Resplendent

Destiny's Children Book Four

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Extract

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PART ONE
RESURGENCE

CADRE SIBLINGS

AD 5301

Before she was called into Gemo Cana's office for her awkward new assignment, Luru Parz had never thought of her work as destructive.

Cana stood before the window, a portal whose natural light betrayed her high status in the Extirpation Directorate. Red-gold sunset light glimmered from the data slates fixed to the walls of the office. Beyond the pharaoh's round shoulders Luru could see the glistening blown-silicate domes of the Conurbation's residential areas, laced by the blue-green of canals.

And on the misty horizon a Qax ship, a Spline, cruised above occupied Earth, swivelling like a vast eyeball. Where it passed there rose a churning wave of soil and grass and splintered trees.

'*Never*,' Cana murmured. 'You *never* thought of it that way, as destructive. Really? But we are destroying data here, Luru. That is what "Extirpation" means. Obliteration. Eradication. A rooting out. Have you never thought about that?'

Luru, impatient to get back to work, didn't know how to reply. If this was some new method of assessment it was obscure, Cana's strategy non-obvious. In fact she resented having to endure this obscure philosophising from Cana, who most people regarded as a musty relic cluttering up the smooth running of the Directorate. Among Luru's friends and pushy rivals, even to report to a pharaoh was seen as a career impediment. 'I'm not sure what you're getting at.'

'Then consider the library you are working on, beneath Solled Laik City. It is said that the library contains an ancestral tree for every man, woman and child on the planet, right up to the moment of the Occupation. You or I could trace our personal history back thousands of years. Think of that. And your job is to destroy it. Doesn't that make you feel at least' –

Cana's small hands opened, expressive – 'ambiguous, morally?'

Cana was short, stocky, her scalp covered by silver-white fuzz. Luru, her own head shaven, knew nobody else with *hair*, a side-effect of AntiSenescence treatment, of course. Cana had once told Luru she was so old she remembered a time before the Occupation itself, two centuries back. To Luru, aged twenty-two, it was a chilling idea.

She thought over what Cana had said. 'I don't even know where "*Solled Laik City*" is – or was. What does it matter? Data is just data. Work is just work.'

Cana barked laughter. 'With a moral void like that you'll go far, Luru Parz. But not everybody is as – flexible – in their outlook as you. Not everybody is a fan of the Extirpation. Outside the Conurbation you will encounter hostility. *You* see a satisfying intellectual exercise in the cleansing; they see only destruction. They call us jasofts, you know. I remember an older term. Quislings.'

Luru was baffled. Why was she talking about *outside*? Outside was a place for ragamuffins and bandits. '*Who* calls us jasofts?'

Cana smiled. 'Poor little Luru, such a sheltered life. You don't even remember the Rebellion, do you? The Friends of Wigner—'

'The Rebellion was defeated five years before I was born. What has it to do with me?'

'I have a new assignment for you,' Cana said briskly. 'Do you know Symat Suvan?'

Luru frowned. 'We were cadre siblings, a couple of dissolutions ago.' And, briefly, lovers.

Cana eyed her; Luru sensed she knew everything about her relationship. 'Suvan left the Conurbation a year ago.'

'He became a ragamuffin?' Luru wasn't particularly shocked; Symat, for all his charm, had always been petulant, difficult, incompliant.

'I want you to go and talk to him, about his research into superheavy elements . . . No, not that. None of *that* matters. I want you to talk to him about minimising pain, and death, for himself and others. He has got himself in the way, you see.'

Luru said stiffly, 'I don't think this assignment is appropriate for me. My relationship with Symat is in the past.'

Cana smiled. 'A past you'd rather forget, a little Extirpation of your own? But because of that past he might listen to you. Don't worry; this will not damage your glittering career. And I know that bonds between cadre siblings are not strong. They are not intended to be. But you might persuade this boy to save his life.

