



Endymion

Dan Simmons

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by Dan Simmons

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Endymion



Dan Simmons



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ENDYMION

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About the Author

*We must not forget that the human soul,
however independently created
our philosophy represents it as being,
is inseparable
in its birth and in its growth
from the universe into which it is born.*

—TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

*Give us gods. Oh give them us!
Give us gods.
We are so tired of men
and motor-power.*

—D. H. LAWRENCE

1

You are reading this for the wrong reason.

If you are reading this to learn what it was like to make love to a messiah—*our* messiah—then you should not read on, because you are little more than a voyeur.

If you are reading this because you are a fan of the old poet's *Cantos* and are obsessed with curiosity about what happened next in the lives of the Hyperion pilgrims, you will be disappointed. I do not know what happened to most of them. They lived and died almost three centuries before I was born.

If you are reading this because you seek more insight into the message from the One Who Teaches, you may also be disappointed. I confess that I was more interested in her as a woman than as a teacher or messiah.

Finally, if you are reading this to discover *her* fate or even *my* fate, you are reading the wrong document. Although both our fates seem as certain as anyone's could be, I was not with her when hers was played out, and my own awaits the final act even as I write these words.

If you are reading this at all, I would be amazed. But this would not be the first time that events have amazed me. The past few years have been one improbability after another, each more marvelous and seemingly inevitable than the last. To share these memories is the reason that I am writing. Perhaps the motivation is not even to share—knowing that the document I am creating almost certainly will never be found—but just to put down the series of events so that I can structure them in my own mind.

“How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” wrote some pre-Hegira writer. Precisely. I must *see* these things in order to know what to think of them. I must see the events turned to ink and the emotions in print to believe that they actually occurred and touched me.

If you are reading this for the same reason that I am writing it—to bring some pattern out of the chaos of the last years, to impose some order on the essentially random series of events that have ruled our lives for the past standard decades—then you may be reading this for the right reason, after all.

WHERE TO START? WITH A DEATH SENTENCE, PERHAPS. But whose—my death sentence or hers? And if mine, which of mine? There are several from which to choose. Perhaps this final one is appropriate. Begin at the ending.

I am writing this in a Schrödinger cat box in high orbit around the quarantined world of Armaghast. The cat box is not much of a box, more of a smooth-hulled ovoid a mere six meters by three meters. It will be my entire world until the end of my life. Most of the interior of my world is a spartan cell consisting of a black-box air-and-

waste recycler, my bunk, the food-synthesizer unit, a narrow counter that serves as both my dining table and writing desk, and finally the toilet, sink, and shower, which are set behind a fiberplastic partition for reasons of propriety that escape me. No one will ever visit me here. Privacy seems a hollow joke.

I have a text slate and stylus. When I finish each page, I transfer it to hard copy on microvellum produced by the recycler. The low accretion of wafer-thin pages is the only visible change in my environment from day to day.

The vial of poison gas is not visible. It is set in the static-dynamic shell of the cat box, linked to the air-filtration unit in such a way that to attempt to fiddle with it would trigger the cyanide, as would any attempt to breach the shell itself. The radiation detector, its timer, and the isotope element are also fused into the frozen energy of the shell. I never know when the random timer activates the detector. I never know when the same random timing element opens the lead shielding to the tiny isotope. I never know when the isotope yields a particle.

But I will know when the detector is activated at the instant the isotope yields a particle. There should be the scent of bitter almonds in that second or two before the gas kills me.

I hope that it will be only a second or two.

Technically, according to the ancient enigma of quantum physics, I am now neither dead nor alive. I am in the suspended state of overlapping probability waves once reserved for the cat in Schrödinger's thought experiment. Because the hull of the cat box is little more than position-fused energy ready to explode at the slightest intrusion, no one will ever look inside to see if I am dead or alive. Theoretically, no one is directly responsible for my execution, since the immutable laws of quantum theory pardon or condemn me from each microsecond to the next. There are no observers.

But *I* am an observer. *I* am waiting for this particular collapse of probability waves with something more than detached interest. In the instant after the hissing of cyanide gas begins, but before it reaches my lungs and heart and brain, *I* will know which way the universe has chosen to sort itself out.

At least, I will know so far as I am concerned. Which, when it comes right down to it, is the only aspect of the universe's resolution with which most of us are concerned.

And in the meantime, I eat and sleep and void waste and breathe and go through the full daily ritual of the ultimately forgettable. Which is ironic, since right now I live—if "live" is the correct word—only to remember. And to write about what I remember.

