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The Medusa Chronicles

Written by Alastair Reynolds
and Stephen Baxter

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THE
MEDUSA
CHRONICLES

STEPHEN BAXTER &
ALASTAIR REYNOLDS

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

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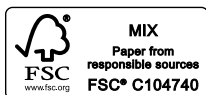
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To the memory of
Sir Arthur C Clarke

A MEETING WITH MEDUSA

Arthur C Clarke, 1971.

In the 2080s Howard Falcon is left crippled by the crash of the dirigible *Queen Elizabeth IV*, of which he was Captain. His life is saved by experimental cyborg surgery.

In the 2090s Falcon pilots a solo mission in a balloon craft called *Kon-Tiki* into the upper clouds of Jupiter, where he encounters an exotic environment complete with an ecology dominated by immense 'herbivorous' beasts he calls 'medusae', which are preyed on by 'mantas'.

Falcon's cybernetic surgery left him with superhuman capabilities but isolated from mankind, for there will be no more such experiments. But Falcon 'took sombre pride in his unique loneliness – the first immortal, midway between two orders of creation. He would . . . be an ambassador . . . between the creatures of carbon and the creatures of metal who must one day supersede them. Both would have need of him in the troubled centuries that lay ahead.'

This book is the story of those troubled centuries.

PROLOGUE

Falcon would always remember the day he had started to dream of escaping into the sky.

Commander Howard Falcon, World Navy, had been just Howard back then, eleven years old, living in the family home in Yorkshire, England, part of a Federated Zone of a newly united world. And it had snowed overnight.

He smeared his dressing gown sleeve across a cluster of panes in the window, wiping away the condensation. Each little square of glass had a precise L-shaped frosting of snow on the outside, where it had gathered on the lower edge and in one corner. There had been flurries of snow over the preceding days, but nothing as heavy as this overnight fall. And it had come in right on schedule, a seasonal gift from the Global Weather Secretariat.

The garden Howard knew was transformed. It seemed wider and longer, from the hedges on either side to the sawtooth fence at the end of the gently sloping lawn, and a ridge of snow lay on the fence, neat as the decoration on a birthday cake. It all looked so cold and still, so inviting and mysterious.

And the sky above the fence and hedges was clear, cloudless, shot through at this still-early hour with a delicate pale-rose pink. Howard looked at the sky for a long time, wondering what it would be like to be above the Earth, surrounded by nothing but air. It would be cold up there, but he'd put up with that for the freedom of flight.

Yet here in the cottage's parlour it was snug and warm. Howard had come down from his bedroom to find that his mother was up already, baking bread. She liked the old ways of doing things. His father had prepared the fire in the hearth and now it was crackling and hissing. On the mantle over the hearth was a collection of ornaments and souvenirs, including a clumsily assembled model on a clear plastic stand: a hot-air balloon with a gondola open to the air, a plastic envelope above.

Howard found his favourite toy and set it on the windowsill so it

could see the snow too. The golden robot was a complicated thing, despite its antique radio-age appearance. It had been a gift on his eleventh birthday only a couple of months earlier. He knew that it had cost his parents dearly to buy it for him.

‘It’s been snowing,’ Howard said to the toy.

The robot buzzed and rattled to show it was thinking. Somewhere in its maze of circuits and processors was a speech-recognition algorithm.

‘We could make a snowman,’ said the toy.

‘Yes,’ Howard agreed, with the tiniest flush of disappointment. At a given prompt the robot tended to come out with the same response, over and over; any mention of snow, and the robot would propose making a snowman. It never suggested a snowball fight, or making snow angels, or sledging. It didn’t really think at all, he reflected with faint dismay. Yet he loved it.

‘C’mon, Adam,’ he said at last. He snatched the robot off the sill, tucking it under one arm.

He went to the cupboard under the stairs to fetch his scarf, being quiet so that his mother did not nag him to put on warmer clothes before leaving the cottage. Then he remembered a chore he’d promised to do. Scarf around his neck, he returned to the parlour and used the poker to stir up the coals. For a moment, mesmerised, Howard stared into the depths of the fire, seeing shapes and phantoms in the dance of the flames.

‘Howard!’ his mother called from the kitchen. ‘If you’re thinking of going out, put your boots on . . .’

