

Nobody's Fool

by Terry Dowling

We, in some unknown Power's employ,
Move on a rigorous line;
Can neither, when we will, enjoy,
Nor, when we will, resign.

— Matthew Arnold

WORMWOOD WAS BROUGHT TO EARTH a little after midday on 4 June 2023. It came through the sky down a magnetic funnel, held and handled by a dozen Nobodoi 'ships'. That was the only time we ever saw Nobodoi 'ships'—*straits* they were later called. The other vessels in the skies of Earth that day were either Hoproi or Matta, preparing to destroy Human civilisation, waiting to unload troops.

Many of us realised early that they had a neutron fragment in tow, cradled and focused by the *straits* with their vast counter-energies. All of Nature threw up its heart as that dreadful mass came down. And more terrifying than Wormwood itself was that here was someone who could control such forces.

1

Aspen Dirk was a boggler. He knew the Nobodoi as few other Humans could. Leave him alone in a room with a Nobodoi artifact and within an hour he would have intuited its purpose. That was his special gift.

Aspen Dirk was also a *boruk*. A third of his body had been warped out of this continuum into another, a tragic result of one of those few times when his talent had not served him well.

Consequently, to look at Aspen Dirk was something of a trial. His torso did not seem to exist. His head, neck and left shoulder slumped across his groin. He looked like a walking head with one arm.

Folded away, protruding onto another reality plane, the rest of Aspen Dirk existed, carried out the vital functions without apparent discomfort other than a sensation of being perpetually bent over.

If anyone were to ask Aspen Dirk what it was like, he would tell them of sudden changes in temperature upon his phased-out self, of strange pressures and sucking sensations. He would also tell them that in his twenty-two years of mindboggling, this had been his only serious misfortune.

Oddly enough, in a reversed fashion, this became an assurance of efficacy in his trade, and he was never short of clients—people who would come to him, anxious and hopeful, clutching some outré construct before them. Dirk would take their money, advise them of his terms, and proceed with the reading.

His great shop in Morion was world-famous. Even the off-world Bridge Races went there. The Matta would bring their artifacts and gewgaws from the great excavations deep within the Impact around Wenna. The Darzie would come with various items obtained through local trade. Even an occasional Hoproi would storm in to learn the properties of some mindboggle or other it had seen advertised as a ‘marvellous Nobodoi weapon’ and bought. Around his door lingered those Lesser Races—Salmans and Tessa and Cire—hoping for the occasional throw-away by an embittered Matt scholar or tech who chose to discard a disappointing relic rather than leave it with Dirk.

When people asked, Dirk told them it was a living like any other. He was wrong. There were very few like it.

Boford Hess was a highwayman. A single glance, one quick look, and you knew it. He wore the Great Sword, the long-bladed jerrykin, like any Aviator or Code soldier, and the usual brace of stars, and he had the dromos crest: single plait of hair woven up through the close-fitting bronze filigree skull-cap then left to fall down his back, between those broad shoulders. He had his distinctive glass, enamel and silver duty-sigil on a chain around his neck.

In an older Human language he might have been called the compleat mercenary. In another, the ideal minder: one who has come to love his employer and for whom the fee no longer matters.

And when Boford Hess came to Dirk’s door that afternoon with probably the best candidate for backman he had found in years, he felt a genuine excitement at how pleased Dirk would be, how absolutely delighted. That pleasure measured the true nature of their relationship. It made Bo smile.

The young, good-looking man at his side was a print, someone’s clone identikin, now looking for work, with very little knowledge of the world as it was and the attitude of someone desperate to learn. The slim, fair-headed, twenty-five-year-old—Green, his name was, Hollis Green—was innocent and smart at the same time, an incredible blend in these days of cosmopolitanism or else. He knew next to nothing and wanted a job that would teach him quickly.

Boford Hess liked that. The boy wore an old combat undersuit and Code military boots—standard issue for prints these days—and had the inevitable dag unit fitted to his left shoulder, giving data-flow pretty well all the time through its flexible extensor, however censored and salted that information was.

Bo had met him in a bar, learned his quite amazing pedigree, explained Dirk and the job of backman—wearing the *boruk* in a carry harness—and still had his interest.

Now Boford Hess rapped at the quarterdoor behind its concealing field, and led his candidate inside when the petals fell back.

“The front of the shop is always crowded,” Bo told the print. “Some races access boggles others can’t, or pretend they can. They stay around hoping to nurture some

latent talent. Dirk's the best, but there're always sceptics. Some customers won't give to him on principle, take pleasure in selling right outside his door."

"Thumbing the nose," Hollis said.

"That's it exactly." The boy was cheerful. Bo liked that. It made all the difference. "In here now."

They were large premises really, with all manner of rooms and tunnel links, a fortune in quarterdoors and other xenotech. An Infinite House, and owned by a Human. Bo didn't want to overdo it, given the lifespan of their backmen these past months. He would've been lucky to get anyone at such short notice, but now, such a find! The lad was special, and Bo found he was showing him more of the shop than he'd first intended.

"All rooms," he said. "There and there. Attics and sub-basements. Phase chambers, some locked for years. Empty except for their boggle. All linked to comp. More Nobodoi stuff here than in your average Carnival or museum. An investment of years."

"Other backmen?" the young man asked.

Bo laughed, thinking he might stall, then decided why bother. "I won't lie. I almost told you in the bar. Wasted. Gone. Dirk represents quite a trophy. Sometimes he goes out himself, like this time. Draws a lot of attention. Sometimes it's just the backman and me. And I tell you, Hollis, if it comes to sticks then I'll serve you up. Got that? No offence."

Hollis gazed evenly at this highwayman-become-minder as they approached another quarterdoor, let it take him as the others had.

"—have to be smarter then," he said as the phasing was done.

"Eh? What?" But Bo understood and approved. Again. And no point in answering now anyway. Hollis was standing very still, getting his first glimpse of the boruk, only the dag whispering, matching volume to ambient noise levels.

"So this is our contender," the famous boggler said, crossing the spacious workroom. He walked as any other Human would; it was the shape that made the gait seem strange. "With a dag yet. I like that, Bo. A bookman. A learner. I like that."

Hollis studied the condensed, quasi-manshape, saw the tousled brown-grey hair, ears like jug-handles (a good thing, they gave the impression of mass), small but clear grey eyes, cheeky smile, ankle-length gown (thank goodness!), soft shoes. In his forties, Hollis decided, having made a point of guessing ages, and was glad his recent dag studies into teratonics and the off-worlder variants had gotten him used to strange somatotypes. This was all quite bearable compared to some of those configurations—a one-armed dwarf, tilted shoulder-line like someone forever listening, head tipped slightly to one side. Not that hard to take at all.

"A print, Dirk," Bo said.

"Figured so, Bo. That's no Bible on his shoulder. What's this then, dagman, backman?" The single arm pointed to a large chalk-white sphere on the nearest worktable. It was half as large again as Dirk's own head.

"I haven't seen one . . ."

"Well?"

"Only read about. I'm a print, Mr Dirk. Twenty days out of rent-tent training . . ."

“So? Tell!”

“Nobodoi. A soul-stone . . .”

“Yes?”

“The remains of a Nobodoi . . .”

“Is it?”

“We think. We assume.”

“Better. More! Precision, backman!”

“Hollis,” Bo offered. The single arm waved him silent.

“When the Nobodoi vanished overnight . . .”

“Good. When?”

“284 AW.”

“AW! Say it, dammit! Say it!”

“284 After Wormwood.”

“Yes. Always say it. Never forget it. Go on!”

“All that was left. Soul-stones.”

“Yes. Ever seen inside one?”

“No, sir. Only told.”

Bo smiled. The boy learned quickly.

“Watch!” Aspen Dirk turned to the bench, lifted a tatting hammer, struck the globe hard. It broke apart, shattered, pieces flying everywhere. A bitter smell filled the room. The dry leathery kernel sat shrivelled amid the powdery remains and gave off its evil stench.

“A Nobodoi corpse, you think?” Dirk demanded.

“No, sir,” Hollis answered at once. “Just what’s left when a Nobodoi has gone.”

“Gone?”

“Been Recalled. The part that can’t translate.”

“Excellent, Hollis. Oh yes, Bo. He’ll do. A veritable prince of backmen. A scholar, and the best of them: self-instructing. The one good thing the Cohabitation’s done—made us natural scholars. You’re one to protect, m’lad. We’ll be sure to bring you back, eh, Bo?”

Boford Hess gave his own great smile. “Payment has to be mentioned, Dirk.”

“Payment?” The boggler rounded on his colleague, yet spoke to the young man.

“Hollis, what do you want most?”

“Knowledge, sir. Information.”

“See, Bo! Got a world to learn.” He turned back to Hollis. “I’ll upgrade that dag of yours with information about the Bridge Races that’ll make your head spin. And the Lesser Races. Tessa, Cire, Satlin, Amazi, all the ones we know. I’ll buy you all the RNA cocktails and empathee-totes you could want.”

The boy’s eyes were wide with excitement, Bo saw, flashing brightly at Dirk’s words. Incredible. It genuinely was what this new print wanted.

“When, sir?”

“Well now. When you’ve done a stint, I think. Carried me round a bit. Earned your spurs.”

“Spurs?”

“Feed him, Bo. Give him a place to sleep. Log his parameters. Set him up for personal tech. We leave on the third of Sellena.”

“Four days?” Bo said, wondering.

“So? Teach him weapons. Show him the shop. The hot rooms. Keep him keen. We’re crossing half the planet to learn something new about our absentee landlords. That’s more than soul-stones, boy; that’s the Nobodies in all their scheming, bugging awfulness. You with me?” He looked at his tall assistant. “We need luck and skill and good boggling, Bo.”

And whistling an old Celtic air, the boruk left the workroom and the stink of shattered stone.

“Is what he said true?” Hollis asked the highwayman. “Are we going to find out something new about the Nobodoi?”

“I can lie, Hollis. You’ll learn to. He’s a boggler. He can’t afford the luxury.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And that’s your first lie.”

2

It had been a crazy, frantic first meeting, Hollis decided, but nothing about the Dirk-Hess alliance was slipshod. In everything they did there was the easy informality of years, the simplicity of routines that worked.

The next morning at 0800, after a shower, a run around the adjacent streets, another shower and breakfast, Bo took him through the Infinite House, showing him door after door of locked boggle-rooms and the unchanging watch-screens.

Hollis saw the boggles in their stasis cradles: spheres, cones, dodecahedrons, blocks of hockiron, peterkill and dove-eye, precious ingots of jazerant, metres of curtain-wire and woven goldwire constructs that never let the eye rest. He wondered at dead-black solids in the ‘hot’ rooms; fox-mitres coruscating with rainbow heat; amblate man-shapes with solitary gemstone eyes, staggering in endless circles; interleaved surfaces of the rare off-planet ore, pracky, whose patinae changed even as he watched; complete closed-system Jannis engines glossy with their own mysterious secretions. Incredibly, terrifying to see standing there, there was even a Nobodoi were-suit complete with its mobile Companion unit and hovering Snake. The suit looked fully sealed. Hollis thought of the shattered soul-stone on Dirk’s work-bench and wondered if this golden featureless talos still contained the chalk-white remains of its vanished owner or if it had been brought here empty. Unopened, how could you tell?

“Don’t worry, it’s not real,” Bo said. “From before my time. A replica of the Blue Beach suit. Dirk duplicated it to hold the sancher. Hardest energy net he ever stole. All the better bugglers have sancher experiments going. He may tell you about it.”

Quarterdoor by quarterdoor, gallery by gallery, Hollis saw the leavings of the great Invasion—the things taken out of the Carnivals, unearthed in the Impact territories, stolen from museums and private collections, gathered together because worried

owners found DNA changes beginning, or strange dreams invading their waking lives, or incomprehensible appetites forming.

“We’re trying to counter the souvenir-hunter mentality, Hollis,” Bo told him as they walked. “Fakes make us waste so much time, and Dirk is doing us all a service. Most of the boggles are, even the greedy ones. The Nobodoi wanted a patchwork Earth, yet by bringing in literally dozens of congruent races . . .”

“I’m learning them,” Hollis said, interrupting, eyes on the watch-screens, studying the contents of the boggle-rooms they passed.

Bo couldn’t take offence. “Yes? Good. You know they themselves are incomprehensible to us, yes?”

Hollis nodded, so much like an eager child. “That’s why the Bridge Races. The main three.”

“That’s it, good. They’re the ones turning up this stuff you see.” And something occurred to Bo, something really very simple which charmed him and pleased him. “Those dag tracks are put out by Human scholars, Human retrieval agencies. Lots of conflation and salting. Vetted material. You want to ask me questions instead of Dirk, Hollis, you can ask.”

“Thanks. Sometimes I need to go slow. Pull in, you know? We’ll have time on the road?”

“We’ll have time. And I think you’ll find”—he laughed, feeling stupid and clever to be making the old joke again with someone who could smile at the wordplay—“that Dirk will be on your back in more ways than one.”

“Not to worry, Bo. I suspect he’s only half the man he used to be.”

“And that, dear short-lived Hollis, is the one comment you will never make again. Clear?”

“Other backmen made it?” Hollis asked.

“Aye. Not one missed. That’s the real reason you’re here today.”

It was ten whole seconds before Hollis laughed.

3

On 3 Sellena, on a perfect spring morning like any the pre-Wormwood Earth might have known, their small party set out. Dirk’s shop—an Infinite House closed up inside its maze of quarterdoors—was set on Protect. Nothing this side of Hoproi war-tech could touch it; using that would activate Darzie hot-glass energy sequences that would leave nothing inside intact.

Dirk, Bo and Hollis rode by closed hire-car to the Ballio district, took the Old Rail—again closed transit—out as far as the city’s tech allowances permitted. For all his status, Aspen Dirk could not get them air-travel without a trade-off of some kind. Boggles for easy miles. On principle, he wouldn’t do it.