If you are reading this, you are almost certainly reading it for the wrong reason. But as with so many things in our lives, the reason for doing something is not the important thing. It is the fact of *doing* that remains. Only the immutable facts that I have written this and you are reading it remain important in the end.

Where to begin? With her? She is the one you want to read about and the one person in my life whom I wish to remember above everything and everyone else. But perhaps I should begin with the events that led me to her and then to here by way of much of this galaxy and beyond.

I believe that I shall begin with the beginning—with my first death sentence.

My name is Raul Endymion. My first name rhymes with Paul. I was born on the world of Hyperion in the year 693 A.D.C. on our local calendar, or A.D. 3099, pre-Hegira reckoning, or, as most of us figure time in the era of the Pax, 247 years after the Fall. It was said about me when I traveled with the One Who Teaches that I had been a shepherd, and this was true. Almost. My family had made its living as itinerant shepherds in the moors and meadows of the most remote regions on the continent of Aquila, where I was raised, and I sometimes tended sheep as a child. I remember those calm nights under the starry skies of Hyperion as a pleasant time. When I was sixteen (by Hyperion's calendar) I ran away from home and enlisted as a soldier of the Pax-controlled Home Guard. Most of those three years I remember only as a dull routine of boredom with the unpleasant exception of the four months when I was sent to the Claw Iceshelf to fight indigenies during the Ursus uprising. After being mustered out of the Home Guard, I worked as a bouncer and blackjack dealer in one of the rougher Nine Tails casinos, served as a bargemaster on the upper reaches of the Kans for two rainy seasons, and then trained as a gardener on some of the Beak estates under the landscape artist Avrol Hume. But "shepherd" must have sounded better to the chroniclers of the One Who Teaches when it came time to list the former occupation of her closest disciple. "Shepherd" has a nice biblical ring to it.

I do not object to the title of shepherd. But in this tale I will be seen as a shepherd whose flock consisted of one infinitely important sheep. And I lost her more than found her.

At the time my life changed forever and this story really begins, I was twenty-seven years old, tall for a Hyperion-born, notable for little except for the thickness of calluses on my hands and my love of quirky ideas, and was then working as a hunter's guide in the fens above Toschahi Bay a hundred kilometers north of Port Romance. By that time in my life I had learned a little bit about sex and much about weapons, had discovered firsthand the power greed has in the affairs of men and women, had learned how to use my fists and modest wits in order to survive, was curious about a great many things, and felt secure only in the knowledge that the remainder of my life would almost certainly hold no great surprises.

I was an idiot.

Most of what I was that autumn of my twenty-eighth year might be described in negatives. I had never been off Hyperion and never considered that I might travel offworld. I had been in Church cathedrals, of course; even in the remote regions where my family had fled after the sacking of the city of Endymion a century earlier, the Pax had extended its civilizing influence—but I had accepted neither the catechism nor the cross. I had been with women, but I had never been in love. Except for my

grandmother's tutelage, my education had been self-directed and acquired through books. I read voraciously. At age twenty-seven, I thought that I knew everything.

I knew nothing.

So it was that in the early autumn of my twenty-eighth year, content in my ignorance and stolid in my conviction that nothing of importance would ever change, I committed the act that would earn me a death sentence and begin my real life.

THE FENS ABOVE TOSCHAHY BAY ARE DANGEROUS and unhealthy, unchanged since long before the Fall, but hundreds of wealthy hunters—many from offworld—come there every year for the ducks. Most of the protomallards died off quickly after their regeneration and release from the seedship seven centuries earlier, either unable to adapt to Hyperion's climate or stalked by its indigene predators, but a few ducks survived in the fens of north-central Aquila. And the hunters came. And I guided them.

Four of us worked out of an abandoned fiberplastic plantation set on a narrow thumb of shale and mud between the fens and a tributary to the Kans River. The other three guides concentrated on fishing and big-game hunting, but I had the plantation and most of the fens to myself during duck season. The fens were a semitropical marsh area consisting mostly of thick chalma growth, weirwood forest, and more temperate stands of giant prometheus in the rocky areas above the floodplain, but during the crisp, dry cold snap of early autumn, the mallards paused there on their migration from the southern islands to their lakes in the remotest regions of the Pinion Plateau.

