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Opening Extract from...

The Quantum Thief

Written by Hannu Rajaniemi

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The QUANTUM THIEF

Hannu Rajaniemi

GOLLANCZ
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This is for Nana

'… there comes a time when you cease to know yourself amid all these changes, and that is very sad. I feel at present as the man must have felt who lost his shadow …'

Maurice Leblanc, *The Escape of Arsène Lupin*

1

THE THIEF AND THE PRISONER'S DILEMMA

As always, before the warmind and I shoot each other, I try to make small talk.

'Prisons are always the same, don't you think?'

I don't even know if it can hear me. It has no visible auditory organs, just eyes, human eyes, hundreds of them, in the ends of stalks that radiate from its body like some exotic fruit. It hovers on the other side of the glowing line that separates our cells. The huge silver Colt would look ridiculous in the grip of its twiglike manipulator limbs if it hadn't already shot me with it fourteen thousand times.

'Prisons are like airports used to be on Earth. No one wants to be here. No one really *lives* here. We're just passing through.'

Today, the Prison's walls are glass. There is a sun far above, almost like the real one but not quite right, paler. Millions of glass-walled, glass-floored cells stretch to infinity around me. The light filters through the transparent surfaces and makes rainbow colours on the floor. Apart from them, my cell is bare, and so am I: birth-naked, except for the gun. Sometimes, when you win, they let you change the little

things. The warmind has been successful. It has zero-g flowers floating in its cell, red and purple and green bulbs growing out of bubbles of water, like cartoon versions of itself. Narcissistic bastard.

'If we had toilets, the doors would open inwards. Nothing ever changes.'

All right, so I *am* starting to run out of material.

The warmind raises its weapon slowly. A ripple passes through its eyestalks. I wish it had a face: the stare of its moist forest of orbs is unnerving. *Never mind. It's going to work this time.* I tilt the gun upwards slightly, my body language and wrist movement suggesting the motion I would make if I was going to put up my gun. My every muscle screams *cooperation. Come on. Fall for it. Honest. This time, we are going to be friends—*

A fiery wink: the black pupil of its gun, flashing. My trigger finger jerks. There are two thunderclaps. And a bullet in my head.

You never get used to the feeling of hot metal, entering your skull and exiting through the back of your head. It's simulated in glorious detail. A burning train through your forehead, a warm spray of blood and brain on your shoulders and back, the sudden chill – and finally, the black, when things *stop*. The Archons of the Dilemma Prison want you to feel it. It's educational.

The Prison is all about education. And game theory: the mathematics of rational decision-making. When you are an immortal mind like the Archons, you have time to be obsessed with such things. And it is just like the Sobornost – the upload collective that rules the Inner Solar System – to put them in charge of their prisons.

We play the same game over and over again, in different forms. An archetypal game beloved by economists and mathematicians. Sometimes it's chicken: we are racers on an endless highway, driving at each other at high speeds, deciding whether or not to turn away at the last minute. Sometimes we are soldiers trapped in trench warfare, facing each other across no-man's-land. And sometimes they go back to basics and make us prisoners – old-fashioned prisoners, questioned by hard-eyed men – who have to choose between betrayal and the code of silence. Guns are the flavour of today. I'm not looking forward to tomorrow.

I snap back to life like a rubber band, blinking. There is a discontinuity in my mind, a rough edge. The Archons change your neural makeup a little bit every time you come back. They claim that eventually Darwin's whetstone will hone any prisoner into a rehabilitated cooperator.

If they shoot and I don't, I'm screwed. If we both shoot, it hurts a little. If we cooperate, it's Christmas for both of us. Except that there is always an incentive to pull the trigger. The theory is that as we meet again and again, cooperative behaviour will emerge.

A few million rounds more and I'll be a Boy Scout.

Right.