'I know you judge me harshly, Luru, me and the other pharaohs. Just remember that our goal is always to minimise distress. That is the reason I work in this place. It is my job, and yours, to mediate the regime of the Qax. Humanity's relations with its conquerors deteriorated after the Friends' Rebellion. Without *us* things would be much worse still. Which is why,' she said slowly, 'I regret asking this of you – especially you, Luru.'

'I don't understand.'

Cana sighed. 'Of course you don't. Child, Jasoft Parz, the exemplar after whom our traitorous class is named, was your grandfather.'

Luru sat in the flitter's small cabin, nervous, irritated, as the land peeled away beneath her.

From the air the spread of buildings, bubbles blown from scraped-bare bedrock, was glistening, almost organic. She could see the starbreaker-cut canals, arteries that imported desalinated water and food from the huge offshore algae farms and exported waste to the sink of the ocean. Down one canal bodies drifted in an orderly procession, glinting in plastic wrap; they were the night's dead, expended carcases returning to the sea.

Conurbation 5204 had been constructed when Luru was ten years old. She remembered the day well; the construction had taken just minutes, a spectacular sight for a little girl. There was talk now that the Extirpation Directorate might soon be moved to a new location in the continental interior, in which case Conurbation 5204 would be razed flat in even less time, leaving no trace. That was how the Qax did things: deliberate, fast, brutal, clean, allowing not the slightest space for human sentiment.

It was a relatively short flitter hop to Symat Suvan's research facility – short, but nevertheless longer than any journey Luru had taken before. And she was going to have to spend more time *outside* than she ever had before.

She didn't want to do this at all.

Luru's brief career, at the Extirpation Directorate in Conurbation 5204, had been pleasingly successful. She was working on a tailored data-cleanse package. The cleanser was to be sent into huge genealogical libraries recently discovered in a hardened shelter under the site known as Solled Laik City, evidently a pre-Occupation human city. The cleanser was a combination of intelligent interpretive agents, targeted virus packages and focused electromagnetic-pulse bursts, capable of eradication of the ancient data banks at the physical, logical and philosophical levels. The cleanser itself was of conventional design; the project's challenge was in the scale, complexity and encryption of the millennia-old data to be deleted.

The work was stretching, competitive, deeply satisfying to Luru, and a major progression along her career path within the Extirpation Directorate. In fact she had been promoted to cadre leader for this new project, at twenty-two her first taste of real responsibility. And she resented being dragged away from her work like this, flung halfway across the continent, all for the benefit of a misfit like Symat Suvan.

She tried to distract herself with her notes on superheavy elements, Symat's apparent obsession.

There was a natural limit to the size of the nucleus of an atom, it seemed. A nucleus was a cluster of protons whose positive electrical charges tended to drive them apart. The protons were held together by a comforting swarm of neutrons – neutral particles. Larger nuclei needed many neutrons to hold them together; lead-208, for example, contained eighty-two protons and a hundred and twenty-six neutrons.

The gluing abilities of the neutrons were limited. It was once believed that no nucleus could exist with more than a hundred or so protons. But some theorists had predicted that there could be much larger nuclear configurations, with certain special geometries – and these were eventually discovered. The lightest of the superheavy nuclei had a hundred and

fourteen protons and a hundred and eighty-four neutrons; the most common appeared to be an isotope called marsdenium-440, with a hundred and eighty-four protons and a crowd of two hundred and fifty-six neutrons. But there were much heavier nuclei still, with many hundreds of protons and neutrons. These strange nuclei were deformed, squashed into ellipsoids or even hollowed out . . .

She put down her data slate. She found it hard to concentrate on such useless abstractions as this corner of physics – and she didn't understand how this could have absorbed Symat so much. She did wonder absently why 'marsdenium' had that particular name: perhaps 'Marsden' or 'Marsdeni' was the name of its discoverer. Such historical details were long lost, of course.

As the flitter neared the top of its suborbital hop the curving Earth opened up around her, a rust-red land that glimmered with glassy scars – said to be the marks of humanity's last war against the Qax, but perhaps they were merely the sites of deleted Conurbations. A Spline craft toiled far beneath her, a great blister of flesh and metal ploughing open a swathe of land, making its own patient, devastating contribution to the Extirpation.

