

STEEL SKY

ANDREW C. MURPHY

per Aspera
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

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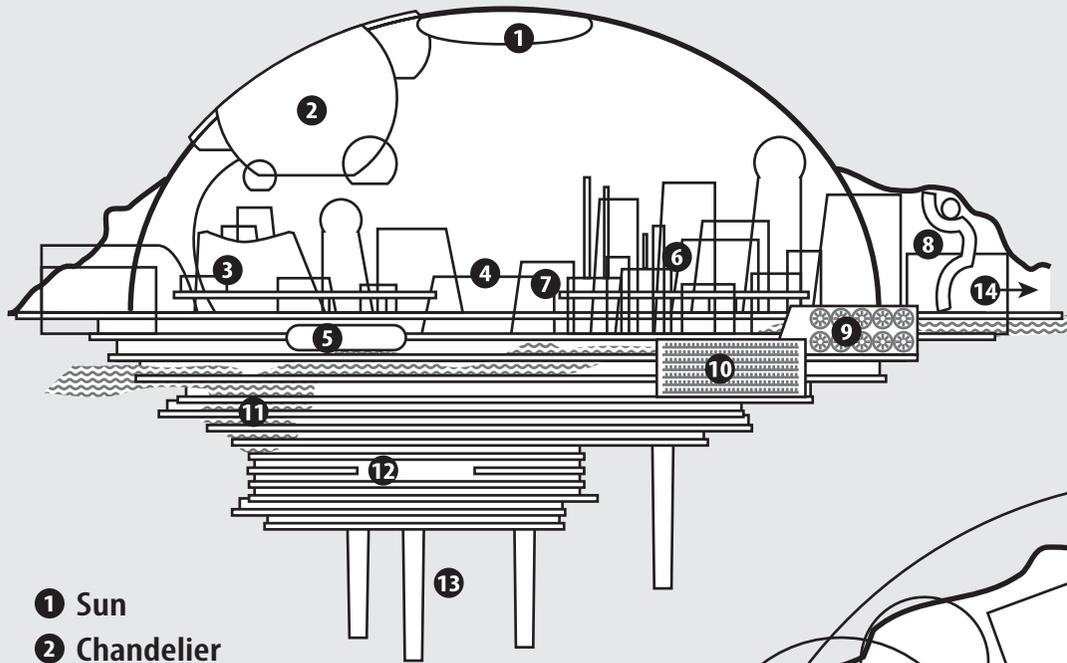
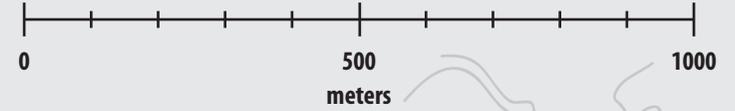
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THE HYPOGEUM



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INHABITANTS OF THE HYPOGEUM

NULL-CLASS CITIZENS

Orcus the 16th: Master Scrutator; unofficial master of the Hypogeum

First Son (“Stone”): His older son, deceased

Second Son (“Hump”): His younger son, heir to the title of Master Scrutator

First Daughter (“Dancer”): His older daughter, formerly affianced to Stone

Second Daughter (“Pinkie”): His younger daughter

Harrel Selachian: Culminant of the Prime Medium, the political body that governs the Hypogeum

Eno Selachian: His son

PRIMARIES

Edward Penn: A physician

Amarantha Kirton: An electrician; one of the Engineered

Cadell Tichener: Her lover; a functionary for the Prime Medium; minor member of the Rakehells

Thraso Tammerlyn: An aide to the Resource Allocation Committee; a powerful Rakehell

SECONDARIES

Orel Fortigan: An engineer in the waterworks

Bernie Pratt: His friend; also an engineer

Kitt Marburg: A chatter

Gordon Golubitsa (“Gloss”): Proprietor of an electronics repair shop

TERTIARIES

Pilchard Horsen: A clop and security guard

Faith Lessup: A wife and mother-to-be

QUATERNARIES

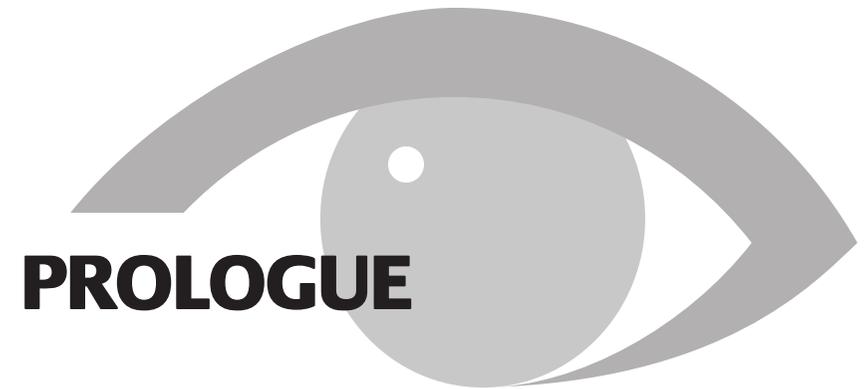
Astrid: A milcher and demimondaine

Samael: Her agent

OTHER

Image: The Hypogeum’s holistic simulated intelligence

The Winnower: A demon; the Dark Spirit of the Stone made flesh



PROLOGUE

Observe, my son — silently, without impatience and without judgment. Now that you are the eldest, this is your duty, and your honor. Of all the skills you must learn to become a man, patience and acuity will serve you the best. Open yourself to receive every detail, no matter how small. From the basher boxes to the Hall Mediar, from the lowest subdecks to the remote mechanisms of the Sun, no deed can escape your black glass eyes. The only thing that can protect the people from your scrutiny is your own preconceptions. Open yourself. Open yourself to the world, and it is yours.

DEEP HISTORY

A crouched figure hurries through dusty, dimly lit rooms. The interior of the museum, like that of most buildings in the Hypogeum, is a maze of soffits and buttresses, the result of over three hundred years of imperfect additions and restorations. The intruder, dressed simply in loose dark clothing, dodges from one blind to another, keeping his head low when crossing open space.

The air is still, thick, and warm. The only sounds are the soft pad of the intruder's feet and the sharp hiss of his breath. As he nears the exhibits, they glow from within, illuminating their contents and describing them in a toneless recorded voice.

"In his last days, Koba became obsessed with fear of assassina-

tion,” the voice murmurs as the intruder passes a display containing a strip of black cloth and a crudely painted portrait. The man in the portrait is old and bald, with heavily lined eyes and pouches of wasted muscle around his mouth and jaw. *“He retired to a featureless, brilliantly lit room that he never left. He allowed no one to enter unless the person’s eyes were covered with a special blindfold. Food and water were passed to him through a small hole in the door...”*

The intruder stops at a long, narrow hallway. At the far end, a second figure is waiting in the shadows, standing rigidly at attention. The intruder takes a deep breath, then launches himself forward at a dead run, arms crossed around his head. One by one the displays light as he passes them. *“Koba’s preferred method of persuasion was electric shock...”* The exhibits fly by, revealing their antique curiosities and growing dark again. *“A series of executions... His oldest friends...”* The voices overlap, becoming a quiet babble. As the intruder approaches the waiting figure, a brilliant light illuminates it, scintillating off of white metal.

“The ceremonial armor of Koba’s son—Koba the Second, also known as Kobe of the Forty Days—was never worn...” The whispering voices are drowned beneath the sound of shattering glass as fists and elbows ram the display at full speed. The intruder collapses in a shower of glittering fragments. The waiting figure, an armored manikin, rocks back and forth. *“Kobe was a secret adherent of the Cult of the Winnower, which his father had tried to destroy. He commissioned the armor to evoke fears of that mythical avenging spirit...”*

The intruder stands haltingly, brushing shards of bloodied glass from his neck and arms. *“Kobe was trying to get into the armor when the guards his father had so painstakingly trained to protect him broke down the door and held him fast while Luka Brattain, who would become the first Culminant, cut the pretender’s throat with his father’s own weapon...”*

The intruder runs his fingers across the armor’s smooth white surface. The helmet resembles a jawless human skull, though it is sleeker, as if cast in mercury. In the blackness of the eye sockets, it is possible to see complex circuitry. The intruder takes it in his hands. The halogen lights have left it as warm as a living thing.

It fits perfectly.

VISIONS

“Watch him. Watch him very carefully.”

“What am I looking for?”

“You’re not looking *for* anything. When you look *for* something to happen, you miss what’s already happening in front of you.”

Hundreds of video images glow in the darkness, forming a patchwork sphere around the two watching figures. One is standing, a tall and bulky man in late middle age. The other, a plump boy barely sixteen years old, is seated in a large vinyl chair. Both are dressed in gray, robed uniforms, and both are completely hairless, with pale skin pitted like poorly cast metal. Shifting aquamarine lights from the monitors slide across their faces.

The man leans forward with one arm around the back of the chair and indicates a key on the console that encircles them. “If you want a close-up, press this button here.”

“Uh-huh,” the boy mumbles.

On the screens, the intruder slips off his shirt and his tights. Though shy about exposing his face, he clearly has no inhibitions about the rest of his body.

“Who is he, Father?” the boy asks as the intruder begins to remove the armor from the manikin.

“I don’t know,” the father growls. “No distinguishing marks. Good build, but not too massive. He knows the museum.” Gray eyes narrow under a protuberant brow. “And he put the helmet on before anything else. He knows we’re watching. Back us up.”

“Uhhh...” The boy’s hands hover indecisively above the console.

“Here!” the father says, his thick, nailless finger stabbing a key. “This button takes us to split screen and shows us the past ten centichrons.”

“Sorry.”

The father makes no reply, watching intently as tiny images scamper in reverse motion. His fingers flicker across the keys. “From the moment he entered the museum, he’s kept his face hidden, his back to the monitoring devices. He knows where they are. Every one.”

“Is that possible?” asks the son.

The father shakes his head. The ubiquitous cameras covering the Hypogeum serve their purpose, but they are decoys. The true genius and enduring legacy of his ancestor, Orcus the First, is the technol-

ogy he invented to trace inverse electron residue, effectively turning any light-emitting device connected to the central power grid into a low resolution camera. Every bulb, every screen, every LCD in the vastness of the Hypogeum is a source of information that leads back to this room. It is the Orcus family's greatest secret, their ultimate source of power. And this man knows it. Somehow, he *knows*.

"What does *this* mean?" The boy points to a blinking line traveling a crooked path from one image to another across the interior of the great glass sphere.

The father snaps out of his reverie. "That indicates an alarm signal going to the security office. There's a clop there — this monitor here — but he's alone, so he's sending a call for backup."

The father twists a knob, and the images rotate dizzily until a new picture comes to rest in front of them. "You see how it all connects, like a giant net?" He points to the different images. "This monitor — the call goes out. *This* monitor — headquarters picks it up, records it, sends it on. *This* monitor — instructions are received by a patrol on one of the lower decks."

The boy nods automatically. "I see."

The father exhales in frustration, leaning heavily on his son's shoulder as he manipulates the controls. The boy sees nothing. Nothing at all.

THE THING IN THE CLOSET

My luck is in the toilet, Security Officer Horsen thinks as the other clops cycle through the airlock. *As usual. Right down the old bog.*

Horsen is a bulky man, with an edges-only mustache of the sort popular on the tertiary decks. Like many clops, he joined the force in large part to wear the single stripe on his shoulder. Of course, he still has to change back to three stripes when he goes off duty, but the prestige of that one stripe is considerable, even if it is only provisional.

