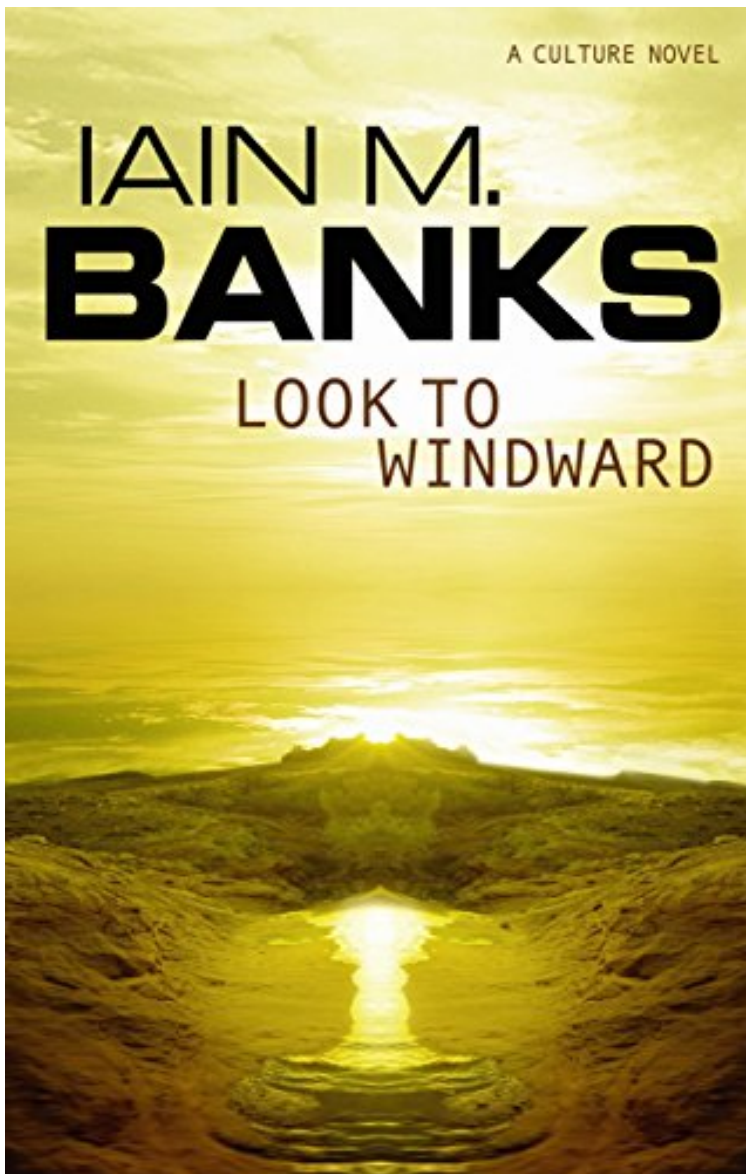


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Look To Windward



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIt was one of the less glorious incidents of a long-ago war. It led to the destruction of two suns and the billions of lives they supported. Now, eight hundred years later, the light from the first of those ancient mistakes has reached the Culture Orbital, Masaq'. The light from the second may not.'Confirms Banks as the standard by which the rest of SF is judged' GUARDIAN'In terms of sheer storytelling prowess and verve, Look to Windward is a work of genius' SFX'A great book' NEW SCIENTISTExtraitChapter One:

The Light of Ancient MistakesThe barges lay on the darkness of the still canal, their lines softened by the snow heaped in pillows and hummocks on their decks. The horizontal surfaces of the canal's paths, piers, bollards and lifting bridges bore the same full billowed weight of snow, and the tall buildings set back from

