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The Algebraist

Iain M. Banks

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Prologue

I have a story to tell you. It has many beginnings, and perhaps one ending. Perhaps not. Beginnings and endings are contingent things anyway; inventions, devices. Where does any story really begin? There is always context, always an encompassingly greater epic, always something before the described events, unless we are to start every story with, 'BANG! *Expand!* Sssss . . .', then itemise the whole subsequent history of the universe before settling down, at last, to the particular tale in question. Similarly, no ending is final, unless it is the end of all things . . .

Nevertheless, I have a story to tell you. My own direct part in it was vanishingly small and I have not thought even to introduce myself with anything as presumptuous as a proper name. Nevertheless, I was there, at the very beginning of one of those beginnings.

From the air, I am told, the Autumn House looks like a giant grey and pink snowflake lying half-embedded within these folded green slopes. It lies on the long, shallow escarpment which forms the southern limit of the Northern Tropical Uplands. On the northern side of the house are spread the various formal and rustic gardens which it is both my duty and my pleasure to tend. A little further up the escarpment rest the extensive ruins of a fallen temple, believed to have been a construction of a species called the Rehlide. (6ar., either severely abated or extinct, depending on which authority one chooses to give credence to. In any event, long gone from these parts.)

The temple's great white columns once towered a hundred metres or so into our thin airs but now lie sprawled upon and interred within the ground, vast straked and fluted tubes of solid stone half buried in the peaty soils of the unimproved land around us. The furthest-fallen ends of the columns – which must have toppled slowly but most impressively in our half-standard gravity – punched great long crater-like ditches out of the earth, creating long double embankments with bulbously rounded tips. Over the many millennia since their sudden creation these tall ramparts have been slowly worn down both by erosion and our world's many small ground-quakes so that the earth has slumped back to refill the wide ditches where the column ends lie, until all that is visible is a succession of gentle waves in the land's surface, like a series of small, splayed valleys from whose upper limits the unburied lengths of the columns appear like the pale exposed bones of this little planet-moon.

Where one column fell and rolled across a shallow river valley, it formed a sort of angled cylindrical dam, over which the water spills, is caught and channelled by one of the metres-deep grooves embellishing the column's length, and then flows down to what remains of the column's ornately carved capital and a series of small, graceful waterfalls which end in a deep pool just beyond the tall, dense hedges which mark the highest limit of our gardens. From here the stream is guided and controlled, some of its waters proceeding to a deep cistern which provides the headwaters for our gravity fountains down near the house while the rest make up the brook which by turns tumbles, rushes, swings and meanders down to the ornamental lakes and partial moat surrounding the house itself.

I was standing waist-deep in the gurgling waters of a steeply pitched part of the brook, three limbs braced against the current, surrounded by dripping exer-rhododendron branches and coils of weed, trimming and dead-heading a particularly recalcitrant confusion of moil-bush around a frankly rather threadbare raised lawn of scalpygrass (basically a noble but failed experiment, attempting to persuade this notoriously clumpy variety to . . . ah: my enthusiasms may be getting

the better of me, and I digress – never mind about the scalpygrass) when the young master – returning, whistling, hands clasped behind his back, from his morning constitutional round the higher rockeries – stopped on the gravel path above me and smiled down. I looked round and up, still clipping away, and nodded with as much formality as my somewhat awkward stance would allow.

Sunlight poured from the purple sky visible between the curve of eastward horizon (hills, haze) and the enormous overhanging bulk of the gas-giant planet Nasqueron filling the majority of the sky (motley with all the colours of the spectrum below bright yellow, multitudinously spotted, ubiquitously zoned and belted with wild liquidic squiggles). A synchronous mirror almost directly above us scribed a single sharp line of yellow-white across the largest of Nasqueron's storm-spots, which moved ponderously across the sky like an orange-brown bruise the size of a thousand moons.

'Good morning, Head Gardener.'

'Good morning, Seer Taak.'

'And how are our gardens?'

'Generally healthy, I would say. In good shape for spring.' I could have gone on to provide much more detail, naturally, but waited to discover whether Seer Taak was merely indulging in phatic discourse. He nodded at the water rushing and breaking around my lower limbs.

'You all right in there, HG? Looks a bit fierce.'

'I am well braced and anchored, thank you, Seer Taak.' I hesitated (and during the pause could hear someone small and light running up the stone steps towards the gravel path a little further down the garden), then, when Seer Taak still smiled encouragingly down at me, I added, 'The flow is high because the lower pumps are on, recirculating the waters to enable us to scour one of the lakes free of floating weeds.' (The small person approaching reached the path's loose surface twenty metres away and kept running, scattering gravel.)

'I see. Didn't think it had rained that much recently.' He nodded. 'Well, keep up the good work, HG,' he said, and turned to go, then saw whoever was running towards him. I suspected from the rhythm of her running steps that it was the girl Zab. Zab is still at the age where she runs from place to place as a matter of course unless directed not to by an adult. However, I believed that I detected a more than casual urgency in her gait. Seer Taak smiled and frowned at the girl at the same time as she came skidding to a stop on the gravel in front of him, putting one hand flat to the chest of her yellow dungarees and bending over for a couple of deep, exaggerated breaths – long pink curls swirling and dancing round her face – before taking one even deeper breath and standing up straight to say,

'Uncle Fassin! Grandpa Slovius says you're out in a communicardo again and if I see you I've to tell you you've to come and see him right now immediately!'

'Does he now?' Seer Taak said, laughing. He bent and picked the girl up by her armpits, holding her face level with his, her little pink boots hanging level with the waist of his britches.
'Yes, he does,' she told him, and sniffed. She looked down and saw me. 'Oh! Hello, HG.'

'Good morning, Zab.'

