

AntiHelix

by

John Guy Collick

The third volume of The Book of the Colossus

Published by John Guy Collick

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At the end of time all directions are given in relation to the body of God. His head lies to the north, and his feet point south.

The Companions and their Perfections

Selva Selvaggia - Espionage

Tam - Epic poetry

Olse - Diplomacy

Auvera - Law

Jessica - Government

Iolitha - Engineering

Gallia - Urban Combat

Mari - History

Medea - Flying

Euphrosyne - Psychology

Belthenna - Medicine

Ruth - Strategy

Morwen - Music

Hanna - Acrobatics

Eloise - Rhetoric

THE ALIENS KNOWN as the Black Roses hovered half a million miles above the body of the human god like three moths made of seething petals. The colossus lay on his back, face turned up to the empty universe. Aeons ago the creatures had taken pity on humanity huddled in its artificial iron spheres. They'd beaten out a flat singularity five light years square in their quantum forges and sprinkled it with ground-up planets to create a landscape of hills and valleys in imitation of mankind's long-lost worlds. They punctured the surface with wormholes drilled down into the past so the survivors could scavenge for supplies and the materials they needed to build a deity to save them.

In another part of the empty universe the Black Roses' own immortal waited patiently in line to carry its people through the Gate of Light into a new cosmos. Only gods could cross the threshold and every sentient race in the last, long night possessed their own - except one. Impressed by the dogged bravery of these creatures bereft of any future beyond the tattered remnants of this reality the aliens helped humanity and now, a million years later, they looked down at the conclusion of mankind's Great Task.

So that all the people building the human god could breathe, the Black Roses poured a thin layer of air over the singularity. It was no more than seventy miles thick, and as the figure below them measured half a million miles from toe to crown and rose ninety thousand miles into the night all they could see was a silhouette against the

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blue-orange patchwork of the vast workbench on which it lay. The stars and galaxies had perished long ago and no other lights shone down on the titan's skin.

The three aliens drifted down towards the Head. They sensed the features and knew the eyes were closed. Unable to withstand the powers needed to create an immortal's thoughts, humanity had built its own servants - the Machine Men. They in turn divided the mind of their creation into eight parts, encased these fragments in the bodies of giants and sent them out into the kingdoms of men to study the beings God would one day save. But disturbing rumours had reached the Black Rose god - of the death of a giant, of a mankind torn apart by war and of a deity driven mad by the experiments of its creators. Darkness crept through the interstices of the Body and in the far-flung realms in and around the sleeping marionette human eyes looked upwards and voices laced with hatred cursed the aliens as the enemies and betrayers of mankind. An insane colossus and his vengeful creators threatened the future of all and so the Black Roses had journeyed through the endless night to see for themselves whether this new being should be allowed to live or die.

The Black Roses floated over the Cheek. At this distance unearthly fires and radiances seeped through the littered wasteland of the Skin. Following the long curve of the Zygomatic Bone they paused above the Ear. The outer rim carved an arc of pure night out of the glowing atmosphere far below. Just inside, a mere five hundred miles from the edge, a speckled puddle of light nestled in the pocket known as the AntiHelix. Curious to see what a human city looked like they wove back and forth over spires, domes, skyscrapers, fortresses, factories and warehouses. Flying machines came and went, dropping down towards the titanic cables of hair, or journeying up towards the Meatus and the entrance to the Skull. No-one

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noticed the watchers. They were black flowers in a black sky.

An unspoken agreement passed between the creatures and they separated, spiralling away into the darkness like scraps of soot in a hurricane. In the halls of the human citadel thousands upon thousands of men and women scurried back and forth, unaware their crimes and follies were being mulled over in three dark-feathered hearts.

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL CRYSANTHE UELLA stood in a hall filled with nine thousand shattered chairs and looked across the skin of God. Desperate for solitude she'd journeyed for a day through the abandoned regions of the AntiHelix until she'd found enough ruin, light and silence to leach the memories from her mind. From inside the empty north sector Crysanthé couldn't see the singularity. Even the Hair, woven from cables hundreds of miles thick and spreading over the valleys, mountains and plains of the Wasteland, lay hidden from view. A faint glow from the distant atmosphere picked out the eastern boundary of her world.

Behind her a ring of light marked the entrance to the Meatus, a vast network of defences, sensors, research stations, engines and citadels rendered into a radiant filigree by distance. She could just make out the opening of the ear canal in the centre. It wound deep into God's skull to the Tympanic Membrane - the outer border of the Mind. On the other side lay the Kingdom of Theuderic where the Machine Men had carved the thoughts of God from energies no human could withstand and turned them into giants. Long ago the four titans of the east stepped out of the Meatus to walk among humanity.

They came past here, immense, stately and pure, she thought. What have we done?

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For Crysanthe's entire life the AntiHelix and the millions who toiled out their days in its actinic honeycomb had existed for one purpose alone - to watch over the Meatus in preparation for the giants' return. Once the sight of all the battleships, fortresses, redoubts and weapon clusters standing sentinel at the entrance to the Ear had filled her with pride. But God was finished and the returning spirits long overdue. Crysanthe had lived for the day when four colossal shadows would take the winding path leading back into the Head. But now nothing remained but the sickening realisation of failure. Humanity was doomed to end in this last cold night. She turned her back on the Meatus as a wave of sorrow swept through her, struggling against tears amid the fragments of her dreams.