“It’s better we’re seen,” Dirk said from his place on Hollis’s shoulders when they’d left the Rail at Bans-Corfeo and were on foot at last, Dirk settled in his comfortable old

travel-harness. “It’s good other Humans know we’re about on business. Say why, Hollis.”

Hollis smiled, glad to be in sunlight, thrilled to be stepping out so easily. The boruk weighed so little, just the mass of his visible parts.

“Builds morale. Boggling brings us all to one level. Humans are as good—”

“Better. Statistically better. Significantly so.”

“—than the Bridge Races.”

“Than any races, Bridge or Lesser. At least that we know of. And yes, it’s where Humans can make a mark. Good.”

Bo strode along to their left, grinning at Hollis’s predicament. He loved being on the road too, loved it when Dirk was happy and talking this way. Hollis was good value, so interested, so new.

Hollis saw the big man smile and felt happier than he could remember, his life ordered at last. Bo moved so easily, powerful body wearing that most splendid of Nobodoi artifacts, a sancher—admittedly a debased one, a ‘battle-net’ downgraded to a confile. Bo had the jewelled net over his chameleons, the grid sparking and shimmering with its inexplicable energies on the now neutral grey of his fatigues. Only a true sancher net could take him, that or Bridge Race tech. In the world of Humans and Lesser Races he was a god, impervious to all energy and powered weapons, to a lot of what blades could do.

On his back, Bo carried their provisions and elaborate medkit. He wore three jerrykins, one long-bladed like a PW Japanese taschi—his Great Sword—one short, and one powered bodysword. All Code issue, all approved for Human use. At his belt were two stars, one a hundred-cycle *choi* weapon, the other a Darzie copy with a hot-glass option. That had cost Dirk a very special boggle from his collection in trade.

Hollis had it much easier. As well as the boruk in his special harness, the chameleons and his own combat boots, he wore only his dag, clipped on his belt now next to a forty-cycle star and a short-bladed jerrykin. “When Dirk’s aboard,” Bo had said, and it made good sense, “I do the fighting. You do the running.”

When Morion was a tiny crust on the horizon, glittering white against the sparkling sea, the leys began—the xenofarming concessions that went up by increments and intensities, tailored to one race or another.

The Earth was girded with stasis-folds, gridded and isobarred with corridor leys and interfaces, locks and aegis points. Where they walked now was Bridge Race/Human neutral—Hoproi, Matta and Darzie could accept these indigenous tolerances easily enough; that is why they were custodians for the Nobodoi here and not some other combination of tributary peoples. Twenty miles away, beyond the hills Hollis could see to the south-west, only the resilient Hoproi could survive for long, or those several heavy-planet support races they had been allowed to bring in with them.

Hollis noticed dull orange-brown fibrils in the grass like headless flowers; smelled their flat brassy scent: Nobodoi tech, organic assists for building a ley somewhere in the west. They were fun now, exotic, hint of a major xeno rift, but soon they would be something else, calibrating seize fields, forming an enclave or a biased corridor.

Hollis knew much of it by heart, had made it part of the junk-think all clones worked at perfecting immediately after being temporised: a defence against the mentalist races. A Darzie mind-rider would get the lot, complete with dag-maps and enhancements, but hopefully little more than that, nothing Hollis didn't want known. Seeing the fibriles thickening to his right made him run the whole thing, partly for the pleasure of remembering but mainly for the inexpressible joy of anchoring the theory to the reality at last. He even recalled the maps in detail, one after the other, and was tracing the major leys away from Morion when Dirk's voice brought him back.

"The French names, Hollis?" the boruk said, interrupting as he had many times since they'd left the Old Rail for the leys road, lightly slapping his backman on the shoulder with his single precious hand.

"French?" Hollis echoed, and went immediately for his dag, brought the extensor to his right ear, heard what the dump gave. He shook his head.

"Nothing. Just an old country, an old language. French names for the five major spaceports . . ."

"Trade ports."

"Trade ports, yes. Morion, Sojourn, Nonchalance, Dayasse and Brogue. That's all."

"All right," Dirk said, dwarf schoolmaster, smirking bundle high in the breeze. "The Hoproi liked the Old French tongue. Part of their own name—*roi*—meant 'king'. They liked that. They gave the names. Call up the Bridge Races. Set: Record."

And Bo flashed a sideways glance. He sensed their mission would soon be explained, out in the leys, away from recon tech, safe in his confile's field.

Hollis made the adjustments. Dirk looked off into the distances, collecting his thoughts.

"Because I'm boruk and boggler, everyone expects me to know more about the Nobodoi than anyone else—why they came here, why they masked our world from transmissions and life-signals of the other stellar civilisations for so long, why they disappeared overnight. Even why they did what they did to our world; most importantly, if they could see through time as many believe; if they truly perceived their own Recall. If they'll Return. Even you expect it, Hollis; sometimes even you, Bo. Don't say anything, it's perfectly reasonable. Before I was groomed as a boggler, I did too. You see me do what I do and it's easy to let yourself believe I know more. I sometimes believe it myself. The world seems so ordinary, so simply . . . there. We just slip into the habit. All my replies, serious, flippant, made from irritation, are seized on and published. Out here I'm alone. You understand?"

"Yes," Hollis said. Bo didn't answer. The ley fibriles were flourishing, thickening, on the western side of the road; an enclave was definitely forming somewhere close by. Soon they'd see tech signs as well and feel the frissons from pressure variances inside the great planet-binding topology fields.

"You mind this, boy?" Dirk asked.

"I love it, sir. Please."

"Prince of backmen!" The hand slapped him lightly, fondly. "I now give you what you believe you already know because I want you biased, like these leys."

“Biased?” Hollis asked, wondering what he meant. He was still coming to grips with the idea of the Nobodoi seeing through time.

“Listen. I’ll tell you what is true. Three hundred years ago, give or take, the Nobodies took over our planet—a truly single-race planet, then if you can imagine it. I can’t. Invisible to us, alien in the extreme by all accounts, though we argue that with the fact of our very involvement in their plans. Can’t be too different. They brought down Wormwood, controlled antimatter, we believe—neutron-star stuff or whatever—levelled Old Australia to form the Impact territories, started rebuilding the world to accommodate the needs of support races. Colonising or rewarding, Hollis, who can say? Some say punishing. Don’t care what your dag says, no one knows for certain. Remember that.”

Hollis felt his heart pounding. This was what he wanted, someone to give him an overview he could trust, not the potted dag summaries. He glanced down once to make sure his dag was on Record then strained to listen, not wanting to miss a word.

“First twenty years, all dealings were carried out through the Bridge Races—Hoproi and Matta at first, later the Darzie, probably subject races to the Nobodoi for centuries, possibly millennia. The Hoproi were brought in as warriors; you will have seen some in Morion—elephantine, splendid, relentless. Get a Hoproi for a friend, you’ve got an enemy for life. The Matta came in as engineers and xenofomers on all the major gaeafame and hockiron projects, later as educators.

“This is the point. This is the bias I want to see you with, Hollis, and no apology. Between them they suppressed existing technologies, all existing national boundaries, disrupted information flow, encouraged regionalism everywhere, began the xenofoming: the hockiron land-bridges, the great irrigation and reclamation projects, the whole patchwork. Try and get a pre-Wormwood map sometime and see how it looked. Hollis, you’ll be amazed. It was so . . . simple. At the same time, they implemented the tech embargo we call the Code, fostered the feudalistic warlord communities you’ll learn about if you haven’t already, the Neolithic and Chalcolithic farm cultures. Kept us all busy in other words. But here is what matters. We’ve tech’d and toted up to being cosmopolitans again, Hollis. We’re almost back there. And they’ve let us. I ask why. Travel a hundred miles in those days, the Human societies were trapped in ley folds, locked away in topology boxes. The Human language was lost in dialects . . .”

“Then Antique—” Hollis said.

“Has really only existed since the Recall, yes. We didn’t even have a planetary language before then, just a polyglot nightmare. The patchwork is what they wanted and what they made. It’s a wonder enough of us survived.”

“Everyone’s been telling me the Nobodoi can’t have been too alien, otherwise there would be no points of congruency. With Hoproi, Matta, any of us.”

“What does your dag say?”

“What you said before. Totally inscrutable.”

“Been to any Carnivals?”

“No chance yet. I’m widening the circle whenever I can.”

“Someday we’ll detour to one. Show you what the Nobodoi liked to build, whatever those complexes really are. They’re hard to boggle. You know about the Link though? You only have to consider that.”

“It’s like a Carnival in the sea.”

“It’s where we’re going now.”

“The Link! Really?” Hollis was amazed, delighted; this was more than he dreamed possible. The boggler, all of them, going to the Link. *The Carnival*, people had told him. A functioning, *visibly* functioning, Nobodoi machine.

Bo grunted, showing he’d known it would be something like that.

Hollis grinned, glad the boruk couldn’t see. He’d already spotted Dirk as being the showman, forever unveiling schemes and mysteries, yet here was Bo knowing better than to ask. It had to irk the boggler, this calm acceptance, this almost perverse patience on Bo’s part, yet Hollis found himself appreciating the mischievousness behind it. Dirk was the one inured to marvels, the one with the wonderful knowledge, used to pulling the strings. This was how Bo got his own back.

“A lot of Humans serve the Races, Hollis,” Dirk said. “I want you Human-biased. I want you working for *this* race, you hear?”

“Aye.”

“Don’t change. Don’t give up.”

“I’ll try not to.”

“Best I can ask. You got dag on were-suits?”

“Yes, why?” Hollis felt his heartbeat quickening.

“Seen one?”

“Never.” There was a tightening in his throat, a mounting thrill of anticipation. First the Link. Now this. “We going to?”

“Bo, stop here,” Dirk said. “Hollis, move to the side of the road. Whatever you do, make no sudden movements till I say.”

Hollis did as Dirk requested. The three of them waited by the roadside, watching the gentle rise of the hill before them, the wide rolling landscape that stretched away to either side, feeling the strange breeze that blew through the grass, blew the brassy, ozone-laden tang of ley-tech at them.

“Soon,” Dirk said. “The pressure is steady. You got dag on the name? Were-suits?”

Hollis had his extensor ready but didn’t need it.

“Man-suit,” he said. “From the Anglo-Saxon *were* or *wer* for ‘man’.”

“Not ‘were’ as in past tense of ‘to be’? What the Nobodoi were before the Recall?”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Is that the origin?”

“Don’t believe so. But it used to be on the dags. So tell me what you’ve learned—No, wait! It’s coming. Any moment. Look!”

And there it was, at the crest of the hill, like any Human strolling down any road: the classic Nobodoi artifact.

Dirk’s hand came down gently on Hollis’s shoulder.

“We stand still. We do not move. We let it pass.”

Hollis felt a rush of panic. His voice came in a broken whisper. “Here to stop us, you think?”

“No, just doing its circuit. Walking on forever, observing, doing whatever it does. The Nobodoi inside has been Recalled, you understand? There’s only a stone in there. Anyway, we’ll see. It’s nowhere near at full power, but intact. It knows we’re here. Another time I might try for the sancher, but not today. See what happens.”

They stood quietly as the three machines came closer. Unlike the replica in Dirk’s collection, this suit was off-white rather than bronze-coloured, with none of the usual hockiron sheen, its ‘head’ completely featureless, the whole thing Human-shaped only in the broadest possible sense. (Dag-lore said ancient observers had christened them everything from ‘talos suits’ to ‘King Tuts’—they did have the smooth, minimalist mummiform look—and, cryptically, ‘First Russian Dolls’, whatever that meant. It amazed Hollis sometimes the terms used by pre-Wormwood Humans.)

It walked with an elusive, infuriatingly eye-catching motion, now fluid, now jerky the moment you concentrated on just the act of walking and not the whole triune. It was as if the air shimmered, and in the shimmer you imagined legs stepping out.

To its left rolled the Companion, a two-metre tall ovoid defensor column moving on its four-ball platform, that like the suit never toppled no matter what terrain was covered. At the top of the smooth column was angled a large featureless dish.

A pharaoh was taking his portable radio telescope for a walk.

And had picked up a pet along the way.

Less than a metre above the suit’s right shoulder, bonded to the whole by a maze of unseen energy fields Hollis had read about, floated the shiny flattened horse-skull shape of the Snake, smooth, featureless as well, capable of darting forth, ranging far and wide, to reconnoitre, to kill. Now it hovered, now it kept obediently in the familiar triptych configuration Hollis saw in his dag displays, that had startled him in Dirk’s boggle room: his Blue Beach replica.

Around the tripartite form were the ghostworks, the flickering, half-seen firefly glints that went with most things Nobodoi when a soul-stone was involved. Hollis blinked at them, as if to clear his vision, only to find himself caught in the roiling heat-shimmer walk of seen-unseen legs as the suit moved past them and continued on down the road towards Morion.

“Years ago,” Dirk said, leaning close to Hollis’s ear, “before the Recall, a triune like this could have struck ships from space, dug earthworks on the Moon from where we stand. Now they simply roam about, follow the leys. Now we raid them if we dare, break them open if we can, steal their sanchers if we’re lucky. Spill out the stones, topple the Companions, make the Snakes fall. This is when I allow for the time sense and tell myself the Nobodoi saw it all. That it’s all right. Reasonable curiosity. Allowable insolence.”

“Can we try it . . . now?” The thought had Hollis tense with fascination and dread.

“Not this time. There’ll be others. We’ve got work to do.”

Apart from the were-suits themselves and structures like the Link and the Stone Ships, Hollis knew that the Devil's Coach was probably the best-known of all the boggles, and often the one cited as the most popular example of the boggle phenomenon.

