

 The Baxterium

The Fubar Suit

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I know I'm still lying here in the regolith, on this dumb little misshapen asteroid, inside my fubar suit. I know nobody's come to save me. Because I'm still here, right? But I can't see, hear, feel a damn thing.

Although I sometimes think I can.

I'm going stir-crazy, inside my own head.

I know they're coming to kill me, though. *The little guys*. The nems told me that much.

So I have a decision to make.

Them or me.

She drifted in blue warmth, her thoughts dissolving.

... Consciousness burst in on her, dark and dry, dispelling the fug of her prenatal dream. She gasped and coughed, expelling fluid from her lungs.

She was turned around, by huge, confident hands. She was held before a looming face, smiling, wet. Her mother.

There were people all around, naked, thin, anxious. Even so, they smiled at this new birth.

Her eyes were clearing quickly. She - they - were in some kind of huge hall, a vast cylindrical space. The roof, far above, was clear, and some kind of light moved beyond it. There was water in the base of the hall, a great trapped river of it, dense with green. The people were clustered at the edge of the water, on a smooth, sloping beach. Children were playing in the water, which lapped gently against the walls.



Adults clustered around, plucking at her fingers and toes, which grew with a creaking of soft, stretching skin. The growth hurt, and she cried. She squirmed against her mother, seeking an escape from this dismal cold.

Her mother put her down, on the sloping wall.

Still moist from birth, she crawled away, towards the water.

One of the children came stalking out of the murky water on skinny legs. It was a boy. He spoke to her, pointing and smiling. At first the words made no sense, but they soon seemed to catch. *Brother. Sister. Mother. River.*

She tried to speak back, but her mouth was soft and sticky.

The boy - her brother - ran back to the water. She followed, crawling, already impatient, already trying to stand upright.

The water was warm and welcoming, and full of sticky green stuff. She splashed out until her head was covered.

Swimming was easier than crawling, or walking.

Her brother showed her how to use her fingers to filter out the green stuff. *Algae*, he said. She could see little knots and spirals in the green mats.

She crammed the green stuff into her mouth, gnawing at it with her gums, with her growing buds of teeth, sucking it into her stomach. She was very, very hungry.

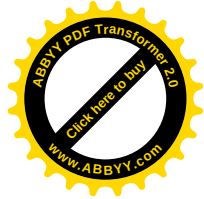
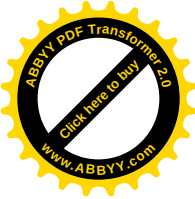
Her name, they said, was Green Wave.

I was born at the wrong time, in the wrong place.

In the year 2050, when I was eighteen years old, no American was flying into space. We'd ceded the high frontier: the Moon to the Japanese, Mars to the Russians, the asteroid belt to the Chinese. America, without space resources, got steadily poorer, not to mention more decadent. A hell of a time to grow up.

I come from enterprising stock. One of my ancestors made a fortune hauling bauxite on twenty-mule trains out of Death Valley. He also got himself killed, however. Another ancestor was one of the first in the Texas oil fields. And so on.

We lost all the money, of course, long before I was born. But we're a family with one hell of a tradition. But when I grew up we were rattling around in a box, with no place to go.



I served in the Army. I studied astronomy. I tried to figure an angle: some place out there the Russians and Chinese hadn't got locked up yet.

Finally I settled on the Trojans: little bunches of asteroids outside the main belt, sixty degrees ahead of and behind Jupiter, shepherded by gravity effects. The density of the rocks there is actually greater than in the main belt.

Not only that, the asteroids out there are different from the ones in the belt, which are lumps of basalt and metal. The Trojans are carbonaceous: that is, coated in carbon compounds. And they have water.

And nobody had been out there, ever.

I started to raise money.

My ship, when assembled, was a stack of boxes fifty metres long. At its base was a big pusher plate, mounted on shock absorbers. Around that there were fuel magazines and superconducting hoops. There were big solar-cell wings stuck on the sides.