the quaysides loomed over all, their windows, balconies and gutters each a line edged with white. It was a quiet area of the city at almost any time, Kabe knew, but tonight it both seemed and was quieter still. He could hear his own footsteps as they sank into the untouched whiteness. Each step made a creaking noise. He stopped and lifted his head, sniffing at the air. Very still. He had never known the city so silent. The snow made it seem hushed, he supposed, muffling what little sound there was. Also tonight there was no appreciable wind at ground level, which meant that -- in the absence of any traffic -- the canal, though still free of ice, was perfectly still and soundless, with no slap of wave or gurgling surge. There were no lights nearby positioned to reflect from the canal's black surface, so that it seemed like nothing, like an absolute absence on which the barges appeared to be floating unsupported. That was unusual too. The lights were out across the whole city, across almost all this side of the world. He looked up. The snow was easing now. Spinwards, over the city center and the still more distant mountains, the clouds were parting, revealing a few of the brighter stars as the weather system cleared. A thin, dimly glowing line directly above -- coming and going as the clouds moved slowly overhead -- was far-side light. No aircraft or ships that he could see. Even the birds of the air seemed to have stayed in their roosts. And no music. Usually in Aquime City you could hear music coming from somewhere or other, if you listened hard enough (and he was good at listening hard). But this evening he couldn't hear any. Subdued. That was the word. The place was subdued. This was a special, rather somber night ("Tonight you dance by the light of ancient mistakes!" Ziller had said in an interview that morning -- with only a little too much relish) and the mood seemed to have infected all of the city, the whole of Xaravve Plate, indeed the entire Orbital of Masaq'. And yet, even so, there seemed to be an extra stillness caused by the snow. Kabe stood for a moment longer, wondering exactly what might cause that additional hush. It was something that he had noticed before but never quite been bothered enough about to try and pin down. Something to do with the snow itself... He looked back at his tracks in the snow covering the canal path. Three lines of footprints. He wondered what a human -- what any bipedal -- would make of such a trail. Probably, he suspected, they would not notice. Even if they did, they would just ask and instantly be told. Hub would tell them: those will be the tracks of our honored Homomdan guest Ambassador Kabe Ischloear. Ah, so little mystery, these days. Kabe looked around, then quickly did a little hopping, shuffling dance, executing the steps with a delicacy belying his bulk and weight. He glanced about again, and was glad to have, apparently, escaped observation. He studied the pattern his dance had left in the snow. That was better... But what had he been thinking of? The snow, and its silence. Yes, that was it; it produced what seemed like a subtraction of noise, because one was used to sound accompanying weather; wind sighed or roared, rain drummed or hissed or -- if it was mist and too light to produce noise directly -- at least created drips and glugs. But snow falling with no wind to accompany it seemed to defy nature; it was like watching a screen with the sound off, it was like being deaf. That was it. Satisfied, Kabe tramped on down the path, just as a whole sloped roofload of snow fell with a muffled but distinct crump from a tall building onto ground nearby. He stopped, looked at the long ridge of whiteness the miniature avalanche had produced as a last few flakes fell swirling around it, and laughed. Quietly, so as not to disturb the silence. At last some lights, from a big barge four vessels away around the canal's gradual curve. And the hint of some music, too, from the same source. Gentle, undemanding music, but music nevertheless. Fill-in music; biding music, as they sometimes called it. Not the recital itself. A recital. Kabe wondered why he had been invited. The Contact drone E. H. Tersono had requested Kabe's presence there in a message delivered that afternoon. It had been written in ink, on card and delivered by a small drone. Well, a flying salver, really. The thing was, Kabe usually went to Tersono's Eighth-Day recital anyway. Making a point of inviting him to it had to mean something. Was he being told that he was being in some way presumptuous, having come along on earlier occasions when he hadn't been specifically invited? That would seem strange; in theory the event was open to all -- what was not, in theory? -- but the ways of Culture people, especially drones, and most especially old drones, like E. H. Tersono, could still surprise Kabe. No laws or written regulations at all, but so many little... observances, sets of manners, ways of behaving politely. And fashions. They had fashions in so many things, from the most trivial to the most momentous. Trivial: that paper message delivered on a salver; did that mean that everybody was going to start physically moving invitations and even day-to-day information from place to place, rather than have such things transmitted normally, communicated to one's house, familiar, drone, terminal or implant? What a preposterous and deeply tedious idea! And yet just the sort of retrospective affectation they might fall in love with, for a season or so (ha! at most). Momentous: they lived or died by whim! A few of their more famous people announced they would live once and die forever, and billions did likewise; then a new trend would start among opinion -- formers for people to back

