

BRIGHT CLOUD OF MUSIC

by **Liz Martin**

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Zack heard the Central Command Core before he saw it. A klaxon shrieked atonally, setting his teeth on edge. A pair of armed marines flanking the outer hatch saluted him, stirring tendrils of mist. Half-obsured figures moved across the inner hatch, inside the Core. Zack stepped across a gangplank over a single step of emptiness, a gimbaling buffer between inner Core and outer sphere. Kozinski waited for him there, the astrophysicist's fleshy, salt and ginger-goateed face as lugubrious as Zack had ever seen.

"Governor." Kozinski gripped his arm. "I am sorry to...wake you." The pause seemed deliberate. He had chimed through in the middle of Marjorie's shrill harangue, continued as weeping in the background for the benefit of the open comm. "I thought it was that you should know." There were those who might think otherwise.

Zack had to shout to be heard. "Can we shut that thing off?"

"We have tried. Itohaki doesn't know how. It's too old. He's working on it. Manually." Kozinski expelled the last word with enough distaste to do for a draught of polluted Earth water. Unnecessarily, he guided Zack into the Core. A haze hung in the cavernous chamber, softening blinking lights and blurring the walls of giant holoscreens. Cold in there, it smelled of damp closets and old shoes. Zack lifted an eyebrow. Kozinski shrugged. "Environmental. It is on the fritz again." Blue, slavic eyes showed more disgust at yuan-pinching bureaucracy than they did resignation.

Between the fug and the siren, Zack's head began to ache.

An orb made of diamondoid materials inset with a floor of the same clear nano-engineering, the Core glowed with a watery blue light cast from all sides. On the walls, H.I. systems projected a real time wrap-around view of Europa's Vostok Ocean, as if the Core was in actuality the twenty kilometre diameter hull of Europa Penal Institution. The air rippled queasily with the light.

Floodlit in a nemoesque panorama, the water shaded from clear aqua in the immediate surrounds to glassy green and through every frequency of blue to indigo, and thence to blackness. Bubbles cupped the chamber on all sides in curving streams, evidence that oxygen exchange systems manufactured every breath that filled their lungs. Plankton swarmed in the floodlights. Seen from below or above but always from the belly out, whiskered cleaner drones ate pathways around E.P.I., recycling algal build-up into protein stores. An anchor of flexible fibres bundled into a hawser as thick around as a terran redwood clamped the apex of the hull. The anchor line stretched up into the vanishing distance, towards the ice cap.

Plankton, bubbles, algae; underneath a frozen sky, Europa lived. It was a suffocating, unsatisfactory, unearthly existence, though, a diatomaceous soup engendered by the heat from undersea tectonic rifts pulled this way and that by Jupiter's influence. It was an uncertain existence, on a moon where the charted sea floor consisted of the calcified remains of mass extinctions, in places kilometres deep.

The siren cut off, leaving Zack's ears ringing, as after one of Marjorie's passions of homesickness.

"Jesu," Kozinski muttered thankfully, a little too loudly.

Other than the fog, normal chaos asserted itself. In the watery light, techs scrambled from console to

console or huddled in tableaux around various displays. To Zack, the Core always maintained the tension of imminent explosion—a singularity in the timeless instant before a Bang.

"Situation."

Kozinski said with a touch of defensive coolness, "We have lost the *Sirius*."

Zack refused to heed the *Keep Out! Scientists Only* sign. Turf was guarded jealously at E.P.I. "Thank you, Doctor. Are we doing anything about it or shall I transmit that news now?" Kozinski's face reddened and his mouth opened, only to snap shut.

"That will not be necessary," a low, musical voice said behind Zack. "I think we can wait to gather more information." A moment later, as if in afterthought of Zack's rank, the speaker added, "Governor."

"Scribe Wu Lin," Zack said, turning. Scribe, a nebulous title, covered a multitude of administrative functions. Wu Lin affected it rather than Chief Financial Officer but in his case it was apt. He wrote many reports for the consumption of the mandarin autocracy. Every off-Earth institution had a cultural officer; only Europa Penal Institution had one who combined C.F.O. and C.O. But, then, E.P.I. played multiple roles as well, as prison, as a base for the mining of Jupiter and as tracking station for an icon of times past, the *Sirius*.