She had good days and she had vicious days. Once in a while discipline and precision soaked through her like ice water, so easy and natural she became a machine. Most of the time she fought through every single ritual and command, trying to coax her thoughts out of the morass of heartbreak and exhaustion. More and more often she commandeered a gondola and let it take her into the ruins at the edge of the citadel. She picked her way through abandoned corridors, vaults, halls, offices and colonnades, walking beneath grimy lights that hadn't illuminated a face in centuries. She always ended up in front of a window, gazing across the littered wreckage of God's skin towards the empty sky.

Around her the fortress complex spread over the ridges and valleys of the AntiHelix - threads of light weaving between the fragments of shattered towers, domes and darkness. Long ago thousands of square miles of palaces, mansions, fortresses, barracks and laboratories blazed daylight among the whorls and folds, as if someone had embedded a glowing jewel within the Ear itself. Barely a

quarter remained occupied. The rest had collapsed into rubble or turned treacherous, inhabited by forces and entities no longer human.

The Empire of the Ear was decaying, becoming fearful, inbred and cruel. The lords of the kingdoms spat their petty ambitions at each other from shadows filled with the stink of corruption and decay. The Emperor Demetrius turned his back on them all and spent his days in the Whispering House deep in the Meatus, surrounded by favourites, catamites and lotus-eaters. Crysanthe let the nobles of the court parade through her mind - Philomel of Lobe, Enguerrand Lord of Temporalis, that depraved shit Thin Hans of Splenius, countless others in their ridiculous costumes. She saw no hope in their remembered faces, just indifference and stupidity. Sickened, she blanked them from her thoughts.

Her gaze met eyes of steel watching her from beauty turned brittle with despair - cheekbones and chin as sharp as knives, blonde hair scraped back to nestle in a high collar of black leather. Crysanthe refocussed beyond her reflection, grinding her teeth as she ignored the accusation staring back from the scratched window. From the moment she awoke she knew that today self-loathing and duty would grind against each other like the tungsten wheels they used to sharpen the halberds of the emperor's bodyguard.

A flurry of movement to the south caught her attention. Between two rivers of pale light a crystal ship rose towards the Meatus, surrounded by a ring of smaller vessels. The emperor's own galleon - an exquisite star dappled with the black crust of command pods, engines, guidance vanes and gun turrets - drifted above the glass and rhodium spires. It was a gift from Long Lock, Crysanthe's home and one of the kingdoms of the empire. Nothing matched the beauty of the ships crafted in the

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chasms between the fibres of God's hair, and the Condottiere Alaric an Vircana himself had presented it to Demetrius.

I should be on that ship.

This was no ordinary journey to the Whispering House. The emperor wasn't escaping from the corruption of the AntiHelix to hide away in the upper storeys of his refuge. Demetrius had summoned the nobles of the court to an emergency council with the ambassadors from the Machine Men.

In Alaric's absence I should be on that ship to speak for Long Lock.

But her commander perished in the god-forsaken wilderness of the Thumb, betrayed by that scum Captain Hathus. The subsequent murder of the giant Bassandis at the hands of Alaric's fleet had not only sealed her own disgrace but her homeland's as well. That she was still alive was a miracle, but she knew it was just a matter of time. If she walked the corridors of this porcelain and metal labyrinth unmolested it was because someone somewhere had a darker fate in mind. Crysanthe no longer cared. Commanders and generals died, realms fell and empires collapsed, but what did it signify next to the aching emptiness left by the death of her beloved Ruth?

The emperor's ship accelerated towards the distant ring of light, its escort jockeying for position. Crysanthe forced herself to look away. The empty night offered no comfort so she closed her eyes and clenched her fists, summoning the old battle disciplines to calm her mind.

"General, it's time."

Crysanthe counted to three before turning round. Colonel Titus, one of the few remaining Dogs, watched her from the broken doorway. Next to him stood Selva Selvaggia, the only woman from that pit of debauchery laughingly called the Kingdom of Splenius who'd proved

herself worthy to join the General's Companions. With her grey robes, bald head and pale blue eyes she resembled a Machine Man. Titus looked like a doll hacked out of mahogany by an overenthusiastic toddler. As always he wore his combat armour. Fashioned from boiled leather threaded with intelligent battle plastics it was a rare treasure inherited from his ancestors. It flexed as he breathed, scanning the air for threats.

"Is everyone gathered?" she asked the girl. Selva nodded.

"The Companions await your pleasure."

Crysanthe noticed the man's gaze flicker away for a second.

You don't approve, do you? You think I'm cruel. The little bitch tried to kill me. He disappointed her. Titus' loyalty and unflinching resolve on the battlefield were legendary. He was a true Dog in every sense of the word - obedient and unquestioning. Yet here he stood all but challenging her decision to execute the traitor.

We're all uncertain. We're all steeped in doubt and ill-discipline.

"Has she asked for anyone?"

Titus shook his head.

