its precious fuel mass to get closer to one of the vacant froggy eyes, and that was where things got weird for a whole different reason. As noted, the main body of the artefact was that huge bowl, which contained only a darkness that would yield to no instruments Kaveney or Mara had at their disposal, a void that seemed shallow at first glance, but might well have gone on into utter nothingness forever. Either side were the 'eyes,' but as Mara closed in, the images showed something quite different from just a huge floating frog face in space. Below the 'left' eye was another eye, and another and another, smaller and smaller, spiralling down to where Mara's image resolution failed. A similar, symmetrical sequence of openings mirrored them on the far side. The artefact, it seemed, was fractal in nature.

Over the next weeks, Mara came closer and closer to the foam of diminishing eyes. We saw details resolve, day after day. The stone surface of the artefact had been decorated erratically; in places it was pure, smooth, faintly reflective, as though it had been polished once; elsewhere there were lines and whorls, a graffiti of mathematics cut around the rims of certain eyes; and elsewhere still was my first glimpse of those piecemeal arabesques I would become so familiar with. They seemed like Celtic knots, like the unfurled foliage issuing from the faces of green men. They also silenced a small but vocal cabal of astronomers who had been holding out that the artefact was somehow an entirely natural phenomenon.

Mara was supposed to swing around the artefact then, taking further photos of its surface as it orbited, and coming back around to rendezvous with Kaveney. That didn't happen. There really was something screwing with Mara's computers by that point, though it wasn't bad programming from the Madrid team. Instead of making another circle, Mara went in.

The last few images showed one of the eyeholes looming larger and larger, and then Mara turned, some remnant of its intended programming kicking in. We got a scan of the star field away from the artefact, including

the dot of Kaveney and a glitter of stars and comet fragments. Then there was one last image – Mara turning back, the view half-eclipsed by the interior of the eye socket, the probe's lights touching on the carvings, which ran inwards, ever inwards – then nothing. Mara was lost, and Kaveney had nothing more to tell us.

Enrico Lossa had, by that point, been at daggers drawn with Naish, so we were all holding our breath when word came that the two of them had been closeted together for three hours and that Naish had cancelled her appointments. We thought Lossa was going to get the boot, frankly. Instead, the two of them called a video conference with the entire live team and our support and training staff. They wanted us to be the first to see.

What we were looking at, in that briefing, was blown-up sections of two of Mara's last images. One looked down the eye socket Mara had vanished into, the other was part of that last starfield shot.

Last to first, Lossa had identified something against the stars, another artefact, vastly smaller (if you'll permit the oxymoron) than our main object, but something hanging there outside the eye socket. Kaveney was able to take better pictures of it later, causing a whole new sensation when they were released, but Enrico's coaxing of the original image showed us something that looked like a long, narrow cylinder with a pointed end and an end that was lumpy with structures, and that, in my book, is a good model for a spaceship.

The other image, of the interior of the eye socket, was never released at the time, and Kaveney couldn't help us with it. There was a light, though. Down in the socket, seemingly very far away, there was a light. Enrico said there was a figure as well, a humanoid figure standing there by the lamp. Naish wouldn't back him on that, though, and nobody else could sift it out of the static.

After that, Old Frogface kept its secrets. Kaveney was already receding from it, and orders to fire thrusters and change course would still result in a long gap before we got any new information. All we knew was that it was out there, this inexplicable, exciting, alien *thing.* And of course, left to its own devices, humanity began bickering. Even as our multinational team was training, aided by decades of spaceflight experience and the latest translation software, the high-ups were throwing all our expensive toys out of the pram. Russian couldn't get on with Europe; America couldn't get on with China; India and Pakistan couldn't get on with each other. We were just getting to

know each other when half the team, sorted by nationality, were pulled from the program. Russia announced it was going to send its own mission, and then the US said the same, and soon enough it was just the sad old European contingent spinning about in the high-G simulators like the last kids on the roundabout.

The breaking of that fragile sense of hope and progress: I can still remember it. Because everyone knew where we'd go, after that. To the politicos and the national security guys, the only purpose of an unimaginable alien artefact is to give some insuperable technological advantage to *our side* or, at the very least, to stop *their side* getting it. I swear I met with people who wanted to just send every missile we had past Pluto "to stop them getting their hands on it." And the more people thought like that, the more we were prodding *their side* into thinking like that too. It was only a matter of time before someone suggested bombing the crap out of the other guys before they launched.

Which was all fun and games for those intended to be on the launch pad.

All the while, the actual preparations for launch crawled on, and Europe were ahead of the game by a narrow margin – it had been a large margin, but everyone else had more money than we did. We were going through the motions of our training, but everyone genuinely expected something vital to get sabotaged, or tanks to mass on the borders, or some bloody stupid demonstration of global ignorance to shoot us down, figuratively or literally.

That was when Mara came back.

The mini-probe just popped out of the artefact as though sneezed out of the Frog God's nostril. It was still transmitting, but erratically. Its onboard computers were scrambled, unresponsive to any instructions. It fell away from the artefact, fast enough to escape the anomalous gravity, vomiting out a weird montage of images one after another as though it had been bursting with news it just couldn't wait to tell us.

Lossa and Naish and the rest went over those images with a fine-tooth comb. So did the live team. So did everyone else's scientists and live teams. There were a lot of corridors in various sizes, some cavernous, some claustrophobic (as best as anyone could judge the scale); there were lamps in the darkness; there was what looked like a statue, far larger than Mara, of something many-limbed and serpentine and seemingly headless, worked in pale stone and towering against a wall busy with spiralling sigils. There was another door, opening elsewhere.

The Mara had only a single image of it to show us, but that was the one that went a hundred times around the world, as soon as it was released. You could see the black stone edge of the circular opening, and beyond it a starfield – when we launched, people were still trying to identify what stars, where in the galaxy that might have been – and, clipping into the image, the unmistakable radiance of a planet gleaming in another sun's light. We saw clouds and seas and the unfamiliar outlines of continents, and there was a great deal of scaffolding and structure large enough to be silhouetted against it, hanging in orbit. Mara's positioning suggested a vantage point closer to that planet than our Moon was to Earth. The natives, whoever and whatever they were, hadn't had to go as far as we did.

Nobody quite dared draw the obvious conclusion for a surprisingly long time. I think most of the science teams were thinking it. Doctor Liu of the Chinese National Space Administration finally bit the bullet and proposed, in a press conference notable for its restrained understatement, that the artefact was one end of a wormhole. Never mind the dark corridors, the statue, all the rest. Somewhere in there was a gate to another world.

We all expected this to just double everyone's crazy paranoia, but it turns out there's a limit. There were a few high-profile firings in the upper echelons of a few governments, and we all reckoned the space-ex-hungry industrialists pulled all the strings they'd spent their money on, and suddenly everyone was talking to one another. This was bigger than individual nations, was the message. This was as big as the entire Earth.

We launched – the select multinational team – not long after.



CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER PARTING COMPANY with the Egg Men, I hear the sound for the first time.

I wake to it, sleep having finally come for me, for all that I seem to need little rest now. It's not that I don't value sleep when it comes: I fall into its arms like a lover, despite the monsters that roam here, despite the travellers who might wish me ill. In dreams, I'm back on Earth again. I'm consorting with other human beings. I lift a pint in the pub, I watch the footie, I turn up stark naked and unprepared for vital astronaut exams. My dreams are so

quotidian it makes me weep to wake from them into the darkness of the Crypts, hundreds of astronomical units from home, and simultaneously much further still.

So, waking is never welcome, but this waking is worse because there is a sound, so insidious that it is almost a tactile sensation. It is a whispering and a chittering, a fluttering and a scratching, and I feel it as if it is scrabbling at the inside of my skull.

Which is possible. I sit up quickly, clapping a hand to my left eye, the anomalous sound seeming to come from that side of my head. It feels as though someone is scraping their nails down the chalkboard of my brain – faint, distant, but impossible to ignore.

I start looking about, but it's dark here, like every part of the Crypts that some wayfarer civilization hasn't tried to make more festive. I try to pin down where the sound is coming from. My left. I turn one-eighty degrees. Now it comes from my right. Misdiagnosing, I roar and flail madly at the ceiling, trying to reach whatever noisemaking goblin is squatting there. I bruise my hands against the stone, which here is a bare few centimetres above my head. I reach about, scrabbling against the seamless floor. Nothing. By now the sound is louder, scrape, scrape, scrape against the nerves of my teeth so that I clamp my hands against my ears to blot it out. And that doesn't work because the sound isn't coming from nearby, isn't coming from outside at all. Covering my ears just means I'm locked in my skull with that scrape, scrape, scrape, that whisper, whisper, whisper, as though a host of tiny people with shrill little voices are conspiring on my shoulder.

I start blundering about in the dark. Normally, I know which way I've been travelling through some sense I have no name for, but now, all sense of where I am has been driven out by that infernal scratching. I stagger one way, bouncing from the walls. The sound is louder, as though I have gone infinitesimally towards the source, despite it originating within my head. I flee the other way, finally tripping over my own feet in a blindly-sensed crossroads. It is marginally further away, but I have the dreadful feeling I may never be able to escape it, no matter what halls or what stars I run to.

And then it fades, *scrape, scrape, scrape*, not gone but fallen below some threshold of audibility, leaving me with a sense like tinfoil on a filling that it's still there, still scratching away. I wonder if it's a parasite gnawing on me. That seems the sort of thing that would come to live in the Crypts with the rest of the low-energy waiting-game monsters. But if I was genuinely

carrying around a little living cargo, it wouldn't have grown closer or further, surely. So instead, perhaps, it's an attack. Perhaps some dark-lurker is trying to attract me or drive me away. Perhaps it's the mating display of some telepathic horror and I'm just an inadvertent recipient.

But something in me feels intent and malice behind that scrape and whisper. There was an irregular rhythm to it that felt like language to me. That was why it woke me. All sounds are not received equal, in the auditory centres of the brain. We can sleep through thunderstorms that sound like the end of the world, and yet the distant throb of music might wake us, or the laughter from next door's discreet garden party. Human sounds, living sounds, sounds of intelligent purpose, these things stand out as signal against all the noise of the cosmos. This scraping and skittering had just enough of that hallmark to break me from sleep. Something out there was trying to insinuate its alien words into my brain, and I don't think I want to hear what it has to say.

I'm awake now, though, despite the unconventional alarm clock. Time to get going. My gut is half-full of worm meat, which is proving a challenge to digest, meaning I'll be sluggish and bloated for a while yet. The worm must have been as omnivorous as my new microbiome, so you'd think that it and my digestive system would see eye to eye, but apparently not. I'll just have to keep plugging away at it until I feel the need to crap out whatever parts of it I simply can't stomach. It won't be much. I've not passed anything bigger than a rabbit dropping for what feels like a month.

That's probably more information than you want to know. Sorry, Toto.

I pick a direction from the crossroads, anything other than the way I came. Perhaps the telepathic attacker has given up and gone to find some richer meal than my poor psyche. I don't believe it, though. Somewhere, deep inside, that scrape, scrape, scrape is still happening. Today I will be twitchy as hell and constantly on a short fuse. I pity the monster that tries it on, frankly. I am in the mood to punch a worm right in the mandibles.

The worm monsters probably sense it and steer well clear, leaving me to trudge through the darkness, one hand trailing along the cold wall. Exploring the Crypts is always a joy, you understand. Any moment I might walk over the edge of an indeterminate drop, or into an aerome filled with vacuum or acidic gas, or – which is what happens – into an area where the pressure must be two atmospheres and the gravity is likewise uncongenial.

I drop, hands and knees, and for a moment I can't breathe, to go with the

not-seeing. The air around me is pleasantly oxygenated with a hint of pine freshness, but it's thick as soup and clenched about me like a fist. I fight it as I'd fight a snake coiled about me, buttressing my ribs against it, forcing the thick medium into my airways and bloating my lungs with it. My breathing becomes very slow, but there's plenty of goodness in each breath, and my metabolism actually speeds up. I feel my bones creak, my muscles pulled taut by the effort of not just collapsing into a puddle. But I've pulled more Gs than this on the simulator, and I've breathed worse air too. Slowly I force myself to my feet, head swimming and eyes feeling as though someone strong has their thumbs pressed against my corneas.

I stumble, but after three lurching steps I'm walking again, and my eyes see a faint glow ahead, another tenanted space, or perhaps one left fallow after its illuminators passed on. The Crypts are older than we have words for, after all, and they stretch everywhere. Long before the Madrid team sent Kaveney to investigate their gravitic anomaly, the Crypts were sitting there in a super-Plutonian orbit, made by hands we will never know, but for purposes clear to every species that comes across them. They are roads through the great dark without, just as there are roads through the lesser dark within. They let us walk to all the other stars.

And so I walk. It feels like less of a privilege now I've been alone for what must be months and barely recognise myself in the mirror. Still, here I am, amongst the stars. Where exactly? There is no 'exactly.' The Crypts go everywhere, and the distances I have to trudge, while a long trek by the standards of a weekend jogger, are trivial compared to the vast cold reaches outside. The Crypts are an artificial phenomenon which let matter, energy and information thumb their collective nose at relativity, and do it unchanged, without all that infinite-mass nonsense that approaching light speed entails.

You just put one foot in front of the other.

I reach the lights. They look bioluminescent to me: rubbery globes lukewarm to the touch, containing swirling medusae-looking things. Plenty are dead at the bottom of each lamp, meaning that these things must likely need, and be receiving, regular maintenance. Soon after, I reach the caves. The lamp-lighters didn't bother to set their living lanterns deeper into the Crypts than their immediate home area, so either they don't explore or their explorers carry portable lamps and don't want to leave the universe's most obvious trail for any sighted hunter to follow.

There are caves here, though, and that's a shock because the Crypt-

builders didn't do caves – these have been carved out from the black stone, and by hand, not machine. The work is crude but effective and I can see the rounded scars of the tools they used. High-G creatures with a profound understanding of leverage, I infer.

Anyway, the locals have hacked out three smallish caves, and inside each is a scene that lazy archaeologists would readily characterise as "for ritual purposes." There are more lamps – no candles or anything with a naked flame, but then the atmosphere is a bit oxygen-happy. There are stones, rounded as though polished by water and of several shades in the red-pink-orange spectrum. Then there are icons, or stelae, or obelisks. They are made from the rubble and dust of the Crypt stone itself, I reckon, moulded together into shapes by some process that hasn't used visible cement or other glue. They're narrow but not pointed at the top, broader at the base, and without other fancy projections, and they're carved, but I can't make anything of it. The lines go in and out of the cracks between pieces of stone, and the overall artistic effect is lost on me.

I back out of the cave, feeling baffled – it all looks a bit home-craft-store as far as the artefacts of a spacefaring civilisation go – and find two locals staring at me.

That sorts out what the icons are supposed to be, for the locals are also narrow at the top and broader at the base, their hides a gleaming green-black. They have four tubular legs like the stubby paws of tardigrades, and there are various orifices towards the front lower edge of their bodies. Constellations of opal fragments are scattered across their upper reaches on all sides, and my guess is that they serve as sense organs.

Oh, and they're about a metre twenty, tops, so: tubby little obelisk guys. I dub them the Pyramid People because when I was training I skipped the lectures about naming aliens.

They're very agitated to see me, fluting and hooting at each other, sounds that come in like little blarting foghorns in the dense atmosphere. I wave at them and they produce an array of extending arms from some of their larger orifices, threatening me with sharp obsidian-looking stones.

We have a bit of a stand-off then. I just stand there, creaking slightly in the gravity, and they carry on a complex warbling conversation like the Spanish Inquisition trying to interrogate a woodwind section. Every so often I wave and say 'Hi' again. Eventually I sit down with my back to the wall and my knees drawn up, and inadvertently end up the sort of shape and size

they're comfortable dealing with. With a final series of basso profundo trills, they waddle off. I might have been told to stay put or asked to follow, and there's no interspecies body language that lets me know which. So I follow. I might be British, but I've been lost in a space labyrinth for an age and I'm done with waiting.