Horsen had become a clop to get away from the mildew and faulty wiring of the lower decks. He had dreamed of working the main concourses, patrolling in the light and warmth of the Sun. Instead, he'd pulled security duty in this old museum that he hadn't even known existed. And now that he finally has a chance to prove himself,

to earn a promotion to the upper levels by catching this intruder, he has been ordered to wait for backup. *I could handle this myself*, he thinks resentfully. *I know I could.*

The lock hisses open, and two clops step inside. A whiff of fumatory, the polluted air of the Hypogeum, enters with them. Clipping their respirators back on their belts, they take a deep breath of the relatively cool museum air. Like Horsen, they wear the standard clop uniform of ribbed black rubber, a sort of flexible armor, with soft guns holstered at their thighs. A shiny scarlet band runs across their eyes and around their close-shaven heads, enabling them to see in all directions at once.

Before Horsen can speak, the taller clop walks forward and growls, "Where is he?"

Horsen stiffens his spine, fighting the urge to take a step backward. He's worked with these two before, and he doesn't like them. Like Horsen, they wear the conditional band through their stripes, but they are secondaries. They avoid him whenever possible and speak to him only when absolutely necessary.

"What took you so long?" says Horsen. "I sent out the call over a quarter-chronon ago."

The tall one crosses his arms and looks down at him. "We were busy."

Horsen isn't surprised. These two seem to have a lot of extracurricular business... and a lot more ready cash than your average clop.

"Well, the intruder's gone. He disappeared off the screens a few centichrons ago."

"You lost him?"

Horsen clenches his teeth. "I didn't *lose* him. He *disappeared*. One moment he was there, and the next he wasn't."

"Where did you see him last?" the smaller clop asks.

"The Koba wing. He stole the armor of Koba the Second, and *he's wearing it.*"

The tall one nods as if this piece of information is not at all unusual. "Take us there," he says.

Horsen swallows a profane reply. Regardless of which level they each return to when they take off their eyebands, as long as they're on duty, this guy is the same rank as he is. Silently, he turns and motions

them to follow.

The door to the Koba wing slides open with a faint whine. “I locked all the exits,” Horsen says, keeping his voice low. “The master door controls still work properly, as far as I know.” He looks down each of the long hallways. “He should still be here in the museum somewhere.”

The three clops walk down the darkened halls, their slippers squeaking against the polished onyx floor. When they reach the shattered exhibit, the recorded voice begins to drone its monologue again. The tall one lifts the denuded manikin off the floor, running his finger along the indentations that have been left by so many years of supporting the armor. “What would he want with this relic?”

Horsen shrugs. “How should I know?”

A small sound disturbs them, a soft *click*. The tall clop raises a finger, hushing them. “You hear that?”

“Sounded like a footstep, maybe,” Horsen whispers. “Close by.” His heart begins to race. The intruder had looked strong.

Releasing his soft gun from its holster, the tall clop turns in the direction of the noise, and suddenly freezes. Among them a muscular figure has appeared, dressed in bone white and blood red, with a face like a skull. It is already in mid-leap, back arched and legs tensed, stretched seemingly beyond human limits. Its hand, a sleek claw of white metal, is raised above its head, sharp fingertips almost touching the ceiling. A long arc of red liquid trails from the claw. Horsen’s eyes follow the arc downward, to the chest of the tall clop.

The figure vanishes. The arc of blood holds in the air a moment longer, then spatters on the ground. The wounded clop stumbles backward with mouth agape, hands across the ribbed fabric of his jacket, which has been torn apart like tissue paper. Blood pours from the wound, spreading across the cool, clean floor. A soft cry escapes his white lips as he falls into the broken exhibit.

“What in Koba’s name was that?” Horsen whispers.

“Cover my back, damn it!” the small clop says, pulling out his soft gun. A low thrumming noise radiates from its elliptical nozzle as he releases the safety. Horsen belatedly draws his own gun and activates it.

The other clop whimpers a while longer, then falls silent.

Horsen and the small clop stand back to back in the center of

the corridor, guns facing outward. “What happened? Where did he go?” Horsen cries.

“Shut *up*,” the small clop whispers through gritted teeth.

With an effort, Horsen closes his mouth, trying to control his breathing. The hall is quiet, seemingly uninhabited despite the carnage. Horsen scans the walls, looking for shadows. The eyeband he wears stretches his vision to 360 degrees, making the world a red-shifted, elastic landscape. Usually the increased range of vision comforts him, makes him feel powerful. Now it is only weird and alien. The world is the color of blood.

He hears a crunch and looks in the direction of the sound. There, not five meters in front of him, a large glass fragment shifts position. Before his eyes it quivers, scraping slowly against the floor, its edge leaving a thin, white scratch in the polished stone. *He’s standing on the glass*, Horsen thinks. *He’s right there*. Holding his breath, Horsen brings his gun up cautiously. With an abrupt creaking noise, the shard stops moving. Horsen freezes. *He knows I can see him!*

The room is utterly still. The shard remains unmoving.

Horsen’s blood is pounding in his ears. Sensing his tension, the other clop turns his head, looking at Horsen with eyebrows raised, but Horsen doesn’t dare look away. His gun is almost in line with the shard when it suddenly cracks in two and jumps into the air. With a cry, Horsen pulls the trigger. The sonic wave strikes an exhibit. The glass resonates, then explodes, throwing a hurricane of ringing, sparkling shards into the air. *Too slow, damn it!* Still, he continues to hold down the trigger as he sweeps the soft gun from side to side wildly, shattering the glass of the other exhibits one by one. Finally, Horsen releases the trigger.

Slivers of glass rain down on them. A carpet of shards sticks to the soles of their shoes, slippery as ice, as he and the other clop rotate around their common center, searching for the intruder. “Where in Koba’s name is he?” Horsen curses.

“He’s close,” the small clop says, his voice a ragged anchor to reality behind Horsen’s back. “We just can’t see him. He must be wearing a blender.”

“How the hell would he get hold of one of those?” Blenders are only worn by Deathsmen, the elite cadre whose job it is to eliminate the old and unfit. Possession of blender technology by anyone else is

an offense punishable by death.

“How should I... There!” Hearing the clop’s gun fire, and the sound of another pane of glass shattering, Horsen turns to help. But the clop isn’t there anymore. He’s on the floor — or most of him is, anyway, twisted in a strange position. The rest of him is spattered on the walls and ceiling and across Horsen’s uniform. Horsen swallows hard, tasting something bitter at the back of his throat.

The blood-red and bone-white figure comes into view again, as if stepping through a curtain in the air. The museum’s halogen lights sparkle off the metal of his gauntlets, boots and cuirass, contrasting against the dark, form-fitting mesh of the rest of his armor. The cuirass tapers to sharp epaulets above the shoulders. Spikes sweep away from the boots and gauntlets. The thing is all points and threats. Keeping his skull-like mask turned toward Horsen, the intruder walks around the mess on the floor, metal boots clicking sharply against the onyx. As Horsen stares into them, the dark pits of the intruder’s eyes seem to grow and swallow him. Horsen remembers the statuette his mother kept in the closet where she thought he couldn’t find it: a small, crude thing with a skinless face and long, hooked fingers, smeared with blood and incense. He remembers tales his father told him about falling bodies, clocks that become silent, and, above all, a dark, masked figure that brings an end to revelry. He remembers his admonition: “To arouse the people’s anger is to stir the Hand of Wrath.”

The intruder bends down and retrieves the small clop’s gun. Continuing his slow and stately steps, he points the gun at Horsen’s head. Horsen briefly considers raising his own gun, then thinks of what happened to the others. With a hasty sweep of his hand, he throws the gun to the floor. It bounces on the stone and discharges, knocking out a light in the ceiling. Sparks fly, and the other lights dim momentarily. Horsen jumps at the noise, but the intruder keeps walking, his boots striking the floor with the restrained regularity of a metronome.

Horsen backs up against a display. It lights and tells him in measured, mechanical tones about five-year hydroponic plans. As the intruder walks through the shadow beneath the broken light, Horsen notices that the eye sockets of the armor are not completely dark. Something inside them glows with dim fervor.

The intruder steps into the light again. The gun emerges first, pointed resolutely at Horsen’s head. The soft gun was designed to be an effective, non-lethal instrument of social control; it will not cause serious injury unless fired from a distance of less than a meter. The armored intruder continues forward until the muzzle is exactly one meter from Horsen’s face. The death’s head tilts just a bit and regards him from behind the gun.

“You don’t have to do this,” Horsen says. “You can just walk right past me. I won’t stop you.”

The intruder shifts the gun first to the left, then to the right, as if he can’t quite get Horsen in his sights, or as if he is trying to decide which hemisphere of Horsen’s brain to aim for.

“You don’t have to do this!”

The mask allows no expression to the intruder’s eyes, but the jaw beneath the mask tightens. There is a hint of a downward tilt to the half-hidden mouth. Disapproval. He does not wish to be misunderstood.

“Did you know?”

Horsen’s mouth drops open in disbelief. The question itself, a non sequitur, is queer enough. But the voice that has asked it is even more astounding. It is quiet, understated, as if this is a polite conversation between friends.

“What?” Horsen shakes his head helplessly.

“Did you *know*?” Despite the intruder’s casual tone, his eye sockets never stray from Horsen’s face, the gun never wavers.

“Know what?”

“I’ll speak more plainly,” the intruder says, pointing with his free hand in the direction of the two dead clops. “The big one was removing the jewels from the Crown of Unity and replacing them with colored glass. The little one was helping him.”

“I had nothing to do with either of them,” Horsen whispers. “I didn’t even know their names.”

“But you *knew*.”

Horsen hears a high-pitched squeal, like air leaking from a balloon. He realizes that the sound is coming from his own throat. “I suspected...” He squeezes his eyes shut, expecting the sonic wave to hit him at any moment, to shake his brain to jelly. “I suspected something was going on, but what could I do?”

“You know what you could have done.”

“I couldn’t report them,” Horsen groans. “I couldn’t. I’m nobody, don’t you see?”

“Because you are a small man, your duty was small. And still you neglected it.”

Horsen opens his eyes. The gun has begun to shift in the intruder’s hand again. This time Horsen recognizes the motion for what it represents. Reluctance.

Horsen sees a single opportunity to live, and he takes it. He falls to his knees, holding his clasped hands out in front of him. “Don’t kill me,” he pleads, awash simultaneously in shame and the joy of living for another moment. “I’ll do anything, *anything*, only let me live...”

“I can’t,” the intruder says, an edge creeping into his voice. “Somebody has to do something. The situation... It’s worse than anyone suspects.”

“*Please*,” Horsen whispers. “In Koba’s name...in the name of humanity...*please!*”

The hand holding the gun makes a small jump, describing a comma in the intruder’s thoughts. The hand twists, then pulls back. Slowly, the intruder lowers the gun.

“All right.” The intruder drops the gun on the floor. Horsen slumps forward in elated exhaustion, the energy draining from every muscle. His forehead hits the floor with a soft thump. Tears leak from the corners of his eyes, pooling inside his eyeband.

He again hears the sharp clack of the intruder’s boots against the onyx floor, and for a moment he can breath again, until he realizes that the intruder has not moved away; he has come *closer*. With his forehead pressed hard against the floor and eyes squeezed tight, he can still feel the heat of the intruder, an overwhelming *presence* hovering over him.

The intruder crouches down, and Horsen feels the smooth, hard metal of one gauntlet brush his cheek. The fingers wrap around Horsen’s chin. Slowly, the hand squeezes. The sharp points at the end of each finger dimple Horsen’s skin, then pop through, creating tiny holes that quickly overflow with blood. The intruder raises Horsen’s head.

“You said you would do something for me,” the quiet voice says.

