

Catherine Asaro: Aurora in Four Voices

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Part I: The Dreamers of Nightingale

He missed the sun. The planet Ansatz boasts one city, Nightingale, a gem that graces eternal night. Just as a diamond sparkles because light that ventures into its heart is captured, bouncing from face to face, so Jato Stormson was trapped in Nightingale. Unlike the light inside a faceted diamond, however, he could never escape. After a few years, his memories of home faded. He could no longer picture the sun-parched farm on the planet Sandstorm where he had spent his boyhood. It was always dark in Nightingale.

The Dreamers—the artistic geniuses who created Nightingale—were also mathematical prodigies. That was why they named their planet Ansatz. It referred to a method of solving differential equations. Guess an answer, an ansatz, and see if it solved the equation. If it didn't, make another guess. Another ansatz. Jato felt as if he were trapped on a guess of a world. One night he went to the EigenDome, an establishment for dancing. He sat at a table and waited for the drink server, but the server never came to his table. That was why he rarely visited the Dome. The artist who had designed the place considered it aesthetic to have humans serve the drinks and the humans in Nightingale ignored him. But that night he was lonelier than usual and even the icy Dreamers were better than no company at all. Made from synthetic diamond, the Dome resembled a truncated soccer ball. Jato had looked up its history in the city library and found a treatise on how the Dome's shape mimicked the molecule buckyball. Its holographic lighting evoked the quantum eigenfunctions that described a buckyball. He didn't understand the physics, but he appreciated the beauty it produced. Tonight Dreamers were everywhere, dancing, talking, humming. Centuries of playing with their genes and living in perpetual night had bleached their skin almost to translucence. Their hair floated around their bodies like silver smoke. Light from lamps outside the Dome refracted through the diamond walls, gracing the interior with rainbows that collected on the Dreamers in pools of color. They glistened like quantum ghosts.

Across the Dome, the doors opened. A spacer stood in the doorway, her body haloed by the rainbow luminance. This was no Dreamer. She looked solid. Sun-touched. She must have come in on one of the rare ships that visited Nightingale; rare, because the Dreamers allowed no immigration and most sun-dwellers found a city of unrelieved night depressing anyway. The only reason people usually came to Ansatz was to trade for a Dream.

Ah, yes. The Trade.

Dreamers make a simple offer; give one a pleasant dream and in return the Dreamer will give you a work of art. They allow you ten days to try. After that, you must leave Nightingale, trade or no trade. Considering the prices Dreamer art claims throughout the

Imperialate, that trade seems astoundingly one-sided, the offer of great treasure for no more than a nice dream.

Jato had let the lure of that promise fool him. He spent years saving for the ticket to Ansatz. But how do you give a dream? It was harder than it sounded, particularly given how sun-dwelling humans revolted the Dreamers. The same husky build and rugged looks that had won him such admiration back home repelled the Dreamers. Considering their disdain for ugliness, he feared they wouldn't even let him stay the ten days.

They never let him go.

So now he sat by himself and watched the spacer walk to a table across in the Dome. She wore dark pants tucked into boots and a white sweater with gold rings decorating the upper arms. Her clothing looked familiar, but Jato couldn't place why. She had no jacket; Nightingale's weather machines aided the planet's natural convection to keep the climate pleasant, free from the fierce winds the tore at the rest of Ansatz. Her hair was a cloud of black curls with gold tips, and dark lashes framed her eyes—green eyes, the color of a leaf in the forest. Her skin had a dusky hue, full of rosy blooming health. None of the Dreamers spared her a second look, but Jato thought she was lovely.

She sat down—and the server showed up to take her order. Irrked, Jato got up and headed for the laser bar, intending to insist they serve him. Reaching it, however, was no simple feat. The Dome's floor consisted of nested rings, each slowly rotating in one direction or the other. The text he had found in the library described some business about "mapping coefficients in quantum superpositions onto ring velocities." All he knew was that it took a computer to coordinate the motion so patrons could step from one ring to another without falling. Dreamers carried it off with grace, but he had never mastered it.

He managed to reach the dance floor, a languid disk turning in the Dome's center. Dancers drifted away from him, slim and willowy, silver-eyed works of art. On the other side, he ventured into the rings again and was soon being carried this way and that. Each time he neared a hovertable occupied by Dreamers, it floated away on cushions of air. He wished just once someone would look up, admit his presence, give a greeting. Anything.

Meanwhile, the server brought the spacer her drink, which was a LaserDrop in a wide-mouthed bottle. Tiny lasers in the glass suffused the drink with color: helium-neon red, zinc-selenium blue, sodium yellow. Drink in hand, she settled back to watch the dancers.

Jato quit pretending it was the bar he wanted and headed for the spacer. But whenever he neared the ring with her hovertable, people and tables that had been drifting away suddenly blocked his path. The spacer meanwhile finished her drink, slid a payment chip into the table slot, and headed for the door. He started after her—and the drink server appeared, blocking the way, his back to Jato, his tray of laser-hued drinks held high.

Jato scowled. He had always been long on patience and short on words. But even the most stoic man could only take so much. He put his hand against the server's back and

pushed, not hard, just enough to make the fellow move. The server stumbled and his tray jumped, rum splashing out of the jars in plump drops. Even then, no one looked at Jato, not even the server.

He made it to the door without pushing anyone else. Outside, lamps lit the area for a few meters, but beyond their radiance, night reigned under a sky rich with stars. Jato strode away from the Dome, his fists clenched. He didn't want to give them the satisfaction of seeing their treatment provoke him.

The Dome was on the city outskirts, near the edge of a large plateau where the Dreamers had built Nightingale. The Giant's Skeleton Mountains surrounded the plateau, falling away from it on three sides and rising in sheer cliffs on the fourth, here in the north. The northern peaks piled up higher and higher in the distance, until they become a jagged line against the star-dazzled sky.

The Dreamers claimed they built Nightingale as a challenge: can you create beauty in so forbidding a place? This was the reason they gave. Jato had heard others put forth, but the Dreamers denied them.

Although his past attempts at convincing spacers to smuggle him offplanet had failed, he never gave up. In the distant shadows, he saw the spacer climbing the SquareCase, a set of stairs carved into a cliff. The first step was one centimeter high, the second four, the third nine, and so on, their heights increasing as the square of integers. The first twenty ran parallel to the cliff, but then they turned at a right angle and stepped into the mountains, rising taller and taller, until they became cliffs themselves, too high, too dark, and too distant to distinguish.

By the time he reached the first step of the SquareCase, the spacer was climbing the tenth, about the height of her waist. She sat on it, half hidden in the dark while she watched him. He approached slowly and stopped on the ninth step. "Can I do something for you?" she asked.

"I wondered if you wanted a guide to the city." It sounded unconvincing, but it was the best introduction he could think of.

"Thank you," she said. "But I'm fine." The conversation screeched to a halt.

He tried again. "I don't often get a chance to talk to anyone from offplanet."

Her posture eased. "I noticed my ship was the only one in port."

"Did you come to trade for a Dream?"

"No. Just some minor repairs. I'll be leaving as soon they're done."

Behind her, Jato caught sight of a globe sparkling with lights in a fractal pattern. As it floated forward, it resolved into a robot drone over a meter in diameter, its surface patterned by delicate curls of the Mandelbrot set, swirls fringed by swirls fringed by swirls in an unending pattern of ever more minute lace.

Following his gaze, the woman glanced back. "What is that?"

"A robot. It watches this staircase."

She turned back to him. "Why does that make you angry?"

"Angry?" How had she known? "I'm not angry."

"What does it do?" she asked.

"I'll show you." Jato strode forward and hauled his bulk onto the tenth step. Although he towered over the spacer, she seemed unperturbed, simply scooting over to let him pass. That self-confidence impressed him as much as her beauty.

As he approached the eleventh step, the globe whirled into his face. When he tried to push it away, it rammed his shoulder so hard he fell to one knee.

"Hey!" The woman jumped up and grabbed for him, as if she actually thought she could stop someone his size from falling over the edge. "Why did it do that?"

He stood up, brushing rock dust off his trousers. "As a warning."

That's when she did it. She smiled. "Whatever for?"

Jato hardly heard her. All he saw was her smile. It dazzled.

But after a moment, her smile faded. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He refocused his thoughts. "What?"

"You're just staring at me."

"Sorry." He motioned at the globe. "It was warning me not to go past the city border, which crosses the cliff here." Having the drones watch him up here was almost funny. As if he could actually escape Nightingale by climbing a staircase that grew geometrically.

"Why can't you leave the city?" she asked.

He discovered he couldn't make himself tell her, at least not yet. Why should she believe his story? Eight years ago, the Dreamers had showed up at his room in the Whisper Inn and locked his wrists behind his back with cuffs made from sterling silver Möbius strips.

He had no idea what was happening until he found himself on trial. They convicted him of a murder that never happened and sentenced him to life in prison.

Supposedly, years of treatment had "cured" him, and he no longer posed a danger to society. So the Dreamers let him out of his cell, which had never been a cell anyway, but an apartment under the city. For a giddy span of hours he had thought they meant to send him home; if he was no longer dangerous, after all, why keep him under sentence?

He soon found out otherwise.

For the Dreamers who believed in his guilt, which was most of them, it would take a lifetime for him to atone. One of their most renowned artists, Crankenshaft Granite, had argued—with truth—that to Jato it would be almost as much a punishment to spend his life confined to Nightingale as to his apartment. But by making the city his jail, they showed their compassion for a criminal who had turned away from his violent nature. Jato saw why that logic appealed to the Dreamers, who for some reason had a driving need to see themselves as kind, yet who in truth considered all sun-dwellers flawed, deserving neither freedom nor friendship.

But he knew the truth. Crankenshaft's motives had nothing to do with compassion. The only reason Jato had a modicum more freedom now was because it made Crankenshaft's life easier.

Jato didn't want to see that wary look appear on this woman's face, the one spacers always wore when they learned his story. Not yet. He wanted to have these few minutes without the weight of his conviction pressing on them.

So instead of telling her, he pointed at his feet and made a joke. "This is where I live. These are my coordinates."

"Your what?"

So much for scintillating wit, he thought. "Coordinates. This staircase is the plot of a non-linear step function."

She laughed, like the sweet ringing of a bell. "Why would anyone go to all this work just to make a big plot?"