They obviously don't have many worries about the dangers of an unknown alien (me), because they just go straight past the other caves towards a steadily warmer light source until I'm looking at a gateway out of the Crypt. I'm looking at their world.

Somehow, the Crypt terminal is actually planetside for them. They didn't have to claw their way out of their high-G gravity well to go and find some distant big dumb object. They just wandered over the next hill, one day (that whole view was dominated by hillsides) and found a great black opening beckoning them. How that even worked, what with the screwy gravity of the Crypts, I couldn't begin to guess. But then, 'couldn't begin to guess' is very much the slogan for exploring the Crypts.

I go over and just stare out. Hillside, as I say, and mostly greenish for once, though nothing like grass, just a carpet of what looks like veiny cactus, and here and there a profoundly phallic projection, endowed with a powerful tumescence to overcome the local gravity. Except this is actually just me misinterpreting what life on a high-G world is actually like, as I discover when I step through.

And of course I step through. To feel the breeze! The sunlight on my skin! Oh, how good it must feel, how rejuvenating!

The two Pyramid People flutle and witter at me, but I just walk past and out into the new world, heedless of their sharp rocks. I come out, open my arms beatifically to the world, and then spend about ten minutes bucking and gasping under the effect of the atmosphere, because it is considerably denser out here than in the Crypts. As I choke, I spare a moment for the Pyramidites who must have had a major light-headed rush when they stepped in, if that was even a thing for their physiology.

And there are plenty of them – at least a score dotted about in front of the entrance, of various sizes, and some decorated with orange ochre, or else with a variety of white and grey markings that are probably a rainbow to eyes seeing different part of the spectrum to me. Some have sling bags; others hold some manner of tools or weapons, all designed with very different principles of leverage than a human would worry about. They set up a hooty

chorus when they see me, but I just do the Jesus pose again and give them my blessing as I clamber to my feet. Then I turn around and almost lose it.

I expect to see just the Crypt-mouth and more hill country, but the land rises in steady stages beyond the mouth, and much of it is heavily forested with plants (?) that would give giant redwoods a run for their money. The smaller ones have heavily buttressed trunks, warty with nodules. The tall ones sway and ripple, their upper boughs bearing vast leaves like kites and weird, bobbing globular balloons. The entire forest reaches up to some high-altitude air current that has all the tall trees canted over at thirty degrees to vertical.

And amongst the trees, bloated whale-sized colossi flap and glide languorously, tearing off great strips of the leaves. And doubtless something preys on them, some swift aerial pack hunter. This world obviously has a two-level ecosystem, those below that wrestle with the mechanics of stomping about under high gravity, and those above that harness the thick atmosphere to soar.

I hear another flutling right by me, and see a delegation of Pyramid People there, no weapons in view, making sinuous motions with their retractable arms. I get no sense of threat from them. Possibly they want me to come and meet their extended families who have never seen a space god before; possibly they are just wondering how I don't fall over with only two legs.

And that is a thing, of course. I am alive and on the surface of another planet. I can breathe the air, and I'd be able to eat the local cuisine, most likely, or even make cuisine of the locals. The gravity and the atmosphere will test me, and the Pyramidites being in the stone age is going to limit any large-scale projects I might have, but I could stay here. I don't have to go back to the dark. I could live and die the first and last and only human this world will ever know, and in a thousand years the Pyramidite archaeologists will find my bones and go nuts.

And the scraping has stopped. Even though I've stopped hearing it a while ago, I am vindicated in my belief that it had been grinding on inaudibly, because I know with absolute certainty that it *has* gone when I step out of the exit. It is a Crypts thing.

The heaviness of heart I feel is not entirely due to the gravity. I wave to them again. "Be nice to each other," I tell them sonorously. "Look after the environment. Um..." If someone asks you if you're a god, you should

probably have some better commandments lined up. The words *Don't eat yellow snow* flash into my mind and I choke them back down.

I go back into the Crypts. This place with its gravity and its crushing atmosphere, it's nowhere human beings are likely to venture. My people will not find me here like Robinson Crusoe and his man Pyramid Pete; and I am human enough that I still want to find them. I will brave the dark and the cold, the hunger and the monsters and that damnable scritching that starts up again the moment I get inside. I will brave them, because dying alone and far from home is the worst thing.

One of the worst things, anyway. But some of the other worst things have already happened, and so I feel qualified to make the assessment.



CHAPTER SIX

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS HELD long enough for us to actually get off Earth and aboard a ship built entirely in orbit, and at least 60% from materials harvested from the private enterprise asteroid mines. We got mates' rates, as far as I could work out, because the Frog God meant Opportunity to a wide range of people, both scientific and commercial. The private investors wanted to be in at the top, but they wanted to do it without breaking from their various home governments, and so a really specific public-private partnership was set up with the stated aim of poking the Frog God in the appropriately-

sized eye. The crew was twenty-nine people, split between the Expedition Team, the Mission Team (because apparently going inside the Frog God itself was somehow not the mission) and the Overlap Team, in which position of miscellanea you'd find yours truly. I was also one of the pilots, although space piloting is one of those situations where they should really equip you with a dog, so your job is to feed the dog and the dog's job is to bite you if you touch any of the expensive equipment. That's unfair to my colleagues and me, of course, since it'd be us saving the ship if something went wrong, but as matters fell out, everyone else had done their jobs well enough that our position at the helm was something of a formality.

The other pilots, for posterity, were Janisha Ushah, Magda Proshkin and John Hamilton – four of us to do a job that didn't need one of us, but then redundancy is important when you're in space, because you can't just pop out to space-Tescos if you forget something. I spent most of my awake-time with Magda, who had the most space-time of all of us, had the best reflexes of anyone I ever met, and was stark raving crazy in a quiet way. She would explain at great length and in seven languages that the spaceship we'd seen drifting near the Frog God was Russian, and that the Soviet space program had sent an expedition to the Frog back in the 1980s, as its last covert attempt to overshadow the US Moon landings. The expedition had failed, which meant the Kremlin had buried all trace of it, but she swore blind that her people had got there first, and that we would find that someone had kept the red flag flying out there, possibly still gripped in the dry, dead hand of a cosmonaut.

Our ship was the *Quixote*. There had been a fight over the name, but Madrid ended up with the casting vote, and *Santiago* got proposed and shot down for don't-mention-the-Reconquista reasons. I suspect there was the sort of committee meeting involved where everyone's first choice was someone else's last choice, and Cervantes won out because nobody hated it and because no one had actually read the book. We were lucky to avoid the good ship *Spacy McFrogface*, frankly.

Once the slingshot was successful and we were zipping off towards the outer solar system at the hoped-for ridiculous speeds, it was time to start the duty rota for real. It was a long, long way to the Frog God, a fair chunk of a human lifespan, and we'd spent it in semi-hibernation, a cold sleep that would keep our bodies and minds ticking over in a very low gear so that mankind's ambassadors to the stars wouldn't be all grey and wrinkly when

we arrived. It was tested tech – all the rage if you were rich as balls back home and felt death's fingers clutching for you, and way better than all that frozen-head-in-a-jar cryogenics from last century. Of course, we'd been repeatedly awoken from that state to take turns being the skeleton crew, and that wasn't quite as tested, but again they got it right, and while you felt like warmed-over shit when they levered you from the tank, nobody actually died.

Actually, Gerde Hoffmeier from the Mission Team died, but that was a heart condition nobody had picked up, just one of those things. We got to do the space funeral thing, solemn videos for everyone back home, whilst simultaneously not having to worry about there being some systemic problem that might pick us off one by one.

And things went wrong, and time passed, and there were a couple of small wars back home that meant various members of the crew were technically blood enemies for months or years at a time, but it's very hard to sustain that kind of nonsense when you're zipping through the asteroid belt with Mars behind you and Jupiter ahead, and no government had managed to get a political officer on board. The only bit of rampant nationalism was Eda Ostrom, a geologist, who taught everyone Danish through sheer force of personality and taking double shifts, so that her native tongue was our lingua franca by the time we arrived. The rest of the long-running edutaintment was Jain Diaz from the NASA contingent teaching us considerate use of pronouns with sufficient patience and determination that ze even had the most hardcore Russians respecting hir life choices. Ze was an indicator of just how much looser things had got in the States after the fighting, which I suppose is some small consolation. By the time the interplanetary satnav told us we'd reached our destination, then, we were fully up on nonbinary etiquette and everyone's messages home were peppered with incomprehensible Danish slang.

And eventually, a generation or so later, we arrived. I want you bear that in mind, when thinking about my later trials and tribulations. We all knew this was a life-mission when we set out. Nobody was clock-watching and knocking off at five. When we returned home, everyone we knew save the youngest babes would be dead, or else availing themselves of the same cold storage as us to stave off their malignant cancers. We were the heroes of our peers when we set out. On our projected return, we would be the heroes of our grandchildren.

I got woken late, having done a long shift only five years before. They woke all of us, of course, once they were sure we had indeed *arrived*, that the

celestial calculations had been on the mark, that all the series of ludicrous chances and risks we had taken had fallen into place, one after another like dominoes in reverse.

Our instruments were picking up the Frog God – and it was big enough that we could see it from the cupola (indeed it was more visible than it should have been, given that you could barely pick the sun out of the starfield this far out). What we also had was Mara, which had ended up caught in the Frog's gravitational pull without, of course, being able to orbit the damned impossible thing, and we had the ship.

Magda was to be disappointed. There were no Soviet markings, nor had it been made by human hands. But it had been made by hands, planned by a mind close enough to ours that it *looked* like a spaceship. It had been designed with sleek lines as though intended for a different medium to space. It had engines at the back and a compartment for crew in the front, and to me it looked like something from the pulp magazines of the 1930s. It was also very incomplete, and everything was vacuum-eroded, no new work on it for countless centuries. If you'd given it a kick your foot would have gone straight through. We had a camera drone ghost along its piecemeal flank, and everyone was very quiet and still, seeing that alien construction that was still *just* human enough. There were no dead cosmonauts, human or otherwise, or any indication of why construction had stalled. The fact remained that, aside from the Frog God itself, some intelligent alien presence had existed in our solar system within the lifespan of the human race; some aliens that, if they had finished their ship and travelled sunwards in search of planets, might have met with our ancestors and looked them in the eye.

Some of the Mission Team would go no further than this; they would send their drones and remote workers all over the Red Rocket – so called in deference to Magda's mythical cosmonauts – trying to find something robust enough to reverse engineer. For me, I looked at that thing and pictured aliens *less* advanced than us, bumbling B-movie Martians who never quite got round to Attacking From Outer Space. But what do I know?

The Mission Team retrieved Mara too, in the hope that the fragmentary images she had sent to Earth would just be the icing on a far more coherent cake, but Mara had been screwed over badly by whatever it had been through. Just before the Expedition Team set off, I heard Halsvenger from Mission saying that they couldn't even see *how* Mara had made that last transmission, given the internal and external damage.

You might be picking up a theme, by now, in matters concerning the Frog God (or, as Naish alone stubbornly maintained, the 'Artefact'): principally, that we were woefully unprepared and didn't understand what the hell we were doing. We couldn't understand how the thing interacted with gravity, because it had to have cast the gravity *shadow* of a Neptune-sized planet to get the attention of the ESA in Madrid, and yet neither Mara nor any of the probes we sent experienced anything of that, as though it had tucked its mass away as we arrived like my cousin Carl sucking his gut in when a pretty girl walked past. Then there was that craziness of perspective, and we could confirm that was absolutely *not* a camera glitch in Kaveney. The Frog God was modest. You couldn't ever see its backside, orbit as you would. That pareidolic goggling visage would face you forever, as if the thing just didn't have any of the normal dimensions or relationships with regular space.

We would, it is plain in retrospect, have been insane to actually step inside the damn thing.

Mind you, we weren't that nuts. We didn't just put on our pith helmets and set out into the unknown. We had the capacity to stay out here for two full years before setting off for our vastly longer return trip (a slingshot around Neptune for acceleration had been calculated, but it wasn't as good as using the Sun). Time enough for some tests.

The *Quixote* came with plenty of remotes, and we started inserting them into the Frog God's orifices in short order. Probes sent into the vast central bowl were obliterated, signal lost and no sign whatsoever of them, either disintegrated or sent so utterly *elsewhere* there was no trace or peep from them. Some of the remotes sent into the other larger openings met similarly apocalyptic ends; later experience suggested they were holes into radically hostile aeromes or extreme pressures. Others seemed literally just shallow sockets that went nowhere, as if they were doors to which we didn't have the key. I wondered, if we had been super-evolved spacefaring blue whales, say, would the larger apertures have gaped and the smaller ones remained sealed? It was hard to avoid that kind of thinking, playing mental chess with the place's absent makers.

Soon, though – almost suspiciously soon – we had identified a conveniently human-scale opening that had within it the sweetest oxygen-nitrogen blend imaginable at a pleasant 0.91G and slightly under one normal atmosphere of pressure: the sort of rarefied air you might get most of the way up a mountain. But dark, very dark. No light in the Crypts save what you

bring with you.

We explored by drone some way, with the Expedition Team assembling like schoolkids every day to get the latest. We saw the remote's spotlights on bare stone walls, and lost in the dust of great chambers. After a few days we found a patch of carving, intricate geometric matters that might or might not have been some form of writing. After a week of cautious flying – and the loss of half our remote fleet to various misadventures – we found a section that was lit. The lamps were plainly not made by the same hands as the walls: they looked weirdly primitive, sparking industrial bulbs of blue crystal stapled crudely to the wall. More than half were dead, and several more were pulsing erratically. Intense droneage of the area found a few corkscrewing metal rods that might have been tools made for inhuman hands, given how their termini seemed to match certain parts of the lamps. Dust lay everywhere, undisturbed, and there was no other trace of the vanished lamp lighters.

We had been cooped up inside the ship for a long time by then, and with very little to do. Communications with Earth were so staggered as to make a free and frank exchange of ideas impossible, and often the different agencies back home were giving us conflicting advice. The final authority on what was to be done was Doctor Naish, that same Janette Naish who had run the briefings on the Frog God back when we were training. She had crowbarred her way onto the top spot on the Mission Team. She was the human authority on all things Frog Goddish, after all, and if she didn't have any astronaut training at the outset, she had remedied that with a grim determination, trading her science for our skills until we met in the middle.

I do not know who the word came from, to send in the Expedition Team at last. I mean, probably it was someone on Earth; the head of the Madrid team, or perhaps even a unified front from all the various space agencies that we should stop pussyfooting around and just go in. But it's equally possible that it was Doctor Naish on her own initiative. She was desperate to get boots on the ground in there, now the remotes had shown we could survive – and we'd be going in suited, after all. We wouldn't be exposing ourselves to teratogens or mutagens or biohazards despite the congenial air and the home-style gravity. We weren't *stupid* about things, is what I'm saying. We weren't like those dumbass astronauts you see in films, who take their helmets off or bend obligingly low to investigate the killer monster alien eggs.

And we weren't prepared. But then, we could have hung before the Frog

God’s slack lips for a hundred years and not been prepared. The remotes did their best, seeding the near tunnels with signal routers so they could send and receive deeper within the rock, but we were going to take it from there.

And I don’t think it was strictly necessary. Not then, not immediately. We could have continued with remotes a while longer, surely. We might have triggered the traps that way, discovered the hazards that would undo us. Similarly, we might have sent a metal box to the Moon in 1969 that popped up an American flag while silently playing the ‘Star Spangled Banner.’ It wouldn’t have been the same. The people back at home and the people on the *Quixote* all wanted the same thing, me included. We wanted to set foot inside the Crypts. We wanted to make them a part of the human domain, to bring them within our compass. The true value of the Expedition Team was as a propaganda victory over the universe.