Family? They're dead. You hung her father from the edge of the AntiHelix itself. When he died the rivals for his command butchered the rest. The daughter survived because she was under Crysanthe's protection and the ungrateful whore repaid her with attempted poison. For a brief second she wondered what would happen if she released the prisoner. She almost laughed. Who'd believe her? She was the General Crysanthe Uella. No pardon, no forgiveness. She led the others into the corridor where a gondola hovered a few inches above the carpet, blades of static sparkling in its energy field. They climbed aboard and Titus poled them towards the southern execution grounds.

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The first twenty miles of the empty tunnel were flanked by passages stretching into the distance on either side. Most disappeared into blackness. Flickering lights punctuated others to illuminate the wreckage of ages. Crysanthé paid scant attention to the broken furniture and machines dotting the edges of her vision. She'd seen it before and she understood what it meant - fear and hopelessness. Once in a while she caught a glimpse of huddled silhouettes - exiles hovering on the borders of AntiHelix. Alone or in small groups they picked through the detritus. She knew that most of them were once servants of the state, discarded as the realm shrunk and stations and departments closed. They rarely returned to their homes beyond the Ear. Instead they lurked on the periphery of this world in quiet despair. The AntiHelix did that to its people, consuming them in endless rituals and dedications until they could think of no other life. Many went insane, creating little offices for themselves in the depths of the abandoned regions, inventing empty ceremonies attended by shadows, drafting and re-drafting meaningless reports that no-one would ever read, pretending their lives still had purpose in this vast net of chrome, ceramics and transparent steel.

The patches of darkness dwindled and the pulse of the lights above the prow steadied. The corridor bellied out into a semi-circular chamber with a gate carved from a single piece of jet set into the far wall. Four guards stepped forward as Titus slowed the gondola. City militia, worse than useless, their arrogance matched only by their laziness. Peacock uniforms of red and silver - grown increasingly ridiculous as the centuries drifted by - said it all. Two-foot-high plumes of lacquered tissue rose from their helmets.

“Her Puissant Worship the General Crysanthé Uella, Lord of the Dogs and Vavasour of the Nine Kingdoms

demands entrance," called Selva. It should have been unnecessary. The gondola's pennant, with its stylised braid looped around a wolf's head, made it clear who rode the ship. Three of the men saluted but their commander slung his machine gun over his shoulder and walked towards the prow. He was doing his duty, of course he was, but when he clambered on board the narrow vessel Crysanthe saw the flicker of amused insolence in his eyes. She doubted anyone else would have noticed but it was enough for her.

Has Long Lock fallen so far that this wretch dares to brave me in my own boat?

In a gesture so swift her arm was a blur she snapped his neck. He collapsed at her feet and Titus pushed him over the side with his boot. A silence fell, punctuated by the terrified sobbing of the other men grovelling on their knees next to the corpse. Selva Selvaggia picked up the helmet from the deck, crumpled the tissue into a ball and tossed it at the guards.

"Open the door," she repeated.

One soldier had enough wit remaining to scramble to his feet and unlock the gate. Titus poled the ship forward and they passed into an immense space filled with light and motion. As the exit irised closed behind them Crysanthe flexed her hand, noticing a red welt on the last joint of her little finger.

I'm losing my skills. She swore under her breath. Selva turned to look at her inquiringly.

This girl is among the best, she conceded. *But she sees too much.*

Chaos swirled around the gondola as they drifted into a terminus as big as a Long Lock fortress. More guards cleared a path for them through the crowds, unaware of their comrade's fate on the wilderness side of the portal. Thousands of people jostled along the platforms between

the floating barges and supply wagons. High above their heads flyers and warships criss-crossed the sky beyond the arching crystal roof. Power and statecraft filled the air. Officials hurried back and forth. A few paused when they recognised the gondola and its passengers. Once those cringing scribes would have stopped and bowed. Now their gazes were a mix of curiosity and disinterest. Thankfully she saw none of the stupid contempt she'd spotted in the militiaman's eyes, but her hands still clenched into fists as she fought the urge to turn the ship and flee back into the empty sectors. Selva stood in front of her, a blue robed figurehead staring across the hall. Behind her Titus hummed to himself as he shifted the craft in and out of the throng, its belly hissing over the shining floor.

They left through a low-roofed iron tunnel and journeyed south for another hour. They changed direction at several junctions, the ship bending back and forth like a black snake. At last they dropped down a ramp leading to the execution grounds. Fewer citizens worked in this sector with its scarred metal, plastic walls and lingering atmosphere of hatred and fear. The few bystanders they passed kept their heads down. Titus brought them to a stop next to a wide archway. Crysanthé stepped out of the gondola and strode towards the waiting crowd, composing herself with a massive effort of will.