I woke the four "hunters" an hour and a half before dawn. I had fixed a breakfast of jambon, toast, and coffee, but the four overweight businessmen grumbled and cursed as they wolfed it down. I had to remind them to check and clean their weapons: three carried shotguns, and the fourth was foolish enough to bring an antique energy rifle. As they grumbled and ate, I went out behind the shack and sat with Izzy, the Labrador retriever I'd had since she was a pup. Izzy knew that we were going hunting, and I had to stroke her head and neck to calm her down.

First light was coming up just as we left the overgrown plantation grounds and polled off in a flat-bottomed skiff. Radiant gossamers were visible flitting through dark tunnels of branches and above the trees. The hunters—M. Rolman, M. Herrig, M. Rushomin, and M. Poneascu—sat forward on the thwarts while I poled. Izzy and I were separated from them by the heap of floatblinds stacked between us, the curved bottoms of the disks still showing the rough matting of the fiberplastic husk. Rolman and Herrig were wearing expensive chameleon-cloth ponchos, although they did not activate the polymer until we were deep in the swamp. I asked them to quit talking so loudly as we approached the freshwater fens where the mallards would be setting in. All four men glared at me, but they lowered their voices and soon fell silent.

The light was almost strong enough to read by when I stopped the skiff just outside the shooting fen and floated their blinds. I hitched up my well-patched waterproofs and slid into the chest-deep water. Izzy leaned over the side of the skiff, eyes bright, but I flashed a hand signal to restrain her from jumping in. She quivered but sat back.

"Give me your gun, please," I said to M. Poneascu, the first man. These once-a-year hunters had enough trouble just keeping their balance while getting into the small

floatblinds; I did not trust them to hang on to their shotguns. I had asked them to keep the chamber empty and the safety on, but when Poneascu handed his weapon over, the chamber indicator glowed red for loaded and the safety was off. I ejected the shell, clicked the safety on, set the gun in the waterproof carrier strapped across my shoulders, and steadied the floatblind while the heavysset man stepped from the skiff.

“I’ll be right back,” I said softly to the other three, and began wading through chalma fronds, pulling the blind along by the harness strap. I could have had the hunters pole their floatblinds to a place of their own choosing, but the fen was riddled with quickmud cysts that would pull down both pole and poler, populated by dracula ticks the size of blood-filled balloons that liked to drop on moving objects from overhead branches, decorated with hanging ribbon snakes, which looked precisely like chalma fronds to the unwary, and rife with fighting gar that could bite through a finger. There were other surprises for first-time visitors. Besides, I’d learned from experience that most of these weekend hunters would position their floats so that they would be shooting at each other as soon as the first flight of mallards appeared. It was my job to keep that from happening.

I parked Poneascu in a concealing curl of fronds with a good view from the south mudbank of the largest body of open water, showed him where I was going to place the other floatblinds, told him to watch from within the slit of the floatblind canvas and not to begin shooting until everyone was placed, and then went back for the other three. I placed Rushomin about twenty meters to the first man’s right, found a good place closer to the inlet for Rolman, and then went back for the man with the idiot energy weapon. M. Herrig.

The sun would be up in another ten minutes.

“About crossdamned time you fucking remembered me,” snapped the fat man as I waded back to him. He’d already got onto his float; his chameleon-cloth trousers were wet. Methane bubbles between the skiff and the mouth of the inlet indicated a large mudcyst, so I had to work my way close to the mudflat each time I came or went.

“We’re not paying you to waste your crossdamn time like this,” he growled from around a thick cigar.

I nodded, reached up, plucked the lighted cigar from between his teeth, and tossed it away from the cyst. We were lucky that the bubbles had not ignited. “Ducks can smell the smoke,” I said, ignoring his gaping mouth and reddening face.

I slipped into the harness and pulled his float into the open fen, my chest cutting a path through the red-and-orange algae that had covered the surface again since my last trip.

M. Herrig fondled his expensive and useless energy rifle and glared at me. “Boy, you watch your crossdamn mouth or I’ll crossdamn watch it for you,” he said. His poncho and chameleon-cloth hunting blouse were unsealed enough for me to see the gleam of a gold Pax double cross hanging around his neck and the red welt of the actual cruciform on his upper chest. M. Herrig was a born-again Christian.

I said nothing until I had his float positioned properly to the left of the inlet. All four of these experts could fire out toward the pond now without fear of hitting one another. “Pull your canvas around and watch from the slit,” I said, untying the line from my harness and securing it around a chalma root.