Pretending not to hear her, Howard crept out of the cottage, closing the door quietly behind him. He crossed the unmarred whiteness of the snow-covered lawn. His slippers pressed imprints into the snow. The air was chilly enough as it was, but there was a damper, more determined cold already seeping through the soles of his footwear. He set Adam down on the stone plinth of a bird table, where he could overlook proceedings.

Howard began scooping up snow.

‘That is a good start,’ said Adam.

‘Yes, it’s coming along.’

‘You will want a carrot for the nose and some buttons for the eyes.’

He worked for a while longer. After a time, Adam encouraged him again. ‘A very good snowman, Howard.’

In truth, the snowman was a lumpy, misshapen form, more like an anthill than a person. Howard found some twigs and jammed them into the slumped white mass. He stood back, hands on his hips, as if

the half-hearted effort was about to transform itself into something creditable.

But the snowman looked even sadder with the twigs.

'Look,' Adam said, raising a rigid arm, pointing into the sky.

Howard squinted, at first not seeing anything. But there it was. A tiny sphere, elongated at the base, moving through the air, with an even tinier basket suspended under it. A flame pulsed from the apparatus over the basket, a brief spark of brilliance against the brightening sky. The sun must have crept over the horizon, at least from the altitude of the balloon, for the side of its envelope was picked out as a crescent of gold.

Howard stared and stared. He loved balloons. He had seen them in books and in movies. He'd built models. He understood how they worked, sort of. But this was the first time he'd ever seen one with his own eyes.

The balloon was passing out of sight, going around the back of the cottage. Howard had to keep tracking it. Barely looking down, he grabbed Adam and ran, scuffing his way through the failed snowman, sending it toppling to the ground.

'I want to be up there,' Howard said.

'Yes, Howard,' Adam said patiently, his head bumping along the ground.

'Up there!'

ONE
ENCOUNTER IN THE DEEP
2099

1

The waves of the midwinter ocean crashed against the hull and spat their foam over the railings around the bow. They might as well have been dashing against cliffs for all the difference it made to the great ship. On deck there was not a trace of the swell, not a trace of rocking. The *Sam Shore* felt as solid and still as if it were anchored to the seabed.

So what was wrong?

Falcon's eyes swept to port and starboard.

Zoom and focus.

Machines frolicked in the grey waters, their pale white bodies easily mistaken for living things.

Track and enhance.

The sleek forms, each a few metres long and equipped with cameras, grabber arms and miniaturised sonar pods, swam gracefully alongside the tremendous hull. At times they came alarmingly close, and Falcon wondered how safe such activity could be, given the choppiness of the sea. What if they collided with the carrier's hull? The safety of President Jayasuriya was at stake . . .

'Whale watching, are we, Howard?'

Falcon turned with some reluctance, the balloon wheels of his undercarriage slipping on the damp deck. But human company, after all, was why he was here; not even Howard Falcon was reclusive enough to turn down an invitation from the World President to join her for New Year on the world's largest cruise ship. Especially not *this* New Year, the birth of the twenty-second century. And he wasn't surprised to see who had found him, with no less a figure than the Captain in tow. Both shielded their faces against the cold and the spray, eyes narrowed to squints.

'Geoff Webster,' Falcon said. 'I'm barely off the shuttle and you've already tracked me down.'

Webster grinned. 'Howard, every time you descend from space I hear celestial trumpets.'

Webster, more than sixty years old, was one of Falcon's oldest friends: one of the few he'd kept in touch with since the *Queen Elizabeth IV*

accident. Webster's manner towards Falcon since his rebuilding hadn't changed one iota, being just as ornery and honest as he'd ever been. And, since Webster was Administrator of the Bureau of Long Range Planning, one of the most significant branches of the Strategic Development Secretariat, he was a useful ally. Indeed Webster had provided crucial backing for Falcon's latest, career-defining venture: his solo journey into the clouds of Jupiter, from which he'd returned only months ago.

Now Webster grinned and presented his companion. 'Howard Falcon, I want you to meet Captain Joyce Embleton.'

To her credit, Embleton didn't hesitate to stick out a hand in welcome, and she managed not to grimace when Falcon took it with what passed for his own hand. 'Very good to have you aboard, Commander Falcon.'