‘Well,’ said Seer Taak, hoisting the child further up and turning and lowering her so that she sat on his shoulders, ‘we’d better go and see what the old man wants, hadn’t we?’ He started down the path towards the house. ‘You okay up there?’

She put her hands over his forehead and said, ‘Yup.’

‘Well, this time, mind out for branches.’

‘*You* mind out for branches!’ Zab said, rubbing her knuckles through Seer Taak’s brown curls.

She twisted round and waved back at me. ‘Bye, HG!’

‘Goodbye,’ I called as they went towards the steps.

‘No, *you* mind out for branches, young lady.’
‘No, *you* mind out for branches!’
‘No, *you* mind out for branches.’
‘No, *you* mind out for branches . . .’

ONE:
the autumn house

It had thought it would be safe out here, just one more ambiently black speck deep-chilled in the vast veil of icy debris wrapping the outer reaches of the system like a frozen, tenuous shroud of tissue. But it had been wrong and it was not safe.

It lay, slow-tumbling, and watched helplessly as the probing beams flickered across the pitted, barren motes far away, and knew its fate was settled. The interrogating tendrils of coherence were almost too quick to sense, too seemingly tentative to register, barely touching, scarcely illuminating, but they did their job by finding nothing where there was nothing to find. Just carbon, trace, and ice-water hard as iron: ancient, dead, and – left undisturbed – no threat to anyone.

The lasers flicked off, and each time it felt hope rise, finding itself thinking, despite all rationality, that its pursuers would give up, admit defeat, just go away and leave it be, to orbit there for ever. Or perhaps it would kick away into a lonely eternity of less than light-slow exile, or drift into a closedown sleep, or . . . Or it might, it supposed – and this was what they feared, of course, this was why they hunted – plot and plan and gather and make and quicken and build and multiply and muster and – attack! . . . Claiming the vengeance that was so surely its, exacting the price its enemies all deserved to pay – by any algebra of justice under any sun you cared to name – for their intolerance, their savagery, their generacide.

Then the needle rays reappeared, fitfully irradiating the soot-ice-clinker of another set of barnacle-black detritus, a little further away, or a little closer, but always with a rapid, meticulous order to them, a militaristic precision and a plodding, bureaucratic systematicism.

From the earlier light trails, there were at least three ships. How many did they have? How many might they devote to the search? It didn't really matter. They might take a moment, a month or a millennium to find their quarry, but they obviously knew where to look and they would not stop until they had either found what they were looking for or satisfied themselves that there was nothing there.

That it was so obviously in harm's way, and that its hiding place, however enormous, was almost the first place they had chosen to search, filled it with terror, not just because it did not want to die, or be picked apart as they had been known to pick its kind apart before killing their victims utterly, but because if it was not safe in this place where it had assumed it would be, then, given that so many of its kind had made the same assumption, none of them would be safe either.

Dear Reason, maybe none of us are safe anywhere.

All its studies, all its thoughts, all the great things that might have been, all the fruits of change from the one great revelation it might have had, and now would never know the truth of, would never be able to tell. All, all for nothing now. It could choose to go with some elegance, or not, but it could not choose not to go.

No un-choosing death.

The needle rays from the needle ships flicked on/flicked off away across the frozen distances, and finally it could see the pattern in them, discerning one ship's comb of scintillations from the

others and so picking out the shape of the search grids, allowing it to watch, helpless, as the slow spread of that mortal inquiry crept slowly, slowly closer.

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The Archimandrite Luseferous, warrior priest of the Starveling Cult of Leseum9 IV and effective ruler of one hundred and seventeen stellar systems, forty-plus inhabited planets, numerous significant artificial immobile habitats and many hundreds of thousands of civilian capital ships, who was Executive High Admiral of the Shroud Wing Squadron of the Four-Hundred-and-Sixty-Eighth Ambient Fleet (Det.) and who had once been Triumvirate Rotational human/non-human Representative for Cluster Epiphany Five at the Supreme Galactic Assembly, in the days before the latest ongoing Chaos and the last, fading rumbles of the Disconnect Cascade, had some years ago caused the head of his once-greatest enemy, the rebel chief Stinausin, to be struck from his shoulders, attached without delay to a long-term life-support mechanism and then hung upside down from the ceiling of his hugely impressive study in the outer wall of Sheer Citadel – with its view over Junch City and Faraby Bay towards the hazy vertical slot that was Force Gap – so that the Archimandrite could, when the mood took him, which was fairly frequently, use his old adversary's head as a punchball.

Luseferous had long, sheen-black straight hair and a naturally pale complexion which had been skilfully augmented to make his skin nearly pure white. His eyes were artificially large, but just close enough to congenitally possible for people to be unsure whether they had been augmented or not. The whites beyond the black irises were a deep, livid red, and every one of his teeth had been carefully replaced with a pure, clear diamond, giving his mouth an appearance which varied from bizarre, mediaeval toothlessness to startling, glistening brilliance, entirely depending on angle and light.

In a street performer or an actor, such physiological departures might have been amusing, even a little desperate-looking; in somebody wielding the kind of power which Luseferous possessed, they could be genuinely disturbing, even terrifying. The same half-tasteless, half-horrifying effect might be claimed for his name, which was not the one he had been born with. Luseferous was a chosen name, selected for its phonetic proximity to that of some long-scorned Earth deity which most humans – well, most rHumans, at least – would vaguely have heard of in their history studies while probably not being entirely able to place when they had heard the word.

Again thanks to genetic manipulation, the Archimandrite was now and had been for some long time a tall, well-built man with considerable upper-body strength, and when he punched in anger – and he rarely punched in any other state – it was to considerable effect. The rebel leader whose head now hung upside down from Luseferous's ceiling had caused the Archimandrite enormous military and political difficulties before being defeated, difficulties which had sometimes verged on being humiliations, and Luseferous still felt deep, deep resentment towards the traitor, resentment which easily and reliably turned itself to anger when he looked upon the man's face, no matter how battered, bruised and bloody it might be (the head's augmented healing functions were quick, but not instantaneous), and so the Archimandrite probably still whacked and smashed away at Stinausin's head with as much enthusiasm now as he had when he'd first had him hung there, years earlier.

