

BLUE REMEMBERED EARTH

Alastair Reynolds



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CHAPTER ONE

He was on his way back from the edge of the study area towards the research station, just him and the Cessna and the open skies above the Amboseli basin, his mood better than it had been in weeks, when the call arrived.

'Geoffrey,' a voice said in his skull. 'You must come to the household immediately.'

Geoffrey sighed. He should have known better than to expect this untroubled state of mind to last.

He was over the property ten minutes later, searching the white-walled and blue-tiled buildings for evidence of disruption. Nothing struck him as out of the ordinary. Everything about the A-shaped residence, from its secluded courtyards and gardens to its swimming pools, tennis courts and polo field, was as neat and orderly as an architect's model.

Geoffrey lined up with the rough track that served as his runway and brought the Cessna home. He bounced down, the fat-tyred wheels kicking up dirt and dust, braked hard and taxied to a vacant spot at the end of the row of airpods belonging to the household and its guests.

He let the engine die and sat in the cockpit for a few moments, gathering his thoughts.

He knew what it was, deep down. This day had been in his future for so long that it had taken on the solidity and permanence of a geographical feature. He was just surprised that it was finally upon him.

He disembarked into the morning heat, the aeroplane issuing quiet, ruminative sounds as it cooled down. Geoffrey took off his faded old Cessna baseball cap and used it to fan his face.

From the arched gatehouse in the wall emerged a figure, walking towards Geoffrey with slumped shoulders, solemn pace and grave demeanour.

'I am very sorry,' he said, raising his voice only when they were almost close enough to speak normally.

'It's Eunice, isn't it?'

'I am afraid she has passed away.'

Geoffrey tried to think of something to say. 'When did it happen?'

'Six hours ago, according to the medical report. But it only came to my attention an hour ago. Since then I've been busy verifying matters and informing close family.'

'And how?'

'In her sleep, peacefully.'

'One hundred and thirty's a pretty good age, I guess.'

'One hundred and thirty-one, by her last birthday,' Memphis said, without reproach. 'And yes, it is a good age. Had she returned to Earth, she might even have lived longer. But she chose her own path. Living all alone up there, with just her machines for company . . . the wonder is that she lasted as long as she did. But then she always did say that you Akinyas are like lions.'

Or vultures, Geoffrey thought. Aloud, he said, 'What happens now?'

Memphis draped an arm around his shoulders and steered him towards the gatehouse. 'You are the first to arrive back at the household. Some of the others will begin chinging in shortly. Within the day, some may begin to arrive in person. The others, those who are in space . . . it will take much longer, if they are able to come at all. They will not all be able to.'

They entered the shade of the gatehouse, where whitewashed walls cast cool indigo shadows.

'It feels odd to be meeting here, when this isn't the place where she died.'

'Eunice left specific instructions.'

'No one told me about them.'

'I have only just become aware of them myself, Geoffrey. You would have been informed, had I known earlier.'

Beyond the gatehouse, fountains hissed and bubbled from the ornamental ponds. Geoffrey shoed aside an armadillo-sized gardening robot. 'I know this is as difficult for you as it is for the family, Memphis.'

'There may be a difficult period of transition. The family . . . the business . . . will have to adjust to the absence of a figurehead.'

'Fortunately, that doesn't really concern me.'

'You may not think so. But even on the periphery of things, you are still an Akinya. That goes for your sister as well.'

Geoffrey said nothing until they were standing in the spacious entrance lobby of the household's left wing. The place was as crypt-silent and forbidding as a locked museum. Glass cabinets, minor shrines to his grandmother's illustriousness, trapped her past under slanted sunlight. Spacesuit components, rock and ice samples gathered from all over the solar system, even an antiquated 'computer', a hinged grey box still fixed together with yellow and black duct tape. Printed books, with dusty, time-faded covers. A dismal assortment of childhood toys, no longer loved, abandoned.