The drive was a fusion-pulse pusher. It worked by shooting pellets of helium-3 and deuterium out back of the craft, behind the pusher plate, and firing carbon dioxide lasers at them. Each fusion pulse lasts two hundred and fifty nanoseconds. And then another, and another: three hundred microexplosions each second. My acceleration was three per cent of G.

My hab module was just a box, with a reconditioned Russian-design closed-loop life support, and an exercise bicycle.

It was a leaky piece of shit. For instance I watched the engineers fix up a ding in a reaction control thruster fuel line with Kevlar and epoxy, the way you'd repair your refrigerator. I spent as little as I could on my ship, and a lot on my suit, which is a Japanese design. I called it my fubar suit, my safety option of last resort.

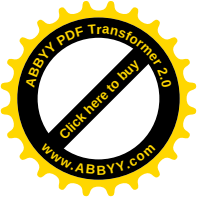
In the event, I was glad to have it.

I was looking at an eighteen-day trip to the Trojans.

I said goodbye to the investors, all of whom had bought a piece of my ass at no risk to themselves. I said goodbye to my daughter. That was hard. I'd said goodbye to her father long before.

I called my ship the *Malenfant*, after that great explorer. I wasn't exploring, of course, but I always had a little romance in my soul, I think.

When I left Earth orbit, the glow of my drive turned Pacific night into day.



On her second day, she woke up a spindly-legged girl almost as tall, already, as her mother. She spent as long as she could in the water, dragging at the algae. They all did, most of the time.

There was never enough to eat. Sometimes the algae was so thin she could barely taste it sticking to her fingers. She was hungry, the whole time, and she kept on growing.

Her brother touched her shoulder. "Get out," he said. His name was Sun Eyes.

"What?"

He took her hand and pulled her from the river. Everybody else was clambering up the curving bank too.

Something was approaching, under the surface of the water, from the darkness at the end of the hall. Something big and sleek and powerful, that churned the water.

Green Wave was one of a row of skinny naked people, waiting by the edge of the water. "What is it?"

Sun Eyes shrugged. "It's a Worker."

"What's a Worker?"

"One of those."

A lot of her questions were answered like that.

The river wasn't really a river, more a long, stagnant pond. The Workers, coming by once or twice a day, stirred up the liquid. Maybe it was good for the algae, Green Wave speculated.

Anyhow, when a Worker came along, the people had to get out of the way.

As soon as it had gone, she joined the rush to splash back into the water. But the algae was thinner than before.

"The Workers take away the algae," said Sun Eyes.

"Why? Can't they see we're hungry?"

Sun Eyes shrugged.

"I don't like the Workers," said Green Wave.

Sun Eyes laughed at her.



The facts of her life were these:

This place was called Finger Hall. It was a cylinder, roofed over by some material that allowed in a dim, murky light during the short day. The river ran down its length. The Hall was maybe ten times as tall as an adult human.

The Hall, it was said, was one of five - five Fingers, in fact, lying parallel. The Halls were joined at one end by a big cavern, as her own fingers were joined at her hand. Her mother said she saw this Palm Cavern once, early in her life, three or four days ago. Her brother had never left Finger Hall.

The only drink was river water. The only food was river algae.

That day, her brother spent a lot of time with a girl. And there was a boy, Churning Wake, who started paying attention to Green Wave. He even brought her handfuls of algae, the only gift he had.

This was her second day. On the third, she came to understand, she would be expected to pair with somebody.

Maybe this kid Churning Wake. She would have a baby of her own on the third or fourth day, maybe another.

And on the fifth day -

Her mother was five days old. She was thin, bent, her breasts empty sacks of flesh. Green Wave brought her algae handfuls.

An old man died. His children grieved, then carried his body to the edge of the water. He had been seven days old.

Soon a Worker clambered out of the water. It was a wide, fat disc, half the height of an adult, and its rim was studded with jointed limbs.

The Worker cut up the body of the old man, snip snip, into bloodless pieces. It loaded the chunks of corpse into a hatch on its back, and then closed itself up and slid smoothly back into the water.