M. Herrig made a noise but left the camouflage canvas still furled on the dome

wands.

“Wait until I’ve got the decoys out before shooting,” I said. I pointed out the other shooting positions. “And don’t fire toward the inlet. I’ll be there in the skiff.”

M. Herrig did not answer.

I shrugged and waded back to the skiff. Izzy was sitting where I had commanded her to stay, but I could see from her straining muscles and gleaming eyes that in spirit she was bounding back and forth like a puppy. Without climbing into the skiff, I rubbed her neck. “Just a few minutes now, girl,” I whispered. Released from her stay command, she ran to the bow as I began dragging the skiff toward the inlet.

The radiant gossamers had disappeared, and the skystreaks of meteor showers were fading as the predawn light solidified into a milky glow. The symphony of insect sounds and the croak of amphisbands along the mudflats were giving way to morning birdcalls and the occasional gronk of a gar inflating its challenge sac. The sky was deepening to its daytime lapis in the east.

I pulled the skiff under fronds, gestured for Izzy to stay in the bow, and pulled four of the decoys out from under the thwart. There was the slightest film of ice along the shoreline here, but the center of the fen was clear, and I began positioning the decoys, activating each one as I left it. The water was never deeper than my chest.

I had just returned to the skiff and lay down next to Izzy under the concealing fronds when the ducks arrived. Izzy heard them first. Her entire body went rigid, and her nose came up as if she could sniff them on the wind. A second later there came the whisper of wings. I leaned forward and peered through the brittle foliage.

In the center of the pond the decoys were swimming and preening. One of them arched its neck and called just as the real mallards became visible above the tree line to the south. A flight of three ducks swept out of their pattern, extended wings to brake, and came sliding down invisible rails toward the fen.

I felt the usual thrill I always encounter at such moments: my throat tightens and my heart pounds, seems to stop for a moment, and then palpably aches. I had spent most of my life in remote regions, observing nature, but confrontation with such beauty always touched something so deep in me that I had no words for it. Beside me, Izzy was as still and rigid as an ebony statue.

The gunfire started then. The three with shotguns opened up at once and kept firing as quickly as they could eject shells. The energy rifle sliced its beam across the fen, the narrow shaft of violet light clearly visible in the morning mists.

The first duck must have been hit by two or three patterns at once: it flew apart in an explosion of feathers and viscera. The second one’s wings folded and it dropped, all grace and beauty blasted out of it. The third mallard slipped to its right, recovered just above the water, and beat its wings for altitude. The energy beam slashed after it, slicing through leaves and branches like a silent scythe. Shotguns roared again, but the mallard seemed to anticipate their aim. The bird dived toward the lake, banked hard right, and flew straight toward the inlet.

Straight toward Izzy and me.

The bird was no more than two meters above the water. Its wings were beating strongly, its entire form was bent to the purpose of escape, and I realized that it was going to fly under the trees, right through the inlet opening. Despite the fact that the bird’s unusual flight pattern had taken it between several shooting positions, all four

men were still firing.

I used my right leg to push the skiff out of the concealing branches. “Cease fire!” I shouted in a command-voice that I’d acquired during my brief career as a sergeant in the Home Guard. Two of the men did. One shotgun and the energy rifle continued firing. The mallard never wavered as it passed the skiff a meter to our left.

Izzy’s body quivered and her mouth seemed to drop farther open in surprise as the duck flapped low past us. The shotgun did not fire again, but I could see the violet beam panning toward us through the rising mists. I shouted and pulled Izzy down between the thwarts.

The mallard escaped the tunnel of chalma branches behind us and beat its wings for altitude. Suddenly the air smelled of ozone, and a perfectly straight line of flame slashed across the stern of the boat. I threw myself flat against the bottom of the skiff, grabbing Izzy’s collar and tugging her closer as I did so.

The violet beam missed my curled fingers and Izzy’s collar by a millimeter. I saw the briefest glimmer of a quizzical look in Izzy’s excited eyes, and then she tried to lower her head to my chest the way she had as a puppy when she acted penitent. At the movement, her head and the section of neck above her collar separated from her body and went over the side with a soft splash. I still held the collar and her weight was still on me, her forepaws still quivering against my chest. Then blood geysered out over me from arteries in the cleanly severed neck, and I rolled aside, pushing the spasming, headless body of my dog away from me. Her blood was warm and it tasted of copper.