To look at, it was a large tumbleweed set at the centre of a shifting, twinkling dust-cloud. It was possible to enter that shimmering cloud, climb inside the large filigree ball while it idled, then, when the thing suddenly engaged, go skimming across the landscape, covering dozens, hundreds, thousands of miles before the Coach finally stopped again, formed its door, and allowed any passengers to alight.

The risk involved was very real. Some of the things were long-haulers, not stopping for weeks or months at a time. One sometimes found them idling with desiccated corpses resting in their woven compartments. Hence the sobriquet, the thrill of trepidation, the prickling of the neck hairs when one considered entering a Coach at one of the idling fields where they converged and waited.

Often there were spectators at the idlings, usually Human but sometimes Satlin or Cire, watching the arrivals and departures, studying prospective passengers as they selected their Coach, entered the accretion field and clambered aboard, settling down to wait the minutes or hours, sometimes days, however long it took, till the door formed and the Coach went off on its travels. The Coaches' motive fields caused dehydration; these onlookers earned money topping up the canteens of travellers reluctant to leave their chosen vehicles in case they moved off without them.

There were five such water vets at Blackstone Field, and they chattered in excitement when they saw the trio approach.

"Ignore them!" Dirk told Hollis. "Answer no questions."

One of the vets hurried off and soon returned with at least a dozen others, all Human, many carrying luggage.

"These are passengers," Dirk said. "They will watch to see which Coaches I do not choose, so they can avoid them as well. Later the vets will sell this knowledge to others who come."

Some of the vets and passengers were calling now, offering fees for a safe selection. A few became bolder and moved tentatively forward. Bo did no more than rest a hand on one of his stars, the vets and would-be travellers moved back.

Hollis went to speak. Dirk's hand gripped his shoulder.

"Not cruel, lad. If my auguring went wrong and one of them died, I'd be discredited and reviled. I don't need reprisal contracts. Better they curse me and keep their lives. What's the Christ-line? There are too many of you!"

Bo and Hollis, with Dirk aloft, walked to the cluster of shifting, idling Coaches, listening to the crackle and hiss of overlapping fields as the thirty or more artifacts 'conferred' together, whatever it was they did. Sometimes, mysteriously, they borrowed field-force; sometimes a Coach was robbed of its mantle altogether and left to rot and fragment, so much abandoned wicker quickly decomposing without the sustaining energies that gave it its form.

The trio moved down the eastern side of the shape with the crowd of spectators ten metres distant, paralleling their route, keeping well clear but talking excitedly among themselves, some making marks on charts. Occasionally Dirk would point to a

particular Coach and call out “No!” so the crowd would hear. Invariably someone would call “Thank you, milord!” and there would be more animated chatter.

After three such calls, Dirk said “This one.”

Hollis felt another quiet thrill. Apart from Dirk’s anticipation of the were-suit, this was his first experience of the boruk’s talent. He himself had noticed no perceptible differences; it was just one more large filigree tangle hovering in its accretion field, rocking slightly from the nudging of communing Coaches. But he had no time to make a further study himself; they were inside the field and climbing aboard. Hollis bent down so Dirk could swing out of the harness using his single arm, then entered the wicker chamber too and found himself a comfortable spot where the intricately interwoven branches came together. The para-organic artifact settled under their weight; the motes of light-borne dust became more agitated, rushing about the filigree core. Some of the other Coaches drew back as if protecting their fields.

When Dirk, Hollis and Bo had secured themselves and their gear with the elasticised straps Bo passed out, Dirk leant over to the door opening and called to the envious onlookers.

“Avoid that and that one!” he cried, straining forward in his straps, pointing with his arm. “That one’s good for north-east and a thousand k’s.”

The crowd cheered; Dirk settled back out of their sight.

“Not long now,” he said. “Remember, Hollis, we dehydrate quickly in these things. Drink lots of water.”

A few minutes later, the door narrowed—a mixture of wicker strands moving closer and the accretion field thickening—and the Coach began to move away from the others, gaining speed, the field buzzing and crackling angrily, finally settling to a steady hum. Within minutes, Blackstone Field was gone from sight, and they were racing across the sunny landscape.

Hollis got used to seeing the roads and fields and changing ley composites through a gold-flecked curtain; it was like being on a dusty road, only the dust was flashing with quartz and mica. He got used to sipping from his canteen, to drowsing in his straps, to having Dirk rouse him with precious words.

“Somewhere in Morion,” the boruk said, an hour on their way. “In the Matta and Hoproi centres, there are maps that show how these Coaches move, the leys they follow, the domains they cross, which ones they avoid. One such map would give us our own world again, bogglers believe, guide us through the Carnivals and harvester fields, the fossae and demon-leys, the sentinel-leys, all of it.”

“You’ve seen these maps?” Hollis asked, marvelling.

Bo smiled. Dirk gestured with his hand.

“No, Hollis. No. We speculate. A phrase I do not say lightly: it stands to reason. The Hoproi, Matta and Darzie aided the Nobodoi, had to negotiate the patchwork, move among what they built, amid the leys and enclaves. Of course there are maps. It may be coded behind their eyes as tote-nets and RNA protocols, but those Races are well mapped, let me tell you. It’s the Human who remains—”

“Nobody’s Fool.”

“Ah yes, Hollis. That. Just what we are. ‘Motley’s the only wear!’ Though fools have always been able to do what others can’t.”

Hollis leant forward against his waist strap, hands on his knees. “But the Bridge Races are deprived too. You said before that Humans have the ability—”

“Which is possibly why the Nobodoi want Humanity in their plan. We bring something to it they need, some small important something. As you say, the Bridge Races are deprived too, contained, regulated, though it does not appear so. They are so favoured compared to us. Our mission relates to this.”

“You think—”

“Hollis,” Bo said, gently but firmly. “Let Dirk tell us our mission.”

The print settled back, nodding.

Aspen Dirk smiled. Oh, this backman’s enthusiasm, this desire to keep at it. Dirk loved it more than he could say, than he would let himself say. He had lost too many backmen, more than two hundred over his fourteen post-boruk years of professional boggling. Bo was right, but he mustn’t dampen the lad’s spirits.

“I always allow that these Coaches are monitored, open to Nobodoi tech and so to the Races. But I *sense* otherwise—I feel the accretion field makes us safe. Morion is a com well, heavy-tech’d, all the cities are. We are safe in the wicker. Now I tell you. In the sea off Broome—”

“That’s in the Impact!” Hollis cried, unable to help himself. The excitement was just too much.

“—stands the Link. Go on, Hollis.”

Again the print leant forward, but calmer now, controlling himself.

“The great construction of shifting rods in the shallows off Broome, a tower of moving struts.” He was reciting dag-lore but not wanting to use his dag—all part of his junk-think, as with the leys material.

“Yes?”

“Considered the epitome of Nobody whimsy. Only one function—”

“Apparent,” Dirk corrected.

“Apparent function. To keep aloft the large silver ball on a jet of sea-water, sometimes pass it from one jet to another as the taller rods shift.”

“Yes?” Dirk asked for the pleasure of hearing the lad speak.

“Tallest rods: 134 metres above sea-level. Ball diameter: six metres, apparently solid. Arc of rotation from structural centre, through a radius of fourteen metres.”

“Good. Sociology then. Anything?”

“Usual pattern around the Carnivals. Broome flourishes as a tourist town because of it. Locals—Human locals—pitch it as a piece of Nobody art, a huge wave-driven mobile.”

“Scientific conclusions? Any?”

Hollis shrugged. “Leys control. A marine regulator for the Stone Ships. I don’t have much. Just that it’s a classic . . . one of the classic boggles.”

Dirk nodded at the dag unit. “You’ve got a tour-guide in that thing. We’re going to Broome. Eight days ago, the certainty came to me that the Link could be boggled at last. I know, Bo, crazy, but that’s what I got. Something occurring in Broome, or about to occur, will furnish the answer.”

“A boggled Link,” Bo said. He was frowning, an uncommon show of emotion for Bo. “Aye,” Dirk said. “Something of great importance, I’d say. My main rival in this business, Hollis, is already there, my contact tells me. Rock Tuo arrived last week—with Hoproi backing.”

“Yet you waited?” Hollis said, noting yet again how Bo rarely asked such questions, just seemed to accept.

“Correct,” Dirk told him. “It felt right to wait, to go now. It has to be like this.”

Hollis nodded. “You’re hostile competitors then?”

Dirk normally guarded his one hand like some precious familiar. Now he struck the wicker with its flat palm. “Tuo and me? Yes indeed. The Hoproi would encourage it anyway, but ideologically, Hollis, I work for Humanity, play Nobody’s Fool gladly, yes, but for that single reason—to gain respect for Humans, status, publicity, so we win back as much of our birthright as we can, so we’re not taken for a Lesser Race attending the three. We own this world. *We* are the race made specifically for it.”

“Not all Humans are like that.”

“Right. Tuo boggles for the Hoproi and the Matta, sometimes the Lesser Races—a true mercenary, a quisling. I’m betting Tuo is on a Hoproi commission.”

Hollis repeated his earlier comment. “Yet you waited.”

“Aye. The feeling, as I say. And Hoproi means tech support. I play cautious. Can’t risk a gentleman like Bo. Can’t go risking my wonderful Renaissance backman.”

“Your what?”

“Later, Hollis,” Dirk said, grinning as Bo was. “We’ve got a long way to go. Bo will rest now. You look at the leys and think of four really good questions for me. And remember, drink often. Toilet in the dump-bags pointing the way we’ve come. You piss through the wicker and we’ll reach the Impact as El Dorados.”

“As what?”

“Four questions, Hollis, for my pleasure. None about the Link. Not yet. I can’t answer one, you get another four. Squander them and I may hold things back. Keep you sharp!”

The old lands of Europe, the old nameless lands, changed and xenoformed, flashed by. The Devil’s Coach ruled it all—now speeding at 200 k’s, now dropping to 40 or 20, making calls at scattered idlings, sometimes stopping and forming its door, sometimes not, rushing on, leaving envious watchers behind. There were times when it navigated intricate routes through landscapes that seemed ordinary enough, generous and benign; at other times it shuttled through major ley-folds, fossae and quel-densities, skirting enclaves for races that could never have survived on such a world unassisted, that now abided in their bastions of strangeness as what? As test cases perhaps, trained observers, peoples being rewarded or punished, who could say?—all part of the plan, the mighty patchwork.

Sometimes there was darkness, what might have been night, what might have simply been storm shadow or some inexplicable darkening of the accretion field.

Hollis consulted his dag at every major shift, got next to nothing, and so watched the road surface, field surface, desert surface, river surface through the wicker-weave walls

and floor, wondering what the accretion field might be doing to his metabolism, his DNA, his Humanity.

Bo slept on, untroubled by such things, his big form tucked up on a makeshift shelf, a Coach veteran able to fit these amazing transitions into some sort of mundane order.

Dirk seemed to be sleeping too, a pitiful scarecrow dwarf form made bearable—given the semblance of being whole—by the loose garments he wore. But just when Hollis thought he might try to nap too, the small grey eyes opened and the boruk asked “Well?”

“Disparate gravities,” Hollis said immediately. “How can that be? It would crack the world.”

“Wasted question,” Dirk said. “Your dag has it.”

“I don’t like using it in front of you.”

“I know. I understand. Nobody tech. The same they used to bring down Wormwood, create the Impact and sculpt the Earth. The Nobodoi ships—call them ships—the *straits*—are buried across the planet, landlocked, field-protected, bonded to the planet forever, growing into it, can you believe that? Using jazerant to interface and extend. They create the stasis chains which in turn allow the leys.”

“The scale of it.”

“Aye. Impossibly vast. Gaea totally re-made, the intricacies, the fine-tuning of tolerances. Think of the balances. The leys are not just pressure corridors, Hollis, and not just gravity biases either. A world’s evolutionary products are tuned to its unique planetary field. Such things are simulated here for many different worlds. It’s infinitely complex.”

“The Carnivals are like the life-boats then? Concentrations of Nobody tech serving the straits?”

Dirk grinned, pleased. “Yes, the life-boats of those great antimatter-handling craft. Still, you wasted a question.”

“All right. Evidence of Nobodoi regard for Humans; that we are more than just a Lesser Race.”

Dirk frowned, grinned again. “Much better. A number of things. Diminishing ley activity around Human centres in the last hundred years. Removal of causation ditches; downgrading of stasis points and aegis points; permission for Humans to travel, to enter the Darzie and Matt civil services, even fill some off-planet postings, to play a part in our own education . . .”

“All part of routine assimilation, surely. Of course we would be given certain key roles on the world native to us.”

Dirk watched the print calmly. “Some Lesser Races moved off-world altogether . . .”

“Only practical. Next phase of the strategy. The planet is fully subjugated; move out unnecessary forces.”

“Or alien viewpoints no longer needed,” Dirk said. “Very well. The bringing in of race-enhancing species like the Amazi and the Satlin.”

Hollis went for his dag, wanting race lexicon, again stopped himself. He had used it constantly, habitually, before Bo had found him; now he hated going to it all the time. Dirk was encyclopedia enough.

“I don’t know those peoples,” he said. “But it sounds like pastoral care, ministering to the morale and psych needs of a subject race. Again, good policy.”

Dirk smiled at the young man’s earnestness. “Only Humans are bugglers!”

That made Hollis stop. He noticed Bo was awake then, that the highwayman’s eyes were watching him. Dirk had been aware of it; he included both of them in his answer, his voice quite different, soft and intense, as he continued.

“The Nobodoi see through time. I *know* it.” He hesitated a moment. “Rock Tuo knows it too, other bugglers. The Nobodoi are grooming a race which can intuit them. Not destroyed them, not just culled them, not just assimilated them. The Bridge Races are worried by it; Tuo has a Hoproi sponsor, Big George himself. I was contacted by a Darzie light-commander and two Matt high solitaires, by Hoproi who pleaded and threatened.”

