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Opening extract from

The Ghosts of Heaven

Written by

Marcus Sedgwick

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The GHOSTS *of* HEAVEN

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Indigo

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Introduction

Generations of stars lived and died.

Around 4,600 million years ago, the death of one of these stars, in a supernova, causes a shockwave to hit a vast molecular cloud, or nebula, made of dust and gas. Words cannot describe how large this nebula is. Only numbers can; it would take a particle of light sixty-five years to cross it.

The shockwave triggers a reaction in the nebula; the dust particles within it are drawn together, and as they collide, and stick together, so their gravitational attraction causes more and more material to coalesce, so that now a small part of the cloud starts to collapse and spin. Over the course of the next 100,000 years, the competing forces of gravity, pressure, magnetism and rotation creates the beginnings of the Solar System; the vast majority of matter forms at the centre of this spinning disc, the Sun. Around it revolves a mess of gas and dust that will, as tens of millions of years pass, form the planets.

The Solar System at this time is cluttered and chaotic; an overcrowded maelstrom of rocky planets, gas giants, moons and asteroids all hurtling through clouds of dust

and gas left over from the Sun's formation. Collisions are inevitable, and they occur.

About 4,500 million years ago, a giant body the size of Mars hits the newly forming Earth. Known as Theia, it slews into the proto-planet at an oblique angle; most of its matter fuses with the Earth. Its iron core sinks to join with the iron core of Earth; but a significant amount of the crusts of both planets is flung back into space where it becomes our Moon.

The impact of Theia proves critical to our existence.

The Solar System is bathed in electromagnetic radiation given off by the Sun, deadly to most forms of life – certainly to human beings, but the iron core of Earth is larger than it would have otherwise been, large enough to remain hot and liquid. The warm liquid rises and falls in strong convection currents within the Earth's core, which, together with the Earth's high rotational speed, gives the planet a powerful magnetic field. It is this magnetic field which repels the great majority of the radiation, sending the charged particles back out into space, or spiralling down the lines of magnetism to the poles of the Earth, where they collide with the atmosphere, causing the Northern Lights, and their Southern counterpart.

The impact of Theia also causes a wobble in the Earth's rotation – it is this wobble that gives us our seasons; spring to summer to autumn to winter; and yet it is also the continuing presence of the Moon after the collision which

stabilises the Earth's motion. Without which the variation in temperature between our seasons would be much greater, lurching between extremes of hot and cold that could make our life here impossible.

A period of relative peace arrives, but then around 500 million years later, the gravitational effects of Jupiter and Saturn not only move Neptune and Pluto further out into space, but also start to influence the uncountable number of asteroids in orbit. Many are pushed out into deep space, but some are propelled into the inner Solar System, colliding with the Earth and the Moon.

As the Earth is struck again and again, the temperature of our planet's surface rises high enough to melt rock, turning our home into a deadly hell. Yet the Late Heavy Bombardment, as it is known, dies away relatively rapidly. In its wake comes a steady trickle of impacts with icy comets and asteroids. These deliver water to Earth from the outer, colder regions of the Solar System; water that will form the oceans. And they also deliver something else; organic compounds, from which the development of life itself is possible.

The Late Heavy Bombardment would have almost certainly eradicated any life on Earth that existed at the time; and yet, the earliest forms of life we have discovered, simple cells without a nucleus, known as prokaryotes, date to immediately after the end of the impacts.

Impacts of objects from space still occur.

It is believed that the time of the dinosaurs ended in a mass extinction around 65 million years ago, the result of a collision with an asteroid. Even in the life of our own species, events such as the Tunguska explosion of 1908, or the Chelyabinsk meteor strike of 2013, show that the danger is not over; collision with an asteroid large enough would throw enough dust into the atmosphere to block out the Sun for many years, causing vegetation, and those animals that depend on it, to die out. Of all the species of life that have ever existed, it is estimated that 99.9% are now extinct.

Yet somewhere in the time since the dinosaurs were destroyed, the mammals that somehow survived evolved, eventually leading to the arrival on Earth, some 4,598 million years after its formation, of mankind.

We cling to the surface of our planet; we live, for the most part, in a tiny layer of breathable gases wrapped around a ball of rock that flies through space, revolving around the Sun. But our path through space is not circular, because the Sun itself is travelling; heading away from the galactic centre as the Universe expands. So the shape that we describe as we fly through space is not a line, nor even a circle; as the Earth revolves around the Sun which itself moves out through space, we form quite another shape altogether; the three-dimensional spiral known as a helix.