So the word came. I remember the briefing clearly. Doctor Naish standing in front of us, telling us the day had dawned.

We were going in.



CHAPTER SEVEN

TODAY IS GOING to be one of those trying days.

It starts with the tar trap. One moment I'm trudging along in the dark – you know, the usual – and then I hit a slick of something viscous and nasty, and I make the mistake of pressing on, and soon after that I'm labouring to move my feet at all, glued to the damn floor by some sort of disgusting ooze. It's another thing they don't train you for in astronaut school.

I blame the scratching. For some time I've been trying to get to the bottom of it, to hunt down whatever psychic bastard is doing it to me and do

such things to whatever anatomy they are possessed of that they will never so much as scratch again. It has become something of an obsession, Toto, that much I allow, but it's not as if the damn Crypts are crawling with entertainment.

And I was getting closer, and now I'm standing here with my feet stuck in goo thinking that maybe I'm closer than I thought and the telepathic scrape-monster has a keen sideline in gluing people to the floor before it eats them, and I have just been reeled in like a fish.

My feet aren't going anywhere, which means that, unless I get the knife and a whole load more desperation, neither is the rest of me. Instead of pointlessly struggling and wearing myself out, I listen for the thing that is surely coming. The alternative is even more depressing, in a way: what if I'm caught in the web of a spider long dead? This glue might remain sticky for millennia. I should patent it. I'd be the richest dead man in this whole alien horror maze.

But no, the trap-maker is alive and well, and abruptly I revise just which is the preferable outcome. I can hear something coming towards me with agonising slowness. It is above me, inching its way along ceiling and walls with careful clicks and clacks as it reaches out and places its feet. Some large, softer part of it is scraping along, giving me the sense of something baggy and huge. Possibly it's just going to drop on me and then absorb both me and the tar into its body over many days. That sounds exactly the sort of thing that my new life is made of.

I have my little jury-rigged firelighter, and abruptly I can't live without seeing the agent of my demise. It surely can't be as horrible as my imagination is painting it. I thrust out the little sparker and flick away at it until I start to throw out little arcs of jagged light.

The trap-maker doesn't pause, and probably can't see. I can see it, though, and that prompts another change of heart, because it is considerably nastier than my feeble Earth imagination had posited. Much of its substance is a coiling nest of intestines spread vine-like back along the passageway, so that what is creeping towards me is just one terminus of its distributed body. And as termini go, it is not a pretty one. There are beak-like plates there, at least seven of them, opposed to one another and boasting serrated edges. Even that's not enough for the discerning intergalactic predator, because it has lashing barbed feelers as well, and coiled things that look a bit like scorpion tails, and fuck-off enormous fangs surely loaded with every kind of

agony-inducing venom imaginable. It looks as though it got into God's desk after school and nicked off with every single nasty toy confiscated from the fallen angels. It writhes towards me along the ceiling, various spiked parts of it clicking and clattering against the stone. It's in no hurry. It's probably waited a thousand years for some dumbass Earthman to come along and wake it up.

A fairly large part of me is suggesting I use my knife on myself, rather than let myself be gradually disassembled by that appalling toolkit. No doubt Hamlet thought the same way when he did that To Be Or Not To Be speech, you know, whether it's nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of etcetera or let yourself be eaten by a Swiss Army knife from space.

The rest of me, though, including that part that largely got spliced into me by that godforsaken Mother Machine (spoilers!) and has left me so very enduring and determined, is having none of it, Hamlet bedamned. I get out my knife. It seems like pissing into the hurricane compared to all those sharp edges the approaching monster has, but I have something it doesn't. I have human ingenuity.

A few minutes pass as it inches closer, its mouthparts twitching in hungry anticipation. Human ingenuity is drawing a blank. Captain Kirk would have thought of something by now, I'm sure, but I have no red-shirted confederates to feed to it. There's just me and my useless human brain.

Then I begin to feel a stinging sensation around my feet. I have bare feet, I should say. Inexplicably, the space boots provided by NASA didn't hold up to months trekking about on a hard surface under a variety of gravities. Now my bare feet feel like they're on fire, the sticky tar about them fairly bubbling with acidic secretions. Because of *course* this is what happens, and the slime will dissolve my legs while its maker snacks on my head. This is exactly what happens when you go into space and I can't think why I ever wanted to get out of Earth's atmosphere in the first place.

It's still just stinging, so far, so I strike a spark to see what's actually going on. What I see is the sticky stuff receding from my toes in a wash of toxic-looking bubbles, and abruptly I can move again. Wherever I place a leathery sole, the alien goo just shrivels away. I am doing this, or at least my body is – I seem to have less and less say in what it can do and when it does it – I am sweating vitriolic solvent through my pores. That is apparently just one more thing the Machine gave me.

I look up at the intestine monster inching overhead and a shock of wrath

fills me. Going to eat *me*, were you? Think you're so highly evolved, with your traps and your stupid number of different mouthparts? Well, you picked on the wrong Earthman, baby! I duck past the thing's blindly questing head, snapping sparks from my lighter to show where it is, and then I'm beneath the glistening cables of its appalling body.

Human ingenuity is still sleeping on the job. What steps up to bat is sheer rage. It's not just the justifiable anger I might feel towards a hideous monster that's tried to eat me, it's *all* of it: it's being lost in this godforsaken place for so long, it's the scritchy scratchy whispering which even now is scraping in my head like a cheesegrater. It's the gravities and pressures, the cold, the dark, the hunger and most especially all the goddamned *monsters* that make this place even more miserable than it needs to be.

I reach up with a roar of fury and grasp two handfuls of slippery cables, and I *pull.* I haul the thing down bodily from the ceiling, rip it from the stone like tearing ivy from a wall, leaving a pattern of wet suckers behind. I pull its substance taut between my knotted hands and I tear and rip. I get my foot on its thrashing, clattering head and I pull cables of gut from it, pop, pop, pop! I tear open individual coils with my bloody *teeth*, is what I do. I stamp on it and I wring it, I crush and I tear. I forget I ever had a knife, or any tool. All the tools I need are my body and my rage.

Some time later I come back to myself, covered in ichor. I have followed the coils of the thing to its heart, a great bloated body with half a dozen ropy arms leading off down various corridors. I've utterly disembowelled it, and when a thing's mostly made of bowels that's quite the undertaking. I am victorious. I am savage. I beat my chest and bellow like an animal.

After that, listening to the echoes of my whooping bounce back to me from the walls of the Crypt, I have the grace to feel somewhat embarrassed. I am British, after all, and I feel my behaviour may have crossed some subtle line of etiquette. Let us never mention this again, Toto.

Once my adrenaline (or whatever I have in its place now) has ebbed to more socially acceptable levels, I am left with that cursed scritching still making a home for itself in my skull. I'd thought this beastie was to blame, a telepathic lure into its nasty sticky trap. Apparently it just had the bad luck to be between me and whatever is actually tormenting me. Still, I feel the Crypts are a marginally better place without it, so no regrets, right?

I flex my arms. They look beefier than Gary Rendell's used to be, and

Gary was a fit bloke, believe me. And Gary's me, of course. I mustn't forget that, only sometimes it can be hard.

I am the monster-killer. I am what the monsters in the dark are scared of, or would be if any of them had enough of a brain to be scared with. I am the thing the Crypts cannot kill, and something out there is fucking with me. That strikes me as a bad policy decision on its part and I am going to track it down and register a complaint with extreme prejudice.

With that resolution, this rough beast slouches off towards where the scritchy is strongest, casting about like a hunting dog at each crossroads and intersection. Sometimes the gravity crushes me. Sometimes the atmosphere is poisonous. Always there is the cold and the dark, but now I have a purpose. Someone's trying to ruin my day and I am going to return the favour, Toto, of that you can be sure.

IT'S NOT LONG before I see light ahead, a clear green-white illumination that flickers occasionally like nothing in nature. I had been thinking about telepathic monsters, native fauna of the Crypts that have evolved alongside countless travellers until they were able to pierce any alien skull with their infuriating hook. This is something else, though: a traveller like me. Is it the source of my torment, or is it just another innocent bystander? I feel a rush of anger, as though dismembering the trapper barely tapped my vast reserves of fury, but I fight it all down. I am an ambassador for Earth, after all. I have walked with the Egg Men and the Pyramid People and a dozen other sentient races. None of whom I have been able to communicate with, it's true, but so far I've not killed anything that hasn't tried to kill me.

This rage is a new and disturbing facet to my personality, and I suspect it's here to stay. I take some deep breaths and relax my muscles, willing the sensation to sink back down to where it came from. I feel it recede, but not very far, like a predator just beyond the reach of my campfire, growling softly to itself. It's as much as I'm going to get from it, I know. Time to put my best face on and my best foot forward, and go and meet the neighbours. Maybe they'll let me borrow the lawnmower. And by lawnmower I mean instantaneous teleportation device that can get me home, because some bugger's got to have come up with one, surely, somewhere in the universe.

Except, of course, if they had, they'd never be here. They'd not need to walk the long roads between the stars by foot.

So, all very calm and collected, I approach on my bare tiptoes, creeping to each corner and peering round, seeing that corpselight radiance grow steadily stronger. Then I come to a chamber – I see the walls widen out, and the light throwing shadows there, some still, one moving.

I don't know why the Crypts have these larger chambers. Many of them are lairs for monsters, which know these places are oubliettes for travellers to end up in, but I'm assuming that 'zoo dungeon storage' was not their original purpose. Some but not all have the floriate Maker sculpting on the walls. Others have been repurposed by latecomers, home away from home for some alien civilization that has left only its broken artefacts and its dust. Whatever their purpose, walk long enough in these dark halls, and you'll find the walls opening out about you, the brief illusion of space and freedom, before you realise it's just another part of the same damn maze.

The chambers mess with gravity too, which I've learned the hard way. Perhaps that's their function, some vital engineering component that regulates the Crypts' insane relationship with physics. This chamber is no exception. Creeping close, I feel the sickening shift in my stomach, and a flat corridor becomes a treacherous slope opening down onto a cuboid room that seemed level a moment ago, but now funnels down towards one of its corners, where a mound of detritus, shed carapaces and broken stone has collected. That's where the camp is.

My eyes see the lantern first, of course. It's a rod as tall as a man, curved at the top like a shepherd's crook. In that open loop the light hangs, supported by nothing but reaching out cracking tendrils of energy to its frame like a Van Der Graaf generator in a bad SF movie. It's soundless, steady save for its occasional fluorescent stuttering.

There are some packs, too. I take them for dead insects of unusual size at first, segmented bodies and stiff curved legs. Only later do I understand them as luggage.

There is a fire. That's the touch that really speaks to me. All that high-tech lighting, and the traveller has lit a fire in a metal bowl. Perhaps its super-advanced heater failed, but I have a sense of something ritual, something from home. It's got a fire because the flames are pleasing to it, because they hold back the grim nature of this place in a way artificial light cannot.

And then, at last, my eyes turn to the camp's master, which is watching me warily.

It's… *almost human* is the phrase that comes to me. Really that's

misleading, because all I see is metal, no indication of whether there's a living thing inside, or a colony of things, or just mechanisms and beep beep boop. It is stooped, long-armed like an ape, and there are vestigial or subsidiary limbs folded along its thorax, armoured in jointed plates like the rest of it. Its domed helm has four windows, two pointing up, two down, none at human eye level. Between the ports is a rectangular panel crammed with a row of toothed wheels that spin constantly, chattering softly back and forth. Perhaps that's how it eats, but it seems more conversational to me. Perhaps when it meets another of its kind, they lock teeth in mechanistic communion, no tongues.

Its limbs are oddly joined, the arms curved inwards at rest, elbows joints the highest part of them. The two legs are bandy, terminating in four-toed pads that seemed too narrow to let it keep balance.

It's the most human thing I've seen in a long time.

Awkwardly, I let myself down, scrabbling and scraping along the carven wall until I reach the little patch of flattened rubble. I've horrified visions of kicking over the traveller's fire or knocking down its lamp-staff, but none of that happens.

"Hi," I say, raising a hand. I'm taller than it, though it looks barrel-bodied and powerful. One of its major arms is larger than the other, bulked out by a cylindrical mechanism, but both terminate in an assembly of fingers: four, equal in size and mutually opposable.

The firelight dances in the lower pair of lenses as it stares at me, or around me. Its clockwork mouth purrs and mutters to itself.

"So, hey." I lower myself down in front of its fire, trying to keep a smile on my face, for all it must mean nothing. "How's tricks, me old mucker? Bit nippy, isn't it? I just walked in from Aldebaran and boy are my legs tired." My voice echoes around the chamber, almost as alien to me as to the traveller. It continues to regard me, or at least its busy mouth remains pointed in my direction. One of its small arms delves into a slot in its side and comes out with a nugget of something it adds to the fire, subtly changing the burned-dry scent of the air. Perhaps that's communication, where it comes from. My olfactory centres do their best, but a few months in the Crypts can't reverse the neglect of millions of years of human evolution. And besides, how would I talk back to it? Creative flatulence?

"How'd you make a dog go woof?" I ask it, because now I've heard the sound of my own voice I can't stop. "Throw it on the fire. No, that's a cat,

never mind me. Still, I guess you don't know what a cat or a dog is anyway, so who's to know? Hey, this is a good one, listen: is it hard to bury an elephant? Sure, it's a mammoth undertaking. Right? Mammoth… And elephants…" It's all coming out now, all the pent-up nonsense, stupid jokes I haven't heard since I was eight. This is me, mankind's ambassador to the stars. "How do they hide in the jungle, eh? Paint their balls red and climb up a cherry tree. And what's the loudest sound in the jungle? Monkeys eating cherries, isn't it?"

"Monkeys," the thing says, not from its whirring teeth but from somewhere within its chest. Whatever makes that sound owes nothing to human teeth and tongue, but it forms the word nonetheless. The echo of it hangs between us.

"Monkeys," I repeated. "Barrel of monkeys. Monkey business. Magic monkey. *Journey to the West. Ack-Ack Macaque.* Monkey can't buy you love. No, wait, that's wrong."

One of its little arms dips inside its suit again and comes out with a rectangular block, offering it to me. I take it without thinking, peeling off the wrapper with long familiarity.

"It's money, money can't buy you love. Because it's the root of all evil, or love of it is." And I'm about to tell this alien how I don't miss money, really, or monkeys, but I did miss love, meaning the company of my fellow humans. First, though, I bring the bar up to my lips and take a decent bite. The curiously distant flavour floods my mouth, a thousand times better than worm meat or air-dried flank of Clive, made as familiar as mum's Sunday dinners by the long journey out here.

I stop.

I examine the wrapper, seeing the ESA logo there, the ingredients in English, French, Spanish and German. And Danish, written on in awkward biro.

"Where'd you get this?" I ask.

Scritch scratch scritch, goes the stylus in my brain.

"That information is not permitted," says the alien from the caverns of its chest. Only it really says something like "Du har ikke lov til at kende disse oplysninger," because we were all speaking Danish like natives by the time we reached the Frog God.

"Where did you get this?" I yell at it. It has met my kin. More, it has met the *Quixote* expedition team, unless there's been some enormous Danish

space-diaspora since I left Earth. It knows where they are, it must do.

"Ikke tilladt," it states, and I don't know if it's just echoing the words or reinforcing them. The intonation is identical.

"No, look at me," I gabble to it. "I'm human. I got lost. I got separated from them." I try to indicate various parts of my anatomy to indicate just how human I am. "I need to find them, please. Tell me where – tell me…" I try to remember the Danish for all of this, because my time in the Crypts has led to me lapsing back into English and now the syntax and vocabulary is muddled in my head, infected by Spanish and German and all nine words I ever learned of Polish.

"Tilladt," it says, like some metal parrot. And then a sound like the whine of a power saw cutting into metal, something no human language ever knew.