She was trim, upright, fashionably bald under an elaborate peaked cap that was jammed down hard against the wind and the spray. And to Falcon's surprise she sounded impeccably British, here at the helm of what had once been the pride of the US Navy. But then it had been more than sixty years, he supposed, since Britain and America had been united in the Atlantic Partnership.

'You're quite the celebrity, Commander. We all followed your jaunt into the depths of Jupiter, earlier in the year. You may find yourself pestered for autographs by some of the younger crew. Although—' She glanced at Falcon's upper body.

Falcon said dryly, 'Believe it or not, I can still sign my name.'

Webster glared at Falcon. 'Howard, we're guests. Be nice.'

Embleton walked around Falcon, inspecting him in a no-nonsense fashion. 'Well, you don't strike me as a shrinking violet. There's still something of the human in you, isn't there? That *is* the face your mother gave you, even if it's become a somewhat immobile, leathery mask.'

'They warned me you were blunt, Captain Embleton. I thought they had to be exaggerating.'

'They weren't. Bluntness is a time-saver, I find.' She cocked her head at him. 'Ah, I see you're trying to smile.'

'I promise not to scare your guests by doing that too often.'

'I have an impulse to ask if you need anything to keep you warm. Most of our guests require something in this damp Atlantic wind, though of course the worst of the weather is kept off by our sonar and electromagnetic screens.' She snapped her fingers. 'Conseil?'

A dustbin-sized robot rolled away from another clump of guests and towards the Captain. 'May I serve you?'

Falcon, surprised, found himself nostalgically charmed. ‘Hello, little fellow. Are you any use at making snowmen . . .?’

Webster raised his eyebrows.

‘Never mind.’

Embleton said, ‘We can get you anything you need, Commander.’

‘Most people in these situations ask if I’m liable to rust.’

‘I did think of it. Anyhow, I’m sure you won’t feel out of place here.’ She leaned over and murmured discreetly, ‘You aren’t our only guest from outer space. Look over to starboard.’

Falcon made out a group of passengers, tall, elegant; when they moved metal glinted on their limbs, and even from here he could hear a whirl of servomotors. ‘Martians?’

‘Third generation. Bigwigs in Port Lowell. On Earth, they can’t get out of bed without their exoskeletons. And I’m told that the intensive work done to save *you* pushed that technology ahead by leaps and bounds.’

‘Glad to be of service,’ Falcon said.

Embleton nodded. ‘You may not be very good at smiling, Commander, but you can tell a joke.’ They took a step closer to the railings around the edge of the deck. ‘And you seem to be taken by our sea sprites.’

‘Is that what you call them . . .? Captain, my background is the World Navy, but I’m out of my depth here. Took me a while to figure out that these beasts were mechanical, rather than exotic dolphins.’

‘Well, there are dolphins around, and all manner of other wildlife. The seas have rather recovered, you know, since the bad old days. No, these sprites are best thought of as wardens – and very helpful to us they are. Come, walk with me . . .’

It was a reasonable hike. The carrier’s flight deck was a mile long, the passengers had been told, and quilted with hatches that had once released fighter aircraft and smart missiles. To Falcon, looking ahead from near the bow of the craft, the great superstructures and fin-shaped hydroplanes at the stern were faded grey by mist.

Embleton said, walking slowly, ‘Commander, the dear old *Sam Shore* is a war veteran, ninety years old, and spends much of its time in dry dock. When at sea we use any intervals when we’re not under power, like this one, to allow the sprites to tend to the hull, the engine vents – even keeping off the barnacles is a challenge.’

‘The sprites are independently powered? Autonomously controlled?’

‘Self-powered, yes of course, but only a small degree of autonomy. The sprites are controlled from the ship, by the Bosun—’

‘The Bosun?’

‘Our main computer. Which itself is essentially subordinate to the commands of the crew.’ She glanced down at Conseil, which had followed them, holding an empty drinks tray in one flexible manipulator. ‘Interesting to reflect that the most advanced artificial intelligence on board is actually this little chap.’