*

There are four quarters to this story; they can be read in any order and the story will work. The four quarters are assembled here in just one of twenty-four possible combinations; this order makes one kind of sense, but the reader should feel free to choose a different order, and a different sense, if desired.

Marcus Sedgwick
Hadstock
May 2014

QUARTER ONE

Whispers in the Dark

I

She is the one who goes on,
when others remain behind.
The one who walks into darkness,
when others cling to the light.
She is the one who will step alone into the cave,
with fire in her hand,
and with fire in her head.

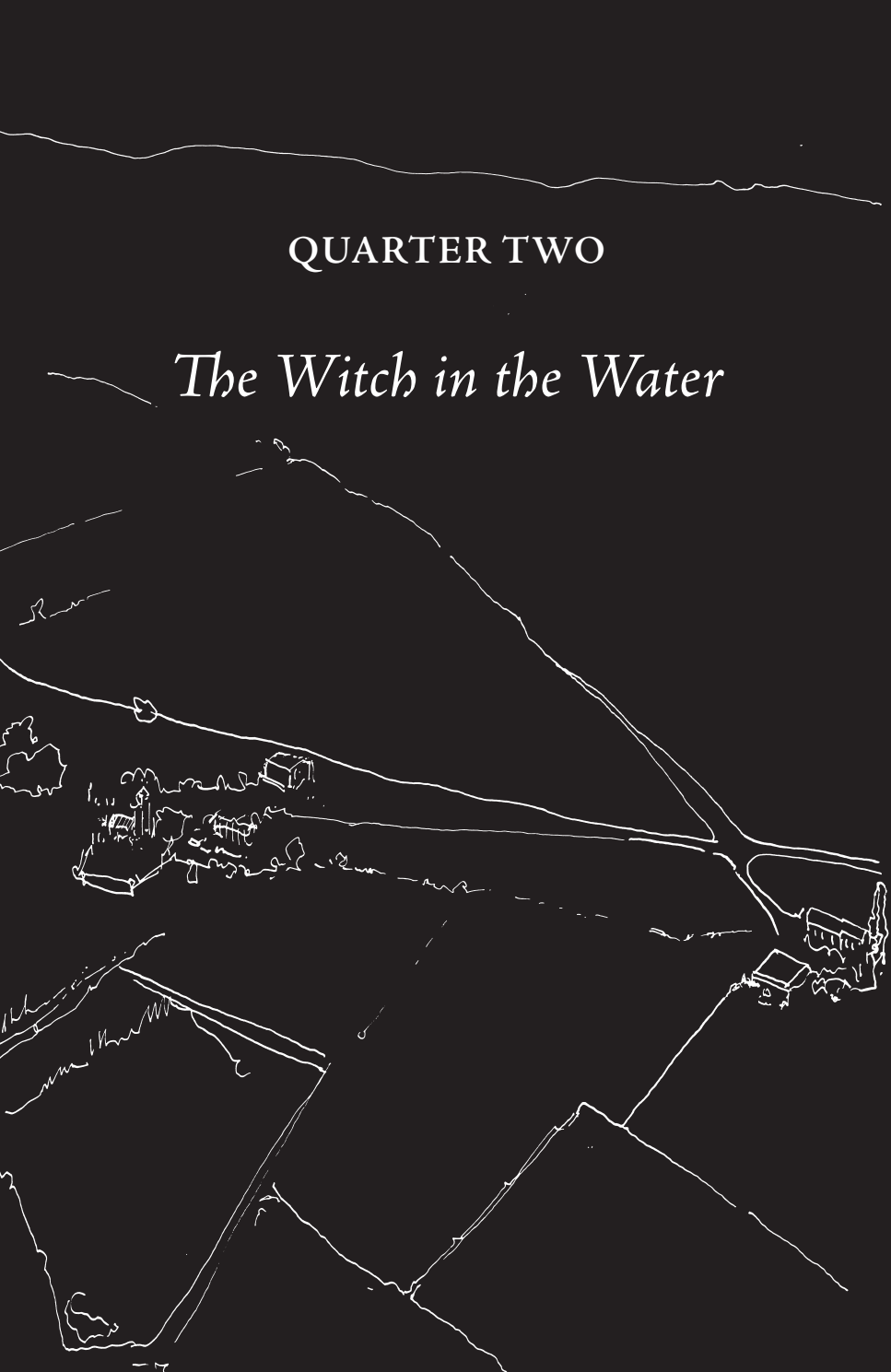
She walks with the people,
climbs up beside the waterfall.
Up, as the water thunders down.
Up, through the cool green leaves,
the summer's light lilting
through the leaves and the air.