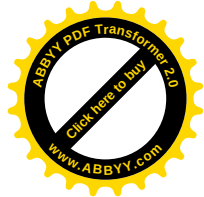
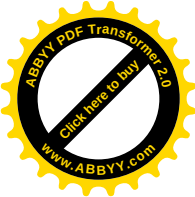
"Why did it do that?" Green Wave asked.

"I don't know," her mother said. She was wheezing. "You have a lot of questions, Green Wave. His name was Purple Glow, because on the day he was born -"

"Is that it? We're born, we eat algae, we die? Is that all there is?"

"We care for each other. We tell the children stories."

"I don't like it here."



Her mother laughed, weakly. "Where else is there?"

I spent the first week throwing up, and drinking banana-flavoured rehydration fluids.

The sun turned to a shrunken yellow disc, casting long shadows. Even Jupiter was just a point of light, about as remote from me as from Earth.

There wasn't a human being within millions of miles. A hell of a feeling.

I found it hard to sleep, listening to the rattles and bangs of my Russian life support. I wore my fubar suit the whole time.

I'd aimed for the largest Trojan, called 624 Hektor. At first it was just a starlike point, but it pulsed in brightness as I watched it. When I got a little closer, I could make out its shape.

624 Hektor: take two big handfuls of Moon, complete with craters and dusty maria. Mould them into egg-shapes, each a hundred miles long. Now touch them together, sharp end to sharp end, and let them rotate, like one almighty peanut.

That's 624 Hektor.

Nobody knows for sure how it got that way. Maybe there was a collision between two normal asteroids which produced a loosely consolidated, fragmented cloud of rubble, which then deformed into this weird compound configuration: two little worlds, made egg-shaped by their mutual attraction, joined in a soft collision. It was exhilarating to see something no human had witnessed before. For a while, it was as if I really was Reid Malenfant. I sent a long radio letter to my kid, telling her what I could see.

Maybe that will be the last she'll hear of my voice. Because I was still sightseeing when everything fell apart.

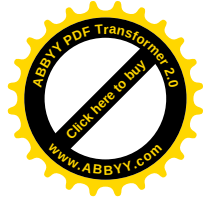
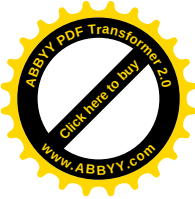
I don't know what went wrong. It happened too fast. My best guess is my reaction control system, little peroxide thrusters, was misaligned. I remembered that ding in the fuel line -

I came in too fast. I tried to turn. I even restarted the fusion pulse drive, but it wasn't enough.

One of the spinning mountains came sweeping up, inexorable, to swat the *Malenfant* like a fly.

Before the impact, I closed up my fubar suit and bailed out.

The solar panels crumpled, and I saw cells tumble away, little black discs the



size of my palm. When my hab module hit it cracked open right down a leaky Russian weld. The drive unit kept working, for a while; it lurched away from the surface, spinning crazily. Other fragments were bounced off the surface, the gravity too low to make them stick: pieces of my ship, scattering into trans-Jovian space.

It took a long time for 624 Hektor to reel me in.

I landed like a dust mote. My boots crunched on lightly-compacted regolith. It felt like loose snow.

I walked towards the wreck. The gravity was so low I kept tumbling away from the ground, as if I was suspended on some huge bungee cord.

Malenfant was fubar, as we used to say in the Army: fucked up beyond all recognition. Just as well I had my fubar suit, I thought.

The stars wheeled around me.

The next day it was her mother's turn.

Green Wave, three days old, was an adult herself now, and her growing pains had diminished. Not her hunger, though. And not her anger.

She stood with Churning Wake at the edge of the water, over her mother's body. "Why does it have to be like this?"

"It just is," said Churning Wake.

"But she lived only a few days. In two, three, four days, it will be your turn, Churning Wake. And mine. It isn't right. It isn't enough."

