



# Hyperion

(The first book in the Hyperion series)

Dan Simmons

## **This is for Ted**

### **PROLOGUE**

The Hegemony Consul sat on the balcony of his ebony spaceship and played Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp Minor on an ancient but well-maintained Steinway while great, green, saurian things surged and bellowed in the swamps below. A thunderstorm was brewing to the north. Bruise-black clouds silhouetted a forest of giant gymnosperms while stratocumulus towered nine kilometers high in a violent sky. Lightning rippled along the horizon. Closer to the ship, occasional vague, reptilian shapes would blunder into the interdiction field, cry out, and then crash away through indigo mists. The Consul concentrated on a difficult section of the Prelude and ignored the approach of storm and nightfall.

The fatline receiver chimed.

The Consul stopped, fingers hovering above the keyboard, and listened. Thunder rumbled through the heavy air. From the direction of the gymnosperm forest there came the mournful ululation of a carrion-breed pack. Somewhere in the darkness below, a small-brained beast trumpeted its answering challenge and fell quiet.

The interdiction field added its sonic undertones to the sudden silence. The fatline chimed again.

'Damn,' said the Consul and went in to answer it.

While the computer took a few seconds to convert and decode the burst of decaying tachyons, the Consul poured himself a glass of Scotch. He settled into the cushions of the projection pit just as the diskey blinked green. 'Play,' he said.

'You have been chosen to return to Hyperion,' came a woman's husky voice. Full visuals had not yet formed; the air remained empty except for the pulse of transmission codes which told the Consul that this fatline squirt had originated on the Hegemony administrative world of Tau Ceti Center. The Consul did not need the transmission coordinates to know this. The aged but still beautiful voice of Meina Gladstone was unmistakable.

'You have been chosen to return to Hyperion as a member of the Shrike Pilgrimage,' continued the voice.

The hell you say, thought the Consul and rose to leave the pit.

'You and six others have been selected by the Church of the Shrike and confirmed by the All Thing,' said Meina Gladstone. 'It is in the interest of the Hegemony that you accept.'

The Consul stood motionless in the pit, his back to the flickering transmission codes. Without turning, he raised his glass and drained the last of the Scotch.

'The situation is very confused,' said Meina Gladstone. Her voice was weary. 'The consulate and Home Rule Council fatlined us three standard weeks ago with the news that the Time Tombs showed signs of opening. The anti-entropic fields around them were expanding rapidly and the Shrike has begun ranging as far south as the Bridle Range.'

The Consul turned and dropped into the cushions. A hoio had formed of Meina Gladstone's ancient face. Her eyes looked as tired as her voice sounded.

'A FORCE:space task force was immediately dispatched from Parvati to evacuate the Hegemony citizens on Hyperion before the Time Tombs open. Their time-debt will be a little more than three Hyperion years.' Meina Gladstone paused. The Consul thought he had never seen the Senate CEO look so grim. 'We do not know if the evacuation fleet will arrive in time,' she said, 'but the situation is even more complicated. An Ouster migration cluster of at least four thousand... units... has been detected approaching the Hyperion system.'

Our evacuation task force should arrive only a short while before the Ousters.'

The Consul understood Gladstone's hesitation. An Ouster migration cluster might consist of ships ranging in size from single-person ramscouts to can cities and comet forts holding tens of thousands of the interstellar barbarians.

'The FORCE joint chiefs believe that this is the Ousters' big push,' said Meina Gladstone. The ship's computer had positioned the holo so that the woman's sad brown eyes seemed to be staring directly at the Consul.

'Whether they seek to control just Hyperion for the Time Tombs or whether this is an all-out attack on the Worldweb remains to be seen. In the meantime, a full FORCE:space battle fleet complete with a fareaster construction battalion has spun up from the Camn System to join the evacuation task force, but this fleet may be recalled depending upon circumstances.'

The Consul nodded and absently raised the Scotch to his lips. He frowned at the empty glass and dropped it onto the thick carpeting of the holopit. Even with no military training he understood the difficult tactical decision Gladstone and the joint chiefs were faced with.

Unless a military farcaster were hurriedly constructed in the Hyperion system- at staggering expense- there would be no way to resist the Ouster invasion. Whatever secrets the Time Tombs might hold would go to the Hegemony's enemy. If the fleet did construct a farcaster in time and the Hegemony committed the total resources of FORCE to defending the single, distant, colonial world of Hyperion, the Worldweb ran the terrible risk of suffering an Ouster attack elsewhere on the perimeter, or- in a worst-case scenario- having the barbarians actually seizing the farcaster and penetrating the Web itself. The Consul tried to imagine the reality of armored Ouster troops stepping through farcaster portals into the undefended home cities on a hundred worlds.

The Consul walked through the holo of Meina Gladstone, retrieved his glass, and went to pour another Scotch.