"It's art." He wished she would laugh again. It was a glorious sound.

"This is some art," she said. "But you haven't told me why your people won't let you leave."

His people? She thought he was a Dreamer? It wasn't only that he bore no resemblance to them. Dreamers were gifted at both art and mathematics, neither of which he had talent

for. Yet this beautiful woman thought he was both. He grinned. "They like me. They don't want me to go."

She stared at him, her mouth opening.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She closed her mouth. "What?"

"You're just staring at me."

"I—your smile—" She flushed. "My apologies. I'm afraid I'm rather tired." She gave him a formal nod. "My pleasure at your company." Then she turned and headed down the stairs.

He almost went after her, stunned by her abrupt leave-taking. But he managed to keep from making a fool of himself. Instead, he stood in the shadows and watched her descend the SquareCase.

When Jato turned into the underground corridor that dead-ended at his apartment, he saw a Mandelbrot globe waiting at the door. Given that he lived nowhere near Nightingale's perimeter, only one reason existed for its presence. Crankenshaft had sent it. With Jato no longer confined to his apartment, Crankenshaft could have him brought wherever he wanted instead of the Dreamer having to come down here.

Jato spun around and ran, his boots clanging on the metal floor. If he could find a side passage too narrow for the globe to follow, he might evade capture. It was a stupid game Crankenshaft played; if Jato escaped the drones, Crankenshaft let him have the day off.

A whirring sound came from behind him. The drone hit his side and he stumbled into the wall, bringing up his arms to protect his face. An aperture opened on the robot and an air syringe slid out, accompanied by the hiss of its firing.

His view of the hall wavered, darkened, faded. . . .

Jato opened his eyes. A face floated above him, an aged Dreamer with eyes like ice. Gusts of wind fluttered her silver hair around her cheeks. He knew that gaunt face. It belonged to Silicate Glacier. Crankenshaft's wife.

Crankenshaft was standing behind her. Tall for a Dreamer, he had a well-kept physique that belied his one-hundred and six years of age. Black hair covered his head in bristles. He had two-tone eyes, grey bordered by red, like old ice in ruby rings.

Jato spoke in a hoarse voice. "How long?"

"You have slept several hours," Crankenshaft said.

"I meant, how long do you need me for?"

"I don't know. We will see."

As Jato pulled himself into a sitting position, Silicate stepped back, avoiding contact with him. He swung his legs over the stone ledge where he had been lying and looked around. Crankenshaft had chosen the big studio. The ledge jutted out of the west wall, an otherwise blank plane of grey stone. On the left, the south wall was a window looking over Nightingale, which lay far below. The east and north "walls" were holoscreens, sheets of thermoplastic that hung from the ceiling. Holo rippled in front of them, swaths of color that trembled as breezes shook the screens.

It always disoriented Jato, that wind. Moving air didn't belong inside a house. For that matter, neither did Mandelbrot globes. But two floated here, one hovering behind Crankenshaft and another prowling the studio.

The major feature in the room was a round pool. A glossy white cone about two meters tall rose out of the water. A second cone stood next to it, its top cut flat in a circular cross-section. The three other cones in the pool were cut at angles, giving them elliptical, parabolic, and hyperbolic cross-sections.

"Circle today," Crankenshaft said. Then he headed across the drafty studio to a console in the corner where the two holo-walls met.

Jato looked at Silicate and she looked back, as cool and as smooth as stone. Then she too walked away, leaving the studio via a slit in a thermoplastic wall.

A gust ruffled Jato's hair and he shivered, wrapping his arms around his body. "Do you have a jacket?" he asked.

Crankenshaft didn't answer, he just stooped over his console and went to work. So Jato waited, trying to clear out the haze left in his mind by the sedative.

A globe nudged his shoulder. When he stayed put, it pushed harder. "Flame off," he muttered.

A syringe extended out of the globe.

Still intent on his console, Crankenshaft said, "It shoots a heat stimulant. A strong specimen such as yourself might tolerate it for ten minutes before going into shock."

Jato scowled. Where did Crankenshaft come up with this sick stuff? He looked at the globe, at Crankenshaft, at the globe again. With Crankenshaft he used care in choosing his battles. This one wasn't worth it.

He took off his boots and went to the pool. The knee-deep water was cool today, but at least no ice crusted the surface. He waded to the truncated cone and climbed up onto it, then sat cross-legged, hugging his arms to his chest for warmth.

"Move ten centimeters to the north," Crankenshaft said.

Jato moved over. "Can you warm it up in here?"

Crankenshaft sat down at his console, concentrating on whatever he was doing. So Jato moved to the south side of the cone.

Crankenshaft looked around. "Move to the other side."

"Turn on the heat," Jato said.

"Move."

"After you turn on the heat."

Stalemate.

Reaching back to the console, Crankenshaft touched a panel. A globe whirled behind Jato and he heard a syringe hiss. Heat flared in his biceps, spreading fast, up his shoulder and down his arm.

"Hot enough?" Crankenshaft asked.

It was excruciating, but Jato had no intention of letting on how much it bothered him. He simply shrugged. "What will you do? Put your model into shock because he objects to freezing?"

A muscle under Crankenshaft eye twitched. He went back to work, ignoring Jato again. However, the room warmed and the burning in Jato's muscles cooled. Either Crankenshaft had lied or else the drone had delivered an antidote with the poison, probably in a bio-sheath that dissolved after a few minutes in the blood.

Over the next few hours the wind dried Jato's clothes. Silicate came in once to bring Crankenshaft a meal on a stone platter. Jato wondered about her, always attentive, always silent. Did she create her own art? Most Dreamers did, even those who worked other jobs. Silicate's only occupation seemed to be waiting on Crankenshaft. But then, Jato doubted Crankenshaft would tolerate artistic competition in his own household.

Finally Crankenshaft stood up, rolling his shoulders to ease the muscles. "You can go," he said, and left the studio.

Just like that. You can go. Get out of my house. Clenching his teeth, Jato slid off the cone and limped across the pool, sore from sitting so long. After coaxing his boots on under his wet trousers, he went to a door in the corner of the studio where the window-wall met one of the thermoplastic walls.

Icy wind greeted him outside. He stood at the top of a staircase that spiraled down the cliff Crankenshaft owned. The city glimmered far below, and beyond it ragged mountains stretched into the darkness. Millennia ago a marauding asteroid had struck the planet, distorting it into a blunt teardrop that lay on its side, its axis pointed at Quatrefoil, the star it orbited. Although Ansatz was almost tidally locked with Quatrefoil, it wobbled enough so most of its surface received at least a little sunlight. Night reigned supreme only here in this small region around the pole.

Crankenshaft's estate was high enough to touch the transition zone between the human-made pocket of calm around Nightingale and the violent winds that swept Ansatz. Yet despite the long drop to the plateau, the staircase had no protection, not even a rail. Another of Crankenshaft's "quirks." After all, he never used these stairs.

Jato grimaced. When he came willingly, Crankenshaft always had a flycar waiting to take him home. Today he would have to go back inside and ask for a ride, a prospect he found as appealing as eating rocks.

So he went down the stairs, stepping with care, always aware of the chasm of air. Around and around the spiral he went, never looking around too much, lest it throw off his balance. He wondered how he would appear to someone down in the city. Perhaps like a mote descending a stone DNA helix on the face of a massive cliff.

The helix image caught his mind. It would make an intriguing sculpture. He could go to the library and find a text on DNA. It would have to be a holobook, though, rather than anything on the computer.

Before Jato had come to Ansatz, his computer illiteracy hadn't mattered. As the oldest son of a water-tube farmer on Sandstorm, he hadn't been able to afford web access, let alone a console. Although everyone here in Nightingale had access to the city web, it did him little good. However, he had figured out how to tell a console in the library to print books.

He doubted he would try the helix sculpture, though. Reading could only give information, not talent. One thing he had to say for Crankenshaft: the man was brilliant. Jato could never imagine him giving away his stratospherically-priced work for a Dream. Besides, what Dream would he find pleasant? Pulling wings off bugs, maybe.

Jato scowled. A few Dreamers high in Nightingale's city government knew Crankenshaft had set him up. They framed him for a crime so brutal it would have meant execution or personality reconfiguration anywhere else. Imperialate law was harsh: an escaped convict fleeing into a new jurisdiction could be resentenced there for his crime. That often-

denounced law was intended to ease the morass of extradition problems that arose as more and more planets came under Imperial rule. But it let Crankenshaft blackmail him; if Jato escaped Nightingale, he was subject to death or a brain wipe.

Crankenshaft's work was known across a thousand star systems. He was a genius among geniuses, and on Ansatz that translated into power. Whatever he wanted for his art, he was given.

Including Jato.

Part II: Dream Debt

Jato lay in bed, unable to sleep. He had dimmed the lights until only faint images of sand-swept fields softened the walls, holoart he had created himself, memories of his home.

Even after eight years, he still found this room remarkable. He had grown up in a two-room dustshack his family shared with two other families. Here he had, all to himself, a bed with a quilt, a circular bureau, a mirror, a bathroom, and soft rugs for the floor. The Dreamers charged no rent and gave him a living stipend. His medical care was free, including the light panels and vitamin supplements his sun-starved body craved.

Tonight the room felt emptier than usual. He gave up trying to sleep and went to the bureau, a round piece of furniture that rotated. He removed his statue from the top drawer. He had come to Ansatz hoping for a miracle, to trade for a fabulous treasure. He had his own dreams then, ones he hoped to achieve by selling such a masterpiece: a farm of his own, a business, a better home for his family, well-deserved retirement for his parents, a wife and children for himself. A life.

He had never intended to make art. Still, living in Nightingale, how could a person deny the pull to create? The statue had taken years to finish and he kept it hidden now, knowing how lacking the Dreamers would find his attempts. He liked it, though.

To get the stone he wanted, he had climbed down windscoured cliffs below Nightingale, into crevices lost in the night-dark shadows. There he cut a chunk of black marble no human hand had ever before touched. Back in his rooms, he fashioned it into a bird with its wings spread wide, taloned feet beneath its body, supported by a stand carved from the same stone. Next he made clay copies of it. He spent several years cutting facets into the copies, redoing them until he was satisfied. Then he carved the facets into the statue and inlaid them with crystalline glitter.