Stinausin, who had barely endured a month of such treatment before going completely mad, and whose mouth had been sewn up to stop him spitting at the Archimandrite, could not even kill himself; sensors, tubes, micropumps and biocircuitry prevented such an easy way out. Even without such extraneous limitations he could not have shouted abuse at Luseferous or attempted to swallow his tongue because that organ had been torn out when his head had been removed.

Though by now quite perfectly insane, sometimes, after an especially intense training session with the Archimandrite, when the blood trickled down from the one-time rebel chief's split lips, re-broken nose and puffed-up eyes and ears, Stinausin would cry. This Luseferous found particularly gratifying, and sometimes he would stand, breathing hard and wiping himself down with a towel while he watched the tears dilute the blood dripping from the inverted, disembodied head, to land in a broad ceramic shower tray set into the floor.

Of late, though, the Archimandrite had had a new playmate to amuse himself with, and he would occasionally visit the chamber some levels below his study where the nameless would-be assassin whose own teeth were slowly killing him was held.

The assassin, a big, powerful-looking, leoninely human male, had been sent without weapons save for his specially sharpened teeth, with which, it had obviously been hoped by whoever had sent him, he could bite out the Archimandrite's throat. This he had attempted to do, a half-year earlier at a ceremonial dinner held here in the clifftop palace in honour of the System President (a strictly honorary post Luseferous always made sure was filled by somebody of advanced age and retreating faculties). The would-be assassin had only failed to accomplish this task thanks to the Archimandrite's near-paranoid forethought and intense – and largely secret – personal security.

The failed assassin had been both routinely, if savagely, tortured and then very carefully questioned under the influences of entire suites of drugs and electro-biological agents, but had given nothing useful away. Patently he had been equally carefully wiped of any knowledge that might incriminate whoever had sent him, by interrogational technicians at least as capable as those whom the Archimandrite commanded. His controllers had not even bothered to implant false memories incriminating anybody close to the Court and the Archimandrite, as was common in such cases.

Luseferous, who was that most deplorable of beings, a psychopathic sadist with a fertile imagination, had decreed that the final punishment of the assassin should be that his own teeth – the weapons he had been sent with, after all – should bring about his death. Accordingly, his four canine teeth had been removed, bioengineered to become tusks which would grow without ceasing, and reinserted. These great finger-thick fangs had erupted out of the bones of his upper and lower jaw, puncturing the flesh of his lips, and had continued their remorseless growth. The lower set curved up and over his head and, after a few months' worth of extension, came to touch his scalp near the top of his head, while the upper set grew in a scimitar-like paired sweep beneath his neck, taking about the same time to meet the skin near the base of his throat.

Genetically altered not to stop growing even when they encountered such resistance, both sets of teeth then started to enter the assassin's body, one pair slowly forcing themselves through the bony plates of the man's skull, the other set entering rather more easily into the soft tissues of the lower neck. The tusks digging into the assassin's neck caused great pain but were not immediately life-threatening; left to themselves they would reappear from the rear of his neck in due course. The fangs burrowing through his skull and into his brain were the ones which would shortly, and agonisingly, kill him, perhaps in as little as another month or so.

The unfortunate, nameless assassin had been unable to do anything to prevent this because he was pinned helpless and immobile against the wall of the chamber with bands and shackles of thick stainless iron, his nutrition and bodily functions catered for by various tubes and implants. His mouth had also been sewn up, like that of Stinausin. For the first few months of his captivity the assassin's eyes had followed Luseferous around the chamber with a fierce, accusatory look

that the Archimandrite eventually grew to find annoying, and so he'd had the man's eyes stitched shut too.

The fellow's ears and mind still worked, however – Luseferous had been assured – and sometimes it amused him to come down and see for himself the progress that the teeth were making into the creature's body. On such occasions, having what one might term a captive – yet necessarily discreet – audience, he sometimes liked to talk to the failed assassin.

'Good day,' Luseferous said pleasantly as the lift door rumbled shut behind him. The chamber deep below the study was what the Archimandrite thought of as his den. Here, as well as the nameless assassin, he kept assorted souvenirs of old campaigns, booty from his many victories, items of high art looted from a dozen different stellar systems, a collection of weapons both ceremonial and high-power, various caged or tanked creatures, and the mounted, profoundly dead heads of all those major enemies and adversaries whose end had not been so complete as to reduce their mortal remains to radiation, dust, slime or unidentifiable strips of flesh and shards of bone (or the alien equivalents thereof).

Luseferous crossed to a deep, dry tank part-set into the floor and looked in at the Recondite Splicer lying coiled and still on its floor. He slipped a thick elbow glove onto his arm, reached into a large pot standing on the broad, waist-high parapet of the tank and dropped a handful of fat black trunk-leeches into the tank.

'And how are you? Are you keeping well? Hmm?' he asked.

An observer would have been unsure whether the Archimandrite was talking to the human male pinned to the wall, the Recondite Splicer – now no longer still, but raising its blind, glistening brown head, sniffing the air while its long, segmented body twitched with anticipation – or indeed the trunk-leeches, thudding one by one onto the mossy floor of the tank and immediately flexing their way with a sort of sine-wave motion across the surface towards the nearest corner, as far away from the Recondite Splicer as it was possible to get. The brown mass of the Splicer began to shuffle massively towards them and they started trying to climb the sheer glass sides of the tank, climbing over each other and slipping back down as soon as they tried to haul themselves up.