The man who held the real power at E.P.I. inclined his head graciously, his braided black queue sliding over the shoulder of an embroidered robe. The button on his cap gleamed red, as did the silk backing the golden thread of his robe. A small man, his Han cheeks had the sheen of greasy caramel, beaded with the moisture of the room. "Your Serenity honours us," he lied. Hands clasped, his fingernails folded together like the petals of a carnivorous blossom of a particularly necrophagic yellow. Zack did not trust Wu Lin. Wu Lin did not approve of Zack. They both pretended otherwise as Zack hosted ceremonies and signed citations and Wu Lin held the financial reins of the prison.

The scientific, diplomatic and fiscal apexes of E.P.I. regarded each other. Kozinski broke first. "Ah...Scribe Wu. Good it is.... It is good that you have come." A native of the Wolesa Compound of the provincial capital, Katoomba, Kozinski only lost track of his syntax when he was unhappy.

"The alarm woke me." Wu Lin accorded Kozinski a lesser bow. "It is, as I suspect, the far-flying *Sirius*?"

Zack nodded. "It is. Dr. Kozinski was about to brief me." He assayed a minor jab. "You're welcome to listen in." Wu Lin spread his hands, inviting either of the two barbarians before him to speak.

Kozinski trimmed stance slightly to be shoulder to shoulder with Zack. "So. During the Melt, the...um...Australian Provinces...yes, the Provinces developed Anteneodiluvian technology of dubious expertise. Pressed by the rising oceans, they did not cross all their technological 't's' nor dot every failsafe 'i' in the race to provide escape for any portion of an increasingly panicked and inundated population." He grimaced, disapproving. In the first days of Zack's tenure, Kozinski had shown the new governor a lengthy treatise on the possibilities of a design he called the Alchemy Drive, which apparently used more common ions than heavy helium or deuterium for reaction mass. Every footnote precise to be sure, Kozinski's plodding thoroughness hadn't helped Zack follow the theoretical science. Gathering that wasn't the point, he had rebuffed firmly any contact by Republican sympathisers.

Kozinski tugged at the white streak in his beard and continued his unnecessary history, grounding his reasoning and asserting his lack of fault in whatever matter he so ponderously approached. "By the time the flood had swallowed low-lying nations of what was then known misleadingly as the European Community and made an Atlantis of the Union of American States, they had turned out one starship." He held up a pudgy finger. "One. The *Sirius*. And so matters stood when the Beneficent Emperor of the

New Kingdom...adopted...his Australian children to protect them from Ural and Nepalese domination."

"May he live forever," Wu Lin murmured his only response to the hesitations over Imperial liturgy. Kozinski squinted a sideways look. Wu Lin nodded encouragingly. Zack saw no trace of humour in the chocolate eyes, but suspected it.

Kozinski went back to trying to extend his facial hair. "The Emperor—"

"May he live forever," Zack put in.

"—mayheliveforever saw the foolishness of trusting his children to the prototype—" Even rushing it, Kozinski got no further.

"Of course, cognisant of the glory of expansion and exploration, the Avatar of Glory found an admirable compromise in a precedent from the ancient history of the magnificent Southern Provinces," Wu Lin said.

"Transportation," Zack agreed. "There were sufficient rebels and *gwailo* to fill the cryoffins of the ship."

Wu Lin folded his hands, emanating benign satisfaction.

Too late, with the "T" word hanging in the air, Zack heard the snap of carnivorous petals shutting. He refrained from swearing. He wasn't a Republican. Wu Lin knew it, but it didn't stop him trying to bait Zack into the no man's land that lay between them.

In Zack, E.P.I. had a provincial-born governor for the first time in its two hundred year history. In theory, he had made the jump from military to diplomatic corps as reward for a "singular act of heroism" that had involved blasting an asteroid and the escapees from this very prison who had taken refuge on it into particulate matter. To this day, he thought they had thrown the single glueball from their stolen repair craft at his ship knowing what his response had to be, choosing martyrdom. In reality, he found himself here because no governor could make any impression on the running of the off-Earth prison system and the Glorious Son of Heaven had begun a campaign of carrots to distract from a stick wielded recently against of the more rebellious provinces of the Empire. What had briefly declared itself Free Siam steamed under a dome erected to protect the rest of the world from air currents carrying unwanted microbes, the Worshipful Steward of Earth's less gentle example of imperial power.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Kozinski said into the silence. "To speak of stars and the firmament, perhaps you would wish to look at the scene of the vanishment?" Zack and Wu Lin both agreed that they would.