'You have been chosen to join the pilgrimage to the Shrike,' said the image of the old CEO whom the press loved to compare to Lincoln or Churchill or Alvarez-Temp or whatever other pre-Hegira legend was in historical vogue at the time. 'The Templars are sending their treeship Yggdrasil!,' said Gladstone, 'and the evacuation task force commander has instructions to let it pass. With a three-week time-debt, you can rendezvous with the Yggdrasil before it goes quantum from the Parvati system. The six other pilgrims chosen by the Shrike Church will be aboard the treeship. Our intelligence reports suggest that at least one of the seven pilgrims is an agent of the Ousters. We do not... at this time... have any way of knowing which one it is.'

The Consul had to smile. Among all the other risks Gladstone was taking, the old woman had to consider the possibility that he was the spy and that she was fatlining crucial information to an Ouster agent. Or had she given him any crucial information? The fleet movements were detectable as soon as the ships used their Hawking drives, and if the Consul were the spy, the CEO's revelation might be a way to scare him off. The Consul's smile faded and he drank his Scotch.

'Sol Weintraub and Fedmahn Kassad are among the seven pilgrims chosen,' said Gladstone.

The Consul's frown deepened. He stared at the cloud of digits flickering like dust motes around the old woman's image. Fifteen seconds of fatline transmission time remained.

'We need your help,' said Meina Gladstone. 'It is essential that the secrets of the Time

Tombs and Shrike be uncovered. This pilgrimage may be our last chance. If the Ousters conquer Hyperion, their agent must be eliminated and the Time Tombs sealed at all cost. The fate of the Hegemony may depend upon it."

The transmission ended except for the pulse of rendezvous coordinates. "Response?" asked the ship's computer.

Despite the tremendous energies involved, the spacecraft was capable of placing a brief, coded squirt into the incessant babble of FTL bursts which tied the human portions of the galaxy together.

'No,' said the Consul and went outside to lean on the balcony railing. Night had fallen and the clouds were low. No stars were visible. The darkness would have been absolute except for the intermittent flash of lightning to the north and a soft phosphorescence rising from the marshes. The Consul was suddenly very aware that he was, at that second, the only sentient being on an unnamed world. He listened to the antediluvian night sounds rising from the swamps and he thought about morning, about setting out in the Vikken EMV at first light, about spending the day in sunshine, about hunting big game in the fern forests to the south and then returning to the ship in the evening for a good steak and a cold beer. The Consul thought about the sharp pleasure of the hunt and the equally sharp solace of solitude: solitude he had earned through the pain and nightmare he had already suffered on Hyperion.

Hyperion.

The Consul went inside, brought the balcony in, and sealed the ship just as the first heavy raindrops began to fall. He climbed the spiral staircase to his sleeping cabin at the apex of the ship. The circular room was dark except for silent explosions of lightning which outlined rivulets of rain coursing the skylight. The Consul stripped, lay back on the firm mattress, and switched on the sound system and external audio pickups. He listened as the fury of the storm blended with the violence of Wagner's 'Flight of the Valkyries.' Hurricane winds buffeted the ship. The sound of thunderclaps filled the room as the skylight flashed white, leaving afterimages burning in the Consul's retinas.

Wagner is good only for thunderstorms, he thought.

He closed his eyes but the lightning was visible through closed eyelids. He remembered the glint of ice crystals blowing through the tumbled ruins on the low hills near the Time Tombs and the colder gleam of steel on the Shrike's impossible tree of metal thorns. He remembered screams in the night and the hundred-facet, ruby and-blood gaze of the Shrike itself.

Hyperion.

The Consul silently commanded the computer to shut off all speakers and raised his wrist to cover his eyes. In the sudden silence he lay thinking about how insane it would be to return to Hyperion. During his eleven years as Consul on that distant and enigmatic world, the mysterious Church of the Shrike had allowed a dozen barges of offworld pilgrims to depart for the windswept barrens around the Time Tombs, north of the mountains. No one had returned. And that had been in normal times, when the Shrike had been prisoner to the tides of time and forces no one understood, and the anti-entropic fields had been contained to a few dozen meters around the Time Tombs. And there had been no threat of an Ouster invasion.

The Consul thought of the Shrike, free to wander everywhere on Hyperion, of the millions of indigenies and thousands of Hegemony citizens helpless before a creature which defied physical laws and which communicated only through death, and he shivered despite the warmth of the cabin.

Hyperion. The night and storm passed. Another stormfront raced ahead of the approaching dawn. Gymnosperms two hundred meters tall bent and whipped before the coming torrent. Just before first light, the Consul's ebony spaceship rose on a tail of blue plasma and punched through thickening clouds as it climbed toward space and rendezvous.