'I don't think you realise how little effect this is going to have on Sunday and me,' Geoffrey said. 'Eunice was never that interested in either of us, once we strayed from the path.'

'You are quite wrong about Sunday. Eunice meant a great deal to her.'

Geoffrey decided not to press Memphis on that. 'Do my mother and father know?'

'They're still on Titan, visiting your Uncle Edison.'

He smiled quickly. 'That's not something I'd forget.'

'It will be a couple of hours before we are likely to hear from them. Perhaps longer, if they are occupied.'

They had nearly reached the ground-floor office where Memphis spent most of his time, managing the household's affairs – and by implication a business empire as wide as the solar system – from a room not much larger than a decent-sized broom cupboard.

'Anything I can do?' Geoffrey asked, feeling awkwardly as if there was some role he was expected to play, but which no one had told him about.

'Nothing immediately. I shall be going up to the Winter Palace in due course, but I can take care of that on my own.'

'To bring back her body?'

Memphis gave a half-nod. 'She wishes her remains to be scattered in Africa.'

'I could go with you.'

'Very kind, Geoffrey, but I am not too old for spaceflight just yet. And you must be very busy with your elephants.' He lingered at the threshold of his office, clearly anxious to return to his duties.

'It's good that you are back here now. If you could stay a day, that would be even better.'

'I feel like a loose end.'

'Be here for the rest of your family. You will all need to draw strength from each other.'

Geoffrey offered a sceptical smile. 'Even Hector and Lucas?'

'Even them,' Memphis said. 'I know that you do not get on, but perhaps now you will be able to find some common ground. They are not bad men, Geoffrey. It may feel like a long time ago to you, but I can still remember when you were all young enough not to hate the sight of each other.'

'Times change,' Geoffrey said. 'Still, I'll make an effort.'

He sat on the edge of his crisply made bed, in the room he had spent hardly any time in these recent years. In his hands was one of the wooden elephants Eunice had given him as a birthday gift. It was the bull, one of a set of six, diminishing in size down to the baby. The other five were still on the shelf where he had left them the last time he'd handled them. They stood on black plinths of some flinty, coal-like material.

He couldn't remember how old he had been when the elephants arrived, packed in a stout wooden box with tissue paper to protect them. Five or six, maybe. The time when the nanny from Djibouti was still taking care of his education and upbringing. The same year he stepped on the scorpion, perhaps?

It had taken him a little while to realise that his grandmother lived in orbit around the Moon, not on or in it, and even longer to appreciate that her infrequent gifts did not actually come from space. They were made somewhere on Earth; all she did was arrange for them to be sent to him. Later it had even occurred to him that someone else in the family – the nanny, perhaps Memphis – was choosing them on her behalf.

He'd been disappointed with the elephants when he opened the box, but not quite adult enough to hide that disappointment. He had wanted an aeroplane, not useless wooden animals that didn't do anything. Later, after a gentle reprimand, he had been made to speak to Eunice's figment and tell her how grateful he was. She had addressed him from the green jungle core of the Winter Palace.

He wondered how good a job of it he had made.

He was reaching to put the bull back on the shelf when the request began pulsing with gentle insistence in his visual field.

>>open: quangled bind
>>via: Maiduguri-Nyala backbone
>>carrier: Lufthansa Telepresence
>>incept: 23/12/2161 13:44:11 UTC
>>origin: Lagos, Nigeria, WAF
>>client: Jumai Lule
>>accept/decline ching?

He placed the bull back at the head of its family and returned to the bed, accepting Jumai's call with a single voked command. The bind established. Geoffrey's preference was always for inbound ching, remaining in his local sensorium, and Jumai would have expected that. He placed her figment by the door, allowing her a moment to adjust to her surroundings.

'Hello, Jumai,' he said quietly. 'I guess I know why you're calling.'

'I just got the news. I'm really sorry, Geoffrey. It must be a big blow to the family.'

'We'll weather it,' he said. 'It's not exactly unexpected.'