I wave the food bar at it. "Listen, mate, you do not want to mess with me right now." And all the time that whisper-scritch in my head is growing louder and more insistent, and is it *this?* Is this the whisperer? How can it even get inside my head, when it looks like a weevil in a diving suit?

Unless it's had practice, of course. Unless peeling human minds is something it's been doing a lot of recently.

I stare at the food bar, focusing on that earnest biro amendment, the handwriting of Eda Ostrom who'd decided to become a Danish nationalist for a lark. I feel that, if I concentrate hard on the torn wrapper, I'd see blood there. I imagine the barrel-bodied thing crouching over dying humans, interrogating them, seeing how their bodies fit together by taking them apart. I imagine it ravaging their minds, tearing out their languages and thoughts just as it's drilling into mine. Abruptly I know with a burning certainty that this is what happened. This thing has the hunchbacked cant of a murderer, sinister in its iron suit. My teammates came here seeking peaceful contact with other stars, but creatures like this metal ape have been here for years, preying on the unwary, killing them and taking their things. It's no better than the worm creatures.

"What are you?" I demand of the thing. "What did you do to my friends?"

"Aber," it pronounces contemptuously. Apes; monkeys. It's not just recalling my earlier words, it's dismissing my entire species: primitives, animals.

I can feel all that rage I had folded up so neatly bursting out inside me.

For a moment, I'm holding the door closed on it, because what good can it possibly do? But the anger floods my skull, drowning out the scritchy. The chamber fills with the rising tide of a roar and the roar comes from me. I bounce the half-eaten food bar off the thing's domed helmet and then I follow with my own aim, leaping high in the air to come down swinging. Two-fisted space action! Pow! Bam! Crunch!

It throws me off – the angle of those curved limbs mean I end up flying ten feet in the air, but I come down with my feet braced against the slope of a wall like a goddamned interstellar ninja and jump right back at it. For a moment I have my hands about the rim of its helmet, and I'm going to open the fucker up and see if it's a monkey or a bug monster or twelve penguins all crammed in together. Then it slaps me down with a big metal fist, and I see something light up and spin within the cylinder attached thereto. That's just enough warning for me to get the hell out of the way before its energy cannon or whatever-the-hell carves up the air where I was crouching, leaving a great molten furrow in the stone of the Crypts itself.

I'm not daunted; in fact I'm even angrier, every knock feeding that insane wrath within me. I get hold of the alien and lift it bodily in the air, slamming it against the wall in the hope I'll break open its armour like an eggshell. Still in one piece, it kicks me in the jaw, catapulting me backwards, and lands on all fours. I see it snatch up its light-crook and the packs, which cling to the alien's armour with their little legs, and lurch to my feet, bellowing hoarsely. It scuttles away, flashing away with its energy gun and drawing new, meaningless sigils in the stone.

Even fighting mad, I steer well clear of that, and I see the thing shimmy up a sheer wall and vanish into a passageway. I make several attempts to follow, still hollering and yowling, words of English and Danish peppering my incoherent ravings. I cannot manage the slope, though, nor jump quite high enough. I am left only with the thing's fire bowl, which I kick over, trampling the coals until the air smells only of my own burnt flesh.



CHAPTER EIGHT

DOCTOR NAISH GOT us all together in one room; the entire crew, even those whose turn it was to sleep. She and the Mission Team had studied Mara's records and the data from our diminishing fleet of drones, and they had received the delayed thoughts of the various scientists back on Earth. She had looked at the facts and prepared a theory that fit them, which the Expedition Team would get to test.

Of all the people who should have been sleeping right then, Doctor Naish looked as though she was top of the list, a world away from the

cheerful, telegenic science communicator who'd been on everyone's TV screens. From the look on her face, I half expected her to just shout "Fuck knows!" at the top of her voice in her broad Scottish accent and throw her tablet across the room.

We floated there in front of her, holding on to various straps and handles. Those of us scheduled to actually go on the expedition wore expressions indicating various stages of constipation, because we'd been given all manner of bone tablets and muscle stimulants to prepare us for being in gravity again, and our bodies weren't appreciating the tune-up. Everyone else just looked tired and ill-tempered, because space is full of panic and boredom in random allotments, and it gets people's backs up eventually.

"The Artefact," said Doctor Naish, rubbing at her eyes. She still refused to call it the Frog God. "What we see out there isn't the Artefact, not really. It's just… the tip of the iceberg, is the phrase I'll be using for the press back home. And the rest of the iceberg is… not in the universe as we know it. We know it's very large, but it's folded almost entirely outside normal space. All we have are its doorways. Plural; the Mara's images are unequivocal, and one of our drones also recorded some similar footage. Similar but not the same, because there was a different starfield and no planet."

She gave us a blank stare as though unsure for a moment who we were or why we were there. She'd been pushing herself far too hard, and now the only answer she had was scientific nonsense. Only the actual fact of the Frog God floating out there stopped everyone laughing at her.

"We don't know how it interacts with normal space. We've all seen how you only ever see the same facing, no matter the angle. It seems likely that the Artefact has several such exits, maybe hundreds, thousands. We have images of two and one of those plainly includes a planet with a spacefaring civilisation in advance of ours. It may therefore be that the Artefact's gates only become active in planetary systems where such activity is detected; and it's proposed that an inactive gateway wouldn't be visible or detectable by any means, folded away out of sight. Or they may just be *everywhere* and we got lucky that there's a gate near us. Or perhaps the Drake Equation comes up with four aces every time and there's space aliens everywhere." She kneaded the bridge of her nose. "Or they bring out the spacefarer in us, like *2001*. I mean we just don't know, do we? All I can say for certain is there was definitely some unexplained interaction between the Artefact, Kaveney and

Mara. It activated them. It drew our attention to itself."

"Hvad vil det have?" Eva Ostrom asked. So what does it want?

Naish just shrugged. "Jeg ved det ikke." Confessing her ignorance. "Does it want *anything?*" she went on in lilted English. "Questions we'll probably never answer. What does it *do*, though? It has a hundred entrances, scaled to different sizes. Several, including the one best suited to us, have a breathable atmosphere and conveniently survivable temperatures and pressures inside – though nobody is going to be taking their helmets off to smell the roses, right?"

No disagreement on that one.

"So what it does is this: it links distant parts of the galaxy. Or perhaps galax*ies*. Mara got to another star system and back in a matter of months. It's a pedestrian underpass. We can go in, things could come out. And have done, in the past; the Red Rocket proves that. Whatever built the Artefact must have had a burning need to connect Here to There on a cosmic scale, and not just for their own purposes. We know there are different environments in there. We think there might even be… 'roads' of particular atmospheres linking similar planets. Or there may be no logic to it at all. Whoever built the Artefact, they don't appear to be using it now. It's just… there. There's no suggestion of internal power or mechanism integral to the structure. The structure itself appears stable, and perhaps, once twisted into whatever space it occupies, its very shape holds it in place. We know so little about how such a thing might be done, it's pointless to speculate."

She had very plainly worn herself to the bone with just such speculation.

"The Expedition Team is on sleep shift as of the end of the briefing," she told us all. "When your alarm goes, you'll be going in. You'll take every possible precaution. You'll have the buggy to carry supplies, tents and tools. You'll have one of the remotes, and we'll watch you for as long as we can. Electromagnetic signals don't carry far inside, but you'll be setting down boosters to get it out to us. Your mission objective is first just to reach the lit area that we've already identified, and establish a camp there. Nothing more than that, for now. We're going to take this very slow and very steady. No grandstanding, is that clear?"

And it was clear. We were going to be so careful. We were no fools.

And she went over every detail of the mission procedure, and every individual confirmed their understanding of it, as belt-and-braces as you like. Then, right as everyone was ready to drift off, Naish's face kind of spasmed

with sheer annoyance and she said, “You’d think, if they could build something like this, they’d have just made something big that spaceships could go through. I mean *why?*” And if the ancient Frog-makers had reared their hoary heads at that moment, they’d have had it from both barrels from an extremely irate Scotswoman. Wisely, they remained unknowable and absent.

NOW, DOCTOR NAISH, I’m really happy for you, becoming head of the Mission Team and all, and Imma let you finish, as the man said, but Gary Rendell is by far the most qualified Crypt-ologist of all time, by now. So I’m going to weigh in with my own thoughts on the sum total of human knowledge about the Frog God, which is suitable to be recorded for posterity on the back of a postage stamp.

I am not convinced by any of the conclusions Naish came to. I have conceived of some counter-proposals during my long, cold exile here. I mean, we see a thing we can get into and we think someone made it to let us get from A to B, right? As if we were hedgehogs, and the Makers were concerned about us getting across a busy motorway. And so they built this goddamn cosmic structure that sort of exists at the secret heart of spacetime or some damn thing, with its openings conveniently everywhere for the benefit of everyone. Except, not so bloody convenient for us, when you think about it. The Pyramid People didn’t even have to get out of the Palaeolithic to go walking to the stars. We had to get 700 AU out from orbit, which stretched our technological ability to the absolute limit. That playing field is hella unlevel, Toto, bro. I’m thinking, what if all these passageways weren’t ever intended for us, or anything like us? I mean, rats can creep about a building via the ventilation ducts, but nobody’s got their convenience in mind when designing the layout.

But, I hear Doctor Naish’s stern brogue correct me, there’s the glitches with Kaveney and Mara, the way the Crypts were so desperate, seemingly, for us to find and visit them, once we’d got close enough to register. Rank anthropomorphism that the real Doctor Naish wouldn’t have indulged in, I know, but most of us back then were definitely thinking of some design at work that had a place for us.

So let’s say the place *is* interested in us. Let’s say it wants us to come in – but on foot, like polite visitors, not just roaring through but pacing their

halls, just like I'm condemned to. Why no space-lanes, like Doctor Naish complained? Is it some ancient religion, every step cleansing our souls? Are we pilgrims on some cosmic Hajj? After all, what if we got to an exit, and it was as remote as our entry-point? It's not as though we could lug the makings of a new spaceship all that way with sled dogs. That was the problem the Red Rocketeers ran into, after all. How long did it take them to bring their spaceship through, piecemeal and plagued by all the hazards of the Crypts? No wonder they never finished it.

Ask the bright-eyed, bushy-tailed Gary Rendell of back then and he'd have given you all sorts of cheery, optimistic answers about our place in the universe and the intentions of the Crypt-lords. But I am not that man any longer. In a very *real* sense I am not that man, and I cannot cross that river twice because I'm in a horrible dark place that doesn't have any rivers. My answer is that the Crypt-makers are still here. They never left. Wander far enough, deep enough, proceed in directions for which no being of regular space has names, and you may find them. Perhaps they're dead, and they bring visitors to die here as a remembrance of the corpse of their greatness. Perhaps they watch us from the very stone, and thrill to our struggles and our pain. Perhaps they dream, and with strange aeons they will wake and wonder about all the little rats scuttling through their ventilation shafts. Because if there's anything in the universe that Can Eternal Lie, it's the Crypts. Some of Naish's colleagues back on Earth even suggested they were a survival from a previous universe, anchored to ours to preserve them from destruction. Another said they were such advanced creations that they had most likely been built in the far distant future, towards our own universe's eventual end, but their immunity to the regular laws of space set them outside time as well, existing simultaneously in all eras, alpha and omega. Clever fellow, that one.

THE INITIAL EXPEDITION Team comprised Joe Martino (USA, team leader and geologist and, as we used to say, neither shaken nor stirred), Louis Chung (USA, psychologist, evidence of how much the US had taken over the project back home), Karen Aanbech (Netherlands, engineer and zero-G ping pong champion), Gary Rendell (UK, general reprobate and responsible for driving the shopping trolley with our stuff on it), Katarin Anderova (Russia, backup engineer and communications specialist, plus backup first contact diplomat)

and finally, after a lot of horse trading, Ajay Hussain (Pakistan, linguist and primary first contact specialist, who got on the team on the strength of his book about the building blocks of language vis-a-vis communicating with aliens, which was conveniently finished on the voyage and published six months before the Expedition Team went in).

I'm going to give you a spoiler here, just so you don't get too caught up in the heroic daring of the whole business:

They all die.

Well, okay, not all of them. I'm still here, for a given value of 'me,' and I think Karen got clear of the initial clusterfuck, but what happened to her after that I cannot say. Probably she got clear of the Crypts and is on a nice family-run farm upstate with all the dogs and hamsters.

China, by the way, was offered a place but declined, being more interested in the Mission Team, and from my privileged perspective I salute their forethought. Oh, and having two team members with the initials KA was a colossal annoyance to the more bureaucratic members of the crew, but I will say that, when the end came, it wasn't that which did us in.

There we were, anyway, out on the shuttle deck of the *Quixote*. I say "shuttle", it was a bit more bare bones than that. There wasn't anywhere to get *in*, to start with, just a frame you belted yourself onto, and some tame little engines, and a set of controls that I got to lord it over because I was the pilot. There's a picture of us, six people and a mechanical trolley and the bulky-looking rotary-skirted drone. The group photo got sent straight to Earth with the next packet of messages, at the highest res they could afford. I'm looking slightly away from the camera, lanky Rendell G with my spacesuit still trailing hoses. Naish had just called for us to say cheese and Anderova K, the devil at my left shoulder, had instead said something unprintable in Danish which threw me off. She, of course, is grinning virtuously at the camera. To my right (your left as you look at the image), Martino J and Hussein A are giving the lens their brightest smiles, a pair of alpha males jostling elbows to be first into the history books. Chung L is on the far end, hand up so the drone appears to be balancing on his wrist. On the other end of the line is Aanbech K, putting a little distance between herself and Anderova K as though it'll help distinguish their initials. She's not looking at the camera either and half her face is hidden in the goggles she's running diagnostics with, because she was, frankly, terrified of getting stuck out there if something fritzed out. And she was right to be, of course, but back then

everyone else had begun to believe we basically had a mandate from God, Frog or otherwise, to go claim the Artefact in the name of science and human endeavour. That's the thing about something as contradictory as the Frog God – simultaneously vastly outside our ken and yet built at a scale that invites us to stride in like the prodigal son expecting his fatted calf. Either it reinforces your insignificance or it makes you the centre of the universe, and all of us except Aanbech K had gone for Option B.

I wanted them to take another picture, but Naish was out of patience and said we had to catch our window. That was a lie; the Frog God wasn't going anywhere, and it didn't matter how much we tried to orbit it, we'd still be staring it in the face. Mind you, what would I have done with another chance to record my last moments in human company for posterity? I don't imagine I'd've had the forethought to stand there second time round looking like Munch's *The Scream*, and that's just about the only appropriate farewell I could have given.

We piled on the shuttle, and Karen insisted on everyone running suit diagnostics again, while she did the shuttle itself. Everything was fine. We told her not to worry; we were only about to step beyond all human experience, I mean, what was there to *worry* about? Then everyone else cleared the bay and we rolled off on rails to the big airlock, waited until it was evacuated, and then pottered off into space. I will confess, whatever I trained to be an astronaut for, it was not piloting that crappy little shuttle. It was about as exciting to handle as the little pretend rocket on a merry-go-round.

We swung close to the Red Rocket, which had not exactly been on the schedule but I'd lost a bet with Magda Proshkin. Close, here, still meant fifty klicks, but our HUDs magnified the image until we felt we'd had a good look. Some had speculated it was only the last in a series, and that its creators had visited Earth in prehistory, the ancient astronauts of the conspiracists. The people who said that sort of thing never saw the vessel in the flesh. It was so charmingly retro, a bit clumsy, more the work of Marvin the Martian than a chariot of von Däniken's space gods.

Then Naish was chewing me out for wasting fuel, and I took us to the little eye of the Frog God marked out with beacons. There was nowhere to park – isn't it always the way? – but Captain Joe took a line over and secured us to a ring that the remotes had screwed with considerable effort into the stone. Everyone piled off and I ghosted the shuttle in until it was actually

resting on the rim of the Frog God's eye. It should sit there forever, just as the Red Rocket had hung out there forever, because Newtonian physics was wiser than we were and wouldn't touch the Artefact with a barge pole for fear of not getting an equal and opposite reaction.