ONE

The Consul awoke with the peculiar headache, dry throat, and sense of having forgotten a thousand dreams which only periods in cryogenic fugue could bring. He blinked, sat upright on a low couch, and groggily pushed away the last sensor tapes clinging to his skin. There were two very short crew clones and one very tall, hooded Templar with him in the windowless ovoid of a room. One of the clones offered the Consul the traditional post-thaw glass of orange juice. He accepted it and drank greedily.

'The Tree is two light-minutes and five hours of travel from Hyperion,' said the Templar, and the Consul realized that he was being addressed by Het Masteen, captain of the Templar treeship and True Voice of the Tree. The Consul vaguely realized that it was a great honor to be awakened by the Captain, but he was too groggy and disoriented from fugue to appreciate it.

'The others have been awake for some hours,' said Het Masteen and gestured for the

clones to leave them.

"They have assembled on the foremost dining platform."

'Hhrghn,' said the Consul and took a drink. He cleared his throat and tried again. 'Thank you, Het Masteen,' he managed. Looking around at the egg-shaped room with its carpet of dark grass, translucent walls, and support ribs of continuous, curved weirwood, the Consul realized that he must be in one of the smaller environment pods. Closing his eyes, he tried to recall his memories of rendezvous just before the Templar ship went quantum.

The Consul remembered his first glimpse of the kilometer-long treeship as he closed for rendezvous, the treeship's details blurred by the redundant machine and erg-generated containment fields which surrounded it like a spherical mist, but its leafy bulk clearly ablaze with thousands of lights which shone softly through leaves and thin-walled environment pods, or along countless platforms, bridges, command decks, stairways, and bowers. Around the base of the treeship, engineering and cargo spheres clustered like oversized galls while blue and violet drive streamers trailed behind like ten-kilometer-long roots.

'The others await,' Her Masteen said softly and nodded toward low cushions where the Consul's luggage lay ready to open upon his command. The Templar gazed thoughtfully at the weirwood rafters while the Consul dressed in semiformal evening wear of loose black trousers, polished ship boots, a white silk blouse which ballooned at waist and elbows, topaz collar cinch, black demi-coat complete with slashes of Hegemony crimson on the epaulets, and a soft gold tricorne. A section of curved wall became a mirror and the Consul stared at the image there: a more than middle-aged man in semi-formal evening wear, sunburned skin but oddly pale under the sad eyes. The Consul frowned, nodded, and turned away.

Het Masteen gestured and the Consul followed the tall, robed figure through a dilation in the pod onto an ascending walkway which curved up and out of sight around the massive bark wall of the treeship's trunk.

The Consul paused, moved to the edge of the walkway, and took a quick step back. It was at least six hundred meters down- down being created by the one-sixth standard gravity being generated by the singularities imprisoned at the base of the tree - and there were no railings.

They resumed their silent ascent, turning off from the main trunk walkway thirty meters and half a trunk-spiral later to cross a flimsy suspension bridge to a five-meter-wide branch. They followed this outward to where the riot of leaves caught the glare of

Hyperion's sun.

'Has my ship been brought out of storage?' asked the Consul.

'It is fueled and ready in sphere eleven,' said Her Masteen. They passed into the shadow of the trunk and stars became visible in the black patches between the dark latticework of leaves. 'The other pilgrims have agreed to ferry down in your ship if the FORCE authorities give permission,' added the Templar.

The Consul rubbed his eyes and wished that he had been allowed more time to retrieve his wits from the cold grip of cryonic fugue. 'You've been in touch with the task force?'

'Oh, yes, we were challenged the moment we tunneled down from quantum leap. A Hegemony warship is... escorting us... this very moment.' Het Masteen gestured toward a patch of sky above them.

The Consul squinted upward but at that second segments of the upper tiers of branches revolved out of the treeship's shadow and acres of leaves ignited in sunset hues. Even in the still shadowed places, glowbirds nestled like Japanese lanterns above lighted walkways, glowing swingvines, and illuminated hanging bridges, while fireflies from Old Earth and radiant gossamers from Maul-Covenant blinked and coded their way through labyrinths of leaves, mixing with constellations sufficiently to fool even the most starwise traveler.

Het Masteen stepped into a basket lift hanging from a whiskered-carbon cable which disappeared into the three hundred meters of tree above them. The Consul followed and they were borne silently upward. He noted that the walkways, pods, and platforms were conspicuously empty except for a few Templars and their diminutive crew clone counterparts. The Consul could recall seeing no other passengers during his rushed hour between rendezvous and fugue, but he had put that down to the imminence of the treeship going quantum, assuming then that the passengers were safe in their fugue couches. Now, however, the treeship was traveling far below relativistic velocities and its branches should be crowded with gawking passengers. He mentioned his observation to the Templar.

'The six of you are our only passengers,' said Het Masteen. The basket stopped in a maze of foliage and the treeship captain led the way up a wooden escalator worn with age.