Jumai Lule was wearing brown overalls, hair messy and tied up in a meshwork dust cap, marks on her face from the goggles and breathing gear now hanging around her neck. She was in Lagos working on high-risk data archaeology, digging through the city's buried, century-old catacombs for nuggets of commercially valuable information. It was dangerous, exacting work: exactly the kind of thing she thrived on, and which he hadn't been able to offer her.

'I know you weren't that close to her, but—' Jumai began.

'She was still my grandmother,' Geoffrey countered defensively, as if she was accusing him of indifference to the matter of Eunice's death

'I didn't mean it that way, as you well know.'

'So how's work?' Geoffrey asked, trying to sound as if it mattered to him.

'Work is . . . fine. Always more than we can keep up with. New challenges, most of the time. I probably need to move on at some point, but . . . ' Jumai let the sentence hang.

'Don't tell me you're getting bored already?'

‘Lagos is close to being tapped out. I thought maybe Brazilia, even further afield. Like, maybe space. Still a lot of militarised crap left lying around the system, nasty shit they could use people like me to break into and decommission. And I hear the Gearheads pay pretty well.’

‘Because it’s dangerous.’

Jumai offered the palm of her hand to the ceiling. ‘What, and this isn’t? We hit Sarin nerve gas last week. Anti-tamper triggers, linked to what we thought was part of a mainframe’s cryogenic cooling reservoir.’ She grinned impishly. ‘Not the kind of mistake you make twice.’

‘Anyone hurt?’

‘Nothing they couldn’t fix, and they upped our hazard bonus as a consequence.’ She looked around the room again, scanning it as if she half-expected booby traps in the made bed, or lurking on the neat white shelves. ‘But anyway, this isn’t about me – are *you* all right?’

‘I’ll be fine. And I’m sorry – I shouldn’t have snapped. You’re right – Eunice and I were never that close. I just don’t really like having my face rubbed in it.’

‘What about your sister?’

‘I’m sure she feels the same way I do.’

‘You never did take me up to meet Sunday. I always wanted to meet her. I mean properly, face to face.’

He shifted on the bed. ‘Full of broken promises, that’s me.’

‘You can’t help the way you are.’

‘Maybe not. But that doesn’t stop people telling me I should broaden my horizons.’

‘That’s your business, no one else’s. Look, we’re still friends, aren’t we? If we weren’t, we wouldn’t keep in touch like this.’

Even if it had been months since the last call, he thought. But he had no wish to sound sour. ‘We’re good,’ he affirmed. ‘And it’s very thoughtful of you to call me.’

‘I couldn’t not call you. The whole world knows – it wasn’t news I could easily miss.’ Jumai reached down for her goggles. ‘Look, I’m only on a break – got to get back to the front line or my extraction chief will be yelling her head off – but I just wanted to say I’m here if you need someone to talk to.’

‘Thank you.’

'You know, we could still go to the Moon one day. Just as friends. I'd like that.'

'One day,' he agreed, safe in the knowledge that she didn't really mean it either.

'Tell me when they sort out a date for the funeral. If I can make it, and if it isn't a family-only thing ...' she trailed off.

'I'll let you know,' Geoffrey said.

Jumai settled the goggles over her eyes and eased the breathing mask into place. He'd tell her about the funeral plans, yes – but he doubted she'd come, even if the ceremony was extended to include friends of the Akinyas, rather than just close relatives. This call had already been awkward enough. There'd be a reason, a plausible excuse, to keep her away. And that, in truth, would be easiest on both of them.

Jumai waved a hand and chinged out of his life. Geoffrey considered it quite likely that he would never see her again.

