

SECRET HARMONIES



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WINNER OF THE ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD

Secret Harmonies

Four Hundred Billion Stars Book 2

Paul McAuley

PROLOGUE

Understanding the Aliens

But els in deep of night when drowsiness
Hath lockt up mortal sense, then listen I
To the celestial Siren's harmony . . .
Such sweet compulsion doth in musicly,
To lull the daughters of Necessity,
And keep unsteady Nature to her law,
And the low world in measur'd motion draw
After the heavenly tune, which none can hear
Of human mold with grosse unpurged ear.

John Milton, *Arcade*

To every co-consistent recursive class of formulae there correspond recursive class-signs r , such that neither $v \text{ Gen } r$ nor $\text{Neg } (v \text{ Gen } r)$ belongs to $\text{Fig } x$ (when v is the free variable of r .)

Kurt Godel, *On Formally Undecidable Propositions in Principia Mathematica and Related Systems*

The shoulder of the last valley shrugged free of the forest and at last the three riders gained the high plain, an empire of red grass sparsely punctuated by clumps of wind-sculpted thornbush. Eastward, the Trackless Mountains rose above a colourless haze, snowcapped peaks reflecting chiselled planes of sunlight.

David de Ramaira reined in his horse and stretched in the saddle. Despite physical therapy, he had not quite regained muscle tone lost during years of coldcoffee sleep. A tall, slim, brown-skinned man, he looked around with a delighted grin, his heart quickening as it had when he had first woken in the reception centre and realised that he had made it. Another world.

"Magnificent," he said. "Magnificent country." To his eyes, the plain of red grass glowed with surrealistic intensity beneath the cloudless indigo sky, something to do with the spectrum of Tau Ceti perhaps, the soft orange sun so different from the star of Earth.

The guide from Broken Hill, Jonthan Say, shrugged. "Soil too thin to farm," he said.

"How far is the village?" de Ramaira asked.

Jonthan pointed out a gleaming line that in the heat seemed to be layered between red grasses and dark sky. "That there's the lake. The abo village is ten days away around the shore." His hair, a halo of spun brass, was matted with sweat and sweat glistened on his bare chest, darkened the thighs of his faded jeans where he gripped the saddle of the bay mare. Fifteen, sixteen years old (they still measured age by the years of Earth, here), imbued with coltish adolescent grace. When he noticed de Ramaira's stare, he jogged the mare and rode on to catch up with Lieutenant McAnders, who as usual couldn't be bothered to wait. The boy's dog circled wide through dry red grass. After a moment, de Ramaira flicked the reins of his own horse, a stolid gelding, and followed the others toward the lake.

While Jonthan Say pitched camp, de Ramaira walked around the reed-fringed shore of the lake to the village, eager for his first glimpse of the Elysian Aborigines. Lieutenant McAnders insisted on coming with him, and for all that he had wanted the moment to himself, de Ramaira kept his peace. After all, she was head of the Office of Aboriginal Affairs and so, by extension, head of the expedition. As they pushed through crackling grasses she gestured at the case he carried and said scornfully, "You won't learn anything new, even with those things."

"We'll see," de Ramaira said evenly.

"Well, hell," the lieutenant said. "You know it all, right?" She was a stocky woman, dressed like de Ramaira in the white coveralls of the Port Authority cops (but with a pistol in the power holster at her hip), hair of no particular colour cut in a bristling crewcut, mouth pursed around the dead butt of a cheroot. De Ramaira was beginning to learn to hate her.

Toiling through long grass, they skirted a marshy arm of the lake and a skimpy line of thornbushes. And there, suddenly, was the village, round huts topping a gentle rise like a random arrangement of boulders. As he came closer, de Ramaira

began to make out a faint, furious high-pitched buzz, like wasps trapped in a bottle. He stopped, set down his case and looked at the cluster of domed roofs. The restless buzzing of the aborigines hung in the hot, still air. De Ramaira wanted to deploy his remotes there and then, but the lieutenant had other ideas.

"Hell, you ought to see them face to face. Maybe then you'll get the idea that they aren't worth the trouble. Lord knows I tried to tell you." She pushed through the grass and de Ramaira sighed and picked up his case and followed.

The huts were surrounded by a wide band of bare earth. The buzzing stopped as soon as the two humans set foot upon this margin, as if at the throw of a switch. In his sudden rush of exhilaration de Ramaira hardly noticed: he had seen his first aborigine.

It stood a little way from the first of the huts, a good deal taller than de Ramaira's own two metres, and terribly thin. Its hide, mottled tan and black, shrinkwrapped its long limbs, closely modelling bulbous double joints, contoured arrowhead-shaped ribs running from narrow pelvis to neck, the long unsutured skull. De Ramaira cautiously circled the creature. Apart from the restless stirring of finely divided fronds packed in its nasal cavity, it was quite motionless, paralysed by human presence just as Webster had described. Its eyes were round and wholly black, its mouth wide and lipless as a frog's. It gave off a faint, fishy reek.

"Keep at that long enough and it'll drop dead," the lieutenant said.

"Is that really true?"

The woman spat out the butt of her cheroot. "Sure. They last maybe two hours and then their nervous systems burn out." She stepped up and rapped the aborigine's low forehead. De Ramaira winced, although the creature did not move. "Know what's going on in there? Almost zero, that's what. I'll show you the Source Cave when you're ready, but there isn't anything to see there, either. This isn't the breeding season, and it's too dangerous to go in when it is, the hatchlings go for anything that moves. As Webster found to his cost. You want the truth, my father thought Webster was a damned romantic."

"His work is well regarded on Earth." In defending Webster, a scientist sent especially to Elysium to study the aborigines, de Ramaira was also defending himself, a phylogenist sent to describe and classify Elysium's biota.

The lieutenant shrugged, and lighted another of her evil-smelling cheroots.

Nettled, de Ramaira added, "If Webster had had more support, he might have been able to give a definite answer to the question of the aborigines' intelligence. He looked up into the enigmatic eyes of the aborigine, pupilless black holes pitted deep in the mask of its face, and wondered if its immobility was due to terrified denial of the existence of humans, of things completely outside its world-picture, or if there was a deeper reason. An expression of irreconcilable distaste, perhaps. He was vain enough to nurture the small hope that he could somehow break the fugue, reach out and make contact.

The lieutenant led de Ramaira around the dozen or so widely spaced huts, pointing out bowls made of grass stems woven so tightly that they could hold water, crude stone-tipped spears, bone knives lying beside the flayed carcass of

mire boar. The huts themselves were identical, four or five metres in diameter and half as high at the apex of their domed roofs, built of mud-plastered panels of plaited grass and reed. Here and there, the village's inhabitants stood or squatted like so many skeletal statues. The lieutenant ignored their presence, and when de Ramaira asked if there were any children she said dismissively, "The little fuckers run off into the grass. They're not worth the trouble of tracking down."