The Consul blinked in surprise. A Templar treeship normally carried between two and five thousand passengers; it was easily the most desirable way to travel between the stars. Treeships rarely accrued more than a four- or five-month time-debt, making short, scenic crossings where star systems were a very few light-years apart, thus allowing

their affluent passengers to spend as little time as necessary in fugue. For the treeship to make the trip to Hyperion and back, accumulating six years of Web time with no paying passengers would mean a staggering financial loss to the Templars.

Then the Consul realized, belatedly, that the treeship would be ideal for the upcoming evacuation, its expenses ultimately to be reimbursed by the Hegemony.

Still, the Consul knew, to bring a ship as beautiful and vulnerable as the Yggdrasil - one of only five of its kind - into a war zone was a terrible risk for the Templar Brotherhood.

'Your fellow pilgrims,' announced Het Masteen as he and the Consul emerged onto a broad platform where a small group waited at one end of a long wooden table.

Above them the stars burned, rotating occasionally as the treeship changed its pitch or yaw, while to either side a solid sphere of foliage curved away like the green skin of some great fruit. The Consul immediately recognized the setting as the Captain's dining platform, even before the five other passengers rose to let Her Masteen take his place at the head of the table. The Consul found an empty chair waiting for him to the left of the Captain.

When everyone was seated and quiet, Het Masteen made formal introductions. Although the Consul knew none of the others from personal experience, several of the names were familiar and he used his diplomat's long training to file away identities and impressions.

To the Consul's left sat Father Lenar Hoyt, a priest of the old-style Christian sect known as Catholic. For a second the Consul had forgotten the significance of the black clothing and Roman collar, but then he remembered St Francis Hospital on Hebron where he had received alcohol trauma therapy after his disastrous first diplomatic assignment there almost four standard decades earlier. And at the mention of Hoyt's name he remembered another priest, one who had disappeared on Hyperion halfway through his own tenure there.

Lenar Hoyt was a young man by the Consul's reckoning - no more than his early thirties - but it appeared that something had aged the man terribly in the not too distant past. The Consul looked at the thin face, cheekbones pressing against sallow flesh, eyes large but hooded in deep hollows, thin lips set in a permanent twitch of muscle too downturned to be called even a cynical smile, the hairline not so much receding as ravaged by radiation, and he felt he was looking at a man who had been ill for years. Still, the Consul was surprised that behind that mask of concealed pain there remained the physical echo of the boy in the man - the faintest remnants of the round face, fair skin, and soft mouth which had belonged to a younger, healthier, less cynical Lenar Hoyt.

Next to the priest sat a man whose image had been familiar to most citizens of the Hegemony some years before. The Consul wondered if the collective attention span in the Worldweb was as short now as it had been when he had lived there. Shorter, probably. If so, then Colonel Fedmahn Kassad, the so-called Butcher of South Bressia, was probably no longer either infamous or famous. To the Consul's generation and to all those who lived in the slow, expatriate fringe of things, Kassad was not someone one was likely to forget.

Colonel Fedmahn Kassad was tall- almost tall enough to look the two-meter Her Masteen in the eye - and dressed in FORCE black with no rank insignia or citations showing. The black uniform was oddly similar to Father Hoyt's garb, but there was no real resemblance between the two men. In lieu of Hoyt's wasted appearance, Kassad was brown, obviously fit, and whip-handle lean, with strands of muscle showing in shoulder, wrist, and throat. The Colonel's eyes were small, dark, and as all-encompassing as the lenses of some primitive video camera. His face was all angles: shadows, planes, and facets. Not gaunt like Father Hoyt's, merely carved from cold stone. A thin line of beard along his jawline served to accent the sharpness of his countenance as surely as blood on a knife blade.

The Colonel's intense, slow movements reminded the Consul of an Earth-bred jaguar he had seen in a private seedship zoo on Lusus many years before. Kassad's voice was soft but the Consul did not fail to notice that even the Colonel's silences commanded attention.

Most of the long table was empty, the group clustered at one end. Across from Fedmahn Kassad sat a man introduced as the poet Martin Silenus.

Silenus appeared to be quite the opposite of the military \*\*\*\*\*man across from him. Where Kassad was lean and tall, Martin Silenus was short and visibly out of shape.

Countering Kassad's stone-cut features, the poet's face was as mobile and expressive as an Earth primate's. His voice was a loud, profane rasp. There was something, thought the Consul, almost pleasantly demonic about Martin Silenus, with his ruddy cheeks, broad mouth, pitched eyebrows, sharp ears, and constantly moving hands sporting fingers long enough to serve a concert pianist.

Or a strangler. The poet's silver hair had been cropped into rough-hewn bangs.

Martin Silenus seemed to be in his late fifties, but the Consul noticed the telltale blue tinge to throat and palms and suspected that the man had been through more than a few Poulsen treatments. Silenus's true age might be anywhere from ninetytoa hundred and fiftystandard years. If he were close to the latter age, the Consul knew, the odds were

that the poet was quite mad.