Falcon bent to read the robot’s manufacturer’s plaque. He learned that ‘Conseil’ was a General Purpose Homiform Mark 9, a product of Minsky & Good, Inc., of Urbana, Illinois, United States, Atlantic Partnership. Falcon knew the name; Minsky specialised in computing technology. They marketed the best desk-top models available, and some of their advanced minisecs were small enough to fit into a pocket.

‘An experimental model, able to take the initiative to some extent. Makes his own decisions about which guest to serve next, to anticipate requests, that sort of thing. And he has some emergency-response capabilities. I’m told that in fact he’s capable of a good deal more independent thought and decision-making than our Bosun. And here he is serving drinks – but that’s the way we like it, of course. With people in charge.’

Webster asked, ‘Conseil? Why that name?’

Falcon tutted. ‘Philistine. A Jules Verne reference, of course.’

Webster wasn’t impressed. ‘That’s rich coming from someone who looks like a *prop* from a Verne movie.’

‘What about time delay?’

Embleton looked up at Falcon. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘In your control of the sprites. Here they are playing around within metres of what I believe are your main ballast tanks, running along the hull here.’

Embleton smiled. ‘You’ve looked us up, I see. Given what happened with the *Queen Elizabeth*, I see why you’d be concerned about time delays and reaction times . . .’

Twelve years ago, a signalling time delay between a remotely operated camera platform and its distant human controller had been a crucial factor in the crash of the dirigible *Queen Elizabeth IV*. When the platform had hit turbulent air, the controller had been too far away to react, the platform itself too simple to respond autonomously . . . The result had been catastrophic, for the platform itself, for the airship – for its captain, Howard Falcon. He wasn’t likely to forget.

Embleton went on, ‘But you needn’t worry about the sprites. The signal delays are minimal, we have a suite of backup options, and the sprites are tightly programmed. If they’re not sure, they just shut down.’

‘But the most elaborate failsafes can go wrong. Yes, as happened with the camera platform that brought down the *Q.E. IV*.’

Webster pointed up. ‘A platform not unlike that one, coming towards us.’

Light flared down from a camera platform hovering silently not two metres above their heads.

And just as the light hit Falcon, a man came striding up, brisk, handsome, dressed in a crisp World Navy uniform. A small entourage trailed him, including a younger man continually glancing at the blocky minisec in his hand. The leader looked around forty, but Falcon knew that with the life-extension therapies that were becoming available, looks could be deceiving.

Falcon recognised him. He could hardly not. This was Captain Matthew Springer, conqueror of Pluto: this year’s other hero of space exploration.

Springer took Falcon’s artificial hand without flinching. ‘Commander Howard Falcon! And Administrator Webster. Captain, forgive me for interrupting. Commander, I was so pleased to learn you’d be on this cruise . . .’

Falcon was aware of the camera platform descending, eager to capture this historic encounter, but with its multiple lenses all trained on Springer.

And Springer was staring closely at Falcon. ‘Hey – you’re breathing.’
‘So are you,’ Falcon said dryly.

Webster rolled his eyes.

But Springer seemed immune to irony. ‘Makes sense, I guess. A touch of humanity. And you can speak more or less naturally. As opposed to through some kind of loudspeaker attachment, right? So what do you use for lungs?’

‘I’ll mail you the specifications.’

‘Thanks. You know, I followed your exploits as a boy. The ballooning stunts. And I have to tell you that of the last generation of technological pioneers, you’re the one I most—’ His aide touched his arm, murmured something, pointed to his minisec. Springer held up his hands. ‘Got to go – drinks with the World President. You jump when called, right, Commander? Catch you later – and please come to my talk about Icarus and my grandfather, which will be in the—’ He pointed at Embleton.

‘The Sea Lounge,’ Captain Embleton said with good grace, even as Springer retreated.

‘And with that he was gone,’ Webster said. ‘Trailed by his fan club like a comet tail, and by that damn floating platform.’

‘Not that the camera spent too long looking at me,’ Falcon said.