My score after the last game is an ache in my bones. The warmind and I both defected. Two games to go, in this round. *Not enough. Damn it.*

You capture territory by playing against your neighbours. If, at the end of each round, your score is higher than that of your neighbours, you win, and are rewarded with duplicates of yourself that replace – and erase – the losers around you. I'm not doing very well today – two double defections so far,

both with the warmind – and if I don't turn this around, it's oblivion for real.

I weigh my options. Two of the squares around mine – left and back – contain copies of the warmind. The one on the right has a woman in it: when I turn to face it, the wall between us vanishes, replaced by the blue line of death.

Her cell is as bare as mine. She is sitting in the middle, hugging her knees, wrapped in a black toga-like garment. I look at her curiously: I haven't seen her before. She has a deeply tanned skin that makes me think of Oort, an almond Asian face and a compact, powerful body. I smile at her and wave. She ignores me. Apparently, the Prison thinks that counts as mutual cooperation: I feel my point score go up a little, warm like a shot of whisky. The glass wall is back between us. *Well, that was easy.* But still not enough against the warmind.

'Hey, loser,' someone says. 'She's not interested. Better options around.'

There is another me in the remaining cell. He is wearing a white tennis shirt, shorts and oversized mirrorshades, lounging in a deck chair by a swimming pool. He has a book in his lap: *Le Bouchon de cristal*. One of my favorites, too.

'It got you again,' he says, not bothering to look up. 'Again. What is that, three times in a row now? You should know by now that it always goes for tit-for-tat.'

'I *almost* got it this time.'

'That whole false memory of cooperation thing is a good idea,' he says. 'Except, you know, it will never work. The warminds have non-standard occipital lobes, non-sequential dorsal stream. You can't fool it with visual illusions. Too bad the Archons don't give points for effort.'

I blink.

'Wait a minute. How do you know that, but I don't?'

'Did you think you are the *only* le Flambeur in here? I've been around. Anyway, you need ten more points to beat it, so get over here and let me help you out.'

'Rub it in, smartass.' I walk to the blue line, taking my first relieved breath of this round. He gets up as well, pulling his sleek automatic from beneath the book.

I point a forefinger at him. 'Boom boom,' I say. 'I co-operate.'

'Very funny,' he says and raises his gun, grinning.

My double reflection in his shades looks small and naked.

'Hey. Hey. We're in this together, right?' *And this is me thinking I had a sense of humor*.

'Gamblers and high rollers, isn't that who we are?'

Something clicks. Compelling smile, elaborate cell, putting me at ease, reminding me of myself but somehow not quite right—

'Oh fuck.'

Every prison has its rumours and monsters and this place is no different. I heard this one from a zoku renegade I co-operated with for a while: the legend of the anomaly. The All-Defector. The *thing* that *never* cooperates and gets away with it. It found a glitch in the system so that it always appears as *you*. And if you can't trust yourself, who can you trust?

'Oh yes,' says the All-Defector, and pulls the trigger.

At least it's not the warmind, I think when the bright thunder comes.

And then things stop making sense.

In the dream, Mieli is eating a peach, on Venus. The flesh is sweet and juicy, slightly bitter. It mingles with Sydän's taste in a delicious way.

‘You bastard’, she says, breathing heavily.

They are in a q-dot bubble fourteen klicks above the Cleopatra Crater, a little pocket of humanity, sweat and sex on a rough precipice of Maxwell Montes. Sulphuric acid winds roar outside. The amber light of the cloud cover filtering through the adamantine pseudomatter shell makes Sydän’s skin run copper. Her palm fits the contours of Mieli’s mons Veneris exactly, resting just above her still moist sex. Soft wings flutter lazily in her belly.

‘What did I do?’

‘Lots of things. Is that what they taught you in the *guberniya*?’

Sydän smiles her pixie smile, little crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes. ‘It’s kind of been a while for me, actually,’ she says.

‘My ass.’

‘What about it? It’s very nice.’

The fingers of Sydän’s free hand trace the silvery lines of the butterfly tattoo on Mieli’s chest.