The thirteen other Companions waited for her in a loose semicircle flanked by a squad of Dogs in ceremonial chain mail. Crysanthé glanced around. She couldn't see any of the uniforms of the citadel garrison or the inevitable idiot leers that any unDog wore in the presence of the women. Good. This was a lesson for their eyes only. Selva Selvaggia took her place beside the others. Each girl was dressed in hand-picked clothes of exquisite taste - suits, dresses, tunics, robes, culottes and jackets - each uniquely

matched to the beauty of its wearer. They bore the badges of their perfections - symbols of music, medicine, poetry, science, acrobatics, strategy, psychology sewn into their collars or worked into bracelets, brooches or tattoos. Crysanthe let her pride in these daughters of the empire steal away some of her sorrow as the Companion Iolitha of Upper Occipital stepped forward and showed her the charge sheet. She didn't bother to read it. She knew what it said. Instead she led the way into the execution chamber, the men hanging back to allow the Companions to enter first in a line behind their guardian.

They filed into a glass room. A transparent airlock ran from the outer wall to a set of concrete steps in the middle of the chamber. Beyond lay the broken terrain of God's skin stretching to a mile-high cliff. The unlit surface was empty, a plain filled with the detritus of centuries.

Once they left the bodies there for all to see. The Emperor Samuel had banned the practice three hundred years before, publicly condemning it as barbaric. She suspected the real reason was because the alien desolation beyond the glass appeared infinitely worse without a single scrap of humanity remaining among the shattered wood, iron and broken machinery.

Crysanthe gave the signal and a few moments later four guards entered with the prisoner. She limped bare-foot between them, her ragged shift stained with blood. A flash of anger caught Crysanthe unawares.

"Why has she been beaten?" she asked, her tone causing everyone else in the room to freeze.

"She tried to kill herself by smashing her face against the walls." said a guard, panic in his voice.

Crysanthe stared at the girl, struggling to keep her contempt hidden.

Are you so weak in the end that you'd try suicide rather than face just punishment? You were a Companion and my gift to

Ruth. Your beauty, your music, the sorrow and love you could tease from a cello fooled us all.

She nodded to Iolitha who held up a copy of the charge sheet.

“Bryony Gelimer, daughter of Andagis Gelimer, you are guilty of attempted murder by poison of your guardian and commander, her most puissant honour the General Crysanthe Uella, and are therefore sentenced to death.”

A guard grabbed the captive by the arm and led her to the inner door.

“She hated you,” Bryony spat through torn lips and broken teeth. “She hated you.”

Crysanthe signalled for the man to wait. Despite herself she wanted to hear what Bryony had to say. She didn’t care what new poison fell from her mouth. The wretched girl was the last one to hold Ruth in her arms and anything, even distorted by lies and hatred, was better than this unforgiving and endless silence.

“Every night, after we fucked, she told me all about your whining needs. They repelled her, suffocated her. She was so happy to be so far away from you, you sour old bitch. She hated you. She said you were pathetic, clinging to youth by bedding your whelps.”

“Enough,” growled Titus. Crysanthe shot him a look that made him drop his head in fear. Bryony tailed off, her meagre store of loathing exhausted. The guard pushed her into the airlock and sealed the door. Crysanthe stared at her through the chipped glass, trying to unpick the words, to sense any echo of Ruth beyond the vicious lies. The girl spat at her before limping to the door at the other end.

She’ll run, thought Crysanthe. *At least she has enough courage left for that.* Most of the condemned stayed by the inner door, some unmoving, some hammering on the glass and begging for help as the breath leached from their

lungs and their eyes turned red in the freezing vacuum. A few tried for the distant cliff, hoping that there might still be air where those caves and jagged holes led into the Body. Impossible. The Epidermis was five hundred miles deep. You'd have to navigate a deadly labyrinth of empty pits and tunnels before you reached any atmosphere. The outer door swung open and the escaping wind streamed Bryony's hair in a dark cloud before her face.

She ran, sprinting despite her injuries, leaping over jagged iron and wood, scrambling up loose slopes of rust. She tripped and fell but dragged herself back to her feet and carried on, staggering with arms stretched out towards the brutal shadow of the cliff. She started to weave from side to side. Her lungs would be screaming for release by now, her vision shattered into a broken red kaleidoscope as her eyes froze. Halfway between the glass door and the black wall she stumbled to her knees. With a final effort of will she tried force herself upright, grasping at the sky with one hand as if searching for someone to lift her up. The ground beneath collapsed, weakened by thousands of years of corrosion, and she disappeared into the depths of the Skin.

Crysanthe stared at the hole.

Your body still bore the traces of her fingers. The scent of her hair lingered in yours. I've thrown you away, I have nothing left but memories.

Later the Companions ran her bath, a ceramic oval set in a floor of pure samarium. While Iolitha and Olse undressed her two more poured essences and salts into the water. Crysanthe stood with her eyes closed and her arms out as they unbuckled her tunic, waiting for perfection to steal away the weariness and the endless cacophony in her head. Uniform discarded, she stepped into the pool. The universe receded, becoming nothing more than a sea

of warmth, exquisite scents and trailing fingers across her skin as the women bathed her. Crysanthé knew the rumours, that she and the Companions took part in filthy orgies every night, that the girls were her lovers and playthings acting out the ridiculous fantasies of men. Thin Hans of Splenius was the worst, a depraved pervert in all senses of the word. He'd coined the nickname for Crysanthé's retinue - the General's Whelps. Pathetic. Learning, art and skill, that's what the Companions existed for - to clarify and preserve the essence of beauty harvested from ages past.

