

Dark Feathered Hearts

by

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The final 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.

And I recall when as a child
I felt your hand take mine
To lift me up from squalid wood and iron
To guide me over nickel floors,
Past cobalt walls
To point through crystal at an empty sky
And fill my head with dreams.
But most of all you taught me how to hate
The loving lies that said I'd found a home
In your cruel dark-feathered heart.

Odilon - Abigail Fabrice

NEKE THE ABHUMAN squatted in the middle of the lead map. He placed the storm lantern down, took the needle from behind his ear and traced the fractal marking the network of halls around the wreckage of the Whispering House. Something was wrong but he didn't know what. It nipped at the edge of his thoughts - a shadow scamp-ering out of sight whenever he tried to pin the bastard down. To be fair it was the first time they'd attempted to pluck a building out of reality from eleven thousand leagues away, but King Max had been in mortal danger, leaving them no choice. After the destruction of the AntiHelix he'd ended up trapped in the emperor's mansion deep inside the Ear Canal and if they hadn't rescued him the Great Task would have finished in a heap of rubble at the feet of the giants Ombratulla, Belsalice and Ruth.

Aeons ago the Abhumans had lived in the centre of the left forearm of God - that immense mannequin tumbling through a void long emptied of stars and planets. Bereft of light and hope, they'd scavenged deep within the interstices of a being so vast that a single cell measured three miles across - each one a maze of wood, canvas and iron. At the point of despair - when they'd realised their race would perish before the deity woke, stood and walked through the portal into the next cosmos - the Brittle Hag came to them. The alien, atoning for her own people's self-centred cruelty, plucked them out of the abyss and stewarded them into awareness. She gifted them with a starship that contained its own universe, and charged

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them with a doom upon which the fate of every living and unborn human depended.

The Machine Men who'd built the heart and mind of God had created eight giants, each one an aspect of the sleeping god's soul, and sent them out into the realms of man to learn about the creatures they were destined to carry into the new universe. But traitors slew the titan Bassandis in the battle for Metacarpi, and only a fragment of his consciousness survived, locked inside Max Ocel's dreams. Neke and his people promised the Brittle Hag they would take the raggedy Time Scavenger back to the Head so the dead giant could be rebuilt.

If only it were so easy. The titan's sisters declared war on mankind and laid waste to the Empire of the Ear. King Max and Queen Abby were wilful children driven by their own passions, thinking that whatever they cast their eyes on in the moment was the most important thing in the whole of creation. They'd forced Neke to imprison them once for their own safety and he was seriously tempted to do it again.

And now this.

Claws ticked on metal and Neke glanced over his shoulder to see Goma and Hama hovering at the edge of the map. They'd alerted him to the anomaly as soon as they'd captured the Whispering House, but he was damned if he was going to show any gratitude. They lacked discipline, their definitions were inadequate, and they relied on naïve axioms. In Neke's opinion innate talent was worse than laziness.

"Have you found the source?" clicked Hama.

Neke tapped the needle against the lead. Taking too long to answer would only feed their arrogance.

"Not yet."

"I have a stupid notion, and one not worthy to trouble friends with, but in my foolishness it struck me that

here the folds in space-time are out of alignment," ventured Goma, gesturing at a point on the sheet twenty yards away. Neke seethed, stood up and loped over the white-dusted metal. His companion crossed his claws across his chest and bowed. The leader of the Abhumans, knowing full well the upstart was about to prove what an atrocious show off he really was, looked down at the diagram. After staring at the complex pattern for several minutes he placed his paws flat on the floor to stop himself falling over. He was supposed to be seeing a schematic of the interior of the spaceship about seven hundred miles away, but none of it made sense. Walls, corridors and rooms couldn't curl up in a spiral like that - could they?

"Does that mean what I think it means?"

Hama nodded.

"Something is trying to get in from outside."

"Outside where?"

"Outside everything."

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN CRYSANTHE RAN she was back in the forests north of House Uella, crushing the black glass-sharded leaves under her bare feet, the wind freezing her face as she listened for the crystal drones. This star ship was so dangerous with its infinite spaces. Her dreams and memories fell too easily between her and the endless walls of rusted iron.

Somewhere to her left a twelve-foot-tall witch powered along a gantry in her exoskeleton, Selva Selvaggia riding piggy-back on Nem and holding the rifles so Crysanthé could run free. She leapt across a trench, scanning the shadows ahead for her quarry. The vault angled into the darkness. She spotted fresh clumps of rust snatched out of the floor. *Close. It came this way.* She should be terrified, having glimpsed the monster fleeing the settlement, but the precise discipline of the hunt filled her with joy. *I can still do this. I can still chase my own perfection.*

“Crys!”

She lifted her hand without breaking stride and caught the rifle, letting the momentum of its drop give her a boost as she sprinted towards the ragged hole in the wall ahead. Nem and Selva disappeared into the jumble of tunnels piercing the mile-thick bulkhead above, seeking to flank the beast.

Except the Abhumans had changed the internal con-

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figuration again. Instead of sloping up towards the next vault the corridor stretched down to an expanse of wooden planks thrown across a twisted frame. The fools kept reaching deep into the Body of God, looking to rescue those who dwelt in the shadowy interstices of the colossus. But the aeons had stripped those hidden night-refugees of their humanity - warping them into creatures driven by hunger and hatred - and now one of them was loose in the ship. Crysanthe froze, scanning for movement or any thickening of the darkness that might mark an enemy, rapid tactical diagrams clattering through her mind. She'd lose time - just seconds but enough. Their quarry had fled at speed. Selva and Nem would catch up easily and she knew they'd have little trouble overcoming it but she still wanted to be there when it happened.

She slung the rifle and hopped from plate to plate, sensing the shifting floor, sticking her arms out for balance as if trying to fly. A sheet of battered copper canted downward. She spotted a clear passageway half a dozen yards below so instead of jumping for the next foothold she let herself drop through a tangle of corroded cables.

Crysanthe landed at the edge of a soft fan of light spreading towards her from another archway a quarter of a mile ahead. She couldn't see what lay beyond, but there was no mistaking the sound of tearing skin and fur. The fierce disciplines in her head told her to wait for the others to arrive, but she didn't want to lose the thread of her childhood memories. She stalked through the opening into a domed hall so high it had its own cloud layer drifting half a mile below the cleated fish-scale ceiling.

It was at least as big as Nem, though now it squatted on the edge of a square pool so its boulder-sized knees flanked a head like melted plastic. Long ropy locks as thick as Crysanthe's thumb plastered wet skin the colour of crude oil. It held half an Abhuman in its fist and

tore at the corpse's neck with black teeth, mumbling to itself around the gobbets of meat. If its expression was anything to go by it wasn't enjoying the meal. As she watched it let the body drop and reached forward to scoop up water. It spat it out and, to her astonishment, started to cry, rocking back and forth on its heels as it keened to itself. Tears glistened on eyes that looked like sacs of congealed blood.

Crysanthe hesitated before bringing the rifle to her shoulder. Maybe the creature was intelligent after all, but it'd attacked the settlement as soon as Neke and his friends had plucked it from deep inside the Spinal Cord and for all she knew the idiot Abhumans had pulled more of these things into the ship. She aimed for the base of the creature's neck and fired, hoping for a clean execution.