They have come so far,
and ache with the pain
of their feet and their backs,
but they cannot stop,
because the beasts do not stop.

From where they climb,
they cannot see the beasts with their eyes,
but they know they are there.
In their mind, they see the deer:
their hooves, their hair, their hearts.
The antlers on the harts,
among the hinds who have the young.
They take the long path into the valley,
moving slowly, day by day,
while the people climb the waterfall
to meet them
with arrows and spears.

QUARTER TWO

The Witch in the Water



1

Approach of Evil

In the mind of the minister was devilry.

He spied on the landscape passing the window of his carriage, and what he saw was not the greendale, not pasture surrounded by low stone wall, not farmstall, nor woodland, nor wavering grass, but wasteland. A spiritual wasteland.

Father Escrove stifled in the carriage, whose two horses and deaf coachman had borne him with appalling lack of speed from the city and out into the world, to this countryside. He fumed silently, and despite the wicked heat he sat as far from the open window as he could manage, as if he feared contagion from the day outside.

Outside, beyond his window, was sinfulness. It was not even a matter of certainty; it just *was*; evil lay barely hidden in those hedgerows, behind those barns, under the eaves of the farmhouses passing by. All across this green nature, the devil had surely found a comfortable resting place. Satan *could* and *did* rise from the hay fields and creep from the forest at any time; seethe his way into some simpleton's soul and take root there. Even now, *the beast* was, without question, approaching through the thick hot air.

He dared move himself a touch closer to the window; the motion of the carriage and the heat inside neatly conspired to send him a little drowsy, but he fought back. He sniffed the air outside. Heavy. Scented. Grass and dung in the heat.

Forgetting the deafness of the driver, he called out.

'How long?'

His words melted and slipped onto the sun-hard mud track behind the clopping horse hooves.

There was not one breath of wind; the stale air sat on the earth and the dale, and the minister's carriage as in an oven.

They were on the top of the world; on the high dale, somewhere at Black Top, he guessed, poking a skinny finger at the map he'd been given. All around the high flat pastures spread away in easy rolling levels of green, cut through only by weather-worn walls of stone. There were few trees; the winters up here saw to that, the winter wind that made it hard for anything to hold, but now, in the summer, the minister felt pressed closer to the sun, and he sat back in his seat, hating.

Sliding satisfied into his thoughts were memories of his work; his calling. Images of unrepentant sinners; some faces he could remember, others he could not, but that mattered little. What mattered were the numbers of those who he had brought to some kind of redemption at the end of a good length of twisted English rope.

*

Successful. That was what he was, he knew, and that was why he had been elevated to Rural Dean, with all that that brought. And what that brought was the opportunity to show the Archdeacon that his faith was justified in this excursion to the wilds, and to this place. Welden; no doubt some foul and rotting sore, had had the misfortune to experience a hiatus; their vicar having upped and died without so much as a moment's warning, leaving the isolated settlement at risk of spiritual decay. And until a new appointment could be made to the hilltop house of God, it fell to Father Escrove to guide the sheep to safety.

They passed the church now.

St Mary's. He sneered at the churchyard; the dead vicar already underground these past weeks. A man who had failed where he would not.

Away with his thoughts for a time, it took a jolt in the carriage to stir Escrove into piercing the world outside with his gaze once more.; they had turned from the pitiful mud track of the greendale onto an even smaller one that set off swiftly down the side of the valley to his destination.

This valley, Welden, was steep-sided; seemingly scored into the landscape by God's chiselling fingertip, winding its way through the dales with Golden Beck at its bottom. Welden Valley was sanctuary to all the life of the place. Outside the brief moment of summer, the wind and the cold kept most life tucked into this groove in the earth;

here, on its tiring slopes were the woodlands, the houses, the farmsteads, the mills and the manor of the squire; Sir George Hamill.