Horsen’s eyes snap open. The death’s head mask is only inches

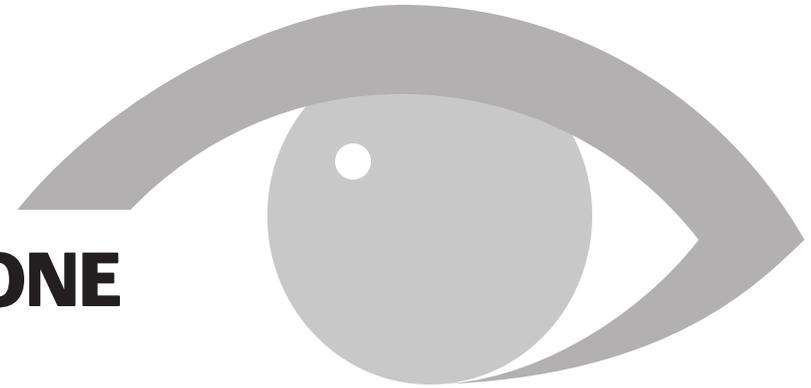
away. Horsen’s body shakes uncontrollably with each breath. The fingers are so strong that they could crack his jaw in an instant.

“Do this much,” the intruder says, lifting Horsen’s chin higher so that he is forced to look into the twin black pits of the intruder’s eyes. “Tell the people I’m here. Tell them I’m back.”

Before Horsen can say another word, the intruder drops him to the floor. Horsen lies where he has fallen, shuddering, watching the armored man walk unhurriedly away. At the end of the hall, the intruder turns his head as he begins to fade from view. A tiny smile is the last part of him Horsen sees, translucent in the soft light.

As it disappears, it whispers, “*Be good.*”

ONE



I recognize that I am lost and I require guidance.

Koba watch over us.

I recognize that I am weak and I require strength.

Koba protect us from the cold.

I recognize that I am mortal and my time in this earth is short.

Koba protect us from the dark.

Guide me and strengthen me, that my every deed be good,
that my every thought be pure, that I might one day join you
in stone and in steel.

Koba protect us from the Sky.

Common Prayer, Hypogean Church

THREE FOURTHS OF A CHILD

“Damn, there go the lights again.”

As the last trace of fluorescence drains out of the tubes, the windowless lab becomes desolately black. With a sigh, Doctor Edward Penn peels off his latex gloves, rolls up his sleeves, and pulls an otoscope from the pocket of his lab coat. The tiny bulb gives him just enough light to see beneath the ultrasound machine. Dust tickles his nose as he reaches for a thick bundle of cables that runs from the wall. He jiggles the cables and pushes the plugs hard into their sockets. Nothing.

“What’s happening?” His patient, half-naked on her back in the dark, sounds as if she’s beginning to panic. Edward can’t blame her.

“Just a moment, Mrs. Lessup.” Crawling back out, he feels for the switch on the ultrasound. He flicks it off and on a few times. Still nothing. He’ll try just about anything to fix the problem short of calling a repairman. Last time they came to his lab, they dragged off two of his machines for scrap. And one of them was still working. Now, in desperation, Edward has become an amateur mechanic. General practice becomes more general all the time.

Frustrated, he kicks the machine. He knows it’s his imagination, but already the room seems stuffy, and the silence is making his blood pressure rise. Loss of air circulation is a serious matter in the Hypogeum, where the oxygen produced by electrolytic converters is barely enough to support the ever-growing population. This hospital has a ward full of brain-damaged simpletons who didn’t notice when the fans stopped turning.

Pushing aside the storage unit of his crowded lab, Edward searches the electrical panel. Finally, it seems, he has found the problem: a loose wire. He turns off the line and twists the wire back into place, wrapping it tight with surgical tape. He activates the line again, and the yellow lights fade in with a deep buzz and a small pop. The fans resume their reassuring hum.

Edward turns toward his patient and takes a small bow. “The miracle worker,” he says. Edward has an undistinguished face, but a strong jaw and a warm smile. Among the black hairs that peek from beneath his surgical cap are isolated strands of gray, like scouts before an advancing army.

Mrs. Lessup lifts her head, not a simple task from her position, and smiles weakly. She is a new patient for Edward, passed on to him when her old doctor was executed for trafficking in painkillers. A thin sheen of sweat makes her skin shine. Transducers are glued to her stomach, which is swollen with pregnancy. Edward realizes he should have told her to sit up while he was fixing the lights.

“Let’s see what your child looks like, shall we?” he says. He activates the controls on the hologrid. A shape begins to form above the pad like smoke in a bottle. “Can you see it, Mrs. Lessup? Your child is big for twenty decamera.” The smoke swims into focus, forming limbs and a head.

“I never feel him kick,” Mrs. Lessup complains.

“That’s no reason to worry. All vital signs are excellent.”

Mrs. Lessup rests her head back and closes her eyes. She looks tired, as if she’s carrying more than just this child.

The image of the fetus floats indistinctly in a dark cloud above the pad, static crawling across its monochromatic skin. Edward studies it. Glowing lines appear along the spine, around the head, as the computer measures and records the child’s statistics. All the data is within normal limits, and yet something feels odd. Edward leans closer into the skittering shadows. The hands are curiously large. The fingers are longer than they should be, it seems.

The child’s head is turned away. Edward walks around the pad to see the face, but a flaw in the imaging mechanism has left the child partly unfinished. Its face is hollow, like a defective doll.

Edward grits his teeth; the evasion seems almost deliberate. *There’s no sense in hiding from me*, Edward thinks. *There are no secrets in the world you’re going to enter, little one. You might as well give up now.*

The image begins to flicker. Edward stares into the hologram as it fluctuates in and out, searching through the static. He cannot say why, but he senses that something is wrong with the child. An irrational fear grips him. Then the tank fails completely, and the child’s image dissolves into ions.

Edward remains staring at the empty space. He slams his fist against the machine, but the image does not return. Mrs. Lessup is making noises of alarm. “This... this thing never works right,” he says absently, gesturing at the machine. He tries to call the image forth in his mind again. What did he think he saw?

“How did the baby look to you, Doctor?”

Edward notes the worried tone in her voice and calms himself. He has broken the golden rule of medicine: never let your patient know when something is troubling you. “Healthy,” he says, in as professional a tone as he can muster. “Your baby is very healthy. Why don’t you get dressed, and we can discuss it?”

He turns his back to her and waits for her to dress. He looks down. Judging from the marks on the floor, a separate office was once connected to this lab so that doctors could leave their patients to change in peace. But that must have been long ago.

He tries to shake his sense of dread, but it will not quit him. He cannot seem to approach the problem in a clear-headed, scientific

fashion. Since his mother's death, things have become confused. His work, the people around him — nothing seems quite as real as it once did. His thoughts are broken up by a nagging sense of something left uncompleted.

He ignores the growing ache in his head and summons up his resolve. He needs to work less and sleep more, that is all.

"Doctor Penn..." The voice of Edward's secretary comes from his ident.

Edward sighs. "Can it wait, Marta?"

"I've been monitoring the Security channel, as you requested," she says quickly. "They think there's a Deathsman in the building. Headed for Mr. Mosley's room."

"Damn." Edward stares at his panel on his ident for a moment as if wondering why this was not on his schedule. "Damn!" he repeats.

"Doctor..."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Lessup." He pushes open the door and runs through. Mrs. Lessup yelps and ducks behind the exam table to protect her modesty. As the door slides shut behind him, Edward turns and shouts: "Don't forget to make another appointment!"

BUILDING BLOCKS

Second Son looks down. The city lies sprawled beneath his feet like the blocks he used to play with when he was a child. From above it is possible to see the original elegance with which the Hypogeum was designed. The oldest buildings, though lost beneath layer upon layer of new construction, have imposed their geometries on the architecture above. In the center is the Atrium, a tapered trapezoid of beveled glass, with its causeway leading to the Hall Mediarly. Upriver are the gray, boxy structures of the industrial sector; in the other direction are the high-class dwellings, each facade angled to catch the light of the artificial sun. As the eye approaches the edges, the buildings become more sophisticated in design: sleek, shiny curves of glass and plastic grow up the sides of the great dome, culminating in this building, the Chandelier, which hangs glistening like a collection of soap bubbles above the city. To live in the Chandelier is the pinnacle of success; all other citizens are below you, and nothing is above but the steel Sky and never-ending rock.

Second Son quickly sidesteps across the translucent floor to the

furnished half of the room where a small rug interferes with the precipitous view. His father, who is known simply by the family name of Orcus, strides easily across the empty space to the very edge. A single pane of hard, clear plastic curves up to become a wall before him, the only thing between him and a four-hundred-meter drop. Second Son stood there once. The vertigo made him pass out.

Orcus turns with a quick pivot that makes his surtout, the robed uniform of a null-class citizen, swirl around him. He has many similarly dramatic mannerisms. He once told Second Son that half the essence of power is the mere appearance of power. Perhaps that is why the men of their family take the depilatory treatment: to resemble Koba in his later days. And the fingernails? Second Son supposes they do it merely to look creepy. As with several generations of the family, Second Son had his removed, roots and all, at the same time he was circumcised.

"The matter is not open for debate," Orcus says. "The Orcus men have maintained the purity of our bloodline in this way for thirteen generations. That tradition will not end with you."

"But does it have to be her?" Second Son cannot seem to control his voice; his question comes out in a high-pitched whine.

"Yes, it does. In time you'll come to see the wisdom of my decision."

"But she hates me!" Second Son struggles to keep his voice in a lower register.

"Nonsense. She merely despises your weakness. And rightly. It is your unwillingness to take the necessary steps to becoming a man that incites her to tease you the way she does. If you are strong, she will respect you."

"I've tried, father. She still terrorizes me!"

"She does not 'terrorize' you." Orcus turns his head. In profile, his head reminds Second Son of a crowbar, running almost in a straight line from the tip of his nose to his forehead before curving around his smooth cranium. "You have no idea what terror is."

"What about the time she set that snare for me, so that I was left hanging by my feet in the family room? Have you forgotten that?"

"No." The barest figment of a smile creases his father's face. "I remember."

Second Son feels his cheeks turn red with shame.

“You should not have fallen into that trap,” his father says. “In the future, you will encounter other traps of different types from less benign sources. You must learn to evade them all.”

Second Son throws himself on the couch, arms crossed. What can he say? How can he make his father understand? He cannot carry this burden. It is impossible.

“Stop sulking. You could do much worse. Your mother wasn’t much of a woman, but I married her. I saw where my duty lay, and I followed it. You have things much easier. My duty was a sacrifice, but yours should be a pleasure, really. Dancer is smart. She’s beautiful. She’s ambitious.”

“She’s not as beautiful as she thinks she is.”

“Listen, boy, you just have to marry her, let her bear children — keep the name of Orcus alive. No one said you have to be faithful to her. Hell, I’d have gone mad if your dull-witted mother was the only woman I ever charvered.”

“Stop talking about Mother like that.”

“What does it matter? She’s with the Stone now. And probably happier for it. What about that girl you’re always mooning over? The skinny one with the green hair?”

“Amarantha.” Second Son squirms in his seat, thinking of her.

“That’s the one. She’s a bit dull, but she seems worth a little trouble. You can still sleep with her, as long as you’re careful.”

“If she wants me.”

“If she wants you?” His father’s voice rises in indignation. “Hump, you’re null-class, an Orcus! What *she* wants is immaterial.”

His father’s use of the humiliating nickname is a deliberate insult. Second Son tries to ignore it. “It’s not that simple,” he says.

“*Make* it that simple.” His father’s voice rises in anger. “Damn it, son! I’m offering you the *world*, don’t you see?”