As boisterous and animated as Martin Silenus seemed upon first encounter, so the next guest at the table exuded an immediate and equally impressive sense of intelligent reticence. Sol Weintraub looked up upon introduction and the Consul noted the short gray beard, lined forehead, and sad, luminous eyes of the well-known scholar. The Consul had heard tales of the Wandering Jew and his hopeless quest, but he was shocked to realize that the old man now held the infant in his arms - his daughter Rachel, no more than a few weeks old. The Consul looked away.

The sixth pilgrim and only woman at the table was Brawne Lamia. When introduced, the detective stared at the Consul with such intensity that he could feel the pressure of her gaze even after she looked away.

A former citizen of the 1.3-g world of Lusus, Brawne Lamia was no taller than the poet two chairs to her right, but even her loose corduroy shipsuit did not conceal the heavy layers of muscle on her compact form. Black curls reached to her shoulders, her eyebrows were two dark lines dabbed horizontally across a wide brow, and her nose was solid and sharp, intensifying the aquiline quality of her stare. Lamia's mouth was wide and expressive to the point of being sensuous, curled slightly at the corners in a slight smile which might be cruel or merely playful. The woman's dark eyes seemed to dare the observer to discover which was the case.

It occurred to the Consul that Brawne Lamia might well be considered beautiful.

Introductions completed, the Consul cleared his throat and turned toward the Templar. 'Het Masteen, you said that there were seven pilgrims. Is M. Weintraub's child the seventh?'

Het Masteen's hood moved slowly from side to side.

'No. Only those who make a conscious decision to seek the Shrike may be counted among the pilgrims.'

The group at the table stirred slightly. Each must know what the Consul knew; only a group comprising a prime number of pilgrims might make the Shrike Church-sponsored trip north.

'I am the seventh,' said Het Masteen, captain of the Templar treeship *ggdrasil* and the True Voice of the Tree. In the silence which followed the announcement, Her Masteen gestured and a group of crew clones began serving the pilgrims their last meal before planetfall.

'So the Ousters are not in-system yet?' asked Brawne Lamia. Her voice had a husky, throaty quality which strangely stirred the Consul.

'No,' said Het Masteen. 'But we cannot be more than a few standard days ahead of them. Our instruments have detected fusion skirmishes within the system's OOrt cloud.' 'Will there be war.?' asked Father Hoyt. His voice seemed as fatigued as his expression. When no one volunteered a response, the priest turned to his right as if retroactively directing the question to the Consul.

The Consul sighed. The crew clones had served wine; he wished it had been whiskey. 'Who knows what the Ousters will do?' he said. 'They no longer appear to be motivated by human logic.'

Martin Silenus laughed loudly, spilling his wine as he gestured. 'As if we fucking humans were ever motivated by human logic!' He took a deep drink, wiped his mouth, and laughed again.

Brawne Lamia frowned. 'If the serious fighting starts too soon,' she said, 'perhaps the authorities will not allow us to land.'

'We will be allowed to pass,,' said Her Masteen. Sunlight found its way past folds in his cowl to fall on yellowish skin.

'Saved from certain death in war to be delivered to certain death at the hands of the Shrike,' murmured Father Hoyt.

'There is no death in all the Universe!' intoned Martin Silenus in a voice which the Consul felt sure could have awakened someone deep in cryogenic fugue. The poet drained the last of his wine and raised the empty goblet in an apparent toast to the stars:

'No smellof death = there shall be no death, moan, moan; Moan, Cybele, moan;for t hy pernicious Babes

Have changed a god into a shaking palsy.

Moan, brethren, moan, for I have no strength left;

Freak as the reed - weak - feeble as my voice- Oh, oh, thepain, thepain of feebleness.

Moan, moan, for still I thaw..."

.Silenus abruptly broke off and poured more wine, belching once into the silence which had followed his recitation.

The other six looked at one another. The Consul noticed that Sol Weintraub was smiling slightly until the baby in his arms stirred and distracted him.

'Well,' said Father Hoyt hesitantly, as if trying to retrieve an earlier strand of thought, 'if the Hegemony convoy leaves and the Ousters take Hyperion, perhaps the occupation will be bloodless and they'll let us go about our business.'

Colonel Fedmahn Kassad laughed softly. 'The Ousters don't want to occupy Hyperion,' he said. 'If they take the planet they'll loot what they want and then do what they do best. They'll burn the cities into charred rubble, break the rubble into smaller pieces, and then bake the pieces until they glow. They'll melt the poles, boil the oceans, and then use the residue to salt what's left of the continents so nothing will ever grow there again.'

'Well...' began Father Hoyt and then trailed off.

There was no conversation as the clones cleared the soup and salad dishes and brought on the main course.