“Pleaded?”

“Oh yes, Hollis. They do not lose face as we do. They whine and wheedle and offer all sorts of gifts. They bluster and make it all seem fun. If the Nobodies see through time, they know what Earth becomes, why they were Recalled, whatever that is. If they see through time there is nothing any of us can do that isn’t already known—unless some Humans, bugglers, are outside the prescient whole. We go to Broome because there is an urgent disclosure about the Nobodoi to be made—from that classic boggle. We only need confirmation of the time-sense, because Humans saw it first! Will that answer your question?”

“Yes.”

They were quiet in the compartment then, mainly because the Coach was sweeping onto the land-bridge at last, a great bone-white hockiron lattice laid upon the ocean. Hollis was out of his straps, moving from one interstice to another, trying to get the best view possible.

Their strand took them into the south-east, the Coach reaching velocities of 400 k’s along the grid. Beneath them the Old Indian heaved its whitecaps, threw up shifting ranges of dark blue water, the greater swells breaking on the lattice arches.

Hollis sat pressed up against the compartment door, wishing now that it hadn’t narrowed and filigreed and dusted over when the boggle wasn’t idling. This was true ocean he saw through the dusting of the field, a vastness of water miles deep in which the continents, original and cultured, Earth-stuff and chemically inert hockiron foundings, stood like high dry table-tops.

It was a difficult, awe-inspiring concept; he might never get used to it. Hollis studied the Nobodoi grid, the now gleaming, now dull, now foam-washed xenotech, bone-like and mighty; was sure he could smell the brine and feel the wind through the field, carried to him by the same osmosis that gave them air to breathe.

“This is not a transportation system,” he suddenly said, sure of it.

He had his back to the others; he did not see Bo’s brows go up when he glanced at Dirk, did not see the boruk’s hand open out like a reverential flower as if to caress him with honest affection.

“No?” Dirk said. “What then?” The words were so quietly said.

Hollis shrugged. "Communications. We're part of a message. Or maybe we're ferrying enzymes and volatiles across the net, spores and pollens, building something. Dismantling leys, re-aligning them. It could be possible. The Coaches might do it, like shuttles weaving change. Helping make the changes."

Bo laughed, slapped his thighs.

Dirk was grinning when Hollis turned, with a sudden telltale glitter in his eyes.

"Dirk, what?"

"Hollis, listen. For ten, eleven years, Bo has been my only trustworthy friend, my sole confidant. Now I get me a clogue, a print, a rogue identikin who right before my eyes begins to read the world anew. On his first land-bridge, he stops being wide-eyed tourist, covering parochial. He translates. Right or wrong he keeps at it. Bless you, Hollis Green."

"But—"

"Don't stop! Give me whatever you get. But now it's callisthenics. Bo, exercises! Rock Tuo will try to kill us for certain. Big George must have his fun. We've got to be ready."

They were at 600 k's an hour in their inertia-free transport when Old Australia loomed ahead, a low crust against the horizon, the hockiron lines converging there, emerging from the ocean like vast white conduits, the very bones of the world, merging again with the old red land.

"The Impact," Dirk said. "Fewer leys but more severe, larger demarcations. Out there is where Wormwood came down."

"Wenna," Hollis said, watching the ancient land come at them. "The Nobodoi city. What is it like?"

"To call it that," Dirk said. "Think of a spaceport that can take antimatter straits, think of creatures setting up house in the Carnivals and you'll have some idea of how strange it is. We will not go to Wenna."

"Humans do."

"They do. They surely do. And not just the Aviators. The Bridge Races let many Humans go there now, I'm happy to say. But the air is wrong, the feel of the reality. It's a hardship posting. We will stay on the coasts. That is Broome there to the south; you can see the Link—that glint is sunlight on metal or the water-jet. We'll overshoot that. The first idlings are a hundred k's inland."

"These Aviators?" Hollis said, watching the distant flash of light, thinking of the Nobodoi city even further off, a hockiron city, of Humans who would live there, and surprisingly it was Bo who answered, giving a quick, scornful laugh.

"Misguided, Hollis. Locked up in codes of honour. They think flying gliders over the heads of the Bridge Races constitutes revolt, makes a case for Humanity. It's pathetic."

"At least they do it."

Bo shook his head and looked out through the wicker.

"They do it," Dirk said. "But they make themselves, all of us, look foolish, self-important. They try, yes, flying their gliders about. But they're a sad, swaggering lot."

"It would be terrible not to matter, wouldn't it?"

"What?"

“Like the Aviators. It would be terrible for you and Bo and me, other bogglers, to be doing what we’re doing and for it not to matter. The plan may be set irrespective of us. We only think we’re making a difference. We may be just one more Lesser Race, all safely known.”

Which was such an encapsulation of what Dirk feared most in the entire world that he swallowed before he answered, and Bo saw the distress voiced only a few times in their eleven years together.

“Let me know what you read on that, Hollis,” Dirk said. “Let me know how it changes. But now, precautions. Be ready.”

“A feeling, Dirk?” Bo said from his ledge of wicker.

The boggler nodded. “A strong one. Be ready.”

5

It was justified. They were down to 100 k’s, no more than ten minutes from the idlings, when a tremendous blow struck the Coach, sent it spinning off course, crackling and weaving, its accretion field shedding motes, losing cohesion, the energies being stripped away.

“Nobodoi weapon!” Bo said, because the boruk was too busy holding on with his single hand to speak. “Single pulse. Has to be to take a Coach!”

“What’s that?!” Hollis cried, as the Coach veered and twisted.

Braced against the wicker like a maimed starfish, Dirk answered. “Easy, Hollis, easy! Not Nobodoi. A Nobody weapon. It will be Hoproi.”

The Coach had steadied but its field was badly depleted. The filigree ball slowed, rocking and skewing, finally settled, scraping the red earth. The door widened back, just seemed to be there.

“Quickly!” Bo said, and had himself and Dirk free of their straps. He lifted the boruk after him out of the Coach.

Hollis made sure his dag was operating, tossed out his own gear, then passed Bo’s larger weapons out to him before scrambling out himself, terrified for the moment that the barrier would re-form and trap him inside.

But the Coach was dying, if that were the term, if it were in truth the lifeform it now seemed with the last of its lights flickering away, leaving it a black, thorny tangle—a forlorn thing in a landscape of red desert that stretched to the horizon in all directions but one. To the north-west there were hills, a low range of deeper red-brown, where the terrain was broken by gullies, outcroppings and old water-courses.

Bo lifted Dirk into the harness with practised ease, barely giving Hollis time to get his bearings.

“Quickly!” he told the backman. “We have to move.”

“We were shot down!” Hollis cried. “They’ll be waiting!”

“No, Hollis,” Dirk said, his voice reassuringly calm. “Not new for us, being grounded. Someone wants us stranded here.”

“Who? Why?”

“We’ll try to find out. Hurry now.”

Hollis set off at once, following the big highwayman towards the rockforms ahead.

“It looks peaceful,” he said, hoping Dirk would say more about who had struck at them, but it was Bo who answered.

“Hollis, no time now. This is the Impact and this is a ley, regardless of how innocent it seems. Look!”

He pointed to the east where the morning sun was well above the wide desert. Hollis saw three chalk-white spheres sitting in the blood-red dust.

“Soul-stones!”

“Aye,” Bo said. “Relics. No one has collected them. No souvenir-taking. Consider why.”

Hollis moved quickly, matching the big man’s stride. For several minutes no one spoke as they crossed the open terrain.

“Trouble ahead,” Dirk said at last, almost in a whisper.

Bo did not turn. “Yes?”

“Harvester field. You get dag-lore on harvesters, Hollis?”

Hollis murmured quick words into his extensor but Dirk interrupted.

“Forget that now. Precis jazerant.”

“One of the new metals,” Hollis said, condensing another of his junk-think patterns. “They make it—”

“They? They? Who?”

“Machines. Nobodoi machines.”

“Wrong. People say that because Nobody were-suits often include harvester fields in their circuits. No, this is Hoproi tech given Nobodoi refraction fields to make it fun for the Hoproi. There’s a field of harvesters ahead.”

“Invisible,” Hollis said.

“Exactly. Thirty metres beyond those rocks it starts. Soon we’ll see looters trying for the jazerant stockpiles.”

“But—”

“Come. You’ll see.”

Within minutes they had reached the broken terrain, stood looking out over a network of shallow gullies and claypan. A well-marked trail followed an old watercourse. It was very quiet; nothing moved in the morning heat but heat-shimmer itself. Again there were soul-stones scattered about; Hollis counted at least five, saw fragments of others. Many Nobodoi had been in this harvester field when the Recall took place all those years ago. It made him wonder what jazerant could be that they had supervised its mining personally, what easement of spirit they might have found in watching the Hoproi tech at work.

“Look!” Dirk said, at his shoulder, single hand pointing. “You can see tracks. These machines are mostly just frames, Hollis. Three to four metres square, on tread systems. They usually move very slowly, can take hours to go a few feet. They draw trace elements into their bonding chambers, make the jazerant there, store it elsewhere in their frame till they’re at quota.”

“You fear them?” Hollis asked, taking care where he stepped on the uneven surface.

Dirk gave a laugh. “Most are set with spring-loaded blades. Some extend arms to snare victims, pull them within range of guillotines and grinders. Some set up elaborate articulations, use more mundane metals to build extensions for themselves, trellises and hedgehogs. The more sophisticated make darts and shurikens, fuse lenses and make sun-traps. They have low-grade intelligence; their twin passions—twin programs—are to make jazerant and embellish themselves with armament.”

“I haven’t learned about them yet,” Hollis said. “Just that the first Human observers called them Swiss Knives.”

“Now you know why. It’s symbiosis. The Nobodoi wanted—want—jazerant, devised the means to make it, gave the brief, allowed for species needs in the implementation. The Hoproi met the requirement in their own terms—they wanted death engines and this is a war-garden. Serves two purposes. We were struck with a Nobodoi weapon used by Hoproi.”

“You said were-suits included these fields in their circuits. Could one of those have struck at us?”

“Never in my experience,” Dirk said. “That would be one Nobody artifact striking at another. No, I think Hoproi. Since Rock Tuo is associated with Big George, I’m betting it’s Big George’s war-garden.”

Hollis blinked in the morning glare. “I keep thinking I see something out of the corner of my eye.”

“Refraction tech. Nobodoi. The machines are invisible to us but stand in plain sight to Hoproi tech vision. What they do with the jazerant now is anybody’s guess.”

“You said before.”

“All right. Speculations. Feed it into the straits. Build an alien superstructure for the Earth. Hockiron armour. Or prisons for antimatter remnants. Bits of Wormwood.”

“Perhaps we can’t ever go back,” Hollis said, watching the quiet shimmering hillsides as he walked, looking across the slopes for some further trace of the invisible engines behind their silent refraction fields. Did he imagine it, or was that a metallic glint at the corner of his vision? Probably sunlight off a quartz outcropping.

“I asked you to tell me when you had something, Hollis,” the voice came, calling him back.

“What? Oh, I just think that whatever Humans become, we’ll probably never again be able to manage our own world unassisted.”

“I often think that too.” Dirk kept his voice low, like conscience whispering at his backman’s ear. “But we mustn’t let that stop us. Learning goes two ways in this. Gaeatech is far more than terraforming. The Nobodoi have done this before but they have never done *this* before.”

“You’re quoting yourself.”

“I am, yes.”

“What now?” Bo asked, quiet patient Bo, tactful Bo, to remind them this was a benign ley, and the Impact.

“There are pressures where the machines stand,” Dirk told Hollis. “All we need watch for are the plantings where a machine has built itself outworks, fences and trellises. The refraction capability is systemic. Whatever is part of the machine is

shielded; we see only what is projected away from the frame. Javelins. Broken sections like there.”

His hand pointed to a low-point in the arroyo before them. Hollis saw what did look very much like a dark section of metal fence: several rust-worn uprights joined to a broken-off length of rail.

“The machine had to move on—probably to meet its quota when a spot didn’t yield a good enough trace flow. They use fields to draw elements from way down. Sometimes there are obstructions. It sacrificed that—its hobby while it worked the area.”

“But Hoproi?” Hollis said.

“Correct. Hoproi tech for a Nobodoi task. All very orthodox. Broome locals will say otherwise, tell you its a Nobody field, push the invisibility angle as proof. Tourist realities are the enemy as always, confusing the issue.”

“We can move,” Bo said, and Hollis realised that the highwayman had been using his confile to confirm Dirk’s estimates. “There.”

They continued down into the valley, moving along the wide trail amid old tread-marks, past the nearer soul-stones (no tread marks near them, Hollis noticed), past the ruined length of harvester fence set with nodules, barbed-wire encrustations and some exotic flourishes—harvester exuberance?

Dirk guided them, reading pressures. “There!” he’d say, and “There!”, pointing, and Bo would move up to check it with his confile. Only once did they disagree, Dirk insisting on an elaborate detour off the trail, only to admit suddenly that he was wrong. The harvester he sensed had long ago departed, at full quota, leaving behind some jazerant tailings—a rare enough thing and easy pickings for looters or some future machine.

Hollis made himself stay calm, but he kept thinking that the harvesters might have registered their presence, and even now one or more might be converging on where they stood, moving relentlessly towards them, devising intricate strategies as they came.

The thought did not seem to worry Bo. He bent down, picked up a coin-sized fragment of jazerant, passed it to Dirk, who considered it for a moment then passed it down to Hollis.

“Here. The Nobodoi may phase it away later, but if they don’t, put it toward your sigil.”

Hollis took the precious fragment, held it up to study the blue and mauve roils, clenched it in his fist a moment, then slipped it into his pocket. “Thank you. Both of you.”

