

Chapter One

The ants on the ceiling had no regard for geometry. Across the carved stucco surface of exquisite fivefold symmetry, the ants followed only the chaotic cracks which struck through it. Some clustered at a yellowing water stain, ignorant of the commanding central starburst which lay just beside it. They would not be dominated by the designer's hand.

Jas, laid out on a threadbare reposing seat, stared straight up at the ceiling and tried to imagine what it had looked like when it was new. When this building had been a mansion for some high Command official, and this room had been a guest bedroom, or a demonstration hall, or a study. The lord of the house would've shown his guests in and gestured with pride at the perfect symmetry, the divinely straight lines, the proliferation of pentagons and pentagrams. He would've challenged his guests to find a single spot where more than three lines intersected, a single place where more than five lines enclosed a shape. They all would've gazed at the gleaming white ceiling and wondered at its perfection.

Jas exhaled and watched the cloud of pipe smoke drift up to the ceiling, one more layer of grime on the dirty gray surface. The ants went rioting for a while when the smoke reached them. If they had a geometer, they could harness the chaos to turn a tiny wheel, and winch up blocks of sugar from the floor.