“Dancer wasn’t meant for me, Father! She was meant for Stone.”

Orcus crosses the floor in two long strides and grabs Second Son by the bicep, hauling him to his feet. “In case you haven’t noticed, Hump,” he hisses, “your elder brother is dead!” His fingers dig into Second Son’s flesh. “And as absurd as it sounds, *you* must take his place!”

“Stop it!” Second Son cries. “You’re hurting me!”

“Koba’s eyes, you’re pathetic!” Orcus drags Second Son to the

door and pushes him through. “Get out. I have work to do.”

Second Son stumbles around to face his father, desperate for one last attempt. “Father, it’s unseemly for a man to marry an older woman. Can’t I marry Second Daughter instead?”

His father glowers down at him. His bulk nearly fills the doorway. “No,” he says. “In five days you and your older sister will be married. The decision is made!” He slams the door in Second Son’s face.

Second Son stares at the door, catching his breath, waiting until his pulse returns to normal. Glancing around to make sure no one is watching, he retreats down the hall and locks himself in the servant’s laundry alcove. He likes how small the room is, how secluded. When he is here, he has no problems, no connection to the world outside. He sits on the floor, hidden between the machines and a gigantic pile of clothes, nestling into them, inhaling their earthy scent. He unclips his portable monitor from his belt and activates it. The screen flickers to life, still attuned to the camera he was watching last time — the camera he always watches — and he smiles. On the screen, a young man and woman are making love. The woman is lying flat upon a bed, head back and eyes closed, with her long green hair spread out around her like a web, like a halo of fissures in fractured crystal...

He watches them for a long time, relishing the sickly feeling in his stomach as his excitement curdles and his anger grows, meditating carefully on his father’s advice.

TWO LIFETIMES

Amarantha Kirton watches Cadell’s backside with approval as he crosses the room to pour her a glass of water. He catches her watching him, and there is a hint of a swagger on his way back. “Now *that* was something special,” he says as he hands her the cup and slips back into bed.

Amarantha sips the water and smiles. “You have a high opinion of yourself, don’t you?” she teases.

“A high opinion of *us*,” Cadell says, stretching languidly across the bed, kicking against the sheets that have bunched up at its foot. Like other fashionable young men in the Hypogeum, he shaves the hair above his forehead into a widow’s peak while wearing the rest pulled back in a long ponytail. His face is narrow and handsome, with the untroubled smoothness of youth. He rests his head on Amaran-

tha's naked stomach.

She leans back, running her fingers through his hair, and takes a deep breath, enjoying the moment. They have free time ahead of them: two chronons till lights-out, and two lifetimes after that. The future for them is unwritten, limitless, and dizzying in its possibilities. Resting her hand on Cadell's head, she looks absently at the ceiling. She imagines it peeling away, like a sheet of paper, floating off in the breeze and rising all the way to the Sky, the steel dome roof of the Hypogeum. She sees the Sky crack along its seams and crumble, great chunks of broken metal tumbling and disintegrating into dust. Beyond is the Stone, which according to the tenets of orthodox Geospiritualism extends forever. Amarantha watches as it splits apart, fissures racing through it at the speed of sound until it shatters in a crackle of blinding white energy, revealing... what?

Anything. It could be absolutely anything at all.

Her attention is drawn back to mundane dimensions by the soft whirring noise of the camera on the ceiling as it refocuses on them. The black hemispheres — each exactly the size of a human eye — are normally silent, but this one has lately developed a personality, as if it were a third person in their lives: an intrusive, dull-witted cousin.

Cadell, feeling her body tense, raises his head. She tries to erase the look of anger on her face, but she is too slow.

"What's the matter?" he asks.

"Those things," she says, gesturing toward the camera. "Watching us every moment of our lives."

"Don't think about it," he soothes. "You'll only upset yourself."

"I hate them," she whispers. "I wish we could tear the damn things down."

Cadell sits up, pulling the blankets with him and covering their bodies. "They're just doing their jobs, the same as the rest of us. Besides," he adds more quietly, "you can't get anywhere in this world if you make them angry at you."

"All right." She kisses his forehead. "Lay down. I'll be good."

Cadell frowns, not trusting her reassurances but uncertain what else to do. He rests his head on her shoulder and closes his eyes.

Amarantha knows that Cadell does not understand her anger toward the Scrutators. His confusion is her own fault. She has told him that she once spent time with Second Son, whose family controls

the cameras, and she told him that it did not go well, but she never told him, or anyone, just how bad it had been.

It had happened more than a year before. Amarantha was a beautiful young woman newly introduced to the social scene. Her family was neither famous nor rich, though by the complicated rules of birth and occupation they were still primaries. Amarantha and her mother carried the extra burden of being Engineered, part of a failed attempt to improve the genetic strain of the Hypogeum. "It's the tossed salad haircut," the other women whispered when they thought she wasn't listening, but she knew they spoke out of jealousy. With her combination of beauty, energy, and charm, she outshone them all.

Then one day she learned that she had attracted the attention of Second Son. She never understood why Second Son had taken an interest in her. Perhaps he was titillated by the idea of consorting with a woman of lesser rank, or perhaps it was because she was Engineered. At any rate, the opportunity to meet such a prestigious young man was too intriguing to pass up, even if he was a few years younger than she was.

He treated her to a delicious private dinner, danced badly with her, then showed her the view from the Chandelier. By that time, despite the attention he lavished on her, she was beginning to regret accepting his invitation. Second Son was a boor. He talked incessantly about himself, and he treated his many servants with appalling rudeness. Finally, as she was trying to find a polite way to cut the date short, he ushered her into one of the Orcus family suites and shut the door behind them. He threw himself on her, kissing her neck and fumbling with the clasps of her dress. To this day, she doesn't remember how she extricated herself, what she said to Second Son to make him let her go. What she does remember is Second Son lying on the floor and sobbing about his family, his dying brother, and his own powerlessness. Amarantha had listened for as long as she could stand it, then fled.

He combed her the next day. Six times. She refused to answer.

The day after that he sent a messenger. She sent him away.

The day after that he sent a different messenger. She sent that one away as well.

Finally he showed up at the electrical station where she worked. She almost felt sorry for him; she knew that it was a terrible blow to

his ego for a null-class citizen to have to personally call on a person of lesser rank. She took a walk with him. They talked. Mindful of his connections, frightened by his family, she was polite and tried not to be angry. Perhaps, she thought, they could be friends.

But it hadn't worked. Second Son didn't know how to simply be friends with anyone. He would visit, then stare at her for long periods without saying anything. When he finally spoke, it would be long and convoluted arguments about how much he loved her, how they should be together. She began to spend her nights at the homes of friends, hoping to elude him. Rather than giving up on her, as she hoped he would, he only increased the number of gifts and messages he sent to her.

Finally, in desperation, she told him she couldn't stand him and that she never wanted to see him again. He screamed and threatened, displaying the famous Orcus temper. When he saw she couldn't be moved, he stormed out, swearing she wasn't worth his time anyway.

Things should have ended there, but the suspicion that Second Son hasn't given up so easily lingers in Amarantha's mind. Sometimes she answers the ring of the comm only to find that the line is blank. Other times one of the cameras focuses on her, at home, at work, or in a crowd, and somehow she knows, just *knows*, that Second Son is watching her.

Cadell, who has fallen asleep beside her, begins to snore. Smiling, she tucks the covers under his chin and upbraids herself for her paranoid thoughts. Surely Second Son has forgotten her. Surely, with his marriage to his sister, Dancer, only a few days away, he has more important things on his mind.

She snuggles in close to Cadell, putting her arm around him. She closes her eyes, envisioning the sky beyond the Sky.

SILVER FINGERTIPS

Edward Penn runs frantically down the crowded, narrow hall, knocking people out of his way. He skids to a stop outside Mosley's room. Gripping the doorjamb, he scans the room, looking for a tell-tale shimmering in the air.

"Is he here yet?" he asks. Mosley's two sons stand up. Their mouths hang open, but they say nothing. The helpless look on their faces indicates that they know what his question means.

"*Is he here?*" he repeats. They look around, uncertain. The air in the room is quiet and still. Mosley, a middle-aged man peppered with lymphoma, lies asleep in the bed, his head bent in an awkward pose. He snores softly. The sickly sweet odor of human decay hangs about him.

Edward pushes past the stupefied young men and unlocks the wheels on Mosley's bed. "Help me push him out of here," he says. "Maybe we can get him to another room before he comes."

"*I am here.*"

The cold, quiet voice comes from a spot just behind him. He turns and sees that corner of the room darken and sink into a black hole. The hole twists and buckles into the shape of a man. Edward gives an involuntary gasp. He has been standing next to the Deathsman the whole time. He lets go of the bed. It continues to turn slowly, finally bumping to a halt against the wall.

The Deathsman stands utterly still, his body hidden within the folds of his black, floor-length cloak. His tight hood is completely featureless, without even holes for his eyes. He is more silhouette than man. The only decoration is an ornate silver filigree around his collar.

"There's been a mistake," Edward says, keeping his voice as level as possible. "This man is in good shape, with an excellent prognosis."

"The Brotherhood of Peace and Reconciliation thinks otherwise, Doctor." The Deathsman's voice is strangely atonal. His jaw does not move beneath the hood. "Please step aside."

"You can't have him."

"Doctor, you may recall that you signed an agreement when you joined this hospital. My authority supercedes yours in this case."

"I also took an oath."

The faintest touch of impatience creeps into the Deathsman's voice. "This confrontation is futile, Doctor, as well as unseemly. Think of the children." The Deathsman turns his head in the direction of Mosley's sons on the other side of the bed. The younger one has begun to cry.

"*I am thinking of them.*"

The Deathsman slips one hand silently out from beneath the black cloak. Thin, bright wires trace across it, flowing in arcane circuit patterns toward the fingertips encased in silver. He flexes his

hand to make sure Edward understands the implied threat. “I will ask you once more to step aside.”

Edward faces the Deathsman silently, and considers his options. Though the Deathsman has not moved, Edward can see his jaw clench beneath his tight hood, his body tense for a confrontation. Edward will either have to back down or try to physically keep the Deathsman away from his patient. It seems unlikely Edward would win such a struggle. Equally remote is the hope that he could convince the Deathsman to walk away. The dark figure is as implacable as the murder he carries in his fingertips.

Edward turns to Mosley’s children. “There’s one more test I want to perform. Help me pull down the covers.”

“Really, doctor...” But as the Deathsman speaks, Edward spins and throws a punch at his hooded face. Seemingly unsurprised, the Deathsman whispers backward, his cloak billowing around him so Edward’s fist glances off his shoulder. As if in defiance of physics, the Deathsman bobs forward again. His silver-tipped hands shoot forward. Edward manages to grab the hands by the wrists. He grapples with the Deathsman, fighting to keep the hands away from his body.

“Help me!” he shouts to Mosley’s sons. The boys watch dumbly.

While Edward’s face is turned, the Deathsman bends one hand down. Silver fingertips brush lightly against the back of Edward’s hand. Edward feels a tingle travel through his body. As if watching from a distance, he sees his arm fall to his side, numb and lifeless. The Deathsman’s free hand lunges out, cold fingertips gripping Edward around the temples.

Edward’s jaw drops. His eyes unfocus. The Deathsman becomes two figures watching him impassively. The room rolls drunkenly as Edward’s knees buckle. Though he cannot feel it, he knows he must be falling. The room seems to bounce on his way down, and he realizes he has hit his head on something hard. Straining his faculties, he is aware of a sensation somewhere around him. It may or may not be pain. He cannot remember what it is like to feel things.