"There are a few hours of daylight left. I'd like to see if the children come back. I'll get an idea of the way these creatures move. They will return to normal, once we've gone?"

The lieutenant assured him that he'd soon have his fill of the aborigines' normal behaviour, and left him alone to play, as she put it, with his remotes. De Ramaira lay in the long grass outside the village until sunset, interfaced with a compsim so that he could send one of the little machines buzzing about the huts at will, taking pictures of the aborigines that its avid camera eyes transmitted blooming one after the other on the inside of his eyelids like the giddy distortions of a bad trip.

As the lieutenant had promised, the aborigines soon began to move once the lieutenant had been left alone, jerking out of their paralysis and resuming their communal buzz all at the same moment. They walked with a curious stiffly bending gait, long arms hanging loosely, narrow head tilted back. It reminded de Ramaira of something, but it was a while before he made the connection. The rigid gait of the aborigines was like that of the figures of ancient Egyptian friezes. They even looked a little like something dug up from some sandy grave, long dead and dried out and . . . distorted.

De Ramaira watched as two aborigines butchered the mire boar carcass with almost ritualistic elaboration, squatting close to their work so that the double joints of their knees bent above their heads. Meanwhile, children, exact miniatures of the immature adults, played at chipping pebbles or bones, or chased each other among the huts; while the only aborigine which could be easily distinguished from its fellows, by a ridged web of scars at its crotch, sat cross-legged at the centre of the village. Like a dried-up spider, de Ramaira thought of Webster, noting the presence of one of these mutilated aborigines in every village he had called them shamans. Really, he had not been strictly objective in many of his interpretations.

The orange sun sank lower, deepening the shadows of the huts. At last de Ramaira recalled the remote and returned to the camp. A fire had been lit in the hearth of pebbles and the lieutenant sprawled beside it reading a book. It was the book de Ramaira had brought with him: a leather-bound volume with its title, *The Report of a Reconnaissance of the Trackless Mountains, 2057*, stamped in gold on its cover. Printed books, like smoking tobacco and marijuana, had been revived during the colony's first years; unlike smoking, however, they had quickly lapse into a curiosity.

The lieutenant, not at all embarrassed at having been caught with evidence of having gone through de Ramaira's kit, said, "There's some odd stuff in here."

"Odder to me than to you, surely." De Ramaira dumped the metal case which housed the remotes. "Where's Jonthan?"

"Hunting for his dog's supper."

"And you're not hunting with him?" Twice on the ride up from Broken Hill, the lieutenant had broken away to fruitlessly pursue some beast or other through the tangled valley forests.

She smiled and said, "He's some catch, right?"

"That's not what I meant," de Ramaira said, stung by the implication. The lieutenant would have read his file as a matter of course, but he didn't like to be reminded of it. "If you've quite finished with my book, I'd like to check up on a couple of things."

The lieutenant closed the heavy volume, but made no move to hand it over. "Why did you bring this, Doctor? This is as close to the Trackless Mountains as you'll get."

"Is it? I'd like to explore them one day, and see what's beyond them, too. I'm an ambitious man, Lieutenant. Describing the plants and animals of this little peninsula is nothing to the chance of exploring a whole world."

"Ambition is all very well," the lieutenant said, "but there are limits." She looked at him. "I wondered why you insisted on coming out this far when there are already villages nearer the city."

"Well," de Ramaira said, "this was the first Webster had fully described." That was only part of the reason. While he had been recuperating from years of coldcoffin sleep he had pored over maps of the peninsula - about the size of California, it was the only part of Elysium settled so far - determining how far he could travel without breaking Port of Plenty's prohibitions. He had wanted to get a good idea of the world as quickly as possible, and the week-long journey had not disappointed him. Out of Port of Plenty on a little coastal packet which had hugged a bleak sandy shore to Freeport, a settlement of low white buildings on either side of a broad river, hemmed by cave-riddled limestone cliffs. Then up the river to Broken Hill on a slow steam-launch with a raked funnel, and then back on horseback to the high grass plains at the foot of the Trackless Mountains. Every day he had gloried in the simple thrill of apprehension - another world! - but he couldn't tell the lieutenant about that thrill. She would refuse to understand. She would sneer. This was nothing to her, no more than another pointless trip into the boondocks. He said, "Look, I know that Port of Plenty prohibits movement of people beyond the peninsula, but I don't see why that should apply to me. I don't intend to start an illegal settlement, after all."

"Some would call you a separatist if they heard talk like that. If the city didn't regulate the settlers they'd be all over the continent inside a century."

De Ramaira had already had conversations like this, and asked the question only to needle the lieutenant. "Would that be such a bad thing?"

"My people were here first, built Port of Plenty years before the colonyboats started arriving. We didn't ask to have more people dumped on us. We have the right to see that our world isn't raped. Keep quiet about your plans in Port of Plenty, or you might never be allowed out again." She crossed to the neat cache of supplies, sorted out two cans and tossed one to de Ramaira. "Let's eat. God knows when the boy will be back."

Jonathan Say didn't return until long after sunset. De Ramaira was reading his book by the light of an electric lantern while on the other side of the campfire the lieutenant fiddled with her transceiver, the tip of her cheroot brightening and dimming like a fitful star. The boy, his dog trotting at his heels, hailed them cheerfully. He had the carcass of something like a fat blunt-headed lizard slung over one shoulder. Long tail tipped with heavy spines; the oval scales which lapped its body tufted with bright red hair. Jonathan allowed de Ramaira to perform a rough dissection - three-chambered heart and single ramifying lung, a string of half-formed eggs coiled in the abdomen like a pearl necklace - then he dressed the carcass and tossed half of it to the dog. As he opened a tin for himself Jonathan asked, "I always wondered, Doctor, why we weren't modified so we could eat the native plants and animals."

"On Earth it's illegal, anti-evolutionary, to modify human stock. Besides, genetic melding can only be done on the ovum before the first division horizon, not on the people who come to settle Elysium."

Across the fire, the lieutenant looked up from the transceiver. "You spend time out here, Jonathan, but you have to go home eventually. That's how it has to be."

The boy said without rancour, "That's how the city sees it, that we can be controlled if we have to rely on our farms and the chemicals we must buy from the city to help the crops grow. If we could live off the land ... Is it true there are escaped rabbits living wild around the city?"

"They're all over the Outback," de Ramaira said. "Something should be done before they screw up the native ecosystem."

