

**PART ONE**  
**CHILDHOOD'S**  
**END**



# 1

It was a remote and unremarkable C-type asteroid, a dark, dust-bound rock pile with a big dent smacked into its equator by some ancient impact. There were thousands like it in the Belt. Hundreds of thousands. It was mostly known by its original name, 207061 Themba, the name it had been given when it had been discovered in the long ago. It lacked significant deposits of metals or rare earths, and its eccentric orbit, skirting the outer edge of the Belt, didn't bring it within easy reach of any centres of civilisation. Even so, it had been touched by human history.

About a thousand years ago, for instance, towards the end of the Great Expansion, someone had seeded it with a dynamic ecology of vacuum organisms. Its undulating intercrater plains were mantled with pavements of crustose species; briar patches of tangled wires spread across the floors of many of its craters; tall spindly things a little like sunflowers stood on wrinkle ridges and crater walls. A cluster of sunflowers up on the rim of a large circular crater stirred now, the dishes of their solar collectors turning eastward as the horizon dropped away from the sun. Boulders scattered across the upper slopes of the crater threw long shadows. Sunlight starred the needle-point caps of a cluster of silvery spires and gleaming streaks shot down their tapering flanks as darkness drained away, shrank to overlapping pools cast around their footings.

One spire near the edge of the little crowd had been painted black. A small movement twinkled at its base. A door dilating, a circle of weak yellow light framing a human shadow. The only inhabitant of these ruins, of this ordinary rock, stepping out into another day of silence and exile.

It was forty-two days after Gajananvihari Pilot had woken in a crippled lifepod on the cold hillside of the crater's inner slope, one hundred and seventy-four days after he had escaped from the hijack of *Pabuji's Gift*. He'd been aimed at the first of a chain of waypoints that would help him reach Tannhauser Gate, had been sinking into the deep sleep of hibernation, when the motor of his lifepod had suffered a near-catastrophic failure and lost most of its reaction mass. The lifepod's little mind had recalculated its options, used the waypoint to change course and establish a minimum-energy trajectory to Themba.

Repair mites had patched up the motor while the lifepod was in transit, but the asteroid was a long way from anywhere else. Hari was grievously short of reaction mass, and couldn't call for help because the outer belt lacked a general commons, and a distress signal might attract the attention of the hijackers or some other villainous crew. Besides, he'd been taught to distrust everyone but his family. His father, his two brothers, Agrata. All most likely dead now. Murdered, as he would have been murdered if he hadn't escaped.

He was nineteen years old, alone for the first time in his life.

He'd channelled his grief and anger into a single-minded determination to save himself. He'd synched his internal clock to Themba's fourteen-hour day, established a strict routine. Waking just before dawn, drinking a protein shake while examining the latest products of the maker and checking his comms (picking up only the ticking of distant beacons; no general traffic, no threats or warnings from the hijackers). Hauling on his pressure suit and leaving his cosy little nest in the spire, climbing a friction track laid down by the spire builders, following it over the crater's rim and through sunflower thickets to the plains beyond.

That day, like every other day, Hari paused at the far side of the sunflowers and used his pressure suit's radar and optical systems to survey each quarter of the visible sky. As usual, the p-suit's eidolon manifested beside him. A shadowy sketch of a slim young woman in a white one-piece bodysuit and an unlikely bubble helmet, her eyes smudged hollows in which faint stars twinkled.

'There appears to be nothing out there,' she said.

'Nothing but stars and planets and moons and rocks,' Hari said. 'Garden habitats. Various kinds of human civilisation. *Pabuji's Gift*, if the hijackers didn't destroy her.'

'No ships. No immediate danger.'

‘No hope of rescue, either.’

It was more or less the same exchange they had every day. Like most QIs, the eidolon wasn't fully conscious. Her conversations were shaped by decision trees and phatic responses.

She said, as she'd said many times before, ‘You will survive this, Gajananvihari. I have great faith in your resourcefulness and resolve.’

‘Don't forget anger, suit.’

‘Anger has no utility, Gajananvihari.’

‘Anger is an energy. Anger feeds my resolve. Anger keeps me going.’

Hari was staring at a faint, fuzzy star above the western horizon. Jackson's Reef, where *Pabuji's Gift* had been hijacked. More than seventy million kilometres distant. He studied it every day, to renew his determination to escape and have his revenge on the criminals who'd murdered his family and stolen their ship and destroyed his life, and to search for the spark of a fusion motor. *Pabuji's Gift* or some other ship, come looking for him.

But that day, like every other day, there was no spark, no ship.

The floor, the surface of the asteroid, sloped away in every direction to the irregular circle of the horizon, still and quiet under the black sky. Vacuum-organism pavements stretched everywhere, patchwork blankets of big, irregular polygons in various shades of red or brown or black, outlined by pale necrotic borders where neighbouring species strove to overgrow each other, punctuated by the slumped bowls of small craters, spatters of debris, scattered boulders. Everything untagged, unaugmented, unadorned by overlays or indices. Naked. Unmapped. Hari had learned to read the contours and patterns of the landscape, but still felt a faint hum of caution when he set out across the surface. He was an intruder in this vast emptiness. A ghost in the desert of the real.