For all that Eunice's death hit the family hard, it wasn't long before she was shunted from the headlines. A simmering sex/vote-rigging scandal in the Pan-African Parliament, a dispute between the East African Federation and the African Union about cost overruns on a groundwater bioremediation programme in former Uganda, a stand-off between Chinese tecto-engineers and Turkish government mandarins concerning the precise scheduling of a stress-management earthquake along the North Anatolian Fault. On the global scale, continued tensions between the United Surface Nations and the United Aquatic Nations regarding extradition rules and the extent of aug access rights and inter-regional Mechanism jurisdiction. Talk of expanding the scope of the Mandatory Enhancements. A murder attempt in Finland. Threat of industrial action at the Pontianak space elevator in western Borneo. Someone in Tasmania dying of a very rare type of cancer, something of a heroic achievement these days.

Only at the household, only in this part of the East African Federation, had the clocks stopped. A month had passed since Geoffrey was called from the sky with news of his grandmother's death. The scattering had been delayed until the twenty-ninth of January, which would give most of the family time to make reasonable travel arrangements for their journeys back to Earth.

Miraculously, the delay was deemed agreeable to all the involved factions.

‘Do try not to scowl, brother,’ Sunday said in a low voice as she walked alongside him. ‘Anyone who didn’t know better would think you’d rather be somewhere else.’

‘They’d be absolutely right.’

‘At least we’re doing this to honour her,’ Sunday replied, after the standard Earth–Moon time lag.

‘Why are we bothering, though? She didn’t go out of her way to honour anyone else while she was alive.’

‘We can give her this one.’ Sunday wore a long skirt and a long-sleeved blouse, both in black velvet offset with luminous entwining threads. ‘She may not have expressed much in the way of love and affection, but without her we’d be less filthily rich than we actually are.’

‘You’re right about the filthy rich part. Look at them all, circling like flies.’

‘I suppose you mean Hector and Lucas.’ Sunday kept her voice low. The cousins were not very far away in the procession.

‘They’ve been hanging around like ghouls ever since she died.’

‘You could also say they’re taking on a burden so that the rest of us don’t have to.’

‘Then I wish they’d get a move on with it.’

The cousins had been born on Titan. They were the sons of Edison Akinya, one of the three children Eunice had had with Jonathan Beza. Until recent years the cousins hadn’t spent a lot of time on Earth, but with Edison showing no signs of relinquishing his particular corner of the business empire, Hector and Lucas had turned their attentions sunwards. Geoffrey had no choice but to deal with them during their frequent visits to the household. The cousins had a large say in how the family’s discretionary funds were allocated.

‘Bad day at the office?’

‘My work’s suffering. They’ve blocked grant allocations while they sort through Eunice’s finances. That makes it difficult for me to plan ahead, which in turn isn’t doing wonders for my mood.’ He walked on a few paces. ‘Difficult for you to grasp, I know.’

Sunday’s look was sharp. ‘Meaning I haven’t got a clue about

planning and responsibility because I don't live in the Surveilled World? Brother, you really have no idea. I didn't move to the Zone to *escape* responsibility. I went there to find out what it feels like to actually have some.'

'Right. And you think the Mech treats us all like a bunch of helpless babies.' He closed his eyes in weariness – this was a spiraling conversation they'd had a hundred times already, without ever reaching a conclusion. 'It's not like that either.'

'If you say so.' She exhaled a long sigh, her capacity for argument evidently just as exhausted as his own. 'Maybe you'll get your funding back soon, anyway. Memphis told me there isn't much more to be done now, just a few loose ends. What the cousins are telling him, anyway.'

Geoffrey hoped that was the case. The scattering, symbolic as it was – Eunice had been a lifelong atheist, despite being born to Christian parents – ought to draw a line under the recent limbo. The wheels of the Akinya juggernaut would start to turn again, from Earth to the Moon, out to their automated mining facilities in the asteroids and the Kuiper belt. (Not that the machines had ever stopped, of course, but it was tempting to think of the robots standing to attention, heads tilted in deference.)

Then they could all get on with their fantastically glamorous lives, and Geoffrey could go back to his dull grey elephants.

'I did consider coming in person,' Sunday said.