Embleton laughed. ‘Well, we wouldn’t want to scare the sea sprites, Commander.’ They set off towards the stern again, trailed by Conseil. ‘I’m sure there are plenty of people on board who’ll be fascinated to meet you. We even have one of the medical team who treated you aboard. But I insist you allow me to give you the guided tour . . . The *Shore*’s keel was laid at the peak of the last period of real global tension, but the ship never bared its fangs in true anger, I’m happy to say. As a Navy officer yourself you might find elements of the design interesting. Of course, nowadays we’re famous for our world-class passenger facilities.’ She glanced over Falcon’s seven-foot-tall body. ‘I wonder how you’d fare on the ice rink?’

Webster laughed out loud. ‘He could skate, if we swapped his wheels for blades. But it wouldn’t be pretty.’

‘Commander Howard Falcon.’ The voice was a gravelly growl.

And – as a group of passengers passed them, drinks in their hands, gaudy as flowers against the Atlantic grey, all no doubt fabulously rich – Falcon stopped and found himself facing a group of chimpanzees.

There were a dozen, of whom three or four glared at the humans with undisguised hostility. The chimps wore no clothes save for loose stringed jackets heavy with pockets, even though some were evidently shivering with the cold. They huddled down on the deck, their closed fists scraping the metal surface. Their apparent leader was older, grizzled grey around the muzzle, and he stood a little taller than the rest.

Embleton stepped forward briskly. ‘I should make proper introductions. You know Commander Falcon already. Commander, this is Ham 2057a, Ambassador to the World Council of the Independent Pan Nation, and another guest of President Jayasuriya.’

Falcon tried not to stare. This was the first simp – superchimp – he’d seen since the crash of the *Q.E. IV*. ‘I’m glad to meet you, sir.’

‘And I you, Commander.’

‘Are you enjoying the cruise?’

‘Missing home in Congo treetops, to tell truth . . .’ The Ambassador spoke distorted but comprehensible English, evidently with some effort. One of his aides seemed to be an interpreter, relaying the speech to the others in pant-hoots and gestures. ‘Know you, of course. To us, Howard Falcon famous for more than Jupiter.’

‘The crash of the *Queen*.’

‘Many sims died that day.’

‘And many human crew—’

‘Sims! Given slave names, like my own. Dressed like dolls. Made to work on cruise ship grander than this one, *Boss*.’

Falcon was aware of Webster flinching at that word. ‘Well, now, Bit-torn’s programme was well intended,’ said the Administrator. ‘It was meant as a way to establish a bridge between cousin species—’

Ham snorted. ‘Simps! So damn useful, clambering around space stations in zero G – climbing in airship rigging. And so funny-funny cute in little slave uniforms, serving drinks. Other animals too. Smart dogs. Smart horses . . . Smart enough to know humiliation and fear. All dead now . . .

‘Then, ship crashed. *You* barely survived. Millions spent saving you. Some simsps survived, barely. They not saved. Millions not spent. Simsps *euthed*.’

Embleton stepped forward. ‘Ambassador, this is hardly the time or the place—’

Ham ignored her. ‘But you, Commander Falcon. Records of crash. No cameras, but forensics, word of survivors. Some simsps lasted long enough to tell story. The ship, doomed. You heading *down*, down to bridge, risk life to save ship, if you could. And you found frightened simp. You stopped, Commander. Stopped, calmed him, told him go, not *down, down*, but *up, up* to observation deck. Where he would have best chance. You said, “Boss – boss – *go!*”’

Falcon looked away. ‘He died anyway.’

‘Did your best. His name, Baker 2079q. Eight years old. We remember, you see. All simsps. Remember them, every one. They were people. Better times now.’ He surprised Falcon by reaching up with one hand. Falcon had to lower his upper body to take it. ‘You come visit Independent Pan Nation.’

‘I’d like that very much,’ Falcon said.

‘Climb trees?’

‘I’m always up for a challenge.’

Embleton smiled. ‘Not until you’ve tried ice skating, Commander—’

But a voice cut across her words: ‘*Whale ahoy! Starboard side!*’

Falcon turned with the rest.

The whales were heading north.

Looking out over this grey ocean, under a grey sky, the great bodies looked like an armada, a fleet of ships, not like anything living at all. Of course they were dwarfed by the tremendous length of the carrier, but there was a power and purpose about them that no machine of mankind could ever match: a fitness for purpose in this environment.