Setting mist swirling, Kozinski led them towards a huddle of techs around a sallow-skinned young man in Specialist blue. Kozinski pointed at him to stay. The others melted away. Clowning, Kozinski's target aimed a finger at his own heart, poking a black and white yin-yang teardrop on his coveralls. The man was a genius, or he wouldn't be one of Kozinski's Specialists.

"Itohaki," Kozinski said shortly, drawing the young man forward.

"What cheer, boss?" Secure in his brilliance, Itohaki pushed a shock of black hair out of his face and grinned around the group.

"Special Itohaki was the ace on duty," Kozinski said. Employing an uncharacteristic brevity, he said, "He is the best." It was not specified at what he was the best. Itohaki bowed.

"Forgery and caricature," Zack said, dredging up a memory of official papers.

"Convicted as charged." Itohaki gave a monkey's grimace as Kozinski's hand tightened visibly on his arm.

"Serene Governor Roberts, sir."

"And yet the *Sirius* is...gone?" Wu Lin said from under Zack's elbow.

Kozinski took it as an accusation. "I do not shoot the hunter when the hart goes over a cliff," he rumbled. His grin crooked, Itohaki watched them all through a screen of hair.

Zack felt silently convicted of collusion with Wu Lin and Kozinski, free men all. "Show us, Doctor," he said.

Instead, Itohaki leaned forward to caress the top of a dark screen set into a console. Immediately, a ball of light came into being above the console. A holographic command sphere, the non-material projection was designed to control the simagery projection of the Core by interaction with a warm human body and voice. The ball swam with the same ocean scene in miniature that lapped around them on the walls. The Nipponese tech stroked the holosphere. "0252 Empire Time, today," he said. "Full view, no atmosphere." His long fingers curved from zenith to nadir, cupping light as if he could feel it, smoothing the virtual surface. Warming to the heat of his gesture, the holosphere flushed dark, as did the dome above them in imitation, blackness stroking smoothly down the walls to meet underfoot. Stars sprang out all around, sharp as pinpricks in the sky.

Itohaki said, "Crux."

Nearly overhead, as it would appear from the surface of Europa's south geometric pole, the four-pointed diamond of the Crux blazed as the most prominent star group. Kozinski put his fists on his hips, perhaps to keep from crossing himself. Wu Lin folded his hands.

"Magnify, Zenith, 30 degrees of arc," Itohaki said. "Center, Epsilon Crux, and highlight." The middle section of the dome seemed to leap closer. Crux spread out to show points of light that had been hidden. "Here," Itohaki said. Well beyond its magnitude, a dim star flared within the heart of the constellation. He added reverently, "Epsilon."

Epsilon Crux. In spite of himself, Zack's neck tightened.

Over two centuries ago, the Celestial Empire's punishment ship had left Earth for Epsilon, taking over the provincial flight plan from start to finish. Not another yuan had been spent on extragalactic technologies, but the race to turn the solar system into a dump for the refuse of Earth had begun with the billows of *Sirius*'s solid rocket boosters. Today, three thousand imprisoned souls and one thousand Imperial volunteers slept in cold stasis on their way to the star. Of the twelve planets that encircled Epsilon, two might do for a virgin Earth. Two uninhabited planets with oxygen/nitrogen atmospheres and oceans of water; one hot, steaming and jungle-clad, the other cold, cold as Europa. Two new homes, unpolluted by man.

"How many years until Encounter?" Wu Lin asked, eyes lidded. The representative of the Stainless Minister of the Way had been recently concerned with the ongoing cost of the Epsilon Mission.

"One hundred and fifty-eight," Kozinski said. "Sixteen parsecs to go."

"One hundred and fifty-eight point two," Itohaki echoed, "until deceleration."

"If they're able to scoop enough." Zack pointed out the true concern, this generation's concern

"By the grace of Gossamer," Kozinski muttered, tainting Zack's detached, apolitical and suitably ex-sublight-captainish comment. Maybe only he heard it.