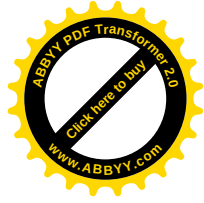
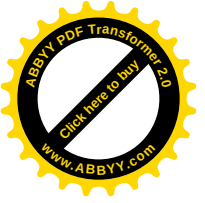
"But it's all we have. It's all there's ever been." He took her hand.

"Like hell."

After a time, he let her hand go.

A Worker slid through the water, its wake oily. It clattered up the curving shoreline of Finger Hall, and loomed over her mother's corpse. It trailed a fine net which was crammed with algae. It raised up a glinting limb, which started to descend towards her mother's body.

Green Wave lunged forward and grabbed the limb. It was cold and hard, its edges sharp. She twisted. There was a crunching noise, and the limb came away from its socket. Green Wave staggered back, breathing hard. There was a steady ticking from somewhere inside the Worker's algae-crusted case.



Sun Eyes grabbed her shoulders. A day older, her brother already looked closer to death than life, she thought.

"What are you doing?"

"Why do they take away the dead?" she snapped. "Why do they take away our food? We don't have enough to eat. If we had more to eat, maybe we'd live longer."

He looked doubtful. "How long?"

"I don't know." She struggled with the concept. "Ten days. Maybe twenty."

"*Twenty days?* That's ridiculous."

The Worker had come forward again, and was sawing industriously at her mother's cadaver. It didn't seem impeded by the loss of its limb.

"You have to let her go," said Sun Eyes.

Green Wave looked at him bleakly.

When the beach was clean of traces of her mother the Worker slid back towards the water. The stump, where she had torn away the limb, trailed cables. The Worker sank beneath the water and began to surge towards the darkness at the end of Finger Hall.

The people clattered back into the water, to resume their endless feeding.

Green Wave, carrying her Worker limb, started to wade along the river.

Churning Wake stood on the bank, watching her. "Where are you going?"

"I want to see where it's taking all our food."

"What about *us*?"

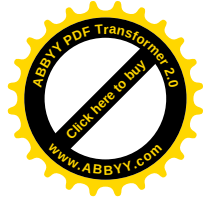
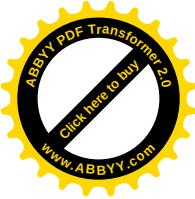
She laughed. "Come with me."

"No," he said. "This is my place. We only have a few days. It's up to us not to waste it."

That made Green Wave hesitate.

What if he was right? Wasn't she gambling away what little was left of her life? Did she really want to risk it all, chasing the unknown?

Maybe she should take time to think this out.



She looked back at Churning Wake, the ribs poking out of his skinny frame. A new infant came crawling past his bony legs, struggling to stand. It was Sun Eyes' son, her nephew, a grandchild her mother had never seen. His wife was already dead.

There had to be, she thought, more than this.

"Come with me," she said again.

Churning Wake ignored her. He strode into the water and started to feed, with steady determination.

Her brother stood hesitating.

"Sun Eyes?"

"You've been trouble since you were born."

"I'm sorry."

He walked into the water.

Side by side, they waded through the shallow water, feeding on filtered handfuls of algae paste. Before long, the little community was just a knot of motion in the dim light of the distance. Nobody called them back. They walked on into the cold and dark.

The fubar suit is a smart design. I read the Owner's Manual, which scrolled across the inside of my faceplate. A fubar suit is a miniature life-support system in itself. It has a small plutonium-based power supply, heavily shielded. It is full of nanotechnology. It could recycle my wastes, filter my water, break down the solid residue, even feed me on the blue-green algae which would grow in the transparent, water-filled outer layers of the suit.

When I walked across the surface of 624 Hektor, I sloshed and sparkled green. Neil Armstrong would have hated it.

The suit could keep me alive - oh, for two or three weeks. It's a hell of a technical achievement.

Beyond that timescale, it just isn't practical to preserve a full-scale human being in a closed skin-tight container.