‘Don’t do that,’ Mieli says. Suddenly, she feels cold.

Sydän pulls her hand away and touches Mieli’s cheek.

‘What’s wrong?’

All the flesh of the fruit is gone, and only the stone remains. She holds it in her mouth before spitting it out, a rough little thing, surface engraved with memory.

‘You are not really here. You’re not real. Just here to keep me sane, in the Prison.’

‘Is it working?’

Mieli pulls her close, kissing her neck, tasting sweat. ‘Not really. I don’t want to leave.’

‘You were always the strong one,’ Sydän says. She caresses Mieli’s hair. ‘It is almost time.’

Mieli clings onto her, the familiar feel of her body. The jewelled serpent on Sydän's leg presses hard against her.

Mieli. The pellegrini's voice in her head is like a cold wind.

'Just a little while longer—'

Mieli!

The transition is hard and painful, like biting down on the peach-stone, the hard kernel of reality almost cracking her teeth. A prison cell, fake, pale sunlight. A glass wall, and beyond it, two thieves, talking.

The mission. Long months of preparation and execution. Suddenly, she is wide awake, the plan running through her head.

It was a mistake to give you that memory, says the pellegrini in her head. *It is almost too late. Now let me out: it is getting cramped in here.*

Mieli spits the peach-stone at the glass wall. It shatters like ice.

First, time slows down.

The bullet is an ice-cream headache, burrowing into my skull. I am falling, yet not falling, suspended. The All-Defector is a frozen statue beyond the blue line, still holding his gun.

The glass wall to my right shatters. The shards float around me, glinting in the sun, a galaxy of glass.

The woman from the cell walks up to me briskly. There is a deliberation in her step that makes it look like something she has rehearsed for a long time, like an actor who has received a cue.

She looks at me, up and down. She has short-cropped dark hair, and a scar on her left cheekbone: just a line of black

against her deep tan, precise and geometrical. Her eyes are pale green. 'It's your lucky day,' she says. 'There is something for you to steal.' She offers me her hand.

The bullet headache intensifies. There are patterns in the glass galaxy around us, almost like a familiar face—

I smile. *Of course. It is a dying dream. Some glitch in the system: it's just taking a while. Broken prison. Toilet doors. Nothing ever changes.*

'No,' I say.

The dream-woman blinks.

'I am Jean le Flambeur,' I say. 'I steal what I choose, when I choose. And I will leave this place when I choose, not a second before. As a matter of fact, I quite like it here—' The pain makes the world go white, and I can no longer see. I start laughing.

Somewhere in my dream, someone laughs with me. *My Jean,* says another voice, so familiar. *Oh yes. We'll take this one.*

A hand made from glass brushes my cheek, just as my simulated brain finally decides it is time to die.

Mieli holds the dead thief in her arms: he weighs nothing. The pellegrini is flowing into the Prison from the peach-stone, like a heat ripple. She coalesces into a tall woman in a white dress, diamonds around her neck, hair carefully arranged in auburn waves, young and old at the same time.

That feels better, she says. *There is not enough room inside your head.* She stretches her arms luxuriously. *Now, let's get you out of here, before my brother's children notice. I have things to do here.*

Mieli feels borrowed strength growing within her, and leaps into the air. They rise up higher and higher, air rushing past,

and for a moment she feels like she lived in Grandmother Brihane's house and had wings again. Soon, the Prison is a grid of tiny squares beneath them. The squares change colour, like pixels, forming infinitely complex patterns of cooperation and defection, like pictures—

Just before Mieli and the thief pass through the sky, the Prison becomes the pellegrini's smiling face.