This eye was about four metres across. Our suit lamps revealed a square stone passageway leading off, twisted into a spiral like a goat's crumpled horn. By now I had the trolley off the shuttle and was ready to go in like an airline flight attendant in a spacesuit.

We went in. That was when things went a little wrong; just a little. Basically, we went in from three sides, but we all ended up crashing together on the same *down*, as though no matter where on the eye's ring you entered, it was the same place. Karen ended up sitting on the trolley, Ajay stepped on the remote, and Louis took Joe's elbow in the back of the helmet and went forward, somehow ripping open his suit.

The suit had all sorts of failsafes, but most of them were designed to ward against vacuum, and we were very much surrounded by atmosphere right then, and weak-kneed under most of a G of gravity. There was a horrible moment when Louis was just crying out, sure he was about to die, and everyone else panicked.

The tear was over his thigh, and we got the rest of his suit isolated. He was bleeding a bit, and if there was anything nasty in the atmosphere it would have got into his system. We had a grim, rapid-fire discussion with the Mission Team over whether to abort. Louis himself put a stop to that, summoning all his American frontiersman spirit and saying he felt fine. In any other situation, he would have been back on the bus faster than you could snap your fingers, but nobody can snap their fingers in a spacesuit, and nobody wanted to delay any more, and he said he felt fine, didn't he?

This isn't going to be the thing that screws us over, by the way. I'm just spinning the wheels of false suspense. Louis Chung was fine right up until he died.

We laboured off into the dark, the beams of our lamps seeming more and more inadequate as the shadows gathered about us.



CHAPTER NINE

I'VE SLEPT AGAIN, and when I wake some of the bruises are still there. That metal thing hit like a bloody train. I'd like to say I gave as good as I got, but that seems unlikely. Nevertheless, I won. It took to its iron heels and left me in possession of the field, not that I really want it. And I still have the food bar. I eat the rest of it, enjoying nutrition that my microbiome doesn't have to dismantle with the care of a bomb disposal technician. The wrapper I keep, though. The wrapper, with its sad little handwritten amendment, is home. It's from a place and time when people knew what a Denmark was and cared

about it. The iron hunchback can't know, nor would the Egg Men or the Pyramid People, or any of the rest of them, for all they're still our fellow travellers. I feel like, in coming out here, we're bleeding our culture, the humanness of us, out into the void. How can what we are survive contact with the Crypts?

I say this with considerable authority. What I am – was – has not survived contact with the Crypts either.

So I wake, and it should be a slow, blissful thing, but in reality that damn scritchy-scratchy has been ramping up and ramping up, and now it's like cicadas in my brain, like circular saws against the inside of my skull. So while my body wanted to stay unconscious and regenerating, instead I leap up and stare around, convinced that *they* are right around the next corner, beaming their tormenting nonsense into the very chambers of my brain. I'd eat humble pie with every conspiracy theorist in the world if they'd only lend me one of their tinfoil hats right now.

I prowl about the chamber and then beyond it, sloping down the corridors of the pan-galactic tomb, sniffing out where the scritch is marginally louder. Its creators are nowhere to be found, not in an hour's search, but I know they're closer. Is it the Iron Hunchback doing this to me, turning up the gain on my pain because I put a foot through his fire? Or is he just another distraction, another station on the road to my cross? Except, when I end up at my destination, I am going to eat Pontius Pilate's heart to make this cursed sound *stop*.

There are more words in it now, or almost-words. I hear the sibilants and plosives of conversation, but without meaning. It means I can never grow used to it, as I might to cicadas or sawblades. The part of my brain that craves human contact is having its balls constantly flicked in a hundred different ways. I feel as though the sound is homing in on the greatest possible annoyance, infinitely impossible to ignore. Much more of this and I'll never sleep again, never have a moment's calm, not even be able to hear my own thoughts. I'll end up dashing my vaunted human ingenuity out against the walls, and doubtless that's when *they* will creep out from the shadows and feed, licking my cerebral fluid from the cold stone.

I ache all over. For my first few hours of hunting I chalk it all down to the Iron Hunchback and our bout of fisticuffs, but I truly do not remember him doing a number on those parts of me that are aching now. I realise that the fight, and perhaps the battle with the intestine-monster before, has led to

my body going through another series of changes. It's Lamarckian evolution in action: push me and my body pushes back, my muscles rearranging themselves, my bones warping to squeeze out another few percentage points of efficiency. It should be agony, except the constant chatter in my head eclipses it all. Mere physical pain is a welcome distraction.

I'm making good headway, as far as I can tell; at least the voices in my head are getting louder, so that every time I turn a corner I think I'm about to confront the Iron Hunchback or whatever goddamn psychic parasite is boring into my mind. What I don't reckon on is finding a patch where the Crypts have broken down.

Now I don't know for sure that's what's happened, but this isn't the first time I've run into this kind of malarkey and my gut feeling is that it is absolutely not business as usual. The Crypts are unfathomably ancient (and/or contiguous with every moment in the universe's existence) and they have no visible moving parts, and so we were thinking of them as a perfect constant, a structure superseding time and space. I guess nothing's perfect, though. The last time it was a leak, a region where the atmosphere was vanishing away in some direction I couldn't even understand. How that might end, left long enough, I didn't want to wait around and find out. Probably the leak would seal itself somehow and the equilibrium of the Crypts would be restored, or else surely even miniscule irregularities would have destroyed the place by now. We are things of a human scale, though. Maybe the Crypts are indeed crashing down around us, just so slowly as to be imperceptible.

That was nothing, however, to this piece of japery.

What happens is that the gravity breaks. I'm loping along a corridor, feeling my way through the dark, fingers trailing along the walls, and then abruptly *down* isn't beneath my feet but in front of me, somewhere along that long, long passageway. I haven't gone over a cliff so much as the world's *become* one, and instantly I'm hurtling my way towards terminal velocity, the air ripping past me.

I've got no idea how long the drop will be before a fatal impact with what had been the far wall. I've a brief sense of open space as I zip through a larger chamber, and then into a thankfully matching passageway across the far side. I'm curled into a ball by this time, braced for an impact that even my strengthened body can't survive. This goes on for several seconds, time for reflection. I hurl my arms out, my legs, brushing the walls/floor/ceiling, trying to slow myself. I'm already going too fast and all that happens is I lose

some skin from my fingertips. Probably I'm screaming.

Then I hit, but instead of a hard surface it's a… nothing. I plunge past the nothing like I'm entering deep water, then slow to a stop, reverse and bob back past, like a cork leaping to the surface. Then I oscillate up and down a few times, finding my level. There's a gravity shift here, from which both directions are *up*. I'm caught between them, and I might as well be at the bottom of a pit.

But I'm not squished, and that scritchy fussing in my head is even louder. I just lie there, suspended between two ups, and collect my scattered thoughts.

There's nothing in this boundary between gravities that I can get purchase on – it's just a discontinuity in one of the universe's fundamental forces, you know, nothing special. I've had this before, indeed I have profoundly unfond memories of it, but that doesn't help me now I'm caught *between*.

So I stretch out, arms and legs at their fullest extent, and I can get my hands against one wall, my feet on the opposite side, so that I'm no longer just hanging in the gravity doldrums but supporting my weight, my entire body strung out in the void.

Can I do this? I ask, because it seems impossible, but it's this or hang forever midway down this passageway until my half-mummified flesh serves only as a lure to hungry monsters.

I move one foot.

I move one hand.

So far so good.

I move the other foot.

I move the other hand.

My body twangs with the strain, but it's a strong body, and I swear I can feel it getting stronger, in that specific way that will let me get away with this nonsense. But after all, I was walking across the galaxy just a moment ago. Now I'm walking up a wall, held in place only by the constant and gruelling extension of my poor abused limbs.

I move my right foot again.

I move my left hand. My right trembles and I feel my knees shake.

Left foot.

Right hand. I'm not two steps up from the gravity plane. An indefinite number still to go.

Right foot.

Left hand.

Etcetera.

I swear, by about the hundredth step, it's getting easier. My muscles have reconfigured to assist this ludicrous mode of movement, making me wonder just what other indignities I could possibly get used to.

Right foot.

Etcetera.

And then I realise the scritchy-scratch is getting further away and I free a hand to fumble around. One of the walls is absent, a passageway leading to my nemesis. I've got there at last.

The relief is almost fatal. There's a moment when my unnaturally taut body twitches and I slip, vividly recalling that long drop back to the gravity plane. I flail madly and my skinless fingertips catch the edge of the passage, leaving me hanging by one aching arm, shrieking as even my augmented muscles tear.

But after all I've been through, I am nothing if not determined. I haul myself bodily up, and claw my way onto the level ground of the passage's wall/floor/ceiling. Then it is indeed a wall, and I slide down to a new flat floor, re-entering the Crypts' standard gravitic alignment. I've escaped the breach. I'm back in business, Toto.

I get to my feet, stooping to clear the ceiling. My limbs and back seem misshapen from all the unwarranted exercise. Probably they'll settle back to where they were, but right now I'm strong and twisted, weirdly simian in my crouching stance. And this new tunnel seems oddly cramped and small compared to the ones I'm used to.

I put one foot in front of the other again, lurching forward.

There's light ahead, the cold clear light of intelligent design. My head is filled with cicadas that speak with human voices, all those scraps of words grating against my inner skull, all that almost-language I can never quite make out. This close, it's deafening.

I'm there. I've found the psychic aliens. I see their shadows around the next corner, dwarfish and skinny, little goblin-men trying to drive me mad with their mind-weapon. But I'm here and, if I'm mad, that was a done deal long before they started in on me.



CHAPTER TEN

JOE TOOK THE lead, of course. He was the sort of man that, look at him and you just about reckoned God had personally designed him with ‘taking the lead’ in mind. Katarin and Louis went after, then me with the motorised trolley with all our gear on it, then Karen and Ajay bringing up the rear. This order had been worked out in advance and had in fact been the subject of colossal international argument on the long flight over. NASA practically threatened to walk away from the project unless their man got to set first foot inside the Frog God, a latter-day Armstrong. What Joe, Louis and the other

US crew would have done had that actually happened, I can't imagine. Were we supposed to just pack them for storage in the sleep chambers until the international kerfuffle sorted itself? Anyway, Roscosmos and the ESA folded on that one, so we didn't have to find out.

And so we trekked into the dark, our suit lamps and torches illuminating black walls, the first few metres inscribed with that ornate but maddeningly nowhere-leading floriate scrollwork, the rest just blank stone. I remember the sound of my breath in my ears, my heart rate. I remember checking and rechecking my HUD to make sure nothing was going wrong with my suit. Gravity was an unwelcome friend from the past come to slob out on our couch and watch our TV, and although all the instruments said the atmosphere was cleaner and more breathable than the air in most major conurbations, nobody was keen to try it – even Louis, who'd already been exposed to it. I can't imagine what it was like for him, how every little tic and murmur of his body must have seemed the harbinger of some dreadful bacterial doom. Except how could there be any pathogens out here that would infect a human body? (And indeed, despite the macrofauna that infests this place, I've not had so much as a sniffle. Maybe some unseen mechanism scrubs the air. Or maybe I'm still incubating…)

We walked for bloody hours.

We knew we were going to. There was one of the lit areas some way ahead that the remotes had found, our base-camp-to-be. We'd all been exercising and on a cocktail of steroids, but none of it prepared us for a long hike under gravity. We had to stop sooner than anyone liked, and then after another march we had to stop again. And then, when we set off, the trolley wouldn't work.

That was unwelcome.

Thankfully, doing complex maintenance while suited up is something we had trained for, and at least the tools wouldn't keep drifting off. Karen and Katarin took the trolley apart and tested every single circuit and ball bearing of it, while the rest of us kicked our heels and Louis flew the remote ahead, trying to get a glimpse of the promised lights. There was nothing wrong with the trolley, except it wouldn't work. Nothing we did could make the damn thing go. The blame for this somehow fell on me because I'd been driving it, though nobody could say what I was supposed to have done wrong.

So that was all our gear – our supplies, our tents, all that useful stuff that

nobody wanted to haul through a G of gravity. In the end we cannibalised the wheelbase of the trolley, and Ajay and I pushed it. Actually pushed it, like an actual supermarket trolley with a squeaky wheel, loaded with as much as we could manually shift.

And we set off again, a testament to the indefatigability of human dumbassery. But, trolley aside, all was still not well. Louis couldn't find the lights, and everyone agreed that, given the distance we'd travelled, we should be seeing them by now. The remote was sent further and further, finding only more lightless passageways, draining a battery we couldn't recharge now we'd had to leave the guts of the trolley behind. We watched the camera feed on our HUDs, seeing only an extra slice of second-hand darkness overlaid on the personal dark outside our helmets.

Joe had a confab with the Mission Team about what we should do. They said they'd send more remotes after us, but probably we hadn't gone as far as we thought, and we should just continue.

I wonder about that trolley, you know. Because I've met plenty of aliens walking the Crypts, and walking was what they were doing. I never met an alien in a golf cart or a motorised carriage. Even the Egg Men, who were kind of in little robot suits, had little robot feets to move them around. I firmly believe the Makers killed our trolley, or something they left behind did, perhaps even some intrinsic and unimaginable law of the Crypts. You travel their ways with a proper reverence, perhaps. You make your pilgrimage to the stars, if not on your knees, then at least by putting one foot after another, just as I still am, all this time later. Nobody gets a free ride.

But there we were, going deeper and deeper into terra incognita because we'd rather play chicken with the universe than look yellow.

When we stopped again, Joe's confab with Doctor Naish was rather more heated. Our remote's battery warning was on, despite the fact it should have had way more life in it, and we hadn't seen so much as a space glow-worm lighting up the place. Worse, the chaser remotes, which should have overtaken us an hour before, were conspicuous in their absence. Naish said they were still on their way to us, following our trail of comms relays. Joe Martino said that was frankly impossible unless she'd sent them by snail. We all had a good laugh; not.

Then Louis said he'd found something.

It was not our proposed base camp, but it was something, and we'd been in those four-metre-wide tunnels for a long time. Any variety seemed like a

good deal. In this case it was a big chamber, twenty metres across at least, by the remote's instruments. There were several passageways issuing off it. None of this had been found by the initial drone, and we had obviously missed a connection somehow, turned when we should have gone straight or vice versa. How could we have been so bloody stupid? I could feel everyone on edge, on the point of blaming each other. Doctor Naish's voice, somewhat staticky, said we should camp in the chamber, set the proximity alarms and keep a watch, generally get some shut-eye. Ajay and I, still on trolley duty, heartily agreed.

"How can the remotes be following our beacons without finding us?" Karen demanded. "I vote we go back."

I don't know what might have happened if we'd listened to her. We didn't, obviously we didn't, and I have reason to believe it wouldn't have been wine and roses even if we had. But it would have been different. I'd still be in *a* mess, doubtless, just not *this* mess.

And there was something – the last words I had from her, crackly and broken over the comms. I wonder, I really do. I wonder just how far we walked, and what we put between us and home other than mere distance.

Toto, this is where it happens. The moment we've all been waiting for.

We reached the big chamber. Twenty metres across, like I said, but far higher, like we were at the bottom of a big old silo. I remember shining my torch upwards, turned as strong as it would go, and seeing a weird silvery layer of dust motes glittering up above our heads, as though it marked the border between two layers of pressure. That was possible, of course – we knew from the remotes' misadventures that there were parts of the Crypts invisibly sectioned off into regions of hostile atmosphere, greater or lesser pressure, all that. We had originally picked out a path that avoided such shifts, and somehow we had followed a different path that still managed to remain curiously Earthling-friendly. And I don't know. I have suspicions about why we never found the lights, but that way madness lies. And I passed madness some while ago and don't want to have to retrace my steps.