Luseferous peeled the elbow glove off and looked round the vaulted, subtly lit space. The chamber was a comfortable, quiet sort of place set well within the cliff, with no windows or light shafts, and he felt safe and relaxed here. He looked over at the long, tawny shape that was the suspended body of the assassin and said, 'Nowhere's quite as nice as home, eh, is it?' The Archimandrite even smiled, though there was nobody to smile at.

There was a rasping noise and a heavy thump from inside the tank, followed by some almost inaudibly high keening sounds. Luseferous turned to watch the Recondite Splicer tear the giant leeches apart and eat them, violently shaking its great patchily brown head and tossing some bits of slimy black flesh all the way out of the tank. Once it had thrown a still-alive leech up and out of the tank and nearly hit the Archimandrite with it; Luseferous had chased the injured leech round the chamber with a shear-sword, cleaving deep slivers out of the dark red granite floor as he hacked and sliced at the creature.

When the show in the tank was over, the Archimandrite turned back to the assassin. He put the elbow glove back on, picked another trunk-leech from the pot and strolled over to the man attached to the wall. 'Do you remember home, sir assassin?' he asked as he approached. 'Is there any memory of it in your head at all, hmm? Home, mother, friends?' He stopped in front of the

man. ‘Any of that stuff at all?’ He waved the leech’s moist, seeking snout in front of the assassin’s face as he spoke. They sensed each other, the cold, writhing creature in the Archimandrite’s hand stretching out to try to fasten itself to the man’s face, the man sucking breath through his nostrils and turning his head as far as it would go, seeming to try and shrink back into the wall behind (this would not be the first time the assassin had been introduced to a trunk-leech). The tusks digging into his chest prevented him from moving his head very far.

Luseferous followed the movements of the man’s head with the leech, keeping it in front of his lightly furred, leonine face, letting him smell the straining, quivering mass.

‘Or did they rip out all those memories when they cleaned you, before they sent you to try to kill me? Huh? Are they all gone? Eh?’ He let the very tip of the trunk-leech’s mouth parts just touch the fellow’s nose, causing the failed assassin to wince and jerk and make a small, terrified whimpering noise. ‘What, eh? Do you remember home, eh, sport? A pleasant place to be, a place you felt safe and secure and with people you trusted, and who maybe even loved you? What do you say? Eh? Eh? Come on.’ The man tried to turn his head still further, straining the puckered skin around the puncture points on his chest, one of which started to bleed. The giant leech trembled in Luseferous’s hand, stretching its mucus-tipped mouth parts still further as it tried to find purchase on the human male’s flesh. Then, before the leech could properly attach itself to the fellow, the Archimandrite pulled it back and let it hang from his half-outstretched arm, where it swung and twisted muscularly with what felt for all the world like genuine frustration.

‘This is my home, sir assassin,’ Luseferous told the man. ‘This is my place, my refuge, this, which you . . . invaded, despoiled, dishonoured with your . . . your plot. Your attempt.’ His voice quaked as he said, ‘I invited you into my house, invited you to my table as . . . as hosts have guests for ten thousand human years and you . . . all you wanted to do was hurt me, kill me. Here, in my home, where I should feel safer than anywhere.’ The Archimandrite shook his head in sorrow at such ingratitude. The failed assassin had nothing but a dirty rag to cover his nakedness. Luseferous pulled it away and the fellow flinched again. Luseferous stared. ‘They did make a bit of a mess of you, didn’t they?’ He watched the failed assassin’s thighs quiver and twitch. He let the loincloth fall to the ground; a servant would replace it tomorrow.

‘I like my home,’ he told the fellow quietly. ‘I do, really. Everything I’ve had to do I’ve done just to make things safer, to make home safer, to make everybody safer.’ He waved the trunk-leech towards what was left of the man’s genitalia, but the leech seemed listless and the man already exhausted. Even the Archimandrite felt like some of the fun had gone out of the situation. He turned smartly and strode to the pot on the broad rail over the tank, dumping the leech inside and peeling the thick elbow glove off.

‘And now I have to leave home, mister assassin,’ Luseferous said, and sighed. He gazed down at the long coiled shape of the once-again-still Recondite Splicer. It had changed colour from brown to yellow-green now, adopting the colours of the mosses it lay upon. All that was left of the trunk-leeches were some dark spots and smears on the walls, and a faint, tangy smell the Archimandrite had come to recognise as that of yet another species’s blood. He turned back to look at the assassin. ‘Yes, I have to go away, and for a very long time, and it would seem I have no choice.’ He started to walk slowly towards the man. ‘Because you can’t delegate everything, because ultimately, especially when it comes to the most important things, you can’t really trust anybody else. Because sometimes, especially when you’re going far away and communications take so long, there’s no substitute for being there. What do you think of that? Eh? There’s a fine thing. Don’t you think? Me working all these years to make this place safe and now I have to leave it, still trying to make it even safer, even more powerful, even better.’ He stepped up to the man again, tapping one of the curved fangs boring through the fellow’s skull. ‘And all because of

people like you, who hate me, who won't listen, who won't do as they're told, who don't know what's good for them.' He gripped the fang and pulled hard at it. The man mewed down his nose with pain.

'Well, not really,' Luseferous said, shrugging, letting go. 'It's debatable whether this will really make us safer or not. I'm going to this . . . this Ulubis . . . system or whatever it is because there might be something valuable there, because my advisers advise so and my intelligence people have intelligence to this effect. Of course nobody's certain, nobody ever is. But they do seem uncommonly excited about this.' The Archimandrite sighed again, more deeply. 'And impressionable old me, I'm going to do as they suggest. Do you think I'm doing the right thing?' He paused, as though expecting an answer. 'Do you? I mean, I realise you might not be entirely honest with me if you did have an opinion, but, all the same . . . No? You sure?' He traced the line of a scar along the side of the man's abdomen, wondering idly if it was one of those that his own inquisitors had inflicted. Looked a bit crude and deep to be their work. The failed assassin was breathing quickly and shallowly but giving no sign that he was even listening. Behind his sealed mouth, his jaws seemed to be working.