up and have their bodies wholly renewed or new ones regrown, or to have their personalities transferred into android replicas or some other more bizarre design, or...well, anything; there was really no limit, but the point was that people would start doing that sort of thing by the billion, too, just because it had become fashionable. Was that the sort of behavior one ought to expect from a mature society? Mortality as a life-style choice? Kabe knew the answer his own people would give. It was madness, childishness, disrespectful of oneself and life itself; a kind of heresy. He, however, was not quite so sure, which either meant that he had been here too long, or that he was merely displaying the shockingly promiscuous empathy toward the Culture that had helped bring him here in the first place. So, musing about silence, ceremony, fashion and his own place in society, Kabe arrived at the ornately carved gangway that led from the quayside into the gently lit extravagance in gilded wood that was the ancient ceremonial barge Soliton. The snow here had been tramped down by many feet, the trail leading to a nearby sub-trans access building. Obviously he was odd, enjoying walking in the snow. But then he didn't live in this mountain city; his own home here hardly ever experienced snow or ice, so it was a novelty for him. Just before he went aboard, the Homomdan looked up into the night sky to watch a V-shaped flock of big, pure white birds fly silently overhead, just above the barge's signal rigging, heading inland from the High Salt Sea. He watched them disappear behind the buildings, then brushed the snow off his coat, shook his hat and went aboard.

"It's like holidays." "Holidays?" "Yes. Holidays. They used to mean the opposite of what they mean now. Almost the exact opposite." "What do you mean?" "Hey, is this edible?" "What?" "This." "I don't know. Bite it and see." "But it just moved." "It just moved? What, under its own power?" "I think so." "Well now, there's a thing. Evolve from a real predator like our friend Ziller and the instinctive answer's probably yes, but --" "What's this about holidays?" "Ziller was --" -- What he was saying. Opposite meaning. Once, holidays meant the time when you went away. "Really?" "Yes, I remember hearing that. Primitive stuff. Age of Scarcity." "People had to do all the work and create wealth for themselves and society and so they couldn't afford to take very much time off. So they worked for, say, half the day, most days of the year and then had an allocation of days they could take off, having saved up enough exchange collateral --" "Money. Technical term." -- in the meantime. So they took the time off and they went away. "Excuse me, are you edible?" "Are you really talking to your food?" "I don't know. I don't know if it is food." "In very primitive societies there wasn't even that; they got only a few days off each year!" "But I thought primitive societies could be quite --" "Primitive industrial, he meant. Take no notice. Will you stop poking that? You'll bruise it." "But can you eat it?" "You can eat anything you can get into your mouth and swallow." "You know what I mean." "Ask, you idiot!" "I just did." "Not it! Grief, what are you glanding? Should you be out? Where's your minder, terminal, whatever?" "Well, I didn't want to just --" "Oh, I see. Did they all go away at once?" "How could they? Things would stop working if they all did nothing at the same time." "Oh, of course." "But sometimes they had days when a sort of skeleton crew operated infrastructure. Otherwise, they staggered their time off. Varies from place to place and time to time, as you might expect." "Ah ha." "Whereas nowadays what we call holidays, or core time, is when you all stay home, because otherwise there'd be no period when you could all meet up. You wouldn't know who your neighbors were." "Actually, I'm not sure that I do." "Because we're just so flighty." "One big holiday." "In the old sense." "And hedonistic." "Itchy feet." "Itchy feet, itchy paws, itchy flippers, itchy barbels --" "Hub, can I eat this?" -- itchy gas sacs, itchy ribs, itchy wings, itchy pads --

"Okay, I think we get the idea." "Hub? Hello?" -- itchy grippers, itchy slime cusps, itchy motile envelopes --

"Will you shut up?" "Hub? Come in? Hub? Shit, my terminal's not working. Or Hub's not answering." "Maybe it's on holiday." -- itchy swim bladders, itchy muscle frills, itchy -- mmp! What? Was there something stuck in my teeth?" "Yes, your foot." "I think that's where we kicked off." "Appropriate." "Hub? Hub? Wow, this has never happened to me before..." "Ar Ischloear?" "Hmm?" His name had been spoken. Kabe discovered that he must have gone into one of those strange, trance-like states he sometimes experienced at gatherings like this, when the conversation -- or rather when several conversations at once -- went zinging to and fro in a dizzying, alienly human sort of way and seemed to wash over him so that he found it difficult to follow who was saying what to whom and why. He'd found that later he could often remember exactly the words that had been said, but he still had to work to determine the sense behind them. At the time he would just feel oddly detached. Until the spell was broken, as now, and he was awakened by his name. He was in the upper ballroom of the ceremonial barge Soliton with a few hundred other people, most of them human though not all in human form. The recital by the composer Ziller -- on an antique Chelgrian mosaikey -- had finished half an hour earlier. It had been a restrained, solemn piece, in keeping with the mood of the evening, though its performance had still been greeted with