Even so, the fubar suit had fallbacks. More drastic options. Mostly untested; the Owner's Manual said I would be voiding manufacturers' guarantees if I exercised them.



I put it off.

I toured 624 Hektor.

With the low gravity it is easy to bound around the equator of either of the little peanut twins. The curvature is tight; I could see I was on a compact ball of rock, curved over on itself, suspended in space. There are craters, some a couple of kilometres across, as if this was a scale model of Luna. Everywhere I found black, sooty carbon compounds, like a dark snow over the regolith.

I hiked around to the contact region.

624 Hektor is a toy world, but even so it is *big*. I was clambering over a sloping landscape, approaching a hundred-mile mountain that was suspended impossibly over my head, grounded in a broad region of mushed-up regolith and shattered rock.

I lost my sense of the vertical. I actually threw up a couple of times - me, the great astronaut - but some kind of biochemical process inside my helmet cleaned me out.

I could leap from one worldlet to the other.

My perspective shifted. Suspended halfway between the two halves of the peanut, I got a brief sense that these were, indeed, two miniature planets, joined at the hip. But then the other half of the pair started to open out, into a dusty, broken lunar landscape. Real Peter Pan stuff.

I wished I could show it to my kid.

The Worker surged steadily along the length of Finger Hall.

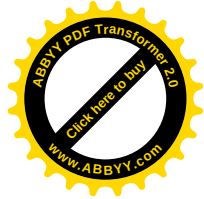
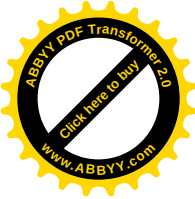
Gradually the walls opened out around them, smooth and high, receding into the distance. At last they reached a new chamber, much wider and higher than Finger Hall. It was roughly circular, and its roof let in the sunlight. A compact lake lapped at its floor, thick with algae.

There were no people here, but more corridors led off from the rim: five narrow tubes like Finger Hall, and one much broader and darker.

"It's just as they said," Sun Eyes said. "This is the Palm Cavern: the Hand from which five Fingers sprout." He held up his own hand. "Just like a human hand. And look - that larger tunnel is like a Wrist, leading to an Arm -"

"Maybe."

The Worker was heading out of the lake, in a new direction. Towards the Wrist.



"We have to go on," Green Wave said.

"I'm too old for this, Green Wave. Maybe we should go back. Anyhow, nobody's ever been up there before."

"Then we'll be the first."

She took his hand and all but dragged him into the water.

The Worker surged silently along the broader corridor that was the Arm, its roof so far above them - seventy, eighty times their height - it was all but impossible to see. There were more Workers here, swimming precisely back and forth along the Arm.

Green Wave and Sun Eyes tired quickly. They were spending so much time just moving, they weren't feeding enough.

The Worker stopped. It was completing small, tight circles in the water, scooping up algae with its trailing nets.

Bringing Sun Eyes, Green Wave moved steadily closer, until the Worker came within an arm's length.

Green Wave grabbed onto the net it trailed. She lodged the detached Worker limb in strands of the net. She helped Sun Eyes get a close grip on the net.

The Worker didn't seem to notice. It wasn't moving so fast; it was easy to hold onto the net, and let the Worker just pull her through the water.

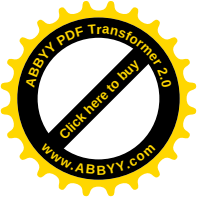
The Worker resumed its steady progress upstream. Some of the net was worn, and she was even able to reach inside and haul out handfuls of algal paste to feed them both.

The walls of the Arm slid steadily past, remote and featureless. On the long beaches there were no signs of people. Maybe, she thought, her own people were alone here, however far this branching series of tunnels and gloomy lakes continued.

Sun Eyes slept for a while. His hair, thinning and straggling, drifted into his eyes; Green Wave brushed it back.

The Worker turned a wide corner, and the river opened out. Now they entered a new chamber, containing a broad, glimmering lake, many times wider than the Palm Cavern they'd seen before. The roof here, far above them, was all but transparent, and Green Wave could see the sun's small disc, and many lesser lights. The water was thick with algae; she merely had to dip her hand in to pull out great fistfuls of sticky paste.