"Don't give the boy ideas," the lieutenant said, taking out her earplug speaker. "He knows what happens to people who go dingo. Right, Jonathan?"

The boy shrugged, began to spoon up his stew.

"Remember those people who took off from Horizon, last year? Word's on the air that they've been captured; the party'll be passing us by in a couple of days, on the way to the prison mines. Watch and learn, boy. Anyway, I'm turning in, don't wait up long, okay?"

De Ramaira, his fingernails biting into the blisters on his palms, watched the lieutenant strut toward the tent. He had heard cops joking about droit de seigneur, but until now he hadn't believed it.

"Got to keep on the right side," Jonathan said softly to de Ramaira, "or my travel permit might get held up come renewal. Doesn't happen all that often anyhow. But usually women more than men."

"Men have asked you too?" It was out before he knew it.

"Sometimes girls are guides, I didn't properly explain. I suppose it's worse for them because women prefer to make their own choice." After a while, he added, "It's almost worth it, to be in-country again."

"I wish I knew it better."

"You'll learn, if you want. My father was from Earth, he knew it best of anyone in Broken Hill. He used to spend weeks out here, you know? When I was old enough sometimes I'd go with him. But he really liked to be alone."

"I'd like to talk with him, if I could."

"He died," the boy said simply. "Happened two years ago. He loved this world to see, but things in it kept making him ill. Sam's all the family I've left."

There was a silence, broken only by twigs popping in the fire, in which de Ramaira thought of and rejected various formulations of polite apology. The larger of Elysium's two moons hung low above the mountain peaks. The first stars were out, tremblingly enlarged in the soft night air.

At last Jonthan stood. His dog looked up at once and said, "'On't, Jonthan."

"Stay there, Sam, look after Dr de Ramaira. My rifle's just there, Doctor, by my saddle, but you shouldn't need it." Jonthan wouldn't meet de Ramaira's eyes.

"Well, good night."

"Good night," de Ramaira echoed as the boy crossed to the tent and lifted its flap. A ray of light shot across trampled grass as he stooped inside. The flap fell. The light went out.

The dog, Sam, said, "No goo', yah?"

De Ramaira reached over and picked up Jonthan's hunting rifle. "Know how the works?"

"Manthing. I juss a 'og, ry?"

"Well, keep a good lookout, then."

"Ry. 'ucking well ry." The dog bared his teeth. De Ramaira couldn't tell if it was meant as a smile or a display of strength.

That night, de Ramaira dreamed that he was back on the colony boat, that his coldcoffin had somehow failed and he had woken in transit. Naked, he arose and walked the aisles between the other coldcoffins, row upon row. Inside each was the masked, skeletal figure of an aborigine, but somehow this didn't seem strange. A tremor went through the pod, the fusion motor cutting in. It was the midpoint of the voyage.

He awoke with a start to the neon orange of Tau Ceti's dawn. Jonthan Sa looked up from tending the ashy campfire and said, "There's coffee."

"Made from some native crap." The lieutenant was buckling her pistol belt around her wide hips.

"Well, I'd like to try it," de Ramaira said, and rolled out of his thermoblanke. The air was the exact temperature of his skin. It was going to be another hot day.

The drink was tan and tart, not much like coffee. "If that stuff poisons you, don't look to me to carry you back to Broken Hill." The lieutenant stalked off to saddle her horse.

"She wants to go hunting," Jonthan said. "If you need help I will be here, Doctor."

"You could come and watch the aborigines with me."

The boy knuckled the springy helmet of his hair. "I've seen them," he said, after a moment.

"Even the goddamn settlers know the abos aren't worth the trouble," the lieutenant said, and grunted as she pulled the cinch of the saddle's bellyband tight around her horse.

"Why must you always denigrate the aborigines, Lieutenant?" de Ramaira

asked. "After all, your job is to represent their interests."

The lieutenant spat out the dead butt of her cheroot. "I'll do just that when they tell me what their interests are, instead of freezing as soon as they set eyes on me or anyone else. Listen, the only reason I got this job was because my father had it before me. My younger brother started at the bottom, and already he's aide to Senator O'Hara - who may well make governor eventually - while I sit in my crummy office or make trips into the stinking wilderness." Her small eyes fixed on Ramaira as if calculating a trajectory. "You look all you want, Earthman. I've got better things to do." She swung up into the saddle, then added gratuitously, "You watch your ass, Jonthan, while I'm away."

De Ramaira spent the whole day at the village, lying in long grass with his eyes closed, watching pictures relayed via the compsim interfaced to his nervous system from the remotes which stitched their trajectories among the mud and grass huts like so many inquisitive mosquitoes. As near as he could judge (apart from the mutilated shaman, sitting in the centre of the village, the aborigines were almost impossible to tell apart - even their black and tan markings were almost identical) there were about three dozen immature adults in the village, about half that number of children. According to Webster there would be at least as many roaming the land, following paths that webbed a territory up to a hundred kilometres in diameter, overlapping with those of half a dozen other villages. They might leave their home village as soon as they were large enough to be independent, six or seven years old, might not return until they had gone through their two or three years as a sexually active male and matured into a female. But always they would return, and in the fall mate with as many males who would accept them before going to what Webster called the Source Cave (another romantic anthropomorphism) to lay their fertilised eggs and die, and be consumed by the hatchlings.

All of the quasimammalian species on Elysium had some sort of variant on this life cycle. Mire boars did not lay their eggs but went into a kind of hibernation and were consumed from within by their children; sabretooths, the biggest predator on the continent, laid their eggs in the flesh of paralysed prey, and soon. Webster theorised that the necrogenetic life cycles were adaptations to the dryer, colder contemporary climate by animals which had evolved in the swampy, tropical world which Elysium had once been and would be again in some distant era, when the inconstant Tau Ceti burned hotter once more. It was a theory De Ramaira intended to test more rigorously, in time. He had plenty of that, at least, the rest of his life. In the meantime, there were the aborigines, and although he would loathe to admit it, he was beginning to tire of simply watching them. He lacked the patience of an ethnologist. Already he'd identified more than a dozen activities, and all corresponded closely to the descriptions given by Webster. As if the aborigines were no more than programmed robots, or like ants and bees, their seemingly purposeful activity merely blind instinct butting at a task until it was done. Only the young showed any semblance of free will. De Ramaira had fantasies of stealing a hatchling, raising it to intelligence. Perhaps it would imprint

on him, like Lorenz's goslings. Well, he'd satisfied himself about the veracity of Webster's painstakingly detailed observations, but he'd discovered nothing new.