As they turned from the main track to the smaller, Father Escrove saw something.

In the corner of the field to his right lay an area where the grass was kept short, and there, cut into that turf, was some sort of pattern low in the earth; a series of lines not even a foot deep.

He strained his neck to make it out, but could not measure any meaning in it.

Then the carriage jumped over a rut and he hit his head on the window frame.

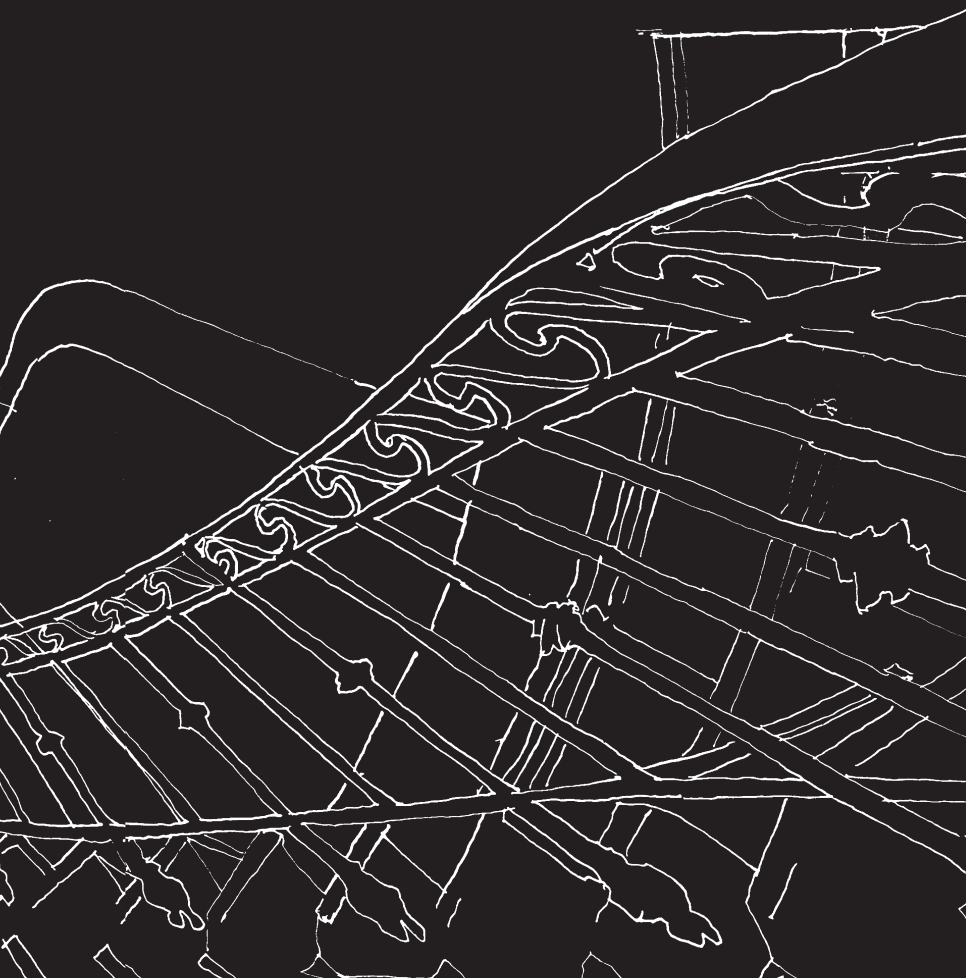
'God's teeth,' he muttered, grimly.

He thought for a moment about what he had come to do.

Then, he smiled.

QUARTER THREE

The Easiest Room in Hell



Saturday, March 26

My room overlooks the sea, to the north and the east.

Verity's, to the south and the east. Between our two rooms is a third smaller bedroom with an easterly view which I will use as my study, and where I am writing now. I will put my desk in here when it arrives from New York. Otherwise all we have is a pair of suitcases each that made the journey with us. The Long Island Rail Road sped us as far as Greenport so that after these weeks of planning and letters to and fro, it is strange to arrive here so suddenly. Of course, from Greenport we still had some few miles out here, but Doctor Phillips had sent a man to meet us with a horse and buggy. Verity loved that, and I couldn't help smiling seeing her so happy. In New York we might just have climbed into a taxi, and though we are only a few hours away, it was a good reminder that things here are somewhat different.