Dreamers used elegant mathematical theories to design their creations. Jato knew his was simple in comparison. The geometry of the facets specified a fugue in four voices, each voice an aspect of his life: loss, of his home and life on Sandstorm; beauty, as in the

stark glory of Nightingale; loneliness, his only companion here; and the dawn, which he would never again see.

Holding the statue, he lay down in bed and fell asleep.

The bird sang a miraculous fugue, creating all four voices at once. Jato held it as he ran through Nightingale. The pursuing Mandelbrot drone gained ground, until finally it whirled around in front of him. Fractals swirled off its surface and turned into braided steel coils. They wrapped around his body, crushing his chest and arms, silencing the bird. He reeled under the icy stars and fell across the first step of the SquareCase.

He wrestled with the coils until he worked his arms free, easing the pressure on the bird. It sang again and its voice rose to the stars on wings of hope.

The fractal coils fell away from his body. As Jato stood up, the spacer appeared, walking out of the shadows that cloaked the SquareCase. She toed aside the coils and they melted, their infinitely repeating patterns blurred into pools of glimmering silver. The bird continued to sing, its fugue curling around them in a mist of notes.

The spacer stopped only a pace away. Her eyes were a deep green, dappled like a forest, huge and dark. She brushed her fingers across his lips. Jato put his hand on her back, applying just enough to pressure to make the decision hers; stay where she was, or step forward and bring her body against his.

She stepped forward. . . .

The Whisper Inn was a round building, graceful in the night. Holding his bundle, Jato stood at its door, an arched portal bordered by glimmering metal tiles.

"Open," he said.

Nothing happened.

He tried again. "Open."

Swirling lines and speckles appeared on the door and a holo formed, an amber rod hanging in front of the door. A curve appeared by the rod and rotated around it, sweeping out a shape. When it finished, a vase hung in the air with the rod piercing its center. Soothing pastel patterns swirled on the image.

"Solid of revolution complete," the door said. "Commence integration."

"What?" Jato asked. No door had ever asked him to "commence integration" before.

"Shall I produce a different solid?" it asked.

"I want you to open."

Silver and black swirls suffused the vase. "You must calculate the volume of the solid."

"How?"

"Set up integral. Choose limits. Integrate. Computer assistance will be required."

"I have no idea how to do that."

"Then I cannot unlock."

Jato scratched his chin. "I know the volume of a box."

The vase faded and a box appeared. "Commence integration."

"Its volume is width times height times length."

Box and rod disappeared.

"Open," Jato said.

Still no response.

Jato wondered if the Innkeeper had his door vex all visitors this way. Then again, Dreamers would probably enjoy the game.

"Jato?" the door asked.

"Yes?"

"Don't you want to enter?"

He made an exasperated noise. "Why else would I say 'Open'?"

Box and rod reappeared. "Commence integration."

"I already did that."

"I seem to be caught in a loop," the door admitted.

Jato smiled. "Are you running a new program?"

"Yes. Apparently it needs more work." The door slid open. "Please enter."

Muted light from laser murals lit the lobby. As the floor registered his weight, soft bells chimed. Fragrances wafted in the air, turning sharp and then sweet in periodic waves.

The Innkeeper's counter consisted of three concentric cylinders about waist height, all made from jade built atom-by-atom by molecular assemblers, as were most precious minerals used in Nightingale's construction. The Innkeeper sat at a circular table inside the cylinders, reading a book.

Jato went to the counter. "I'd like to see one of your customers." He knew the spacer had to be here; this inn was the only establishment in Nightingale that would lodge sun-dwellers.

The Innkeeper continued to read.

"Hey," Jato said.

The Dreamer kept reading.

Jato scowled, then clambered over the cylinders. "The offworld woman. I need her room number."

The Innkeeper rubbed an edge of his book and the holos above it shifted to show dancers twirling to a Strauss waltz.

Jato pulled the book out of his hand. "Come on."

The Innkeeper took back his book without even looking up. A whirring started up behind Jato, and a Mandelbrot globe bumped his arm.

"I owe her," Jato said. "She gave me a dream."

That caught the Dreamer's attention. He looked up, his translucent eyebrows arching in his translucent face. "You come with Dream payment?" He laughed. "You?"

Jato tried not to grit his teeth. "You know payment has to be offered."

"She is in Number Four," he said.

Jato hadn't actually expected a reply. Apparently the unwritten laws of dream debt overrode even the Innkeeper's distaste for talking to large, non-translucent people.

Old-fashioned stairs led to the upper levels. As Jato climbed, holoart came on, suffusing the walls with color. He glanced back to see the holos fade until only sparks of light danced in the air, mimicking the traces left by particles in an ancient bubble chamber.

No one answered when he knocked at Number Four. He tried again, but still no answer.

As he started to leave, a click sounded behind him. He turned back to see the spacer in the doorway, light from behind her sparkling on the gold tips of her tousled hair. She wore grey knee-boots and a soft blue jumpsuit that accented her curves. The only decorations on her jumpsuit were two gold rings around each of her upper arms. A tube trimmed each of her boots, running from the heel to the top edge of the boot, an odd style, but attractive.

"Yes?" she asked.

Jato swallowed, wondering if he had just set himself up for a rebuff. He tried to think of a clever opening that would put her at ease, perhaps intrigue or even charm her. What he ended up with was the scintillating, "I came to see you."

Incredibly, she stepped aside. "Come in."

Her room was pleasant, with gold curtains on the windows and a pretty rumpled bed that looked as if she had been sleeping in it.

Jato hesitated. "Did I wake you? I can come back later."

"No. Now is good." She motioned him to a small table gleaming with metal accents. Its fluted pedestal supported two disks, the upper joined to the lower along a slit that ran from its center to its rim, a style common in Nightingale. The only explanation Jato had ever extracted from a Dreamer was, "Riemann sheets." He had looked it up at the library and found an opaque treatise on complex variable theory that apparently described how the sheets made a multi-valued expression into a mathematical function.

After they sat down, he set his bundle in front of her and spoke the formal phrases. "You gave me a dream. I offer you my work in return."

She watched his face. "I don't understand."

"A beautiful dream." He wondered if he sounded as awkward as he felt. "This is what I have to trade." Pulling away the wrapping, he showed her the bird. Giving it up was even harder than he had expected. But it was a matter of honor: he had a debt and this was the only payment he had to give.

As she sat there staring at his life's creation, his face grew hot. He knew the wonders she had seen in Nightingale. The bird was pitiful in comparison.

"It makes music," he said. "I mean, it doesn't make the music but it tells you how to make it."

She looked up at him. "Jato, I can't accept this." An odd expression crossed her face, come and gone too fast to decipher. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought it was awe. Then she said, "Regulations don't allow me to accept presents."

Through the sting of her refusal, he realized what she had said. "How did you know my name is Jato?"

"After we talked, I looked up your Ansatz records."

He stared at her. Those records were sealed. That was the deal; as long as he did what Crankenshaft wanted, his records remained secret and he had his relative freedom on Ansatz.

Somehow he kept his voice even. "How?"

"I asked," she said. "The authorities had to let me."

Like hell. They were supposed to say No. Had his presence become so offensive that they decided to get rid of him despite Crankenshaft? Or maybe Crankenshaft no longer needed him.

Then it hit Jato, what else she had said. Regulations didn't allow her to accept gifts. Regulations.

Of course. He should have recognized it earlier. The gold bands on her jumpsuit were no decorations. They denoted rank.

"You're an ISC soldier," he said.

She nodded. "An Imperial Messenger. Secondary Class."

Jato stared at her. Secondary was equivalent in rank to colonel and "Messenger" was a euphemism for intelligence officer. He had almost asked a high-ranking spy-buster to smuggle him off Ansatz.

ISC, or Imperial Space Command, was the sole defense in known space against the Traders, whose military made a practice of "inviting" the settled worlds to join their growing domain. All settled worlds. Whether they wanted to join or not. The Traders based their economy on what they called "a benevolent exchange of work contracts designed to benefit both workers and the governing fellowships that hold their labor contracts," one of the more creative, albeit frightening, euphemisms Jato had heard for slavery. The Imperialate had formed in response, an attempt by the free worlds to remain that way. That was why so many colonies, including Ansatz, had joined the Imperialate despite the loss of autonomy that came with ISC's autocratic control.

He spoke with a calm he didn't feel. "Are you going to turn me over to ISC?"

"Well, no," she said. "I just wondered about you after you followed me up those strange stairs."

Relief swept over him, followed by distrust, then resentment, then embarrassment. One of his few comforts on Ansatz had been his pleasure in creating the bird. Now every time he looked at it he would remember how she rejected it.

As he rose to his feet, an emotion leapt across her face. Regret? It was mixed with other things, shyness maybe, even a fear of rejection. It went by too fast for him to be sure.

She stood up. "May I request an alternate gift? Something that wouldn't violate regulations?"

He had no alternate gifts. "What do you mean?"

"I'd like to see Nightingale." She hesitated. "Perhaps you would show it to me?"

She wanted a guide? True, he was the best candidate; the Dreamers would never deign to offer such services. But most people would prefer no guide at all to a convicted murderer.

Of course his records said he was "cured." Besides, rumor claimed Messengers had enhanced speed and strength. Perhaps she was confident enough in her abilities that she didn't see him as a threat.

"All right," he said.

"Well. Good." It came again, her beguiling flash of shyness. "Shall we, uh, go?"

He smiled. "It would help if I had a name to call you."

"Oh. Yes. Of course." She actually reddened. "Soz."

"Soz." He gave her a bow from the waist. "My pleasure at your acquaintance."

Her face softened into a smile. "And mine at yours."

They walked down to the lobby in awkward silence. Outside, they strolled through the Inn's rock garden, where tall lamps made shadows stretch out from human-sized mineral formations. The arrangement of rocks looked random, but it had an underlying order calculated from chaos theory.

As they followed a path toward the city proper, Jato tried to relax. Conversation had always been his stumbling block. In his adolescence, he had discussed it with his father while they were weeding a field.

"About girls," he had said.

"What about them?" his father asked.

"You know."

His father sat back on his heels. "Treat her right and she'll treat you right."

"Can't talk."

"Then listen."

"Don't know what 'treat her right' means."

"The way you want to be treated."