At last he recalled his remotes and returned to the camp. The boy was sprawled in the shade of the tent; Sam roused himself to say, "McAn'ers no' ba', so w' sleep'."

"She's been gone a long time, hasn't she?"

"Yeah. Goo' an' long." Sam growled, and settled back to sleep.

The sun had bled into the western horizon, Jonthan had relit the campfire and he and de Ramaira had eaten, but still the lieutenant had not returned. Jonthan squatted by the fire and watched the darkness. The firelight playing over his bare lean torso made him look like something by Michelangelo, de Ramaira thought glancing up now and then as he read in his book, rummaging through terse descriptions: Twenty days beyond the first foothills we reach a high plain. Lambs and horse slaughtered for meat. Cold driving rain.

De Ramaira did not ask what the boy was thinking. He had hardened his heart to the only defence against the affair. He was an observer, nothing more. But at last Jonthan stood and picked up his rifle and said, "I'm going to look for her. You better come too, Doctor."

Although the big moon had risen above the Trackless Mountains, its cold radiance laid such a tangle of deceptive shadows over the grassland that darkness would have been preferable. De Ramaira's horse, stolid enough by day, kept shying at nothing its rider could see, or stumbling heavily on the uneven ground. Ahead, Jonthan's torch threw a nervous oval of yellow light which on occasions occasionally revealed the rustling track Sam pushed through tall grass as he searched out the lieutenant's faint trail. Once, he lost it for more than ten minutes, and in the hiatus Jonthan, his patience worn out by concern, lost his temper. "Wanna 'racker, ge' a 'ucking blu'houn'," the dog grumbled as he cast about. But at last he rediscovered the trail and they set off again.

And ten minutes later found the lieutenant's horse standing patiently in the moonlight, reins flipped over its head. Finding the lieutenant took longer, even with Sam's help. De Ramaira was about to suggest that the horse could have run off after she had fallen somewhere else, when Sam barked. A moment later Jonthan gave an inarticulate cry.

The lieutenant lay in a kind of nest of dry grass, her face and arms marred by dead white swellings, her eyelids so puffy that she could scarcely open them. As the boy and de Ramaira tended her, she roused enough to mumble fragments of her story. She had disturbed a mire boar in the bottom of a dry ravine and chased it through dense banks of thornbush until her horse would go no further, getting her legs badly scratched up in the process. Then, on the way back to the camp, some kind of fever had taken hold in her, weakening her muscles until she could ride no further.

Jonthan helped her drink a little water, and then he and de Ramaira lifted her over the saddle of her horse. As they slowly rode back, de Ramaira asked about the cause of the lieutenant's fall. "Are the thornbushes poisonous, then?"

The boy, leading the lieutenant's horse with one hand and guiding his own with the other, said, "Almost all wild plants are poisonous if you eat a piece of them but I never did hear of anyone being poisoned by a thornbush scratch. I guess she could be more sensitive than most. Like my father."

"Allergic, then, not poisoned. We'll give her some antihistamines, back at the camp."

But the camp was a long way off, the going slow. The lieutenant, by now delirious, kept slipping off her saddle. Every ten minutes or so they would have to stop and heave her up again. The third time it happened Jonthan cried out, "She could fucking well die out here!"

It was the woman's own damn silly fault, but de Ramaira could hardly tell the boy that. He was about to suggest that they tie her across the saddle when the dog said, "Something ow there. Liss'n."

But the humans saw it before they heard anything. No more than a fitful sparkle at first, far out beneath the huge starry sky, suddenly resolving into two headlight beams. And then the sound of a cushiontruck came to them, small and clear. The boy grabbed his rifle, pointed it straight up and fired, swore as he fumbled to eject the spent cartridge and insert a new one. But there was no need. His signal had been heard. The truck was turning toward them.

Kneeling in the flat glare of the cushiontruck's headlights, de Ramaira inexpertly swabbed the lieutenant's swollen forearm and jabbed home the ampoule of antihistamine.

Jonthan, watching him closely, asked, "Will that do any good?"

"I'm not that sort of doctor. We'll have to see."

The leader of the three cops who had come to their rescue, a rangy young man called Sinclair, scratched at his sun-bleached mop of hair and said disdainfully, "In-country's no place for keyboarders. You don't know it, you can get hurt bad. One of his companions, a woman, said, "No lie," and laughed. Sinclair added, "You finished now, get her in back. Your camp close by? Lucky for you we were heading for it."

The loadbed of the cushiontruck was pitch black beneath its canvas roof. Something shifted in the darkness as de Ramaira and Jonthan lifted the lieutenant into it, and Sinclair shone his torch briefly, showing half a dozen people huddled on a bench. "Can't let you ride with these, you sit up front with me. Mueller will bring your horses along with the ones we took off of these shiteaters." Behind them, the woman cop laughed again. It was not a friendly sound.

When de Ramaira quit the tent at the lakeside camp, he found Sinclair overseeing the unloading of the prisoners. He had eased an antipyretic pill down the lieutenant's throat and left Jonthan dabbing water on her dry lips, an intimacy that made him uneasy. Now, watching the prisoners as they clumsily clambered down, hobbled by short ankle chains, he asked Sinclair, "Is that really necessary?"

"Weren't for the chains they'd be over the Trackless Mountains soon as we turned our backs. They know they're for the mines." The blond cop was amused. "Listen, how did you all get in such a mess?"

Wearily, de Ramaira told Sinclair what he knew about the lieutenant's accident. The woman cop, Mueller, went from prisoner to prisoner, linking their ankle chains to a staked line.

The third member of the patrol, a taciturn man named Kelly, brewed coffee.

When de Ramaira had finished, Sinclair grinned, showing yellow teeth crowded in a narrow jaw. "She wanted hunting she shoulda come with us," he said, and eagerly related how he and his companions had tracked down the illegal homestead in a valley high in the mountains, of the ambush which had trapped the runaway settlers. The cops were due to share out the prisoners' possessions in addition to a credit bonus, and the lieutenant's misadventure only added to the schadenfreude. They stayed up late, drinking coffee and passing around fake reefers which de Ramaira politely refused, joking in loud voices about their little clean-up action.

Jonthan stayed in the tent with the lieutenant, Sam sprawled watchfully outside. That night, de Ramaira slept fitfully, waking often on the hard ground beside the ashy fire to see the lamp still burning in the tent, outlining the boy's figure as he bent in an attitude of devotion.

Toward dawn, de Ramaira untangled himself from his silvery cocoon and went over to the tent. Jonthan was asleep at last, face smooth and untroubled, fist doubled in his groin. The lieutenant breathed raggedly beside him, still unconscious, the reaction blisters on her arms inflamed. De Ramaira gave her another shot of antihistamine and patched a glucose drip into a vein inside her elbow. The boy awoke and instantly asked, "Is she any better?"