Ajay and I just parked the trolley and sat down on it, exhausted. My suit was already showing some warning signs of wear and tear, never really intended to be worn for extended periods in-atmosphere. Katarin was setting up the one tent we'd been able to carry, which was self-powered and would provide us with somewhere to de-suit, if we were Olympic-grade contortionists. We'd had two tents, but one was back with the trolley's

innards. The whole expedition was a disaster; everyone knew it, nobody was talking about it.

Karen had the drone controller and was taking the little flier up to look at that dust ceiling, with what was left of its battery. Joe was hailing home again, saying that we'd have to come back after we'd slept, a long and defeated slog nobody much wanted to envisage. Naish's voice on the comms was crackly and faint despite the relays. The replacement drones hadn't turned up, though Naish seemed to be saying she'd found the room we were describing but where were we? Another room, obviously, only a crazy person would think otherwise. And perhaps that wasn't even what Naish was saying; her voice seemed to be echoing to us distantly, from far far away.

Louis snapped, then. He had thus far kept up a profoundly dignified professional front, but something about this latest indignity broke him and he threw a magnificent strop. "That's the line!" he yelled, whether to Naish or to us. "This goddamn mission!" He took his helmet off, fumbling angrily with the catches. His pink-tinted face glowered at us, weirdly undersized within the neck-ring of his suit. "Don't look at me like that," he snapped. "I already got a body-full of whatever the hell this place has to offer, don't I? And it's fine. The air's fine. Look." He made a great show of breathing in and out, an effort mostly hidden by the bulk of his suit.

"You're going to have to go into quarantine when we get back," Joe warned him.

"I'll live with it. This is goddamn ridiculous," Louis shot back. "I have never been part of such a goddamn fool mission in all my days. I swear we should never have got into bed with the goddamn Hispanics." By which I assume he meant Madrid.

"What the hell?" Karen said, having pretty much ignored all the shouting. She had the drone up at the dust boundary and now it was dancing wildly through the motes, its lights spinning about the walls. It wasn't an atmospheric line, but a gravitic one, just like I would later find at the bottom of my long fall. Except in this case it was *down* both ways from the line instead of *up*.

We were instantly absorbed in what she'd found, all save Louis, who plainly wanted an audience to complain some more to. The little drone bobbed and wove about, unable to orient itself as Karen tried to sit it on the very boundary. Then its lamp beam strafed over the ceiling and I cried out. Everyone else had their eyes on the remote, but I saw what was beyond it.

“Eyes!” I shouted unhelpfully – and inaccurately, as it turned out.

Karen was quick off the mark and had the drone up above/below the boundary layer, scanning down/up at the ceiling/floor beyond, still unsteadily because she was having to drive the thing with half the controls reversed. We had a shaky glimpse of a great yellow-brown leathery mass clumped in whorls and tangles, just about coating the entire ceiling. Here and there were clenched-fist nodules that I’d taken as eyes.

They opened.

This was all maybe thirty metres up, and five metres past the dust layer. We saw them unfurl and then flick at us, slender lances darting down like rain.

What happened was this: the thing was thrusting its pseudopods *up*, of course, not down, but once they cleared the dust then it was downhill all the way, a free lunch as its tentacles speared towards us. One of them struck Joe through the helmet, piercing the industrial-toughness plastic like a bullet and going most of the way towards his boots. There was an explosion of blood and cartilage from his knee where the tip came out. He wasn’t screaming. He was too surprised for that, though not as surprised as when the thing retracted its limb and whipped him up twenty metres up into the air.

For a moment he hung there, and, I kid you not, he had his bloody knife out and was trying to cut the thing, though the fall would have killed him even if the impaling trauma didn’t. Then with a great convulsion the tentacle hauled him to the gravity boundary and, from there, it was downhill all the way. He practically hit the remote as he tumbled, and a momentary sweep of its lamp highlighted the opening of a dreadful barbed orifice which swallowed him whole.

Like rain, I said; well, there’s never just one raindrop, is there?

Katarin was next. The lance plunged through her chest as she stood staring up, and I think it killed her outright. Louis was skewered through the thigh, and the whole chamber rang to his screams. Ajay ran and grabbed his hand, and nearly had his shoulder dislocated when the thing hauled poor bloody Louis Chung up in one muscular fling, his yelling cut off in a crunch that reverberated through the walls of the chamber.

Karen ran. I wish I’d run with her right then, but Ajay and I were just standing there like morons, babbling to one another, trying to raise Naish and the Mission Team, still thinking we could save anybody. I remember us turning to each other, clumsy in our suits like a pair of comedy puppets

waving our arms and panicking at each other. We had not been trained for this, nobody had.

The next pseudopod plunged through his shoulder and into his chest. We had a moment of realisation, eyes locked, and I fumbled for his hand. Then he was gone, our fingertips brushing for a fraction of a second as he was whipped to his doom.

And I looked about the chamber, wheeling around, unsure of where we had come from, unsure which passage Karen had taken, panicking like a horse with a broken leg. And I ran. I ran the wrong way, if indeed there was a right way.

Later, after I'd skidded down too many corridors and all my HUD readings were red – suit damage, integrity compromised, running out of battery, running out of air – after I realised I was horribly lost, that I couldn't find the relays (which I should have thought to look for when I legged it, but which had gone completely out of my head); after all of that, when I thought I knew just how screwed I was (I didn't, there was more), I found a lit area. I don't think it was the one we were looking for, but it was there, a string of dim reddish beads in a line along the ceiling for about a hundred metres. I collapsed then, weeping for the others – plenty of time later to weep for myself. Before I could follow poor doomed Louis's example and wrench my helmet off so I could breathe the dead air of the Crypts for the first time, though, I heard a voice.

Karen. She was calling us. She was calling anybody.

"*...there?*" I heard. "*Ajay? Louis? ...hear me? ... Aanbech to Mission, ...tor Naish, hello?*"

"Hello!" I cried out joyously. There was hope. She had survived! We would find each other and find our way home! Hope!

"*...hear me?*" she continued. "*Gary?*"

"Yes!"

"*Ajay? Anyone?*"

"Karen, it's me!" I shouted, as though bellowing into the microphone and deafening myself would boost the signal.

"*...at the exit, but I can't... the* Quixote*. There's nothing here but... anyone?* Quixote*, where* are *you? Is this even...?*"

And then I lost her, and I have never found her since.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

WELL NOW, MY little mind parasites. Caught you bloody red-handed, haven't I?

So I go round the corner, and they're even smaller than I thought, wretched spindly gremlins that barely come up to my waist. Fragile, too; they don't walk these goddamn halls in their hairy birthday suit like I am. It's silver suits and goldfish bowl helmets for them, and little lamps and torches everywhere because the mind-whisperers are scared of the dark. Even as I make my appearance, a butt naked demon king from the world's worst panto,

their voices keen in my head like swarms of locusts, like giggling imps, like the ghosts of the wronged dead. I almost think I hear the names of my vanished comrades amongst the chitter: Martino, shaken not stirred, Aanbech, Rendell. They know my name. *The bastards know my name.*

I want so much to stomp them into jam, to grind my heel on all that whispering and scritching until there's nothing but a stain on the stone, but I am a man. Am I not, still, a man? Am I not a thing of reason, Toto?

What's that, Toto? Kill them all? But no, I shall be merciful, if they only tell me *why* they torment me so.

I try to ask them. It comes out like a roar, but then I've been roaring inside since the scritchy started up, pacing about the bars of my psychic cage unable to act against my torturers. Now the lion is on the streets and he's bloody pissed off, I can tell you. You rattled my cage, little goblin men. You hissed and whispered your glottals into my cerebellum and now I'm going to going to going to –

No. No, I will not. Not yet. Give them a chance. Let them explain. And so I ask again even as they cling together. I spit out interrogatives in English and Danish past the jut of my teeth. I see their pasty little faces go white and their mouths open and shut, but no sound comes out of their stupid helmets and the scritchy just gets louder and louder, a shrilling chorus in my brain.

"Just shut up!" I say to them. "Just stop, just, just, I'm not going to be able to stop myself, just stop doing it to me and I'll go, I will! Just – *stop!* What's that?" That slack circle of a mouth opening and shutting meaninglessly, a goldfish in the bowl. I grab one of the goblins. I shake the other one off and then I take the one I've got and dash it against the wall to break that helmet and let the words out. Only when I've done that, there aren't any more words, just a lot of blood and shards of skull and greasy greasy grey that coats my hands. And although this one's dead and no longer broadcasting its cicada song, the buzzing chitter from the other one grows louder and louder until I feel they've got a sawblade against my skull and are trying to do to my brain what I just did to their friend's.

"Is that all you've got?" I bellow, or try to, but it just sort of comes out like a slobbering froth of sound. The remaining goblin is trying to scoot away from me, her suit scraping on the floor. The torch she dropped is turned on her now, like an interrogation. Her pale, terrified face, eyes wide with horror, a dash of blood across the clear dome of her helmet like a smudge of dirt on the cheek of a Dickensian orphan. Quite artistic, really, couldn't have done it

better if I'd planned it. And she's screaming so loud and I want to tell her that (a) I can't hear her and (b) you can make yourself deaf like that, 'cause I remember just how those helmets are. Maybe she's begging, as well; you know, for her life. That's the sort of thing goblins do just before they stab you in the back, isn't it?

Yes, Toto. Yes, it is.

But I am a man. I am civilized. I am humanity's ambassador to the stars. All right, I killed one of them, and that probably means some awkward paperwork back at the embassy, but it was an accident. I was attempting to establish a line of communication. Not my fault they don't have robust diplomatic channels, after all.

So I try harder this time. As the other goblin cowers and screams silently – moreover, as the keening of her mind saws into me with all her grief and fear – I just flick the front of her helmet, just thumb and forefinger, like I was killing a fly. I expect a crack, but the industrial-toughness plastic shatters and quite a lot of it goes into her face and eye, but at least I can hear her now. At least we've established the possibility of dialogue.

"Just get out of my head," I roar reasonably. "Stop it with the scratchy-scritchy stuff. I can't be having with it." I accept that, to an impartial observer, this may come across as a little less urbane than I intend, but with mind parasites surely it's the thought that counts.

But she's still screaming, and now there's more blood and eye everywhere and she doesn't seem *interested* in any kind of détente. I pick her up and explain my point of view to it, lay out my grievances and suggest some sort of dispute resolution, shaking the goblin for emphasis in lieu of bullet points. Surely we can get round a table and settle our differences like civilized monsters? At some point during this process she stops screaming and gives up on the mediation process.

The sudden cessation of sound is blissful. The near-absence of scritch-whisper is little short of divine. No false alarms this time, I can genuinely blame goblin mind-worms for all of my troubles. I sit down, feeling emotionally exhausted. It's hard, Toto, it really is hard to survive, a lone human being lost in the Crypts for months or weeks or years. Sometimes you have to take pleasure in the simple things.

Speaking of which, my stomach reminds me I have dead goblins rapidly cooling, and maybe I shouldn't encourage the horrible monsters of this place by leaving good food around the place.

I consider just bolting them, but the suits look problematic, like eating tinfoil and cling-film. I strip them off, or at least I tear the suits away, shredding them. I keep the name tags, though. The first goblin was Carswell P and the second Proshkin M, which is a weird coincidence when you think about it.

Being the rational human, I should probably ponder a bit, but my stomach is jabbing me urgently, so I decide that post-prandial cogitation is the order of the day and wolf them down.

And my, are they *good!* You've got to remember, I've been a long, long time with my modified gut fighting a dozen different alien biologies, proteins evolved in the light of other stars, means of storing energy less and more efficient than a little belly fat, weird sugars that'll do more than rot your teeth. I mean, there are only so many places molecular chemistry can go if you're built around the carbon atom, but a lot of those places are far from Earth. But these goblins, oh, man, these *goblins*. I never had anything that went down so smooth. They're made of stuff my microbiome tore into like it was pork chops and sausages. No long hours of aching and nausea as my stomach tries to conquer yet another unfamiliar biochemistry. You'd think the goblins had been *made* to be eaten. The only problem is how tiny they were. I crunch those two up like popcorn and they barely touch the sides.

But there are more of them out there. I can hear their whispering. It's not maddening yet, not now I've worked out my issues a little, but I can feel it rising again. I can feel them *out there*, the delicious little noisemakers. I'm going to register a complaint with the neighbours, Toto. If they won't invite me to their noisy little party, then I'm going to crash it and empty the buffet.



CHAPTER TWELVE

I HELD ON to my helmet for far longer than I should. For quite a while I sat in the lit section, trying to call the Mission Team, or Karen, or anyone. After getting nothing but dead air, I jury-rigged the receiver so I could search frequencies, scanning for any kind of communication at all. Sometimes I felt there were patterns to the white noise, like whales passing beneath choppy water, but I never got anything. The stone of the Crypts and the general electromagnetic fritziness of the place makes long-range communications nigh on impossible. But when I finally realised it was move or die, I took the

helmet with me, dangling from my hand like a teddy bear for the whole first [period between sleeps] of my odyssey. The battery was going anyway, and the red lights on the HUD weren't even touching on how fucked I was, but I couldn't abandon it even though it was just dead weight.

I could have taken off the suit, too, but the Crypts were too damn cold, no matter how clumsy it was.

Sometimes I called out, until the echoes of my own voice curdled into something nasty and I began to think that the only thing worse than being alone might be not being alone. Soon enough my throat was too dry, though. I'd worked my way through all the water the suit had salvaged from all the water my body had profligately pissed away, and I reckoned I was probably on the fourth time round. The rancid stuff I was drinking was like an old friend, like a guest who turns up and doesn't know when to go.

I found a second lit patch surprisingly quickly, almost as soon as the faint glow of the last had faded. I'd been blundering about in that pitchy dark when my fingers found tooled grooves in the stone. Following them a short distance, I saw a grey light ahead. It came from a single orb, weirdly un-luminous, sheened with mother of pearl. It had been set right in the floor by some alien race who presumably never stubbed their toes or tripped over things. You could put your hand to it, and there would be no silhouetting, no sense of actual light coming from it, and yet it bathed the passageway in a flat grey-white radiance for fifteen metres either way.

I remember just standing and staring, the helmet dropping from slack fingers (faceplate badly scratched, but who really cared at that point?) This was *alien.* This was the most alien thing I'd ever encountered. Save perhaps the Crypts themselves, and they were alien on such a mad scale you couldn't really appreciate it. The lights in the previous section, taken as a whole, had they really been so different to those lights my neighbour Steve had put out in his garden one Christmas and just left there forever? Not so much. This would have shut Steve up about his water feature and his chrysanthemums, though. And it was there, untended and abandoned in the depths of this black maze, and so was I.

That was the big red sign on the HUD, metaphorically speaking. That was when I appreciated just how screwed I was. I was never going back. I was lost in a labyrinth that might be as big as the galaxy. Alien feet had trodden this very corridor, and I had no evidence that their owner had ever found *its* way out either. I had less and less water with each turn of the glass,

and I had no food at all. Fleeing for my life, I'd not thought to grab any. All I had in inexplicable profusion was breathable air.

I slept by the alien marble, practically curled around it. I cast no shadow in its light. Perhaps it created illumination by exciting the molecules of the walls or something. Perhaps I was hoping its creators would choose this moment to return and change the bulb. I awoke, no less lost or alone, and knew the choice wasn't move or die at all. It was move or stay still, and either menu option came with a side order of die.

This is where the indomitable human spirit comes in, because rather than staying with that weird but still comforting light, I walked off into the dark. Some optimistic neuron in my brain which had never heard of statistics was telling me that to stay still was certain death, to move on was only *nearly*-certain death, because I might find something. The Crypts were vast, and who knew what was around the next corner?