rapturous applause. Now people were eating and drinking. And talking. He was standing with a group of men and women centered on one of the buffet tables. The air was warm, pleasantly perfumed and filled with soft music. A wood and glass canopy arced overhead, hung with some ancient form of lighting that was a long way from anybody's full-spectrum but which made everything and everybody look agreeably warm. His nose ring had spoken to him. When he had first arrived in the Culture he hadn't liked the idea of having com equipment inserted into his skull (or anywhere else for that matter). His family nose ring was about the only thing he always carried with him, so they had made him a perfect replica that happened to be a communications terminal as well. "Sorry to disturb you, Ambassador. Hub here. You're closest; would you let Mr. Olsule know he is speaking to an ordinary brooch, not his terminal?" "Yes." Kabe turned to a young man in a white suit who was holding a piece of jewelry in his hand and looking puzzled. "Ah, Mr. Olsule?" "Yeah, I heard," the man said, stepping back to look up at the Homomdan. He appeared surprised, and Kabe formed the impression that he had been mistaken for a sculpture or an article of monumental furniture. This happened fairly often. A function of scale and stillness, basically. It was one hazard of being a glisteningly black three-and-a-bit-meter-tall pyramidal tripod in a society of slim, matte-skinned two-meter-tall bipeds. The young man squinted at the brooch again. "I could have sworn this..." "Sorry about that, Ambassador," said the nose ring. "Thank you for your help." "Oh, you're welcome." A gleaming, empty serving tray floated up to the young man, dipped its front in a sort of bow and said, "Hi. Hub again. What you have there, Mr. Olsule, is a piece of jet in the shape of a ceerevell, explosively inlaid with platinum and summitium. From the studio of Ms. Xossin Nabbard, of Sintrier, after the Quarafyd school. A finely wrought work of substantial artistry. But unfortunately not a terminal." "Damn. Where is my terminal then?" "You left all your terminal devices at home." "Why didn't you tell me?" "You asked me not to." "When?" "One hundred and --" "Oh, never mind. Well, replace that, umm...change that instruction. Next time I leave home without a terminal...get them to make a fuss or something." "Very well. It will be done." Mr. Olsule scratched his head. "Maybe I should get a lace. One of those implant things." "Undeniably, forgetting your head would pose considerable difficulties. In the meantime, I'll second one of the barge's remotes to accompany you for the rest of the evening, if you'd like." "Yeah, okay." The young man put the brooch back on and turned to the laden buffet table. "So, anyway; can I eat this...? Oh. It's gone." "Itchy motile envelope," said the tray quietly, floating off. "Eh?" "Ah, Kabe, my dear friend. Here you are. Thank you so much for coming." Kabe swiveled to find the drone E. H. Tersono floating at his side at a level a little above head height for a human and a little below that of a Homomdan. The machine was a little less than a meter in height, and half that in width and depth. Its rounded-off rectangular casing was made of delicate pink porcelain held in a lattice of gently glowing blue lumenstone. Beyond the porcelain's translucent surface, the drone's internal components could just be made out; shadows beneath its thin ceramic skin. Its aura field, confined to a small volume directly underneath its flat base, was a soft blush of magenta, which, if Kabe recalled correctly, meant it was busy. Busy talking to him? "Tersono," he said. "Yes. Well, you did invite me." "Indeed I did. Do you know, it occurred to me only later that you might misinterpret my invitation as some sort of summons, even as an imperious demand. Of course, once these things are sent..." "Ho-ho. You mean it wasn't a demand?" "More of a petition. You see, I have a favor to ask you." "You do?" This was a first. "Yes. I wonder if we might talk somewhere we'd have a little more privacy?" "Privacy, thought Kabe. That was a word you didn't hear very often in the Culture. Probably more used in a sexual context than any other. And not always even then." "Of course," he said. "Lead on." "Thank you," the drone said, floating toward the stern and rising to look over the heads of the people gathered in the function space. The machine turned this way and that, making it clear it was looking for something or someone. "Actually," it said quietly, "we are not yet quite quorate... Ah. Here we are. Please; this way, Ar Ischloear." They approached a group of humans centered on the Mahrai Ziller. The Chelgrian was nearly as long as Kabe was tall, and covered in fur that varied from white around his face to dark brown on his back. He had a predator's build, with large forward-facing eyes set in a big, broad-jawed head. His rear legs were long and powerful; a striped tail, woven about with silver chain, curved between them. Where his distant ancestors would have had two middle-legs, Ziller had a single broad midlimb, partially covered by a dark waistcoat. His arms were much like a human's, though covered in golden fur and ending in broad, six-digit hands more like paws. Almost as soon as he and Tersono joined the group around Ziller, Kabe found himself engulfed by another confusing babble of conversation. " -- of course you don't know what I mean. You have no context." "Preposterous. Everybody has a context." "No. You have a situation, an environment. That is not the same thing. You exist. I would hardly deny you that." "Well, thanks." "Yeah. Otherwise you'd be talking to yourself." "You're saying we don't really live, is that it?" "That