Greenport, the end of the line, proved to be a bustling little town, with a fine station and I even saw a turntable on which the locomotives can be turned around before their trip back to the city. There is a ferry terminal too, with boats

to New York and the Connecticut coast. But even the short ride, eight miles or so, from there to Orient Point, showed our destination to be even farther removed from modern society.

At one point, the land of the North Fork tapers so there is sea but a stone's throw away on either side, and our driver showed us how the land is so low-lying that it is no wonder that floods across it are not uncommon.

Then the land widens once more and climbs a little, forming the headland. A road to our right leads to Orient itself, but our driver took us straight on, to the place which is to be our new home.

The building itself is as remarkable as I had been told. While all around are various outbuildings: the sheds connected to the farm and gardens, workshops, the crematorium with its tall chimney, and so on, the landscape is otherwise somewhat bleak and windswept, aside from the Kirkbride building; so ornate, majestic and, I truly believe, inspiring. Six full floors with their tiered wings tower over the grounds.

Here we sit in our rooms, with a bathroom of our own and even a small kitchen, at the eastern end of the seventh floor. This floor is shorter than the others, and covers only the central block of the building so that we have a view over the roofs of the sixth floor.

It is a fine view. Each of our three rooms has a door leading out to a balcony of all things! With a finely-wrought

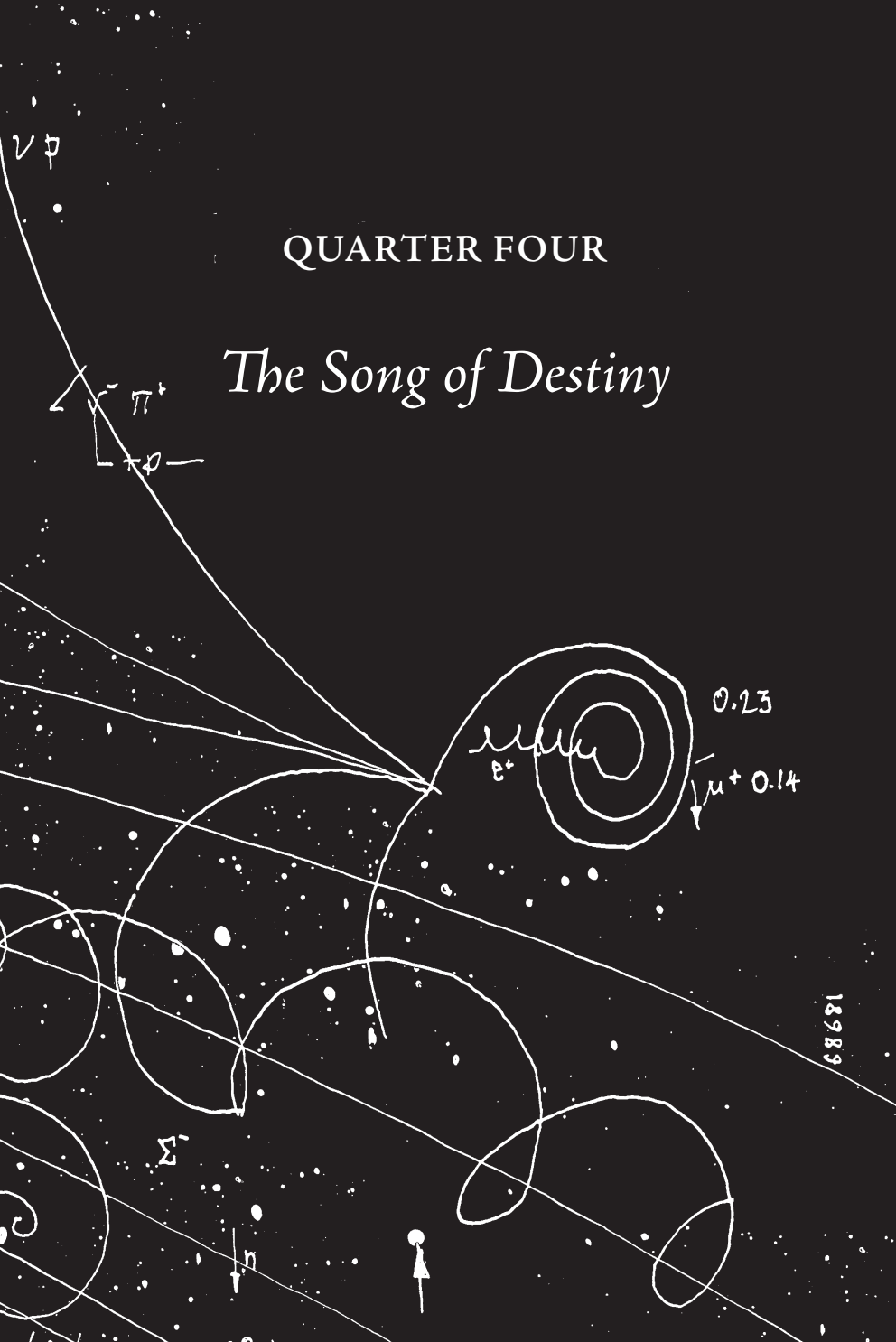
white wooden railing safe enough for me to allow Verity to sit outside if she wishes. The balcony runs right round the building, so that I could stroll along to Doctor Phillips' rooms in the centre if I wished, and there I might converse with him as two gentleman on the deck of a liner, not as newly-arrived employee talking to venerable employer.