Her flitter drifted to the ground, a few hundred metres from Symat Suvan's exotic matter plant. She emerged, blinking, beneath a tall sky. Far from the rounded chambers of the Conurbation, she felt small, frail, exposed.

This was a place called *Mell Born*. It had been spared the starbreaker ploughs so far, but even so nothing remained of the land's pre-Occupation human usage save a faint rectangular gridwork of foundations and rubble. The place was dominated by a single structure, a giant blue-glowing torus: a facility built and abandoned by the Qax. Now it was occupied by a handful of ragamuffins who called themselves scientists – there were no scientists in the Conurbations. The humans had even built themselves a shanty town, an odd encrustation around the huge Qax facility.

Symat Suvan was here to meet her. He was tall, gaunt, looming, agitated, his eyes hollow; his bare scalp was tanned a pale pink by the unfiltered sun. 'Lethe,' he snapped. '*You*.'

She was dismayed by his hostility. 'Symat, I'm here to help you.'

He eyed her mockingly. 'You're here to destroy me. I always knew *you* would finish up like this. You actually *liked* running the mazes the Qax built for us – the tests, the meaningless career paths, the competitions between the cadres. Even the Extirpation is just another pleasing intellectual puzzle to you, isn't it, in a lifetime of puzzles? Oh, the Qax are smart rulers; they are exploiting your talents very effectively. But you don't have any idea what your work *means*, do you? . . . Come with me.' He grabbed her hand, and pulled her towards the curved electric blue wall of the facility.

She shivered at the remembered warmth of his touch. But he was no longer her cadre brother; he had become a ragamuffin, one of the dwindling tribes of humans who refused to remain in the Qax Conurbations, and his face was a mask of set planes and pursed lips, and his determined anger was intimidating.

To get to the Qax facility they had to walk through the shanty community. It was a pit of rough, improvised dwellings, some little more than heaps of sheeting and rubble. But it was a functioning town, she realised slowly, with a food dispensing plant and a clinic and a water supply, even what looked like a rudimentary sewage system. She saw a small, dishevelled chapel, devoted to some no-doubt illegal religion, whose gods would one day free humanity from the rule of the Qax. All of this was laid over a mighty grid of rubble. There were still fragments of the old buildings, bits of wall and pipe poking like bones from the general wash of debris, some scarred by fire. Where vegetation had broken through the concrete, the remnant walls had become low hummocks coated with thick green blankets.

There was a stink of smoke and sour humanity, and the air was full of dust which clung to her skin and clothes. It was hard to believe that any cadre sibling of hers would choose to live here. Yet here he was.

Symat was talking rapidly about superheavy elements. 'It used to be thought that marsdenium and its more exotic sisters could only exist as technological artefacts, manufactured in giant facilities like this Qax factory. But now we know that

such elements can be born out of the great pressures of a supernova, the explosive death of a giant star.'

She tried to focus. 'An exploding star? Then why are you looking for heavy elements here on Earth?'

He smiled. 'Because the Earth coalesced from a cloud of primordial gas and dust, a cloud whose collapse was triggered by the shock wave from a nearby supernova. You see? The primordial supernova laced the young Earth with superheavy matter. So the heavy elements have deep significance, for Earth and all that live on it or in it.'

On a heap of shattered stones a small child was sitting on the lap of an older girl, playing with a bit of melted glass. The girl was the infant's cadre sister, Luru supposed. They both had hair, thick dark thatches of it. The little one looked up, coughing, as they passed.

'This isn't a healthy place,' Luru observed.

'What did you expect? But I keep forgetting. You expect nothing; you know nothing. Luru, people die young in places like this. How else do you think I became so senior here so quickly? And yet they still come. *I* came.'

'Perhaps you were seduced by the closeness of the cadres here.' A healthy dissolution might restore the social balance here, she thought.

He stared at her. 'There are no cadres here. The cadres, dissolved every couple of years, are another Qax social invention, imposed on humans after the Rebellion for the purposes of control. Didn't you even know that? Luru, these are *families*.'