When the bath was over the Companions wrapped her in a thick robe. They set a painting chosen from their secret archives on a stand before her table. Four of them sang a wordless rondo as others served food and wine the like of which not even the emperor tasted. That wasn't exactly true. As Crysanthé gazed in wonder at the portrait of a young woman standing in a paper forest, Selva Selvaggia of Splenius placed a fig on the plate in front of her. The general recognised that look.

"Stolen?"

Selva's mouth twitched.

"From the Whispering House?"

The girl gave the slightest of nods.

"You are banished for five days," said Crysanthé. Selva bowed her head but the general could still detect sardonic amusement in the set of the girl's shoulders.

Splenius. You're all corrupted by that depraved bastard Thin Hans, even you. Selva stepped backwards into the shadows, her face lowered in contrition. It was only after the door clicked shut that General Uella ate the fig and allowed herself a grin at the Companion's impudence. In truth she'd be glad to be rid of her for a few days. Something about Selva Selvaggia bothered her but she couldn't put her finger on it.

Before bed Crysanthé dismissed the rest of the Companions. She stood alone in the centre of her quarters staring at the piles of unread intelligence reports, rosters, deployment cycles, supply audits and technical manuals. How long since she'd even looked at any of them? *I've lost touch with my command - unforgivable.* She picked up a file at random and read the title - *A Report on the Disposition of the Forces of the Kingdom of Splenius.* She tossed it onto the heap with a sour laugh. A waste of paper - she doubted there was anything in Thin Hans' rancid pit worth the time or effort. After glancing at a few more dispatches she turned away in weary disgust and headed for her bower.

She didn't go straight to sleep. Instead she dug into the bottom of a drawer and pulled out a glass plate. It held a fuzzy image captured from a Speaking Lens. She looked at three faces. Two men stood at the edge of the room. Herman Ocel of Metacarpí cut a bearded, austere figure exuding self-importance. His son, Maximilian Ocel, waited beside him - a lighter-haired and raggedy-looking younger version of the old lord. In the centre of the picture stood Ruth an Vircana - slender face, gorgeous mouth and dark eyes filled with desperate longing. Crysanthé traced the lines of the girl's cheek with her fingers, wishing she could somehow push through the cold surface and tumble back into that time and place to save her love.

Why am I doing this to myself yet again?

She hefted the photograph above her head, ready to smash it on the edge of the chest. In the end she placed it among her clothes and slid the drawer shut.

CHAPTER TWO

MAX OCEL REALLY was going to throttle his partner Abby Fabrice.

"We'll break them in gently," she said when they landed their two ships next to the wormhole entrance. "Let's take them to a world near the end of time so they don't dissolve, where there's no real danger and it's pretty and bountiful enough to encourage them to return by themselves while you and I sod off to the Kingdom of the Machine Men."

That was before Abby had opened the catalogue they found in the abandoned offices and he'd spotted the entry that sent his heart into his boots.

Dish world - one of the oh-so rare warehouse systems built by a long-dead civilisation.

Please no. Not a Dish world.

It'd be stuffed with treasure, wonders and horrors. He recognised the gleam in Abby's eye, like a child's with bottomless pockets in an unguarded sweetshop, but it was the last place King Max wanted to lead his Abhuman subjects.

"Come on, relax. It'll be fun," she said as she loaded her revolver. "We can't mollycoddle the hairy buggers forever."

Max knew all too well about Abby's idea of fun. He looked up from a plateau of scarred iridium at the sky

overhead. A band encircled the guttering ember of a red dwarf where an innermost world had once orbited. Chains with links as big as moons extended from the ring, ending at the edge of the ice-rimed bowl on which he stood. Ahead and behind two more planet-sized hemispheres trailed their sour atmospheres as the engine of the artificial solar-system swung them around the sun like cars on a fairground wheel. If he squinted against the flames he could see titanic statues, a few whole but most broken, floating across the star - a hand, a leg, helmets and swords, faces with mouths open through which the carmine light shone. He stared down at Abby in frustration. She gave him the happy smile of someone who hadn't bothered to organise a picnic on the assumption it would all fall together by magic.

I'm going to wring your scrawny neck for this.

She thumped him affectionately in the balls.

"Cheer up, it can't be far." Before he had a chance to reply she jogged away. She wore an armoured kilt and jacket fashioned from alien wood she'd found in a tomb of coloured glass on the last world they'd visited. Tissue-light but diamond-strong it sounded like someone throwing a box of castanets down a tin staircase. Max shook his head.

And this was supposed to be a lesson in stealthy thievery.

The noise started again - a distant pounding like a giant smashing a mallet against the floor. Abby paused as the sound grew louder. They both scanned the landscape - a featureless sheet spattered fire-brick red by the star overhead and criss-crossed by mathematically precise trenches four yards deep.

Whatever it is, it's in the passageways, thought Max. Where we're heading.

The hammering faded, travelling away from them towards the edge of the world.