He moved with a sliding shuffle in the negligible gravity, using ski sticks to keep his balance while tethers whipped from his waist, gecko-pads at their tips slapping against the rock-hard surface of the vacuum-organism pavement, retracting, whipping out again. The eidolon drifted beside him. Hari had been born and raised in microgravity – *Pabuji's Gift* was thrifty with reaction mass and spent most of its time coasting in free fall – but he wasn't used to unbounded spaces and found it hard to keep a sense of orientation in the rolling landscape. Everything was either too far away or too close. Sometimes he seemed to be climbing a wall; sometimes he seemed to be descending a near-vertical ramp,

moving faster and faster, feeling that he was about to fall away into the sky. Fall, and keep falling for ever. Then he'd stop and catch his breath before setting off again.

Jupiter's brilliant star rose in the east, chasing the sun towards zenith. Themba was small, with an average diameter of just six kilometres. Even at Hari's cautious pace, it was easy to outwalk the day.

His bright yellow p-suit was tanned to the hips with inground dust, and dust had worked into its joints, stiffening the left knee, limiting the rotation of the right shoulder. It had already reached the limits of self-repair. Hari hadn't been able to print new parts or adapt spares scavenged from the antique p-suits of Themba's dead, but he was determined to keep working until he had finished refuelling the lifepod.

That day, like every day, he prospected for beads of water-ice, amino acids, and polycyclic aromatics extruded by the lobes and ruffles of the vacuum-organism pavements. He swept up the beads with an extension tool and dumped them into a bag hung from his waist; when the bag was full, he sealed it and headed towards a patch of vacuum organism he'd infected with a virus from the lifepod's library. This was a dark red crustose species with pillowy lobes at its margins which, after the virus had reprogrammed its metabolism, had begun to accumulate organic precursors and elements that the lifepod's hybrid motor could use to synthesise reaction mass. Clusters of flaky crystals glittered with green sparks in the beam of the p-suit's black-light lamp; Hari swept them up into a fresh bag. It was his second harvest from this patch, one of the first he'd turned. Synthesis was slow in the freezing vacuum, but he had over six hectares in production now. Pretty soon he'd have enough reaction mass to reach the nearest settlement, a trip of three hundred days or so. A long stretch in hibernation, but not impossible . . .

It was his only real hope of escaping Themba. Any ships the spire builders might have possessed were long gone, taken as trophies of war or claimed by scavengers, and the rock's most recent inhabitant, an ascetic hermit who had died long before Hari's arrival, must have hitched a ride to it with someone who'd traded the favour for good karma. Hari had searched long and hard in and around the spires and the crater, had probed permanent shadows in scores of crevasses and pits, but had found no trace of a lifepod or gig.

He moved on to another patch of modified vacuum organism, and another. Spiralling outward, skirting a huge boulder socketed in a fat collar of vacuum-organism growth, climbing a wrinkle ridge, passing the

slim black rectangle of the monolith set on top. A sect of philosopher-monks had planted them on asteroids across the Belt during the Great Expansion. They were different sizes, but all possessed the same proportions – 1:4:9 – and anyone who touched the black mirrors of their faces elicited a radio squeal aimed at the core of the galaxy. Some thought that it brought good luck, to touch a monolith. Others believed that their stuttering pulses might one day alert some vast, cool, implacably hostile intelligence, which was why only a few survived intact, usually on remote and untenanted rocks.

Themba's monolith was four times Hari's height. Jupiter's bright star hung above it. As usual, he gave it a wide berth. If he set it off, the hijackers or some wandering dacoit ship might detect the signal, would know at once that Themba was inhabited.

Sometimes, though, he was tempted to step up to the monolith and set his gloved hand against its black face and trigger its here-I-am squeal. Sometimes he hoped the hijackers would track him down. He had no defence against them except for a few simple traps and tricks, they'd almost certainly capture or kill him, but one way or another it would put an end to the torment and uncertainty of his exile. And perhaps he'd be able to take some of them with him before he was overwhelmed. He pictured them jerking in nets. Impaled by spikes. He pictured himself slashing at a horde of faceless figures with an incandescent energy beam. He pictured himself attacking them with fists and feet. He hadn't been able to take part in the fight to save the ship. He swore that he wouldn't miss his chance next time.

Early in his exile, still raw with grief and fear, he'd told the eidolon about these fantasies. 'Agrata should have given me weapons,' he'd said. 'Drones. Bomblets. A gauss rifle or a reaction pistol.'

'Agrata didn't want you to fight,' the eidolon had said. 'She wanted you to survive.'