He had to explain what that meant. And that the girl who nursed the child was not the little one's cadre sibling, but her mother.

They reached a door that had been crudely cut in the wall of the Qax facility. They passed through into an immense curving chamber where vast engines crouched. Hovering light globes cast long, complex shadows, and human technicians talked softly, dwarfed to insignificance. There was a smell of burned lubricant, of ozone.

Luru was overwhelmed.

Symat said, 'This place was thrown up by the Qax after the Rebellion. It was one of hundreds around the planet. We think it was a factory for making exotic matter – that is, matter with

a negative energy density. They abandoned the place; we don't know why. Since it was built with human wealth and labour I suppose it means nothing to them. We refurbished the machinery, rebuilt much of it. Now we use it to make our own superheavy nuclei, by bombarding lumps of plutonium with high-energy calcium ions.'

That puzzled her. He'd said his goal was the *detection* of superheavy elements in Earth's crust. So why was he manufacturing them?

'Why were the Qax making exotic matter?'

'None of us knows for sure,' he said. 'There is a rumour that the Qax were trying to build a tunnel *to the future*. It's even said that the Qax Governor itself is an immigrant from the future, where humanity is triumphant. And *that* is why the Qax work so hard to control us. Because they are frightened of us.'

'That's just a legend.'

'Is it? Perhaps with time all history becomes legend.'

'This is nonsense, Symat!'

'How do you *know*, Luru?'

'There are witnesses to the past. The pharaohs.'

'Like Gemo Cana?' Symat laughed. 'Luru, there are no survivors from before the Occupation. The Qax withdrew Anti-Senescence treatment for two centuries after the Occupation. *All the old pharaohs died*, before the Qax began to provide their own longevity treatments. These modern undead, like Gemo Cana, have been bought by the Qax, bought by the promise of long life.' He leaned towards her. 'As they are buying you, Luru Parz.'

They emerged from the clean blue calm of the facility, back into the grimy mire of the town.

Disturbed, disoriented, she said evenly, 'Symat, the star-breaker beams are coming here. Once the Qax tolerated activities like this, indigenous cultural and scientific endeavours. Not any more, not since the Friends of Wigner betrayed the Qax's cultural generosity towards indigenous ambitions.' The Friends had used a cultural site to mask seditious activities. 'If you don't move out you will be killed.'

He clambered on a low wall and spread his arms, his long robe flapping in the thin dusty breeze. 'Ah. *Indigenous*. I love that word.'

‘Symat, come home. There’s nothing here. The data cleansers were sent through this place long ago.’

‘Nothing? Look around you, Luru. Look at the scale of these old foundations. Once there was a host of immense buildings here, taller than the sky. And this roadway, where now we mine the old sewers for water, must have swarmed with traffic. Millions of people must have lived and worked here. It was a great city. *And it was human*, Luru. The data might have gone; we might never even know the true name of this place. But as long as these ruins are here we can imagine how it must once have been. If these last traces are destroyed the past can *never* be retrieved. And that’s what the Qax intend.

‘The Extirpation isn’t always a matter of clinical data deletion, you know. Sometimes the jasofts come here with their robots, and they simply burn and smash: books, paintings, artefacts. Perhaps if you saw that, you would understand. The Qax want to sever our roots – to obliterate our identity.’

She felt angry, threatened; she tried to strike back at him. ‘And is that what you’re seeking here? An *identity* from unravelling this piece of obscure physics?’

‘Oh, there is much more here than physics.’ He said softly, ‘Have you ever heard of *Michael Poole*? He was one of the first explorers of Sol system – long before the Occupation. And he found life, everywhere he looked.’

‘Life?’

‘Luru, that primordial supernova did more than spray superheavy atoms through the crust of the young Earth. There were complex structures in there, exotic chemistries. *Life*. Some of us believe they may be survivors of a planet of the primordial supernova – or perhaps they were born in the cauldron of the supernova itself, their substance fizzing out of that torrent of energy. Perhaps they breed that way, seeds flung from supernova to supernova, bugs projected by the mighty sneezes of stars!