Several hundred metres on, as they rounded a clutch of towering sandstone rockforms, they saw some looters on the far side of the dried-out water-course, a dozen men and women dressed in chameleon drab moving single-file along the gentle slope, apparently following the tread-path of some unseen machine. All had packs on their backs and carried long tag-poles, testing the ground around them as they went.

Dirk was known to them. The second figure in line waved, the fifth as well. Dirk gave a quick salute in reply. Not a word was said.

It was the silence that got to Hollis more than anything. Here were Humans plundering a war-garden; the Hoproi would be off somewhere monitoring this, watching and wagering, continuing to cull the host-race by pandering to its appetites—its greed, its simple need to win. These Humans came here knowing this.

“This is sad,” he said, actually forgetting Dirk for the moment, again thinking to catch the briefest, corner-of-the-eye glint of something on the slopes—the optical trick that marked things Nobodoi. When he tried for it again, the spot was empty, unremarkable in any way.

“No, Hollis. These are people making themselves meaningful to themselves. It’s something they let us do. We do it.”

But Hollis was still out on the slopes, watching the looters moving in their cautious line. It seemed comical, almost pathetic. All of it futile somehow. Dirk and his pressures; Bo’s confile scans; the looters with their secret hand-signs to one another, their poles and their careful prodding, all because of tread prints that looked more heavily impressed, that might mean a near-full jazerant store and not an excess of cunning armament. It was one more tourist reality, all this. Things for the marks while the real doers went about their business of running the world. Just fakes and distractions. Absurdities. The problem of all prints too, Hollis realised, had the sense to realise, moving on again, aware of Bo and Dirk and that the boruk had said something just now. His dag would have it; he’d left it on Record. He’d review it later.

There was a scuffle to the side, a cry. One of the looters had found soft earth, had poled and triggered a planting more intricate than most. Further down their line, part of the slope gave way, a looter slid downslope with a yell, fell kicking and scrambling, wrist and leg-hooks trying for purchase, straight into a harvester’s reach.

The man was lifted bodily, whisked to a point eight metres away, three metres off the ground, his form cross-hatched with refraction bars of the concealed frame. There were guillotine sounds, scythe closings; suspended in mid-air the man seemed literally to fall to pieces, limbs and head dropping away, the torso mutilated further before being cast aside. There was a great deal of blood—making a paint-out of parts of the harvester gridwork till cunningly-wrought scrapers and volatiles quickly slid and sprayed and restored full refraction.

It did not end there. An invisible extension must have engaged then, carefully placed, pushing up through the dirt, for another looter screamed, plunged forward, tipped off balance, and tumbled downslope, dog-legging from an unseen fence across to where the machine waited. Again, service extensors went into play with the sound of whirring gears; the latest victim—a woman—was taken aloft, her blood streaked uncannily in swathes across the bright air, smeared along the edges of unseen knives and deadly rollers.

Utter silence followed—the sense of it at least—for the looters were casting about them with their tag-poles for a time, then finally started back the way they had come.

“Do you know what they do with the jazerant they steal?” Dirk asked, but left no time for Hollis to answer. “They might keep it in a private hoard somewhere until, one night, it just disappears, phased away by Nobodoi tech. Hasn’t happened to me. Seems I’m allowed to keep the bits I’ve got. They may even let you keep your piece, seeing

you're with me now. What most looters do is sell it back to the Hoproi, since only they really know why the Nobodoi use it—present tense. And maybe the Hoproi just stockpile it against a Nobody Return. Maybe—as you say, Hollis—they feed it into the straits and build a new skeleton for poor old Gaea, new underpinnings for the planet. These death engines may belong to Big George. He was the one who was keen to get me here, did all the talking. It may be his personal war-garden, in which case I'm betting he'll be waiting for us. We should go.”

6

Big George was indeed waiting.

As they cleared the ravines and passed through the last of the hills on a graded, unsurfaced road, they saw the Hoproi war-master ahead of them.

It was absurd and unsettling the way the creature just stood alone by the roadside, as if by keeping still enough he would not be seen. Hollis had learned the schematics and data profiles by heart; he had seen about ten Hoproi at safe distances. This was different. This Hoproi was considering him, watching him approach, was here partly because of him. He was in the creature's plans.

And as Bo, Dirk and he came down the road, the size and presence of the creature became frighteningly real. The comical faded; the fear came. This was alien stuff, a being, mind-set, value-system evolved under a different sun, according to vastly different parameters. Now he stood in hot bright sunlight amid this ruined desert terrain and could only be apprehended, explained—neutralised—by what it resembled.

Someone had tried to make an elephant. Hollis couldn't avoid the primer comparisons he'd been given in his rent-tent. Someone had taken four elephant legs and, without the image of the original, had tried to fashion a beast that went with them—and got it splendidly, extraordinarily wrong. The great barrel torso went up three metres from those legs, to end in sensory fibres and a protected eating orifice not presently visible. Two thirds up that great body, at the cardinal compass points, four trunks were coiled like neatly closed springs against what was usually a grey-brown hide. The creature had four solitary eyes, each positioned in the cartilaginous girdle between the trunks. At least two of them studied the Humans now as they approached.

What made it even more absurd and unnerving was that Big George was painted all over—a bright powder red mostly, with blue chevrons and stars, yellow suns and zig-zags, like some escaped circus beast from another age. The trunks themselves were variously orange, light blue, mauve and yellow.

An elephant starfish, Hollis decided. A discarded beach toy.

“Ho, Bo!” the creature boomed in his big jolly voice, more a result of the race mind-set than any modification or conditioning tote. No easy translation tech for Hoproi; they underwent excruciation, endured horrific surgery to let them speak Antique. Such was their commitment to their job on Earth. “Noble choi-boy, join me when Dirk is done, yes? Speaking of. Good morrow, Aspen Dirk. This is a day, what? Hollis Green, print, C-

mate, identikin, clogue, man so new, welcome and bless! You have a noble hat. A most eminent hump. Quasimodo-elect to the boruk boggler hisself! Salute!”

Hollis blinked in the heat, matching the bizarre words to the reality. A Hoproi had addressed him.

“Hello, Big George,” Dirk said, calmly. “Your garden?”

“Mine?” the Hoproi boomed, his voice echoing amid the hills. “Hah! Good show!”

Which was no answer.

Dirk tried again. “To what do we owe the honour?”

Big George waited, and Hollis realised that the creature waited to see if Bo were going to speak, saw that Bo was carefully presenting himself as a Code contract soldier, as the silent equivalent of one of Big George’s own absent, probably concealed choi warriors. All part of the act.

Finally, the creature spoke. “You come to plumb the Link. You and Rock Tuo. You plumb the Nobodoi, you struppy boggle-boys. Work, work, work!”

Hollis had his dag extensor fitted but got nothing for ‘struppy’. Hoproi loved words, made up their own patter according to ancient idioms and euphonies.

“You got good bristling Bo, so coy today. You got confile and inclination. Big guns. I tilt at your windmills, fit you all into good plan.”

“We got through your garden,” Dirk said. “Enough plans for one day, Big George.”

“Not that! Not that! Pah!” And the creature moved for the first time. One of the four trunks curled in close against his body shifted a little and the bonding horn peeped out, glinting; the trunk settled again. Somewhere close by, four armed and armoured choi were watching, saw that twitch and understood it.

“Listen good!” Big George said. “Not all Hoproi A-1 good guys like Big George. Uh-uh. Some Hoproi stop you quick smart—no more Dirk, no more Bo, Hollis, finito! Some chapters want Dirk, Bo and good new Hollis at Broome, yessiree! Some want Link solved, yes please. Some chapters shout, whoa! No go! Ka-pow!”

“You want us to boggle the Link? We can trust you, Big George?”

“What? What’s that?” Big George boomed. “God’s rockets! I fight for you. Big risk. Over there”—and with a crack that had Hollis wide-eyed and taking several steps back, a trunk whipped out and pointed into the north-west—“you find Fancy Anselm dead, choi slashed and slotted. Who did that smorgasbord, you think?” The trunk coiled back against the great torso.

“Doesn’t prove a thing, Big George,” Dirk said. “He could’ve been the good guy, yes?”

“God’s rockets, you testy Thomases get me sad. Here I stand armless—”

“Harmless,” Dirk said.

“Verily, genuine Magna Carta. Saint of golden excellence and faithfulness—”

Dirk thrust his single arm out like a swan neck, like a raised Hoproi trunk, Hollis realised, and Big George stopped. Dirk brought his arm down, but very slowly.

“You want Rock Tuo to get you the Link—boggling, I’m thinking. Want me for a back-up because most bugglers won’t play to Hoproi rules. But you’ve already got a plan, Big George. You get some chapter points for a personal play right now.”

“Thomases!” the Hoproi bellowed, moving out onto the road, trunks uncurling, horns showing. “Fraidy cats! I need you at Broome. Not Rock Tuo! Pah! Everyone must be in the show or it folds.”

Hollis couldn't get the sense of it, and felt that Dirk was probably missing it as well. But one thing was certain: this was a show of Hoproi emotion.

“We'll go there,” Dirk said carefully. “But as independents, you read me clear? Meet up later and compare notes. See what Rock Tuo gets, yes?”

“You never make it,” Big George boomed. And the creature moved his trunks in a distinctive configuration.

Dirk knew to hold on when Hollis went sprawling face-down in the dust, pushed by Bo, guided by an arm across his own disfigured back, just in time to miss starshot that kicked up dust, tore the road surface where they had been standing.

Bo had his own star aimed, sent three quick pulses of energy into the hills to keep choi support at bay.

Big George had passed a confile net from his unseen rear arm round to a front pair; the net sizzled and poured shield energies across the painted hide.

Very calmly, Bo brought out his second star. For the first time he spoke. “You got hot-glass covered on that, Big George?”

The Hoproi laughed, shifting his trunks, delighted, dismayed, who could ever be sure?

“God's rockets! You got hot-glass on the menu, Bristling Bo?”

“Verily, Big George. Smell and taste on the cart. Do me the honour?” And he triggered the option. The air buzzed, suddenly filled with the smell of ozone over and above the confile discharge.

“Rain check on taste, Big Bo. Not dressed for Darzie. You take the cake.”

“See you in Broome,” Dirk said, taking charge, maintaining the choi protocols.

“We can hope, fine Dirk,” the Hoproi said. “Choi come home, Bo?”

“Bring them home,” Bo said.

Big George liked it when Dirk's warrior spoke. As if he had just now made no attempt on their lives, he rumbled pleasure, moved his trunks to make semaphores.

In from adjacent rockforms ran four Humans dressed in the plated beetletech of Ardent Spoilers, their chest plates marked with Big George's personal sign rendered in the intricate colour gradations of the Hoproi's shooting club chapter. Men or women, it was impossible to tell, but they ran cruciform with their arms outstretched, intended to show they meant no harm, but a manic, disturbing sight. They whooped as they came, making a ululation that was equally unsettling: these were Humans deep inside a Race conditioning, their Humanity drawn dangerously thin, contaminated, poisoned but lovingly preserved. Through them, Big George savoured the Earth, read the reality of the downtrodden host-race, fought Human war in a Human way.

When the four augmented shapes stood about their lord, arms still cruciform, choi was made. The four trunks reached out, a bonding horn slipped into the special cup at the base of each Human's spine, locking in place, completing the fighting-wheel. Now the arms came down, the four armoured figures awaiting their master's commands.

“Noble star,” Big George said, acknowledging them, drawing on their viewpoints now. “There is a ley that runs through my heart. It draws destiny, sweet and fair. Love you, noble Bo. Honour you, Boggler Dirk. Adieu, fine copycat, Hollis Green. We build plans and pictures for you, yessir!”

And as a clumsy-looking but never clumsy-moving cluster of shapes, a well-rehearsed pinwheel, the formation moved off, falling into ‘running star’ deployment: one Human to the front, one to each side, the side trunks curling back to allow the side companions to run freely, the rear trunk sweeping out to the left so that companion had no trouble matching the pace.

Hollis could not look away. He found it ridiculous, yet elegant and unnervingly impressive, something wrong and yet right. Nor was he surprised to see that they went, not down the road towards Broome, but across the rocky terrain as if indeed keeping a ley-line angled through Big George’s enormous heart. Within minutes they had vanished from sight.

Dirk’s hand rested on Hollis’s shoulder. “Comical, efficient and ruthless. They fit into a 4000-tonne combat scat and a diplomatic salon with equal ease, and yet like nothing better than to get out in the heat and dust like this. They are the deadliest enemy because they make us laugh while they kill us.”

Twenty minutes down the hot quiet road, Dirk, Hollis and Bo found the body of Fancy Anselm lying with its choi-mate Humans in death, the thick deep Hoproi blood mixing with the always too red blood of its companions. Starshot had done it; the wounds were clearly those of high-cycle Code weapons. Fancy Anselm’s confile net was inert, wasted.

Hollis could only stare in amazement. Another first in his short life: a dead Hoproi. And for Bo, too, this close, going from what Hollis heard the big man tell Dirk, as unexpected as that was. Choi died, Hoproi almost never did.

The great barrel form was flaccid now, the blackening, grey-brown hide unadorned but for blue chapter stripes and chevrons, the four trunks locked fast to its full complement of Battle Wands, probably having dragged them to a corporate death.

Hollis raised his extensor, took dump on it. Apparently the spinal horn of each umbilicus contracted violently, piercing the grafted ledge of bone and synthetic at the Human’s coccyx, literally locking the companion to the host in death-clutch.

In principle, it insured surviving choi would avenge a wounded or dying host—there was no alternative—and Hollis wondered how that was covered in the Code recruitment brochures.

“Check the sidekicks, Bo,” Dirk said. “Hollis, you see the implications?”