depends what you mean by live. But let's say yes." "How fascinating, my dear Ziller," E. H. Tersono said. "I wonder -- " "Because we don't suffer." "Because you scarcely seem capable of suffering." "Well said! Now, Ziller -- " "Oh, this is such an ancient argument..." "But it's only the ability to suffer that -- " "Hey! I've suffered! Lemil Kimp broke my heart." "Shut up, Tulyi." -- you know, that makes you sentient, or whatever. It's not actually suffering." "But she did!" "An ancient argument, you said, Ms. Sippens?" "Yes." "Ancient meaning bad?" "Ancient meaning discredited." "Discredited? By whom?" "Not whom. What." "And that what would be...?" "Statistics." "So there we are. Statistics. Now then, Ziller, my dear friend -- " "You are not serious." "I think she thinks she is more serious than you, Zil." "Suffering demeans more than it ennobles." "And this is a statement derived wholly from these statistics?" "No. I think you'll find a moral intelligence is required as well." "A prerequisite in polite society, I'm sure we'd all agree. Now, Ziller -- " "A moral intelligence which instructs us that all suffering is bad." "No. A moral intelligence which will incline to treat suffering as bad until proved good." "Ah! So you admit that suffering can be good." "Exceptionally." "Ha." "Oh, nice." "What?" "Did you know that works in several different languages?" "What? What does?" "Tersono," Ziller said, turning at last to the drone, which had lowered itself to his shoulder level and edged closer and closer as it had tried to attract the Chelgrian's attention over the past few moments, during which time its aura field had just started to shade into the blue-gray of politely held-in-check frustration. Mahrai Ziller, composer, half outcast, half exile, rose from his crouch and balanced on his rear haunches. His midlimb made a shelf briefly and he put his drink down on the smoothly furred surface while he used his forelimbs to straighten his waistcoat and comb his brows. "Help me," he said to the drone. "I am trying to make a serious point and your compatriot indulges in word play." "Then I suggest you fall back and regroup and hope to catch her again later when she is in a less trenchantly flippant mood. You've met Ar Kabe Ischloear?" "I have. We are old acquaintances. Ambassador." "You dignify me, sir," the Homomdan rumbled. "I am more of a journalist." "Yes, they do tend to call us all ambassadors, don't they? I'm sure it's meant to be flattering." "No doubt. They mean well." "They mean ambiguously, sometimes," Ziller said, turning briefly to the woman he had been talking to. She raised her glass and bowed her head a fraction. "When you two have entirely finished criticizing your determinedly generous hosts..." Tersono said. "This would be the private word you mentioned, would it?" Ziller asked. "Precisely. Indulge an eccentric drone." "Very well." "This way." The drone continued past the line of food tables toward the stern of the barge. Ziller followed the machine, seeming to flow along the polished deck, lithely graceful on his single broad midlimb and two strong rear legs. The composer still had his crystal full of wine balanced effortlessly in one hand, Kabe noticed. Ziller used his other hand to wave at a couple of people who nodded to or greeted him as they passed. Kabe felt very heavy and lumbering in comparison. He tried drawing himself up to his full height so as to appear less stockily massive, but nearly collided with a very old and complicated light fitting hanging from the ceiling. The three sat in a cabin which extended from the stern of the great barge, looking out over the ink-dark waters of the canal. Ziller had folded himself onto a low table, Kabe squatted comfortably on some cushions on the deck and Tersono rested on a delicate-looking and apparently very old webwood chair. Kabe had known the drone Tersono for all the ten years he had spent on Masaq' Orbital, and had noticed early on that it liked to surround itself with old things; this antique barge, for example, and the ancient furniture and fittings it contained. Even the machine's physical makeup spoke of a sort of antiquarianism. It was a generally reliable rule that the bigger a Culture drone appeared, the older it was. The first examples, dating from eight or nine thousand years ago, had been the size of a bulky human. Subsequent models had gradually shrunk until the most advanced drones had, for some time, been small enough to slip into a pocket. Tersono's meter-tall body might have suggested that it had been constructed millennia ago when in fact it was only a few centuries old, and the extra space it took up was accounted for by the separation of its internal components, the better to exhibit the fine translucency of its unorthodox ceramic shell. Ziller finished his drink and took a pipe from his waistcoat. He sucked on it until a little smoke rose from the bowl while the drone exchanged pleasantries with the Homomdan. The composer was still trying to blow smoke rings when Tersono finally said, "...which brings me to my motive in asking you both here." "And what would that be?" Ziller asked. "We are expecting a guest, Composer Ziller." Ziller gazed levelly at the drone. He looked around the broad cabin and stared at the door. "What, now? Who?" "Not now. In about thirty or forty days. I'm afraid we don't know exactly who quite yet. But it will be one of your people, Ziller. Someone from Chel. A Chelgrian." Ziller's face consisted of a furred dome with two large, black, almost semicircular eyes positioned above a gray-pink, furless nasal area and a large, partially prehensile mouth. There was an expression on it now that Kabe had never seen before, though admittedly he