Jato thought of having a girl treat him the way he wanted to be treated. "What if we get into trouble?"

His father scowled. "Don't."

He had figured that his father, who became his father only a few tendays after he married Jato's pregnant mother, would have had a more informative answer than that. "What if it happens anyway?"

"You see that it doesn't." He pointed his trowel at Jato. "You go planting crops, boy, you better be ready to take responsibility if they grow." Lowering his arm, he looked across the field to where Jato's mother was curing tubes by the water shack, her long hair brushing her arms, Jato's five younger siblings helping her or playing in the dust. "Choose a place you value." His voice softened. "A place you can love."

Jato watched him closely. "Did you?"

He turned back, his face gentle now. "That I did."

That was the extent of his father's advice on women, sex and love, but it had held up well over the years. On Nightingale, however, he barely ever had the chance to talk to a woman, let alone go walking with one. So being with Soz felt odd.

Eventually the path became a boulevard. They ended up at a plaza in front of Symphony Hall, near the tiled pool. A lamp came on, bathing the pool in rosy light, and a fountain shot out of the water in a rounded arch. A gold lamp switched on, followed by a fountain with two arches, then a green lamp and three arches, and so on, each fountain adding smaller refinements to the overall effect. Altogether, they combined to create a huge blurred square. Sparkles of water flew around Jato and Soz and mist blew in their faces.

"It's lovely," Soz said.

Jato watched her, charmed by the way the rainbow-tinged mist haloed her head, giving her pretty face an ethereal aspect. She looked like a watercolor painting in luminous colors. "It's called the FourierFount," he said.

She smiled. "You mean like a Fourier series?"

"That's right." He restrained himself from blurting out how much he liked her smile. "The water arches can't combine like true wave harmonics, but the overall effect works pretty well."

"It's unique." She glanced down at his hands. "Jato, look. Your bird."

He held up the statue and saw what she meant. Light from the fountain was reflecting off the glitter so that it surrounded the statue with a nimbus of rainbows.

She held out her hands. "May I?" He handed it to her, and she turned it this way and that, watching the shimmer of light on its facets. "What did you mean, that it makes music?"

"The angle of each facet defines a note." He wondered if he even had the words to explain. Before composing the fugue, he had tried to learn music theory, but in the end he just settled for what sounded right. He played no instruments, nor could he make notes in his mind without hearing them first. He needed a computer to play his creation. The Dreamers steadfastly ignored his requests for web training, so he muddled through on his own, eventually learning enough to use one particular console in the library.

"Could I hear the music?" Soz asked.

Her request touched off an unexpected spark of panic. What if she scorned what she heard, the musical self-portrait he had so painstakingly crafted? "I can't play it," he said. "It needs four spherical-harmonic harps."

"We can have a web console do it."

He almost said no. But he owed her for the dream and playing the fugue would pay his debt. Going on a walk through Nightingale didn't count; dream debt required a work of art created by the debtor.

Still he hesitated. "It's a long way to the console I use."

She motioned at Symphony Hall. "That building must have public consoles."

He could imagine what she would think of a grown man who could barely log into the web of a city where he had lived for years. He paused for a long time before he finally said, "Can't use them."

"It has no console room?"

"It has one."

"Can't you link to your personal console from here?"

His shoulders were so tense, he felt his sweater pulled tight across them. "No personal console."

She blinked. "You don't have a personal console?"

"No."

"Where do you work?"

"Library."

"We can probably link into the library system from here." She watched his face as if trying to decipher his mood. "I can set it up for you."

So. He had run out of excuses. After another of their awkward pauses, he said, "All right."

He took her to an alcove in Symphony Hall. Blue light filled the room and blue rugs carpeted the floor. The sculpted white shapes of the public consoles made a pleasing design around the perimeter of the room.

Soz sat on a cushioned stool in front of the nearest console. "Open guest account."

When a wash of blue appeared the screen, Jato almost laughed. Only Dreamers would color-coordinate a room's decor with its web console.

"Welcome to Nightingale," the console said. "What can I do for you?"

"Library access," she said. "Establish a root directory here, standard branch structure and holographics, maximum allowed memory, full paths to available public nodes, and all allowed anonymous transferral options."

"Specify preferred nodes," the console said.

"One to produce a music simulation, given a representation of the score and a mapping algorithm."

A new voice spoke in mellow tones. "Treble here. Please position score and define algorithm."

Soz glanced at Jato. "You can take it from here."

He just looked at her. It had sounded like she was speaking another language. He hadn't even known the computers she spoke to existed. "Take it where?"

She stood up and moved aside. "Tell Treble how to access your files."

"I don't have an account."

"Everyone has an account."

He had to make a conscious effort to keep from gritting his teeth. "I guess I'm no one."

Soz winced. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way." She started to say more, then stopped. Glancing around the alcove, she said, "This room must be easy to monitor."

"Probably." Did she think the Dreamers were watching them? "The drones keep track of me."

She nodded. Any questions or comments she had intended to make about his lack of computer accounts remained unsaid. Instead she indicated a horizontal screen on the console. "If you put the statue there and give Treble the mapping for the fugue, it will make a hologram of the bird, digitize it, transform the map, and apply the transform to the digitized data."

Jato wished he were somewhere else. This was worse than the business with the door at the Inn. At least then he had been revealing his ignorance to an inanimate object. "I've no idea what you just said."

Incredibly, she flushed, as if she were the one making an idiot out of herself rather than him. "Jato, I'm terrible at this. Ask me to calculate engine efficiency, plot a course, plan strategy—I'm a whiz, like you with your art. Put me in front of a handsome man and I'm as clumsy with words as a pole in a pot."

He stared at her. A whiz . . . like you with your art. She thought he was a "whiz." A handsome whiz, at that.

Jato smiled. "You're fine." He motioned at the console. "So I put the statue there?"

Her face relaxed. "That's right. Then tell Treble how to figure out the notes."

He set down the bird, and two laser beams played over it, making the glitter sparkle. When they stopped, he said, "Treble?"

"Attending," the console answered.

"The angle a facet makes with the base of the bird specifies a note. It varies linearly: facets parallel to the base are three octaves below middle C and those perpendicular are

three octaves above." He touched the statue, his fingertips on its wings. "Each plane parallel to the base defines a chord and each facet touching the plane is a note in that chord. To play the fugue, start at the bottom and move to the top."

"Is height a discrete or continuous variable?"

"Continuous." Only a computer could do it. Human musicians would have to take planes at discrete heights. If the intervals between the planes were small enough, the human version approached the computer version. But the fugue only truly became what he intended when the distance between planes was so small that for all practical purposes it went to zero.

"Facets with one ridge are played by a spherical-harmonic baritone harp," he said. "Two ridges is tenor, three alto, and four soprano. Loudness is linear with glitter thickness, from pianissimo to fortissimo. Tempo is linear with the frequency of the light corresponding to the glitter color." He tapped a beat on the console. "Red." He increased the tempo. "Violet."

"Data entered," Treble said. "Any other specifications?"

"No." Then, realizing he would have to see Soz's reaction to the music, Jato said, "Yes. Lower the room lights to fifteen percent."

The lights dimmed, leaving them in dusky blue shadows. It was too dark to see Soz's face clearly. A deep note sounded, the rumbling of a baritone harp. After several measures of baritone playing alone, tenor joined in with the same melody, mellow and smooth. Alto came next and soprano last, as sweet as the dawn.

Treble shaped the music far more tenderly than the generic program he used in the library. Yes, that was it, the minor key there, that progression, that arpeggio. Treble had it right. At the bird's arching neck, soprano soared into a shimmering coloratura. Notes flowed over them, radiant and painful, too bright to endure for long. The other harps came in like an undertow, pulling soprano beneath their deeper melodies. At the head of the bird, soprano burst free again, a fountain of sound.

Yes. Treble had it. Treble knew.

Gradually the music slowed, sliding over the outstretched wings above the bird. Finally only baritone rumbled in the glimmering wake of soprano's fading glory. The last notes vibrated in the alcove and died.

Jato stood frozen, afraid to move lest it rouse Soz to reveal her reaction. Yet the silence was also unbearable. What did she think? That was him in that music, the vulnerable part, without barriers or protections.

Her head was turned toward the console, so he saw only her profile. A glimmer showed on her cheek. Something was sliding down her face.

He touched the tear. "Why are you crying?"

"It's so beautiful." She looked up at him. "So utterly sad and utterly beautiful."

Beautiful. She thought his music was beautiful. He tried to answer, make a joke or something, but nothing came out. So he drew her into his arms and laid his cheek on top her head.

She didn't pull away. Instead she put her arms around his waist and held him. The fresh scent of her newly washed hair wafted around him. Softly she said, "What place do you like best in Nightingale?"

"The Promenade."

"Will you take me there?"

He swallowed. "Yes."

Part III: The Giant's Rib

Bathed in starlight, the west edge of the plateau dropped into the jagged immensity of the Giant's Skeleton Mountains. Its crevices cut deep into the planet's crust, the tormented remains of a planetoid impact that had brutalized Ansatz in a long-vanished eon. Spires jutted up like skeletal fingers on walls between the chasms.

Natural bridge formations tried to span the kilometers-deep fissures, but most spans were incomplete, their broken ends hanging in the air.

The plateau itself claimed one of the few unbroken bridges. The Promenade. It rose up from the plateau's southern corner, spanned its length, and ended high in the northern cliffs. Two kilometers long and averaging only two meters wide, the bridge curved out from the plateau over a great chasm. Spires on the chasm walls supported it with columns of rock.

The Dreamers had tooled the Promenade's upper side into a path, giving it meter-high retaining walls on both sides. They laid down a courtyard at its southern base, with undulating lines enameled into the geometric design of gilded tiles.

As Jato and Soz crossed the courtyard, wind grabbed his jacket and tossed her curls around her face. She said something, but he couldn't hear her over the blustering wind, so he leaned down. "Say again?"

Her breath tickled his ear. "It's exhilarating."

"It's even stronger on the Promenade."

"Beat you there!" She took off and sprinted up the bridge, leaning forward against its steep cant. Laughing, he tried to catch her, but she ran like a rocket.

They raced the entire kilometer to the apex. At the top, Soz threw out her arms and spun around, her hair whipping about her head. She spoke and the wind kidnapped her words. When Jato shook his head and pointed to his ears, she shouted, "How far to the bottom?" Then she leaned over the wall, staring into the void below.