It must have heard her, jerking round so the bullet clipped its shoulder. She shot it again, but the beast was hideously fast, ripping the rifle out of her hands. She jumped away but fell sprawling. It grabbed her leg, splattering her with grey blood from the new wound in its face, and swung her across the floor like a mop, claws tearing at her before letting go. Crysanthe hurtled over the uneven plates on her back. A splash and she was looking up at the ceiling through rust-clouded water. The bastard had tossed her into the pool and she was trapped.

She stayed submerged for as long as she could, waiting for a shadow to appear at the edge or slip in beside her. When she broke the surface her attacker still squatted at the far end. It chewed at the Abhuman corpse, watching her, oblivious to the pale threads running from the gashes on its shoulder and cheek. Shreds of oily skin hung down from its eye socket. Crysanthe realised it was either scared of the water, or just waiting for her to tire and drown. Tactics formed and reformed in her head as she riffled through a thousand battles and firefights. Her

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leg ached and a dark cloud gathered around her thigh. The pool stank of formaldehyde and stale iron, making her eyes water. Anger grew - at her own stupidity and the mutant that gnawed away at the carcass, staring at her as if it was her fault the Abhumans were inedible.

She hunted for inspiration. She didn't think she'd been badly injured, but was losing blood. Selva and Nem could be anywhere in this shifting labyrinth. No point waiting any longer. Crysanthe had no illusions about bargaining with the monster, especially after the carnage in the settlement. Three dead before they'd chased it into the depths of the ship. Once it'd given up on its meal she'd be next.

She risked a glance down and spotted a faint circle of light in the pool wall. The creature bent its head over its food, lost in misery for a second. Crysanthe hyperventilated and sank beneath the surface. A tube spiralled away, wide enough for her to fit. Through the acrid fuzz she saw rungs along the bottom and felt the current pushing her forwards. She grabbed one and hauled herself along. *One hundred and twenty yards in my lungs, then I die.* She counted them out in arm swings. When she hit ninety, long past the point of no return, the tube looped upwards for a short distance. Round grills set in the roof let her press her face against the metal and take in more air. Interlocked cogwheels as big as houses arched into the lightless void on all sides. It was so tempting just to lie there, cling to the bars and let the intricate patterns whirl her exhausted thoughts away, but even now the monster might be swimming after her.

At another hundred and thirty-five yards the pipe broke open into a channel that curved into a mist-filled hall. Crysanthe dragged herself half out of the water, almost blind with suffocation. During the last few moments of life she could have sworn the tunnel's walls had

turned to glass, and smeared faces with open mouths had tracked her convulsive scramble. She didn't recognise any of them. The air roaring back into her lungs was sharp with ammonia but she no longer cared. She rolled onto her hands and knees and stood up.

The claw marks on her thigh looked ugly, but at least the bleeding had stopped and she guessed that the chemicals in the water had pickled any bacteria from the monster's talons, but she didn't have any weapons and was lost. She left the stream and limped towards the wall rearing up into the mist half a mile away. Dark shapes suggested doors or holes. Crysanthe had a rough map in her head from the distances and directions she'd travelled so far, and reckoned she knew the rough orientation of the settlement and the centre of the ship – unless Neke and his friends decided to twist everything around again and snatch more demons from inside God's torso.

A corrugated steel plate fell into the room with a crash and the creature stepped through, blood eyes staring into hers with relentless hatred. Crysanthe turned and sprinted back towards the pipe. A futile move. Even if she swam back against that current she'd just end up in the pool again. Her injured leg gave and she stumbled. Feet slapped the ground behind her and she dropped sideways into a reverse roll. Cloth ripped and pain drew train tracks down her back. When she came back up the creature was pacing slowly round her, chuckling to itself. It held bloody shreds of battle canvas in its fist. Crysanthe started to jog backwards. The beast cocked its head and grinned with long black teeth before loping in pursuit. It wasn't even trying.

"You shut us down in the darkness, you skin people oh so bright beneath your lovely skies. You buried us among the filth and the poison and the old machines and the chemicals." Its voice was achingly beautiful - the se-

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ductive contralto of a trained opera singer.

"We're going to save you, save you all," said Crysanthe. "This ship carries part of God's mind. Once he's awake he'll take us all through the God Door and you'll walk across fields and beaches under new suns."

"Liar."

Its arm lunged out further than was decent and hooked another rent across her stomach. More blood welled between the ripped webbing. The creature licked its finger and grimaced.

"Tainted flesh and foul water."

The mist grew thicker and Crysanthe found it hard to focus on her enemy. She was shaking badly now, trying to keep her thoughts together against the exhaustion and pain. In this fog she'd have little forewarning before the next attack.

It jumped for her, talons held high. A metal claw grabbed her round the waist and threw her backwards. She hit the floor, smacking the back of her skull against the thick rust. She had a confused impression of machine arms and black oil twisting over each other in a tangled mess. Something shrieked and there was a sound like a chicken leg being wrenched from a carcass.

Nem held the beast's head in both hands. She turned it this way and that before tossing it to one side and slapping the palms of her metal hands together as if wiping off the dirt.

"I hate monsters. They're all ungrateful shits."

As Crysanthe clambered to her feet Selva jumped down from her perch on the witch's shoulders and sprinted towards her. She ran her hands over Crysanthe's leg, stomach and back before teasing her hair apart and hissing at what she found. Clearly satisfied that her lover wasn't going to die immediately she pushed her exquisite face into Crysanthe's, pale blue eyes burning, and shouted.

“You fucking *idiot!* You almost got yourself killed.”

For a second Crysanthe was too stunned to respond. Without thinking she became General Uella again, facing down breath-taking impudence from one of her very own Companions. She instinctively went to slap the girl, hard, but Selva caught her arm and pushed it away. Once upon a time she'd have broken the neck of anyone who dared to treat her like this, but now all she could do was stand open-mouthed and trembling. Unbelievably her eyes filled with tears. Selva stalked back to where Nem was poking at the corpse with a metal-spined foot and pretending to be deaf.

Crysanthe rode on Nem's back while the girl walked beside. She'd calmed down enough to stare at the top of her partner's exquisitely tattooed skull and worry. *You are my anchor in the storm of this universe.* The general had been completely alone, abandoned to die, face smashed in and body full of alien parasites. When all had been lost, calm, knowing Selva Selvaggia stepped out of the shadows and reawakened a love so fragile and terrified she'd thought it gone forever. The Companion from Splenius never got angry. She might get tight round the mouth once in a while, or let a flash of irritation show in those stunning eyes, but it rarely lasted. Crysanthe had never seen her rage like this. Had she really been so stupid in chasing after the monster without waiting? Did she deserve such contempt? She was a warrior for God's sake, they both were. *If I lose you I lose everything.*

“This is the third time we've had intruders in the ship.” said Selva, as calm as you please, though the muscles still bunched in her jaw. Crysanthe longed to reach out to touch her, even though her sudden sense of vulnerability made her angry and ashamed.

“The ship is snatching chunks out of the depths of

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God's body," answered Nem.

"It's the Abhumans," said the general. "Tell them they've got to stop trying to save monsters."

The witch gave a deranged chuckle.

"The scallywags won't listen to me."

Crysanthe opened her eyes again to find herself snoring into the back of Nem's enormous head. The woman smelt of sandalwood. She sat up, leaving a patch of drool in the witch's hair, and saw they'd returned to the Abhuman settlement. Most of the creatures had gathered around the map room. The rest looked down at her from the balconies and holes in the walls of a wide shaft that stretched upwards for two miles. Crysanthe stepped gingerly down, refusing Selva's hand, and limped into the hall. Max Ocel, Abby Fabrice and Nem's sister Ioam stood beside three shrouded corpses at the edge of the lead chart. Neke and five other Abhumans huddled over the frosted metal, scratching signs with bright pins.