had known the Chelgrian only casually and for less than a year. "Coming here?" Ziller asked. His voice was...icy, was the word, decided Kabe. "Indeed. To this Orbital, possibly to this Plate." Ziller's mouth worked.

"Caste?" he said. The word was more spat than pronounced. "One of the...Tacted? Possibly a Given," Tersono said smoothly. Of course. Their caste system. At least part of the reason that Ziller was here and not there. Ziller studied his pipe and blew more smoke. "Possibly a Given, eh?" he muttered. "My, you are honored. Hope you get your etiquette exquisitely correct. You'd better start practicing now." "We believe this person may be coming here to see you," the drone said. It turned frictionlessly in the webwood seat and extended a maniple field to work the cords which lowered the gold cloth drapes over the windows, cutting off the view to the dark canal and the snow-enfolded quays. Ziller tapped the bowl of his pipe, frowning at it.

"Really?" he said. "Oh dear. What a shame. I was thinking of embarking on a cruise before then. Deep space. For at least half a year. Perhaps longer. In fact I had quite decided upon it. You will convey my apologies to whatever simpering diplomat or supercilious noble they're sending. I'm sure they'll understand." The drone dropped its voice. "I'm sure they won't." "Me too. I was being ironic. But I'm serious about the cruise." "Ziller," the drone said quietly. "They want to meet with you. Even if you did leave on a cruise, they would doubtless attempt to follow you and meet up on the cruise ship." "And of course you wouldn't try to stop them." "How could we?" Ziller sucked on his pipe for a moment. "I suppose they want me to go back. Do they?" The drone's gunmetal aura indicated puzzlement. "We don't know." "Really?" "Cr. Ziller, I am being perfectly open with you." "Really. Well, can you think of another reason for this expedition?" "Many, my dear friend, but none of them are especially likely. As I said, we don't know. However, if I was forced to speculate, I'd tend to agree with you that requesting your return to Chel is probably the main reason for the impending visit." Ziller chewed on his pipe stem. Kabe wondered if it would break. "You can't force me to go back." "My dear Ziller, we wouldn't even think of suggesting to you that you do," the drone said. "This emissary may wish do so, but the decision is entirely yours. You are an honored and respected guest, Ziller. Culture citizenship, to the extent that such a thing really exists with any degree of formality, would be yours by assumption. Your many admirers, among whose number I count myself, would long ago have made it yours by acclamation, if only that would not have seemed presumptuous." Ziller nodded thoughtfully. Kabe wondered if this was a natural expression for a Chelgrian, or a learned, translated one. "Very flattering," Ziller said. Kabe had the impression the creature was genuinely trying to sound gracious. "However, I am still Chelgrian. Not quite naturalized yet." "Of course. Your presence is trophy enough. To declare this your home would be -- " "Excessive," Ziller said pointedly. The drone's aura field flushed a sort of muddy cream color to indicate embarrassment, though a few flecks of red indicated it was hardly acute. Kabe cleared his throat. The drone turned to him. "Tersono," the Homomdan said. "I'm not entirely sure why I'm here, but may I just ask whether, in all this, you are talking as a representative of Contact?" "Of course you may. Yes, I am speaking on behalf of the Contact section. And with the full co-operation of Masaq' Hub." "I am not without friends, admirers," Ziller said suddenly, staring at the drone. "Without?" Tersono said, field glowing a ruddy orange. "Why, as I say, you have almost nothing but -- " "I mean among some of your Minds; your ships, Tersono the Contact drone," Ziller said coldly. The machine rocked back in its chair. A little melodramatic, thought Kabe. Ziller went on, "I might well be able to persuade one of them to accommodate me and provide