"Fingers," she said.



"What?"

"Fingers. A Hand. An Arm. If that's all true, this must be the Chest. Or the Stomach."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Sun Eyes said tiredly.

"If I'm right, that way must be the Head."

"The Head of what?"

"How should I know?"

In the direction she pointed, there was a broad, dark exit. The Neck? A series of thick pipes snaked out of the lake, and passed into the Neck. There was a system of net hoppers in front of the pipes; the water was greener there, as if richer with algae. Workers clustered around the hoppers, working busily, dumping in algae from their own nets. She pictured some prone giant, sucking nutrient out of this algal hopper in its Stomach.

Sun Eyes clutched at the net. "We're leaving the shore. I can't feel the floor."

It was true. The Worker was forging its way across the lapping surface of the lake; they were already a long way from the curving walls, heading for the deeper water under the high arch of the Stomach roof.

And now there was something new. Something deep under the water. It was a light, flickering, bubbling. No: a bank of lights, in neat rows, stretching off all around her.

"What do you think it is?" she whispered.

"I don't know. I only ever saw lights in the sky."

"Maybe it's another sun, under the water. Maybe -"

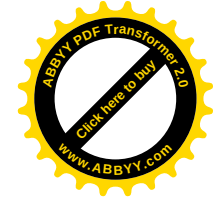
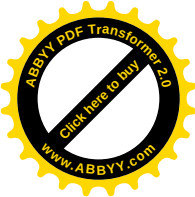
But now a hatch on top of the Worker's back was opening up. A limb came looping over, and plucked objects out of the hatch. The objects, dried-up and irregular, were the remnants of Green Wave's mother. The Worker dumped them into the water.

They fell quickly, but when they hit the underwater suns there was a ferocious, silent bubbling.

"So that's what happens to dead people," said Sun Eyes.

"That's what will happen to us."

The hatch closed, and the Worker swam in lazy, broadening circles.



"I'm tired," Sun Eyes said.

She fed him more handfuls of algal paste.

I lay on my back, face up to the stars, unsure if I would ever get up again. I let the nems get to work.

I wish I could say it was painless.

The idea is simple.

The fubar suit has constructed a stable, simplified, long-duration ecosphere inside itself. Most of the volume is just air, but there is a shallow water lake pooling in the suit's back, arms and legs. There is blue-green algae growing in the lake, feeding on sunlight, giving off carbon dioxide - *spirulina*, according to the Owner's Manual, full of proteins, vitamins and essential amino acids. The other half of the biocycle is a community of little animals, living inside the suit. They are like humans: eating the algae, drinking the water, breathing in oxygen, breathing out carbon dioxide. Their wastes, including their little dead bodies, go to a bank of SCWOs - supercritical water oxidisers - superhot liquid steam which can oxidise organic slurry in seconds. A hell of a gadget. It can even sustain underwater flames; you have to see it to believe it.

Of course you can't close the loops completely. But I was able to plug the suit into the surface of 624 Hektor and supplement the loops with raw materials - carbon compounds, hydrates. It would last a long time.

It's all constructed and maintained by the nems - nano-electromechanical systems, tiny crab-like robots with funny little limbs. The suit is full of them. They're even burrowing their way out into the asteroid surface, in search of raw materials.

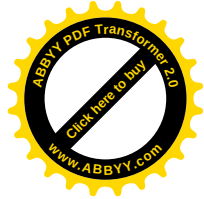
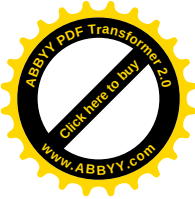
I read all about the nems in the Owner's Manual. The technology is neat; the nems are run by chips lithographed by high-energy proton beams, and they store data in chains of fluorine and oxygen atoms on the surface of dinky little diamonds -

I always liked Japanese gadgets.

But I should stick to the point.