His vision goes next. The green linoleum floor, tilted like a wall, shrinks to a bright pinprick, as if the universe is traveling away from him at an astonishing rate of speed. His breath leaks from his lungs. A brief surge of fear for what must follow washes over him before he finally loses consciousness and the darkness envelops him.

ALMOST ZERO

“...but first I have to cross half that distance, right? And then I have to cross half the distance that’s left. And then I *still* have to cross half the distance that’s left. And so on and so on. No matter how far I go, I still have half the distance left to cross. And so I have proved that motion is impossible.”

Orel Fortigan smiles. Bernie is always coming up with brain-teasers like this. Maybe since they replaced his right frontal lobe with microchips, he feels a need to show what he can do with all that computing power.

They stand close together at the bottom of a narrow shaft. Despite the chill, the concrete walls drip with condensation. A single globe on the wall provides the only illumination. The air vibrates from the roar of pressure outside.

Bernie closes the access panel. His jumpsuit whispers around his gaunt body as he stands. He wipes his hands with a rag from his back pocket. “Well, am I right or am I wrong?” he asks. Bernie doesn’t open his mouth much when he speaks. The artificial voice box they gave him when the cancer took his real one does all the work for him. Besides, if he opens his mouth too wide, you can see the inside of his face between his cheek and his carbon steel jaw.

Orel doesn’t mind. He’s no joy to look at himself. He is overweight and suffers from cloracne, an immune disorder that has turned large portions of his face and upper torso into a mass of pustules and raw flesh. He wears a red scarf around his neck and chin to cover the worst of it. “I’m thinking,” he says.

“Let’s do our job while you’re thinking. You said there was a problem in Gimmel Eight?”

Orel pulls his tengig out of his pocket. He presses a button and looks at the screen. “Power outage,” he says.

They climb the ancient rusting ladder and step into the deafening rumble of the main sluice tunnel. Beneath their feet thousands of cubic meters of water thunder by, raising a mist that beads on their jumpsuits. The rough concrete abutment that they have just exited is one of seven that part the river along the walkway. Under metal covers on each one are control panels containing the manual override controls for the locks. Here the water is diverted to the turbines, the sewers, and Hydroponics.

When they reach the other side, Orel activates a thick metal door. It slides open slowly, with a deep and drawn-out groan. These doors are designed to hold back all the waters of the sluice tunnel in case they should overflow. Three years ago, when the Levellers threatened to jam the gates shut, flooding the entire subsystem, Orel was standing behind one of these doors. His job was to do whatever was necessary to keep the door shut. He spent a long time alone in the dark that day, sweating despite the dank cold. Fortunately, the terrorists had been intercepted. Their threat was never carried out. When the other workers came and told him he was safe, he cried with relief. He was fourteen.

Now, as they walk through the door, Orel says, "I've got it. Your argument would make sense if the time needed to cross each fraction of the distance was constant. In that case velocity would be constantly decreasing and time versus distance would be an asymptotic curve, never reaching its goal. But the time it takes to cross each fraction of the distance is getting smaller at the same rate that the distances are decreasing. The sum of all those times will still be finite, even if you divide the distance infinitely."

They walk down the long, narrow tunnel that divides the power station from Hydroponics. A single, fluorescent light runs along the ceiling. Mold grows on the walls.

"But I *am* dividing it infinitely," Bernie says. "Don't you see? No matter how much distance I cross, there must still be a tiny distance left keeping me from my goal."

"Not really. Because the distance left to you and the time it takes to cross that distance quickly become not just very small, but infinitely small."

"But still greater than zero."

"No. Because an infinitely small number is equal to zero."

"What?"

"I can prove it." They pass through another thick door and enter the brightly lit corridors of Hydroponics. A tiny maintenance robot rolls past them. "Let's take an infinitely small number: a decimal point followed by an infinity of zeros and then a one. We'll call it 'Almost Zero.' If we're dividing a finite distance infinitely, we must reach this number sometime, right?"

"Okay ... for argument's sake, I'll agree."

"What's one minus Almost Zero?"

"Hmm." Bernie turns and looks at him. Between his ugly black metal jaw and his ugly black bristling hair, his two handsome blue eyes are crinkled in amusement. "It's a decimal point followed by an infinite number of nines. Although, in this case, the infinity involved is actually greater by one than the infinite number of zeros in Almost Zero."

"Good boy," Orel says dryly. "Let's call this number 'Almost One.' Now, Almost One can be expressed as the sum of a decimal point followed by an infinity of threes and a decimal point followed by an infinity of sixes — the decimal equivalents of one-third and two-thirds. So Almost One is actually equal to one. So if we subtract Almost One from both sides of the equation, we see that Almost Zero is, in fact, equal to zero. So if you keep dividing the distance infinitely, you will quickly reach a point where you have zero distance left to travel.

"And we're here." With a dramatic flourish, Orel punches the lock plate for the entrance to Gimmel Eight. Nothing happens. "Door's stuck," he says, hitting it a few more times. He smiles weakly. Reality has, once again, failed to conform to his rhetoric.

Bernie examines the control panel. "Just like you to change the subject when I'm winning an argument. There's been a pneumatic breach. That's why the computer won't let you open the door. That's fumatory in there. You'd suffocate in a minichron."

"Damn." Orel peers through the tiny window in the door. It is completely dark on the other side. "Lights are out, too. What do you suppose happened?"

"Let's find out." Bernie unsnaps the cover to the manual override and throws a switch. A thick, translucent web of plastic whips out from the doorjamb, stretching across the door in an iris pattern. Bernie and Orel unclip their respirators from their belts and attach them to their faces. "Ready?" Bernie asks, his voice muffled by the filter.

Orel nods, and Bernie hits one last button. The door behind the webbing slides open. The webbing bulges toward them, pushed by the pressure of the air behind it, then flexes as the strands react to the tension. When the web appears stable, Orel sticks his hand into the center of the opaque swirl of filaments. The webbing gives, then tightens. Cool, oiled plastic adheres to the skin of his fingers like the lips of some unnatural creature. He pushes further in, the membrane

sliding slickly over his flesh, until his hand is completely through.

He waits for a moment, his wrist encircled in plastic. A guy he knows once gave himself second-degree burns by walking carelessly through a web right into the steam of a burst hot water pipe. But the air on the other side is only slightly warmer than inside. “Feels okay,” he says.

Laboriously, he works the rest of his arm through. He pushes his face into the web, the respirator pressing into the skin around his nose and mouth, and works his head through. He continues to push. Getting his legs through is awkward, but the tension of the webbing keeps him from falling over.

On the other side, he pulls his foot clear, and the webbing pops shut behind him, vibrating like a drum. His scarf still hangs limply from the center of it. As he yanks it free, it crackles with static electricity.

While he waits for Bernie, Orel works his jaws, letting his ears pop. If only the boys in Pneumonics would increase the pressure inside the buildings to equal or surpass the pressure of the great cavern outside, he thinks, breaches wouldn’t be so dangerous. But no, that would make too much sense.

Bernie is through. He looks down at his hands. They are glistening with silicon oil, like the rest of him. “I hate doing that,” he says.

Orel nods. The beam of his flashlight reveals scores of thick pipes, a pair of pumping stations, and a series of shallow, forty-meter long tanks filled with dark, motionless water. Even through their respirators the stink of algae is everywhere. The air in these rooms is normally kept high in carbon dioxide — Hydroponics serves the double purpose of food-production and CO₂ absorption — so the breach is not immediately a problem. Still, it should be fixed before the poisons in the fumatory damage the plants.

“Everything looks okay,” Bernie says. “What do *you* think happened?”

“I was worried there might have been an explosion, but it doesn’t look like it. We’re pretty close to the edge of the city here. Maybe there was a rock slide.”

“I hope not.”

“Agreed.” Their footsteps echo off the low ceiling. Somewhere water drips monotonously.

Orel’s flashlight fixes on one of the thick cement pillars. The glowglobe on the side of it is broken. Slivers of glass protrude from the rim like jagged teeth. “Someone did that deliberately,” he says.

He swings the light to the next pillar. The globe there, too, has been smashed. He moves the light further down, revealing the other pillars receding in the distance. Each globe is broken.

“Someone likes his atmosphere moody,” Bernie says in a hushed voice, moving further into the darkness. The beam of his flashlight bobs and sways in the moist air. He kneels at the edge of one of the tanks. “Look at this.”

Orel squats beside him. A bed of cultured algae three centimeters thick floats on the surface of the water. A rough semicircle has been scooped away from the edge. Bits of algae have dripped onto the cement, where they are drying in clumps. Green fingerprints are smeared along the edge of the tank.

“You don’t suppose someone’s been eating this gunge raw, do you?” Bernie asks.

“Euugh. I hope not.”

A small clanking noise echoes through the room. Both men jump up. Orel swings his flashlight about, but he sees nothing. Straining his ears, he hears a sound that may be running footsteps, but he can’t be sure over the hum of machinery. “What the hell was that?”

“It came from down there,” Bernie whispers, gesturing with his flashlight to the far end of the long room. “It could be nothing.”

“It could be whoever broke the lights.”

“Maybe we should get out of here. Let the clops handle it.” Bernie’s face, almost invisible in the dark, is pinched with fear. “Bouncing trespassers isn’t our job.”

Orel thinks that is an excellent suggestion. But the idea of looking tough in front of Bernie is hard to resist. “Let’s just take a quick look around,” he says. “We can call them later if we still think we should. It’s probably nothing.”

Cautiously, Orel walks toward the far end of the room. Bernie follows, his flashlight casting Orel’s shadow on the wall ahead, creating the illusion of a giant lurking in the corner. At the end of the tank, a shovel harvester hangs from a runner in the ceiling. Every other day the machine travels along the track, its metal jaw bending down to scoop up the algae before spitting it upstairs to be processed into

something edible...if not necessarily appetizing. It hangs motionless now, occasionally releasing a burp of steam. As they walk around it, their feet stick in a thin film of drying algae. Between the machine's housing and the wall is a narrow space littered with trash. The mold growing on the wall has been smeared away at shoulder level.

"It looks like somebody tried to squeeze through here," Orel says.

Bernie's respirator exaggerates his labored breathing. "You can't honestly intend to go in there."

Orel shines his light into the gap. The rumble of the great dynamos above reverberates in the narrow space. Far within, his flashlight beam glints off something shiny.

Now would be a fine time to turn back, he thinks. The idea of running away doesn't bother him. He's not that proud. But the thought of waiting for someone else to come and investigate — waiting for some soft-handed bureaucrat from upstairs to figure out the mystery and explain it to them — galls him.

What's the danger? he thinks. *What are the odds that this is actually something dangerous?* Not high, he decides. Probably just some kid. And whoever it is might be in trouble. Turning sideways, he slides into the gap. He is embarrassed to note that he is only slightly less wide sideways than head on. Holding his flashlight in front of him, he shuffles in. Bernie takes a nervous look backwards, then moves to follow.

After about ten meters, they come to a dead end. The space widens somewhat where the machinery meets the wall, and there, pushed into one corner, they find a mound of torn paper and cardboard, large enough for a man to sleep on. Orel fishes through the shreds of paper with the toe of his boot. Tucked into the paper on one side are several pieces of glass, broken and polished into the shape of crude knives. There is also a smooth, shiny stone, just the right size to fit comfortably into a person's hand.

"Weird," Orel whispers.

"Look at this." Bernie indicates a thick mylar tube. A hole big enough for a man to fit through has been ripped into it.

"The breach," Orel says.

The tube runs into the wall. Climbing inside, Orel sees an air circulator with the grill broken off. Cautiously, he pushes into the

aperture. There is barely enough room for his head and flashlight. The filters within have been torn apart and the fan disassembled. There is dried blood on the blades. Beyond that are more torn filters and the darkness of the duct.