'You said that there was a Hegemony warship escorting us,' the Consul said to Het Masteen as they finished their roast beef and boiled sky squid.

The Templar nodded and pointed. The Consul squinted but could make out nothing moving against the rotating starfield.

'Here,' said Fedmahn Kassad and leaned across Father Hoyt to hand the Consul a collapsible pair of military binoculars.

The Consul nodded his thanks, thumbed on the power, and scanned the patch of sky Het Masteen had indicated. Gyroscopic crystals in the binoculars hummed slightly as they stabilized the optics and swept the area in a programmed search pattern. Suddenly the image froze, blurred, expanded, and steadied.

The Consul could not avoid an involuntary intake of breath as the Hegemony ship filled the viewer. Neither the expected field-blurred seed of a solo ramscout nor the bulb of a torchship, the electronically outlined image was of a matte-black attack carrier. The thing was impressive in the way only warships through the centuries had succeeded in being. The Hegemony spinship was incongruously streamlined with its four sets of boom arms retracted in battle readiness, its sixty-meter command probe sharp as a Clovis point, and its Hawking drive and fusion blisters set far back along the launch shaft like feathers on an arrow.

The Consul handed the binoculars back to Kassad without comment. If the task force was using a full attack carrier to escort the Yggdrasili, what kind of firepower were they

setting in place to meet the Ouster invasion?

'How long until we land?' asked Brawne Lamia. She had been using her cornlog to access the treeship's datasphere and obviously was frustrated with what she had found. Or had not found.

'Four hours until orbit,' murmured Het Masteen. 'A few minutes more by dropship. Our consular friend has offered his private craft to ferry you down.'

'To Keats?' said Sol Weintraub. It was the first time the scholar had spoken since dinner had been served.

The Consul nodded. 'It's still the only spaceport on Hyperion set to handle passenger vehicles,' he said.

'Spaceport?' Father Hoyt sounded angry. 'I thought that we were going straight to the north. To the Shrike's realm.' Het Mssteen patiently shook his head. 'The pilgrimage always begins from the capital,' he said. 'It will take several days to reach the Time Tombs.'

'Several days,' snapped Brawne Lamia. 'That's absurd.'

'Perhaps,' agreed Het Mssteen, 'but it is the case, nonetheless.'

Father Hoyt looked as if something in the meal had caused him indigestion even though he had eaten almost nothing. 'Look,' he said, 'couldn't we change the rules this once - I mean, given the war scare and all? And just !and near the Time Tombs or wherever and get it over with?'

The Consul shook his head. 'Spacecraft and aircraft have been trying to take the short route to the northern moors for almost four hundred years,' he said. 'I know of none who made it.'

'May one inquire,' said Martin Silenus, happily raising his hand like a schoolboy, 'just what the gibbering fuck happens to these legions of ships?'

Father Hoyt frowned at the poet. Fedmahn Kassad smiled slightly. Sol Weintraub said, 'The Consul did not mean to suggest that the area is inaccessible. One may travel by ship or various !and routes. Nor do spacecraft and aircraft disappear. They easily land near the ruins or the Time Tombs and just as easily return to whatever point their computers command. It is merely the pilots and passengers who are never seen again.' Weintraub lifted the sleeping baby from his lap and set her in an infant carrier slung around his neck.

'So the tired old legend goes,' said Brawne Lamia.

'What do the ship logs show?'

'Nothing,' said the Consul. 'No violence. No forced entry. No deviation from course. No unexplained time lapses. No unusual energy emissions or depletions. No physical phenomena of any sort.'

'No passengers,' said Het Masteen.

The Consul did a slow double take. If Het Masteen had, indeed, just attempted a joke, it was the first sign in all of the Consu!'s decades of dealing with the Templars that one of them had shown even a nascent sense of humour. What the Consul could see of the Captain's vaguely oriental features beneath the cowl gave no hint that a joke had been attempted.

'Marvelous melodrama,' laughed Silenus. 'A real-life, Christ-weeping Sargasso of Souls and we're for it.'

'Who orchestrates this shitpot of a plot, anyway?'

'Shut up,' said Brawne Lamia. 'You're drunk, old man.'

The Consul sighed. The group had been together for less than a standard hour.

Crew clones swept away the dishes and brought dessert trays showcasing sherbets, coffees, treeship fruit, draums, tortes, and concoctions made of Renaissance chocolate. Martin Silenus waved away the desserts and told the clones to bring him another bottle of wine. The Consul reflected a few seconds and then asked for a whiskey.

'It occurs to me,' Sol Weintraub said as the group was finishing dessert, 'that our survival may depend upon our talking to one another.'

'What do you mean?'" asked Brawne Lamia.

Weintraub unconsciously rocked the child sleeping against his chest. 'For instance, does anyone here know why he or she was chosen by the Shrike Church and the

All Thing to go on this voyage?'"