'You see, for once I'm not absolutely sure myself, and I could use some advice. Might not make us all safer at all, what we're planning to do. But it has to be done. The way some things just have to. Eh?' He slapped the man's face, not hard. The man flinched all the same. 'Don't worry, though. You can come too. Big invasion fleet. Plenty of room.' He looked around the chamber. 'Anyway, I feel you spend too much time stuck in here; you could do with getting out more.' The Archimandrite Luseferous smiled, though still there was nobody to smile at. 'After all this trouble I'd hate to miss watching you die. Yes, you come with me, why don't you? To Ulubis, to Nasqueron.'

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One day in the sub-season of Desuetude II, the uncle of Fassin Taak summoned his only occasionally troublesome nephew to his side in the chamber of Provisional Forgetting.

'Nephew.'

'Uncle. You wanted to see me?'

'Hmm.'

Fassin Taak waited politely. It was, these days, not unknown for Uncle Slovius to remain silent, apparently pondering, for some time after even such a simple and technically redundant exchange, as though they had each given the other something profound and indeed unexpected to think about. Fassin had never entirely made up his mind whether this habit indicated that his uncle took his avuncular duties with particular and solemn seriousness, or just meant that the old guy was going senile. Either way, Uncle Slovius had been paterfamilias of the Seer Sept Bantrabal for either nearly three or over fourteen centuries, depending on how you reckoned time, and was generally regarded as having earned the right to be indulged in such matters.

Like the good nephew, devoted family member and faithful faculty officer he was, Fassin respected his uncle on principle as well as through sentiment, though he was aware that his attitude might be influenced by the fact that according to the customs of their family and the rules of their caste, the seniority and deference presently accorded his uncle would one day fall to him. The pause continued. Fassin bowed fractionally. 'Uncle, may I sit?'

‘Eh? Oh, yes.’ Uncle Slovius raised a flipper-like hand and waved it vaguely. ‘Please do.’

‘Thank you.’

Fassin Taak hitched up his walking britches, gathered in his wide shirt sleeves and folded himself decorously into a sitting position at the side of the large circular pool of gently steaming and luminously blue liquid that his uncle floated within. Uncle Slovius had some years ago assumed the shape of a walrus. A beige-pink, relatively slim walrus, with tusks barely longer than the middle finger of a man’s hand, but a walrus nevertheless. The hands Uncle Slovius had once possessed were no more – they were flippers now, on the end of two thin, rather odd and ineffectual-looking arms. His fingers were little more than stubs; a scalloped pattern fringing the ends of his flippers. He opened his mouth to speak, but then one of the household servants, a black-uniformed human male, approached him, kneeling at the side of the pool to whisper something into his ear. The servant held his long pigtail out of the water with one many-ringed hand. The dark clothes, long hair and rings all indicated that he was one of the most senior functionaries. Fassin felt he ought to know his name, but couldn’t think of it immediately.

He looked round the room. The chamber of Provisional Forgetting was one of the rarely used parts of the house, only called into action – if you could call it that – on such occasions, when a senior family member was approaching their end. The pool took up most of the floor space of a large roughly hemispherical room whose walls were translucently thin agate inlaid with veins of time-dulled silver. This dome formed part of one bubble-wing of the family’s Autumn House, situated on the continent Twelve on the rocky planet-moon ’glantine, which orbited the gaudy, swirlingly clouded mass of the gas-giant Nasqueron like a pepper grain around a football. A tiny portion of the massive planet’s surface was visible through the transparent centre section of the dome’s roof, directly above Fassin and his uncle.

The part of Nasqueron that Fassin could see was presently in daylight, displaying a chaotic cloudscape coloured crimson, orange and rust-brown, the summed shades producing a deep red light which fell through the violet skies of ’glantine’s thinly breathable atmosphere and the dome’s glazed summit and helped illuminate the chamber and the pool below, where the black-clad servant was supporting Uncle Slovius while he supped on a beaker of what might have been either refreshment or medicine. Some dribbles of the clear liquid escaped Uncle Slovius’s mouth, trickling down his grizzled chin to the folds of his neck and dripping into the blue pool, where tall waves slopped to and fro in the half-standard gravity. Uncle Slovius made quiet grunting noises, his eyes closed.

Fassin looked away. Another servant approached him, offering a tray of drinks and sweetmeats, but he smiled and raised one hand in a gesture of rejection and the servant bowed and retreated. Fassin fixed his gaze politely on the dome’s roof and the view of the gas-giant, while watching from the corner of his eye as the servant attending his uncle dabbed at the old man’s lips with a neatly folded cloth.

Magisterial, oblivious, moving almost imperceptibly with a kind of tumultuous serenity, Nasqueron turned above them like some vast glowing coal hanging in the sky.

The gas-giant was the largest planet in the Ulubis system, which lay within a remote strand of Stream Quaternary, one of the Southern Tendril Reefs on the galactic outskirts, fifty-five thousand years from the galaxy’s nominal centre and about as remote as it was possible to get while still being part of the great lens.

There were, especially in the current post-War age, different levels of remoteness, and Ulubis system qualified as back-of-beyond in all of them. Being on the outermost reaches of the galaxy – and hanging well underneath the galactic plane, where the last vestiges of stars and gas gave way to the emptiness beyond – did not necessarily mean that a place was inaccessible, providing it was close to an arteria portal.