"Three kilometers!" He pulled her back to safety turning her around, his bird pressed against her back, his pulse beating hard as the bridge vibrated in the rushing gales. She looked up at him with a flushed face. The wind, the night, the danger—it brought her alive. Without stopping to think, he pulled her into an embrace.

Sliding her arms around his neck, she drew his head down into a kiss. He returned the favor with pleasure, making up for eight years of solitude. He couldn't believe this, that she wanted him. Who would have thought it?

Jato paused. Why did she want him? Lifting his head, he looked down at her. He was trapped on Ansatz for life and they both knew she would soon leave. What was this, take advantage of the love-starved convict, then go back to her life where she didn't have to worry about him?

Soz watched his face, her eyes alternately visible and hidden as the wind threw around her hair. She touched his cheek with fingers as gentle as the smile that kept emerging and hiding behind those glorious curls. Jato decided the "why" didn't matter. He wanted to tell her things, how good she felt, how lovely she looked, but he couldn't think of anything that wouldn't sound clumsy. So instead he kissed her again.

The bridge's vibrations were increasing, making it pitch like the deck of a sea-ship. It gave a particularly inspired heave and knocked Soz and Jato apart, separating them as if it were their chaperon. They stumbled back from each other, both flailing their arms for balance. Jato laughed and Soz spread her arms wide as if to address the Giant's Skeleton itself with her protest.

Then something on the plateau caught her attention. She went back to the wall and peered toward Nightingale. "What are those?"

Looking out, Jato saw what she had noticed, the familiar statues, massive and tall, halfway between the plateau's edge and the city. Sometimes those gigantic stone beasts were lit and other times they stood in the dark, like now, their mouths forever open in silent roars.

"Wind Lions," Jato said. Coming to stand behind her, he put his arms around her waist. "Wind machines. If they were ever turned on, the cliffs would magnify their effect."

"No wonder it's so windy up here."

He bent his head and spoke against her ear. "This is normal wind. The Lions aren't on."

When his breath wafted against her ear, she closed her eyes and sighed. With her back against his front, she raised her arms and slid them around his neck. The motion pulled up her breasts, making her nipples point at the stars. He kissed her ear, and she rubbed her head against his cheek like a cat. Then she murmured, a soft noise audible only with his head so close to hers, one of those sounds he had forgotten a woman made when she liked the way a man touched her. Maybe it was the eight years of solitude, but he couldn't remember any woman on Sandstorm feeling this fine. He wondered how it would be to make love up here in the wild gales, three kilometers above the Giant's chasm.

"Why not?" she asked.

He smiled. Why not indeed? "Why not what?"

She lowered her arms and turned in his embrace. "Why aren't the Lions ever on?"

He tilted his head toward the courtyard. "Do you remember the design in the tiles back there? The curving lines?" When she nodded, he said, "It's a plot of the vortices for a single-degree oscillator with an undamped torsional flutter." He stroked her blowing curls back from her face. "Wind makes the Promenade twist. If it ever blew hard enough, the vortices in its wake around the bridge would drive a self-induced resonance until the Promenade tore itself apart."

"What would ever possess them to set it up like that?"

Jato smiled. "Because they're crazy." As he bent his head to kiss her, the bridge gave a violent shudder and threw them to the side. They stumbled along the wall, lurching from side to side as they struggled to regain their footing. It didn't work; they finally toppled over and hit the walkway with a thud.

"Hey!" Soz laughed, struggling to wriggle out from under Jato's bulk. "It's mad at us."

"I've never seen it this windy." Jato managed to get up to his knees, but when Soz tried to do the same, the agitated bridge knocked her over again. She finally succeeded by moving with an unnatural speed, as if she had toggled a switch that activated an

enhanced mode of her body. They knelt there face to face, Jato holding her shoulders, she with her hands braced against his chest. The Promenade kept moving, more than he had ever felt it do before, rippling almost. It moaned in the assault of air as if the Giant were waking from his mountainous grave.

Soz wasn't smiling any more. "The Lions are blowing."

He couldn't believe it. "That's impossible. The Dreamers consider this art. They would never destroy it."

"The whole bridge is shaking. It doesn't feel stable."

They stared at each other. Then they scrambled to their feet and took off running for the northern cliffs. The cliffs were closer than the courtyard, but even so they had nearly a kilometer to go.

Suddenly the bridge lurched like a string shaken by a mammoth child. Flailing

Then it came: a great booming crack. Thunder roared as if a great mountainous rib was tearing away from the Giant's skeleton. The bridge convulsed and they sprawled forward, slammed down onto the path. Rolling onto his side, Jato grabbed Soz and they held on to each other while the universe convulsed around them.

Within seconds the frenzied gyrations of the bridge eased. They managed to sit up, hanging onto each other while they stared back along the way they had come.

Meters away, the broken end of the Promenade hung in the air.

For one endless instant they stared at the jagged remains of that break. The shuddering edge shook off a chunk of itself, and the boulder dropped into the void below, hurtling into the shadows.

Carefully, so very carefully, they got to their feet and backed away, taking each step as if they were in a mine field. Only when they were well away from the break did they turn.

And then they ran.

The Promenade groaned in the onslaught of wind. They sped through a universe of wailing gales and convulsing rock, racing toward the shadowed bulk of a mountain that seemed an eternity distant.

Finally, mercifully, they were almost there. A few more steps—

A meter away from safety, the bridge pitched under their feet and slammed them against the wall. Stars wheeled past Jato's vision as he flipped over the barrier. He grabbed at the air, at the rock, anything—

With a wrenching jolt, he yanked to a stop. He had caught a projection and was hanging from it, his body dangling against the outer side of the Promenade. He scrabbled for a toehold, but the bridge was shaking too much to let him get purchase. Far below, the chasm waited.

His hands began to slip.

"Jato!" Soz's voice was almost on top of him. She had fallen lengthwise on the wall, with one leg hanging over the edge.

"Below you!" he shouted. His hands slipped again.

As she grabbed for him, he lost his grip. She caught one of his wrists—and the force of his falling yanked her off the wall. They dropped, dropped, dropped—

And smashed into ground. Soz landed on top of her with an impact that nearly broke his ribs. She rolled off and kept rolling, scrabbling for a handhold. He clutched her upper arm, but it jerked through his grasp, then her elbow, her lower arm, her wrist—and he locked hands with her, clutching in desperation while they slid downhill. He struggled to stop their plunge, but his fingers just scraped over stone.

Then he caught a jutting piece of rock and held on hard, his body straining with Soz's weight. A scratching came from below—and she let go of his hand.

"Soz, no!" He grabbed at the air. "Soz!"

"It's all right." Her strained voice came from below him. "You slowed me down enough so I could stop on a ledge. We're on a shelf in the cliff, under the Promenade."

"How can you tell? It's dark." Even the starlight was muted below the bridge.

"Got enhanced optics in my eyes," she said. He heard more scrabbling, and then she was pulling herself up beside him.

So they went, climbing the cliff centimeter by excruciating centimeter. Soz reached the landing at the end of the Promenade and stood up, her body silhouetted against the stars. He climbed up next to her, half expecting the ground to crumble. But they were solidly on the mountain now, at the top of a staircase that wound its way through the mountains down to the plateau.

They descended in silence. Gradually the wind eased, until it was no more than a whisper of its earlier violence.

Finally Soz said, "Someone knew we were up there."

"The drones." Jato wondered if Crankenshaft had set alarms in the city computer web to alert him when anyone looked at records of the trial. Whoever had set the Wind Lions against them would be desperate now, knowing they had to complete what they started lest Soz escape and report back to ISC.

"I hadn't intended to get involved here," Soz said. "I was going to wait until I got back to headquarters to recommend they send an investigator."

Investigator? Jato stiffened. If ISC got into this, he could be retried in an Imperial court. "Soz, why? I'm serving the sentence they gave me."

She spoke quietly. "To find out why someone went to so much trouble to trump up that phony murder charge against you."

That threw him. Really threw him. Crankenshaft had been meticulous in setting up the evidence, specifically to fool people like Soz.

It was a moment before he found his voice. "How did you know it was false?"

She snorted. "I saw the holos of that kid you supposedly killed. He was hanging around the port docks, watching a ship unload cargo."

"That kid' was a computer creation. He never existed."

"I know."

"But how?"

She motioned toward the starport. "In several holos you can see the ship he's watching. It's a Tailor Scout, Class IV. Eight years ago those Tailors were using non-standard flood lamps to light their docking bays. Kaegul lamps. Advertised as 'the next best thing to sunlight.' They emitted ultraviolet light as well as visible."

"Sounds reasonable."

She shook her head. "Their UV component was too strong. It caused sunburns. So that model fell out of use fast. Only a few ships ever carried it."

Jato whistled. "Dreamers have less melanin in their skin than most people. It makes them more susceptible to UV."

Quietly she said, "Any Dreamer who spent as long under those Kaeguls as they claimed that boy did would have been broiled raw. Those records are beautiful, near perfect. Probably 99.9 percent of the people seeing them would have been fooled. But they're still fakes." Glancing at him, she added, "That's not all."

"What else?"

"Combat."

"Combat?"

"See enough of it and you get good at recognizing the symptoms of shock." She watched his face. "You. In every holo. You hardly said a word throughout that entire trial."

The whole nightmare was a blur in his mind. "Nothing I said would have made any difference."

"But why, Jato? Judging from how the Dreamers treat you—forgive me for saying it, but they act as if they don't like having you around."

"They think I'm revolting."

"So why make you stay?"

His voice tightened. "Because of Granite Crankenshaft."

"What is that?"

"Not what. Who. A Dreamer. He wanted me to be his model. For life. To sit for him with nothing in return but the 'honor' of living here. I told him no. I thought he was crazy."

She stared at him. "He framed you for murder because you wouldn't be his model?"

"I don't know why. He finds me as repulsive as everyone else here." Jato spread his hands. "He used blackmail because it's more effective than abduction. As long as I cooperate, he won't call in the Imperial authorities."

"All because he wants to paint your picture?"

"Not paint. Holosculpture. It's on his web. I've never seen what he's doing." He exhaled. "The stakes are high, Soz. His sculptures bring in millions. A few have gone for billions."