"She's fighting it. How are you?"

The boy shrugged, then touched the lieutenant's brow. "She's so hot."

"You can leave her long enough to get some breakfast," de Ramaira said. "If you're going to look after her, you must look after yourself."

"I shouldn't have let her go off alone," the boy said.

"Eat. Then you can wallow in guilt all you want."

Their water sack was empty, so they set off for the lake together. One of the prisoners was awake, a burly man with a bald pate and the longest white beard de Ramaira had ever seen, a gaze as fierce as a hawk's. All around, the sea of reed grass stretched silent and still. When they had pushed through the reeds which fringed the lakeshore, Jonthan pointed to ominous black clouds towering over the mountains and said that there was a storm coming down.

"Well, I suppose we'll be back in Broken Hill soon enough."

"I guess," Jonthan said, and bent to fill the sack.

The three cops were up and about by the time de Ramaira and Jonthan returned to the camp. "We've plenty of clean water in the truck," Sinclair called out, but the boy ignored him and went on toward the prisoners. Sinclair said sharply, "They drink when we've done. Go look to your keyboarder, kid."

De Ramaira said, "There's no need -"

Sinclair pushed hair from his eyes. His stare was hard and mean. "They're my prisoners, friend. Go on, boy."

All the prisoners were awake now, the old man with the patriarchal white beard

another man about de Ramaira's age, and two women and three children, the oldest a girl of twelve or so with a dirty bandage around her head. The patriarch caught de Ramaira's eye, then deliberately spat on the ground between his boots. De Ramaira looked up again. De Ramaira tried and failed to match his fierce proud gaze and turned away, ashamed.

It took the cops more than an hour to feed the prisoners and load them onto the truck, and by the time they set off a fine rain had begun to fall. De Ramaira sat in the cab of the cushiontruck, turning to watch the aborigine village dwindle into the landscape. Kelly whistled tunelessly as he steered the vehicle along the narrow track. Sinclair and Mueller were following on horseback, leading the string of spare mounts, and Jonthan Say rode with them; Sinclair hadn't allowed him to ride in the back of the truck with the prisoners and lieutenant McAnderson. The rain fell harder, sweeping across empty red grassland. Lightning flickered like whips at the level horizon.

After a while, de Ramaira ventured, "Will this get worse?"

"Maybe so."

And a little later: "This reminds me of Kansas, you know. On Earth."

"Yeah? Fancy."

After that riposte, de Ramaira abandoned any attempt at conversation and simply watched rain and grass trawl past, thinking of the aborigines and his failure to understand them. Perhaps they are only animals after all, he thought, but it gave him no comfort. He was beginning to understand the frustration which had driven Webster to his extravagant fantasies of Shamans and Source Cave and secret underground rituals.

The convoy began to descend into the first of the forested valleys, following a narrow trail made treacherous by the rain that poured straight down between the towering trees. At last Sinclair rode up to the cab and yelled through the side window, "Go on before it gets worse, Kelly. Mueller and the kid and me, we'll catch up."

Kelly instantly gunned the cushiontruck and it leaped forward. De Ramaira watched with helpless fascination as large bare trunks whipped past scarcely centimetres from the sides of the truck. The windscreen was blinded by rain. The truck scythed over a swollen stream at the bottom of the valley, crested the ridge beyond. And then the trail vanished in a tangle of boulders and mud and uprooted trees. Kelly blew air from the truck's skirt but there was no way to stop in time. Sliding sideways, the truck slammed into a fallen tree, spun nose-first into another. De Ramaira pitched forward, banged his head on the windscreen. There was only the sound of rain and running water.

"Fuck," Kelly said succinctly.

They had fetched up at the edge of a spreading lake, penned by the landslip and visibly rising. De Ramaira and Kelly checked on the prisoners and the lieutenant and were examining the buckled side of the truck when Sinclair and the others rode up.

Sinclair walked around the truck, then shook his head and ordered the prisoners out. A wind was getting up, raising a chop on the water, blowing rain

sideways. Jonathan and de Ramaira lifted the lieutenant down and rigged a shelter with a waterproof poncho while Sinclair started the truck and tried to back it out of the jam of boulders and tree trunks. For a moment it seemed as if he might succeed, but then the damaged skirt blew out in a spray of air and mud and the truck sat down with abrupt finality.

As the prisoners unloaded their looted possessions, Sinclair told de Ramaira and the boy, "We'll walk out, follow the river back until we can cross it safely."

Jonathan said, "It would be quicker to go downstream."

"So we'd be caught when that pile of rock goes? It isn't going to last much longer, I reckon. Save your advice for keyboarders, boy. I was working in-country way before you got hair on your balls." Sinclair indicated Lieutenant McAnderson unconscious on her stretcher beneath the orange poncho. "Better figure out a way of carrying her," he said, and strode off to harangue the prisoners.

Jonathan slung a blanket between two of the horses, stiffened by stays taken from the truck's canvas roof. When the lieutenant had been lifted onto this improvised stretcher the party set off through the storm.

Sinclair's plan to keep close to the flooded river until they found a crossing place was soon abandoned. Floodwater was steadily undermining the sides of the valley, exposing a reticulated net of roots which seemed to connect each tree with every other. Trees at the edge of the flood had already fallen, dragging others with them and pulling up ragged tangles of root. The cops could have picked a way through the muddy wreckage on their own perhaps, but not the shackled prisoners or the horses. So, in single file, the party climbed higher and higher up the steep slopes of the valley, people slipping and horses foundering in earth turned to mud by the relentless rain.

At last Sinclair called a halt. Everyone hunkered down as best they could, soaked through and exhausted. All around, tall trees groaned under the lash of the wind. Gusts of rain blew between them like shot, obscuring anything more than a few metres away.

De Ramaira, cold and soaked through despite his poncho, bruised forehead throbbing, boots filled with mud, leaned against a buttress root of one of the tall trees and wondered vaguely what would happen. It came to him that they could all die here. He pushed the thought around in his head, but it didn't seem particularly relevant. Exhaustion flattened his perception to here, to now, the cold rain blowing into his face, the hard wet shape of the tree root against his back.

Jonathan left the horses which were carrying the lieutenant and came over to de Ramaira. Sam slunk miserably beside him. "She'll die if we don't get out of this," Jonathan said. "I've got to do something."

De Ramaira wiped cold rain from his face; more blew over him an instant later. One of the prisoners' children sat crying in the mud a little way off, picking at the shackles around his ankles. De Ramaira said, "Those cops were crazy to try and get that truck down the trail, and now we're headed off in the wrong direction. Do you think they'll listen to you?"