‘There is much we don’t understand: their biochemistry, the deeper ecology that supports them, their lifecycle – even what they look like. And yet we know there is a forest down there, Luru, a chthonic forest locked into the substance of the ground, inhabited by creatures as old as the Earth itself. You see, even in these unimaginably difficult times, we are finding new life – just like Michael Poole.’

Wonder flooded her, unwelcome. Bombarded by strangeness, she felt as if some internal barrier were breaking down, as if Symat's bizarre superheavy creatures were swimming through her mind.

He peered into her eyes, seeking understanding. 'Now do you see why I'm prepared to fight for this place? Humans aren't meant to be drones, for the Qax or anybody else. *This* is what we live for. Exploration, and beauty, and truth.'

She returned to Conurbation 5204, without Symat. She filed a report for Gemo Cana. Her duty fulfilled, she tried to get back to work, to immerse herself once more. As always, there was much to do.

But the work was oddly unsatisfying.

She was distracted by doubt. Could it really be true, as Symat had said, that her career trajectory, with its pleasing succession of tasks and promotions, was just a Qax social construct, a series of meaningless challenges meant to keep bright, proactive people like herself contented and contained and usefully occupied – useful for the Qax, that is?

Meanwhile it was a busy time in the Conurbation. The cramped corridors were crowded with people, all of them spindly tall, bald, pale – just as Luru was herself – all save the pharaohs, of course; they, having been born into richer times, were more disparate, tall and short, thin and squat, bald and hairy. The cadres were undergoing their biennial dissolution, and everybody was on the move, seeking new quarters, new friends, eager for the recreation festival to follow, the days of storytelling and sport and sex.

Luru had always enjoyed the friendly chaos of the dissolutions, the challenge of forming new relationships. But this time she found it difficult to focus her attention on her new cadre siblings.

At the age of twenty-two Luru was already done with childbirth. She had donated to a birthing tank; it was a routine service performed by all healthy women before they left their late teens, and she had thought nothing of it. Now, thinking of the families of Mell Born, she looked at the swarms of youngsters scrambling to their new cadres, excited, all their bare

scalps shining like bubbles on a river, and wondered if any of these noisy children could be *hers*.

Gemo Cana said, 'I read your report. You're right to question why Suvan needs to manufacture his strange elements. He's obviously planning something, some kind of rebellious gesture.' She looked up from her data slate, as if seeing Luru for the first time. 'Ah. But you aren't interested in Symat Suvan and his grubbing in the dirt, are you?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Cana put down the slate. 'It got to you. The outside. I can see it in you. I knew it would, of course. The only question is what difference it's going to make. Whether you will still be useful.' She nodded. 'You have questions, Luru Parz. Ask them.'

Luru felt cold. 'Symat Suvan told me that the Qax's ultimate intention—'

'Is to cauterise the past. I suppose he talked about our identity being dissolved, and so forth? Well, he's right.' Cana sounded tired. 'Of course he is. Think about what *you've* done. What did you *think* was the purpose of it all? The Extirpation is an erasing of mankind's past. A bonfire of identity. *That* is the truth.'

'But—'

'There are further plans, you know,' Cana said, ignoring her. 'For example: the Spline starbreakers penetrate only the first few tens of metres of the ground, to obliterate shelters, archives and other traces. But the Qax intend to perform a deeper ploughing-up. They have a nanotech replicator dust, which – Well. You see, with such tools, even the fossils will be destroyed, even the geology of the Earth itself: never to be retrieved, the wisdom they contain never to be deciphered.

'Another example. The Qax intend to force mass migrations of people, a mixing, a vast melting pot.' She touched her chest. 'Then even *this* will be lost, you see, in a few generations – the differences between us, the history embedded in our bodies, our genes, our blood types. All mixed up, the data lost for ever. There is a simpler proposal to replace our human names with some form of catalogue numbers. So even the bits of history lodged in our names will be lost. It will only take two or three generations before we forget . . .'