No one spoke.

'I thought not,' said Weintraub. 'Even more fascinating, is anyone here a member or

follower of the Church of the Shrike? I, for one, am a Jew, and however confused my religious notions have become these days, they do not include the worship of an organic killing machine." Weintraub raised eyebrows and looked around the table.

'I am the True Voice of the Tree,' said Het Masteen.

'While many Templars believe that the Shrike is the Avatar of punishment for those who do not feed from the root, I must consider this a heresy not founded in the Covenant or the writings of the Muir.'

To the Captain's left, the Consul shrugged. 'I am an atheist,' he said, holding the glass of whiskey to the light. 'I have never been in contact with the Shrike cult.'

Father Hoyt smiled without humor. 'The Catholic Church ordained me,' he said. 'Shrike-worship contradicts everything the Church defends.'

Colonel Kassad shook his head, whether in refusal to respond or to indicate that he was not a member of the Shrike Church, it was not clear.

Martin Silenus made an expansive gesture. 'I was baptized a Lutheran,' he said. 'A subset which no longer exists. I helped create Zen Gnosticism before any of your parents were born. I have been a Catholic, a revelationist, a neo-Marxist, an interface zealot, a Bound Shaker, a satanist, a bishop in the Church of Jake's Nada, and a dues-paying subscriber to the Assured Reincarnation Institute. Now, I am happy to say, I am a simple pagan.' He smiled at everyone. 'To a pagan,' he concluded, 'the Shrike is a most acceptable deity.'

'I ignore religions,' said Brawne Lamia. 'I do not succumb to them.'

'My point has been made, I believe,' said Sol Weintraub. 'None of us admits to subscribing to the Shrike cult dogma, yet the elders of that perceptive group have chosen us over many millions of the petitioning faithful to visit the Time Tombs... and their fierce god... in what may be the last such pilgrimage.'

The Consul shook his head. 'Your point may be made, M. Weintraub,' he said, 'but I fail to see it.'

The scholar absently stroked his beard. 'It would seem that our reasons for returning to Hyperion are so compelling that even the Shrike Church and the Hegemony probability intelligences agree that we deserve to return,' he said. 'Some of these reasons - mine, for instance - may appear to be public knowledge, but I am certain that none are known in their entirety except to the individuals at this table. I suggest that we share our stories in the few days remaining to us.'

'Why?' said Colonel Kassad. 'It would seem to serve no purpose.'

Weintraub smiled. 'On the contrary, it would - at the very least - amuse us and give at least a glimpse of our fellow travelers' souls before the Shrike or some other calamity distracts us. Beyond that, it might just give us enough insight to save all of our lives if we are intelligent enough to find the common thread of experience which binds all our fates to the whim of the Shrike.'

Martin Silenus laughed and closed his eyes. He said:

'Straddling each a dolphin's back

And steadied by a fin,

Those Innocents re-live their death,

Their wounds open again. '

'That's Lenista, isn't it?' said Father Hoyt. 'I studied her in seminary.'

'Close,' said Silenus, opening his eyes and pouring more wine. 'It's Yeats. Bugger lived five hundred years before Lenista tugged at her mother's metal teat.'

'Look,' said Lamia, 'what good would telling each other stories do? When we meet the Shrike, we tell it what we want, one of us is granted the wish, and the others die. Correct?'

'So goes the myth,' said Weintraub.

'The Shrike is no myth,' said Kassad. 'Nor its steel tree.'

'So why bore each other with stories?' asked Brawne Lamia, spearing the last of her chocolate cheesecake.

Weintraub gently touched the back of his sleeping infant's head. 'We live in strange times,' he said.

'Because we are part of that one tenth of one tenth of one percent of the Hegemony's citizens who travel between the stars rather than along the Web, we represent odd epochs of our own recent past. I, for example, am sixty-eight standard years old, but because of the time-debts my travels could have incurred, I might have spread these threescore and eight years across well more than a century of Hegemony history.'

'So?' said the woman next to him.

Weintraub opened his hand in a gesture which included everyone at the table. 'Among us we represent islands of time as well as separate oceans of perspective.

Or perhaps more aptly put, each of us may hold a piece to a puzzle no one else has been able to solve since humankind first landed on Hyperion." Weintraub scratched his nose. 'It is a mystery,' he said, 'and to tell the truth, I am intrigued by mysteries even if this is to be my last week of enjoying them. I would welcome some glimmer of understanding but, failing that, working on the puzzle will suffice."

'I agree,' said Her Masteen with no emotion. 'It had not occurred to me, but I see the wisdom of telling our tales before we confront the Shrike."

'But what's to keep us from lying?" asked Brawne Lamia.

'Nothing." Martin Silenus grinned. 'That's the beauty of it."