"What was it?" asked Max, staring at her injuries. Abby whistled.

"You look like you've been pissed on by a giant."

Crysanthe ignored her.

"It was human," said Selva, stepping into the room behind her. "All the creatures in the depths are human. The long wait has transformed them in the same way it changed the Abhumans."

"It spoke to me. I think it was just hungry and thirsty, and lonely too," added Crysanthe.

"So you killed it," said Abby.

Max rolled his eyes and pointed at the corpses. Abby shrugged and sniffed. Crysanthe hoped sheer exhaustion would keep her own rising anger at bay. She'd had enough run-ins with Abby Fabrice to know that the only way she'd ever get any peace was by murdering the insufferable shit.

"What if there's more?" asked Ioam.

Neke broke away from the other Abhumans and loped towards them, clicking his claws and tongue.

"There will be no more from that region. We have closed access. Those creatures are too far gone to be brought out of the darkness," translated Abby.

"You've got to stop this," Crysanthe said to the creature. It looked at her with billiard ball eyes filled with her own haggard and bloody reflection. She tried to become General Uella, wincing as she pulled her shoulders back. At least Neke had the grace to hunch down a bit in awe.

"Stop yanking places out of the body of God. You know our mission is too important to run these risks. We've no idea what's hiding in there."

"No. We want to bring people into the light, as the Brittle Hag did to us, so they too can walk beneath new suns."

"Unleashing monsters into the ship threatens everything." She sensed the humans stiffen at her tone of voice but Neke just stared back in what looked like the Abhuman equivalent of placid interest.

"They're not monsters," clicked the creature. Max swore.

"I am King Max. I order you to stop," he shouted.

"Nice one," said Abby.

This was getting nowhere.

"The centre of the ship is stable," ventured Neke. "Where this realm intersects with the old universe you will be safe."

"If you discount all the giants and villains waiting for us back there," said Abby.

Crysanthe turned to Selva. The girl looked as calm and attentive as ever. It threw her for a moment and she couldn't shake from her mind the desperate fury she'd seen in the woman's eyes a few hours ago.

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"We'll move back to our old quarters."

Selva nodded.

"As you wish."

It was at times like these that Crysanthe really wished she'd kept a few of the crushed suns inside her to mend her injuries. She sat naked on the bed in their cabin while Selva sewed up the gashes in her thigh and stomach, occasionally letting her feelings be known with a sudden yank of the needle. Crysanthe suffered in silence, refusing to be drawn. At length the girl leaned forwards and bit off the end of the thread. She stared silently at the wound for a while before dipping down to plant a soft kiss between her patient's legs. But when she looked up her face was hard and her eyes filled with tears.

"I thought I'd lost you."

"I'm General Crysanthe Uella, Commander of the Dogs. We are the Athanatoi of the Empire of the Ear, remember? One slobbering demon pulled out of God's guts isn't going to kill me," she answered, though underneath the bluster she suddenly felt ashamed. She reached forward and lifted the girl's chin with her finger.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't go into the ship anymore. You don't need to."

Selva really was upset. She'd never known her Companion like this before and it shocked her. The girl took her hand and pressed it to her own cheek as if she held the most precious thing in the universe.

"Why?"

"I've seen what it does to you. Whenever we enter those infinite spaces, those halls and corridors and mazes, you're happier than I've ever seen you before and the further you go, the worse it gets. It's as if you want to run away from us all, from me, lose yourself among all that iron and steel and emptiness."

Crysanthe let her hand drop. Was it true? The Brittle Hag's ship did fascinate her. On the outside it looked like a crude metal disc with a single letterbox window, but the interior spiralled out into an infinite universe far beyond their own threadbare reality. The Abhumans lived in this trans-dimensional realm, endlessly mapping its configuration on a lead sheet grown to half a mile on each side. They used their knowledge to snatch lumps out of the body of God and store them in the immense halls, vaults, pits and caverns - to what purpose? No-one could get a sensible explanation out of them, not even Nem who, of all of them, was closest to these infuriating creatures. They were looking for something, but they didn't seem to know what.

Anyone with half a brain would have avoided the vessel all together. It was a never-ending chaos and now its inhabitants were cheerfully adding monsters to the mix in the crazed belief it was their duty to rescue mankind's cast-offs. But it was also the only ship fast and tough enough to carry its passengers to the other side of the Head so they could enter the western ear and finally make contact with Theuderic and his Machine Men. They had no choice but to travel in it and hope Neke and his friends didn't end up turning the whole thing inside out along the way.

Yet that wasn't why Crysanthe had been spending ever more time inside the vessel, journeying further and further with the others, or once or twice on her own. The immensity of this realm that existed - where? - fascinated her. There was always another hall, another corridor, another door to step through, each bigger than the last until she stood at the edge of rooms as big as worlds where clouds threaded between mountains of scrap. Today, when she'd chased the beast, it had felt so natural to be there, the walls blurring into an abstract canvas on which

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she could paint her memories and her longing.

Chasing crystal drones through the forests of Catagen.

She'd been a warrior and a scion of one of the greatest houses of Long Lock. All gone. She'd briefly been Empress of the Ear. All gone. The Empire itself was now a federation with Thin Hans of Splenius and her brother Bauto leading the interim government and the Companions acting as a transitional administration. The crushed stars left behind after the siege of the AntiHelix - the intelligent microscopic suns that had powered the armies of Ombratulla, Belsalice and Ruth - went back to their own time having discovered what horrors they'd been party to, vowing never to return. Once they'd filled her own mind with their helpful chatter, now it was silent. Everything had fallen away - home, titles, family, triumphs and honours. Was that why the ship called to her? Did its abstract emptiness and dancing shadows echo the naked cipher Crysanthe Uella had become? She looked into Selva's eyes. The girl watched her closely, trying to guess her thoughts.

"Even if the empire has gone and you're empress no more, we will still have to treat with Theuderic, or whoever or whatever stands between us and the God Door," said Selva. "You must do it. We can't lose you."

"Why me?" asked Crysanthe, genuinely puzzled.

"You are Crysanthe Uella. You are the best of us."

She was about to give a sarcastic answer but saw the message in the girl's eyes, remembered the desperate fear and anger in her lover's face when Nem rescued her from the monster, and relented. She teased the girl up into her embrace without thinking and yelped in pain. In the end they had to make love at arms' length so as not to tear any stitches, laughing at the frustration of it. Long afterwards Crysanthe, forgiven, kissed the sleeping girl on the top of the head and gave her a silent promise not to disappear

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into the ship. Yet in her dreams, she raced barefoot and alone over iron bridges and along cliffs that angled out over continents of metal plating and shattered glass, an entire universe of nothing calling to her.

CHAPTER TWO

MAX STOOD AT the window watching God's skin roll beneath the ship. Even though the Abhumans had taken over the navigation of the vessel with their insane mathematics he wanted to feel as if he still had some semblance of control. They drifted over the boundary between the Sternocleidomastoid and the Omohyoid muscles. To the north God's jaw formed a cliff eighteen thousand miles high. This craft could have reached the other side of the Head in a day or two, but there were too many unknowns, too many uncertainties ahead. Neke and Nem said they were approaching something - a fundamental rift in space-time that lay between them and the west. Max could sense it in the air, a tightening of reality that made his teeth ache and crammed him further into himself.