'I thought for a minute you had, at least when you first showed up.'

'Even you can't have missed the time lag, brother.' She ran a hand down her sternum. 'It's a prototype, a kind of claybot – I'm road-testing it.'

'For . . . what's the name of that boyfriend of yours?'

'Oh, this is way out of Jitendra's league. It's a friend of his, someone working in mainstream robotics. I'm afraid I'm under strict orders not to mention the firm involved, but if I said it rhymed with Sexus—'

'Right.'

Sunday grabbed his hand before he could react. 'Here. Tell me how it feels.'

Her fingers closed around his.

'Creepy.'

The hand felt colder than it should have, but the effect was

otherwise convincing. Her face was almost as realistic. It was only when she pushed the sunglasses back onto her scalp that the spell failed. There was a deadness to the eyes, the difference between paste jewellery and the real thing.

'It's pretty good.'

'Better than good. But you haven't seen the half of it. Watch this.'

Between one breath and the next, Sunday departed. He was suddenly looking at an old woman, grey hair tied back in an efficient bun, her skin a map of thirteen decades.

Geoffrey barely had time to react before Eunice vanished and Sunday returned.

'Given the circumstances,' he said, 'that was very disrespectful.'

'She'd have forgiven me. That's the breakthrough, the reason for the prototype. The rapid-morph material came from the Evolvarium on Mars – it's some kind of adaptive camouflage, in its original context. Plexus ... did I just say that? They've got exclusivity on it. They're calling it "Mercurial". Faster and more realistic than anything else out there.'

'So you see a big market for this?'

'Who knows? I'm just along for a free ride while someone else gets test data.' Sunday let go of Geoffrey's hand and tapped a finger against her cheekbone. 'We're recording constantly. Every time someone sees me, their reactions are filed away – micro-expressions, eye saccades, that kind of thing – then fed into the system and used to tweak the configuration algorithms.'

'What about manners? It's not good form to let people think they're talking to a real person when they're not.'

'Their fault for not having the right layers enabled,' Sunday said. 'Anyway, it's not just me: there are twenty of us walking around now, all chinging in from the Zone. We're not just testing the realism of the configs. We're seeing how well they can maintain that realism even with Earth-Lunar time lag thrown in.'

'So you could go to the trouble of sending down a body, but you couldn't come in person?'

She gave him a quizzical look. 'I showed up, didn't I? It's not like Eunice would have cared whether any of us was physically present.'

'I'm not sure I knew her well enough to say for sure.'

'I doubt she'd have given a damn who's here in the flesh and who isn't. And she'd have hated all this fuss. But Memphis had a bee in his bonnet about us all leaving the household on time.'

'I noticed. My guess is that Eunice stipulated something, and he's just following the script.'

After a moment, Sunday said quietly, 'He looks really old now.'

'Don't say that.'

'Why not?'

'Because I was thinking exactly the same thing.'

Memphis was leading the procession, walking ahead of the main party with an earthenware jar in his hands. Since leaving the house they had been walking due west towards the grove of acacia trees that marked the limit of the crumbling boundary wall.

'Still got the old suit, though,' Geoffrey said.

'I think he's only ever had the one.'

'Either that or hundreds of exactly the same style.'

The favoured black business suit remained immaculate, but it draped off his thin frame as if tailored for some other, bulkier man. The hands that had carried Sunday out of the hole all those years ago must have been the same ones now gripping the earthenware jar, but that seemed impossible. Where once Memphis had walked with confident authority, now his gait was slow and measured, as if in every footfall lay the prospect of humiliation.

'At least he dressed for the occasion,' Sunday said.

'And at least there's a heart beating under these clothes.'

'Even if they do reek ever so slightly of elephant dung.'

'I thought I'd have time to get back to the research station and change, but then I lost track and—'

'You're here, brother. That's all anyone would have expected.'