She drew him to a stop. "This Crankenshaft—does he have glittering hair?"

"I don't know. It's too short to tell."

"Black?"

"Yes."

"How about his eyes?"

"Grey, with red rings."

"Bloodshot?"

"No. The irises have red in them."

She blew out a gust of air. "This is making more sense."

"It is?"

"The Traders established this colony."

It wasn't her comment that surprised him, but how she said it, as an accepted fact rather than a long-debated theory the Dreamers vehemently denied. The Traders were a genetically engineered race distinguished by red eyes, and black hair with a distinctive shimmering quality. Their creators had only been trying to engineer for a higher pain tolerance, but the work produced an unplanned side-effect: Traders felt almost no emotional pain either—they had no compassion.

A race with no compunction about hurting people could do a lot of damage. Fast. When they began to spread the stain of their brutality across the stars, the colonized worlds had two choices: submit to them or join the Imperialate. As far as Jato knew, no one had ever willingly chosen the Traders.

There were those who claimed the Dreamers descended from a group of Trader geniuses morally opposed to their own brutal instincts. They manipulated their genes to rid themselves of those instincts and produced their translucent coloring as an unexpected side-effect. It led them to settle on Ansatz in the forgiving dark, where they traded the fruits of their genius for dreams, in penance for the sins of their violent siblings.

"It's possible Crankenshaft carries throwback genes," Jato said. "His wife, too. She's like ice."

Soz considered him. "You realize that except for your eyes and the relative dullness of your hair, you could pass for a Trader."

He stiffened. "Like hell. I can trace my family—"

"Jato." She laid her hand on his arm. "No one would ever mistake you for a Trader. It's the Dreamers' problem, not yours. They evolved themselves into a mild people, rejecting their heritage. Your large size, dark hair, and muscular build may stir memories they can't deal with. It's probably why your appearance bothers them."

A strange thought, that. It would never have occurred to him that perhaps he repulsed the Dreamers because he reminded them of themselves.

She peered down the stairs, though they were too far up to see much except the lonely circle of light from a lamp at the bottom. "Who do you think activated the Wind Lions?" She turned back to him. "Are we up against the city government or this Crankenshaft? Or both?"

He considered. "Most city officials don't believe I was set up. Those few involved with the set up would be more subtle, use a scenario easier to pass off as an accident. This is Crankenshaft's style. He would go for drama and make it look like I planned it, some rape-murder-suicide thing."

"Charming man," she muttered. "Stupid, though. ISC would never buy it. I have augmented strength and reflexes. You would more likely end up dead than me."

"Even with the Promenade breaking?"

That made her think. "It would complicate things," she admitted. She motioned at the plateau. "If he's the one who turned on the Lions, those drones down there must be his."

"Drones?" Jato swore and started back up the steps.

Soz grabbed his arm. "There's nowhere to go that way."

He stopped, seeing her point. They couldn't go up, they couldn't go down, and the chasm waited beneath them. Now was the time to find out what arsenal, if any, they had at their disposal. "What else can you do besides see in the dark?"

"I've a computer node in my spine with a library of combat reflexes." She bent her arm at the elbow. "My skeleton and muscles are augmented by high-pressure hydraulics and powered by a microfusion reactor that delivers a few kilowatts. It gives me reflexes and strength two to three times greater than normal, as much as my body can sustain without overheating."

"Can you stop the globes?"

"Three or four, I could handle. But there are nine there." She looked down the stairs again. "They're coming."

He saw it now too, the Mandelbrot sparkle of globes revving into active mode. Their lights flowed upward in a fractal curve of luminance.

"Jato," a voice said.

He nearly jumped. The voice came out of empty air: cool, impersonal, commanding.

"Come down here," it said. "Bring the woman."

As Jato's adrenalin surge calmed, he realized it was only a globe transmitting the voice.
"Go to hell, Crankenshaft."

"You have twenty seconds to resume descending," his tormentor said.

"Let her go and I'll do what you want," Jato said.

"Fifteen seconds."

The globes continued up the stairs, whirring like a swarm of huge bugs. Ten steps away, five, two. A syringe hissed, and Soz fainted with a speed that blurred, kicking up her leg. Her heel smashed into a globe, and it spun out from the cliff in a spiral of glittering lights.

A second globe rolled in to fill the gap, a third came from the side, a fourth whirred behind Soz, and a fifth hung over them, its syringe pointing down like the cannon on a miniature battlecruiser. Jato and Soz kept moving; faint, dodge, faint, Soz using her augmented speed. Two globes collided in midair with the grating racket of ceramoplex crashing together.

It was only a matter of seconds before a syringe shot hit Jato in the chest. The area went numb almost instantly and the sensation spread fast. As his arms dropped like stones to his sides, he lost his balance and tumbled down the stairs, stars and mountains careening past his vision.

He had one final glimpse of Soz lying on her back on the stairs, pinned down by globes, before his head hit stone.

Part IV: Aurora

A high ceiling came into focus. After a while a thought surfaced in Jato's mind. He was alive.

He sat up, favoring his bruises. He was alone in Crankenshaft's studio. No, not alone. Soz lay on the other end of the ledge, eyes closed, her torso rising and falling with each breath. Relief rushed over him, followed by a Neanderthal impulse to go over, stake out his territory, and protect her from Crankenshaft. It wasn't the world's most logical response given she was an Imperial Messenger, but he had it just the same.

He wondered why she was still unconscious. Even his body contained nanomedes designed to repair and maintain it. An ISC officer probably carried molecule-sized laboratories.

As he got off the ledge, a clink sounded. Turning, he saw a chain with one end attached to a ring in the wall. Its other end fastened to a manacle around his ankle.

He gritted his teeth, wishing he could wrap the chain around Crankenshaft's neck. At least the tether was long enough to let him reach Soz. That almost made him back off; he trusted nothing Crankenshaft did. But his instincts were still at work, conjuring up protect mate impulses, so he went over to her.

Crankenshaft had no illusions about Soz needing protection. Her wrists were manacled behind her back and also to a ring in the ledge. He had set her boots on the floor and chained her ankles to the ledge. For some inexplicable reason, he also put metal bands around her neck and waist. Jato leaned over to lay his palm on her forehead—

Her hand clamped around his wrist so fast he barely saw her move. He froze, staring as she sat up. It hadn't been obvious from the way she had been lying, but the chain joining her manacles was broken.

He found his voice. "How did you get free?"

She dropped his hand, her face relaxing as she recognized him. "Nano-chomps. I carry a few hundred species."

"You mean molecular disassemblers?"

"In my sweat."

He stepped back. He had no desire to have voracious bugs in her sweat take him apart atom by atom.

"They can't hurt you," Soz said. "Each chomper disassembles a specific material. The ones I carry are rigidly particular, even down to factory lot numbers."

He motioned at her manacled feet. "Wrong lot number?"

"Apparently so. Or else flaws in the molecular structure." Leaning over, she rubbed her wrist against the chain attached to his ankle.

"Hey." He jerked away his leg. "What are you doing?"

"They might work on yours."

"You don't think that's dangerous, carrying bugs in your body that take things apart?"

"They aren't bugs. They're just enzymes. And they're no more dangerous than being trapped here."

He knew it was probably true, but even so, he was having second thoughts about his amorous impulses. People sweated when they made love. A lot.

"Jato, don't look like that," she said. "The chompers are produced by nodules in my sweat glands that only activate when I go into combat mode. Besides, they can't take apart people. Our composition is too heterogeneous."

He sat on the ledge, near her but not too close, and motioned at his still-chained ankle. "Wrong lot, I guess."

"I guess so." She tugged the manacle on her wrist, managing to slide it up about a centimeter. The skin on her wrist was more elastic than normal tissue, not a lot, but enough so she could drag it out from under the manacle. He saw what she was after, a small round socket in her wrist.

"You have a hole," he said.

"Six of them, actually. In my wrists, ankles, lower spine, and neck."

That explained the neck and waist bands. "What do they do?"

"Pick up signals." She held up her arm so the socket faced the console across the room. "If I insert a plug from that node into this socket, it links the computer web inside my body to the console."

That didn't sound like much help. "The plug is there and you're here."

"That's why consoles transmit infrared signals." Her face had a inwardly directed quality, as if she were running a canned routine to answer him while she focused her attention elsewhere. "The sockets act as IR receivers and transmitters. Bio-optic threads in my body carry signals to the computer node in my spine. It processes the data and either responds or contacts my brain. Bio-electrodes in my neurons translate its binary into thought: 1 makes the neuron fire and 0 does nothing. It works in reverse too, so I can 'talk' to my spinal node."

He suspected Nightingale was probably flooded with IR signals. "How can you stand so much noise hitting you all the time?"

"It doesn't. Only if I toggle Receive." Her full attention came back to him. "The signals do get noisy and it isn't as secure as a physical link. But it's enough to let me interact with a node as close as the one over there."

"And?"

She made a frustrated noise. "This room ought to be bathed in public signals. But I'm getting nothing at all."

He doubted Crankenshaft would cut himself off from the city. "Maybe he did something to you."

"My diagnostics register no software viruses or tampering." She paused. "But you know, my internal web is engineered in part from my own DNA. Maybe he infected it with a biological virus." Without another word, she lifted her wrist and spit into its socket.

Dryly Jato said, "Insulting it won't help."

She smiled. "The nanomeds in my saliva may be able to make antibodies if there's a virus loose in my biomech web."

"Are you getting anything?"

"Nothing." Several moments later she said, "Yes. A notice about a ballet." Her concentration had turned inward again. "I still can't link to the city system . . . but I think I can get into the node in that console over there."

Jato stared at her. "Not a chance. That's Crankenshaft's private node. Everyone knows his security is unbreakable."

A cold smile touched her lips. "Security is my game."

A moment later she said, "I can call up his holosculpture of you if you want."

Jato swallowed. She might as well have hit him with that ancient proverbial ton of bricks. "Yes. I want."

She indicated the center of the studio. "That's it."

He turned—and almost gasped.

The air above the pool was glowing with a rainbow-hued mist. It drifted across the glistening white cones that stood in the water, like shadows made on outcroppings of rock by clouds obscuring a sun. This, from a man who had lived his entire life in the night. Holo of Jato appeared on every cone. On the tallest, the one with the circular cross-section, he sat with knees to his chest, shivering, his clothes and hair dripping. He was younger, eight years younger, only a husky teenager. His face cycled through emotions: rage, confusion, resentment.