He was exhausted, spending as much time awake as possible. He didn't want to dream in case he returned to the garden marking the boundary between his mind and the deity's. Max was terrified he'd alert Belsalice and Ombratulla and through him they'd find his daughter and the fragment of Bassandis, or Ihanna the Machine Man would learn that the giant's soul was inside his unborn child's head and it was Abby, not he, who needed to be torn apart to rebuild God. They should never have joined the expedition. In the last night in Splenius he'd had

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the choice of running away from all this and living out the rest of his days with Abby in some far-flung realm - down by the feet perhaps, or beyond. But the ghost of his bastard of a father pushed him on - *stone duty* - and Abby agreed. God only knew what demented self-destructive urge she chased. He fumed, fingers tightening around the dead ball of the control stick. Cretins, both of them. What kind of responsible parents would they make if and when Rebecca ever turned up?

“Max?”

He jumped. Ihanna the Machine Man stood at the entrance to the cockpit, watching him with her prison-window eyes, a shard of exactness in the light from the corridor. *Act normal*. It was so hard with the aching fatigue clutching at the edge of his mind. Whatever happened he didn't want her inside his head. The second he stepped back into the garden he'd no doubt she'd be there, and if Rebecca turned up to say hello she and her mother were doomed. But perhaps Ihanna had already visited. Anselm found no problem entering Max's thoughts to have a rummage around when the fancy took him.

She stood beside him on steel pinion legs and looked out at the night landscape. As they'd ascended the side of the Neck, following the curve towards the Thyroid, the lights below had faded away. Unlike the radiant chaos of the Abdomen, God's throat was an empty wilderness lit by the occasional glowing mist or single light amid thousands of miles of nothing. Whoever or whatever built the colossal fabric of the Anterior Triangle were long gone - more empires and kingdoms crumbling under the weight of a million years of the Great Task.

“An ancient realm,” murmured Ihanna.

Two beacons hundreds of leagues apart drifted beneath the spacecraft. Max wondered if anybody still lived there and, if so, what they had become. Far to the south a

single arc of purple lightning illuminated the arches of a broken viaduct seventy miles high.

"Has Bassandis contacted you since we left the Anti-Helix?"

Max kept his eyes fixed on a guttering flame on a mountain side as it crawled towards them.

"No."

The last time he spoke with the giant was in a gazebo spun from black diamond in a garden inside his daughter's mind. He'd told no-one but Abby.

"I can't enter the Mind. Belsalice and Ombratulla are watching and we Machine Men don't have minds capable of protecting us like you God Talkers. We always interfaced directly with God's soul, and that means we're exposed."

"Can they harm you?"

"Once I would have said no," answered Ihanna. Thankfully she kept her gaze on the landscape outside. Right now he felt as if he had a map of Rebecca's whereabouts tattooed across his face for all to see.

"But with these alien powers they brought out of deep time - the science and the energies of all those crushed suns," continued Ihanna. "God knows what they're capable of now."

A long silence fell between them. Max hunted for an excuse to leave that wouldn't look too obvious. As always the first thing he wanted to do after talking with the Machine Man was find Abby to make sure she was still alive - a stupid anxiety, but he'd already thought he'd lost her twice and couldn't go through that again.

"Why are they filled with such unrelenting hate?"

The question took him by surprise. Ihanna was as still and precise as ever, but he could have sworn he detected a desperate sadness behind her diffident tone.

"Because we killed Bassandis, and Ruth egged them

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on to vengeance?" he suggested.

"The murder of their brother was a crime, but not one that warranted the slaughter and enslavement of thousands, or this urge to turn God against his makers. If Ombratulla and Belsalice can feel such loathing, and be so cruel in executing revenge, something is fundamentally wrong with the mind of God. It's flawed somehow, and we Machine Men have failed."

Max had no answer.

"I only hope Lord Theuderic can bring them back," finished Ihanna, speaking to no-one in particular. Max sensed a chance to slip away but as he turned to go Ioam and Nem came into the cabin. Thankfully the mad sister had taken off her exoskeleton and put some clothes on. Her outfit had been created by Thin Hans' favourite designer. She wore striped stockings, a leather miniskirt, rubber bodice and blue ruff, and her hair fountained up above her head in a three foot pony tail.

"We know what's ahead," said Ioam.

"A symmetry line," added Nem.

Max had no idea what she was talking about.

"The bones of force that hold God together are mirrored along a central axis. We're about to pass through it," explained the more stable witch.

"And?"

Max noticed Ihanna watching Ioam intently. This didn't sound promising.

"We might get turned inside out, or scrunched up very very very *very* small," Nem circled her finger and thumb and peeped at him through the hole. "Or we could just explode. Maybe the western side of God is made of antimatter and the symmetry line keeps us apart for a reason."

"If it extends through the whole body why didn't we come across it at the Umbilical Ocean?" asked Max.

"Either Leontine kept her Steel Sphere east of the boundary, or you did pass through it but her world protected you," said Ioam.

"Are we safer here or back in the Abhumans' universe?"

"Mr Furry told me to tell you all to stay here," said Nem.

A hand slipped into Max's and with a jolt of panic he saw Abby beside him, chewing the inside of her cheek and squinting at the jumbled chaos of God's throat.

"We're not stopping," she asked. "Are we?"

"Not unless we're planning on giving up," said Ioam. "I'm guessing there's no other way of getting to Theuderic except through the other ear."

Ihanna nodded.

"If you humans want to prepare yourselves I'll stand watch here. As far as I know Machine Men can pass between the two sides of God's body without injury. I doubt it will harm you, but it might not be pleasant."

As far as you know? Max assumed Ihanna was as all-knowing and wise as Anselm had appeared to be, and in constant contact with the Kingdom of the Machine Men deep inside the Heart and Head. Yet she talked like an exile, as if her understanding of her own people came from memories and part-remembered folk tales.

"If we carry on at this speed we'll hit the symmetry line in about an hour," Ioam was saying. She jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "We'll sit in our bower with pillows over our heads. I suggest you do whatever might bring you comfort."

They left the cabin but Max chased after Ioam, catching up with her at the entrance to her room. The ceilings in the ship's hub were too low for the sisters so she sat on a leather scatter cushion and worked at the nape of her neck with fingers as long as Max's forearm, wincing

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with relief.

"I want to get Bassandis back into my own mind," he said after checking to make sure Ihanna still stood sentinel on the bridge.

"How are you going to do that? You haven't a clue where he is." The fingers stopped kneading. "Have you?"

She glanced in the direction of the control room.

"You don't trust the machines. Can't say I blame you. I've had enough of creatures we make only to have them rebel against us. All creations chafe against their creators, why should these be any different? They may claim to serve mankind, but do they really?"

She waggled her head from side to side and her vertebrae cracked like snapping branches.

"If Bassandis goes back inside your mind what's to stop them killing you to get him out?" Her eyes narrowed. "So the only reason you'd want that is to protect someone else. Abigail."

She spotted his alarm.

"We're God Talkers, Max. We look after each other. That clockwork bitch can drop dead. But Abby's not one of us so how come Bassandis is inside her?"

"He isn't, he's hiding in our baby's head."

"Fuck me." Ioam put her long white hands to her piranha mouth.