The party numbered around thirty, including the two of them. He'd done his best to identify the various family branches and alliances that were present, but keeping tabs on the wilder offshoots of the Akinya tree had never been his strong suit. At least elephants had the decency to drop dead after fifty or sixty years, instead of hanging around and procreating into their second century. In the Amboseli basin there were nearly a thousand individuals. Geoffrey could identify at least a hundred of them with a single glance, assessing shape and size and posture with barely any conscious application of effort, calling to mind age, lineage and kin affiliations, status within family, bond group and clan. Tracking Akinyas

ought to have been trivial in comparison. There was even a matriarch, bull males and a watering hole.

Predators and scavengers, too.

What were they all doing here? Geoffrey wondered. What did they all expect to get out of it? More pertinently: what did *he* expect to get out of it?

A pat on the head for being a dutiful grandson? Not from his father and mother, who – like Uncle Edison – were still on Titan. Kenneth Cho and Miriam Beza-Akinya had sent golems of themselves, but the time lag was so acute that the machines were acting under full autonomy, mostly witnessing rather than interacting.

Had he expected something more of them?

Perhaps.

'I am glad you both found time in your busy personal schedules,' Hector said, sidling over to Geoffrey and Sunday.

'We were always going to be here, cousin,' Sunday said. 'She meant as much to us as she did to you.'

'Of course.' Like his brother Lucas, who had also joined them, Hector wore a dark suit of conservative cut, offset with flashes of tribal colouration. The tall, muscular siblings looked uncomfortable in their formal wear. The cousins had spent so much time in space that African heat did not become them. 'And perhaps now that we are all together again,' Hector went on, 'it might be an apposite time for some of us to rethink our positions within the fold.'

As if recalling some obscure biblical proverb, Lucas declared: 'A household needs many pillars.'

'I think the household's doing fine without us,' Geoffrey said. 'Besides – aren't we both beyond redemption as far as you're concerned?'

'You have an analytic mindset,' Hector said, in his best gently patronising manner. He was only ten years older than Geoffrey but managed to make that decade seem like a century. 'And Sunday is ... adaptable.'

'Please, spare my blushes.'

Geoffrey was about to offer a tart reply of his own when he noticed that Memphis was slowing his pace to a halt.

Conversation lulled as the party followed his lead. Sparring with the cousins had made Geoffrey tense, but now the feeling in his

gut only worsened. He hated ceremony at the best of times, but especially when he had no idea exactly what was planned. He watched as Memphis turned slowly around, presenting the earthenware vase like a newborn child being held to the sky. He'd stopped in the shadow of the acacia grove, looking back towards both the low outline of the house and the mountain that rose beyond it, a scant fifty kilometres away.

Geoffrey risked a glance over his shoulder. With the sun now set, the sky beyond Kilimanjaro was a cloudless and translucent flamingo pink. It would soon be pricked by the first and brightest of the evening stars, but from the summit the sun must still have been visible. Day-lit snows glittered back at the assembled party with a blinding laser-like clarity.

Eunice had never seen those snows with her own eyes. They had melted almost completely away by the time she was born, not to begin their return until she was well into her exile.

He silenced his thoughts. The party had fallen completely silent. Memphis was speaking now.

'She liked to come here,' he began, pausing until he had everyone's attention, and then repeating those opening words before continuing. 'These trees were here when she was a little girl, and although that was long before I knew her, she never stopped coming out here to read, even during the rains.'

Memphis's habit was to speak slowly, and his voice was at least an octave deeper than anyone else's.

'Even in the final months she spent on Earth, after she had returned home to prepare for her last expedition, it was still her habit to sit here, in the shade of these trees, her back against that very trunk.' Memphis nodded, letting the party take in the particular tree with the slight hollow in its bole, a depression that could have been moulded to support a human back. 'She would sit with her knees drawn up, an ancient, battered reader – sometimes even a printed book – balanced on them, squinting to read the words. *Gulliver's Travels* was one of her favourites – her old copy's still in the museum, a little the worse for wear. Sometimes I would call and call and she would not hear me – or pretend not to hear me – until I had walked all the way here, to this spot. As much as I tried, I could never bring myself to be angry with her. She would always smile and give the impression that she was glad to see me. And I think she was, most of the time.' Memphis paused,

and one by one – or so it seemed to Geoffrey – his attention lingered on each of the guests.