Dying is like walking across a

desert, thinking about stealing. The boy is lying in the hot sand with the sun beating down on his back, watching the robot on the edge of the solar panel fields. The robot looks like a camouflage-coloured crab, a plastic toy: but there are valuable things inside it, and One-Eyed Ijja will pay well for them. And perhaps, just perhaps Tafalkayt will call him son again if he is like a man of the family—

I never wanted to die in a

prison, a dirty place of concrete and metal and bitter stale smells and beatings. The young man's split lip aches. He is reading a book about a man who is like a god. A man who can do anything he wants, who steals the secrets of kings and emperors, who laughs at rules, who can change his face, who only has to reach out his hand to take diamonds and women. A man with the name of a flower.

I hate it so much when they catch you.

pull him up from the sand, roughly. The soldier backhands him across his face, and then the others raise their rifles—

not at all as much fun as

stealing from a mind made of diamond. The god of thieves hides inside thinking dust threaded together by quantum entanglements. He tells the diamond mind lies until it believes he is one of its thoughts and lets him in. up—

The people who are many have made worlds that shine and glitter, as if just for him, and he just has to reach out his hand and pick them up

It's like dying. And getting out is like

a key turning in a lock. The metal bars slide aside. A goddess walks in and tells him he is free.

being born.

The pages of the book turn.

Deep breath. Everything hurts. The scale of things is wrong. I cover my eyes with vast hands. Lightning flashes at the touch. Muscles are a network of steel cables. Mucus in my nose. A hole in my stomach, burning, churning.

Focus. I make the sensory noise into a rock, like those on Argyre Planitia, large and clumsy and smooth. In my mind, I lie down on a fine mesh, pouring through it, crumbling into fine red sand, falling through. The rock cannot follow.

Suddenly it is quiet again. I listen to my pulse. There is something impossibly *regular* about it: every beat like a tick of a perfect mechanism.

Faint scent of flowers. Air currents tickling the hairs of my forearms, and other places – I am still naked. Weightlessness. The inaudible but palpable presence of smartmatter, all around. And another human being, not far away.

Something tickles my nose. I brush it aside and open my eyes. A white butterfly flutters away, into bright light.

I blink. I'm aboard a ship, an Oortian spidership by the looks of it, in a cylindrical space perhaps ten metres long, five in diameter. The walls are transparent, the dirty hue of comet ice. There are strange tribal sculptures suspended inside them, like runic characters. Spherical bonsai trees and many-angled zero-g furniture float along the central axis of

the cylinder. There is starry darkness beyond the walls. And small white butterflies, everywhere.

My rescuer floats nearby. I smile at her.

'Young lady,' I say. 'I believe you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.' My voice sounds distant, but mine. I wonder if they got my face right.

Up close, she looks awfully young, genuinely so: her clear green eyes lack that rejuvenated, seen-it-all look. She wears the same simple garment as in the Prison. She floats in a deceptively comfortable angle, smooth bare legs outstretched, relaxed but ready, like a martial artist. A chain made from multicoloured jewels snakes around her left ankle and up her leg.

'Congratulations, thief,' she says. Her voice is low and controlled, but betrays a hint of contempt. 'You have escaped.'

'I hope so. For all I know this could be some new Dilemma variation. The Archons have been pretty consistent so far, but you are not paranoid if they *really* have you imprisoned in a virtual hell.'

Something stirs between my legs and banishes at least some of my doubts.

'Sorry. It's been a while,' I say, studying my erection with detached interest.

'Evidently,' she says, frowning. There is an odd expression on her face, a mixture of disgust and arousal: I realise she must be listening to this body's biot feed, a part of her feeling what I'm feeling. Another jailer, then.

'Trust me, you are out. It required considerable expense. Of course, there are still several million of you in the Prison, so consider yourself lucky.'

I grab one of the handles of the central axis and move behind a bonsai tree, covering my nudity like Adam. A cloud

of butterflies alights from the foliage. The exertion feels strange as well: the muscles of my new body are still waking up.

'Young lady, I have a name.' I offer her my hand across the bonsai tree. She takes it, dubiously, and squeezes. I return the grip as hard as I can. Her expression does not change. 'Jean le Flambeur, at your service. Although you are absolutely right.' I hold up her ankle chain. It squirms in my cupped hand as if alive, a jewelled serpent. 'I am a thief.'