An older Jato stood on the next cone, the one with its top cut off at a slant, giving it an elliptical cross-section. He remembered when he had modelled for it, how he stood for hours on a narrow shelf protruding from the surface. Crankenshaft had since removed the shelf and erased it in the image, so the Jato holo simply floated in the air, with red and blue clouds scudding across his face. He was shouting, fists clenched at his sides. No

sound: just his mouth moving. With the play of light, it was hard to make out words, but he knew what they were. He had been cursing Crankenshaft in his native tongue.

The Jato by the parabolic cone was sitting, submerged to his hips in the pool. He trailed his hands back and forth in the water, a habit he had developed to cope with the boredom. He was kneeling by the hyperbolic cone, up to his waist in water. Crankenshaft had doctored the holo to make him look old. Ancient. His face was a map of age untouched by the biosculpting the rich used to sustain youth during their prolonged lives. Gusts blew brittle white hair around his head. Stooped, gnarled, decrepit: it was a portrait of his mortality.

That tableau remained frozen for a few seconds. Then all the Jatos stood up and began stepping from cone to cone, passing through each other while multi-colored clouds flowed across their bodies. Some raged, others shivered, others moved like machines.

Each figure split, becoming two Jatos, all continuing their strange march. They split again, the original of each quartet stepping from cone to cone while the others kept pace in the air. New images appeared like shadows, all different by just a small amount, creating a feathered effect. A younger one was crying. He remembered that day; he had told Crankenshaft about his family, how he loved them, how they must think he had died. Another Jato image was laughing. Laughing. Yet there were times he had laughed—even had civil conversations with Crankenshaft.

Holos of water augmented the pool, overlaid on the real water like multiple exposures: waves in impossibly sharp points, or serrated like a saw, glowing phosphorescence in red, purple, green, blue-green, gold, and silver. Gusts in the studio whipped the true water into peaks that added random accents to the holos.

The Jatos split again, along with their shadows. They all stopped and raised their hands, the motion feathered among the images, as if it portrayed multiple quantum universes, each projecting a future that diverged from the original. The image of a rainbow-hued waterfall sprayed over the figures, making them shimmer. But no blurring could hide the fury on those faces.

"Saints almighty," Soz said. "It's spectacular."

Jato tried not to grit his teeth. "That's why he's so famous."

"I can see why he wanted you for his model."

"You can?"

She motioned at the holos. "You couldn't get that purity of emotion—that fury—from a Dreamer. From most anyone. But from you, it's perfect. Pure passion unadulterated by civilization."

"Am I supposed to be flattered by that?"

Soz winced. "I didn't mean—" She stopped, staring at the sculpture. "Jato, look at your eyes."

"That would be a feat." But he knew what she meant. He studied the images—and when he saw it, he nearly choked. Crimson. Ruby hard and ruby cold. The eyes on each image had turned red. The hair was changing too, going from dark brown to crystalline black. He couldn't believe it. Crankenshaft was making him look like a Trader.

He stood up, his fists clenching at his sides. "I'll kill him."

"It's guilt," Soz said. "And catharsis."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It's all there," she said. "The guilt the Dreamers feel, knowing the brutality their disowned kin have inflicted on a thousand peoples. And catharsis. Realizing the monster isn't in them anymore. They've freed themselves, become Dreamers instead of Traders."

"Then it's a lie." Jato was so angry he could barely get the words out. "For this 'catharsis,' Crankenshaft made himself into the very thing this is supposed to free him from. He's made me look like what he hates in himself, what he can never get rid—" Jato stopped cold. Then he sat down again. "Oh, hell."

Soz was watching his face. "What?"

"His greatest work. Face his demons and exorcise them. I'm the substrate." It was suddenly all too obvious. "Get rid of me and he loses his inner devils." Jato swallowed. "He's going to kill me as part of the sculpture. It's what he's always intended."

She stared at him. "That's sick."

Jato wished he had never pulled her into this. "If we had died on the Promenade, he would have worked with that footage. Now you're onto him, so he has nothing to lose by bringing us here where he can tailor the work to his needs."

"Actually," a voice said. "You're the one who is going to kill her."

He looked up with a jerk. Crankenshaft was standing across the studio, by the console in the corner where the two holo-walls met. In one hand he held Jato's bird sculpture; in the other, he had a laser carbine.

"A tragedy," Crankenshaft continued, in the voice he used when he wanted to bait Jato, to drive his rage. "She came to the greatest artist alive hoping to inspire a dream. A beautiful woman, after all, has certain advantages. Unfortunately she arrived while you were here."

He sighed. "I should never have left you two alone. But who would have thought an Imperial Messenger would be in danger? Besides, Jato, we thought we had cured you." He shook his head. "She was overconfident. An unguarded moment and you were able to bind her." Lifting the bird, he said, "A blunt instrument you stole from me brought about her death. I was forced to kill you in self-defense."

Jato stood up, an explosion working up inside of him. But before it let loose, Soz spoke in a mild voice. "You're Granite Crankenshaft."

Unease showed on their captor's face. "You should have never pried into his records, Messenger."

"Why would you claim Jato stole that bird from you?" she asked. "He made it."

The tic under Crankenshaft's eye gave a violent twitch. He shifted the sculpture, his hand gripped around it as if he held a weapon. "No one would ever believe he created a work as stunning as this, with that fugue. Only his exposure to me enabled him to do it. Me. He could never have done it by himself. So the credit belongs to me."

Jato knew he should be infuriated that Crankenshaft would claim credit for his work. But the implication in his captor's words so staggered him that the arrogance of the statement rolled off his back. He could hardly believe it. The great Granite Crankenshaft was threatened by his work.

Crankenshaft unhooked a cord from his belt and threw it at them. It landed at Jato's feet, a leather thong with ceramoplex balls on each end that could have been anything from decorations to superconducting webs.

"Tie her hands behind her back," Crankenshaft said.

Jato crossed his arms. "No."

Crankenshaft touched a panel on the console. A giant globe crept through a slit in the thermoplastic wall and floated to the center of the studio.

"Non-linear dynamics and metapsychology," he commented. "Do you know that with detailed enough initial conditions, you can model procreation? The correlation between the calculated results and an actual act that proceeded from those conditions is quite high."

Jato scowled. "What are you talking about?"

"Sex," he said. "Establish the initial scene well enough and you can model the rest with amazing accuracy."

"Go to hell," Jato said.

"Tie her hands."

"No."

"Commence protocol," he said.

Three syringe guns slid out of the globe. Jato didn't duck fast enough, but it didn't matter: none of the shots were aimed at him. Soz moved in a blur, but she couldn't go anywhere with her ankles chained to the ledge. One shot missed her, but judged from her reaction, the other two hit home. She jerked as if she had been struck and her entire body tensed.

"What are you doing?" Jato shouted at Crankenshaft.

"Jato, it's all right," Soz said. "I'm fine."

"It's a clockwork venom," Crankenshaft told her. "Even your meds can't adapt enough to deal with it."

She said nothing, just focused her attention on him with an unsettling intensity.

"What's a clockwork venom?" Jato asked.

Soz glanced at him. "The name comes from clock reactions." Although she sounded cool, sweat was beading at her temple. "Combine certain chemicals under proper conditions and they cycle through a series of reactions. In human blood, clockwork venoms undergo a cycle, each step producing a different poison."

"Can your nanomedes fight it?" Jato asked.

Crankenshaft answered. "Even sophisticated meds have trouble with complicated cycles. This one has hundreds of steps, all with varying duration lengths and side reactions that change from cycle to cycle. It's a brilliant work of chemistry." He gave Jato an appraising look. "You've felt one poison in the cycle. Last time you were here. Perhaps you recall?"

Jato remembered all right. It had burned like hell.

"The others have different effects," Crankenshaft observed, as if Soz were a lab experiment. "Nausea, muscle stiffness, dizziness, pain. She'll start vomiting soon. Eventually she will die."

Soz remained calm, but sweat was running down her temples. When she wiped at it, the motion looked mechanical, as if she had let the hydraulics in her body take over.

"As soon as her hands are bound," Crankenshaft said, "I'll give her the antidote."

"Jato." She spoke quietly. "Do what he says. Please."

There was no mistaking the strain in her voice. Jato grabbed the thong off the floor and wrapped it around her wrists. The broken lock mechanism on her manacles felt warm, probably from the energy released when her chompers ate it. He tied the thong loosely around her wrists, making no attempt to knot it. But the ceramoplex balls activated and yanked the cords tight, binding her wrists and then locking into each other.

"Leather," Crankenshaft said.

Jato straightened up. "What?"

"In molecular terms, it's complex," he said. "More heterogeneous than, say, manacles. Not as strong, but a logical backup when dealing with disassemblers."

Jato gritted his teeth. How did Soz stay so cool? She just watched Crankenshaft, intent and quiet. Crankenshaft took a ring with two mag-keys off his belt and threw it to them. As the keys hit the floor near Jato's foot, a syringe on the globe hissed. Soz moved like an automaton, trying to duck, but the shot hit her anyway.

"That had better be the antidotes," Jato said.

"The red key unlocks your ankles," Crankenshaft said. "Gold unlocks hers."

After Jato freed their ankles, Soz moved stiffly, swinging her legs off the ledge.

"Go to the pool," Crankenshaft said. "Both of you."

"No," Jato said.

"Don't make it harder on her than necessary," Crankenshaft said. "I can calculate a lot of what I need, but I'll achieve better results with genuine images of the two of you to work from."

Jato stayed put. "I won't rape her and I won't kill her. You can doctor holos to make me look like a Trader, but nothing can make me act like one."

Crankenshaft's voice hardened. "Go to the pool. Otherwise, I'll pump her so full of clockwork venom she'll beg you to kill her."

With no warning, Soz moved. Fast. Dropping to one knee by her boots, she whipped out her hands, shreds of leather flying away from her wrists. She yanked the "decorative" tubes off her boots and brought them up, one in each hand, liquid shooting out from both. One stream splattered over the drone, creating clouds of gas. The other hit Crankenshaft's carbine and splashed into his face. He shouted, dropping the laser as he covered his face with his hands. When the gun hit the ground, it shattered like porcelain.