‘Thank you all for coming, especially at such short notice. To those family and friends who could not attend, or could not be here in person, I assure you that Eunice would have understood. It is enough that the family is here in spirit, to honour her and to witness this scattering.’

Memphis tipped up the urn and began to release the ashes. They breezed out in a fine grey mist.

‘She chose to return, not just to Earth but to Africa; not just to Africa but to former Tanzania; and not just here but to her household and this grove of trees, where she had always felt most at home.’

Memphis halted, and for a moment it was as if he was distracted by something only he could hear; a distant ringing alarm, an inappropriate laugh, the approach of a vehicle when none was expected.

Geoffrey glanced at Sunday, the two of them sharing a thought: was it age, momentarily betraying him?

Then Geoffrey felt something odd, something both familiar and yet completely out of place.

The ground was thrumming.

It was as if, somewhere out of sight, a multitude of animals were in stampede, and drawing nearer. Not that, though. Geoffrey knew immediately what was making the ground tremble like that, even as he refused to accept that it was happening.

The blowpipe was not – *could not* – be functioning. It had been out of service for at least five or six years. While there was always talk of it being brought back into operation, that was supposedly years in the future.

That it should be reactivated today, of all days . . .

‘It was here,’ Memphis said, the ground vibrations now quite impossible to ignore, ‘that Eunice first dreamed of her shining road to the stars. Scarcely a new idea, of course, but it took Eunice’s vision to understand that it could be made to happen, and that it could be brought into existence here and now, in her lifetime. And by sheer force of will she made it so.’

Disturbed by the drumming, a multitude of finches, cranes and storks lifted from trees in a riot of wingbeats and raucous alarm calls.

So it was the blowpipe, then, as if there had been any doubt. Nothing else had the power to shake the ground like that. A hundred or more kilometres to the west, at this very moment, a payload was racing through the bowels of the Earth, slamming along a rifle-straight vacuum tunnel that would eventually bring it right under the party. Simple physics dictated that there would be recoil from the magnetic pushers, recoil that could only be absorbed by the awesome counterweight of the Earth itself. Launching masses eastwards delayed the sun's fall to the west. It made the day last infinitesimally longer. On the day of her scattering, the sun had slowed for its daughter.

Not everyone in attendance knew what was happening, but one by one those who had some inkling turned to face Kilimanjaro. They knew what was coming next, and their anticipation soon spread to the other members of the party. Everyone looked to the fire-bright snowcap.

The emerging payload was a swiftly rising glint.

In less than a second, the pusher lasers were activated and aligned. There were five of them in all, stationed in a wide ring around the exit iris, a few hundred metres below the summit. They were highly efficient free-electron lasers, and most of the energy they were emitting was shone straight onto the underside of the rising payload, creating an ablative cushion of superhot plasma. Their cooling systems were deep inside the mountain, so that they did not disturb the snowcap. Sufficient stray light was reaching his eyes to make the lasers visible, five platinum threads converging at the top, the angle between them slowly narrowing as the payload rose, and then appearing to widen again as it fell further and further to the east. The guests were looking along the payload's line of flight, so they couldn't easily tell that it was rising at forty-five degrees rather than vertically. But by now it was almost certainly out over the Indian Ocean, over the sovereign seaspace of the United Aquatic Nations.

Someone started clapping. It was, perhaps, not quite the appropriate response. But then someone else joined in, and then a third, and before long Geoffrey found himself clapping as well. Even Sunday was giving in to the mood. Memphis had by then disposed of the ashes and was looking, if not precisely pleased with himself, then not entirely dissatisfied with the way events had ensued.