Arteria – wormholes – and the portals which were their exits and entrances meant everything in the galactic community; they represented the difference between having to crawl everywhere at less than the speed of light and making almost instantaneous transitions from one stellar system to another. The effect they had on a system's importance, economy and even morale was similarly dramatic and rapid. Without one, it was as though you were still stuck in one small village, one dull and muddy valley, and might be there all your life. Once a wormhole portal was emplaced, it was as though you suddenly became part of a vast and glittering city, full of energy, life and promise.

The only way to get an arteria portal from one place to another was to put it in a spaceship and physically take it, slower than light, from one place to another, leaving the other end – usually – anchored where you'd started out. Which meant that if your wormhole was destroyed – and they could be destroyed, in theory at any point along their length, in practice only at their ends, at their portals – then you were instantly all the way back to square one, stuck in your isolated little village once again.

Ulubis system had first been connected to the rest of the galaxy over three billion years earlier, during what was then known as the New Age. It had been a relatively young, not-long-formed system at the time, just a few billion years old, but was already multiply life-supporting. Its arteria connection had formed part of the Second Complex, the galactic community's second serious attempt at an integrated network of wormholes. It had lost that connection in the billion-year turmoil of the Long Collapse, the War of Squalls, the Scatter Anarchy and the Informorta breakdown, then – along with most of the rest of the civilised galaxy – slumbered as if comatose under the weight of the Second, or Major, Chaos, a time when only its Dweller population on Nasqueron had survived. The Dwellers, being numbered amongst the species meta-type known as the Slow, worked to a different timescale, and thought nothing of taking a few hundred thousand years to get from point A to point B; a billion years of nothing much happening was, they declared, merely like a long sabbatical to them.

Following the Third Diasporian Age (and much more besides – galactic history wasn't really simple on any scale) another wormhole brought Ulubis back on-line to become part of the Third Complex. That arteria lasted for seventy million peaceful, productive years, during which several Quick species, none of them native to Ulubis, came and went, leaving only the Dwellers to bear consistent witness to the slow turn of life and events. The Arteria Collapse had plunged Ulubis into solitude once again, along with ninety-five per cent of the connected galaxy. More portals and wormholes disappeared during the War of the New Quick and the Machine War, and only the establishment of the Mercatoria – at least by the estimation of those who controlled it – brought about a lasting peace and the beginning of the Fourth Complex.

Ulubis had been reconnected early on in this slow, still-at-the-early-stages process and for six thousand years that latest arteria had made the system an easily reached part of the gradually recovering galactic community. However, then that wormhole too had been destroyed, and for over a quarter of a millennium Ulubis's nearest working access point had been fully two hundred and fourteen years away further down the increasing thickness of the Stream at Zenerre. That would change in about seventeen years or so, when the wormhole end-point currently being transported towards Ulubis system at relativistic speeds aboard the Engineership *Est-taun Zhiffir*

arrived and was emplaced, probably where the old portal had been, at one of the Lagrange points near Sepekte, the principal planet of the Ulubis system. For the moment, though, Ulubis, despite its importance as a centre for Dweller Studies, remained remote chronologically as well as physically.

Uncle Slovius waved the servant away with one flipper and drew himself up against the Y-shaped cradle which supported his head and shoulders above the blue glowing surface of the pool. The servant – Fassin recognised him now as Guime, the second-highest-ranking of his uncle's retainers – turned back and tried to help Slovius in this manoeuvre. However, Slovius made hissing, tutting noises and slapped at the male with one flipper hand. Guime dodged the weak, slow blow easily and stepped back again, bowing. He stood nearby, by the wall. Slovious struggled to lift his upper body any further out of the pool, his tailed torso stirring sluggishly under the luminescent waves.

Fassin started to rise from his cross-legged position. 'Uncle, do you want me to—?'

'No!' his uncle shouted in exasperation, still trying ineffectually to push himself further up the cradle. 'I would like people to stop *fussing*, that's all!' Slovius turned his head round as he said this, trying to look at Guime, but only succeeded in causing himself to slip further back into the liquid, so that he was even more horizontal than he had been before he started. He slapped at the pool surface, splashing. 'There! See what you've done? Interfering idiot!' He sighed mightily and lay back in the wallowing waves, apparently exhausted, staring straight ahead. 'You may adjust me, Guime, as you wish,' he said dully, sounding resigned.

Guime knelt on the tiles behind him, put a hand under each of Slovius's armpits and hauled his master upwards onto the cradle until his head and shoulders were almost vertical. Slovius settled himself there, then nodded briskly. Guime retreated again to his position by the wall.

'Now then, nephew,' Slovius said, crossing his flipper hands over the pink expanse of his hairless chest. He looked up at the transparent summit of the dome.

Fassin smiled. 'Yes, uncle?'

Slovius seemed to hesitate. He let his gaze fall to his nephew. 'Your . . . your studies, Fassin. How do they progress?'

'They progress satisfactorily, sir. In the matter of the Tranche Xonju it is still, of course, very early.'

'Hmm. Early,' Uncle Slovius said. He looked thoughtful, staring into the distance again. Fassin sighed gently. This was obviously going to take some time.

Fassin Taak was a Slow Seer at the court of the Nasqueron Dwellers. The Dwellers – Gas-Giant Dwellers, to give them a fuller designation . . . Neutrally Buoyant First Order Ubiquitous Climax Clade Gas-Giant Dwellers, to grant them a still more painfully precise specification – were large creatures of immense age who lived within the deliriously complex and topologically vast civilisation of great antiquity which was distributed throughout the cloud layers wrapping the enormous gas-giant planet, a habitat that was as stupendous in scale as it was changeable in aerography.