I don't know how long I walked in the dark, trailing a hand along the wall to keep my bearings. Actually it can't have been long, because I didn't have any food and my stomach was far more conservative in outlook back then. A few days, maybe, enough that the water in my suit had given up touting itself as anything other than it was and now tasted proudly of pure piss in a bag. Oh, and enough for me to discover that the breathable air I was so rich in was also not a given in my new home. In the utter dark I managed to walk straight into a very different aerome. The gravity was higher, which meant that between one step and another I fell flat on my face, and the air was utterly without oxygen. Thankfully it wasn't actually toxic, but the CO_2 levels must have been off the scale, or maybe it was chock-full-o-nitrogen, but I was asphyxiating instantly, hauling in lungfuls of useless pulmonary roughage with no nutritional value whatsoever.

I didn't consciously remedy this situation at all, but my body took over and I scraped and kicked and elbowed my way backwards until my head passed through the invisible boundary and I could breathe again. I rolled over and jack-knifed until I was faceplanted into the stone with my arse towards the ceiling, belching like a seven-year-old comedian because some of what I'd been inhaling was far heavier than Earth air, and I needed gravity to help it on its way out of me. My higher brain functions, meanwhile, were happily tumbling over the thought of *What if that had been chlorine or cyanide or…*

I probably cried a bit, too. I remember doing a lot of that around then. I should have looked on the bright side. Death by cyanide gas would have been

far more merciful than starving.

A day or so later there was another lit section. This time it was a slime trail, phosphorescent enough to read by, and at the end of it was a corpse, limbless, eyeless, mostly just a leathery lump fringed with whiskers. It had metal rings punched in its skin, though, and a handful of baffling artefacts hung from them. How it might have used them, what they were for, I couldn't say. I had found the remains of a fellow explorer, though, one more wanderer in the dark that had got so far and no further.

I think that was when I started to talk to myself, Toto. I addressed the dead alien, said some words, and somehow the words didn't stop and they're still coming now. I was my only company, after all. Even the croaky rasp of my desiccated voice was better than no voice at all.

It happened soon after. How soon? No idea, see previous issues with timekeeping. I came to a chamber lit by a half-dozen globes dangling from the ceiling on silken threads. I looked up in panic, but there was no leathern monster lurking there. Instead the walls and floor were all inscribed with that strange vegetal ornamentation I have remarked on. The patterns flowed irresistibly downwards, having a definite direction, for all that they had no beginning or end. They rolled in from every wall in that octagonal room and converged in the centre of the floor, where rested a flower.

Well, not a flower, not really. A rosette of stone, a design of radial symmetry like petals folded in upon themselves over and over at every scale from larger than me to smaller than I could see, fractalling into infinity.

I should say, the Crypt-makers were very fond of rectangles and squares, save at the actual entrances to their domain, where perhaps some extra-dimensional geometry required perfect circles. The corridors are square-sectioned, the halls are rectangular blocks of absent stone. That chamber was the only place I saw in the whole circus that didn't obey the rule. Of course, I didn't know that then. I wasn't the galaxy-class Crypt-ologist I am now.

So I went in. I trod the winding path of the dendritic carvings, which seemed to twist and uncurl all around me when I wasn't looking. Of course, I was starving to death and I'd been traumatised and alone for a week, so unaccountable movement in the corner of my eye was nothing to remark on. I just approached that rosette because it was there, because it was a landmark in an architectural desert. I stood on it, right there in the centre, staring about me as though waiting for the Mission Team to leap out and yell "Surprise!"

The globes began to descend from the ceiling, and of course it was the

movement of the *light* that made the carvings seem to undulate like tentacles, or the throat of a peristalsing giant. I thought I was going to die, but instead of bolting or railing or begging, I just stood. I had crossed a line, inside my head. My indomitable human spirit had clocked off. *Just do it*, I thought, not in the trainer slogan sense, but because I was ready for the end.

Beneath my feet, the stone shifted.

I was lifted up, turned slowly about, the globes and the glistening walls circling me. Below, all the petals were opening, a great ripple of many-leaved movement as the flower opened. I revolved, arms out like a benevolent deity, like a sad clown in a musical box. Beneath me was a throat, a serrated oesophagus edged with spiny leaves. I should have been horrified, but it seemed weirdly beautiful to me, that all this alien splendour was devoted to the humdrum act of making an end of Gary Rendell, formerly of Stevenage but now very definitely of no fixed abode.

Something spoke to me, or I think it did. Maybe it was me talking to myself. I mentioned that was a thing by then, right? But I will report my impressions, like a good astronaut. It seemed to me that I was being asked a question by something vast, which could never become small enough to understand my answers. I gave it meaning, though; painted it with humanity enough to decide it was asking what I wanted. What was I after, coming in here with dead space-mollusc on my boots, crying to myself about how hard it was? Didn't I know there were kids who'd kill to be an astronaut slowly dying in an alien maze? What, basically, was my problem?

And so I told it. I told it what I missed most. I told it about hunger and how my belly felt like a raisin and I was so weak I couldn't walk another step, could barely stand up another moment. And I told it about loneliness, about humanity being a social animal not meant to be so dreadfully apart from others of our kind. I probably burst into tears again, knowing me. I mean, here I was having the first human contact with an unimaginable alien intelligence, and it was kind enough to ask how I was. No wonder I was overwhelmed with emotion. Best first date ever.

And then it ate me. The bit I was standing on retracted like a frog's tongue and yanked me down into the guts of the thing, and the petals closed over my head.

If I'd been playing the odds, this would be just one more of the predators that had evolved to survive the Crypts, and I would have been as dead as Joe and Katarin and the rest. It wasn't a monster, though; it was a machine. I'd go

further than that, in fact. It was a Machine. *The* Machine. It was the Mother Machine that said, bring me your hungry, your unwilling exiles, and I shall give them what they most desire, and they shall be born anew from my jagged, knife-edged womb.

Or that's what it probably said, my dear old Mum, but frankly I was too busy screaming to really appreciate the poetry of it. Like a true mother, in fact, it was probably telling me it was all for my own good, but I was being torn apart and so it was hard for me to appreciate it. I thrashed and fought, but it's hard to do that without skin, and with your guts unspooled like a dead cassette tape. I tried to beg for life, and then for a quick death, but Mother was playing washerwoman with my lungs and so I was unable to put my point across as eruditely as I wanted. And I tried to pass out, but she wouldn't let me. She was telling me what she was doing, in an alien notation I couldn't ever understand or even remember, but it was very important to Mother that I hear it. When my ears were torn off, she just spoke her wisdom into my brain.

I mean, I could go on, Toto, but I reckon you get the idea by now. Reassembly was even worse, to be honest, but this kind of torture-porn can be a drag, and I don't want to dwell. I'd rather look on the bright side, because it really was all for the best, just as if I was a kid who had to wear a brace for a bit to get those straight teeth. And probably the Mother Machine didn't understand about things like consciousness and pain and going goddamn crazy forever because something's peeling your skin off and thrusting fingers between every fibre of your muscles; I mean, why would it?

So let's skip forward to the moment of my second birth, when I emerged into that octagonal chamber again, just the same old Gary Rendell, mostly. I wasn't covered in blood or ichor or blue slime. I didn't have wings or talons. I didn't even have eyes that could see in the dark, because this dumbass here didn't mention that little problem to Mother. Can you imagine? I might have had these feeble human eyes poked out by a godlike alien device, and I missed my chance.

I stood there, shucking off the few rags of spacesuit left to me, looking for the scars that I knew should be there, but weren't. The Mother Machine's craftsmanship is second to none. I'd been remade at a cellular level, maybe even a molecular level. And I would be able to go find my lost kin even if I had to walk forever to do it.

I didn't appreciate it at the time, but I would never starve, never

suffocate or be poisoned (and no, I didn't ask for those, but I think it's all part of the hunger thing, or else it was on special offer or something, buy one invasive body modification, get one free).

And that, Toto, is how I got to be the man I am today: hard work and determination and an alien machine that flayed me alive so I could be the best that I could be.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I MEAN: YES…

I mean, okay, confession time, I am overdoing the naïve and tragic monster here. I am not Hercules at home with the family, after all, and while the Mother Machine might have made me Herculean, it didn't drive me quite so obliviously mad as that. I could make a lot of excuses: I've not been well, it was an off day, haven't been sleeping, all that, but I can't fool myself and I can't fool you, Toto. I can't really pretend that I just went off after the rest of the goblins without putting two and two together.

I'm going to keep calling them goblins, because one thing human ingenuity is good at is an infinite capacity for self-delusion.

I sense I'm losing audience sympathy, Toto. After all, surely I'm meant to have that big scene now where I hold up those name tags in my bloody hands and scream at the gods for tricking me. I mean, this is grade-A anagnorisis territory, as much as if I'd killed my father and married the Mother Machine. Howl, howl, howl! as the man says. And somewhere a masked chorus sings about reaching too far, tragic flaws and hubris.

But really, hubris? Me? Gary Rendell from Stevenage? Not exactly Prometheus, am I? I never stole anything from the gods. They turned up like Greeks, arms full of gifts and wanting to know how they could help. I can't be blamed, can I, for saying I wanted to get back to the others, to go home? And so it becomes a little more Monkey's Paw than Homeric ode. I made a perfectly well-meaning wish and there were unintended consequences. Mistakes were made, but innocent ones. I'm not at fault. Don't blame me.

And I still hear them, that irresistible mental thread that cuts through my brain like fishing line and draws me towards them. It hurts, that tug. It won't let me rest. Scritch, scritch, scritch all the time inside my skull as their thoughts bombard me like particles in an accelerator.

There's a pack of them just round the corner, I realise. I can hear them clatter and rattle with their tools and devices, but more than that I can hear their buzzsaw minds flaring with fear. And I should go, I know I should. I should be the noble savage and return to my land so as not to corrupt the civilized visitors with my mores. I mean, I can dress it up as diplomacy as much as I want but I'm covered in the blood of Carswell P and Proshkin M,

which would probably count as a faux pas at most diplomatic functions. Should I hold out my arms for a hug to show this modern Prometheus just wants to be loved?

And, oh, the fear! The frenetic squabbling panic of them as they try to get their gear packed up before I arrive, except I'm just round the next corner, listening. That fear, the keenest, scritchiest cicada-call of them all, except now my body reacts a bit differently. Now my body has had a taste of that fear, and the soft, easily-digestible tissues that house it. My stomach growls a demand of its own and my salivary glands are working overtime. If they didn't want to be eaten, they shouldn't be so delicious.

I make a last lunge for dignity. I am Gary Rendell, astronaut. I was born on Earth too many decades ago. I was lost from the Expedition Team too

many months or weeks or centuries ago. I will wave my humanity like a flag, drape myself in it. I will beg forgiveness from the goblins. And I only ate two of them.

And so I round the corner. I want to stand straight like Washington crossing the Delaware, but somehow the corridors are too cramped for that, forcing me to maintain my bestial stoop, my shoulders brushing the ceiling. I hold up a hand: Hi, kids, minotaur-in-training here, how's that maze working out for you?

There are five of them here, and they've been stripping something from the walls, metal strips some previous travellers laid down. There are lights here, like watery cats-eyes, but most of them are dead because the goblins are vandals and are taking away the machinery that powered them, like scrap dealers going down the street for any old iron. Don't they realise how precious these little islands of light are? Ghastly little destructive creatures.

But still, I keep one hand up in friendship. "Hey, there!" I tell them brightly. "Now, I know this looks bad…"

One of them has a cutting torch, and he takes advantage of my loquaciousness to go for me with it. The name on his badge is Li L and some characters I don't know, which suggests the Chinese crew contingent ended up on the Expedition Team whether they wanted to or not. Li L is definitely going for it with that cutter, though, and my hand of friendship ends up with a big old burn across the palm, which doesn't hurt anywhere as much as I thought it would. One of the others is backing him up with a gun, an actual honest-to-goodness chemical propellant firearm, and apparently it's monster season because they let me have it with the entire magazine over Li L's shoulder.

I feel the impacts like the punches of the Iron Hunchback (and what happened to *that* guy?) and I'll have a nice tight clump of bruises in the morning, but my skin appears to be proof against close-range small arms fire now, which is an interesting development. The others have run, and they're hauling a trolley of scrap after them, apparently important enough that they'll risk their lives for it. But then metal's scarce in the Crypts. You want building material, you've got stone, stone or stone.

And now Li L's jabbed me in the gut with the cutter while I let my mind wander. I don't think this diplomacy thing is working. Behind him, Diaz J apparently forgot to come out with a second clip, and so ze's got a crowbar and aren't we a pair of determined tomb raiders then, eh? But they want a

fight, and they want to cover for their friends, and that seems all very dulce et decorum est, so I'll play my role, snarling and swiping at them until their friends are far enough I can barely see their lamp-glow. I think they know they're screwed, by then. The burns are only skin deep and not slowing me down, and Diaz J can't put more force into a crowbar swing than ze did with hir bullets.

So I step back, spreading my hands in a shrug *what-you-gonna-do?* sort of a gesture, as best I can in the limited space, and grin at them, because they're bloody game, I can tell you. I appreciate that.

I kill Li L first because he won't get out of my face with that cutter, and between you and me it is starting to sting. I just close a hand around his weapon and his arms and clench them all into one pulpy mass with my best power handshake. Diaz J hits me in the eye then, right with the hooked part of the crowbar, and that hurts like buggery. I slam Li L down into the floor and just straight-arm Diaz in the chest, powering hir twenty feet straight backwards until ze hits a wall. That's not enough, apparently, because ze's trying to get up when I reach hir, though probably concussed and with severe internal organ damage. I put hir out of hir misery with another solid slap and briefly consider going after the others. Not like I wouldn't catch up with them pretty sharpish. My stomach growls, though, and it would be a shame to charge off and have some revolting scavenger eat these delicious meats. And it feels disrespectful to Li's and Diaz's courage to go after the others right away. It's not as though I won't be able to find them when I'm done here. No, I'll respect their bravery, and also their generous contribution to my diet.

I sit down and tuck in. Bon appetit.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SO AFTER BEING stripped down and remade by the Mother Machine, I – actually, you know the rest of it, Toto. I mean there's more, obviously; there's detail and circumstance, but is any of it really important? The scale of the Crypts renders us all meaningless, so does it matter precisely where I went, what obstacles I cleared, what strange faces and non-faces I met? You can pretty much construct it from all the usual snippets: seen things you people wouldn't believe, boldy gone, sought out strange new worlds, galaxy far, far away, trying to find a way home. I am the most travelled human being

in the history of the species. I have met aliens beyond your imagination – no forehead ridges or Halloween costume masks here, but hot and cold running aliens in every corner of this convoluted place. Some of them were going about business as usual, having tamed a corner of the Crypts to suit them, walking to other worlds like the Makers intended. Others were lost, like me. And I ate hardly any of them, Toto; only the ones like Clive who were dead already. It's only since the scritchy started that my temper's gone sour and I've started picking fights. I'm a man more sinned against than sinning.

And yes, the scritchy is my fault, in the end. I didn't know it at the time, but the Monkey's Paw surely put a finger in my eye when I wished to find my folks again. What else is it that's letting me home in on them but the changes Mother made? And it's not my fault they make me so angry, with their constant jabber and chatter. It's not my fault I'm strong now, and they can't stop me.

I'm sensing a certain criticism from you, Toto, but you'd have done the same in my position. You're a figment of my imagination, after all. Of course you would.

But enough of the backstory. I carried you from Madrid and the launch of Kaveney all the way to the Mother Machine, the story of how I was made and remade. It's time to bring things to a conclusion. That whispery whine in my head is still there, and although it's far away, I know it's the rest of them, all of them that made it into the Crypts, all those rescue parties and expeditions and scientists. I wonder who they even left on the *Quixote*. And what that skeleton crew did, when the Crypts finally swallowed everyone. Or perhaps most of them are still on the ship, already on their way home, and I'm only homing in on a few luckless castaways. I mean, that would be narratively more satisfying, wouldn't it? Not from my perspective, not from those luckless sods left behind, but for those on the ship, they'd feel a real sense of achievement. They'd get the requisite sadness about those who couldn't make it combined with the satisfaction of making it home to tell the tale. But at heart, I know, wherever they get back to, it won't be home. Not the same river, not the same man, right?