"It's worse than that," said Max. She'd guessed enough for him to realise there was no going back, so as quickly and as softly as he could he explained about Rebecca, how she was conceived in the next universe and filled with energies from that reality.

"She's the new power in God's mind. She pulled Abby in to save me when Ombratulla and Belsalice tried to capture me. Bassandis is in her garden, but if the Machine Men find out they'll kill Abby and Rebecca to extract him. If I can get him back into my mind they'll be safe."

Ioam stared at Max in silence. She was terrifying with her blazing almond eyes and shark's teeth grin, and she'd toyed with the idea of killing him once or twice, but he reckoned he'd been through enough with her by now to trust her not to betray him to Ihanna.

"Come to get stuff ready," Nem announced, squeezing in through the hatchway.

"What's the Machine Man doing?" asked Ioam.

"Staring out of the window mumbling to herself."

Ioam told her sister to shut the door.

"Bassandis is inside Max's baby's head and he wants to take him out so Ihanna and her friends don't kill Abby or the bairn."

So much for confidences. Ioam caught Max's expression.

"Calm down, it's Nem. She's a God Talker. I'd trust her with my life and so should you." A thought struck her. "Bassandis can come and stay in my mind palace. I owe nothing to the future and everything I ever loved has gone except Nem. Perhaps Sorameistre waits from me in the west but I think she'll be as cruel and indifferent as the others."

"Why doesn't he live in my whirly sphere house?" asked Nem.

"No," said Ioam. "Absolutely not. He's been traumatised enough already."

Nem sniffed and started to bundle up cushions and random pieces of bric-a-brac.

"You'd really take Bassandis into your head?" asked Max, trying not to sound too desperate. Ioam nodded.

"The problem's getting him from Rebecca's garden to your palace," continued Max. "He'll have to traverse the Mind. Belsalice and Ombratulla will be looking out for him."

Nem lifted her sharp bladed face to the ceiling and

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sniffed again.

“We’re here. Better get ready.”

Max went to find Abby. She was prepping herself for the encounter with the symmetry line by stretching - though he couldn’t see how that would help if reality itself was about to flip. He guessed it was yet another diversion to fill her mind. The interior of the Brittle Hag’s ship drove her crazy with boredom. She got some solace from adventuring in the trans-dimensional realms, but Max understood the real reason for her long periods of truculent brooding. She was supposed to be pregnant - eleven months gone, but the only signs of a child were random visions and an increase in bloody-mindedness.

Abby sat cross-legged on the bed and poked for the umpteenth time at her abdomen with her finger. Such a look of woe crossed her face that it broke Max’s heart. He shuffled beside her and enfolded her in his arms. She clung to him as if he was about to be torn away.

“Ioam will take Bassandis into her mind, if we can get him there. That’ll mean you and Rebecca will be out of danger.”

She snorted into his chest.

“We’re about to fly through a rent in space-time in a starship full of monsters, towards a showdown with three mad giants. I’ve got this thing inside me doing God knows what.”

He took her face in his hands.

“It’s our child.”

“Yeah, right. You’ve spoken to her, visited her mind garden or whatever it’s called. I met her once in a dream.”

“Surgeon Tali showed us on her scanners.” A nub of flesh no bigger than a finger nail. He guessed it was a foetus and the doctor had assured him everything appeared normal, if you discounted the vision of the four-year-old from a new universe playing a children’s game with a

titan in a suit. Abby pressed her face against his neck.

"I don't know Max. I don't know what to think anymore. I feel as if we're just bobbing along like corks to our own destruction."

It started in his feet. Abby gave a muffled shriek. Max recognised the sensation immediately - it was exactly the same as when the Brittle Hag forced her way through the hull of Leontine's ship in her distortion sphere, pulling Max after her. Someone was simultaneously scraping every millimetre of his skin with a razor blade. It passed over his body in an unbearable loop while the fabric of the ship boomed and rang like a steel plate flexed to the limits of endurance. As the symmetry line sliced through his eyeballs he had a brief vision of chaos, as if the entire universe had been flayed and nailed to a spinning infinite-dimension grid. He heard Nem give a whoop of fear and delight like a child tipping over the brow of a roller-coaster. With a final ear-splitting chime the spacecraft broke free and silence poured through the corridors. Abby peeled her sweat-soaked face away from his shirt, panting hard. Ioam leaned against the door, eyes showing white around their irises.

"You OK?"

Max nodded.

"Nem wants to do it again," said the witch. "I said no."

When they'd untangled themselves and got used to the idea they were still alive, and the ship intact, Max led the others to the cabin where Ihanna stood as precise as ever, looking out over the nightscape. If the transition had affected her in any way she didn't show it. She nodded into the distance.

"There."

A red light winked at the base of a mountain range built out of jumbled cubes. It just looked like another random spark to Max.

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“What about it?”

“It’s a beacon. It’s repeating a pattern with enough variation to suggest intelligence behind it. It started shortly after we crossed the symmetry line.”

“An SOS or fuck-off?” asked Abby.

“I don’t know,” answered the Machine Man.

“Worth investigating?” Max’s gaze met Abby’s. *A distraction from your unhappiness?*

Crysanthe and Selva came into the cabin, holding hands in a white-knuckled grip. Selva appeared as composed as ever but the general had a wild look about her.

“We should carry on and not waste any more time,” she managed to say.

That was enough for Abby.

“I think we should definitely go and check it out.”

Before the shouting started Ihanna spoke up.

“We’ve no idea what lies before us. If there are living creatures here they can give us valuable intelligence. Besides, we have a duty to help whatever is there if they’re in need.”

“Do we?” asked Ioam. “Since when?”

In the end they outvoted Crysanthe. As the Brittle Hag’s vessel approached the mountain range Max saw a tower in the centre of a cluster of domes that looked part-melted. The scattered radiance from the emergency beacon fell across a net of blue-black cables, as if someone had knitted baskets from a giant’s hair, turned them upside down and kicked them out of shape. At first he thought they’d suffered an attack but quickly realised they’d been built that way. Smears of yellow and purple ovals might have been windows, but otherwise the station looked deserted. Certain angles and shapes in the complex tugged at his mind, awaking vague memories he couldn’t place.

“I think it’s Black Rose,” said Ihanna.

The memory of Odilon bursting into a fountain of tattered soot filled Max's thoughts with howling panic. He made for the controls so he could angle the craft over the mountains and hit maximum speed before any of those dark-feathered bastards came after them, but Abby grabbed his arm. What was she doing?

"You're joking," he said. "One of those creatures slaughtered the Philosophers. Anselm barely overcame him - there might be hundreds in there."

"That was Odilon," said Abby. "He's dead."

He'd seen that face before - the mix of desperate longing and total loathing at the thought of meeting a creature who'd betrayed her entire childhood. Odilon had dangled vile lies and promises of salvation with his alien deity in front of her, claiming he did it out of love.

"And who's to say they aren't all against us?" he asked.

"There's no reason to assume that every Black Rose has turned on humanity," said Ihanna. "There's nothing stopping them from destroying our god and condemning mankind to the eternal night. If they were united they would have done so aeons ago. It sounds as if your enemy was a rogue agent."

"He spoke of others," said Abby.

"If you're worried, I'll enter the structure alone. You can take this vessel to a safe distance."

"We need you to guide us to Theuderic. I forbid it," said Crysanthe. Abby snorted and muttered something abusive.

Max felt fur on his arm and saw that Neke and a couple of other Abhumans had floated silently in. The creature had a cut on the side of his bread-loaf head, no doubt from the earthquakes caused by the symmetry line.