All in all, it is a place that would suit the Vanderbilts, or the Astors, or the Du Ponts, were it on the South Fork of the island. From my vantage point up here, and close to the gods I fancy, it takes some little effort to remind myself why I have come, what my work will be, and that in the building beneath and behind me are some three thousand insane, all sent here because society has no more hope for them.

I must end. Verity is calling for her father. I record in this journal only the brief hope that I may do well enough to send one or two of the insane back to the society that rejected them.

QUARTER FOUR

The Song of Destiny



1

Every night he dreams of things for which there are no words.

The dreams are strange and last all night.

Each night is ten years long.

His days, by comparison, are but a blink in time. Twelve hours is all he is allowed, twelve hours for waking, to do whatever work must be done, twelve hours every ten years. He has been woken twice so far; when he is woken for the third time, Sentinel Bowman is 425 trillion kilometres from home.

Twelve hours is more than enough, he decided, the first time he was awake. Without the need to eat, and with a ship that runs itself, there is, in truth, little to do but read the reports of the five sentinels who were awake before him, one per year, each for their own twelve hours. Once he's done that, he writes his own report as Sentinel Six, adds it to the log of the others, and posts all of them for the four sentinels who will wake after him to read, each in turn, a year apart.

Outside the twelve-hour slots during which the sentinels are awake, for the rest of each year the *Song of Destiny* ghosts on through space, carrying its cargo of five hundred who float somewhere between life and death, in Longsleep.

'Yes,' Bowman said aloud, to no one, the first time he woke. He wanted to see if his voice still worked after ten years in Sentinel Sleep, a gentler but vastly more expensive technique than that applied to the five hundred pods; hence the allowance of only ten sentinels to each wake, alone, for routine maintenance and surveillance of the cargo and other of the ship's systems. Just twelve hours every year.

When the five hundred reach their destination, to wake from Longsleep will be a slow and laborious process. The bodies slowly raised from sub-zero temperatures; the oxygenated preservation fluid drained from lungs and airways; the sustaining gel pumped from their digestive system, and so on and so on. The whole method will take a day or more; the waker only fully recovering consciousness some hours after that. Despite the ship's gravity system and constant bone/muscle stimulation on the sleepers, it will take weeks of recuperation before they can be said to be close to functioning normally.

The trials back on Earth for Longsleep were messy and dangerous; only after decades of research into each individual obstacle posed by trying to shut down aging to an absolute minimum was the technique declared ready for purpose.

Sentinel Sleep, a rival system developed during the same period, is another matter; it is an almost prohibitively expensive technology aboard a ship where every single thing is unimaginably expensive. But waking takes only half an hour or so, during which Bowman tries to hold on to the dreams that slip through his mind, teasing and taunting his memory like sand running through his fingers.

Once the waking process is over, the lid to Sentinel Bowman's pod beeps twice as it glides open. Then there is only the need to remove the feeding and excretion tubes from his body before he climbs out.

Now, waking for the third time, he stands on the gently curving deck, testing his legs against the force of gravity. Even though he designed several of the ship's systems himself, he still marvels at the elegant simplicity of the gravity system; artificial gravity created by the application of basic physics.