Little guys. Of course they are like miniature people. What else could they be? They are made out of me.

There's no nice way of putting this. The fubar suit couldn't keep me alive - not as sixty kilograms of eating, breathing, excreting woman anyhow. So the nems took me apart.



The nems used my body water to make the lakes, and my meat - some of it - to make the little guys. What's left of me is my head. My head is sustained - my brain is kept alive - by nutrients from the little biosphere that takes up the space my body used to occupy. One day, the theory goes, the medics will retrieve me and will reassemble me, in some form, with more nanotech.

It's grotesque. Well, it's not what I wanted. I'm only thirty-eight years old. I have a kid, waiting for me.

I just didn't have any choices left.

The fubar suit was a last resort. It worked, I guess.

I just wish they'd tested it first. Damn those Japanese.

Little humans. They are supposed to look like us, bug-sized or not. They are supposed to be able to move around; the water surfaces in there are doped somehow, so the little guys aren't locked in place by surface tension. They are supposed to breed quickly and eat and breathe and die back, and just play their part in the two-component biosphere, keeping me alive.

What they're not supposed to be is *smart*. What they're not supposed to do is *ask questions*.

What a mess.

When she woke, she was so stiff it was all she could do to unhook her claw-like hands from the net. Sun Eyes was still sleeping, shivering gently. His scalp was all but hairless now, his face a mask of wrinkles.

She looked around. The Worker was close to the shore of this great Stomach cavern, but it was working its way back towards the exit from which it had emerged.

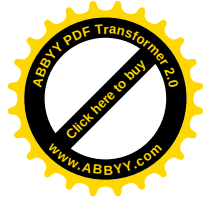
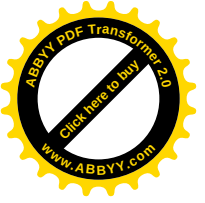
Time to get off, she thought.

She shook Sun Eyes. His eyes were crusted with sleep. "Green Wave? I can't see so well. I'm cold."

"Come on. I'll get you to the shore."

She helped him disentangle himself from the netting. His legs unfolded from his chest with painful slowness.

At last they were standing, in water that came to their waists. She slid an arm around him, and they walked to shallower water, scooping up algae. Green Wave still carried her purloined Worker limb.



The Worker, apparently oblivious to the loss of its passengers, surged steadily towards the exit to the Arm.

"It's going back," Sun Eyes said.

"I know. We have to go on."

"What for?"

"I'm not sure."

"Where?"

She pointed. "That way. The Head."

They began to work their way around the complex, sculpted shoreline, towards the exit Green Wave had labelled the Neck. They walked in the shallows. They could only manage a slow pace, such was Sun Eyes' condition.

She felt a deep stab of regret. She'd taken Sun Eyes away from where he should be, with his children and grandchildren. And she was old herself now - too old to have a life of her own, too old for children. She wondered what had happened to Churning Wake, if he was surrounded now by splashing children who might have been hers.

They neared the sharp folds in the ground that marked the entrance to the Neck. She could see the big pipes that carried water up from the lake. The pipes were clear, and she could see thick, greenish, rich fluid within.

Food, taken away from people who needed it. A diffuse anger gathered.

They walked into the Head.

It was darker here. Most of the light came from the Stomach lake, a greenish glow at the mouth of this broad tunnel.

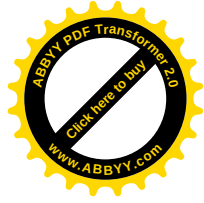
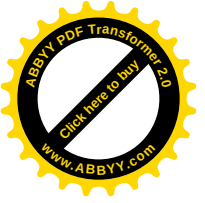
There was little free water here, little food. But still she urged Sun Eyes on. "Just a bit more," she said.

They reached a pit in the ground, twenty or thirty paces across.

She sat Sun Eyes down, propping him up against a wall.

She lay on her stomach. The pit was pitch dark. It was the first time in her life she'd seen a breach in the floor. Her imagination raced.

She reached down into the pit.