me with my own private cruise. One which this emissary might find much more difficult to intrude upon." The drone's aura lapsed back to purple. It wobbled minutely in the chair. "You are welcome to try, my dear Ziller. However, that might be taken as a terrible insult." "Fuck them." "Yes, well. But I meant by us. A terrible insult on our part. An insult so terrible that in the very sad and regrettable circumstances -- " "Oh, spare me." Ziller looked away. Ah yes, the war, thought Kabe. And the responsibility for it. Contact would regard this as all very delicate. The drone, misted in purple, went quiet for a moment. Kabe shifted on his cushions. "The point is," Tersono continued, "that even the most willful and, ah, characterful of ships might not accede to the sort of request you have indicated you might make. In fact I'd wager quite heavily on it that they wouldn't." Ziller chewed some more on his pipe. It had gone out. "Which means that Contact has already fixed this, doesn't it?" Tersono wobbled again. "Let's just say that the wind has been tested." "Yes, let's. Of course, this is always assuming that none of your ship Minds were lying." "Oh, they never lie. They dissemble, evade, prevaricate, confound, confuse, distract, obscure, subtly misrepresent and willfully misunderstand with what often appears to be a positively gleeful relish and are generally perfectly capable of contriving to give one an utterly unambiguous impression of their future course of action while in fact intending to do exactly the opposite, but they never lie. Perish the thought." Ziller did a good stare, Kabe decided. He was quite glad that those big, dark eyes were not directed

at him. Though, certainly, the drone seemed impervious. "I see," the composer said. "Well then, I suppose I might as well just stay put. I imagine I could just refuse to leave my apartment." "Why, of course. Not very dignified, perhaps, but that would be your prerogative." "Quite. But if I'm given no choice don't expect me to be welcoming, or even polite." He inspected the bowl of his pipe. "That is why I asked Kabe to be here." The drone turned to the Homomdan. "Kabe, we would be so grateful if you'd agree to help play host to our guest Chelgrian when he or she appears. You would be half of a double act with me, possibly with some assistance from Hub, if that's acceptable. We don't yet know how much time this will take up on a daily basis, or how long the visit will last, but obviously if it proved to be extended we would make additional arrangements." The machine's body tipped a few degrees to one side in the webwood chair. "Would you do this? I know it is a lot to ask and you needn't give a definitive answer quite yet; sleep on it if you please and ask for any further information you'd like. But you would be doing us a great favor, given Cr. Ziller's perfectly understandable reticence." Kabe sat back on his cushions. He blinked a few times. "Oh, I can tell you now. I'd be happy to be of help." He looked at Ziller. "Of course, I wouldn't want to distress Mahrai Ziller..." "I shall remain undistressed, depend on it," Ziller told him. "If you can distract this bile-purse they're sending you'll be doing me a favor, too." The drone made a sighing noise, rising and falling fractionally above the seat. "Well, that is...satisfactory, then. Kabe, can we talk more tomorrow? We'd like to brief you over the next few days. Nothing too intense, but, considering the unfortunate circumstances of our relationship with the Chelgrians over recent years, obviously we don't want to present a less glorious incident of a long-ago war. It led to the destruction of two suns and the billions of lives they supported. Now, eight hundred years later, the light from the first of those ancient mistakes has reached the Culture Orbital, Masaq'. The light from the second may not.'Confirms Banks as the standard by which the rest of SF is judged' GUARDIAN'In terms of sheer storytelling prowess and verve, Look to Windward is a work of genius' SFX'A great book' NEW SCIENTIST