The Mandelbrot globe hissed and a shot from its air-syringe hit Jato in the neck. In a bizarre blur of motion, Soz threw her boots. They hurtled through the air and smashed into the globe, shattering its outer shell where the liquid from her cylinder had doused it. The whole assembly crashed to the floor, its innards breaking apart on the stone. Blinking and humming, the debris moved in twitches as it began to reassemble itself.

"Smash the components!" Soz yelled, sprinting across the studio. She moved like a puppet, her body under control of hydraulics rather than muscles and bones.

As Jato strode over to crush the remains of the drone, he saw Crankenshaft lower his hands, revealing a face covered with burns. In the same instant that he grabbed for a gun on his belt, Soz reached him. She brought her hands up with eerie speed and hit him under the chin, snapping back his head. He flew over backward, crashing to the ground. His head hit the floor and he lay still, breathing but unconscious.

"Soz, no!" Jato raced forward when she jerked up her leg. He collided with her as her foot came down, and they staggered to the side, enough to make her miss Crankenshaft. Her foot hit the floor with a teeth-jarring impact that would have crushed the Dreamer's chest.

Jato gulped in a breath. "No killing."

She turned to him like a machine, no emotion on her face. It was hard to believe this was the same woman he had kissed on the Promenade.

Then her expression became human again, as if she had reset herself. She exhaled. "He'll live." Grimly she added, "We might not. Are you all right?"

A familiar burning was spreading in his neck and torso. "I took a shot of venom. Did he give you an antidote?"

"No. More venom." She went to retrieve her boots and their tubes. "My meds are trying to synthesize an antidote, but it's hard to do when their target keeps changing."

"We better hurry." He grabbed his bird off the console. "His node must have alerted the city and his other drones."

She pulled on her boots. "I put locks on his system. It will take a few minutes for it to break them." Her voice sounded strained. Labored.

As Jato turned toward the door across the room, his gaze raked the pool—and he froze.

The holosculpture was still evolving. It had spawned more and yet more Jatos, until they blended into a design of feathered motion. A superimage had formed, a fractal, its pattern repeating on a finer and finer scale. Superimposed on the fractal, a face was coming clear. A giant Trader face.

His face.

"No." He spun back to the console.

"Come on!" Soz called.

He stabbed at the console. "We have to destroy that sculpture."

"We have to go! We don't have much time."

"He stole my life." Jato gave up on the computer and swung around to her. "He created a mirror of himself, but he put it on me. It's like—like—" He slammed his palm against the console. "He's a thief. Of my soul." He pointed at the sculpture. "That's me. No matter where I go or what I do, as long as that exists he owns me."

Sweat was dripping down her face. "I can't guarantee I'll find all his backups."

"If anyone can, it's you." He clenched his fists. "He owes me. And for him, losing his 'masterpiece' will be a punishment worse than dying."

Soz strode to the console and went to work, making hieroglyphics ripple across its panels in garish displays. She didn't waste time pulling out her wrist socket; instead, she hauled off her boot and set her foot on the console, showing no strain with the contorted position as she plugged a prong from the console into her ankle socket.

Seconds passed.

Longer.

Waiting.

"Got it!" Soz jerked out the prong. "Downloaded one copy into my internal memory for you. Erased everything else." She yanked on her boot. "Now let's go."

They ran across the studio to the cliff door. As they stepped outside, into the blasting wind, she stared down the stairs. "No rail."

Jato struggled to keep his balance, fighting the gales and his venom-induced dizziness. "I'll go first. If I fall, I won't hit you. You're light enough so if you fall you probably won't knock me off."

"All right." Her voice sounded thick.

He had expected her to insist on going first. His gut reaction ignored the obvious; she was part computer and machines worked on logic rather than heroics.

Clutching his statue, he started down the stairs. An abyss of air and rushing wind surrounded them, turbulent, violent. Step. Step again. He took it slow, halting when waves of dizziness hit.

Step.

Step again.

Scrapes came from above and he jerked his head up to see Soz lose her footing. Lunging for her, he lost his own balance and stumbled on the step, teetering over the void. Lurching back, he reeled to the step's inner edge, where he fell to one knee and found himself staring down the shaft of air in the center of the spiral.

"Jato?" Soz rasped.

He took a breath, looking up to see her kneeling on the step above him.

"You all right?" he asked. She nodded and they got up, then continued their descent.

The wind was probably cold, but with the fever burning in his body he couldn't tell. He moved in a haze of nausea and dizziness.

Step.

Step again.

Step—

No step. He looked down. They had reached the bottom.

Soz made a strangled sound and sagged against his back, grabbing him around the waist with both arms to keep from falling. Turning, he put his arm around her for support.

They walked around Nightingale, far enough outside the city to let darkness cloak them. His legs strained to run but he held back, not only because his poisoned body couldn't keep such a pace but also because it would draw attention. A couple strolling arm-in-arm along a romantic path was one thing; two people running was another.

He motioned at the tubes on her boots. "What's in those things?"

"Liquid nitrogen." She sounded hoarse. "With disassemblers to boost its effect. It freezes what it hits and the chompers eat it. They're less specialized than the ones in my body, which makes them more dangerous, but they dissolve after exposure to air."

"How did you free your hands? Do the chompers in your sweat eat leather after all?"

"No." She grimaced. "Mine are far too specific. Anything general enough to take apart a material as heterogenous as animal hide would probably take apart our hides too." She showed him the broken chain on her manacle. "Feel."

He ran his finger along the jagged edge. "It's sharp."

"So was the part on the ledge. I rubbed the thong against it until it cut the leather."

"No tech that time," he said. "Just brains."

She smiled wanly. Sweat soaked her collar and she walked stiffly, her legs controlled by the hydraulics inside her body.

The starport was so small it had no terminals, just a gate at the airfield entrance. As they neared it, two Mandelbrot globes rolled out to intercept them. Jato tried to dodge, but the one headed for him easily compensated for his evasive actions. It slammed him in the chest and he stumbled backward, then recovered and sprinted to the side. As the globe followed, he doubled back to run around it. The ploy worked with Crankenshaft's drones on days he programmed them for slower responses, to make the chase "entertaining." Jato doubted this one belonged to Crankenshaft, though; after what had happened, his would go for the kill.

This globe caught him—and rammed his head. As he fell, patches of light punctuated his vision and loud noises buzzed in his ears. With his statue cradled against his chest, he hit the ground and groaned. As he rolled away from the whirring demon, he caught a glimpse of the aircontrol tower. Lights were coming on inside it.

They had run out of time.

Then Soz said, "Eat it, fractal."

A stream of liquid arched into view, bathing the drone in a shower of glistening drops. The globe reoriented on Soz like a giant ceramoplex balloon. As it went after her, she tried to feint, but she lost her balance and fell to her knees. When the globe swooped in on her head, she jerked to the side. It hit her shoulder—and shattered, raining Mandelbrot innards all over her body. In seconds, she was kneeling in the midst of junk large and small, from both globes, lights blinking and components humming.

Soz and Jato stared at each other. Then they scrambled to their feet and sprinted for the airfield. Alarms were blaring, coming from the distant airtower and speakers along the field's perimeter. As they ran through the gate, which was no more than a few bars that swung to one side, Jato saw a Jag starfighter out on the tarmac. It gleamed like alabaster, as much a work of art as any sculpture.

When they reached the Jag, its hatch dilated like a high-speed holocam. As soon as they lunged through the opening, it snapped closed. A membrane irised in the nose of the ship, revealing a cockpit. As Soz squeezed into the pilot's seat, it folded an exoskeleton of controls around her like a silver-mesh glove. Jato stood behind her chair, hanging on to its back while his nausea surged.

"Neck and lower spinal nodes blocked," an androgynous voice said.

"Ankles," Soz said, intent on her controls.

While her hands flew over her forward controls, a robot claw pulled off her boots and a mesh enfolded her feet, plugging into her ankle sockets. After that Jato heard nothing; the ship was communicating directly with her internal systems.

Suddenly Soz spun around her chair and pulled down Jato's head. He fell forward, grabbing the arms of her seat to catch himself. She kissed him hard, pushing her tongue into his mouth.

He jerked away. "Are you craz—"

"I'm giving you the antidote. In my saliva. My web figured it out and my meds made it." She pulled him back into the kiss.

So he kissed her, while guns boomed from the port defenses and the ship shook. Although the Nightingale port claimed only a small arsenal, it could still do damage. He just hoped the Jag could protect itself while its pilot and her passenger took their medicine.

Then Soz pulled away from him and smiled. The cockpit elongated and a second chair rose from the deck. "Co-pilot's seat," she said. "You take."

He slid into the seat, and a slender probe from it extended to his ear—in time for him to hear a voice shout, "Skyhammer-36, acknowledge!"

He nearly jumped out of the chair. Then he realized he was hearing Soz's communications with the aircontrol tower.

"You are not cleared for take-off!" the voice said. "I repeat, you are not cleared for take-off."

"Tough," Soz said. Then she fired the rockets.

Jato knew a stealth craft like the Jag could come and go with barely a whisper—if that was what its pilot wanted. They took off in a thundering roar of rockets. For her parting salute to Nightingale, Soz blasted the holy hell out of that tarmac.

As acceleration pushed them into the seats, a holomap came on, showing Nightingale receding into the spectacular bones of the Giant's Skeleton Mountains. The peaks withdrew until they were no more than wrinkles in the vast panorama of the world.

Gradually Jato's mind absorbed the situation. He was free. Free.

Or at least, he thought he was free. "What happens now?" he asked.

Soz glanced at him. "I'll take you to headquarters. You can clear your name." She hesitated, a blush on her cheeks. "I can help out, if—if you would like."

Her uncertainty floored him. He had seen her face death by Promenade collapse, clockwork venom, and snuff-art, all with remarkable composure. Yet asking if he wanted her to stick around made her nervous.

He smiled. "Yes. I would like that."

Her face gentled. She glanced at the statue he still held. "I felt what it took for you to offer your sculpture to me. Thank you."

"It's not much."

"It's spectacular, Jato. Both the bird and the fugue."

He swallowed, at a loss how to tell her how much her words meant. So instead he motioned at her holo display. "Soz, look."

Together they watched the sun rise over the rim of Ansatz.