Luru was shocked at the thought of such cultural vandalism.

Cana evidently read her expression. 'So at last we've dug far enough into Luru Parz to find a conscience. At last we've found something that shocks you. And you're wondering why any human being would cooperate with such monstrosity. I'll tell you why. The alternative is worse. The alternative is *the destruction of the species* – an option the Qax have considered, believe me. That is why we are here, we who collaborate. That is what we must work ceaselessly to avoid.'

She stood, restless, and picked a slate off the wall. 'Look at this. It is data on the deletion of data: a recursive register of destruction. And when all the primary information is gone, of course, we will have to delete this too. We must even forget that we forgot. And then forget that in turn. It will go on, Luru, a hierarchy of deletion and destruction, until – on one last data slate in an anonymous office like this – there will remain a single datum, the final trace of the huge historic exercise. If it falls to me I will erase that last record, gladly. And then there will be no trace left at all – *except in my heart*. And,' she added softly, 'yours.'

Luru, half understanding, was filled with fear and longing.

Cana eyed her. 'I think you're ready. You face a choice, Luru Parz.' She reached into her desk and produced a translucent tablet the size of a thumbnail. 'This comes from the Qax themselves. They are able to manipulate biochemical structures at the molecular level – did you know that? It was their, um, competitive edge when they first moved off their home planet. And this is the fruit of their study of mankind. Do you know what it is?'

Luru knew. The tablet was the removal of death.

Cana set the tablet on the desk. 'Take it.'

Luru said, 'So it is true. You have been bought with life.'

Cana sat, her face crumpling into sadness; for an instant Luru had the impression of very great age indeed. 'Suddenly you have grown a moral sense. Suddenly you believe you can judge me. Do you imagine I *want* this? Should I have followed the others to Callisto, and hidden there?'

Luru frowned. 'Where? Jupiter's moon?'

Cana regained the control she had momentarily lost. 'You judge, but you still don't understand, do you? There is a

purpose to what we do, Luru. *With endless life comes endless remembering*.

'We cannot save the Earth from the Qax, Luru. They will complete this project, this Extirpation, whatever we do, we jasofts. And so we must work with them, accept their ambiguous gift of life; we must continue to implement the Qax's project, knowing what it means. For then – when everything else is gone, when even the fossils have been dug out of the ground – *we will still remember*. We are the true resistance, you see, not noisy fools like Symat Suvan, we who are closest of all to the conquerors.'

Luru tried to comprehend all of this, the layers of ambiguity, the compromise, the faintest flicker of hope. 'Why me?'

'You are the best and brightest. The Qax are pleased with your progress, and wish to recruit you.' She smiled thinly. 'And, for exactly the same reasons, I need you. So much moral complexity, wrapped up in a single tiny tablet!'

Luru stood. 'You told me you remembered how it was, before the Qax. But Symat said all the old pharaohs died during the Occupation. That nobody remembers.'

Cana's face was expressionless. 'If Suvan said that, it must be true.'

Luru hesitated. Then she closed her hand around the tablet and put it in a pocket of her tunic, her decision still unmade.

When she returned to Mell Born she found it immersed in shadow, for a Spline ship loomed above the ruins. The Spline rolled ponderously, weapon emplacements glinting. There was a sense of huge energies gathering.

Her flitter skimmed beneath the Spline's belly, seeking a place to land.

The crude shanty town was being broken up. She could see a line of Directorate staff – no, of *jasofts* – moving through the ramshackle dwellings, driving a line of people before them, men, women and children. Beetle-like transports followed the line of the displaced, bearing a few hastily grabbed belongings. The jasofts were dressed in skinsuits, their faces hidden behind translucent masks; the raw surface of Earth was not a place where inhabitants of the great Conurbations walked unprotected.

A small group lingered near the electric blue walls of the Qax facility, robes flapping, their stubborn defiance apparent in their stance. One of them was Symat, of course. She ran to him.

'I didn't think you would return.' He waved at the toiling, fleeing people. 'Are you proud of what is being done to us?'