Bernie's voice sounds very far away. "What do you see?"

"It looks like he stopped the motor with his bare hands." Orel pulls himself back a little too quickly, the jagged edge of the broken grill scraping his neck and jaw. He feels a trickle of blood run down his neck. He rubs it away as he crawls out of the tube. "I've seen enough. Let's get out of here."

They work their way back through the gap. "The sound we heard must have come from here," Bernie says. "We scared the intruder, and he snuck out through the tube."

"Let's hope so."

"But who in their right mind would want to live in Hydroponics?"

Orel takes a deep breath. "I think — and I know it sounds crazy, but it's the only theory that fits the evidence — I think it has to be a Rat."

"It can't be! They've never come this far in. They wouldn't dare!"

They squeeze their way out of the gap. "That breach didn't look as if it was made by someone breaking out. It looked like someone forced his way *in*."

They stand in the darkness for a moment. "Let's get out of here," Orel says finally. "We can comm a clop to investigate. Then, if it's safe, we can get some equipment and repair the breach."

"Good idea."

They walk back past the tanks considerably faster than they came in.

"You know," Bernie says, "there's a glitch in your argument about Almost Zero somewhere. I can't pinpoint it yet, but it's there."

"The glitch is the concept of infinity itself," Orel replies. "It's self-contradictory. When you use the word 'infinity,' you're implicitly putting boundaries around something that is by your own definition boundless. In the real world, there are no infinite values, just very large or very small..."

They are almost to the door when a piercing squeal erupts behind them. Orel barely has time to turn before the thing is on him,

its limbs flailing, its long teeth bared.

FIRSTS AND SECONDS

Second Son walks through the Center for Indagation, self-consciously keeping his head high and his back straight. The Scrutators watch him out of the corners of their eyes, not lifting their faces from the monitor screens. He knows they do not respect him; they think he is much less a man than his deceased brother. The pressure of their scrutiny makes a chill run up his spine.

The unpleasant irony of the situation is not lost on him.

He walks up the shallow carpeted steps that radiate from the center of the hall. Two supervisors greet him and tell him whatever useful information they've recently learned. They flutter around him, simpering and flattering. Second Son nods perfunctorily and moves on.

His hand rests gently on the handle of his dirk, the long dagger traditionally worn by the men of the Orcus family. The gesture is ostentatious, he knows, but it makes him feel better. The silver zeros on his shoulders sparkle in the columns of light.

The Scrutators are pretending to be too hard at work to notice he is there. Second Son makes a point of staring over a few shoulders, adjusting displays and giving orders.

"You there!" he says to one of them. "Stop staring at that one image! Keep rotating views. When you concentrate too much on one detail, you lose the big picture."

The Scrutator turns to look at him. Second Son slams his palm down on top of one of the monitors. "Don't make faces at me! Do your job!"

Second Son thinks he sees a rebellious tilt to the man's eyebrows as he turns back to the monitor. The Scrutators despise him, he knows, but they fear his father more.

Depressed, he leaves the hall. The Center for Indagation is hidden in the approximate center of the Hypogeum, beneath the industrial sector. It consists of five round halls linked in a circle by a single curved walkway. The individual monitor stations radiate from the middle of the walkway in the center of each hall. The stations are arranged so that whatever one Scrutator learns is irrelevant to the Scrutator next to him. It is their job to gather information, not to

interpret it. Only Orcus sees how it all links together.

Second Son passes into the hub of the five circles, to the entrance of the private gallery. He presses his ident to the copper panel, and the first light turns green. He punches in his personal code, and a second light turns green. He presses his eyes to the goggle-shaped receptor and is briefly blinded as lasers scan his retinas. The third light shines, and a door hisses open. As it shuts behind him, he begins the procedure again at a second door. The architect of this place, Orcus the First, Master Scrutator for the great Koba, was as paranoid as the dictator he served.

An elevator takes Second Son to his family's gallery. The door swings down behind him as he enters the Second Sensorium. It shuts with a pneumatic hiss, and the lights go out. Images are projected everywhere on the interior of the deformed sphere except directly above him, where a lone camera hangs. The only unmonitored place in the Hypogeum is the Master Sensorium, where his father works.

Second Son climbs into the control area. He still finds the hard vinyl chair uncomfortable; it hasn't yet reformed itself from the imprint left by his brother's tall, muscular body.

He begins a preliminary sweep. He rotates his chair and taps the keyboard, activating certain cameras, deactivating others, panning in, panning out. The entire world is contained in this small room. He can access any camera in the Hypogeum from here, including those that cover the workers in the five circles below him. He tries to take in all the images at once, as his father instructs, but he cannot do it. No matter how much he pushes his brain, he only sees the scenes one at a time. He has never experienced the apprehension of the entire Hypogeum as a single whole the way his father describes it. Second Son wonders if it is just a lie.

Throughout the Hypogeum, preparations are being made for the celebration of his wedding. In the Chandelier, tables are being set in the Discroom, and food is being prepared in the kitchens. In other parts of the Hypogeum, musicians are practicing. Clops are setting up security. In private homes, guests are picking out their best clothes. Chatters are entertaining their clients with descriptions of the lavish decorations. *All this bother*, he thinks, *to commemorate the union of two people who despise each other.*

With a sigh, Second Son stops scanning and activates a retro-

spect. He does not even have to glance at the keyboard as he inputs the time and place. The scene he chooses is of the Orcus complex a little less than a year ago. On the screen, he sees himself from above, walking across the family room. It is painful to watch this younger, slightly plumper version of himself blunder into danger. The wire hidden in the carpet, which he had overlooked then, is painfully obvious now.

As he steps on it, the wire snaps tight around his feet, yanking him to the ceiling. Watching himself dangle upside-down, Second Son realizes how perfectly his sister planned the trap: not only was the path from the dining area to his room one that Second Son was likely to travel, it was also very well monitored. He can see himself from four different angles. The lowest camera has a wide-angle lens, making Second Son look like a bloated, helpless giant.

His sister walks into the room. She is wearing red and gold gym clothes that cling to her muscular body. Her wavy auburn hair is tied back, as if she has been exercising, but there is not a drop of sweat on her. With her high cheekbones and brilliant blue eyes, First Daughter — or Dancer, as she is more commonly called — is a beauty unlike anyone else in this generation of the Orcus family. She says she got her hair from her mother's mother. Her arrogant manner, however, comes straight from their father.

Behind her is the man she was seeing at the time, a hulk of a man with a vacant expression. Second Son cannot remember his name. The tufts of hair at each temple on the otherwise shaved head mark him as a palaestran, a warrior athlete, but he is not one of the famous ones.

Dancer laughs and executes a small pirouette. "I *told* you it would work!" she says.

"You were right," the palaestran says.

"Let me down!" Second Son says, as loudly as his lungs will allow in his inverted position. "Father will be very displeased when he hears about this!" The older Second Son winces at his younger self's pathetic attempt at bravado.

"Why don't you let yourself down?" Dancer asks, tilting her head to one side. Dancer is always in motion. "Why don't you just reeeeeeach up to those fat little ankles and untie yourself?"

Second Son tries, grunting. He can barely pull himself high

enough to touch his knees. He gives up, letting himself fall back, jerking the rope tighter. He swings and rotates slowly.

"Can't even do one sit-up," Dancer says, rolling her eyes toward the palaestran. "I think somebody needs a more rigorous exercise schedule, don't you, Lem?" *That's right*, Second Son thinks, *that was the man's name*.

"Should we let him down now?" Lem asks.

"Absolutely not!" Dancer declares. "I want to bring a little color to those cheeks!" She slaps Second Son hard on the buttocks.

Second Son watches his younger face grow purple. Seeing it, he can again feel the pain as the rope bites into his ankles. He had hobbled on swollen feet for a decameron.

"Let's just leave him here for a few days," Dancer says, circling him.

"I recognize that I am lost and I require guidance..."

"What's that?" Dancer's grin grows wider still. "Lem, can you believe it? He's *praying*! Speak up, Hump! We can't hear you!"

Second Son screws his eyes shut and continues mouthing the prayer silently.

"Stupid! Koba was a man like any other!" Dancer seems genuinely offended. "He pulled his tights on one leg at a time. He breathed and ate and shat like any other man. And he died like any other man. Great-great-great-great-grandfather *killed* him!"

"That's not true!" Second Son shrieks. "He chose to become one with the Stone! Orcus the First had nothing to do with it!"

"Maybe it's true, maybe it's not." Dancer affects nonchalance. "The point is, it makes our family look more powerful to have that rumor circulating."

She makes a face as if something unpleasant has just occurred to her. "Incidentally, Hump, dangling upside-down by your feet doesn't have quite the same effect."

"Let me down!" he cries. "Let me down!"

"Lem! Look, he's *wet* himself!"

Second Son doesn't remember this part. He leans closer to the screen. He can see a dark stain growing on his tights, but he decides it's just perspiration.

"It's a good thing you have an older brother," Dancer says, "otherwise Father would never have any opportunity for grandchildren."

Dancer walks jubilantly out of the room. Her lover lumbers after her. Second Son stares at himself, hanging helplessly, fingers almost touching the floor, tears rolling up his face. Dancer turns her head, smiling, for one last look before she slips away. Second Son freezes the image, feeling the rage burn in his chest.

He had hung there for almost a chronon before his brother Stone finally came along and found him. Stone cut him down and massaged the feeling back into his feet without a word of criticism, without even a look of disappointment. Of all the family, Stone was the only one who never seemed to think of Second Son as a failure. Stone only tried to help him when he could, to defend him whatever the cost to himself. Stone could bear any burden without complaint. Perhaps that was why they had given him that nickname, the highest compliment possible in the Hypogeum.

Second Son loved his brother unconditionally. When Second Son was a little boy, Stone took him for rides on his shoulders. Second Son loved the rides so much and took them so often that someone commented that Second Son looked like a hump on Stone's back. That was the origin of Second Son's hated nickname.

Second Son preferred to remember Stone the way he was when they were young, before he got sick. He had changed so much in his last days. He withered like a plant in the dark, his once-bright eyes sunk deep in their sockets. His clothes hung around him and his hair turned white, though he was only nineteen. But the transformation in his personality was what frightened Second Son the most. The once stoic and cheerful elder brother complained perpetually, sometimes about things that no one else could even see. He snapped at people for no reason at all. As the tumor grew in his brain, he lost the ability to distinguish one person from another, confusing Second Son for Second Daughter, or Dancer for their dead mother. In the days before he finally died, he stared at any person who entered his sickroom with complete indifference. Second Son had tried to say goodbye, but it was useless. Stone could not see him at all.

Finally, the Deathsmen came to hasten his end. The Orcus family was sufficiently important to warrant not one, but *three*, members of the Brotherhood. Their father stood in the hallway, shaking with helpless fury as they glided past. When they were gone he rampaged through Stone's room, tearing the medical equipment from the walls

and smashing it to pieces on the floor.

Dancer never came to visit Stone after he became truly ill, not once. She pretended not to understand that he was sick.

Second Son deactivates the monitor with a savage punch of the button. *That bitch*, he thinks. *I'll show her.*

ELEGY

The Deathsman nudges Edward Penn's body out of the way with his foot. He leans over the bed, casting a deep shadow across the patient who lies there. Mosley's eyes remain closed in unconsciousness, but his breath becomes deeper and faster through his half-open mouth, as if he senses what is approaching. His sons stand respectfully and nervously on the other side of the bed.