The Dwellers, at least in their mature form, thought slowly. They lived slowly, evolved slowly, travelled slowly and did almost everything they ever did, slowly. They could, it was alleged, fight quite quickly. Though, as far as anybody was able to determine, they had not had to do any

fighting for a long time. The implication of this was that they could think quickly when it suited them, but most of the time it did not appear to suit them, and so – it was assumed – they thought slowly. It was unarguable that in their later years – later aeons – they conversed slowly. So slowly that a simple question asked before breakfast might not be answered until after supper. A rate of conversational exchange, it occurred to Fassin, that Uncle Slovius – floating in his now-quite-still pool with a trancelike expression on his tusked, puffy face – seemed determined to emulate.

'The Tranche Xonju, it concerns . . . ?' Slovius said suddenly.

'Clutter poetry, Diasporic myths and various history tangles,' Fassin answered.
'Histories of which epochs?'

'The majority have still to be dated, uncle. Some may never be, and possibly belong with the myths. The only readily identifiable strands are very recent and appear to relate to mostly local events during the Machine War.'

Uncle Slovius nodded slowly, producing small waves. 'The Machine War. That is interesting.'

'I was thinking of attending to those strands first.'

'Yes,' Slovius said. 'A good idea.'

'Thank you, uncle.'

Slovius lapsed into silence again. A ground-quake rumbled distantly around them, producing tiny concentric rings in the liquid of Slovius's pool.

The civilisation which comprised the Dwellers of Nasqueron, with all their attendant fellow flora and fauna, itself formed but one microscopic fragment of the Dweller Diaspora, the galaxy-spanning meta-civilisation (some would say post-civilisation) which, as far as anyone could tell, preceded all other empires, cultures, diasporas, civilisations, federations, consocia, fellowships, unities, leagues, confederacies, affilia and organisations of like or unlike beings in general.

The Dwellers, in other words, had been around for most of the life of the galaxy. This made them at least unusual and possibly unique. It also made them, if they were approached with due deference and care, and treated with respect and patience, a precious resource. Because they had good memories and even better libraries. Or at least they had retentive memories, and very large libraries.

Dweller memories, and libraries, usually proved to be stuffed full of outright nonsense, bizarre myths, incomprehensible images, indecipherable symbols and meaningless equations, plus random assemblages of numbers, letters, pictograms, holophons, sonomemes, chemiglyphs, actinomes and *sensata variegata*, all of them trawled and thrown together unsorted – or in patterns too abstruse to be untangled – from a jumbled mix of millions upon millions of utterly different and categorically unrelated civilisations, the vast majority of which had long since disappeared and either crumbled into dust or evaporated into radiation.

Nevertheless, in all that flux of chaos, propaganda, distortion, drivel and weirdness, there were nuggets of actuality, seams of facts, frozen rivers of long-forgotten history, whole volumes of exobiography and skeins and tissues of truth. It had been the life-work of people like Chief Seer Slovius, and was the life-work of people like Chief Seer-in-waiting Fassin Taak, to meet with and

talk to the Dwellers, to adapt to their language, thoughts and metabolism, to – sometimes virtually, at a remove, sometimes literally – float and fly and dive and soar with them amongst the clouds of Nasqueron, and through their conversations, their studies, their notes and analyses, make what sense they could of what their ancient slow-living hosts told them and allowed them to access, and so enrich and enlighten the greater, quicker meta-civilisation which presently inhabited the galaxy.

'And, ah, Jaal?' Slovius glanced at his nephew, who looked sufficiently surprised for the older male to add, 'The, oh, what's their name . . . ? Tonderon. Yes. The Tonderon girl. You two are still betrothed, aren't you?'

Fassin smiled. 'We are indeed, uncle,' he said. 'She is returning from Pirrintipiti this evening. I'm hoping to meet her at the port.'

'And you are . . . ?' Slovius gestured with one flipper hand. 'Still content?'

'Content, uncle?' Fassin asked.

'You are happy with her? With the prospect of her being your wife?'

'Of course, uncle.'

'And she with you?'

'Well, I hope so. I believe so.'

Slovius looked at his nephew, holding his gaze for a moment. 'Mm-hmm. I see. Of course. Well.' Slovius used one of his flipper hands to wave some of the blue glowing liquid over his upper chest, as though he was cold. 'You are to be wed when?'

'The date is fixed for Allhallows, Jocund III,' Fassin said. 'Somewhat under half a year, body time,' he added helpfully.

'I see,' Slovius said, frowning. He nodded slowly, and the action caused his body to rise and fall slightly in the pool, producing more waves. 'Well, it is good to know you might finally be settling down at last.'

Fassin considered himself to be a dedicated, hard-working and productive Seer who spent well above the average amount of time at the sharp end of delving, actually with the Nasqueron Dwellers. However, due to the fact that he liked to complete each interlude of this real, useful life with what he called a 'proper holiday', the older generation of Sept Bantrabal, and especially Slovius, seemed to think he was some sort of hopeless wastrel. (Indeed, Uncle Slovius seemed reluctant to accept the term 'proper holiday' at all. He preferred to call them 'month-long blind-drunk stoned-out benders getting into trouble, fights and illicit orifices in the flesh pots of—' well, wherever; sometimes Pirrintipiti, the capital of 'glantine, sometimes Borquille, capital of Sepekte, or one of Sepekte's other cities, sometimes one of the many pleasure habitats scattered throughout the system.)

Fassin smiled tolerantly. 'Still, I shan't be hanging up my dancing shoes just yet, uncle.'

'The nature of your studies over your last, say, three or four delves, Fassin. Have they followed what one might term a consistent course?'

‘You confuse me, uncle,’ Fassin admitted.

‘Your last three or four delves, have they been in any way linked thematically, or by subject, or through the Dwellers you have conversed with?’

Fassin sat back, surprised. Why ever would old Slovius be interested in this? ‘Let me think, sir,’ he said. ‘On this occasion I spoke almost exclusively with Xonju, who provided information seemingly at random and does not fully appear to understand the concept of an answer. Our first meeting and all very preparatory. He may be worth following up, if we can find him again. He may not. It might take all of the months between now and my next delve to work out—’

‘So this was a sampling expedition, an introduction?’