What in God's name is it? A machine perhaps. Max prayed it was nothing more than an ancient engine grown senile with eternity rattling its way around the inside of this colossal bowl. In his heart he knew better. These worlds had been fashioned by creatures as paranoid as they were crafty. It was unlikely they'd give a pair of robbers and half a dozen monsters a free run of the place so they could pilfer whatever took their fancy.

A few yards ahead Abby dropped out of sight into a corridor. Swearing copiously, Max ran after her. She stood waist-deep in mist looking up at him with that maddening smile. Since they'd almost split up a year ago she seemed to be doing her best, forever turning up the impish charm he'd found so hard to resist when they first met. This was definitely not the time or place to be winsome.

"What are you doing?" he said, trying to ignore her admittedly stunning grin and cloud of red hair. "At least up here we can see what's coming."

"Neke said that if we're going to find the storage vaults we have to follow the trenches."

On cue a grey scribble dropped into the fog ahead of her. Max caught a glimpse of matted fur and eyes the colour of midnight opals. Even though he recognised the newcomer his hand still went for the pistol in his belt.

Here we go again, now what? He climbed down beside Abby as an Abhuman rose out of the mist. With its bread-loaf shaped head and curved tusks it resembled a nightmare insect half-ripped apart by a cruel child. It scamp-ered towards them like an overexcited dog.

"Stop being so jumpy, you're embarrassing me." hissed Abby. Max seethed. Even after nine months as king of these creatures he still found them unsettling. The problem was made fifty times worse by the fact that his partner had picked up their language much faster than

he. She'd consoled him by joking that great monarchs were supposed to be distant and enigmatic. He guessed she was trying to put him at his ease and he should have been grateful, but he didn't like feeling so helplessly stupid as she walked towards the newcomer clicking her fingers and tongue at manic speed. She looked like she was possessed by the ghost of a mad jazz percussionist. He struggled to make sense of the conversation, catching one word in ten and what sounded like a bunch of names. Abby started to hop up and down, always a bad sign.

"They've found the store rooms," Abby said but she couldn't hide everything under the excitement.

"And?"

Max guessed what was coming next. He mastered his anger with difficulty. Abby stopped jogging on the spot and avoided his eyes.

"Hafna is missing. He is the son of Topi and Safu, husband of Meso and father of Givec and Tumna."

Whenever they announced a death the Abhumans listed the closest relatives in a ritual to honour the deceased. Max was sure they found the process all very cathartic but he hated it. It was bad enough when a creature died following the commands of the king but to have the collateral damage reeled out every single time they mentioned its name made things infinitely worse. One dead and five lives filled with tragedy because of stupid Max Ocel and reckless Abby Fabrice.

A claw tipped with can-opener nails gripped his arm. He found himself staring at his own reflection in eyes the size of billiard balls.

"It is OK," clicked Neke in the slow, comforting pace of a parent lecturing a particularly thick child. "Hafna did good things to help King Max."

Max shook his hand free.

"It's not alright. It's a stupid waste of a life," he shout-

ed, anger stoked with tiredness breaking through despite himself. Neke looked at Abby who launched into a frantic two-handed symphony of clicks. Max mentally kicked himself.

“Hafna did good things to help his king,” Abby said in a loud voice, giving him that look. Max stuffed his fury into the depths of his mind.

“Hafna son of whoever, whatever... his death was not a waste. He made a noble sacrifice,” he said after he’d calmed down. He waved his hand at the creature.

“Translate that.” Abby snapped her fingers a few times. Neke placed his claws on his grey-furred chest and bowed to Max.

When the alien known as the Brittle Hag saved him from the Steel Queen’s wormhole, forever exiling herself in the next universe, she’d coaxed a promise from Max to care for the Abhumans. It was only when he stood on the desert in the shadow of God’s left shoulder watching the grey multitude disgorge from the iron disk of the Hag’s starship that he realised what she’d saddled him with. Two thousand of the beings bowing before their new king - a scruffy Time Scavenger from the ruins of nowhere in particular. A year later and how many had died? A dozen? Abby knew the names of every one and all their relatives besides. Not a huge number out of the entire population but that wasn’t the point. Each fatality, whether through chance or because of these idiotic survival lessons they were trying to din into the creatures, filled him with raw guilt. They’d tried to justify it to themselves. They had to teach the Abhumans to be self-sufficient and scavenge for what they needed from the wormholes. Max’s own destiny lay beyond the Tympanic Membrane. Somewhere in his own brain a remnant of the giant Bassandis slept in a garden under a sky of burning coals. He and Abby had to get this fragment of God’s mind to the Kingdom

of Theuderic in the hope that the Machine Man would use it to recreate the dead titan. From the very beginning they'd agreed to leave the Abhumans behind. There was no way Max was going to risk the lives of all his subjects either during the run they'd have to make through the Empire of the Ear or in the raging chaos inside the Head. As soon as the Abhumans learned to fend for themselves they could become a republic, thank you and goodbye.

But Neke and his people didn't see it like that. They'd realised Max and Abby's plan early on and since then had taken great pains to explain on as many occasions as possible that every Abhuman had dedicated their entire being to helping Max complete his task. If they all died along the way then so be it. The Brittle Hag had imbued them with a bone-headed sense of duty and ambition that far outstripped their abilities. They weren't warriors. Max saw a race of gentle beings possessed of a childlike seriousness of purpose, a curiosity at the universe around them and not much else. They didn't shy from violence and put up a reasonable defence when cornered, but it was clear they found the whole idea of conflict baffling. They wouldn't last five minutes against those cruel bastards from the Empire of the Ear.