The Celestial Empire of two centuries gone had possessed its share of Wu Lins. The *Sirius* had been launched with enough reaction mass to get it up to .3c. Stopping would require an equal amount of deuterium. Some had been launched ahead of it; most had been posited to be found on the way, without much note that the definition of "space" was "emptiness." The Gossamer Nebula between Earth and Epsilon, a diaphanous breath of matter edge on to the solar system, made it possible. Just possible. If so, it had already happened. *Sirius* should have reached Gossamer over seventy years ago. There would have been only one shot, one sweeping harvest through the plane of the nebula at luminal speed, no turning around for another pass. News of it should reach E.P.I. next month.

"Are you sure we lost signal?" Zack asked, meaning, *Have you checked the calibration of the antennae, tested the electronic net, searched with every eye and ear we have?* Kozinski, mind reading, nodded dour confirmation. The simpler and more significant answer came from Itohaki. The tech touched the screen without removing a protective hand from the star filled ball of the holosphere.

Sound flooded the Command Core, a distant squeal, modulating too fast to track across multiple frequencies and pinged with a tiny, musical crackling. The music, untranslatable by human ears, sang fat with data for listening antennae far beyond Jupiter's magnetosphere, narrow beam antennae that listened only to Epsilon and boosted onward what they heard.

"A downlink." Wu Lin stated the obvious. For the first time Zack realised that the scribe felt the same nervousness they all did.

"Seventy-two years to get here." Itohaki's eyes glittered in the dark like stars.

"When did we lose her?" Zack asked.

"First she twinkles," Itohaki said. Wu Lin's slippered toe tapped. Zack didn't bother to translate. Two-way non-coherent. TWNC, or "twink" to ops people. From Itohaki it sounded a salacious comment but meant only that the data flow between *Sirius* and Europa had inexplicably changed. For two hundred years it had been two-way coherent, Europa's signal answered by *Sirius* on a frequency so stable that it served as a tool itself, an umbilical allowing precision tracking. Itohaki was saying that for some reason *Sirius* had begun generating her own, less stable, frequency, going into failsafe mode. It could only mean that her receiver had become damaged and she could no longer hear Europa.

Itohaki held up a hand as Wu Lin opened his mouth. "Wait." Wu Lin's lids drooped with displeasure.

Zack thought that he almost caught the beginning of a tone change, then, a resonant grating in his teeth, the degrading of the signal as *Sirius*'s backup maser hijacked the frequency choice and Europa tried to keep up for one desperate instant across the width of the galaxy.

The downlink stopped. It ended, between one tone and the next.

It quit, nothing more dramatic than that, and yet the tension in the chamber returned to that state of pending annihilation.

"Gone." Itohaki's hand fell to his side. The holosphere under his palm vanished. "Gone."

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In Zack's office holographic imaging simulation system, attenuated ghosts of ammonia and sulphur streamed backwards from the nose of the atmosurfing probe. Clinging with gossamer hands, condensate

phantasms of the upper air slipstreamed beside the unmanned science craft, trying to hold it back. Kilometres ahead but brought close by brobdingnagian size, cloud banks of creamy green and snowpiss yellow lifted from a low level of ammonium hydrosulfide, lazy giants saluting the efforts of their wispier kin to keep a material intruder from their ethereal realm.

H₂O p.p.m. + 9.5% The information appeared in the upper right quad in green letters, exorcising ghosts.

Jarred, Zack blinked stinging, holo-focussed eyes. Christ, he'd been drifting again.

Hotspot 50k. A second announcement appeared below the first. His office, hinted at through the holograph suspended over his desk, seemed less real-time than the dynamic pastels of Jupiter, 675,000 kilometres away. Furnishings showed as darker shades of black against the open doorway into the hall. The doorframe caught a slippery gleam of light from the candle burning in the bedroom across the way, by a bed squatting emptily against the wall. Neatly creased covers exposed linen triangles of mattress. He averted his eyes but couldn't stop breathing. The mephitic taint in the air came not from Jupiter but from Marjorie, smoking and playing old recordings in the dark bedroom. A cloud of bloomfag smoke drifted from the bedroom.

He lowered his face to his hands and pushed steepled fingers up either side of his nose. He took in a breath through pinched off nostrils.

Clouds and ghosts. That about summed it all up.