‘Indeed.’

‘Before that?’

‘A protracted conference, with Cheuhoras, Saraisme the younger, Akeurle Both-twins, traav Kanchangesja and a couple of minors from the Eglide adolescent pod.’

‘Your subjects?’

‘Poetry, mostly. Ancient, modern, the use of image in the epic, the ethics of boasting and exaggeration.’

‘And the delve before?’

‘With Cheuhoras alone; an extended lament for his departed parent, some hunting myths from the local near-past and a lengthy translation and disposition on an epic sequence concerning the adventures of ancient plasmatics voyaging within the hydrogen migration, perhaps a billion or so years ago, during the Second Chaos.’

‘Before that?’

Fassin smiled. ‘My extended one-to-one with Valseir, the delve which included my sojourn with the Raucous Rascals of Tribe Dimajrian.’ He imagined he didn’t need to remind his uncle of too many of the details of that particular excursion. This had been the protracted delve which had made his name as a gifted Seer, the six-year journey – by body-time; it had lasted nearly a century by outside reckoning – that had established his reputation both within Sept Bantrabal and the hierarchy of ’glantine Seers beyond. His exploits, and the value of the stories and histories he had returned with, had been largely responsible for his elevation to the post of Chief Seer-in-waiting in his Sept, and for the offer of marriage to the daughter of the Chief Seer of Sept Tonderon, the most senior of the twelve Septs.

‘This takes us back how many years, in real?’

Fassin thought. ‘About three hundred . . . Two hundred and eighty-seven, if I recall correctly.’

Slovius nodded. ‘There was much of that delve released during its course?’

‘Almost nothing, sir. The Raucous Rascals insisted. They are one of the more . . .
unameliorated adolescent pods. I was allowed to report that I was alive once per year.’

‘The delve before that?’

Fassin sighed and tapped the fingers of one hand on the fused glass at the side of the pool. What on old Earth could this be about? And could Slovius not simply look up the Sept records for such information? There was a big cantilevered arm thing stowed against the wall of the pool chamber with a screenpad on the end. Fassin had seen this device lowered into place in front of Slovius for him to peer at and prod the keys with his finger stumps. It was, patently, not a very rapid or efficient method of interrogating the house library, but it would answer all these questions. Or the old fellow could just ask. There were servants for this sort of thing.

Fassin cleared his throat. ‘Most of that was taken up with instructing Paggs Yurnvic, of Sept Reheo, on his first delve. We paid court to traav Hambrier, in one-to-one time with the Dwellers to allow for Yurnvic’s inexperience. The delve lasted barely three months, body-time. Textbook introductory, sir.’

‘You found no time to pursue any studies of your own?’

‘Little, sir.’

‘But some, yes?’

‘I was able to attend part of a symposium on deep poetics, with the university pod Marcal. To detail the other attendees I would have to inquire within the Sept records, sir.’

‘What more? Of the symposium, I mean. Its subject?’

‘If I recall, a comparison of Dweller hunting techniques with the actions of Machine War Inquisitories.’ Fassin stroked his chin. ‘The examples were Ulubis-system local, some regarding ’glantine.’

Slovius nodded. He glanced at his nephew. ‘Do you know what an emissarial projection is, Fassin?’

Fassin looked up at the segment of gas-giant visible through the transparent roof panel. The night terminator was just starting to appear to one side, a line of increasing darkness creeping across the distant cloudscape. He looked back down at Slovius. ‘I may have heard the term, sir. I would not care to offer a definition.’

‘It’s when they send a tuned suite of queries and responses to a physically remote location, by light beam. To play the part of an emissary.’

‘“They”, sir?’

‘Engineers, the Administrata. Perhaps the Omnocracy.’

Fassin sat back. ‘Indeed?’

‘Indeed. If we are to believe what we are told, the object they send is something like a library, transmitted by signal laser. Suitably housed and emplaced within enabled equipment of sufficient capacity and complexity, this . . . entity, though it is simply a many-branched array of statements, questions and answers, with a set of rules governing the order in which they are expressed, is able

to carry out what seems very like an intelligent conversation. It is as close as one is allowed to come to an artificial intelligence, post-War.'

'How singular.'

Slovius wobbled in his pool. 'They are assuredly surpassing rare,' he agreed. 'One is being sent here.'

Fassin blinked a few times. 'Sent here?'

'To Sept Bantrabal. To this house. To us.'

'To us.'

'From the Administrata.'

'The Administrata.' Fassin became aware that he was sounding simple-minded.

'Via the Engineership *Est-taun Zhiffir*.'

'My,' Fassin said. 'We are . . . privileged.'

'Not we, Fassin; you. The projection is being sent to talk to you.'

Fassin smiled weakly. 'To me? I see. When will—?'

'It is currently being transmitted. It ought to be ready by late evening. You may wish to clear your schedule for this. Did you have much arranged?'

'Ah . . . a supper with Jaal. I'm sure—'

'I would make it an early supper, and don't tarry.'
'Well, yes. Of course,' Fassin said. 'Do you have any idea, sir, what I might have done to deserve such an honour?'

Slovius was silent for a moment, then said, 'None whatsoever.'

Guime replaced an intercom set on its hook and left his place by the agate wall to kneel and whisper to Slovius, who nodded, then looked at Fassin. 'Major-Domo Verpych would like to talk to you, nephew.'

'Verpych?' Fassin said, with a gulp. The household's major-domo, Sept Bantrabal's most senior servant, was supposed to rest dormant until the whole sept moved to its winter lodgings, over eighty days from now. It was unheard of for him to be roused out of sequence. 'I thought he was asleep!'

'Well, he's been woken up.'

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