So the half-baked plan was to find a distant corner of the singularity near a well-stocked wormhole where they could potter out their lives until the deity was ready to carry them through the God door - hence the lessons on how to steal things from the past. It wasn't working. Max had the suspicion they were going through this pantomime to keep him and Abby happy and he'd never be rid of them. Abby seemed content to coach them through lethal dangers. She plainly saw hidden strengths in these beings that he didn't, but she wasn't king with all the stomach-grinding anxiety and responsibility. Obviously he hadn't inherited any of his father's steel-hearted sense

of leadership and measured disregard for the lives of his people. He'd made his mind up.

As soon as we get out of this place and Abby can fix the queen's ship we'll run away and let these poor bastards sort themselves out.

Infuriatingly the *Leontine*, a spacecraft tough and fast enough to survive a raw wormhole, developed a fault the moment they set down among the abandoned warehouses at the top of this shaft and Abby had neither the tools or knowledge to fix it. That left them with the Brittle Hag's craft and that was home to the entire Abhuman population.

"Neke says the hammering is caused by a defence mechanism, but they haven't figured out how it works yet. Hafna was investigating when he disappeared."

"Do we even know what it looks like?"

Abby shook her head.

"They haven't seen it. It comes and goes in the mist. All they've heard is the noise."

Great.

"We need to go. Now," he said to Abby, checking his carbine. He'd taken it from one of the Steel Queen's dead guards under the stars of another universe.

"Ask him to lead us to the stores. Let's grab what we can and leave this place."

They should have gone straight back to the wormhole stairs but the scavenger in him was damned if they were going to waste the whole trip. Neke scampered on ahead with Max behind and Abby taking up the rear. He toyed with half a dozen angry remarks about needless risk once the creature was out of earshot but bit his tongue.

They padded along corridors lined with mist. Everywhere looked the same though once or twice Max caught glimpses of the ring mechanism above, spinning the dish worlds around their star. Abhuman vision clearly sensed

things beyond his own. Neke knew exactly where he was heading, weaving through identical passageways without breaking stride.

The gangling figure ahead froze and gestured for them to stop. The sound returned, rushing towards them like a nightmare train, vast and remorseless. Max felt the ground shudder under his feet and saw ripples across the surface of the waist-high fog.

It's in this corridor. Blank terror flooded his mind. The landscape dissolved into an alien chaos of red, white and black shapes. Max fought back against the panic, trying to reshape it into a crystal point of rage, knowing that was the only way he'd survive. Somehow he managed to aim his gun at the darkness beyond Neke even as the pounding made his head ring.

It receded, thundering into the distance.

"It must have been in a trench parallel to this," whispered Abby, her voice trembling. "It missed us."

Max didn't bother replying. Neke set off again and he followed, trying to push his heart back down his gullet.

The passageway opened onto a circular pit. Max reckoned it was at least ten miles wide. The ground sloped downwards to a dome rising like a hub in the centre of a wheel. The mist stopped at the entrance to the arena as if someone had sliced the end off with a knife. They waited just inside the shadows. Nothing moved in the silence. Looking between his feet Max saw a pitted surface reflecting the machine-filled void above his head. The image of two colliding statues drifted past his boots. A carved warrior rebounded from the side of a chariot and broke apart, limbs spinning away across the red glare.

They're as big as mountains. Lost in wonder for a moment he looked up. *Once this sky was full of figures. Why?* Were they the heroes and heroines of this dead realm or the corpses of more gods grown brittle with the passing

of aeons?

Abby nudged him and nodded in the direction of the next half-planet. It drifted ahead of their own at the end of four taut chains. Whatever heating mechanism lay buried inside had perished long ago and the entire bowl was full of ice stained by the rays of the sun. It reminded Max of a dish of sherbet mixed with blood. One of the arms of the broken statue, still holding a sword in its fist, tumbled in a lazy arc towards the surface. There was flash of light as it slammed into the frozen terrain. Max could have sworn the whole world rocked as the fragment vaporised in the explosion and waves of steam rippled out from the detonation.

God help us if any of those bits land here. He checked the sky once more for any approaching debris. As far as he could tell nothing was heading their way but it was difficult to see against the light. He looked at the dome. They'd wasted enough time. Without waiting for the others he jogged across the amphitheatre.

A semi-circular arch opened onto a honeycomb of vaults stacked with boxes, crates, barrels, pitchers, amphorae and iron-banded chests. Abby gave a yelp of delight, dancing round in a circle as she craned her head back to take it all in. Above Max's head ladders led to gantries and catwalks criss-crossing between platforms piled high with more containers. Despite his lingering anger at Abby's reckless stupidity he had to admit that dish worlds never failed to deliver.

"There's enough here to keep them stuffed to the gills and wallowing in luxury for the next hundred years", Abby said. "See, not every suggestion I make is completely mental."