'We should put it to a vote,' said the Consul. He was thinking about Meina Gladstone's contention that one of the group was an Ouster agent. Would hearing the stories be a way of revealing the spy? The Consul smiled at the thought of an agent so stupid.

'Who decided that we are a happy little democracy?" Colonel Kassad asked dryly.

'We had better be,' said the Consul. 'To reach our individual goals, this group needs to reach the Shrike regions together. We require some means of making decisions." 'We could appoint a leader,' said Kassad.

'Piss on that,' the poet said in a pleasant tone. Others at the table also shook their heads.

'All right,' said the Consul, 'we vote. Our first decision relates to M. Weintraub's suggestion that we tell the stories of our past involvement with Hyperion."

'All or nothing,' said Her Masteen. 'We each share our story or none does. We will abide by the will of the majority."

'Agreed,' said the Consul, suddenly curious to hear the others tell their stories and equally sure that he would never tell his own. 'Those in favor of telling our tales?" 'Yes,' said Sol Weintraub. 'Yes,' said Her Masteen.

'Absolutely,' said Martin Silenus. 'I wouldn't miss this little comic farce for a month in the orgasm baths on Shote."

'I vote yes also,' said the Consul, surprising himself.

'Those opposed?'

'Nay,' said Father Hoyt but there was no energy in his voice.

'I think it's stupid,' said Brawne Lamia.

The Consul turned to Kassad. 'Colonel?' Fedmahn Kassad shrugged.

'I register four yes votes, two negatives, and one abstention,' said the Consul. 'The ayes have it. Who wants to start?'

The table was silent. Finally Martin Silenus looked up from where he had been writing on a small pad of paper.

He tore a sheet into several smaller strips. 'I've recorded numbers from one to seven,' he said. 'Why don't we draw lots and go in the order we draw?'

'That seems rather childish, doesn't it?' said M. Lamia.

'I'm a childish fellow,' responded Silenus with his satyr's smile. 'Ambassador'-he nodded toward the Consul- 'could I borrow that gilded pillow you're wearing for a hat?'

The Consul handed over his tricorne, the folded slips were dropped in, and the hat passed around. Sol Weintraub was the first to draw, Martin Silenus the last.

The Consul unfolded his slip, making sure that no one else could see it. He was number seven. Tension ebbed out of him like air out of an overinflated balloon. It was quite possible, he reasoned, that events would intercede before he had to tell his story. Or the war would make everything academic. Or the group could lose interest in stories. Or the king could die. Or the horse could die. Or he could teach the horse how to talk.

No more whiskey, thought the Consul.

'Who's first?' asked Martin Silenus.

In the brief silence, the Consul could hear leaves stirring to unfelt breezes.

'I am,' said Father Hoyt. The priest's expression showed the same barely submerged acceptance of pain which the Consul had seen on the faces of terminally ill friends. Hoyt held up his slip of paper with a large 1 clearly scrawled on it.

'All right,' said Silenus. 'Start.'

'Now?' asked the priest.

'Why not?' said the poet. The only sign that Silenus had finished at least two bottles of wine was a slight darkening of the already ruddy cheeks and a somewhat more demonic tilt to the pitched eyebrows. 'We have a few hours before planetfall,' he said, 'and I for one plan to sleep off the freezer fugue when we're safely down and settled among the simple natives.'

'Our friend has a point,' Sol Weintraub said softly. 'If the tales are to be told, the hour after dinner each day is a civilized time to tell them.'

Father Hoyt sighed and stood. 'Just a minute,' he said and left the dining platform.

After some minutes had passed, Brawne Lamia said, 'Do you think he's lost his nerve?'

'No,' said Lenar Hoyt, emerging from the darkness at the head of the wooden escalator which served as the main staircase. 'I needed these.' He dropped two small, stained notebooks on the table as he took his seat.

'No fair reading stories from a primer,' said Silenus.

'These are to be our own tall tales, Magus!'

'Shut up, damn it!' cried Hoyt. He ran a hand across his face, touched his chest. For the second time that night, the Consul knew that he was looking at a seriously ill man.

'I'm sorry,' said Father Hoyt. 'But if I'm to tell my . . . my tale, I have to tell someone else's story as well.'

These journals belong to the man who was the reason for my coming to Hyperion . . . and why I am returning today.' Hoyt took a deep breath.

The Consul touched the journals. They were begrimed and charred, as if they had survived a fire. 'Your friend has old-fashioned tastes,' he said, 'if he still keeps a written journal.'

'Yes,' said Hoyt. 'If you're all ready, I will begin.' The group at the table nodded. Beneath the dining platform, a kilometer of treeship drove through the cold night with the strong pulse of a living thing. Sol Weintraub lifted his sleeping child from the infant carrier and carefully set her on a cushioned mat on the floor near his chair. He removed his comlog, set it near the mat, and programmed the diskey for white noise. The week-