"I know a place where we can shelter."

Sam growled, "No goo'."

Jonathan shook his head. His curly hair was plastered to his skull. He looked twice, three times his age. "There's no other way," he said.

"The Source Cave?" de Ramaira asked.

"That's kilometres to the north. This is something else."

"No goo'," the dog insisted, but Jonathan went over to Sinclair and bent to confer with him. They talked a long time. At last the cop stood, rain streaming from his white poncho, and called to his two companions. "Kelly, Mueller! Get the cattle moving. We just might have a place out of this fucking storm!"

With Jonathan at the head of the party, leading the horses which carried the lieutenant's stretcher, they crossed the ridge and descended into another valley, following the line of a low cliff. Trees leaned out above them, giving a little shelter from the rain. They had not gone very far when de Ramaira realised that they were following a definite path. Then the path turned from the cliff, descending into a wide, tree-circled clearing.

In the middle was a symmetrical grassy mound, fenced by poles which each raised into the pouring rain a skull marked with a broad red stripe. Everyone stopped, prisoners bunching together, cops looking around as if expecting an ambush.

De Ramaira went past them to Jonathan, touched the boy's shoulder. "The aborigines?"

"Something my father found."

"I can't remember anything like this described in Webster." A mixture of anger and excitement fizzed in de Ramaira's blood. Anger because he was certain that the boy wouldn't have told anyone about this place if the lieutenant's life had not been in danger; excitement because of the implications, the possibilities. . . .

Jonathan said, "The aborigines don't use this place very often. My father -" He broke off as Sinclair stalked up.

The cop asked, "What is this shit? Where's that shelter you promised?"

"Just up ahead."

In the shadow of the hood of his poncho, Sinclair's face was congested with blood. He thrust his face close to Jonathan's. "So show us, for Christ's sake!" he said hoarsely, then spun on his heel and began to shout at the prisoners.

"Ba'," Sam said. "Ver' ba'."

A narrow path led out of the clearing, so narrow that the lieutenant's stretcher had to be unshipped from the horses and carried by two of the prisoners. It climbed and turned, revealing the stream in the valley below, and then widened into another clearing, this one in the embrace of a sheer cliff. A narrow cave entrance broke the cliff face, its arch smoke-blackened, and in front of the cave were neat rows of plants so unexpectedly familiar that it was several seconds before de Ramaira could put a name to them: potatoes.

The cave was long, dry and sandy-floored, a rubble slope in back rising up into darkness. Jonathan reached into a crevice and fetched out a lantern, lighted it and held it above the lieutenant's wet white face as the prisoners set her down. D

Ramaira shucked his poncho and checked the lieutenant's pulse and temperature.

Mueller herded the prisoners to the back of the cave, began to link them to an alarm wire. "Cuff the kid too," Sinclair said.

Sam rose, his wet hair bristling in points, but Jonthan muttered, "Easy." Sinclair and Kelly had both unholstered their pistols.

"I had to," Jonthan said to the dog. He looked at de Ramaira, gave a little shrug, as of resignation, and sat down on the sandy floor.

De Ramaira started to protest, but subsided when Sinclair glared at him. Might have been right. The cops broke out self-heating cans and passed them around. While they ate just outside the cave entrance, sheltered from the rain by the lip of an overhang and passing a flagon of wine back and forth (loot from the homesteaders), de Ramaira sat with the boy and the other prisoners.

De Ramaira had little appetite. With one eye on the cops, he asked Jonthan about the raised mound, the skulls.

"My father found it," the boy explained. "He followed them here just as Webster followed them to the Source Cave. They have places all over their territory, he used to say, like we have rooms in our houses. But he never told me what they did. I think it's something to do with the scarred one."

"The shaman."

"Maybe they initiate a new one here when the old one dies. Most aborigines only live a dozen or so years, but the scarred ones live much longer. Those skulls have been there as long as I can remember, and there are piles of them downslope, I guess the old ones are thrown out when the place is used again. An aborigine will come by now and then, put up any poles that have fallen over, clear back the grass. I do that too, when I can."

"A ritual, a ceremony, for a specific purpose. Do you understand what it means, Jonthan? It could prove that the aborigines really are intelligent. Your father told me no one?"

"Only me. And he didn't tell me very much. Maybe if Webster had been around, my father would have told him, but Webster died before Broken Hill was founded. He used to live out here sometimes, my father - he loved this place, Doctor. He buried him here, flowers on the grave, from Earth. They don't need to be tended like the potatoes because his body in the ground keeps off the native plants."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"You can leave the city whenever you want, can't you? I thought maybe you could come here once in a while. Check it over."

"Well, I'd like to help -"

De Ramaira was interrupted by the hoarse whisper of the white-bearded patriarch. "You'd like to help?" He and the other prisoners, even the children, were looking at de Ramaira. The man repeated. "You like to help, I know a way."

"I don't even have a knife, let alone a gun," de Ramaira was whispering to the man. "Are you crazy?"

"We aren't talking violence," the man said. "Just feel in my pocket, the left one. It's okay, the cops aren't looking. Just be casual. Okay, you got it?"

A twist of paper. De Ramaira unfolded it, spilled a dozen black, slippery seeds.

onto his palm.

The man told de Ramaira, "Was saving those in case things got too bad. Want you to put one in that wine of ours the cops are drinking."

"You are crazy." De Ramaira turned his hand over, tipping the seeds to the floor. "See that, now. I won't be a party to murder. Not even of those three."

"We aren't talking murder. Just one in all that wine will knock them out, is all. We won't do anything to them after, just slip away. I've never told a lie in my life and I don't aim to start now. You don't mind knocking those fools out a while, right? Or you want the boy to go to the mines? Not a nice place, Earthman."

"'ucking well righ'," Sam growled.

De Ramaira asked Jonthan. "You want to take a chance on this?"

The boy looked at the lieutenant, looked back at de Ramaira. "The man is right about the mines."

De Ramaira sighed, then began to pick the seeds from the sandy floor. The patriarch smiled.

When de Ramaira sat beside Sinclair, the cop clapped his shoulder and said "We're about to have a goddamn shooting contest! You shoot?" The wine had made him loose and foolish. Beside him, Mueller was thumbing fat cartridges into the breech of a hunting rifle.

De Ramaira moved from under Sinclair's hand and said, "I'll leave the shooting to the professionals." He could feel the shape of the seeds in his clenched hand.