Her eyes widen. The scar on her cheek goes black. And suddenly, I'm in hell.

I am a bodiless viewpoint in blackness, unable to form a coherent thought. My mind is trapped in a vice. Something *squeezes* from all sides, not allowing me to think or remember or feel. It is a thousand times worse than the Prison. It lasts for an eternity.

Then I am back, gasping, stomach heaving, vomiting bile in floating gobbets, but infinitely grateful for every sensation.

'You will not do that again,' she says. 'Your body and mind are on loan, do you understand? Steal what you are told to steal, and you may be allowed to keep them.' The jewelled chain is back around her ankle. Her cheek muscles twitch.

My Prison-honed instincts tell me to shut up and stop throwing up, but the flower man in me has to speak, and I cannot stop him.

'It's too late,' I gasp.

'What?' There is something beautiful about the wrinkle that appears on her smooth forehead, like a brushstroke.

'I am reformed. You got me out too late. I'm an evolved altruist now, mademoiselle, a being filled with goodwill and neighbourly love. I could not possibly dream of taking part in

any sort of criminal activity, even at the behest of my lovely rescuer.'

She stares at me blankly.

'Very well.'

'Very well?'

'If you're no good for me, I'll just have to go back for another one. *Perhonen*, please bubble this one up and throw it out.'

We stare at each other for a moment. I feel stupid. Too long on the train of defection and cooperation. Time to jump off. I'm the first one to look away.

'Wait,' I say slowly. 'Now that you mention it, perhaps I do retain some selfish impulses after all. I can feel them coming back as we speak.'

'I thought they might,' she says. 'You are supposed to be irredeemable, after all.'

'So, what's going to happen now?'

'You'll find out,' she says. 'My name is Mieli. This is *Perhonen*: she is my ship.' She makes a sweeping gesture with one hand. 'As long as you are here, we are your gods.'

'Kuutar and Ilmatar?' I ask, naming the Oortian deities.

'Perhaps. Or the Dark Man, if you prefer.' She smiles. The thought of the place she put me in before does make her look a little like the Oortian dark god of the void. '*Perhonen* will show you your quarters.'

When the thief is gone, Mieli lies down in the pilot's crèche. She feels exhausted, even though the biot feed of her body – that has been waiting for her with *Perhonen*, for months – tells her she is perfectly rested. But the cognitive dissonance is worse.

Was it me who was in the Prison? Or another?

She remembers the long weeks of preparation, days of subjective slowtime in a q-suit, getting ready to commit a crime just so she could be caught by the Archons and enter the Prison: the eternity in her cell, mind wrapped in an old memory. The violent escape, hurled through the sky by the pellegrini, waking up in a new body, shaking and raw.

All because of the thief.

And now there is the quantum umbilical that connects her to the body the pellegrini made for him, a constant dull awareness of his thoughts. It feels like lying next to a stranger, feeling them moving, shifting in their sleep. Trust the Sobornost goddess to make her do something guaranteed to drive her crazy.

He touched Sydän's jewel. The anger helps, a little. *And no, it's not just because of him, it's for her as well.*

'I've put the thief away,' says *Perhonen*. Its warm voice in her head is something that belongs to *her* at least, not something that was tainted by the Prison. She takes one of its tiny white avatars and cups it in her palm: it flutters, tickling, like a pulse.

'Feeling amorous?' asks the ship, jokingly.

'No,' says Mieli. 'I just missed you.'

'I missed you too,' says the ship. The butterfly takes flight from her hand, fluttering around her head. 'It was terrible, waiting for you, all alone.'

'I know,' says Mieli. 'I'm sorry.' Suddenly, there is a throbbing sensation inside her skull. There is an edge in her mind, like something has been cut and pasted in place. *Did I come back the same?* She could speak to her Sobornost metacortex, she knows: ask it to find the feeling and wrap it up and put it away. But that's not what an Oortian warrior would do.