"It's abandoned," he clicked. "We had a look."

"You've already been inside?" asked Max after a few seconds silence.

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"We wanted to test our ability to reach out into this universe after we passed through the rift. No problems at all."

"You created a portal into a Black Rose base and went and had a sniff around?"

By now he'd realised that Abhumans had difficulty reading tone of voice and tended to take everything he said at face value. He guessed Neke wore the equivalent of a chirpy grin, which made him look like a cross between a slavering wolf-hound and a giant spider.

"Show us," said Abby, treading on Max's foot in case he made the mistake of telling her she had to stay behind.

Neke led them into the trans-real dimensions of the ship. Whatever they'd passed through had shaken the internal layout like puzzle pieces in a tin, and nothing was the same as before. The passageway from the hub turned into a maze of narrow wooden-slatted corridors followed by ravines that fell into darkness, spanned by arched bridges of woven copper. Once in a while the Abhumans paused, listening, and Max heard the distant sound of metal, stone, wood and ceramics breaking apart and re-assembling in titanic shapes as the effect of the symmetry line continued to ripple outward through eternity. When they reached the settlement, now resting on a perfectly circular plateau three miles across, Max found the entire adult population crammed into the map hall scribbling away on their hands and knees. At the far end, a dozen creatures unrolled a two-yard wide bale of lead while four more carefully soldered its long edge to the chart.

They're updating their maps.

After Ioam pulled her clothes off and clambered back into her exoskeleton the Abhumans took them another half mile to a wall filled with odd-angled doorways and vents. After apparently picking one out at random they

led the party along a sloping passageway that snaked back and forwards through what looked like solid mahogany. It eventually changed into a brittle, greasy plastic weave - a smaller version of the citadel's outer walls. A hundred yards from the exit, in a steady draft of acid-tainted mist flowing up the tunnel from the dark violet-lit space beyond, they checked their weapons and Crysanthe told them they'd execute something called bounding overwatch.

"Bollocks to that," said Abby, pushing past her. Max hurried to keep up, the general's curses ringing in his ears and the ground under his feet vibrating as Nem followed. He stepped out onto a cracked concrete floor beneath a domed space criss-crossed with an immense tangle of cables, each as thick as his body. His first guess was that it was wreckage, but a closer look revealed impossible complexity. It reminded him of the four-dimensional map Pell had used to navigate their way out of Interosseus. Maybe this was a bigger version. It looped and writhed in knots, spirals and curlicues, stretching into the half dozen tunnels leading to the rest of the base.

Neke scampered down a curving passageway with Abby and Nem while Crysanthe and Selva followed on behind, sighting down their rifles as they jogged soundlessly through the shadows. Max ran to catch up. He prayed the Abhuman was right, and the Black Rose station really was abandoned.

CHAPTER THREE

AFTER A HUNDRED yards the corridor turned into a tube, the flat concrete floor replaced by the same undulating weave as the walls and ceiling. The pipe filled up with clutter. At first a few machines lay scattered here and there - dark metallised boxes with indicators, switches and dials, clusters of tubes banded with copper and spheres of midnight-blue glass. Max threaded his way between, following a curve to find the others standing in front of a wall of artefacts and crates blocking the bottom half of the passageway. Above their heads the cats' cradle webbing disappeared into the purple gloom, shimmering like a network of blood vessels filled with indigo oil.

"Warehouse? Supply depot?" asked Abby. Nem plunged her metal hand into a box lid and wrenched it open. Books and papers spilled out - paperbacks, leather volumes, sheaves of manuscript tied with string, ring-bound manuals with plastic pages grown yellow at the edges. While Abby and Ioam leafed through a couple Max read the spines - *Blackmail or War? The Current Great Illusion, You and the Refugee, Must War Spread?* Earnest self-help masking tendentious, patronising rubbish. They had all the hallmarks of his father's Department of Social Wisdom and every other petty dictator's bureaucracy besides. Crysanthe clearly thought the same. She showed one to Selva, who shook her head with a laugh before the

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general tossed it back onto the heap. More crates yielded bales of wool and corroded tins of an unidentifiable meat. *Rations and supplies*. For who? Max doubted the Black Roses needed any of this - had they abandoned this facility so that others could take it over and use it as a way station?

Nem powered over the wall, returning a few minutes later to tell them that the stacks stretched as far as she could see. If they were going any further they'd have to scramble along the tops of the boxes. Max spotted movement in the web above but when he sighted along his carbine, heart smacking against the chrome stock, he saw three Abhumans scrambling through the cables on all fours like tree cats. They dropped down and one by one half-carried, half-led the humans up to join Nem. Ihanna sprang from lid to lid on her needle legs at breakneck speed.

"Still think this is Black Rose?" asked Max.

She gestured at the web above their heads.

"That has their signature, but I don't understand why they were stockpiling all this."

Crysanthe asked Neke again if he was sure the station was abandoned. Despite his cheery nod she told Selva and Nem to guard their rear.

"Max, Ioam and Ihanna, come with me. I'll run point, you take flank."

Abby gave her a *what about me?* look. Crysanthe looked her up and down and shrugged.

"Do what you want."

The general set off along the passageway. Max had to clamp Abby's arms to her sides, and by the time she'd calmed down the other three were twenty yards ahead. He sprinted after them, stumbling and barking his shins on the edge of mothballed machines coated in concrete dust.

After half an hour's exhausting scramble, made worse by the cheerful ease with which the Abhumans tripped through the web overhead, the boxes stopped at a junction. Two refuse-choked corridors led away to Max's right but the one ahead was clear. It was much smaller than the main conduit and looked designed for foot traffic. The shining cradle ended at the wall above the entrance. Crysanthe crept forward, Abby stalking her shadow to make a point. Max followed, but after a dozen paces he trod on something soft. One of the occupants must have left a rug or blanket on the floor - a ragged heap the colour of black onyx. Puzzled, he prodded it with his gun. The material looked paper thin and petalled. *Seething petals*. He remembered his hands sinking into the boiling mass of Odilon's Black Rose body as he fought with the traitor on a chain two miles above Metacarpi. He jumped back, stomach churning in disgust, ready to empty his magazine into the tattered mass just as Abby yelled out.

"MAX! GET IN HERE!"

He sprinted after her. The tunnel opened onto a domed junction. Machines rested against the walls, lights shining on a few consoles. The rest of the group gathered in front of a translucent teardrop hanging from a sheath of twisted cables like a giant's earring. It was as if the unholy engines had brought Max's memories to life, for inside stood Odilon the Watcher, his hands pressed against the curving wall. Without thinking Max shouldered his gun and fired half a dozen rounds at the Black Rose. Although the creature winced away from the impacts the bullets didn't even mark the pod's surface. Crysanthe kicked his elbow. His arm went dead, and he dropped the weapon. Ioam hoisted him up by the collar so he had to balance on tiptoes. He heard Abby's frantic swearing and saw that the sorceress had his partner in the same grip on the other side. Nem powered into the room, kicking up a clatter of

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sparks with her steel feet. Selva straddled her shoulders.

"Selva. Cover those two idiots," the general told her.

The girl jumped down and levelled her carbine at Max's head. Her ice eyes glittered and Max realised the bitch would have few qualms about pulling the trigger if her lover so ordered it. He tried to paint a semblance of reason on his face.

"Ioam, it's OK."