"Your father's work in this earth is done," the Deathsman intones in his featureless voice. "Eternal contentment waits for him, and I am the Bringer of Peace. Do not grieve, for this is a moment of beauty and fulfillment. Rejoice, rather, for his accomplishments that are behind him and the glory that is to come. May the manner in which he lived and the manner in which he moves on be an inspiration to us all. Do you have any last words for him?"

The boys lean over Mosley. In turn, they kiss his forehead and murmur their love for him. Beneath his mask the Deathsman smiles sourly. At every terminus he attends there are tears and kisses and heartfelt words, but the sentiments are so often the same. Even the words and phrases the mourners use tend to be identical from one group to another, as if they all drew their thoughts from a single liturgy of grief. The Deathsman yearns for a spark of originality, a hint of transcendence.

Mercifully, the Mosley boys are not extravagant in their remorse. They step aside, and the Deathsman touches his fingertips to Mosley's forehead. Mosley twitches once. His head sinks into the pillow as the will leaves his muscles. There is no more. The silver fingertips are instantaneous and painless.

After a respectful silence, the Deathsman asks, "Who is to be Caretaker?"

"I am," says the older boy.

"Watch your father's body and see that no disrespect is done to his person," the Deathsman recites. "It is your duty to comfort any

who are reluctant to accept his passage, and to silence any who would show disrespect to his memory. Will you accept this duty?"

"I will."

"Good. You will have approximately ten centichrons alone with him." The Deathsman walks to the door. "And if a nurse should come along," he says over his shoulder in a less solemn tone, "have him put the doctor in a bed. He'll regain consciousness in a few chronons."

The room wraps itself around the Deathsman and contracts like a closing eye. He slips away into the gray world.

IT WOULDN'T HURT

"So what are *you* going to wear?" Cadell asks as he sifts through the clothes in his meticulously ordered closet. On the left, gray and brown cover-ups for everyday; in the middle, black and white patterned suits for special occasions; and on the right, a few choice outfits for truly special occasions in oh-so-hard-to-find *color*.

"Nothing," Amarantha replies. "I'm not going."

Cadell turns his head. Every sight of her is a revelation to him. She is lying naked on the bed, propped up on her elbows. Her soft emerald hair cascades over her shoulders. Her chin rests indifferently on one hand. The pose accentuates the curve of her back, dipping into her tiny waist, rising again into her hips, which are unusually full for a woman of her slimness. Cadell has never known a woman who can look so alluring without even thinking about it. She is a marvel.

"Don't worry, sweetheart, it won't be that bad. You might even have a good time." He holds up one of his suits. "Do you think I should wear the green one?"

She glances over her shoulder quickly. "No. It's nice, but you've worn it too often. You ought to wear something they haven't seen before."

Cadell twists his lips quizzically and studies the suit. "Are you sure?"

"Have I ever been wrong?"

Cadell puts the suit back in the closet.

"And I mean it," she adds. "I'm not going. You can just go by yourself and have a good time."

"Come on, Ama. This is a very big event. Everyone will be there. You know how much the other Rakehells like you. Please? This is

important to me."

Amarantha sighs, and Cadell can see her weighing her options in her mind. They have been invited to the party by his superiors in the Rakehells, a quasi-official organization of up-and-coming political employees. The invitation of a junior member to such an important function is a distinct honor, and not to be turned down lightly.

"Second Son will be there," she says.

"Of course he will. But I imagine he'll be too busy to bother you much at his own engagement party."

Amarantha pulls the covers around her. "You watch—I guarantee he'll corner me and talk at me for half a chronon. He never lets me get a word in edgewise, because he knows the first thing I'll say is 'I have to go now.'"

Cadell casts a nervous eye at the camera on the ceiling. "You know, it wouldn't hurt you to be nice to him."

"What do you mean?"

Cadell hears the sudden ice in Amarantha's voice. "Well, I mean, you could just give him a break, that's all," he says cautiously. "He's just a kid, you know. And he could do a lot to advance my position if you would just..."

Amarantha jumps out of the bed, dragging the sheets with her. "If I would what? Smile and bat my eyes? Do a little dance for him?" "Sweetheart... that's not what I'm saying at all."

Amarantha's voice rises in volume. "Then what *are* you saying? Maybe I should just pull him to the floor and fuck him right there! Would that help your *career*?"

"I didn't mean anything at all. I wasn't thinking."

Her open palm lashes out, striking him in the temple. "I can't believe what an asshole you are sometimes!"

He raises his elbows to ward off another blow, but she is already back on the bed, burrowing under the covers. He sees that he has genuinely hurt her. His mistake was to think of her as having the same desperate drive to succeed that he does, the same indifference to humiliation.

"You're right, sweetheart. I'm sorry." He stands next to the bed, looking at her. After a few moments she shifts over to make room for him.

They lie spooned together. He runs his hand gently up and down

her arm. “I was wrong,” he says. “I’ll go to the party alone.”

She sighs. “I’ll go. But I’ll give that squirt a piece of my mind if he bothers me. A big piece.”

Smiling, he rests his chin on her shoulder. Feeling her body relax, he runs his hand around her hip and down across her stomach. “Fair enough.”

A FEMALE VISITOR

Orel lifts himself to his elbows, his head throbbing with pain. A thin stream of blood runs down the side of his head to drip on the floor. He hears the sound of scuffling and heavy breathing nearby. Looking up, he sees Bernie about five meters away, with the creature on top of him. Orel can see that its form is human, even if its behavior is not. Its teeth are locked on Bernie’s left arm. Bernie is trying to push it off with his feet, but the creature cannot be dislodged. Its head shakes back and forth furiously, ripping into the arm. Tatters of cloth and plastic are flying around them.

Orel gets to his feet, finding it more difficult than he expected. He pulls a wrench from his tool belt and circles around to approach the creature from behind. With each step, he staggers a little to one side. When he is almost upon the creature, it hears his steps and turns its almost hairless head. It squeals deafeningly, baring long, white teeth. Its tiny, black eyes glisten with menace.

Orel swings the wrench down against its head as hard as he can. The creature moves to evade the blow, but not quickly enough. Its head collapses with a wet crunch like an old, rusty pipe. It falls sideways, red and gray bits falling from its crushed skull. Bernie struggles out from underneath its body.

Orel is barely aware of him. He is watching the creature’s body to make sure it is really dead.

“I’m going to throw up. I’m going to throw up,” Bernie says, ripping off his respirator. He stands with his head bowed for a moment, then holds the respirator back over his face. “I can’t,” he says. “I’m too damn scared to throw up.” He takes a few deep breaths. “What the hell *is* that?”

“Rat,” Orel says, dropping the wrench. He, too, is breathless and sick with adrenaline.

“It could have killed me!”

“It would have, too, if it had latched onto your good arm.” Orel gestures at Bernie’s exposed cybernetic arm beneath the torn fabric and plastiflesh. Long scratches have been made in the black metal. “Look what it did there. It could have stripped your other arm to the bone.”

Bernie edges closer. “It’s dead, isn’t it?”

“It’s dead. Skull caved in. Pretty easily, too. Must not have had enough calcium in its diet.”

Bernie laughs weakly. “Let’s not talk about its diet.”

“Cyborg, medium rare.”

Their laughter sputters out. “Do you really think he’s a Rat?” Bernie asks. “Maybe he’s just some lunatic.”

“He’s a Rat, all right.” Orel kneels down beside the body and, hesitating a moment before touching it, turns it face up. “Or rather, *she’s* a Rat.”

The creature is short and wiry. She is naked from head to toe, but nothing suggests her sex other than her genitals. Her breasts are mere bumps. Her face is gaunt and devoid of personality, its character lying not in the pinprick eyes, but in the angry, oversized incisors protruding over the thin lips and recessed chin.

Orel is surprised to see that her right arm ends in a red, twisted scar just below the elbow. “We were nearly killed by a one-armed girl,” Bernie says with a grimace.

Orel turns the creature’s head and lifts the lid of one eye. The pupils of her eyes are so dilated so that they nearly overwhelm the irises. “Look at this,” he says. “That’s why she broke the lights. She couldn’t stand the brightness.” He lifts the creature’s good hand. “Look at the callus. On her hands and knees as well as her feet, for climbing across rock. She’s a cave dweller, all right.”

“I’ve never heard of one of them coming into the Hypogeum,” Bernie says. “I thought maybe they were just an old story.”

“I wonder why she decided to come here.”

“There are scars all over her body, like the ones on my arm.” Bernie kneels down next to Orel, his voice rising in excitement. “She was attacked by other Rats. She didn’t *want* to come here — she was forced to!”

“Do you think that’s how she lost her arm?”

“Maybe. Or maybe she lost the arm in an accident, or a fight, and

that's why the others chased her out. Because she was crippled."

Orel considers this. In his imagination he sees the Rat, her arm trapped under a rockslide. She tries to pull loose, but the stones are too heavy. The other Rats turn away from her, giving her up for dead. She is left alone in the dark, crying in pain. Desperately she leans forward and bares those enormous teeth. She begins to chew ...

"Poor thing," he says. "She never had a chance."

"Who does?" Bernie asks peevishly. He stands up, wiping the blood and mold from his jumpsuit. "What do you think we should do with the body? Should we call the knackers or should we call the clops?"

"Let's not call anybody for a bit," Orel says, lifting the creature's callused hand. He runs his thumb along the edge of the thick, yellow fingernails. "I'd like to take a closer look at her."

MOSLEY'S BODY

The designation of Caretaker is primarily ceremonial. No one really expects that anyone will come along to desecrate the corpse in the moments following death. But even in the Hypogeum, where sentiment usually takes back seat to expediency, the importance of giving mourners something to do, something to make them feel needed, is understood. So Mosley's eldest son stands watch by his father's body, protecting it from harm.

After a while, two orderlies arrive. The son steps aside, and they wheel Mosley's bed to the door. Seeing Dr. Penn's prostrate figure, they pause, considering it. But they have received no instructions about a second body, so they continue on their way.

They wheel the body through the halls to a large elevator in a quiet corner of the hospital. They push the bed in, maneuvering it awkwardly with outstretched arms so as to avoid actually stepping over the threshold into the car. One of the orderlies reaches in and stabs the single button. The light inside the elevator begins to blink rhythmically. The orderlies stand against the opposite wall and watch the doors close.

The elevator descends, rattling through the hospital, continuing past the basement and the subbasement. It does not slow, but descends past the sewers to the very lowest catacombs of the Hypogeum. With a soft ping it opens to a dimly lit hallway with walls of bare, chiseled

rock. The floor is lined with scratched and yellowed plastic mats. The gutters that run along the edges are indelibly stained dark brown. A short, hunched man in a surgical mask and a smock lumbers toward the elevator. He yanks the body off the bed. Holding the body by the ankle, the man in the smock hits a button in the elevator to signal receipt of the body. The doors bounce once against the corpse's head before the hunched man pulls the body fully out of the way. When the doorway is clear, the elevator and the bed travel upward again.

With a single practiced movement, the hunched man slings the body over his shoulder. He proceeds down the passage, his broad feet slapping against the floor, carelessly dodging the bulbs that hang from the low ceiling. Without raising his eyes, he travels through the endlessly branching corridors until he comes to a wide room filled with bubbling vats and roaring furnaces. Other hunched men hurry to and fro, almost invisible in the steam. No words are spoken. This is the domain of the knackers, the untouchable class of the Hypogeum, despised by even the lowest quaternaries.

Mosley's body is thrown on a polished metal table. Two men undress the body, rolling and manipulating it with the ease of long experience. The clothes are tossed into a passing laundry cart. The hair on the head and body is shaved and vacuumed though a flexible plastic hose hanging from the ceiling, where it is sucked into a long pipe. At the other end of the pipe it will be used to make rope, filters, and insulation.