Outside, the rain had gentled. The storm was almost over. Out in the middle of the potato patch, Kelly was setting the last skull on its uprooted pole. Strung out in a line, the vacant grins of the skulls glimmered through the settling dusk. De Ramaira started to protest about the desecration, but Sinclair only said, "If the abos did stick them up, they can always find plenty more." He pushed the jug of wine toward de Ramaira. "Go ahead, take a drink. It's okay, we shook it up with Sterilin tablet."

The wine's thick sweet taste was cut by a burning chlorine tang. Sinclair and Mueller were watching Kelly finish his work. Quickly, guiltily, de Ramaira thumbed a seed into the narrow neck of the jug, set it down and said that he ought to check on the lieutenant.

Sinclair shrugged, and took the rifle from Mueller. "One gets you five if I don't hit it first time," he told her, then yelled, "Goddamn it, Kelly, move your body out of the way!" and without waiting loosed a single round. Echoes of the discharge rolled around the high cliff. Kelly had dropped to the ground; now he picked himself up, smiling. None of the skulls had been touched.

As Mueller took the rifle for her turn, de Ramaira went back and sat beside Jonthan. The patriarch leaned over and asked, "You did it?"

"I did it. You're sure it won't kill them?"

"Probably not. What are they shooting at? The horses?"

Dr Ramaira jerked around as Mueller fired two shots in quick succession. "They set up those skulls we saw along the trail. Some sort of game."

"You see?" one of the women whispered to Jonthan. "You see how it is?"

The lieutenant was still unconscious, but her fever had burned out. De Ramaira settled beside her and waited for the seed to do its work, while the cops took potshots and passed the jug of wine back and forth. He didn't remember falling asleep, but suddenly Sam was tugging at his sleeve.

"Come see," the dog said, when he saw that de Ramaira was awake. "Come see. They slee' like 'ucking babes."

Sinclair was curled around the almost empty wine jug just inside the cave, snoring loudly. Kelly and Mueller sprawled on wet grass a little way beyond. Moonlight flooded the clearing, made luminous the few skulls which still stood on their poles among the potato plants. His heart beating in his throat, de Ramaira bent over Mueller and pulled the keyring from her belt.

Once freed, Jonthan went straightaway to the lieutenant. The patriarch looked over the sleeping cops while the others stretched and rubbed their chafed ankles, murmuring to each other and glancing sidelong at de Ramaira. The other man said, "Thanks for this, Earthman. We'll be on our way, now."

"May I ask where you are going?"

One of the women laughed softly, gathering the youngest child to herself. "Well," she said, "you may ask."

The patriarch returned, stooping under the low cave roof. "We'll take the horses and the rest of our stuff, though the truck will have to stay where it is. Then we go back to where we hid our stock, and after that I hope you don't mind if I don't tell you. But we won't be staying this side of the mountains. Leave that cop, boy. She'll live or die without you. You come with us."

"I'm no part of your thing," Jonthan said. "This is my place."

"The mine will be your place, you stay."

"He's right," a hoarse voice said. It was the lieutenant.

De Ramaira's heart stumbled. How much had she heard? How long had she been awake? He was no longer the cool observer, no longer separate, aloof. Because he cared so much for the boy he had floundered into something he didn't understand.

The lieutenant raised herself on her elbows. Her face was a puffy mask bleached by harsh lamplight. When she smiled, bloody cracks opened in her lips. She said, "I'm not going to stop you people. It's not my place to say anything, except to Jonthan."

"Listen, boy, I know this is your place, and your father's, but you won't serve his memory in the mines. Take it in your heart and go. I'll look to his grave, though I can't promise to do it regularly. And don't worry, Doctor, I won't tell on you. It's my part."

The patriarch put away the pistol he had taken, and told his people to get the horses ready. "Why are you doing this?" de Ramaira asked the lieutenant.

"You live here long enough, you'll understand." Her grin was ghastly. "Now listen," she told the patriarch, "I can fake I've been under all the time, but the doctor here can't. He doesn't get any blame, you should take care of him. See what I mean?"

"Sure," the man said, and with a sudden motion swung his arm at de Ramaira.

head. He had wrapped a set of ankle cuffs around his big fist. De Ramaira barely had time to flinch.

De Ramaira and Lieutenant McAnders returned to the aborigine village two months later. The fall rains were over and the grass of the plain had turned, flawless green sea now, stirring in the cold wind which blew from the Trackles Mountains. De Ramaira dismounted when they were in sight of the village, and drew the wrapped package from his saddlebag.

As he walked toward the village, the unravelling seeding heads of the grasse brushing the hem of his jacket, de Ramaira felt a quickening nervousness. But he couldn't leave it undone; he owed it to Jonthan.

The aborigines were motionless as he walked between their huts to the center of the village where the shaman sat, a crooked wire-thin statue marred at the forking of its folded legs. "I brought this to show you what had been done, to show you what needs to be replaced," de Ramaira said. "I'm sorry, for what has happened."

He laid the package on the ground and unrolled it to show the pieces of shattered bone. Some were still touched with red. "I'm sorry," he repeated, and waited, his whole skin tingling, for some token of understanding.

A move.

A sound.

A blow.

Anything.

But the aborigine sat as still as ever, and after a while de Ramaira left the village and walked empty-handed through the long grass to the waiting woman.

"I don't think I'll ever know about them," he said as they rode off, "nor even really know if they're intelligent. When I saw the mound, what Jonthan told me, I thought I knew then. Now . . . well, it could have been set up by Jonthan's father for all I know."

"That's a crock of shit and you know it," the lieutenant said. She twisted to spit out the butt of her cheroot, wiped her mouth on her wrist. "Never thought I'd see this, David, but who can tell with those critters. We'll break through to them, talk with them. Maybe not soon. But eventually, I can feel it."

"I don't think I'll ever understand you, lieutenant, let alone the aborigines," de Ramaira said, and laughed. "All I know for certain is that you're all of you aliens. I don't think I'll ever understand any of you."

He was wrong, but more than a dozen years would pass before he finally learned the truth.

PART ONE

1. The Body in the Beach

When the helicopter rounded the point of the bay, Miguel had barely enough time to grab his pack and reach the cover of a patch of quaking vine, in a deep saddle which broke the ridge of the dunes. He was settling himself among white flowers and shivering loops of leaves when the helicopter turned sharply, almost standing on its nose above the sea's chop, the bubble of its cabin flaring with Tani Ceti's last light. The cops had seen the overlander, all right.