He couldn't get them out of his head. Four thousand ghosts among the stars, frozen or dispersed like gases. For a month, there had been no hint as to *Sirius's* fate. Differenced Doppler and spectroscopy showed no change in the Gossamer Nebula over the last two days. Nothing had disturbed it seventy-two years ago for the news to have reached Sol as a great flag waving, signalling a manmade intruder running silent, perhaps, but still running.

The music from across the hall wound down. His comm chime rang. He jumped on the response. "Roberts."

"Shall we dance?" The reply came in a whisper. A woman?

"Marjorie!" he yelled, rising. It would be just her idea of a joke. The link chimed off. The music resumed, ancient theatre tunes, the volume rising to drown him out. He glared out the door, uncertain. It had been Marjorie, hadn't it? He couldn't be positive of his own wife's voice.

"Identification Roberts, Zachary Joachim, Level 10, trace last—" The chime rang again. "Roberts!" he snapped. The passphrase of the Republicans, vengeful over the death of Siam, was no joke. From the framed holo on the corner of his desk, Marjorie smiled mischievously at him, with that frenetic unaccountability in her face that had first attracted him.

"Zack!" A shocking babble of voices and an electronic squeal came over the link along with Kozinski's voice.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"*Sirius!*" Kozinski shouted. "She has come back!"

"On my way."

Wu Lin beat Zack to the Core, though. He stood at Kozinski's side as Zack stepped past an inner and outer pair of guards. Supposedly it took an order from him to double the guard but he no longer blinked

at usurpation. "Situation, Doctor?" he called. Around the chamber, scenes of the ocean alternated with panels of stars and Earth and one limb of burly Jupiter, flexing helium muscles in profile.

Kozinski straightened, beaming. "A three second burst." Seated, Itohaki mumbled to himself as his fingers danced over a console. Figures and numbers flowed across the screen.

"Does it give her status?"

"Not yet." His head down, Itohaki's neck flushed. Kozinski patted a thin shoulder, unable to keep his nervous fondness from overflowing.

"Yet?" Wu Lin repeated.

"I'm trying, sir." Itohaki's muttering descended into the inaudible range.

While the tech worked on a translation, the others talked too loudly of their relief. Kozinski paced, turning his head to the door as if contemplating a longer stroll to ease his nerves. Wu Lin's gaze flicked from Itohaki to a screen showing Earth, beautiful in her blue-marbled serenity. Itohaki grew more and more stiff. Each time Wu Lin breathed down his shoulder, he jumped.

"Is it so difficult?" Wu Lin asked, after an hour.

Itohaki licked his lips. "No sir. I don't know, sir."

"Let him work." Kozinski waved a hand. "It is occupying."

The hair on Zack's neck prickled. Wu Lin was right. Itohaki should have been able to translate the truncated burst by now or tell them it was useless. Itohaki's lack of self-assurance began to seem disturb. That, Kozinski's hand on the tech's shoulder and the looks Kozinski kept sneaking at the door. The fact that *Sirius* had found them when they couldn't find her was one thing. She had star mapping systems to locate Sol. The fact that she had transmitted and stopped was another. Either she knew where they were or she didn't. Either she could send and receive or she couldn't.

"It's garbled," Itohaki said.

Zack said, "Twinked?"

"Yes, Your Serenity." Itohaki could have been carved of amber. "It's not non-coherent."

Zack wasn't sure what a triple negative worked out to be, except one great big *No!* shouted as quietly as Itohaki could manage. Beside him, he could see Wu Lin labouring through the contradictory translation.

Kozinski had certainly caught the initial non-agreement. He squeezed Itohaki's shoulder. "You are working too hard," he said. "Work harder." Wu Lin shot a look at the door. Zack felt more keenly the presence of those two pairs of guards with their stunners against their shoulders, wide barrels rising beside the high cheekbones and satin skin of...Siam.

Shall we dance? He heard a whisper in memory. Not a joke, a warning.

"Please," Wu Lin said, folding his hands and looking to Kozinski, "contact Earth."

"I think that is premature, yes?" Kozinski straightened abruptly. "Are we ready?"

"Please." The button on Wu Lin's cap jiggled with his nod.

"There is a forty-five minute com delay!" Kozinski resisted. He looked frightened. Zack pretended not to hear the oddly intimate exchange between two men always at a careful distance before.

