



A
CULTURE
NOVEL

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SURFACE DETAIL

It begins in the realm of the Real, where matter still matters. And it begins with a murder.

Lededje Y'breq is one of the Intagliated, her marked body bearing witness to a family shame, her life belonging to a man whose lust for power is without limit. Prepared to risk everything for her freedom, her release, when it comes, is at a price, and to put things right, she will need the help of the Culture.

Benevolent, enlightened and almost infinitely resourceful though it may be, the Culture can only do so much for any individual. With the assistance of one of its most powerful - and arguably deranged - warships, Lededje finds herself heading into a combat zone not even sure which side the Culture is really on. A war - brutal, far-reaching - is already raging within the digital realms that store the souls of the dead, and it's about to erupt into reality.

Thirteen

This deep in the ice you would need serious amounts of cooling. Otherwise you'd boil. At least you would if you were any normal sort of human, or indeed if you were any kind of conventional being with the sort of biochemistry that could not cope with temperatures much outside a narrow band between freezing and boiling. Keep cool inside the ice or you'd boil alive. The alternative would be to submit to the pressure, which would crush you to oblivion even quicker than the temperature would cook you to death.

It was all relative, of course. Below freezing or above boiling of what, and where? Water was the reference medium he was used to, as part of the pan-human meta-species, and liquid water at standard temperature and pressure, he supposed, but then: whose standard temperature and pressure?

Down here, inside a water planet, under a hundred kilometres of warm ocean, the sheer pressure of the water column above turned the water first to slush and then to ice. It was high-pressure ice, not low-temperature ice, but it was still ice, and the further down towards the planet's centre you went the harder and hotter the ice got, heated by the same pressure that had forced the water from its liquid to its solid state.

Even so, there were imperfections and contaminants in the ice: flaws, boundaries – sometimes narrowing down to only a single molecule wide – between volumes of the solid where it was possible for other liquids to slip amidst the vast compressive masses of the surrounding ice.

And, if you had evolved here, or had been carefully designed to exist here, it was even possible for creatures to exist within the ice. Tendril-slim, transparently tenuous, more like highly spread-out membranes than anything resembling an animal, they were able to make their way up and down and along the flaws and seams and fissures in the ice, seeking food in the shape of those minerals and other contaminants the ice held, or, in the case of the predators of the deep ice, attacking those grazing creatures themselves.

He – what he now was – had not evolved here. What he was now was a simulation of a creature, an organism designed to be at home in the pressure ice of a water world. But only a simulation. He was not what he appeared to be.

He was beginning to wonder if he ever had been.

The ice inside the water planet did not really exist; neither did the water planet itself, nor the star it orbited nor the galaxy beyond nor anything of what appeared to be real no matter how far out you might think you were looking. Nor how far in you looked, either. Peer into anything closely enough and you would find only the same graininess that the Real exhibited; the smallest units of measurement were the same in both realms, whether it was of time or extent or mass.

For some people, of course, this meant the Real itself was not really real, not in the sense of being genuinely the last un-simulated bedrock of actuality. According to this view everybody was already in a pre-existing simulation but simply unaware of it, and the faithful, accurate virtual worlds they were so proud of creating were just simulations within a simulation.

That way though, arguably, madness lay. Or a kind of lassitude through acceptance that could be exploited. There were few better ways of knocking the fight out of people than by convincing them that life was a joke, a contrivance under somebody else's ultimate control, and nothing of what they thought or did really mattered.

The trick, he supposed, was never to lose sight of the theoretical possibility while not for a moment taking the idea remotely seriously.

Musing upon such thoughts, he slipped with the others down a one-kilometre-high, many-kilometres-long flaw in the ice. In human terms it was probably like being a caver, a pot-holer, he imagined. Though that must do the experience little justice.

They were, he supposed, like separate strands of sluggish oil seeping between the ice sheets on what he still thought of as a conventional world, a rocky planet with ice at the poles and mountain peaks.

He commanded a small but potent force: a crack team of thirty, all highly trained and armed with poisons, chemical micro-explosives and packages of solvent. Most – perhaps all – of the marines and machines whose representations he'd inhabited over the subjective-time decades the great war had lasted to date would have regarded this as laughably inadequate weaponry, but it would be perfectly deadly down here, where not one of those marines or war machines would last for more than a fraction of a second. They were over-officered – he was here as a

major, though in any other theatre he'd be a general – but that just reflected the importance of the mission.

He could feel the presence of each of the others, chemical gradients and electrochemical signals passing within and between each of them keeping him in literal touch with every one of the thirty marines under his command. Here was Corporal Byozuel on the right, slipping and sliding down a particularly wide channel, briefly beating the rest of them for penetration; here was Captain Meavaje way out on the left and spin-forward, guiding his squad's four solvent-carrying specialists through a tricky sequence of fissures like a three-dimensional maze. First Byozuel, then the marines between them in sequence, reported a strong quake. Vatuail felt it himself an instant later.

The ice seemed to creak and whine, the space which most of Vatuail himself was in tightened, shrinking by half a millimetre. Another part of him was in a cavity a little higher further up; this widened a fraction, trying to pull him upwards. He had to grip tighter, push harder, to continue his slow progress downwards, towards the core.

... All right, sir...? came the question from Lieutenant Lyske, who was next but one along the line.

... Fine, lieutenant... he sent back.

Vatuail had sensed them all stopping, freezing in position as the quake's compression wave had passed around and through them. Freezing like that slowed them down a fraction and it did no real good unless you were in a wide fissure about to enter a narrower one, but it was just what happened, what you did; human nature, or animal nature, or sentient nature, however you wanted to characterise it; you stopped and waited, hoping and dreading, hoping not to be about to die and dreading the feel of the ice around you shifting, and dreading too the biochemical scream that might come pulsing through the single living net they had made of themselves as somebody else was so compressed by fissures closing around them that they were squeezed to single, separated molecules, crushed to mush, chemicalised out of existence.

However, the quake had gone, leaving them all intact and alive. They resumed their progress, insinuating themselves deeper and deeper into the water world's ice. He sent electrochemical signals out to let everybody know that they were all okay. Still, they could not afford to relax just because that little instance of random danger had gone; they were approaching the level where they might expect to find defences and guards.