Hollis watched as Bo went from one choi-mate to the next, impressed with how skilful the man was at using Hoproi med-tech. He had to make himself think of what the boruk had asked.

“I think I do. Hoproi do not often kill Hoproi.”

“Exactly. They pride themselves on it. So we have faction fighting. The shooting clubs are at one another over this boggling.”

“They suspect what it is you are about to learn.”

“They already know what Human boggling will confirm. The Nobodoi see through time. They know that. That they saw their own Recall. Saw—”

“A Return!”

“Wouldn’t that stir them? They’ve filled the power vacuum. Organised it all with the Matta and the Darzie. I might have it wrong. The Nobody plan for Earth is probably intact, but global power must be habit-forming. Who knows?”

“One is alive!” Bo called.

Dirk rose up in his harness. “Say again!”

“Alive!” Bo called, crouching over one of the armoured forms, and Hollis saw the Wand stir, no muscular contraction, no death spasm. It happened, the dump said it did, sometimes. Some choi, stronger than others, usually veterans or those more accustomed to operating on remote, survived the death-shock of the host, though temporarily since the clutch was already made. The horn had closed; the necrosis eventually started down the trunk; volatile alien poisons entered the Human system; such choi finally died.

Perhaps there was time. Bo was busily at work, removing the laminations and cup seals, using special tech on the spinal coupling itself. Hollis smelled hot-glass at work, the Darzie star, saw low-burn starshot trained on the tough toroidal collar.

There was a scream; the choi-Human went rigid in agony, then limp, unconscious. The trunk came away intact in Bo’s hand, horn and all, leaving ruined synthetic and an angry cauterised wound glistening with sealant.

“Yes?” Dirk called.

“Likely,” Bo answered. “Full of lazy-maisie. No heartstop from shock now anyway. Depends on the toxins, whether the reagents get them in time. Give me ten.”

“Aye,” Dirk said, then to Hollis: “You heed this. You keep this true. Life knowledge over book learning every time.”

“Yes,” Hollis said, watching Bo work over the still figure, removing Wand beetle-plate, exposing the chameleon undersuit such as Bo and he wore.

Dirk’s hand came down on Hollis’s shoulder, very gently.

“For old-world seafarers, sailors and fishermen, pre-Wormwood mostly, life by the sea was more than a livelihood. It determined the form of life in every detail, how it was lived, the traces, the artforms: songs, stories, dramas, whole customs, community mores, the beliefs, the reality, Hollis, the prevailing reality.

“For the off-world peoples it is the same, you know it is. For the Hoproi, war is an imperative, a lifestyle, an elegant and self-justifying mind-set, an artform too—an ethos eloquent unto itself. That war-garden we saw—the placement of the engines, the way they move, the patterns they make in moving, the precise way they kill—may all be aesthetic refinement. Again, natural and eloquent unto itself. For the Nobodoi, the Carnivals, the land-bridges, the leys, the Link, this present boggling imminence I feel so heavily may be the same: an aesthetic, rational, numinous culmination. It may only be refinement, an exquisite nicety from an over-civilised race, something with an emblematic payload, an act of decadence and self-indulgence. It may not. I’m being Human, you see. Our bias must be to always go beyond what simply is—to find more. I’m after what being Human is, Hollis, you understand? You see any of this in what we’re doing? I

have to know where we stand. How we stand. Why *we* were chosen this time. Our planet. Our race. Why us.”

“I see that,” Hollis said.

“I hope so. There was once a people—a Human people—called Amerinds, whose most highly developed societies depended on a food animal that was wiped out by tech’d invaders of their own species. And Tuaregs, whose ethos—”

Hollis reached up to touch the boruk’s hand.

“Dirk, I know. I understand.”

“Yes,” Dirk said. “Yes. Hollis, help me down.”

Hollis crouched, held his right forearm up so Dirk could grip it, then out, taking the boggler’s weight as he swung smoothly out of the harness, dropped to the red soil. Together, not as boruk and backman, as two Human people, they crossed to Bo.

The highwayman was kneeling over the unconscious form. Hollis crouched down as well to be more at Dirk’s height.

“A female,” Bo said, stating what was obvious now with most of the armour off. She was around thirty, pale-skinned, solidly-made, physically a very good specimen, with black hair and clear signs of Asian ancestry despite the skin colour. There were neat *choi* tattoos on her left cheek and forehead.

“Lazy-maisie is a godsend for us,” Dirk said. “Race-tailored like all the best Darzie drugs. Not only counters shock but also carries *tote* capability. Right now it is suppressing all the Hoproi programs and interfacing chemicals and restoring the innate Human bias, original homeostasis. All shockproofed. Beautiful.”

“When it wears off . . .”

“No. That’s the beauty of it. Homeostasis. It shuts out the alien matter, accesses older data, communicates only with its own chemically enhanced parts. Worst you get is amnesia. Usually it’s only stupor. This Wand will need reconditioning eventually, but for Hoproi to return this Human to *choi*, a whole new chemical horizon—or rather a new *old* horizon—will have to be carefully suppressed. The hard work is at the other end. That’s how it was designed. Good interrogation drug. Bo, let’s get her away from here.”

Bo carried the woman, Hollis most of his weapons, until they were well away from the death-scene. When they reached a shady spot under some sheltering rockforms, Bo set the Wand down and administered more injections. In a matter of seconds, the woman stirred, became conscious, sat up, combat ready.

Bo had moved well clear after giving her the final shot, knowing what this *maisie* variant would do—he had not seen a dead Hoproi up close but he had probably tended remote *choi* before.

“What?” the woman cried, trying to go into a crouch, falling back, sitting with her legs out, her arms back supporting her.

“We rescued you from death-clutch,” Dirk said. “We are allies.”

“Handsome?”

“I’m sorry. Wasted. Flashed down. There seems to be faction fighting.”

“What? I’m—What is this?” She shrieked the words, striking the earth with her fists.

“We had to use *lazy-maisie*,” Dirk said, his voice very calm.

“*Cras!*” she swore. “You’ve taken me down!”

“You would have died.”

“They’ll have to clean me. They—” She stopped, discovering implications, the *maisie* sorting her memories, finding what was needed. She looked at Dirk as a child might.

The *boruk* nodded. “That’s right. It seems Handsome was flashed by *choi*.”

“No!” she said. “*Hoproï* do not kill *Hoproï*. Never.”

“Seems, I said. Listen now please.”

“I’ve been taken down!” she cried, her eyes unfocused, her gaze suddenly hollow, aimed beyond Dirk, beyond them all.

“No,” the *boruk* told her gently. “You will re-apply. Get new *totes*. I know *Hoproï*. I can ask.”

She blinked back tears, sitting cross-legged now, her hands tight fists behind her in the dust. The *lazy-maisie* was doing its job, answering questions as they rose in her mind with both *pre-choi* and *choi* memory, responding to nuances of anxiety, guiding itself that way, trying to regulate this injured personality while keeping it publicly viable. It was causing these sudden silences. The confusion was not a bad sign. The blanking would diminish.

Dirk waited a suitable time then introduced himself and his companions, knowing she listened because her eyes turned to each person named. “Your name?”

There was a fierce frown. “I hate this!”

“I know. Your best name?”

“Hesi.”

“We saved you, Hesi.”

“Yes. I hate this!”

“We need to know who flashed Handsome, Hesi. We’ve a problem here.”

“You didn’t—”

“Oath on that. Listen closely for our problem. Decide if you can advise us. Yes?”

“You won’t trust me.”

“We will because we need to. We’ll have to learn to trust each other. But I’m Boggler Dirk and you may remember how Handsome liked my boggling, how he liked Bo here.” It was a gamble, Hollis knew, but Dirk must have sensed it was right. “Can you make *choi* oath, Hesi? No harm. Just to listen?”

“Think I can,” she said. “I’d like to. It’s this interference.” She struck the earth with a fist. “I can’t be sure. God’s rockets, I hate it!”

“It’s stabilising, Hesi. It’s learning you. You know how it works. You use it.”

The Wand nodded abstractedly. “I—” she started, broke off.

“This much,” Dirk said. “No harm to Hollis, Bo and me till you can promise the other, yes?”

“You didn’t kill Handsome?”

“I swear it. But we need to know who did and here’s why. We’re going into Broome to boggle the Link. Everything we do, everything that happens, may be deliberately intended, part of a Nobody plan—if they see into time. You got memory on this?”

The woman nodded but did not speak. She was looking beyond them again.

“You came out here with Handsome.” Dirk did not mention Big George. “Can you say why? You got Handsome’s brief on that?”

She grimaced, beat the sides of her head with her open hands. “I’m losing it! This fuggin’ maisie! You’ve cut me out of—”

“Death-clutch, Hesi!” Bo said, warrior Bo, soldier to soldier. “You talking scut! Listen to Dirk!”

The boruk went straight back to it. “Everything we do, every encounter, like this now, may be seen by Nobodoi, you got it? We need to know what part you play—since we’ve met you.”

Hesi frowned, blinked back the tears of rage that added to the trails down her grimy cheeks. “Nobodoi knew Handsome would be taken?”

“Maybe not. There may be blanks. We can’t discuss a time-sense when we don’t have it.”

“It’s like Dirk explaining boggling,” Hollis said. “It just is.”

Which made Bo smile. Sometimes this young print just didn’t know when to stay out of it. He had to talk, had to be in any event then occurring. Maybe all prints were that way, Bo decided, compulsive participants, tactless but too artless to be offensive.

Dirk accepted the comparison. “So this, Hesi. Handsome was wasted, choi weaponry, but Hoproi can’t kill Hoproi. We saved you from clutch—”

“Spoiled your day with lazy-maisie.”

“Hollis!” Dirk snapped. “Now you’re part of our plan—possibly a Nobody plan—to go to Broome and the Link. Yes?”

“You swear that—”

“We honour Hoproi. You already have my word. Bo, give her your Darzie star. Hesi, you have doubts of us, you decide. We have honour. Good Human honour. Yes?”

“I’ll try,” she said and got to her feet.

“Good. Anything of Handsome comes to you, you tell us if you can. Anything.”

They distributed packs and weapons, and Hesi seemed more comfortable in parts of her armour and some of the gear, doing what was essentially remote choi work. It occurred to Hollis too that, with Dirk aloft, they made a higher centre for their group—not really a Hoproi surrogate of any kind but a centre nonetheless.

Bo took the opportunity to pass out ration sticks and, with Broome no more than two hours away to the north-west, they set off once more.

7

They were no more than forty minutes down that road when Hesi pointed to where it dropped to a ravine crossed by a bridge.

“No go!” she cried, too loudly, only regaining her customary choi stealth when those two words were said. “We need a detour.”

“Hesi?” Dirk said.

“Banding Bridge,” she explained. “There’s a spook close by.”

Hollis did not go for his dag; he knew the idiom. A were-suit.

“There is?” Dirk asked, surprised that he had not read the pressures yet.

Bo raised field glasses. “Full triune?”

“Yes.” Hesi used her own glasses to scan the bridge.

“No sign,” Dirk said, having used his talent.

Hesi turned to face Dirk. “It’s there.”

“I do not doubt it. I simply said there is no sign.”

Hesi nodded, lifted her glasses again. “A month back, Twikker brought in a boggler to douse it. Wanted a sancher.”

“A boggler? Who?”

“Chimo. Eight-in-ten.”

“Chimo lied,” Dirk told her. “He’s six-in-ten.”

“Was,” Hesi said. “No go. See scorch marks on the far side? What’s left.”

“Hmm,” Dirk said. “Hesi, Bo, Hollis. We may be part of a winning plan or simply infinite contingencies. I say we take the bridge. Test Nobodoi intentions. We could be dooming ourselves, so I’m happy to solo it. You decide.”

“You’re crazy,” Hesi said.

“Possibly. Give Bo back his things and find your detour. Hollis?”

“We going for a sancher?”

“Don’t know. Have to boggle that when we’re down there.”

“I’m for it.”

“He’s the print, isn’t he?” Hesi asked Bo, as if there was no one else there to hear. “Handsome said there was a C-mate in this.”

“Indeed,” Dirk said, laughing. “He’s our new hero. You staying?”

Hesi shook her head, but started down the road towards the bridge. Bo followed, grinning.

“If I survive,” Hollis said, starting after them.

“What’s that?” Dirk asked, eyes closed, already reading the pressures.

“I’m a new hero if I survive.”

Dirk laid his hand on the backman’s shoulder, eyes still closed, and read the bridge. It hadn’t been built as a bridge, not originally. A hockiron conduit, huge and bone-white, pushed out of one side of the gully and into the other. Local Humans had concreted around it, making a shell that carried the road. They reached the near side without incident.

“Nothing,” Hollis said, straining for the ghostworks that meant things Nobodoi, the corner-of-the-eye shifts and glints that signified soul-stone and so were-suit.

“Full triunes use phasing,” Dirk told him. “It’s already there.”

“What, invisible?”

“No. Out of continuum for the moment. Like my body. Stepping onto the bridge should do it.”

“You want the sancher?” Hesi asked, glasses still raised to her eyes.

“That your purpose in this, you think?”

She shrugged. “We got confiles, Bo and me. Hot-glass. We might do it. Twikker and Chimo couldn’t, but—”

“Hesi, I’m 9.6-in-ten. I got Bo’s confile from the Port Herriot dousing. I’m the one with the sancher from the Blue Beach suit.”

“Hmm. You going to try for a true sancher now?”

“Still reading on that. If your spook appears, if it displays, then I’ll decide.”