Maybe you're right, if we can secure the place and disarm that machine that keeps stalking us.

A flicker of movement in the corner of his eye made

him swing the carbine round. He relaxed, cursing his nerves. Four more Abhumans were crawling over the galleries, ladders and shelves like grey spiders, passing objects from claw to claw. They'd gathered their plunder into heaps by the entrance. Max tried to work out what they'd chosen - clothing, scrolls covered in angular diagrams, machines whose purpose he could only guess at and boxes of multi-coloured wafers. Abby picked one up, sniffed it, licked it and pulled a face.

Another Abhuman dropped in front of them. Max looked to Abby for help. She mouthed the name *Prion*. Max had a stab at greeting the creature in its own language. Abby snorted and shook her head. He dreaded to think what he'd just said.

"Where is my friend Hafna, King Max?"

Neke answered for him and Prion bowed low, covering his eyes. Max fumed - trying to come up with something comforting and regal, but as always he drew a blank.

"Tell them to grab what they can carry and let's go," he said to Abby. She ignored him. She was staring outside, a revolver in each hand. He recognised her expression and a sick chill twisted in his stomach.

Whatever these were they were silent. Between the hub and the distant wall he counted ten black slabs rising out of the ground like dominoes on a bar table. They were twice the height of a man.

They must have extruded from the floor.

He swallowed. Those simple blocks, cast in the same scarred iridium as the rest of this world, exuded a malevolent intelligence. He felt as if they were watching the intruders with a machine hatred - ancient and implacable.

"A defensive wall?" asked Abby. "Keeping us in or something else out?"

"Doubt it. They're scattered all over the place."

Nothing moved. He couldn't see any weapons or gun

slits. Judging by the statues thumping into each other between here and the sun the beings who built these dish worlds had been human. Those monoliths were too thin to contain people. He nodded to Abby. They hefted their guns in their fists and tiptoed forward. Sooty talons yanked them back.

"King Max and Queen Abby must not put themselves in danger," clicked Neke in what Max guessed was the Abhuman equivalent of baby language. The five creatures faced each other and started to communicate at high speed. It sounded to Max like insane flamenco.

"They have a theory," said Abby.

"Which is?"

She shook her head, clearly out her depth.

"What is it?" she asked, speaking aloud for Max's benefit as she snapped her fingers.

"We will test our theory and if it is right we will tell King Max."

"You'll tell King Max now," said Max, exasperated fury welling up inside him again. He was supposed to be their ruler yet they treated him like an idiot child.

"I command you," he added.

They ignored him. Instead Prion crept out of the archway and approached the first obelisk. Nothing moved. The slab of carmine-edged metal looked as if it had sat there since the beginning of the world. He beckoned the others. They started to inch towards to the distant passageway in relays.

"Do we follow or what?" asked Abby.

One of the obelisks toppled over next to Prion. He barely had time to leap out of the way as the mass slammed into the ground. With the noise a hideous realisation stole over Max, confirmed as two more slabs fell and the first started to rise again. The creatures scattered, racing back to the dome. Only Neke ran in the opposite direction,

charging for the corridor. A monolith followed him, flipping end over end, picking up velocity as it chased the Abhuman. Half a dozen other blocks thundered towards the hub. Hammering filled the universe but instead of crashing into the store room the shapes slowed, finishing upright a few yards from the entrance.

Something's stopping them getting any closer. Max still heard the relentless pounding of the machine chasing Neke through the passageways. It'd approached flyer speed by the time it disappeared into the mist. He doubted the Abhuman had survived.

"At least we know what made that colossal din," said Abby. "Now what?"

"Where's Prion?" asked Max, counting three remaining creatures.

Abby nodded into the distance, her expression hardening. Between the archway and the wall Max spotted a smear of fur and black gore.

That's how it works. They chase us down and crush us. The Abhumans clicked to each other. Even he understood the sadness in the rhythm of their claws. Prion son of someone, father of someone, friend of someone - all for the glory of King Max.

Is this what it's like to rule, Father? Little wonder you hid away in those empty rooms at the top of the Carceral Archipelago.

"Tell them from now on no-one goes anywhere without you and me," he told Abby.

Precious good it would do. Nine slabs remained. At the speed those things moved they didn't stand a chance. In the corridors it'd be worse - as futile as running from a train in a tunnel. They were trapped.

A pale lump waved at them from the top of the wall. Abby gave a whoop and Max couldn't help but grin.

Neke. The crafty bugger got away after all. Behind him the

John Guy Collick

Abhumans broke into an excited cacophony.

“Those things can’t go on the roof. They have to stay in the corridors,” said Abby. “If we climb up there we’re safe.”

For the time being. We still have to enter the passageways to reach the wormhole stairs. Max guessed that once they triggered the defenders again the slabs would hunt them wherever they went, ready to pound them into mush the second they jumped down from the roof. If memory served him the last half mile to the entrance was along a narrow straight. Even so, at least they had a slim chance of getting out alive.

“Oh. My. God,” said Abby, looking at the sky. Max followed her gaze. The head of a broken statue drifted towards them. It was as big as a mountain and its eyes and mouth bled sunlight.