"Better be," she said, letting him drop. Even so she kept her right hand clamped over his shoulders, fingers on either side of his neck and nails poised over his heart.

"This creature killed Bassandis, and slaughtered countless others including the Philosophers working with the Steel Queen." said Max, as slowly as he could manage. Odilon's penny-coloured gaze bored into his eyes. *But you died. You fell into a raw wormhole. Nothing survives that.*

"Go on," said Selva, her gun never wavering.

"This is Odilon the Watcher, my father's best friend. The two of them found Bassandis in the Wasteland, but my father didn't know what he was. The Black Rose fooled him into thinking he'd discovered a weapon to defend the city. They imprisoned the titan, and when Alaric turned up with the fleet they set Bassandis loose so the ships would destroy him. Odilon killed my father, and before that he murdered my mother when I was two years old."

"So this is the total bastard," said Ioam. "Obliterate it."

"How?" asked Abby. That brought Max up short. Underneath the defeatism and contempt in her voice he detected an odd hunger. Did she want to keep this monster alive? Did she still have feelings for it, after all its betrayal, all that had happened?

"We came across him again in the Steel Queen's sphere. He told us that Leontine was building a wormhole to

bypass the God Door using the Philosophers to run the equations she needed. He wants to stop humanity getting into the next universe, so after trying to destroy part of God's mind he slew the Philosophers and wrecked the Queen's experiment, destroying her kingdom in the process. He tried to kill me, but Anselm fought with him and they both fell into the rift."

"Max. I don't think that's Odilon."

Abby's comment silenced everyone in the room. Max pushed Ioam's hand away and took a few steps towards the pod. Abby joined him. Selva paced alongside, rifle still pointing at his temple, angled so the bullet would pass through both their heads.

"They're shape changers, remember? We saw Odilon transform into different people in Anselm's city."

Was she right? God, but it did look like the treacherous shit - those copper eyes and that rubber-mask face throwing your feelings back at you even as he wormed under your skin.

"Odilon couldn't have survived that wormhole," he said. But even if this wasn't Odilon, the Black Roses were dangerous and powerful, and their motives growing darker as the last night fell.

"Leave it," he decided. "If it's trapped it can stay there."

The creature's mouth moved, though the translucent crystal blocked all sound.

"...and imprisoned me." said Ihanna. She studied the being's face. "Your god is in great danger. Set me free and I will intercede on your behalf with my god," the Machine Man lip-read.

"Yeah right," muttered Abby.

"Why have you taken that form?" asked Max.

"He can't hear us," said Ioam. Nem walked up to the pendant and tapped the surface with her claw. It rang out

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like a cymbal.

"When Anselm first met Odilon he spoke with him in my mind garden, trapping him under a glass," Max explained to Ihanna. "The Black Rose was terrified. Can you control the creature if we release him?"

He expected Abby to have a fit ... but was that the start of a grin on her face? It looked frightful. God only knew what she was planning if she got near the alien.

"Maybe Max is right," said Selva. "If we can't destroy it and it's trapped we should leave. It's too risky to mess with."

"I want to know what happened to the other Black Roses," said Ihanna. Max told her about the one he'd stepped on, and Nem dragged the corpse in like a discarded rug leaving a sooty trail behind her. Memories of the struggle on the iron link washed over him, making the room sway. The witch held up a cluster of three yellow boxes with a tube running through their centres.

"Found this underneath. Looks like it's still working."

Ihanna took the device and pointed it at the imprisoned Black Rose. It stepped back from the glass with its hands up.

So now we have something you fear, thought Max.

"Basilus did this," the creature said through Ihanna. "He killed Tanieates and imprisoned me."

The Machine Man turned to the others.

"If we're going to talk properly with this creature, we'll have to let him out. Finding out why the Black Roses are turning against mankind could be just as important as restoring God's mind."

"We saw Odilon tear apart two dozen people," said Max. "Even Anselm struggled to contain it."

Ihanna faced him and her bland, inhuman expression unnerved him.

"I have this." She held up the weapon.

“OK, let’s do it,” declared Crysanthe in a tone Max had come to recognise as her imperial commander voice. It always yanked a wire inside his head, making him pull his shoulders up a fraction. Abby just rolled her eyes.

Under Nem’s direction the Abhumans swarmed over the cable, tracking it back to one of the machines humming against the wall. The Black Rose, speaking through Ihanna, coached them through half a dozen steps Max didn’t understand until the weave started to unravel and the crystal dropped end over end to the floor, the alien remaining upright throughout the whole descent. When it touched the concrete its walls dissolved like ice in a furnace, leaving a ring of hissing steam and the cold taint of chlorine in the air.

The Black Rose stepped towards them. Max fought the urge to run screaming over the crates, desperately telling himself this wasn’t Odilon returned from the dead, intent on ripping him apart to get at God’s mind.

“My name is Ramul,” said the Black Rose.

“Why do you look like that?” asked Abby. Ioam had let her go as well and she walked towards the alien who gave her a kind smile.

“I did it for you, Abigail Fabrice, to show you a face I know you love.”

Abby lifted her gun and emptied it into the creature. Max hit Selva as hard as he could on the elbow before she could shoot, snatched the carbine and reversed it to point at her. The woman’s expression didn’t change but he barely had time to duck as her roundhouse kick scraped the top of his head. He hopped out of range only to thump the back of his skull against the muzzle of Crysanthe’s weapon.

“Stop now or I will blow your brains through your face.” Even with Abby’s shrieking curses filling the room the woman’s soft command paralysed him. Selva re-

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tried her rifle with a moue of amusement. He turned to see Abby pinned to the ceiling by the Abhumans who clearly thought they were protecting her. Ramul, unhurt, looked around with baffled interest. Max remembered Abby shooting Odilon just after he'd killed his father, to the same effect.

"Max, please give me one good reason not to execute the insufferable idiot," said Crysanthe wearily. Ramul peered up at Max's partner, who still struggled and shouted in the middle of a cluster of grey limbs.

"I'm sorry Abby, I didn't mean to upset you."

The Black Rose burst into a cloud of petals. Nem clanged back in alarm as the other humans dropped into combat crouches. Only Ihanna stood as precise as a footman, pinion legs side by side and hands clasped at her waist. The whirling chaos clumped together with a gentle thud to form a new body. It still looked like Odilon - bald and copper eyed, but this time it was young woman with long, pointed features.

"I didn't realise that Odilon would inspire so much hate."

"Odilon imprisoned Bassandis and tried to destroy the Steel Queen. He lied to me and Abby."

"I was unaware," came the alien's answer. "Odilon is one of the utter enemies of man, and they dwell far away from me and my fellows. While many are content to let their thoughts float through the Black Rose weave, the utter enemies have withdrawn into their own fortresses and battle stations and shielded their intentions and ideas. We only see the effects of their actions and from this we understand they are implacably opposed to mankind entering the next cosmos."

Max had a bunch of questions to ask but first he had to deal with Abby. After he'd told her to behave in half a dozen different ways and volume levels she finally gave

in, dropping down with the Abhumans who immediately formed a wall in front of her. She folded her arms and stared at Ramul from under her red thicket, murder written all over her face.

"Why do you call them 'utter enemies'?" asked Ihanna.

"Because they are neither true enemies nor indifferent enemies."

"How many enemies do we have?" said Ioam. "And are there indifferent, true and utter friends?"

Ramul nodded.

"I am an utter friend."

Abby spat on the floor.