'I hope you will forgive that little piece of showmanship,' he said, raising his voice just enough to quell the clapping. Before continuing, he looked down at the ground, almost shamefacedly. 'A couple of days ago, after I had already returned with the ashes, I learned that an all-up test was scheduled for this afternoon. Nothing had been publicised, and the engineers were particularly keen that there be no announcement beforehand. I could not let the opportunity slip.'

'I thought you were years away from operation.' This was Nathan Beza, grandson of Jonathan Beza, Eunice's late husband. Jonathan had remarried on Mars; Nathan – who had come from Ceres for the scattering – had no blood ties to Eunice.

'So did we,' Geoffrey muttered under his breath.

'The damage was never as bad as we thought when this happened,' said Hector, rubbing a finger along the sweat-line where his collar bit into his neck 'The engineers were right to err on the side of caution, even if it hurt our shares at the time of the malfunction. But it made our competitors complacent, snug in the knowledge that we'd be out of business for a long, long time to come.'

'What did we just put up?' asked Geoffrey, breaking his vow of silence.

'A test mass,' said Lucas. 'Offsetting of repair and redesign costs could have been achieved with a commercial payload, but the risk of a security leak was deemed unacceptably high.' Lucas had the easy, authoritative diction of a newsfeed anchor. 'Implementing watertight non-disclosure protocols within our core engineering staff has already proven challenging enough.'

'So other than you two and Memphis, who exactly knew about this?' Sunday asked.

'Matters proceeded on a need-to-know basis,' Lucas said. 'There was no need to risk exposure beyond the family.'

'My sister and I are still family,' Geoffrey said. 'Last time I checked, anyway.'

'Yes,' Hector said, over-emphatically. 'Yes, you are.'

'A number of technical and legal hurdles must be surmounted before a satisfactory transition to full commercial operations can be effected,' Lucas said, sounding as smooth and plausible as a corporate salesbot. 'A robust testing regime will now ensue, anticipated to last three-to-six months.'

‘The main thing,’ Hector said, ‘is that Grandmother would have found it a fitting tribute. Don’t you agree, Geoffrey?’

Geoffrey was composing a suitably tart riposte – everything he knew about Eunice told him that this was exactly the kind of self-aggrandising spectacle she’d have gone out of her way to avoid – when he realised that by wounding his cousin he would be hurting Memphis as well. So he smiled and shut up, and shot Sunday a glance warning her to do likewise.

Sunday set her jaw in defiance, but complied.

They watched until, as suddenly as they had activated, the lasers snapped off. Presuming that the launch had proceeded without incident, the lasers would by now have pushed the payload all the way to orbital velocity, doubling its speed upon emergence from the mountain. Barring any adjustments, the payload would be back over equatorial Africa in ninety minutes. By then all the stars would be out.

The party was beginning to drift back to the house. Geoffrey lingered a while, thinking about waiting until the payload returned. It was then that he noticed the child who had been there all along, mingling with the party but never attaching herself to any part of it. She was a small girl, of Chinese appearance, wearing a red dress, white stockings and black shoes. Sunday and Geoffrey both carried Chinese genes, but this girl did not look in the least African. The style and cut of her dress brought to mind a different century.

Geoffrey didn’t recognise her at all, but she was looking at him with such directness that he glanced around to see who might be standing behind. He was alone.

‘Hello?’ he said, offering a smile. ‘Can I—?’

He voked an aug layer. The girl wasn’t a girl at all, but another robot proxy. Maybe she was part of Sunday’s field test. He looked for his sister, but she was twenty paces away, talking to Montgomery, Kenneth Cho’s brother, who walked with the stiff gait of someone using a mobility exo under their clothes.

Geoffrey sharpened his aug query. He wanted to know who was chinging into this proxy body. But the aug couldn’t resolve the ching bind.

That, if anything, was even stranger than the appearance of an unknown child at his grandmother’s scattering.