I make my approach a leisurely one. I want to give the runners time to tell tales of the return of Gary Rendell, back from the dead, come to tell you all – I shall tell you all… what? Like the man in the poem, I'm lost for words, and not only because my means of communication has become steadily more monstrous. What, really, *could* I tell you? What moral lesson has all this

suffering taught me? Don't go into the Crypts? The universe is full of aliens just as dumb as you? Astronaut is delicious once you get the wrapper off?

Don't go. I want to look back in time and speak to young Doctor Naish, or young Gary Rendell. Don't go into space, I'd tell him; don't send me into space, I'd tell her. There are plenty of others who want the honour. Don't send this bright young thing from Stevenage, please. So much could be avoided.

The best way not to get mired in same-man/same-river paradoxes is not to cross the river the first time.

And then, with the buzzing of the minds now painfully clear in mine, I lounge round the corner and discover that this is the mother lode. This is the entrance/exit, the eye of the Frog God that we so recklessly stared into. I look out and see the stars, and maybe one of them's the Sun.

There is a particular awe in coming across an exit from the Crypts. It's a rare thing – I've done it maybe a half-dozen times in all my wanderings. Mostly there are just stars, the Frog God leering at a distant sun from some remote part of its solar system. Twice there was a planet hanging there, close enough that the locals would have marked the Frog God with their early telescopes, if they ever invented them. On one of those worlds I saw long strands of light across the almost sea-less surface; not the busy clusters of cities, just long strands that might have been the work of hands or some colossal natural show. There were moving lights in orbit too, though, darting between shadows that might have been dockyards, or space stations, or captured asteroids. The other world looked dead, mottled grey, hanging in the firmament like a spent bullet. Probably it had always been that way, but I couldn't shake the thought that the Crypts sought out intelligences that might appreciate them and come walk their ways. So perhaps there had been life on that grey world, and perhaps there had been rival Frog God sects or a war over who might control the goggling visage that dominated their night sky. Perhaps they went where we so nearly went, desperate that the other guy shouldn't get the prize.

There's no planet now, of course. The Frog God's out past Pluto, always has been, always will be. The starscape isn't empty, though. The Red Rocket is there. It's still incomplete; in fact it's less complete than before, still in the early stages of construction. There's no sign of the *Quixote*, but then I wasn't expecting it. Looks like Naish landed quite a proportion of the ship's compliment at the brink of the Crypts, though, so either there was a skeleton

crew left on the old girl or something bad happened to her and this was all they could save. I decide on the latter. After all, they're determinedly building the Red Rocket rather than waiting for the *Quixote* to reappear. And then I realise the cruellest twist of fate in all of this. Why did Magda Proshkin have the fatal luck to cross my bloody path? If not for that ill chance, then she might have built the thing herself and fulfilled her own prophecies.

You seem bemused, Toto. Surely you understand that if something plays hob with space and gravity like the Crypts do, then they must necessarily play the same games with other dimensions? We thought the Artefact was as old as the universe, but it doesn't need to be. It just needs to twist time about it until it can be seen and reached from forever and now, all at the same time. And I know there must be a way of going in and out without ending up your own grandfather or past the heat death of the cosmos, because I've seen plenty of aliens using this place as their personal galactic shortcut. And if their destination is astray from their home timeframe by a few hundred million years, why, that doesn't matter a bit! Because time doesn't care, time is relative and personal, which is how I can have been wandering in these bloody Crypts so long and still make it here.

And who knows, maybe some of them'll survive to finish the Red Rocket in the end. Just because we found it derelict and incomplete doesn't mean it can't also be complete later, or earlier. Let them finish it and blast off for Earth even if it's not the Earth they want to find. What if they do end up in 5th-century Scandinavia or something? At least everyone has a working knowledge of Danish to help them tell stories to the locals.

But I don't think they'll survive that long. I have a feeling that a former colleague is going to dine on their bones tonight.

There is a chamber cut from the stone here, just behind the Frog God's eye. It's neater than the caves of the Pyramid People, but I know it's man-made. Naish has played it safe and made her base in sight of the stars, in case they go anywhere. I see maybe a dozen people, some sleeping, some upright, all suited, but most without helmets. They see me.

I recognise Doctor Naish. I should probably feel an additional stab of ire at her pasty Scottish face. She's the one who got me into this nonsense in the first place, after all. Why couldn't she have gone to study Mercury or something, and left gravitational anomalies well alone? I don't hate her, though. She's the person left here who I knew longer than anyone else, back from before the mission, before training, back when I did odd jobs for the

Madrid branch of the ESA. I feel almost fond of her, an old friend. We should catch up, chew the fat.

Just let me see everyone else off first.

There's a little gunfire, but I shake it off irritably. Nobody's much keen to go toe-to-toe with me now, not since Li and Diaz got theirs. Naish is shouting, though. It sounds as though she's calling in the cavalry, so I guess another salvage team's in earshot. The more the merrier. Let's make this a proper farewell party. Everyone's invited.

Except what comes out of a tunnel at the far end of the chamber isn't just another goblin, it's an ogre, head and shoulders above these mewling little chitterers, these stunted runts, these *humans*. I roll my shoulders, standing tall for once thanks to the space Doctor Naish has cut for me. Across the room is a metal shape with bandy legs and big, curving arms, four blank lenses for eyes and a row of chattering cogs for teeth.

I almost feel relief. I thought that scrap we had was meaningless, the clue of the food bar wrapper a mystery I'd never unravel, but here it is, the Iron Hunchback itself. It hands something off to one of my former compatriots, a device that looks unfamiliar and half-complete. Has it been trading with them, helping them? Is it a true Crypt-traveller, wise to all the paths and the tricks the place plays with time? Or perhaps just another lost exile seeking common cause? It lurches forward swiftly enough, though, joyous for the battle, the goblins running to hide beyond it. I see some dents in its armour that I gave it, and no doubt it remembers the pounding it gave me.

It tries its energy weapon first. Now, you can't dodge lasers, no matter what the sci-fi films say. You can't dodge them, because they move at the speed of light, and if you see them coming then you've already taken one through the eye. You can fake them out, though. I saw the direction its big arm was pointing in, and ran forward in an erratic zigzag, feeling the fire of it warm my hide but nothing more.

The others, Naish, Ostrom, they're all cowering in its shadow. *My* people, fellow humans of Earth, and they're hiding behind the Iron Hunchback like it's going to save them. I'm going to rip off that dome and use its body as a dustbin. How dare it stand between me and my repatriation? I will not be denied my rightful prey.

The anger rises so hot in me that I forget the next dodge and take a charcoal weal across my shoulder. The pain only fortifies me. I will bloody

have this alien tosser. ‘Iron Hunchback’ is giving the bastard way too much dignity.

“Eat it, you git!” I howl and then I’m on it, leaping forward and clinging to its shell with fingers and toes as I try to pry it open.

It’s strong, I know, but I’m stronger than I was the last time we slugged it out, and that was an even match. I am the Crypts’ darling, you metal twat, and you are going to be hearing from my lawyers. Oh, I am going to write to the editor of the *Times* about you, Mr Tin Tosspot, signed Angry from Stevenage.

Iron Git goes flailing back, off balance on those silly little feet. I grip the rim of its dome with one hand and pound away with the other, bringing to bear all the leverage of my long arms and dense muscles. It staggers and I knock a handful of dents in the metal, but the clear portholes remain unbroken, made of something far more resilient than glass or plastic. Then it brings a steel fist arcing down into my jaw. I feel a tooth explode from my lips with the force, and lose my grip. It’s after me with the energy gun as I hit the floor, but I land on hands and feet and spring right back. I will sort you out, son. You’re going home in an ambulance, you see if you’re not.

I give it a double-handed smash across the chest to unbalance it, and then go for its legs, hoping to upend it like a turtle. The Git’s surprisingly light on its toes, though, and it gets another jackhammer punch to my head that’s going to leave a bruise. Something about the mechanical advantage of its limbs and its armoured shell mean it punches even harder than I do. Probably I’m tougher, but it’s a mug’s game when I can grapple. Let’s see how those daft arms work then.

And so I get it in a hold, one hand prying at its lid again, the other buckling the plate at the lower edge of its barrel torso. Its hands lock at my shoulder and neck, but I’m right, it doesn’t have the strength that way, better at landing quick-twitch blows than sustained effort. I grunt and strain, feeling rivets and seams start to give. Let’s open up this can and find out what colour the soup is.

But I’ve forgotten the other arms, the little arms. My chest is right there, for them, and they unfold from the alien’s body and tear into me with a whole autopsy kit of moving blades and saws. I try to pull away when I feel them go in, but the Git is holding me tight, even if he can’t do much else in the clinch. It rips me up, carving through meat and organs and juddering off bone until I shriek with the injustice of it. I’m the Mother Machine’s favourite son. I was

supposed to win. I was supposed to –

It shifts the angle of its arms and flexes its grip, and abruptly the horrible pain of having a great gash carved in me becomes the even worse pain of having that gash widened by the appalling power of the Git's arms working against one another. I howl my defiance, poor monster that I am, and then its servos whine with effort and it rips my arm off.

My arm. My *bloody arm,* and a fair chunk of shoulder from the far side of that line it cut in me. My *arm* is gone. I was *using that!*

It's fair to say the fight has gone out of me. Pain and fear are now the dominant emotions holding court in my brain. The Git is up for more fight – perhaps it wants to beat me to death with the wet end. I'm not sticking around for that. I leg it, back into the Crypts. Another day, I promise Doctor Naish and her alien house guest. I let my agonised shrieks swear revenge for me: I will be back, for the whole pack of you!

I will. I *will!* And yet, whenever I stop, the blood starts, as though only my constant racked shambling can keep the life inside me. As if I'm truly condemned now, to stagger through these midnight halls like the Flying Dutchman, an endless life of pointless travel. Except even that's optimistic, because a strange feeling is creeping on me. I remember it from a long time back, a lifetime ago. Gary Rendell of Stevenage knew it, but it's not been my companion for an age. *Weakness* is walking in my red footsteps, Toto, creeping closer with every step. I can't keep going indefinitely. The strength I thought was limitless now gouts from me when I pause to take a breath, the ragged edges of one torn lung fluttering and fluting as I do.

Toto, I… I don't think I'm going to make it. And as you're a figment of my imagination, I guess you're stuffed too.

But I can't just lie down and die. That part of me was stripped away with the other fallible bits, like my fussy stomach. I need a place to go, and in all the Crypts there is only one Place worthy of the name.

I can feel the Mother Machine out there, my benefactor, my torturer, waiting for another fool to step into it so it can bestow its help. Am I grateful for that help? Would I rather have died the first time? No! I have set foot on distant worlds. I have battled monsters. Although, to Neitzsche's smug satisfaction, I may also have become one. I'm replaying my last few days and I can't quite shake a whiff of the monstrous about what I've thought and done. What with the cannibalism and murder. But I was provoked, Toto.

Mother, Mother, can you hear me, your son, your creation? I'm coming,

but you're a long way away and I grow weak. Mother, they have slain me! Send help! No, there's no help that can come in time, only vengeance. Rise from your bed in the Crypts and hunt them down. Avenge me, Mother, avenge me!

I stop. I sway. The blood is coming out of me no matter what I do. Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him, eh? Where was I keeping it all? The weakness, that eminently human Gary Rendell sort of a feeling, rises up in me like a spring tide, and I know I'm done. But even as I fade, I feel Mother shift in answer to my prayer. I feel her shudder to life somewhere in the Crypts to grant my final wish, and with that happy knowledge, I know I can let go.

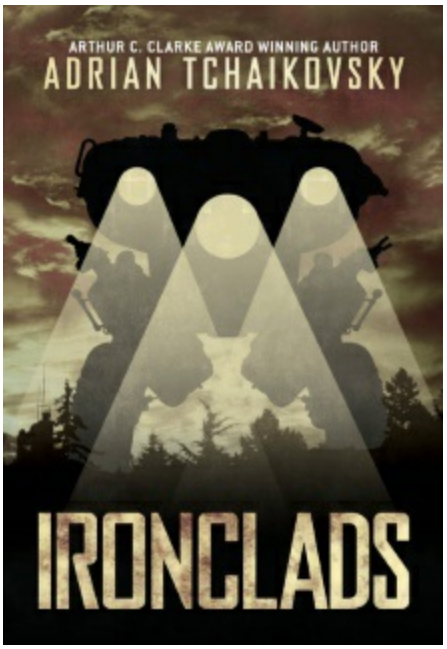


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrian Tchaikovsky was born in Woodhall Spa, Lincolnshire, before heading off to Reading to study psychology and zoology. He subsequently ended up in law and has worked as a legal executive in both Reading and Leeds, where he now lives. Married, he is a keen live role-player and has trained in stage-fighting and historical combat. He maintains an interest in history and the biological sciences, especially entomology.

Adrian is the author of the acclaimed 10-book *Shadows of the Apt* series starting with *Empire in Black and Gold* published by Tor UK. His other

works for Tor UK include standalone novels *Guns of the Dawn* and *Children of Time* and the new series *Echoes of the Fall* starting with *The Tiger and the Wolf*. Other major works include short story collection *Feast and Famine* for Newcon Press and novellas *The Bloody Deluge* (in *Journal of the Plague Year*) and *Even in the Cannon's Mouth* (in *Monstrous Little Voices*) for Abaddon. He has also written numerous short stories. In 2016 he won the Arthur C Clarke Award, and he has been shortlisted for the David Gemmell Legend Award and the British Fantasy Award.



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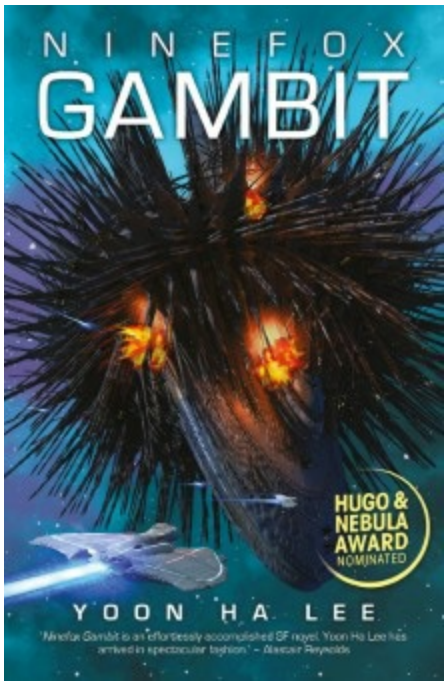
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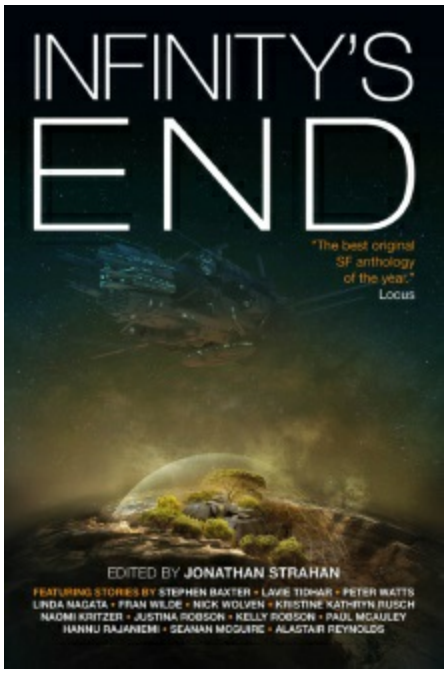
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