'You are not well. I should not have let you go,' *Perhonen*

says. 'It was not good for you to go there. She should not have made you to do that.'

'Ssh,' says Mieli. 'She's going to hear.' But it is too late.

Little ship, says the pellegrini. *You should know that I take care of my children, always.*

The pellegrini is there, standing above Mieli.

Naughty girl, she says. *Not using my gifts properly. Let me see.* She sits down next to Mieli gracefully, as if in Earthlike gravity, crossing her legs. Then she touches Mieli's cheek, her deep brown eyes seeking hers. Her fingers feel warm, apart from the cold line of one of her rings, exactly where Mieli's scar is. She breathes in her perfume. Something *rotates*, clockwork gears turning, until they click into place. And suddenly her mind is smooth as silk.

There, is that not better? One day you will understand that our way works. Not worrying about who is who, and realising that they are all you.

The dissonance being gone is like cold water on a burn. The sudden relief is so raw that she almost bursts into tears. But that would not do in front of *her*. So she merely opens her eyes and waits, ready to obey.

No thank you? says the pellegrini. *Very well.* She opens her purse and takes out a small white cylinder, putting it in her mouth: one end of it lights up, emitting a foul smell. *So tell me: what do you make of my thief?*

'It is not my place to say,' says Mieli quietly. 'I live to serve.'

Good answer, if a little boring. Is he not handsome? Come now, be honest. Can you really pine after your little lost amour with somebody like him around?

'Do we need him? I can do this. Let me serve you, like I've served you before—'

The pellegrini smiles, her rouge lips perfect like cherries. *Not this time. You are, if not the most powerful of my servants, the most faithful. Do as I tell you, and faith will be rewarded.*

Then she is gone, and Mieli is alone in the pilot's crèche, butterflies dancing around her head.

My cabin that is not much bigger than a cleaning cupboard. I try to ingest a protein milkshake from the fabber in the wall, but my new body is not taking to food too well. I have to spend some time on the space-bog: a tiny autonomously moving sack that comes out of the wall and attaches itself onto your ass. Apparently Oortian ships are not big on comfort.

One of the curving walls has a mirrored surface, and I look at my face in it while going through the undignified if necessary bodily functions. It looks *wrong*. In theory, everything is exactly right: the lips, the Peter Lorre eyes (as a lover said, centuries ago), the dimpled temples, the short hair, slightly grey and thinning, the way I like to wear it: the skinny, unremarkable body, in reasonable shape, with its tuft of chest hair. But I can't help looking at it and blinking, as if it was out of focus slightly.

What's worse, I have a similar feeling *inside* my head. Trying to remember feels like poking at a loose tooth with my tongue.

It feels like something has been *stolen*. Ha.

I distract myself by looking at the view. My wall has enough magnification to show the Dilemma Prison in the distance. It's a diamonoid torus almost a thousand kilometers in diameter, but from this angle it looks like a glistening slit-pupilled eye among the stars, staring straight at me. I swallow and blink it away.

'Glad to be out?' asks the voice of the ship. It's a feminine

voice, a little like Mieli's, but younger, sounding like somebody I'd quite like to meet under happier circumstances.

'You can't possibly imagine. It's not a happy place.' I sigh. 'Your captain has my gratitude, even if she appears to be somewhat on the edge at the moment.'

'Listen,' says *Perhonen*. 'You don't know what she went through to get you out. I'm keeping an eye on you.'

It's an interesting point, which I file away for future investigation. How *did* she get me out? And who is she working for? But it's too early for that, so I simply smile.

'Well, whatever job she wants me to do *has* to be better than shooting myself in the head every hour or so. Are you sure your boss would be all right with you talking to me? I mean, I am a manipulative master criminal and all that.'

'I think I can handle you. Besides, it's not like she is my *boss*, exactly.'