Hollis noted the Wand’s preoccupation with looting the suit, trying for the sancher; he knew it was a choi priority, as it was any Human’s. He sensed the danger of it, comforted himself with the knowledge that Dirk and Bo were aware of it too. He went back to studying the bridge, marvelling at how the smooth, flawless hockiron slid in and out of the newly-moulded strata with nary a sign of the violation. The Broome inhabitants, so he assumed, had laid their pathetic crust of sile concrete along the rounded top, had erected the pilasters and facings at each end, superimposing the Human sense of a bridge like the enactment of some desperate race memory. Hollis found it sad but hated feeling that, made himself see it Dirk’s way, read it as a stubborn and defiant thing, like the looting. Not just safely conventionalised reality. Not just the work of ants carrying on regardless, building around whatever happened to be. Better than that.

He followed the smooth line of the bridge. The thought of a were-suit waiting for them seemed an oddly quaint touch compared to the effortless accomplishment of the conduit, a deliberate scaling-down by the Nobodoi to help in their dealings with Humans, probably the other races as well.

“Step onto the bridge,” Dirk said, and Hollis did so, not daring to hesitate, stepping into a silence broken only by their footsteps and the sparking of the confiles Bo and Hesi wore.

No sooner were they all on the bridge than the spook was there, waiting on the other side. Full triune: suit, Companion, Snake. There were no lights about the thing yet, not full ghostworks, just the usual vague corner-of-the-eye trickery, the suggestion of things moving when nothing was.

Dirk had his hand splayed out before Hollis like an hieratic star, as if warding off the possibility of harm by the up-raised palm. A famous mannerism no doubt. A boggler trademark.

“Dirk—”

“Keep going, Hollis. It either will or it won’t.”

Halfway across, ghostworks started glittering around the forms, building into striations, flowing, streaming up into the air around the Snake.

“Bo,” Dirk said.

This was the dangerous part. Bo’s confile began powering up, Hesi’s as well. Chimo had done just this with Twikker—and the Banding suit had not accepted it. The Snake had flashed out its sentry pulses, or Companion had sent quick parcels of energy, clean, efficient.

Hollis kept walking, smelled hot-glass, confile and hot-glass, and now Hesi was moving by him on the left, ahead of Bo, taking the lead, holding the Darzie star.

That your purpose in this? Dirk had asked her. Her reason for being here.

Hollis kept going, hand well clear of his own star, dag telltale winking red, taking it all. He wanted to speak, ask Dirk questions, ask what was going on. But he was learning

to keep silent, knew that there might never be time now, that this might be it. He inventoried what he saw in case there was a chance, then smiled and told himself they were committed anyway. No going back. And who ever brought two confiles, hot-glass and a boggler's strange hand-out gesture to a dousing?

"Trusting you, Hesi," Dirk murmured, but not for her. Only Hollis heard it, feeling good, not at all slighted that Dirk counted him as part of what he could trust.

More steps forward, more thoughts since that's all there was for him now as backman. Bo and Hesi were four paces ahead, closing on the far end, nearing the triune that stood flickering in the hot, dusty air.

Could it work? The confiles had once been sanchers, each one the display part of a were-suit, its ganglia perhaps, or its nervous system, or possibly an ideological artifact, a statement of its pedigree, part of some arcane heraldry—who might ever know?

Hollis knew something of the theory, never enough but something, dag-dump. Each confile, set on free range, allowed to operate wild, recognised its own parent tech, strived to match the ambient energy fields, just as Coaches merged their accretion fields, boggle stuff to boggle stuff, just as the Stone Ships sailed the world's oceans as isolated vessels but sometimes rendezvoused at Longitude 70°, Latitude 30°.

It was that questing that was the danger, the variations as they attempted to calibrate themselves. The hot-glass might help. It overlaid the confiles' efforts to synchronise the sometimes extreme fluctuations with a benign and constant discharge, so those swings did not register as such.

Bo and Hesi stopped ten metres from the suit, allowing Dirk and Hollis to reach them.

"Begin irradiation," Dirk said.

Bo fired his hundred-cycle star directly at the dish of Companion, while Hesi concentrated the Darzie star on the suit itself. Ghostworks raced about the triune; the Snake started to move off to the side, stopped, moved, stopped again.

The lightforms vanished. The Snake dropped to the earth with a dull thud and lay inert. The front of the suit roiled, shimmered. Suddenly the sancher was there, displayed like a gift held out before it on invisible arms.

Bo and Hesi stopped firing. It was done.

"Yes!" Hesi cried, smiling her first smile since they'd found her. "We did it."

Hollis stared wide-eyed at the strange sight, the precious net just hanging there.

So easy? he wondered. *Is that all?*

He had dag-lore on it. Now Bo, any of them, could reach out and simply pluck the thing out of the air; the suit would break open down its sides, the soul-stone would be exposed, might even tumble forth onto the ground. The suit would never move again. Within minutes, it would vanish, phased out of their world into some other, leaving only the stone sitting in the dust, the only evidence of the desecration. The only other evidence. The sancher was there, possibly spoiled, possibly only a confile.

Hollis turned his head to speak, wanting to ask if he could be the one to take it down, finish the dousing, but Dirk spoke first.

“We leave it. We keep going.”

“Dirk?” Bo said.

Hesi did not have his control. “But it’s a sancher! You got it out! You can probably keep it intact.”

“Leave it. Move on now. Hollis!”

Hollis began moving at once, striding past the waiting suit. As they passed, even as Hollis watched, the marvellous net vanished in a flicker of light, taken back in, and ghostworks danced about the suit again in a sudden frenzy, like troubled insects suddenly freed. Only when the small band of Humans was well clear of the bridge, at the top of the ravine, did the Snake stir, slowly lifting back to its original position at the suit’s right shoulder.

“Why?” Hesi asked, as Hollis was determined not to, as Bo never would this side of Morion and a debriefing.

“It’s . . . just right,” Dirk answered in an distracted way. “Now I must concentrate on the Link.”

And that was all he said until the seaside town of Broome stretched out before them at the horizon, fixed against the red land like a glittering buckle of gems and flashing pearl, the great hockiron sweeps of the land-bridge gleaming on the ocean to the north, the Link rising up like a brooch of stasis-locked quicksilver, pinned to the brilliant afternoon sky with its restless, boiling crown dancing in the sunlight.

8

In another world, another life, pre-Wormwood, Broome had been a town, then a great city, then a town again, re-made, post-Wormwood, near where the bones of the hockiron grid slid into the wide red land. A seaside tourist town, with a core population of ten thousand Humans, the inevitable yet varying Bridge Race musters, a scattering of Lesser Races, many of them itinerants moving between the Impact cities, on across the land-bridges to the Old World centres. Leys met and diverged close by, making shifting whirlpools of energy that brought surprising winds and odd frissons, that made this Human-normal zone only provisionally that, an exciting nexus, a wonderful, eerie, vital place to be.

And while Broome was mainly a town for transients, there were a score of Matt typhies in the northern suburbs, their elaborate precincts guarded both by their own integral tech and by Code mercenaries. There were Hoproi shooting club chapters on Main Street near the New Broome Hotel, and hordats, and adorned but never truly concealed hockiron extrusions that had once been Nobodoi installations of some kind, now taken over by the shooting clubs, though nothing anywhere in this dazzling mix of rich colour and gleaming hockiron stood taller than the Link looming several kilometres off the coast, its gleaming ball riding the shifting water-jet above struts and rods already 134 metres high.

It drew the eye of every new arrival in this part of the Impact. Walking on the streets you could tell the natives because they did not glance sideways each time the view was there; they were inured to it, able to shut out the distant roar and deep metallic ringing of the moving parts. Eighty-four of the rods were movers, the other twenty-nine were locked into the hockiron footing that in turn locked the whole ocean-spanning grid into this ancient land-mass probably forever.

Dirk, Bo and Hesi made it a point of looking ahead, but Hollis was unable to resist. This was Nobodoi—and Nobodoi purpose at work. The boggle was so vast, so impressive, the ultimate mystery; nothing as amazing as the land-bridge, not really, but somehow far more incredible since no use could be made of it. It stood off-shore, ministering to itself, one of the first structures the Nobodoi built after Wormwood had been brought down and its planet-sculpting job completed.

Dirk had been specific in his instructions. He would not look at it, refused to yet, but he was communing with it, every part of his talent attuned to its workings.

As they moved along the crowded streets, Bo and Hesi watched for choi, for any off-worlder trace but especially Hoproi. Hollis tried to do the same, tried to affect the quality of insouciance Dirk liked—confident Humanity striding forth, examples to all who looked their way. Most of the time he managed. He saw the Darzie spy-eyes dip and weave about the hordat rooflines, noticed the Matt charabanc that slid by on its quiet fields—a gleaming silver ovoid crusted like a Fabergé egg, its cutaways and outgrowths chased and filigreed with goldwire sensors, the whole thing strange and sublime.

Hollis had never seen Matta but of course they would be active at such a time. The movement of bogglers (what the Matt called *quenth* talents) across the patchwork automatically drew Bridge Race interest; the present situation insured close attention now with the Hoproi shooting clubs at odds, Fancy Anselm dead, Big George working with Rock Tuo. A Link bogging imminent. This was Nobodoi business. Major administrative protocols were implicitly affected. *Their* interests.

“Where to?” Hollis asked.

“Big George’s chapter-house. Somewhere along here. No, wait! Bo, look!”

But Bo and Hesi had already reacted in choi fashion, moving several paces before Hollis and Dirk, weapons conspicuously angled across their bodies.

Further up the street Hoproi were gathering, at least seven, possibly eight of the creatures, and not just locals—Hoproi who had come to this corner of the Impact, to their shooting club chapters here, because of the bogging.

“Keep it confident,” Dirk said, because the choi were all turned their way, formidable, beetled, un-Human with their helmets closed. Crowds of tourists and locals had gathered as well, used to many strange things on these streets but probably not an assembly of chapter representatives holding confab out of doors.

“That’s Big George on the left,” Dirk said for Hollis’s benefit. “That’s New Luke next to him. And Times David, Bo?”

“Aye. Can’t tell the others.”

Hesi answered before Dirk could. "Choi armour gives it. Fauve Angus and Goody Hal are from Club Reeve. That Handsome's lot there: Spider Larran and Crown Minos. You give me back now, Dirk?"

"That what you want, Hesi?"

"Aye. Hate this. Hate this maisie. They might work on me. They might take me on."

"Right. I'm saying you've played a part in whatever the plan is. Your presence got us the Banding spook, don't ask why. It just did. Feel good for that. Forgive the maisie."

"Saved me. Got you a chance at the suit. Wasted, but a chance."

"That's not what I mean. It mattered, okay, *not* taking it? This time it mattered."

Hesi shrugged, began handing her equipment back to Bo.

"Keep the Darzie star," Dirk said, and Bo's head lifted just a fraction.

Hesi blinked, wide-eyed. "Keep it?"

"For trade. Might get you cleaned. Get you a place in choi."

Hesi nodded, gripping the gun in both hands. "You're a good one, Dirk." She gave a nod to Bo, another to Hollis, and walked off ahead of them, arms out from the body so there could be no misunderstanding of intent. She headed towards the Hoproi and choi-Humans from Handsome's shooting club. Hollis saw her have words with a choi-mate who then detached from Crown Minos, took the Darzie weapon from her, and escorted her back to the chapter-house. It looked promising.

"Let me down, Hollis," Dirk said, and Hollis tensed his arm, crouched, steadied himself for the shift of weight, brought the boggler to the road surface. Dirk walked out ahead of them to the rendezvous.

"Yay, what gives?" Big George boomed as they neared the confab. "Boggling on? Bets taken."

Hollis made himself stand as confidently as he could behind the dwarf shape of the boruk, though it was impossible not to be overwhelmed by the towering Hoproi shapes and faceless choi-mates.

Dirk seemed to have no difficulty with such things. "Will you tell us what is happening here, Big George?"

"You boggle Link. We watch. All here to watch, keep savvy."

"Not to kill like before."

"No way."

"Other boggles?"

"Coming, you bet. You do first."

"Where is Rock Tuo?"

"Where indeed? You start pronto! Tuo come later."

"Tuo come now. We boggle together. We—"

But Dirk did not finish. He half-turned as if to speak to his backman and his minder, and Hollis saw such a look of dread on the boruk's face that he felt the hairs on his neck rise and immediately searched their surroundings for some cause, though there was nothing that he could see. He came back to the same terrible look, saw the expression of concern on Bo's face as well.

"Dirk, what?" Bo said.

"What? What?" Hollis demanded.

“Something has just been placed into my phased-out hand.”

Hollis found himself looking straight at the hand held close against Dirk’s side, then understood the boruk’s words.

His phased-out hand.

“What? What does that mean? What sort of object?”

“It is round. Smooth. Solid,” Dirk said, and Hollis could imagine Dirk actually feeling for such things.

“Are you sure?” Not one of his most brilliant questions, Hollis realised.

“It is . . . an activator. I just know.”

“For what, Dirk?” Bo asked.

As if in answer, shouts went up down the street—cries and screams as people fell back in panic.

Along Main Street, newly exposed to their view by the retreating crowds, a were-suit came walking, its Companion rolling along to its left, the Snake hovering at its right shoulder like a small flattened skull.

“God’s rockets and Holy Trinity!” Big George boomed, his choi combat-ready. New Luke and Times David also went on alert, sending out piercing whistles, their call-signs. Remote *choi*-mates came running to complete their fighting-wheels. Some Hoproi moved back, while others—Fauve Angus and Goody Hal—started moving away altogether, heading towards their grand hockiron chapter-house near the New Broome Hotel.

Standing wide-eyed around the shifting Hoproi groups, the Human crowds watched the suit approach. Many people had fled, many had returned, unable to keep away.

“The suit from the bridge!” Bo cried. “The Banding suit! I’m sure of it, Dirk. I recognise—” But he stopped.

The Snake came streaking overhead, making a terrible scream as it rushed by, dropping to hover directly in front of Goody Hal and Fauve Angus, floating before the huge figures and their Human fighting-wheels.