Now one tremendous head lifted out of the water not thirty, forty metres from the flank of the *Shore*, misshapen to Falcon’s untutored gaze, pocked and scarred like the surface of some asteroid. But a vast

mouth opened, a cave from whose roof dangled the baleen plates that filtered this beast's diet of plankton from the upper levels of the sea, a thin gruel to power such a tremendous body. And then an eye opened, huge but startlingly human.

As he looked into that eye, Falcon felt a jolt of recognition.

He had travelled to Jupiter, where, in layers of cloud where conditions were temperate, almost Earthlike, he had encountered another tremendous animal: a medusa, a creature the size of the *Shore* itself, swimming in that unimaginably remote sea. This whale had been shaped by evolutionary pressures in an environment not entirely dissimilar to Jupiter's hydrogen-helium air-ocean, and surely had much in common with the medusae. And yet Falcon felt a kinship of common biology with this tremendous terrestrial mammal that he knew he could never share with any Jovian medusa.

Ham, the simp Ambassador, was at his side. 'There you are, Commander Falcon. Another Legal Person (Non-human).' And he pant-hooted with laughter.

2

During dinner, the USS *Sam Shore* discreetly submerged.

Hatches and service ports were closed and sealed silently. Ballast tanks were opened, the in-rush of water politely muffled so as not to disturb the passengers. The dive planes were set for a one-degree descent, barely noticeable even to those guests paying close attention to the level of the drinks in their glasses.

Falcon noticed, of course. He sensed the angle of the deck, the tilt from one end of a corridor to the next. Through the sensors in his undercarriage he picked up the change in the subsonic frequency coming from the engine, signalling a decrease in the power output, possible now that the ship was moving underwater in its optimum environment.

Very few things escaped Falcon.

After dinner, and before Springer's speech, he and Webster went for a walk.

The so-called service deck of the *Shore*, beneath the immense hangar deck, was a cavern of girders and rivets and rails and cranes and rotating platforms, where once fighter planes and nuclear-tipped missiles had been fuelled, serviced, refurbished. Now this brightly lit chamber had been transformed into a combination of shopping mall and upper class hotel – and on an astounding scale, a full mile of it.

'You should feel at home here, Howard,' Webster was saying. 'After all, if the *Queen Elizabeth* hadn't crashed, you'd have ended up a cruise liner captain too, wouldn't you? Of course, nowadays you'd never get a dress uniform to fit . . .'

Falcon ignored him and inspected the fixtures. For this prestigious cruise the ship's owners, together with the World Food Secretariat, Marine Division, had used the space to mount an exhibition of the modern ocean and its uses, presumably intended to prompt well-heeled passengers to become investors. Falcon and Webster glanced over exhibits, models and holographic and animated images of various wonders natural and otherwise – although Falcon was unsure if anything about Earth's oceans could still be called natural. At the

close of the twenty-first century a large proportion of mankind was still fed by tremendous plankton farms, sustained by the forced upwelling of nutrient-rich materials from the ocean floor. As land-based mineral sources had been depleted the sea bed had been extensively mined too. Of course, nowadays humanity was more than conscious of the needs of the creatures with whom it shared the world – and even, in the case of the uplifted chimps, shared political power. But the whole Earth was becoming a managed landscape, Falcon thought, like one vast park – which was one reason people like himself became hungry to leave.

They found a panel on career opportunities, and Webster bent to see, curious. ‘Look at this stuff, Howard. The specialisms you can take on: seamanship, oceanography, navigation, undersea communications, marine biology . . .’ He straightened up stiffly. ‘You know, the Bureau of Space Resources uses some sea floor locations for simulation work. You can trial suits designed to cope with the heavy pressures we will encounter on Venus, for instance. Shame we can’t go see that during this jaunt.’

‘No,’ Falcon said, ‘this tub is strictly a shallow diver. Just enough to hide from enemy aircraft—’

‘Excuse me.’

The woman stood alone in the gloom of the gallery: soberly dressed, dark, she looked to be in her mid-thirties. Falcon, at seven feet, towered over her by a good foot and a half. Not surprisingly perhaps, she seemed nervous.

Webster snapped his fingers. ‘I remember you. Nurse Dhoni, right? You were at the military hospital, Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, when we—’

‘When Commander Falcon was brought in from the *Queen Elizabeth*, yes.’