Mosley's throat, forearm, and groin are cut open. The blood rolls down the table to a drain. From there it flows to a large collecting vat where it joins with the blood of hundreds of other men and women who have died today. Some will be returned to the hospital. The rest will be used in the making of puddings, juices, and plastics.

A deep incision is made down the sternum, and a pair of metal claws descend to crack open the chest. The intestines are lifted out; their contents will be turned into fertilizer and bacteria culture. The other organs are examined and checked against a list from the hospital. Those that are not compromised by the lymphoma are packed into a stasis field container, similar in principle to the touch of a Deathsman, and returned to the hospital via a different elevator. The rest are dropped down a chute to a conveyor belt, where they will be separated according to chemical content, dissected, and distilled.

The contents of the skull are removed. Extra care is taken in the extraction of the pituitary gland because of the part it plays in the production of musth, a natural euphoric highly prized by those citizens who can afford it.

The skin is peeled away from the body to be made into vellum and paper. The fat is cut off for use in oil, wax, and soap. The muscles are dropped into another chute where they will be ground up and sent to the kitchens. The collagen in the blood vessels is used to make elastic. The marrow and stem cells are extracted from the bones. The bones themselves are pulverized to make fertilizer and cement. Whatever is left is thrown into the great bubbling vats. Nothing is wasted.

The knackers work tirelessly and without speaking. A knacker who does not shoulder his share of the work might end up lying on one of the metal slabs instead of working at it. But there is another reason for their perseverance. A worker who excels in his duties here might, if he is lucky, be promoted to a different level, where it would be his duty to break down and assemble machines instead of the bodies of other men and women.

JUSTIFY

Ready grabs the old man's wrist and presses their idents together so that the access ports link up. With Ready's knife to his throat, the old man enters the release code to drain his financial account. When they're done, Ready punches up his own account to see what's been added to it. "That's *it*?" he says. Though his eyes and his voice don't betray it, Ready wants to cry. When he quit his job at the hydrogen conversion plant, swearing not to live behind plexiglass and die in flames like his father, Ready thought he was finally free. Now he realizes he's just traded one jail cell for another one, slightly larger and just as indifferent.

Despite Ready's angry tones, the ragged people hardly even look up. Only the old man, the 'father' of this conglomeration, is watching Ready and his partner. The others continue cooking something unpleasant in a metal box over an open fire. Ready doesn't want to guess what it might be.

"That is all we have," the old man says in a flat voice. He is not frightened of Ready and Hoon. He is not even angry at being threatened. He seems only to consider them an inconvenience.

Ready pushes the old man's face. He stumbles backward into the wall, which breaks apart, bits of rusty metal and cardboard coming unglued. Beyond the wall, another huddled family looks up, seemingly unsurprised by the intrusion. Unhurriedly, one of them stands and begins building the wall up again. The old man's family reacts only just enough to protect whatever it is they are cooking.

"Do you want me to kick your fucking face in?" Ready shouts, waving his ident. "I know you've got to have more than this!" Bags of the family's belongings bump against him as he moves. There is barely enough room to stand in the tiny hovel.

"That's all we have," the old man repeats. "Look around you. Do you think we are rich?"

Ready's friend Hoon laughs with a goofy grin. Hoon didn't tie his respirator on tight enough as a child. He's not too bright.

In frustration, Ready runs his fingers through the stripecuts in his hair. A life of misery has left these people indifferent to the threat of violence.

"Maybe I should just tear this place up," he says, waving his arm. "Maybe I'll break a seal and let the fumatory in." At this last threat, the other family members finally look up. *That* scared them.

"The tough thing about a broken seal, y'know," Ready says quietly, "is that you can never be really sure it's been fixed. You may think it's airtight, but really it's leaking slowly, until one day — Surprise! — everybody wakes up to a blue tongue breakfast!"

The old man crawls to Ready and grabs the hem of Ready's jacket with both hands, eyes wide with fear. "Please. Please do not hurt us. I swear what I have given you is all I have. Please, I am only a poor man trying to survive!"

Ready turns his head and spits with disgust. "All right. For Koba's sake, let go of me." The man lets go and buries his head at Ready's feet. "I'll let it go this time, but next time I come 'round you'd better have a little more for me."

"I will," the man mumbles into Ready's feet. "I swear I will."

"All right, all right. Let's go, Hoon."

Ready pushes through the flap separating the family's room from the rest of the basher boxes. There aren't many doors in the basher boxes, just holes cut from one space to another. The rooms are built helter-skelter on top of one another, with never more than a few

meters of level floor at a time. The rickety walls are built of whatever material is handy: corrugated metal, plastic, cardboard, or even bits of broken glass glued back together.

Hoon giggles as they push through the junk houses. “Good work, Ready,” he says.

Ready says nothing. What kind of a life is this? He wonders if they would take him back at his old job. He wonders how long he could work there without killing himself.

He passes through a hanging metal sheet into a long, dark room lit by a single globe. The floor is sturdy metal. This place was actually *built*. Perhaps it is part of the maintenance tunnels. “Hey, Hoon,” he says, “do you know where the fuck we are?”

Hoon does not reply immediately, and Ready turns around to look at him. Hoon has an odd look on his face, as if the question is outrageous. His big eyes look even weirder in the dim light. With a grunt, he lowers his head and runs headlong across the floor. His head hits the wall with a loud reverberation. The impact makes a large dent in the soft metal.

Ready guffaws. “You crazy bastard! What the hell was that?”

Without a word, Hoon picks himself up off the floor and bashes his head against the wall again. It crumples further with a deep creaking groan. Something in Hoon’s collar breaks, and the glowbands on his jacket flicker out. He slumps to the ground, his eyes shut and his mouth open.

Ready feels a drop of fear trickle down his spine. Even Hoon isn’t *this* stupid. Something is wrong. “Hoon,” he says, keeping his voice soft and level, “what the hell are you doing?”

Hoon gets up again. No, that’s not right. This time Ready can see that Hoon is *floating* up, like a puppet on strings. He swings backward, and now Ready can see it clearly. Hoon’s collar is distended and crumpled, as if someone is holding him up by the collar of his jacket. He is swept forward, and his head slams into the wall one more time. The wall is visibly bowed now, close to collapse. Hoon’s head leaves a long, red streak as he slides to the floor.

“Hoon!” Ready feels sweat tickling his scalp between the rows of his stripecut. He runs across the room to his friend.

He sees the motion an instant before it hits him: a wild movement in the air, a furious rush of elemental force. It explodes in his

face, throwing him backward. He lands hard. Bits of broken plastic from his respirator are stuck in his cheek. With his tongue he can feel the sharp edge of one that went all the way through.

The invisible thing grabs him by the collar and swings him around. He trips backward over Hoon’s body and collides with the wall. This time the battered wall collapses inward, and Ready lands in the hole, half in the room and half out. Smoke swirls around his head.

It’s a chimney vent, he realizes. He can feel the heat rising from far below on the back of his head and shoulders. Ready struggles to get up. With his respirator broken, he’ll suffocate in here.

But before he can pull himself free, the broken metal walls of the shaft contort and lean in toward him in a vaguely human shape. He feels sharp claws pressing against his chest, forcing him back down. A death’s head coalesces out of the gray smoke, dark eyes burning through it.

The soft, fleshy mouth below the metal mask speaks to him. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you,” it whispers.

He ignores the voice and continues to struggle. Sweat is rolling down his face. His eyes sting from the fumes. If he doesn’t get out of the chimney soon he’ll die.

“I saw what you were doing tonight,” the voice continues. “Those people have nothing, less than nothing. The only things they can hold on to are hope and pride, and you would take even those away from them.”

“Let me up!” Ready screams. The hands do not move. He feels his anger begin to crumble. Fear wells up in his throat. “If you want a cut, you can have it!”

“You don’t understand, boy.” The death’s head mask leans closer. “You think that money is the oil that keeps society’s engine running, but it’s not. Trust is. Trust in each other is what allows us all to work together smoothly. When you remove trust, the engine cannot function. Fear and suspicion make motion impossible. The engine seizes up and destroys itself.”

Ready tries to struggle free. “You’re crazy!”

“Not at all.” A single metal hand wraps itself around his collar and effortlessly pushes him halfway over the edge, into the roiling vapors and roaring heat.

“Justify your existence to me,” the Winnower says, almost invisible behind the thick, greasy smoke.

“Look,” Ready says, choking on soot, “I don’t know what your problem is, but I never did anything to anybody that somebody else didn’t do to me first.”

“I’m afraid that’s not good enough. If people acted morally only on the condition that everyone around them behave in perfectly ethical fashion, then there would quickly be no ethics at all.”

Ready feels broken metal scrape down his back as he is pushed further out. The steel hand gripping his jacket is the only thing keeping him suspended. Bits of ash float lazily around him. “I’ve got kids...” he says, looking over his shoulder at the orange light of the furnace far below. “Little Rachel, she’s only three...”

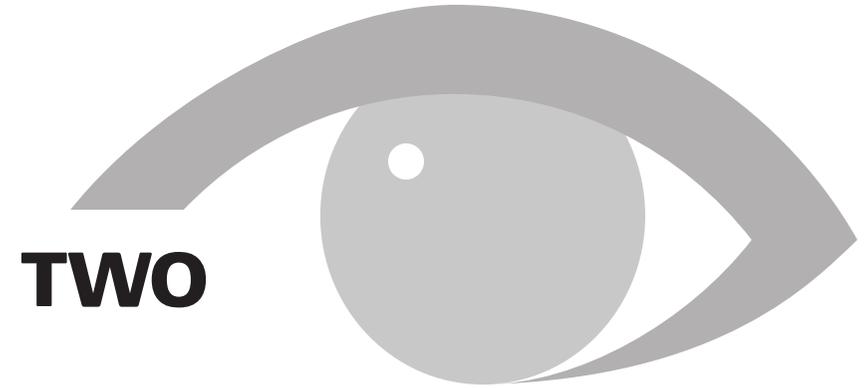
“The Hypogeum was originally designed to hold fifty thousand persons. Today it is crammed to bursting with almost five times that number. Fatherhood does not help the community, or make you a better man. Anything else?”

“Uh...uh...” Ready’s mind reels, and then it suddenly hits him: maybe this psychopath is actually the answer to all his problems. Maybe it’s fate.

“What if I...” he says quickly, “What if I...”

And then he falters. He has absolutely no idea what to say next.

“I thought not.” The steel hand gives a final shove, and Ready falls backward into the smoke. He is completely lost in suffocating grayness. Only the rapidly increasing heat tells him that he is hurtling toward the furnace. He screams until his lungs begin to burn.



Timeless and strong,
as stone, as steel.
Talons sharper
than the memory of fear.
Conceived in cupidity,
born of brutality,
suckled upon starvation.
Winnower.

*Surviving fragment from
The Book of Equity, circa 220*

BLUESHIFT

Orcus presses his hands hard against the window until his nail-less fingers turn white and the veins bulge from the backs of his hands. He leans his massive body forward, the tip of his aquiline nose flattening against the glass, and looks out upon the Hypogeum. The shining towers reach upward, straining to touch him, while the jumble of buildings and causeways between them descend into a poisonous blue haze. Somewhere in that impenetrable puzzle of steel and concrete is a man in the guise of a demon, a man who kills with the grace of a gymnast, then disappears into the crevasses like a cockroach.

Orcus pushes his forehead against the plastic, as if trying to ooze through it, to become one with the city. The situation is absurd. The party to celebrate his children’s nuptials begins in a matter of