The ship is a Toroid Class IV; essentially a giant ring, two kilometres wide, spinning; spinning perpendicular to its direction of travel. The *Song of Destiny*, like all the Toroid IVs, spins at just the right velocity to create a continuous outward momentum almost equal to the force of gravity on Earth.

It is this ring that forms the living space of the ship, if living is the word that can be applied to the five hundred Longsleep pods and ten sentinel pods that line its walls. On deck, the gravitational effect is almost indistinguishable

from Earth. There are a couple of tell-tale signs that things are different: the gentle concave curve of the floor, and the fact that on the ship, gravity has a *supplementary direction*. Yes, the ship spins at its constant speed, so gravity pulls down just as it would on Earth, but then there is the rotation to consider; which means that walking one way round the ring of the ship's deck is more like walking uphill, and walking the other, something like walking down.

Even though, for the majority of the time, everyone on board the *Song* is sleeping, gravity is a necessary part of the fight against the long-term effects of space travel. And when the ship finally arrives at its destination and goes into orbit, then, of course, it will truly come into its own. For now, it merely makes the sentinel's work sessions that much easier than they would be in zero g.

The ship is completed by the five Bases; spaced out equally around the rim; like five stones spread around an eternity ring. Each is a replica of the other: inside are computer terminals where the sentinels work, chlorophyll banks, water recirculation systems, nutrient facilities, control systems for the ship's motor, and a planet-to-planet ship, or PTP.

'Yes,' says Bowman, as he wakes for the third time and climbs from his pod. He slides open the drawer from underneath the pod and pulls on his sentinel's uniform; dark grey, orange trim. Though he is effectively alone on the ship, it wouldn't seem right to go to work naked. Besides,

there are CCTV cameras in various key places on deck; and he knows that some of the other sentinels are women.

'Yes,' he says, 'twelve hours are more than enough.'

He gazes down the length of the deck, as far as he can see until it curves upwards out of sight. Every ten metres is a Longsleep pod. After fifty Longsleep pods, there's the pod of Sentinel Seven; fifty pods the other way would take him to Sentinel Five. Whenever he passes one of his colleagues, he waves a hand in greeting. He's never met any of them, and never will, not till the journey is over. He saw a couple of them briefly on Venture Day, as they were installed in their pods for real, all practice done, a day or so before the ship left Earth orbit. He doesn't know them, but they are just like him, he supposes; each chosen for their special skills and aptitude, to be the guardians of five hundred souls through space for a hundred years.

There is not the slightest sound and not the slightest movement anywhere. Inside each pod rests a just-living human being, each of them invisible.

Since the ship has a radius of a kilometre it's over 1200 metres from one Base to the next; Bowman's pod is four hundred metres from where he has spent twenty-four hours in the last twenty-six years; Base Four.

The lights are dim but grow brighter as he walks towards the Base. He catches sight of his reflection in one of the small ports in the wall of the ring. It faces forward, in the direction they're flying, but there is no sense of movement at

all; the stars are too far away for them to change position as they travel. It's hard to be sure in this light, but there is his face, looking back at him; not a day older than when he first climbed into the sentinel pod, twenty-six years ago.

It doesn't seem possible, but it is. Yet it is only possible because his waking hours are so limited; there is no option; in eleven-and-a-half hours, he must be refitting himself in his pod, waiting to be taken into Sentinel Sleep again. If he misses just one deadline with the pod, his life expectancy will drop, vastly. The chances are he will not make it to destination a young man, if alive at all.

That's when it occurs to him; staring through the narrow porthole; he, like all the others on board the *Song of Destiny*, is not travelling through space in a straight line. The ship itself is travelling in a straight line, but the ship is spinning; so everyone on board is rotating as they move forward at something close to nine-tenths light speed.

He is travelling in a spiral; a helix through space.

He ambles into Base Four, shutting the door to the ring; only vaguely wondering why he is bothering to shut the door when there is no operational need to do so. If he'd stopped to think, he might have realised that the sight of pod after pod stretching away round the curve of the ring unnerves him slightly; as if he's flying a mortuary through space. He knows none of these people; none of them. That's

why he was chosen for his job as a sentinel, in part at least. Along with the other sentinels, it is his job simply to see them, and the ship, safely through space.

He flops down into the chair in front of Terminal Base Four, and that's when he sees the series of red lights blinking on the screen in front of him.

Six of the five hundred are dead.