Those days – those *years* – of recovery still lived in Falcon’s nightmares. He did his best not to recoil.

‘Actually, it’s Doctor now. I cross-trained. I specialised in neurosurgery at—’

‘Why are you here?’ Falcon snapped.

She seemed taken aback, and Webster glared at him.

Dhoni said, ‘Well, because of you, Commander. Once the President’s staff had invited you, they looked around for friends, family and such to make you welcome. And of your medical team from back then, I’m the only one still working in the field. The rest have retired, moved on, or in one case died – Doctor Bignall, if you remember him.’

‘You didn’t have to come.’

Webster growled, 'For God's sake, Howard.'

'No, Administrator Webster, it's OK.' She sounded as if it was anything but OK, but she held her nerve. 'I needed to see you, Commander. After your exploits on Jupiter made the news, I did some investigating. It's been an awfully long time since you had a proper check-up, let alone an overhaul.'

Suddenly Falcon was suspicious. He glared at Webster. 'Did you set this up, you old coot?'

Webster looked as if he was going to try to bluff his way out, but gave in with good grace. 'Well, now, Howard, I knew you wouldn't listen to me.' He rapped his knuckles on the shell of toughened alloy where Falcon's chest should have been. 'The outside stuff is doing fine. We can switch components in and out with no trouble. But what's inside was pretty beat up to start with, and isn't getting any younger. How old are you now, fifty-five, fifty-six . . .?'

Dhoni reached out uncertainly to Falcon, then dropped her hand. 'Let me help you. How do you sleep?'

Falcon set his jaw. 'As little as I can.'

'Even with the sleep inducers? There are new treatments now, things we can offer you—'

'Is that why you're here? To use me as a lab rat, again?'

That got through the last of her defences. Her mouth worked, and she swallowed. 'No. I'm here because I care. Just as I cared then.' She turned and stalked away.

Falcon watched her go. 'She nearly burst into tears.'

'No, she didn't, you ass. She nearly knocked your block off, and you would have deserved it. I saw you back then, Howard. I know it was a nightmare. But she was there all the way through, Hope Dhoni. Just a kid. There all the way through.' He seemed to struggle for words. '*She wiped your brow.* Oh, the hell with you. I need a drink.' He walked off, calling back, 'Enjoy Springer's ego trip. I've had enough heroes for now. But when you find that woman again you apologise, you hear?'

3

In the USS *Sam Shore*'s Sea Lounge, Matt Springer stood at a lectern beside an empty, dimly lit stage.

The room itself was extraordinary, Falcon thought, as he rolled in and discreetly took a place at the back. The Sea Lounge was probably the single most famous, or notorious, feature of the cruise ship this huge carrier had become. It was a place of curves and tangles and sweeping panels, no straight lines, all in the colours of the sea: green and blue and with a mother-of-pearl sheen. The stage itself stood under an apex where arching ribs joined, and the audience before Springer was cupped in a shallow basin. Captain Embleton – there in the front row alongside the President – had told Falcon this was experimental architecture. The same technology they used to filter-mine sea water had been put to work sculpting this room, layer by layer – the room had been *grown*, like a sea mollusc's shell, rather than built in the traditional fashion. Even the hidden service elements, the ducts and pipes and vents and cabling, had been planned into the carefully computer-controlled process.

The decor meanwhile looked high Victorian to Falcon, with polished tables, high chairs and divans. The tables were set with expensive-looking glasses, cutlery and porcelain crockery. But Falcon noticed the details – each item of cutlery marked with the motto MOBILIS IN MOBILI, the small flags on each table, black with a golden 'N' – that gave away the true inspiration behind this place. Falcon allowed himself a smile. More than two centuries since its launch in the pages of Verne's great novel, Captain Nemo's *Nautilus* still sailed seas of imagination. Falcon murmured, 'You'd have enjoyed this, Jules.'

And in this elaborate setting, dressed in a crisp Navy uniform, smiling at the passengers as they filed into their seats, Matt Springer looked at ease, welcoming, in control. Falcon envied the man for his human grace in this very human company, while Falcon himself skulked in the shadows.

But he was not alone for long. Webster soon found him.