'Oh,' I say. I'm old-fashioned, but the whole human-gogol sexuality thing always bothered me in my youth, and old habits die hard.

'It's not like *that*,' the ship says. 'Just friends! Besides, she made me. Well, not *me*, but the ship. I'm older than I look, you know.' I wonder if that accent in its voice is real. 'I heard about you, you know. Back then. Before the Collapse.'

'I would have said that you don't look a day over three hundred. Were you a fan?'

'I liked the sunlifter theft. That was classy.'

'Class,' I say, 'is what I've always aimed for. By the way, you don't look a day over three hundred.'

'Do you really think so?'

'Mm-hm. Based on the evidence so far.'

'Would you like me to show you around? Mieli won't mind, she's busy.'

'I'd love that.' *Definitely female – maybe some of my charm survived the Prison.* I suddenly feel the need to get dressed: talking to a female entity of any kind without even a fig leaf makes me feel vulnerable. 'Sounds like we'll have plenty of time to get to know each other better. Maybe after you get me some clothes?'

First, *Perhonen* fabs me a suit. The fabric is too smooth – I don't like wearing smartmatter – but looking at myself in a white shirt, black trousers and a deep purple jacket helps with the sense of unself a little.

Then she shows me the spimescape. Suddenly, the world has a new direction. I step into it, out of my body, moving my viewpoint into space so that I can look at the ship.

I was right: *Perhonen* is an Oortian spidership. It consists of separate modules, tethered together by nanofibres, living quarters spinning around a central axis like an amusement park ride to create a semblance of gravity. The tethers form a network in which the modules can move, like spiders in a web. The q-dot sails – concentric soap-bubble-thin rings made from artificial atoms that spread out several kilometres around the ship and can catch sunlight, Highway meso-particles and lightmill beams equally well – look spectacular.

I steal a glance at my own body as well, and that's when I'm *really* impressed. The spimescape view is seething with detail. A network of q-dots under the skin, proteomic computers in every cell, dense computronium in the bones. Something like that could only have been made in the *guberniya* worlds close to the sun. It seems my rescuers are working for the Sobornost. Interesting.

'I thought you wanted to get to know *me*,' *Perhonen* says, offended.

'Of course,' I say. 'Just, you know, making sure I'm presentable. You don't spend much time in the company of ladies in the Prison.'

'Why were you there, anyway?'

Suddenly, it feels amazing that I haven't thought about it for so long. I have been too preoccupied with guns, defection and cooperation.

Why was I in the Prison?

'A nice girl like you should not worry about such things.'

Perhonen sighs. 'Maybe you're right. Maybe I should not be talking to you. Mieli would not like it if she knew. But it's been so long since we had anyone *interesting* onboard.'

'This certainly does not seem like a lively neighbourhood.' I indicate the starry field around us. 'Where are we?'

'The Neptunian Trojan belt. Arse-end of nowhere. I waited here for a long time, when she went to get you.'

'You have a lot to learn about being a criminal. It's all about the waiting. Boredom punctuated by flashes of sheer terror. Sort of like war.'

'Oh, war was much better,' she says, excitedly. 'We were in the Protocol War. I loved it. You get to think so *fast*. Some of the things we did – we stole a moon, you know. It was amazing. Metis, just before the Spike: Mieli put a strangelet bomb in to push it out of orbit, like fireworks, you would not believe—'

Suddenly, the ship is silent. I wonder if it realised it has said too much. But no: its attention is focused elsewhere.

In the distance, amidst the spiderweb of *Perhonen*'s sails and the spimescape vectors and labels of habitats far away, there is a jewel of bright dots, a six-pointed star. I zoom in in the scape view. Dark ships, jagged and fang-like, a cluster of seven faces sculpted in their prows, the same faces that adorn

every Sobornost structure, the Founders: god-kings with a trillion subjects. I used to go drinking with them.

The Archons are coming.

'Whatever it was that you did,' *Perhonen* says, 'looks like they want you back.'