The energy beam slashed back again, cut a heavy chalma branch from its trunk a meter away from the skiff, and then switched off as if it had never existed.

I sat up and looked across the pond at M. Herrig. The fat man was lighting a cigar; the energy rifle lay across his knees. The smoke from his cigar mingled with the tendrils of mist still rising from the fen.

I slipped over the side of the skiff into the chest-deep water. Izzy’s blood still swirled around me as I began wading toward M. Herrig.

He lifted his energy rifle and held it across his chest in port arms as I approached. When he spoke, it was around the cigar clenched between his teeth. “Well, are you going out there to retrieve the ducks I got, or are you just going to let them float out there until they ro—”

As soon as I was within arm’s length I grabbed the fat man’s chameleon poncho with my left hand and jerked him forward. He tried to raise the energy rifle, but I seized it with my right hand and flung it far out into the fen. M. Herrig shouted something then, his cigar tumbled into the floatblind, and I pulled him off his stool and into the water. He came up spluttering and spitting algae and I hit him once, very hard, squarely in the mouth. I felt the skin on my knuckles tear as several of his teeth snapped, and then he was sprawling backward. His head hit the frame of the floatblind with a hollow bang, and he went under again.

I waited for his fat face to rise to the surface again like the belly of some dead fish, and when it did, I held it down, watching the bubbles rise while his arms flailed and his pudgy hands batted uselessly at my wrists. The other three hunters began shouting from their shooting positions across the fen. I ignored them.

When M. Herrig’s hands had dropped away and the stream of bubbles had thinned to a weak trickle, I released him and stepped back. For a moment I did not think that

he was going to come up, but then the fat man exploded to the surface and hung on the edge of the float. He vomited water and algae. I turned my back on him and waded across to the others.

“That’s all for today,” I said. “Give me your guns. We’re going in.”

Each man opened his mouth as if to protest; each man took a look at my eyes and blood-spattered face and handed me his shotgun.

“Retrieve your friend,” I said to the last man, Poneascu. I carried the weapons back to the skiff, unloaded them, sealed the shotguns in the watertight compartment under the bow, and carried the boxes of shells to the stern. Izzy’s headless corpse had already begun to stiffen as I eased it over the side. The bottom of the skiff was awash with her blood. I went back to the stern, stowed the shells, and stood leaning on the pole.

The three hunters returned eventually, awkwardly paddling their own floats while pulling the one in which M. Herrig was sprawled. The fat man was still hanging over the side, his face pale. They climbed into the skiff and began trying to pull the floats aboard.

“Leave them,” I said. “Tie them to that chalma root. I’ll come back for them later.”

They tied off the floats and pulled M. Herrig aboard like some obese fish. The only sounds were the birds and insects of the fen coming alive and M. Herrig’s continued retching. When he was aboard, the other three hunters seated and muttering, I poled us back to the plantation as the sun burned through the last of the morning vapors rising from the dark waters.

And that should have been the end of it. Except, of course, it was not.

I WAS MAKING LUNCH IN THE PRIMITIVE KITCHEN when M. Herrig came out of the sleeping barracks with a stubby military flechette gun. Such weapons were illegal on Hyperion; the Pax allowed no one except the Home Guard to carry them. I could see the white, shocked faces of the other three hunters peering from the barracks door as M. Herrig staggered into the kitchen amid a fog of whiskey fumes.

The fat man could not resist the impulse to give a short, melodramatic speech before killing me. “You crossdamned heathen son of a bitch...” he began, but I did not stand around to listen to the rest. I threw myself down and forward even as he fired from the hip.

Six thousand steel flechettes blew apart the stove, the pan of stew I had been cooking on the stove, the sink, the window above the sink, and the shelves and crockery on the shelves. Food, plastic, porcelain, and glass showered over my legs as I crawled under the open counter and reached for M. Herrig’s legs, even as he leaned over the counter to spray me with a second burst of flechettes.

I grabbed the big man’s ankles and jerked. He went down on his back with a crash that sent a decade’s worth of dust rising from the floorboards. I clambered up over his legs, kneeling him in the groin as I climbed, and grabbed his wrist with the intention of forcing the gun out of his hands. He had a firm grip on the stock; his finger was still on the trigger. The magazine whined softly as another flechette cartridge clicked into place. I could smell M. Herrig’s whiskey-and-cigar breath on my face as he grimaced triumphantly and forced the weapon’s muzzle toward me. In one movement I slammed my forearm against his wrist and the heavy gun, squeezing it tight under M. Herrig’s

fleshy chins. Our eyes met for the instant before his struggles made him complete his squeeze of the trigger.