At first she could feel nothing but the smooth flooring. But that came to an end quickly, and below it she could feel beneath, to some much rougher, looser material. It felt damp and cold. There were even algae here, clinging to the walls in clumps.

She could hear Workers doing something, perhaps chewing at the loose rubble down there. Building the pit, onwards and outwards.

She straightened up stiffly. She tried to see deeper into the Head - there were suggestions of vast, sleeping forms there, perhaps an immense face - but there was no light, no free water. She couldn't go any further.

She went back to Sun Eyes. He seemed to be sleeping.

She told him what she'd found.

"Maybe there are world beyond this one." Her imagination faltered. "If we are crawling through the body of some human form, maybe there is another, still greater form beyond. And perhaps another beyond that - an endless nesting ..."

He slumped against her shoulder.

She laid his light, wizened body down against the floor. In the darkness she could feel his ribs, the lumps of his joints.

Her anger flared up, like the light of a new sun.

I know I'm still lying here in the regolith, on this dumb little misshapen asteroid, inside my fubar suit. I know nobody's come to save me. Because I'm still here, right? But I can't see, hear, feel a damn thing.

Although I sometimes think I can.

I'm going stir-crazy, inside my own head.

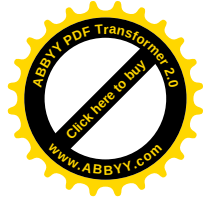
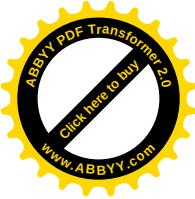
I know they're coming, though. *The little guys*. The nems told me that much.

They aren't supposed to be smart, damn it!

But the nems will stop them, if I tell them.

So I have a decision to make. I could stop them.

After all, it's them or me.



She got to her feet. She picked up her battered Worker limb, and stumbled out of the Neck, towards the light of the Stomach lake.

She started to batter at the feeder pipes with the Worker limb, her only tool.

The pipes were broad, as thick as her waist, but they punctured easily. Soon she had ripped fist-sized holes in the first pipe, and algae-rich water spilled down over the flooring, and flowed steadily back into the lake. She kept it up until she'd severed the pipe completely.

Then she started on the next pipe.

The Workers didn't react. They just swam around in their complacent circles, piling up the net hopper with algae that wasn't going anywhere any more.

She worked until all the pipes were broken.

She threw away her Worker limb, and lay down where she was, in the slimy, brackish water she'd spilled. She licked at the floor, sucking in a little algal paste, and let herself sleep.

Sometimes I think humans aren't supposed to be out here at all. Look at me, I'm grotesque. These little guys, on the other hand, might be able to survive.

Even prosper.

A hell of a shock for those smug Chinese in the asteroid belt, when a swarm of little Americans comes barrelling in from the orbit of Jupiter.

What the hell. It didn't look as if anyone was coming for me anyhow.

Funny thing is, I feel cold. Now, that's not supposed to happen, according to the Owner's Manual.

It was hard to wake up. Her eyes didn't open properly. And when they did, they wouldn't focus.

She lifted up her hand, and held it close so she could see. Her skin was brown and sagging and covered in liver spots.

She got to her feet, and stumbled down the slope.

She stood at the edge of the water, peering at the Workers, until her rheumy, ruined eyes made out one which didn't look quite right. One that was missing



a limb.

She struggled through water that seemed thick and resistant, until she had caught hold of the Worker's net, and it was pulling her away from the shore.

With any luck this creature would, unwitting, take her home. She'd be a sack of bones by then, of course, but that didn't matter. The important thing was that someone would see, and maybe connect her with the enriching of the water, and wonder what she'd found.

More would come, next time. Children, too.

They would find that pit, up in the Neck, the way out of the world.

She smiled.

The water was warm around her.

She wondered what had happened to Sun Eyes. Maybe he was somewhere beneath her now, fizzing in the light of those underwater suns.

She closed her eyes. She drifted in blue warmth, her thoughts dissolving.

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