Max was suddenly aware that they were standing in a bubble of light in an infinity of darkness, like plastic figures in a snow globe floating over a cold ocean.

"You spoke of battle stations," said Crysanthé, lowering her gun. "Are these Black Roses coming to attack?"

"No, they won't."

"How can you be so sure? And why would we trust you?" asked Max. He waited for the creature to elaborate but no further explanation came. There was little point in pushing. Even if an armada was descending on them from the depths of empty space what they could do about it?

"What happened here?" asked Ihanna. Max noticed she'd moved to within a few paces of Ramul and hoped she could handle the prisoner if it turned nasty.

"There were six of us here, one from each faction. We don't fight beyond the limits of our god, but Basilius - another utter enemy - broke the code. He attacked by stealth and in the battle only he and I survived. I imprisoned myself in the pod for protection, and Basilius fled. I think - I hope - he's returned to our deity."

"If you can't see Odilon's thoughts why did you turn

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into him for my benefit?" asked Abby.

"Odilon loved you, and that love continued to ripple through the weave long after he and his friends closed themselves off. I thought it would help if I became the ideal Odilon, as he should have been."

Abby swallowed. Her eyes glistened for a second and Max noticed the tendons flicker in her throat. He knew what she was battling against, and for her sake the last thing he wanted was for her to react.

"Kill it or leave it here," he said to Ihanna. "I don't trust a word these bastards say."

Ioam nodded in agreement.

"All monsters are ungrateful shits," added Nem helpfully.

"No," said Crysanthe. "We have to treat with these creatures. She may be the only link we have with the Black Rose God."

"You must come with us and speak with Theuderic," Ihanna announced to Ramul.

"You're making a colossal mistake," warned Max. "It's already trying to get inside our heads with its charades."

"We can deal with it," said Selva, giving him a look that made him feel like an idiot peasant leaning over a fence.

"It would be better for me to return to my God and plead on your behalf."

"No, I need you to talk to the Lord of the Machine Men first," said Ihanna. "Will that be a problem?"

She unclasped her hands and took a step towards the alien. Perhaps the others didn't see the threat, but Max remembered Anselm blossoming into a lethal cage, Odilon hammering against the razor-thin bars in his attempt to escape. Ramul gave Ihanna a bow.

"Not at all."

On Max's insistence, the Abhumans built a cell for the Black Rose - a steel cube with a single window made from transparent onyx a foot thick. Selva was appalled at this treatment of an envoy from the aliens, but there was no way he was going to let the creature roam free and thankfully Crysanthe sided with him. The box sat on the floor of a room in the ship twenty leagues from the settlement, surrounded by white plastic walls that rose four miles to a cloud bank that shed an endless drizzle.

Max and Abby stood side by side watching Ramul, who waited unmoving in the centre of her prison. Max guessed it wouldn't take much effort for her to break out, and he sensed she tolerated imprisonment for her own reasons. Politeness? He didn't think so. He was looking at cunning and deceit warped into alien shapes, forged in this thing they called the weave - millions upon millions of minds dividing themselves into factions and counter-factions. *Utter enemies, true enemies, indifferent enemies, indifferent friends, true friends, utter friends. And we thought all we needed to do was build a puppet.* He had so many questions, but all Ramul's answers had been as vague and evasive as expected. She wouldn't even tell them why the station was full of crates stuffed with food, clothes and all manner of bizarre and pointless clutter.

"I can't get him out of my head," said Abby, snapping him out of his thoughts. Her hair had collapsed in the damp and she looked like a ginger rat.

"This isn't Odilon."

He put his arm round her shoulders - feeling tendons like stone ridges.

"How do we know he isn't out there, or in her - part of some group consciousness - watching me through her eyes?"

She rubbed her stomach again.

"That's why I hate him. He won't leave me alone. He's

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still in here as well," she tapped her own temple. "With all his loving lies."

Four Abhumans had taken it on themselves to stand guard over the alien. They looked a sorry bunch, squatting down in the rain and amusing themselves by scratching mathematical diagrams on the floor with their claws, their fur plastered against their pot-bellied bodies and scrawny limbs. One of them, Goma, loped over and clicked at Abby.

"Go and get dry and warm for baby's sake."

She sniffed and wiped the water from her face.

"Rebecca's not even in this reality. I doubt she's going to catch cold."

Max let it pass but led her back to their room in the centre of the ship, and once they'd dried off he called Ioam and Nem over.

"If we take Bassandis out of your baby's head she's no longer under threat, and neither are you," said Ioam.

"What about you though?" asked Abby. The witch snorted.

"I dare any of those pointy-toed buggers to try and open my brain."

Abby looked at Max.

"So how do we do this?"

Max turned to Ioam and Nem.

"When's the last time you entered God's mind?"

"Not since we left the Whispering House. Even if the giants can't see into our heads we didn't want to risk alerting them. They know where your mind garden is, but not my palace or her, er ..." she hunted for a suitable word, "... playground." She nodded at her sister, who gave Max a cheery grin filled with razor fangs.

"You can enter whenever you like? You can control it? Can you teach me?"

Max had struggled to return to his garden. It always

seemed a hit and miss affair. Surgeon Weep got him inside, as had Anselm. Once or twice he'd returned when he'd been desperate and Abby had knocked him out, an experience he didn't particularly want to repeat. Like the sisters he'd avoided trying to go back, fearing the titans or Ihanna would follow him into the mind of God and learn about Rebecca. But if he wanted to track down Bassandis he'd no other choice.

"Shall we try now?"

Ioam and Nem held hands, and both reached out to Max. He hesitated for a fearful second but realised that with two twelve-foot-high sorceresses by his side he was as safe as he'd ever be.

"First sign of danger and we're out," said Nem, sounding remarkably normal for once. Giant spider hands enfolded his. He closed his eyes and in a second the floor fell from under his feet. He could have sworn he heard Abby call his name.

He walked inside his mind garden. It looked small and cold and empty. A white iron table stood in the centre. He approached it and ran his fingers over the lacework. Rust peeked through the enamel which had yellowed and started to peel. One of the chairs lay on its side. He picked it up - a strange wave of unhappiness passing through him. *Bassandis and Rebecca have gone. There's only me.*

"Is this it?"

Ioam and Nem stood behind him, looking around with barely concealed disbelief. He didn't care for the look of distaste on Ioam's face and Nem seemed to have been hit with a fit of the giggles. He bristled. This was the inside of his head. It might not be much, but he could do without the sneers. Next they'd be running their fingers over the furniture and tutting at what they found.

"Why? What's it supposed to be like?"

"You didn't find out you were a God Talker until a

couple of years ago, did you? Even so, is this the best you could do? No wonder Bassandis and your daughter buggered off."

"Hello?" said Nem, looking beyond the clapboard boundary. In his embarrassment and anger he'd forgotten about the black walls fencing in his mind, erected by Ombratulla and Belsalice shortly after the Abby storm rescued him. They ran across the domed hills, rising up to the burning sky. With a churning surge of dream fear he saw what looked like huge faces peering down at them over the tops of the barriers. For a second he thought they were the giantesses themselves, but soon realised they were the dark sentinels that wandered the soul of God like errant dreams.

"We should leave. There's nothing here."

Ioam took his hand.

"Poor Max," a man's voice said, and he opened his eyes to find himself back in the cabin with Abby and the witches. They looked down at him with expressions of curious pity and all he wanted them to do was go away and leave him alone.