In another moment the helicopter was skimming over the dunes, circling twice before finally settling near the overlander. The helicopter had an egg-shaped cabin, much clear plastic webbed by black steel, and a long narrow tail with flared air vents to stabilise it. The wash of its rotors sent tidewrack fluttering out to sea, enveloped Miguel in torn petals and a gritty sandstorm. He was still cleaning sand from his face and whiskery beard when the two cops ducked out of the helicopter and sprinted down the beach to the overlander.

Miguel crouched lower, leaves trembling around him.

The cops walked around the big white vehicle, ducking to look under its tracks, peering up at its curved windscreen.

Then they went up the ladder onto its roof and one pulled up the hatch while the other clambered inside, reappearing a minute later to say something that was lost in the roar of the surf. Both cops scrambled down and quickly quartered the beach, their white coveralls ghostly in the last light. At last, one returned to the helicopter, leaning into the plastic bubble of the cabin to talk to the radio.

Miguel watched the other cop poke around at the foot of the dunes. They knew he was hiding from them, he thought. The goddamn cops, you didn't stand a chance against them when they got on your tail. He should have run when he had had the chance. He could have been a kilometre away by now.

The cop by the dunes bent, began to scoop away sand with both hands. A body appeared, then part of a bloated leg. The cop turned away, pinching the wings of his nostrils with finger and thumb. A dozen metres away, Miguel caught a whiff of corruption over the dusty scent of the quaking vine. He was shivering with anticipatory fear now, nerving himself to make a run for it. So much for charity. He should have left the body where he had found it, propped up against the overlander with the back of its head spattered all over the tracks. Now the cops wouldn't rest until they found out who had buried the body; and because the body's head was spoiled they might take Miguel's instead, if they caught him, turning him into a machine the way they did to all their dead people.

As both cops bent to the unpleasant task of exhuming the corpse from its shallow sandy grave, Miguel slowly wriggled backward, tendrils clutching at his clothing, catching in his matted hair. When he was out of sight of the beach he stood, dusting sand from his red trousers. Then he shouldered his pack and broke into a run, feet flying over close-cropped turf, the scooped mouths of rabbit burrows, dancing around loops of briar and vine. He ran through the maze of the dunes until he was winded and then he walked on, holding his aching side, shadows gathering around him. Some time later he heard the angry buzz of the

helicopter. It circled above the dunes for half an hour, searchlight blazing, before giving up and turning away, heading west.

Miguel had taken cover in a hollow clump of thornbush. Even after the helicopter had gone he sat still, fearing some trick, so still that, first one, then two, then a dozen more, rabbits emerged from their burrows and began to nibble at the turf. When Miguel finally stood, they dived for safety in frantic crisscross trajectories of white scuts.

Miguel walked back the way he had come.

The overlander was still there, but the hatch in its roof had been locked. Miguel pried at it in a halfhearted way, then sat on his heels. He thought, I should have taken as much as I could at the beginning and gone on. He'd spent too much time here, bumping his head on a mystery not for him. And now the goddamned cops would be after him, really, specifically after him . . .

Miguel pulled a heavy foil envelope from inside his overjacket, scraped off a sliver of the gummy stuff inside with a fingernail, put it under his tongue. Numbness spread from the cavern of his mouth, weighting his tongue, his jaw, suffusing his face. His fear did not go away, but it no longer seemed important.

There was little light now. Only the small inner moon was up, a chipped fleck of light not much brighter than the first stars. But as the drug took hold, things seemed to gain their own luminescence, as if every object shadowed a spectral inner light. The unravelling lines of foam far down the beach continually renewed lacy patterns of phosphorescence; and the curved beach itself held a heavy glow flecked with small furtive flickers of life. Each leaf of the quaking vine, every recurved blade of grass, glistened as if coated with frost. Only the overlander was unchanged, a dead shadow in the landscape of living light.

Miguel rubbed his bristly chin, chuckling to himself, then dropped to the sand and crossed to the empty grave. The long, shallow hole held a deep, dusty green radiance, as if lined with moldering velvet. Miguel urinated into it, his water gouging crusty shadows in the green glow. Piss on it all, on everything that came out of the city. He climbed the steep dune face and stood at the rim for a moment, a stocky, ragged figure silhouetted against the starry sky.

And stepped down, was gone.

2. The Dingo

On a desk-sized platform of mesh high above the baking Outback, in the shade of the reaching dish of the relay station's ten-metre antenna, Richard Damo Florey looked out across dry red grassland at the shimmering horizon while the machines talked to each other. He held a compsim in his right hand, one input jacked into the guidance computer, the other into the cuff, wrapped loosely around his left wrist, which interfaced with her nervous system via a subdermal implant. It turned him into the active link, the mediator, between the relay station and Constat, the one point eight megacee computer in Port of Plenty (he imagined microlaser impulses jittering back and forth along the buried cable like quantum fireflies). But unless Constat found something wrong, there would be nothing else for him to do.

Bored with the scenery, Florey took another peek at the operation: an endless array of figures scrolling across his vision, the manifestation of Constat's interrogation of the billion or so elements and innumerable shifting pathways of the guidance computer. Briefly, Florey shifted deeper, but encountered only Constat's calmly floating colophon, a skeletal sketch in vivid electric blue of four interlocking pyramids hanging before the unsettling sense of dark seething vastness, as if an information-dense yet insubstantial mountain had somehow rooted in his mind. This intimation of Constat's power gave him a chill despite the sweltering heat. So different from the idiot savant mind of his compsim, icons accessed subroutines worn smooth with familiarity. Thinking about accessing Constat was like contemplating a dive into a sea of churning razors.

He uncoupled and found himself staring into the sun, his glasses darkened to an opaque black. Afraid of losing his balance and falling from his precarious perch, he looked away and, one hand holding the compsim, the other the platform's flimsy railing, stood quite still while the sensitive molecules in the lenses depolarised.

Although tricked out in the coveralls of the Port Authority cops, even to the recoilless pistol in the power holster at his hip, Rick Florey looked bemused and defenceless: a sparely built technician marooned with his machinery in an anarchic nature. As his sunglasses cleared, the shimmering plain became visible once more, but there was little to interest him out there. Open tracts of red grass, a few clumps of twisted leafless trees, perhaps the dark slash of a river canyon. Directly below were the remnants of the research post, bleached shells of a half a dozen abandoned shacks scattered on a weedy apron of concrete and ringed round with a sagging wire fence, and the white overlander where the two cops who had escorted Rick out to the relay station sat in air-conditioned comfort. Orange sunlight flared on the curved windscreen; Rick couldn't see if the cops were watching him or not.

He peeked again. The compsim was still parading numbers.

With his wrist, Rick wiped sweat from his forehead, yawned. This routine inspection was horrible tedious, despite the importance of the relay station. A century ago it had received an unending stream of news and advice from a laser

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