I TOLD ONE OF THE OTHER HUNTERS HOW TO USE the radio in the common room, and a Pax security skimmer was setting down on the grassy lawn within the hour. There were only a dozen or so working skimmers on the continent, so the sight of the black Pax vehicle was sobering, to say the least.

They banded my wrists, slapped a cortical come-along to my temple, and hurried me into the holding box in the rear of the vehicle. I sat there, dripping sweat in the hot stillness of the box, while Pax-trained forensic specialists used needle-nosed pliers to try to retrieve every shard of M. Herrig's skull and scattered brain tissue from the perforated floor and wall. Then, when they had interrogated the other hunters and had found as much of M. Herrig as they were going to find, I watched through the scarred Perspex window as they loaded his body-bagged corpse aboard the skimmer. Lift blades whined, the ventilators allowed me a bit of cooler air just as I thought I could no longer breathe, and the skimmer rose, circled the plantation once, and flew south toward Port Romance.

MY TRIAL WAS HELD SIX DAYS LATER. M'S. ROLMAN, Rushomin, and Poneascu testified that I had insulted M. Herrig on the trip to the fen and then assaulted him there. They pointed out that the hunting dog had been killed in the melee that I had begun. They testified that once back at the plantation, I had brandished the illegal flechette gun and threatened to kill all of them. M. Herrig had tried to take the weapon away from me. I had shot him at point-blank range, literally blowing his head off in the process.

M. Herrig was the last to testify. Still shaken and pale from his three-day resurrection, dressed in a somber business suit and cape, his voice shook as he confirmed the other men's testimony and described my brutal assault on him. My court-appointed attorney did not cross-examine him. As born-again Christians in good standing with the Pax, none of the four could be forced to testify under the influence of Truthtell or any other chemical or electronic form of verification. I volunteered to undergo Truthtell or fullscan, but the prosecuting attorney protested that such gimmickry was irrelevant, and the Pax-approved judge agreed. My counselor did not file a protest.

There was no jury. The judge took less than twenty minutes to reach a verdict. I was guilty and sentenced to execution by deathwand.

I stood and asked that the sentence be delayed until I could get word to my aunt and cousins in north Aquila so that they could visit me one last time. My request was denied. The time of execution was set for sunrise on the following day.

3

A priest from the Pax monastery in Port Romance came to visit me that evening. He was a small, somewhat nervous man with thinning blond hair and a slight stutter. Once in the windowless visiting room, he introduced himself as Father Tse and waved the guards away.

“My son,” he began, and I felt the urge to smile, since the priest looked to be about my age, “my son ... are you prepared for tomorrow?”

Any urge to smile fled. I shrugged.

Father Tse chewed his lip. “You have not accepted Our Lord ...,” he said, voice tense with emotion.

I had the urge to shrug again but spoke instead. “I haven’t accepted the cruciform, Father. It might not be the same thing.”

His brown eyes were insistent, almost pleading. “It is the same thing, my son. Our Lord has revealed this.”

I said nothing.

Father Tse set down his missal and touched my bound wrist. “You know that if you repent this night and accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, that three days after ... tomorrow ... you will rise to live again in the grace of Our Lord’s forgiveness.” His brown eyes did not blink. “You do know this, do you not, my son?”

I returned his gaze. Some prisoner in the adjoining cell block had screamed most of the last three nights. I felt very tired. “Yes, Father,” I said. “I know how the cruciform works.”

Father Tse vigorously shook his head. “Not the cruciform, my son. The grace of Our Lord.”

I nodded. “Have you gone through resurrection, Father?”

The priest glanced down. “Not yet, my son. But I have no fear of that day.” He looked up at me again. “Nor must you.”

I closed my eyes for a moment. I had been thinking about this for almost every minute of the past six days and nights. “Look, Father,” I said, “I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, but I made the decision some years ago not to go under the cruciform, and I don’t think that this is the right time to change my mind.”

Father Tse leaned forward, eyes bright. “Any time is the right time to accept Our Lord, my son. After sunrise tomorrow there will be no more time. Your dead body will be taken out from this place and disposed of at sea, mere food for the carrion fish beyond the bay....”

This was not a new image for me. “Yes,” I said, “I know the penalty for a murderer executed without converting. But I have this—” I tapped the cortical come-along now permanently attached to my temple. “I don’t need a cruciform symbiote embedded in

me to put me in a deeper slavery.”