Earth and her regally coiling atmosphere shone in projection on one wall. The view equatorial, the Australian Provinces stretched from the Great Dividing Archipelago across to the Flinders, MacDonnell and Kimberley Isles. Towards the southern curve of the horizon, the line of the massive Flinders' sea wall glittered where it caught the light, keeping back sea sludge. Kozinski turned away. Wu Lin studied Zack. In Zack's mind, doubts evaporated. Suspicions coalesced.

The threatened and miraculously recovered *Sirius* a Republican battle cry.

"Zachary." A woman's voice trilled from every speaker in the Core, startling him in his tension. "Zachary, my darling. Zachary, I know you're there. Zachary?" She giggled. "Shall we dance?"

"Oh, Marjorie," he said, on the air punched out of his lungs. She *was* involved. She giggled again. Everywhere, eyes turned his way. Zack strove for calm. "Marjorie, where are you?"

"Darling, you know that. The only home we have." She hummed a few notes. "So good of you to leave me your system keyed for gubernatorial access. So sweet. You were always sweet to me. I've been talking to Earth, to the dead." Kozinski jumped.

"Marjorie, stay there." Zack moved for the doorway, hoping his stiffness seemed that of a man embarrassed rather than that of a man escaping to find weapons and troops to put down a brewing rebellion. Did they mean to take over *Sirius*? To declare her a Republican ship? Two guards stepped together, barring his path. He stopped short.

Above the doorway, an H.I. flashed into an image of his wife; slender, beautiful, always reckless Marjorie. Pale as a geisha, she sat on his desk, bare legs kicking. The hooped skirt of the ball gown she wore rucked up on his desk in velvet plateaus. Black hair tumbled around the slant of her eyes. Exotic. She had always been exotic, Siamese-born, Han-blooded, Empire and provinces in one body. A volatile combination, explosive when mixed, easily unbalanced. Clouds of white smoke billowed around her. Pinched between fingernails of a mandarin length, she held a bloomfag, a narcotic manufactured from the algal recycling vats. She'd found a source the first week they had arrived.

"Marjorie," he said.

"Zackary, darling?" she answered brightly. "I told them you wouldn't let them. Regimental Zackary!" She hopped off the desk, the hoop falling magically into place. She saluted. "Yes, sir. No, sir! Field of honour Zackary. Imperial son Zackary. Zackary with his starched collars to hold up his chin, so he can't see what's under his nose. When they figured out that you wouldn't give them fuel they seemed to think that I'd be good enough to look through your papers every now and then." Her lopsided grin slumped. "I'm sorry, Zackary?" She took a long drag on the smoke.

"Marjorie." It was all he could say.

"Darling." Still smiling, she began to cry.

Wu Lin and Kozinski stood shoulder to shoulder, abandoning pretence. Republicans. He abandoned pretence, too. "Let me go to her. You can send guards." Kozinski's eyes shifted to Wu Lin.

"I won't let you in." Marjorie carolled. "These doors were made for riots and I won't let you in until you do something for me." She bent forward, leaning over Zackary's desk into the H.I. simagery and through the projection of Earth. "Kill them for me, hero Zackary? Kill them and you'll be king. Don't you see?"

I've been watching Earth. First I talked to my babies and later I watched. I think somebody was listening to me. I think it all happened sooner than was meant to." She giggled. "I made a little recording."

An expectation of unknown horror tightened Zack's neck. "What recording, Marjorie?"

"I tried to warn you, darling. Shall we dance? That's what we say, you know? We rebels?" Throwing her head back, she blew out a dramatic stream of bloomfag smoke and crumpled, twisting to bury her face in her arms. The projection of Earth surrounded her. From out of a froth of black velvet her finger crept out to toggle a button on the H.I. keyboard and around her Earth began to sparkle.

In the Core, the image of serene Earth changed to match hers. She had fed her recording into central communications, overriding what had evidently been a stock image showing in the Core. "Oh, God," Zack breathed, and meant it as a prayer. The atmosphere over the Empire burned.

He held onto a console. Over Earth, a flash came and went, heat lightning wrapping around the shimmering planet. "Glueballs," he said as sympathetic waves of heat and cold washed over his skin. Earth based communications had just been knocked out. The cameras must be longbased, not the moon. Luna hovered in frame, peeking out from behind Earth.