She said, 'You are manufacturing superheavy elements, here in this facility. What is the real reason? Have you lied to me, Symat?'

'Only a little,' he said gently. 'We do understand something of the creatures of the rocky forest that has flourished beneath our feet.'

'Yes?'

'We know what they eat. We have tried to provide them with food, to get their attention—'

Without warning a thread of ruby-red light snaked down from the hide of the Spline. Where the starbreaker touched, buildings disintegrated, panels and beams flying high into the air. From the heart of the old Qax facility came a scream of tortured air, a soft concussion, a powerful, blood-red glow. The ground shuddered beneath their feet.

'It has begun.' She grabbed Symat and tried to pull him towards her flitter. 'Symat, please. You were my cadre sibling; I don't want to see you die. *This* isn't worth a life.'

A blankness came into his eyes, and he pulled away from her. 'Ah. Not *your* life, a pharaoh's life, perhaps.'

'I am not yet a pharaoh—'

He wasn't listening. 'You see what a dreadful, clever gift this is? A long life makes you malleable. But my pitiful life – a few decades at best – what is the use of such a life save to make a single, defiant gesture?' He stepped away from her deliberately. He closed his eyes, and raised his arms into the air, robe flapping. 'As for you – you must make your choice, Luru Parz.'

And from beneath Symat's feet a bolt of dazzling light punched upwards, scattering debris and rock, and lancing into the heart of the Spline. There was a stink of meat, of corruption.

A shock wave billowed over her, peppering her with hot dust. Luru fell back in the rubble, stunned. Symat was gone, gone in an instant.

And the roof of flesh above her seemed to tip. The Spline sank with heavy gentleness towards the ground.

And she was going to be crushed beneath its monstrous belly. She turned and ran to her ship.

The flitter, saving itself, squirted towards the narrowing gap of daylight beneath that descending lid of flesh. Luru, bloody, bruised, filthy, cowered in her seat as immense pocks and warts fled above her head. A dark, steaming fluid gushed from the Spline's tremendous wound; it splashed over the ground, a lake of blood brought from another star.

Suddenly she burst into daylight. From the air she could see how the raking starbreaker beam had left a gouge in the earth like an immense fingernail scratching a tabletop. But the gouge was terminated by the dying Spline, a deflating ball, already grounded.

The flitter, in utter silence, tipped back and lifted her up towards the edge of space.

The sky deepened to violet, and her racing heart slowed.

She tried to work out what had happened. There must have been a cache of the strange, ancient supernova creatures, she decided, drawn there by Symat's superheavy-element bait. Perhaps the eruption had been purely a matter of physics, a response to the sudden release of pressure when the upper levels of the crust were stripped away. Or perhaps that great blow against the Spline had been deliberate, a conscious lashing out, a manifestation of the rage of those ancient creatures at this disturbing of their aeons-long slumber.

And now, all around the sky, she could see more Spline entering the atmosphere: four, five, six of them, great misty moons descending to Earth. A fine dust pulsed from them in thin, silvery clouds, almost beautiful. The dust spread through the air, settling quickly. Where the glittering rain touched, the land began to soften, the valleys to subside, the hills to erode. It was shockingly fast.

This was the wrath of the Qax. The overlords had learned not to hesitate in the face of human defiance. And this nanotechnological drenching would leave the planet a featureless beach of silicate dust.

She took the translucent tablet from a pocket of her skinsuit.

The scrap of Qax technology gleamed, warm. She thought of the wizened, anguished face of Gemo Cana, of Symat's vibrant, passionate sacrifice. *You must make your choice, Luru Parz*.

I am too young, she thought. I have nothing to remember. Nothing but what was done today.

As the mountains of Earth crumbled, she swallowed the tablet.

We endured another century of the Qax.

When their reign ended it happened quickly, the result of an event far from Earth, the actions of a single human, a man called Bolder.

For all our conspiring, I think we never really believed the Qax would leave.

And we certainly never imagined we would miss them when they were gone.