Father Tse pulled back as if I had slapped him. “One mere lifetime of commitment to Our Lord is not slavery,” he said, his stutter banished by cold anger. “Millions have offered this *before* the tangible blessing of immediate resurrection in this life was offered. Billions gratefully accept it now.” He stood up. “You have the choice, my son. Eternal light, with the gift of almost unlimited life in this world in which to serve Christ, or eternal darkness.”

I shrugged and looked away.

Father Tse blessed me, said good-bye in tones comingled with sadness and contempt, turned, called the guards, and was gone. A minute later pain stabbed at my skull as the guards tickled my come-along and led me back to my cell.

I WON'T BORE YOU WITH A LONG LITANY OF THE thoughts that chased through my mind that endless autumn night. I was twenty-seven years old. I loved life with a passion that sometimes led me into trouble ... although never anything as serious as this before. For the first few hours of that final night, I pondered escape the way a caged animal must claw at steel bars. The prison was set high on the sheer cliff overlooking the reef called the Mandible, far out on Toschahi Bay. Everything was unbreakable Perspex, unbendable steel, or seamless plastic. The guards carried deathwands, and I sensed no reluctance in them to use them. Even if I should escape, a touch of a button on the come-along remote would curl me up with the universe's worst migraine until they followed the beacon to my hiding place.

My last hours were spent pondering the folly of my short, useless life. I regretted nothing but also had little to show for Raul Endymion's twenty-seven years on Hyperion. The dominant theme of my life seemed to be the same perverse stubbornness that had led me to reject resurrection.

So you owe the Church a lifetime of service, whispered a frenzied voice in the back of my skull, *at least you get a lifetime that way! And more lifetimes beyond that! How can you turn down a deal like that? Anything's better than real death ... your rotting corpse being fed to the ampreys, coelacanth, and skarkworms. Think about this!* I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep just to flee from the shouts echoing in my own mind.

The night lasted an eternity, but sunrise still seemed to come early. Four guards walked me to the death chamber, strapped me into a wooden chair, and then sealed the steel door. If I looked over my left shoulder, I could see faces peering through the Perspex. Somehow I had expected a priest—maybe not Father Tse again, but a priest, some representative of the Pax—to offer me one final chance at immortality. There was none. Only part of me was glad. I cannot say now whether I would have changed my mind at the last moment.

The method of execution was simple and mechanical—not as ingenious as a Schrödinger cat box, perhaps, but clever nonetheless. A short-range deathwand was set on the wall and aimed at the chair where I sat. I saw the red light click on the small comlog unit attached to the weapon. Prisoners in adjoining cells had gleefully whispered the mechanics of my death to me even before the sentence had been passed. The comlog computer had a random-number generator. When the number generated

was a prime smaller than seventeen, the deathwand beam would be activated. Every synapse in the gray lump that was the personality and memory of Raul Endymion would be fused. Destroyed. Melted down to the neuronically equivalent of radioactive slag. Autonomic functions would cease mere milliseconds later. My heart and breathing would stop almost as soon as my mind was destroyed. Experts said that death by deathwand was as painless a way to die as had ever been invented. Those resurrected after deathwand execution usually did not want to talk about the sensation, but the word in the cells was that it hurt like hell—as if every circuit in your brain were exploding.

I looked at the red light of the comlog and the business end of the short deathwand. Some wag had rigged an LED display so that I could see the numerals being generated. They flicked by like floor numbers on an elevator to hell: 26-74-109-19-37 ... they had programmed the comlog to generate no numbers larger than 150 ... 77-42-12-60-84-129-108-14-

I lost it then. I balled my fists, strained at the unyielding plastic straps, and screamed obscenities at the walls, at the pale faces distorted through the Perspex windows, at the fucking Church and its fucking Pax, at the fucking coward who'd killed my dog, at the goddamned fucking cowards who ...

I did not see the low prime number appear on the display. I did not hear the deathwand hum softly as its beam was activated. I *did* feel something, a sort of hemlock coldness starting at the back of my skull and widening to every part of my body with the speed of nerve conduction, and I felt surprise at feeling something. *The experts are wrong and the cons are right*, I thought wildly. *You can feel your own death by deathwand*. I would have giggled then if the numbness had not flowed over me like a wave.

Like a black wave.

A black wave that carried me away with it.