Streaks of light slanted into the atmosphere, dumb mesonic bursts exploding at varying depths. So many bucked in the upper atmosphere that it seemed none could be making it through. Only those that penetrated to smart-mode altitude could drop their payload. The moment he began to hope, lights began to glow on land and sea.

Xi'an went first. Expanding outward at luminal speeds, a pearl of light appeared around what had been the Imperial capital. The Emperor, may he live forever, was gone, kicked up into the winds now racing behind the light wave, vaporised along with his city and ten kilometres of encircling Earth.

In the quiet Core, reality overtook intention with the speed of decaying quarks.

Coastal Zhengshou became a nimbus of light, and next Taiwan.

As they all watched, Cooma took a hit. "No!" Kozinski cried, shocked. A tech fainted. Zack closed his fingers. Blind. Blind fools to think they could challenge without being hit back. Kosciusko, Katoomba, Provincial Jongfu, Orange and New Adelaide went like a widdershins clock around the southern grouping of Australian islands. The sky writhed. The Empire lost K.L. In rapid succession, a tight grouping took out Uluru, Alice and Remembrance.

Something big exploded in the stratosphere.

Zack covered his eyes. The noises of moaning and puking made themselves known around him, and the sound of Marjorie singing snatches of a song he didn't have time to recognise.

Taking his arm from his eyes, he witnessed the quiet Earth. It was over. It had been over for forty-five minutes, he realised, the time lag between Europa and Earth. Nothing moved. No lights sparkled. No streaks shot against the blue planet. He blinked against swarming motes. Earth looked focussed, her colours more defined, more saturated.

"Oxygen...oxygen ionisation...." Wild-eyed, Kozinski gabbled around a mouthful of blood and slid to the ground. "Alchemy," he groaned. "Alchemy." Zack took a breath and, with it, because of it, knew what was wrong with Earth. What was missing. Why the colours were so intense, the delineation of horizon and background space so sharp.

Wu Lin slid a scrambler out of his robe. He put it in his mouth and pulled the trigger. Without blood or

mess, he crumpled to the floor.

Zack soaked up Earth's last beauties. She would suffocate and die. Unfiltered sunlight would wither her. No more rain. No more wind. The domed cities could hold out, maybe. It seemed an irony that those forbidden to exchange atmospheres with the planet as a whole would survive, while what was left of ocean and land laboured to replace what had been taken. It would be thousands of years before Earth breathed on her own again. Kozinski had shared his Alchemy Drive with others and they had used it to cannibalise the ions of Earth's atmosphere, not to drive a starship but as a weapon.

"Gov," Itohaki croaked behind Zack.

"Shall we...." Stumbling, Marjorie started over. "Shall we dance? On a bright cloud of music, shall we fly?"

"Governor." Itohaki gulped. A squeal burst out between the walls of the Core, a long wail, receding, healthy. *Sirius*. Zack stood. It was hard to care. Itohaki's voice cracked. "I...I heard Scribe Wu Lin wanted to...to cut her...off...." Bewilderment thickened his throat. "I...I turned off her receiver last month but I always knew where she was.... Doc caught me...checking it today. He was so.... He was watching us all so.... I...faked a signal...." He put his head down. "She hit Gossamer tomorrow. Seventy-two years ago tomorrow."

Itohaki's crime was passion, and hubris, that he could watch over *Sirius* by himself, trusting the rest of them to watch over Earth. As if there should be need for that sort of trust. He would have his day to track *Sirius* through Gossamer, not much more. What was left of Earth, friendly or not, would be coming here.

Every screen in the room flickered to the scene in Zack's office. On them, Marjorie swooped away from his desk and spun around the room in multiple fragments, waltzing with an invisible partner to *Sirius*'s hungry infant cry. As she spun, she sang.

Shall we dance? On a bright cloud of music shall we fly?

Shall we dance? Shall we then say 'Goodnight' and mean 'Goodbye'?

Or perchance, when the last little star has left the sky,

Shall we still be together with our arms around each other and

shall you be my new romance?

On the clear understanding that this kind of thing can happen,

Shall we dance? Shall we dance? Shall we dance?

Liz Martin lives and writes in Sydney, Australia. Her novel, **Hashakana**, has been short listed for the prestigious 2000 George Turner Prize for Science Fiction and Fantasy.