Goody Hal immediately set up a whistling from his sensory fibres; at the same time, the two forward choi detached and ran off towards their chapter-house. The disclosed trunks produced a confile from another choi’s field pack, brought it up, shimmering, the remaining choi glittering in activated confiles of their own, weapons raised, facing the Snake. Fauve Angus tried to disassociate itself from Goody Hal’s response, took a few steps to the side, halting only when the Snake angled slightly in his direction. Then Fauve Angus’s choi brought up their own confile defences.

While this happened, the suit came striding on, as inexorable as ever, its Companion moving with it.

Big George made the rumbling that was unmistakably Hoproi mother-tongue. Goody Hal boomed in answer, began moving slowly back towards the group of Humans and Hoproi in the middle of Main Street. Fauve Angus followed, and with them came the Snake, keeping its original distance, angled back towards Goody Hal.

“You got strife aboard, Goody Hal!” Big George rumbled, using Antique now. “You have grief, Fauve Angus!”

“You got were-suit gone wacko is what, Big George,” Goody Hal called, closing the last of the distance, back with his rivals from the other shooting clubs. “We got sancher if we take it down, savvy?” And one of Goody Hal’s free trunks indicated his chapter-house down the street. The hockiron there was beautifully adorned with battle-flags, plaques of peterkill and dove-eye, spacemetal escutcheons, even sections of ancient Pre-Wormwood Human weapons. Extended from the open top of the structure was an intricate glistening construct, Hoproi battle-tech, a ceremonial house defence no doubt of enormous power. It could make valleys and weld hockiron for the Nobodoi; doubtless it could take a post-Recall were-suit with little difficulty.

Big George rumbled something in Hoproi, then added Human words to what he had said, as if wanting all these watching Humans to know. “Your chance. Your sancher. Your chapter.” He had disowned the alliance.

The suit was close, no more than thirty metres away. Big George moved to the side, conspicuously exposing his chapter rivals.

The tension was incredible. Hollis found there was just too much to look at: first this were-suit on the streets of Broome, deploying its Snake with obvious intent, then Goody Hal—and Fauve Angus too now—for some race-secret reason with stars levelled directly at it via their choi, presumably with chapter reinforcements on the way and fixed house-tech already trained upon it. No doubt scat support was imminent as well.

The Snake hovered quietly on one side of Goody Hal and Fauve Angus; the suit and its Companion waited on the other. The Humans and remaining Hoproi were out of it, theoretically at least; Goody Hal and Fauve Angus did seem to be the focus of the suit’s attention. Further back, the Matt charabanc sat quietly, goldwire gleaming; robot or occupied, who could tell? Several Darzie spy-eyes hovered at the rooflines.

Oddly enough, few of the Lesser Races were visible among the nervous, fascinated onlookers—several Salmans, some Satlin and Cire, at least one Tessa. Otherwise there were only Humans, some of them choi and so only provisionally that, all of whom knew what starshot crossfire might do, let alone Hoproi house-tech, but who could not bear to leave now. This was Nobodoi business, after all, some manifestation of their continuing role in this world they had re-made. Because of Hoproi.

Hoproi were the reason the Banding suit was here, nothing surer. Hollis saw the intent look of concern on Dirk’s face. The boruk’s eyes were open but he was probably still communing, still dealing with the amazing development in his other reality. Whatever it was in his phased-out hand. Or perhaps he had already dealt with that crisis, put it into some greater picture, used to accommodating alien realities.

An activator, Dirk had said. Then the suit had appeared and gone into action. A suit *he* had spared. Such implications.

The stalemate resolved dramatically. A scat appeared overhead, its insignia that of Goody Hal’s chapter-house. It slid across the bright blue sky, all beetled and deadly, shimmering in its sentry fields; had just started to hover when it simply disappeared. No explosion, no detectable weapons trace from Snake, Companion or suit, but dealt with just the same. Phased out. Sent somewhere else as Dirk’s torso had been. Simply gone.

Goody Hal began a rumbling colloquy with Big George; the were-suit triune waited as if listening, picked out in ghostworks, perhaps drawing energies from the leys to dress itself in a coronation display, a magnificent psychological deterrent or perhaps just its natural processes of replenishment for what it had to do.

It was so distracting that Hollis barely saw when Goody Hal vanished in a three-stage blink: *choi, choi, self!* Then Fauve Angus the same way: multiple blinks, gone. Gone, as the scat had gone. A great murmuring went up from the crowd.

“Phasing tech—” Hollis began.

“Wait, Hollis!” Bo said. “You caused that, Dirk?”

“I don’t know,” Dirk answered, perspiration beading his brow. “I’m still holding it, but I’ve done nothing. Big George? You reading this?”

“All eyes, you betcha! Never seen trinity do that. Wow!”

“What did Goody Hal tell you?”

“Bad business, Dirk,” the Hoproi said. “Contracts broken up and down the town.”

“Details,” Dirk said, and Big George must have feared what Dirk’s activator could do. He did not hesitate.

“Old contract. Nobodoi honour Hoproi—kings of the world this time. No summary justice. Goody Hal, Fauve Angus sent packing. Not fair! Not on! Bad business. Must stand trial. Hoproi justice.”

“I’m not getting this, Big George. Slow down.”

“You understand,” Big George rumbled. “Hoproi here to push. Always to push. Best Hoproi push. In Goody Hal’s house, there, we got wrong pushers . . . provokers . . . extenders.”

“Go too far?”

“Yes. Push Hoproi. Push Nobodoi. Push Human. You say, what?”

“Factions,” Dirk said. “Competing factions.”

“Some bits. Well spotted. Um . . . more . . .”

“Ah, testers. Challengers of the system, of the order.”

“Good. Good. Brief is to test the overlords. Explore them. Push there and never give up. Zealous.”

“Brief from whom, Big George? Nobodoi?”

“What? Whassat? No, Dirk. No! This Hoproi thing. Part of the package. Job to record interface, phenomenon of selves. Do for Hoproi. This Hoproi way.”

“Artists? A group of artists?”

“Some bits. Some bits, yes. More. Go too far. Bad pushers out of good. Say Recall is race cull. Got that, Dirk? Nobodoi cull themselves.”

“Are there races that do that?” Hollis asked, thinking of the soul-stones scattered across the world, wondering if they could be cull remains—hence the melancholy around the suits, around the few Nobody artifacts he had seen, wondering too if extant Nobodoi could still be about, watching all this? In this suit perhaps.

“Wait, Hollis!” Bo said.

“No, Bo!” Dirk told him. “Fair question. Big George?”

“Some races cull. Mostly animals, a miscuing of directives. These bad pushers test Nobodoi, tailor genetic weapon to eat up stones, rot them, powder them. Motives wrong. This bad lot. Woeful faction. Say one thing, do another.”

“Go on,” Dirk said. “Why?”

Big George gave a deep rumble. “Difficult, Dirk, Bo, squeaky-clean Hollis. Hoproi must not kill Hoproi. Old contract. Old book. Nobodoi must not. You get the drift? Nobodoi can send Hoproi out of town. Send Hoproi home. But old respect. Old deal. Deep love.”

“But Fancy Anselm!” Dirk said. “You killed—”

“Heaven forfend! No so! That Rock Tuo! That bugger Human work two sides. Oath to Big George, sure, do the trick. Boggle the Link, I swear, oh yes. Oath to Goody Hal and Fauve Angus. Push the Nobodoi all sides. Great profit. Human chance. He could not resist.”

“I resisted,” Dirk said.

Big George rumbled deep inside. A trunk arched slightly, Hoproi surprise. “They rattle your cage too?”

“Believe it.”

And Hollis saw Bo nod with understanding of a greater plan he now too understood: Dirk’s delaying in Morion not just seen as boggler caution, not just for assessment time needed and facts appraised. It had been to bring them himself, Hollis Green.

“Strong feeling about this, Big George,” Dirk continued. “Where is Tuo?”

“Gone bye-byes. Gone on long sea-voyage. Out to lunch. Him seconded for wonderful adventure.”

“Precisely?”

“In a woe-is-me box. In a sentinel ley. By now he one foot square. Soon at bottom of ocean trench maybe. Pretty stone.”

“Big George—”

“He murder Hoproi.”

“How, Big George?”

“That Fancy Anselm’s war-garden you plundered.”

“No plundering,” Dirk said.

“No? Beautiful Hollis got jazerant aboard, yes? No matter. Fancy Anselm come to get dues paid. But Rock Tuo want you alive for boggle-fest, to help plumb the Link, yes? He helping Goody Hal and bad pushers. Get choi support, waste Fancy Anselm. Me warn off in time.”

“You fired on *us*, Big George!”

“So? You in garden. You worthy. Top class. You needed at Broome pronto! Hypotheticals: one, you go loner on me; two, you go ally of Tuo, all working together as bad pushers. All epidemic now anyway.”

“Academic.”

“Sure. That. Suit came. Good move. All forgiven. Showdown. Human justice, just perfect.”

“What? No, Big George.”

“You got activator, you say. You get suit in this.”

“No. Nobodoi did that.”

“No, Dirk. Your job. Punish these pushers.”

“No. Even if I could I would not punish Hoproi. Not for crimes I cannot fathom.”

Big George rumbled. “Must, Dirk. Hoproi protocol. You host-race. Human job. You failing here.”

“That’s right. Failing. Human. I choose in this. Failing by your ethos not mine.”

“Nobodoi ethos, Dirk! Only answer. You do job—balance the books. We esteem you. Many smiles all around the town. Hip hip hooray!”

“Big George, try to understand—”

“You do! Big chance here, Dirk. You got activator. You got were-suit, clear brief. Down there in that house is new weapon eat up soul-stones. Bad intent. Justice needed here!”

“George! Big George!”—Dirk corrected himself—“Understand! The Matt are watching.” He pointed to the silver egg. “Darzie.” He indicated the spy-eyes perched on the eaves or floating back and forth in the on-shore breeze. “Hoproi. All here on your own terms. I insist on Human terms for this too, you understand me? It matters this time. You honour us by our standards this time!”

“Nobodoi already know,” Big George said. “Fit everything to plan. See much. Not all maybe, but most.”

“Right. Then they probably already know what I have chosen to do.”

“You already goodbye scat. You already goodbye Goody Hal and Fauve Angus.”

“No! No! I did not! I’m holding something I know is an activator but I haven’t consciously used it yet.”

There was silence then. The spectators stood watching, listening, the breeze moving flags and awnings, stirring Big George’s sensory fibres, stirring the grey-brown hair on the boruk’s head. From far off came the constant droning roar of the water-jet, the deep distant clanging of rods as they moved in the sea.

“And now I do choose, Big George. I throw down the activator. Don’t want it. There!”

So smoothly it happened. The were-suit vanished in three blinks of light: suit, Companion, Snake, all gone.

And with the effortless unreality of dream, the water-jet of the Link streamed skyward, a sudden mighty geyser many times its normal height and strength, sending the great gleaming ball high into the air. The ball curved, high and sure, flashing in its long slow arc, came crashing down, sheathed suddenly in a pale mauve light—a stasis field, it was!—struck Goody Hal’s chapter-house. Within that imprisoning field everything was annihilated—the house gone, the earth concussed and driven into a well, the terrible destruction sealed in a mauve, cauterising light, a containment field such as guided the leys, such as nursed Wormwood in those awful early days.

“Woweee!” Big George cried, booming Hoproi laughter around the Antique expression. “Bejesus! Sodom and Begorrah!”

“I threw the activator down!” Dirk cried, trying to explain. “I discarded it!”

Big George boomed in delight, his trunks flexing and unflexing, his choi breaking formation, going remote. “Sure. That did trick. All win!”

“But I threw it away.”

“Yes. You choose in honour and goodest faith. You allowed to win too. All allowed to win. Nobodoi law. Hoproi law. Human law. Hah! This a fine show. This takes the Oscar!”

Dirk cried out again, but this time it was a different, more desolate cry. “No!”

Bo read that difference, Hollis did too, read fear not anger, and were quickly at Dirk’s side.

“Dirk, what?” Bo whispered the words.

“It’s back! The activator is back!”

“Steady,” Bo said. “Hollis, you reading this?”

“Yes.”

“Throw it away again, Dirk!” Big George bellowed in excitement. “See what happens next. Yippee!”

“No. Not until I boggle it. Not until I try!”

“Hah, you dear to me! You justice nut, Dirk! What now?”

Dirk tried to keep his voice steady. “We take rooms at the New Broome. I boggle this activator.”

“Surely. This great treat! We like the way you wage war, Dirk!”

And Dirk, Bo and Hollis turned away, headed down the street to the hotel which stood miraculously untouched beside the glowing containment field and the great pit of what had once been Goody Hal’s chapter-house.

9

The boruk did his best. Tech and med systems helped, but precisely eighty-seven hours later, Dirk slumped into exhaustion at last and, somewhere, somewhen, the activator slipped from his unseen hand.

At least three things happened.

Dirk became whole, his phased-out self restored to him, a sign to all of Nobodoi approbation. He filled out on the bed where he slept like a man giving birth to himself.

At the same time, the jazerant in the harvester stockpiles of all the war-gardens around Broome vanished. Forty seconds later, a new silver ball was seen riding on the water-jet of the Link.

When that happened, like invisible ink responding to the heat of a flame, a tattoo appeared on Dirk’s newly restored forearm, the circle inside half-circles that was the Nobodoi sign, which was, several Hoproi later confirmed, the Nobody cipher for ‘gratitude’ but also for ‘commitment’.

What Bo received for his part was not made clear—perhaps it lay in his future—but Hollis got to keep his small piece of jazerant, and on Day 206 in his life adventure as temporised print, when he went forth from Dirk’s service at last to discover more of the patchwork, he added it to his personal sigil for all the Races of the world to see.

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