She sometimes said something unexpected. Something that made Hari think. He'd thought about that remark for a long time, and it had strengthened his resolve to escape from Themba and reach Tannhauser Gate. But in spite of trying to fill his hours and days with routine and work and meticulous planning, he was sometimes overcome by a tremendous raging despair at the cosmic injustice of what had happened to him, to his family. At how their future had been smashed, how he'd been left dazed, stranded in the wreckage. The awful details of the hijack lurked at the edge of his mind like one of the insanity memes

that the True Empire had deployed against its enemies. A monstrous presence haunting the service levels of his mind, an ancient and insane bot raving against the limits of its protocols.

Anger was an energy, all right. If he wasn't careful, it would consume him.

At last he had collected his daily quota of beads, and headed home. Scooting in a straight line towards the crater, sunflowers suddenly bristling at the top of a long crest. Their black dishes were aimed west now, where the sun hung a handspan above the crater's floor. Hari found the friction track and followed it towards the cluster of spires at the bottom of the slope.

Once, the spire builders had spread across more than a third of the main belt, with outposts in the outer belt and the Hildas and Trojan groups, but like most clades it had overreached itself, splintering into sects that had fought bitter battles over minor differences in doctrine. The spire builders on Themba had been wiped out when their home had been struck by drones that shredded into expanding clouds of needles seconds before impact, perforating the spires and their unfortunate inhabitants. Centuries later, the ascetic hermit had settled there. He had removed the bodies of the spire builders and buried them in a common grave, carved a pocket habitat from the maze of little rooms in the base of one spire, pressurised it, and lit and warmed it using power drawn from the black paint he'd sprayed on its riddled skin. And then he'd stripped out another spire, and begun to decorate the interior of its shell with intricate murals that combined scenes and incidents from obscure poems, songs and stories with visions of a marriage between the physical world and the human mind.

The hermit had been working on one of these murals when he had returned to the Wheel. Although, being an ascetic, he would not have thought of his death in that way. There were no heavens or hells, according to them, no cycles of reincarnation. Hari had found him on a net strung between two I-beams, a shrivelled mummy kneeling in his pressure suit, his paint wand still clutched in his gloved hand.

According to a book that Hari had found in the shelter, the hermit's name had been Kinson Ib Kana, and he had died twenty-eight years ago. Or at least, that was the last time he had opened the book. Hari had learned little else. Kinson Ib Kana's p-suit was as dead as its owner, and like all followers of his faith he lacked a bios. Hari didn't know why

he'd settled on Themba, where he had come from, whether he had any family, or how old he'd been when he'd died.

He had wrapped Kinson Ib Kana's leathery corpse in its parti-coloured robe and laid it on the ground beyond the spires and covered it with rocks taken from the margins of the big cairn that marked the common grave of the spire builders. He stopped there now, and with the eidolon standing shadowlike at his back paid his respects to the dead man and told him about his day, then shuffled across the dusty slope to the blunt cone of his lifepod. He tipped the reaction-mass makings into the maw of its motor, skimmed down the slope to the spires, and cycled through the airlock into the pocket habitat. He stripped off his p-suit, tumbled his harvest of water-ice, amino acids and aromatics into the hopper of the hermit's maker. Shat, scrubbed himself clean, ate the ration of paste and pellets extruded by the maker, worked for a while on a dart thrower, read a story in the ascetic's book, and at last wrapped himself in the narrow hammock strung between two struts and told the lights to fade.

Another day gone. As always, he fell asleep while thinking about what he would do once he reached civilisation. He was supposed to make his way to Tannhauser Gate and, with the help of his family's broker, contact the hijackers and offer to trade Dr Gagarian's head for the release of any hostages, and the ship. But he was late, so very late, and it was highly probable that only he had survived. Agrata had said as much. His father's viron had been erased; she had lost contact with his brothers and their bioses had fallen silent. It was possible that the hijackers had taken her alive, but when he'd left her, when he'd been shot out of the ship in the lifepod, she had been getting ready to fight them to the death. He'd get to Tannhauser Gate, he'd try to negotiate with the hijackers, but if there were no survivors, if they didn't want to give up the ship, he'd crack open the files cached in Dr Gagarian's head and sell them. He'd mine old databases, locate a trove of ancient treasures in the outer dark, and convince some freebooter to enter into a partnership and make his fortune. He'd pull off a coup in a city bourse, become the bodyguard of some rich trader and save her life, work ten or twenty years in the docks, do everything and anything he could to raise enough funds to hire a gang of reivers and track down the people who had murdered his family and wrecked his life. And then, oh then, he would have his revenge . . .

Another day passed, and another. Early one morning, he woke to find

the eidolon bending over him, the twin stars of her eyes gleaming above the sketch of her smile.

‘I have news, Gajananvihari! I have good news! It is Agrata! It is Agrata Konwas! She is alive! And I have a message from her!’