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ROBERT SILVERBERG

NEW DIMENSIONS IV

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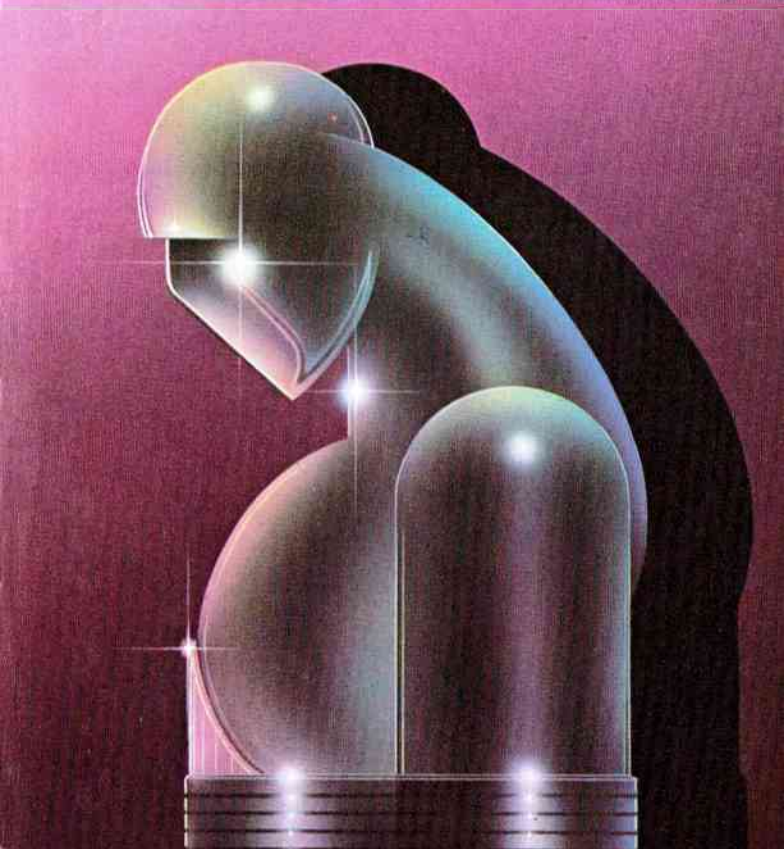

"People of Earth Beware!"

"We, the people of the Crab Nebula, have come and Earth is ours. This planet will be run for the benefit of the people of the Crab Nebula. Resistance is useless. Seventy-five out of every hundred humans will die. The rest will continue to live as before, though under the explicit direction of our people. Behave and you will be treated accordingly. Resist and you will die . . . !"

The ultimatum had been issued. Were there any who would fight for Earth?

—from *The Bible After Apocalypse*

New Dimensions IV

Edited by
ROBERT SILVERBERG

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New Dimensions IV

This is the fourth in a series of annual collections dedicated to presenting the most striking and original science-fiction of our time. No stories in *New Dimensions* have ever been published before. The authors range from brilliant newcomers to experienced veterans; the one thing they have in common is a desire to break new ground, to discover new ways of approaching the body of ideas, images, and concepts that is science fiction. Old formulas and weary clichés are unwelcome here; *New Dimensions* looks for writers whose visions are exciting and unique.

New Dimensions is edited by Robert Silverberg, himself one of science-fiction's best-known writers, author of such novels as *The World Inside, A Time of Changes,* and *Downward to the Earth.* Mr. Silverberg has won science fiction's prized Hugo and Nebula awards a number of times and is a past president of the Science Fiction Writers of America.

Contents

After the Dreamtime

Richard A. Lupoff

Richard A. Lupoff, after a dozen years in the East as a minion of IBM, lives now in Berkeley, California, in a pleasant house full of children, dogs, cats, old books and magazines, and phonograph records, and makes his way happily as a free-lance writer. He is an authority on, among other things, early comics, paleolithic science-fiction novels, rock music, and the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs. His published work includes, apart from nonfiction items on several of the aforementioned subjects, three novels so far— One Million Centuries *(1967),* Sacred Locomotive Flies *(1971), and* Thintwhistle on the Moon *(1974)—and the extraordinary, much-acclaimed novella "With the Bentfin Boomer Boys on Little Old New Alabama," in* Again, Dangerous Visions. *He makes his* New Dimensions *debut with a rich, powerful tale of aboriginal astronauts and tall-masted starships that is likely to remain a long while in readers' memories.*

No, I do not see that membrane ships very closely resemble the clippers that long ago plied the living oceans of earth, those mighty windjammers that stood so tall above the ever-moving brine, their shafty masts thrusting canvas squares high into earth's salt-tanged air. Possibly our captain, Nurundere, would have something to say on the topic; he is learned in history, law and custom. Or better yet—but no, I forget myself, old Wuluwaid will tell you nothing.

Wuluwaid is gone; our modern outlook would mark him simply dead. The older religions would mumble of heaven, or reincarnation. Nurundere, our captain ... now, he might have something other to say of the fate of Wuluwaid. In the

tradition of our people, he might well say that Wuluwaid had returned to the Dreamtime.

I respect the ancient traditions. I would rather believe in the Dreamtime than in any heaven or the workings of the great wheel of karma, but what I believe in actually is very little.

"Jiritzu," old Wuluwaíd used to say to me, "you lack all regard for your ancestry and for the traditions of our people. What will become of you and your Kunapi half Dua? For what did my Bunbulama and I raise our beautiful Miralaidj—to marry a lazy modern who cares nothing for the Aranda, who thinks that maraiin are mere decorations, who can hardly read a tjurunga?

"She might as well marry a piece of meat!" And saying this old Wuluwaid would grimace, reminded by his own speech of the grayness of his skin, and I would embrace him. He would take my face between his two hands, rubbing my cheeks as if some of the blackness would be absorbed into his own melanin-poor cells, then sigh and mutter, "Soon I will be with my Bunbulama, and you will sail the membrane ships with my Miralaidj and she will bear you beautiful sons and daughters to carry on the line of the Aranda and to sail the membrane ships after you."

Wuluwaid envied me, I know. We were the sailors of the star-winds, we the Aranda and the Kunapi. We few thousands who owned a world, Yurakosi, where our old folk go to live when they become grayed-out, caring for the children too young for space. The rest of us, our melanin-rich skins protecting us from the hard radiations of space, were the select of all mankind.

We alone, we few thousand, can sail the membrane ships, working their decks and masts all but naked to the stars. Others envy our gift, blasting from sun to sun sealed in iron boxes, venturing out only when clad in clumsy, clanking spacesuits . . . and we in trousers and sweaters, the only living beings we know of who can survive as we are in deep space, sustained only by a close-air generator the size of a hand strapped to one leg.

Back on the mother planet earth our distant ancestors had been separated by some trick of geography, cut off from human crossbreeding and left to survive beneath the burning sky of the old Australian continent. Blackfellows, the other earthers called our ancestors when they found them after an

isolation of twenty-five thousand years. Blackfellows, aborigines, or—confusing our ancestors with another black race of earth—bushmen.

Great Mother knows there were plenty of other blacks on the old earth. (There, Wuluwaid would be pleased with me; I call on the name "Great Mother" for strength even though I claim no belief in the old mythology of the Dreamtime.) There were peoples in old Africa, old Asia, with as much dark pigment in their skin as we have in ours. But among our people there was some subtle difference, some microscopic chemical variation that was amplified by the hard radiation of space. Other humans would sicken and die in the raw blast of the cosmos. We alone could thrive. Only slowly, in the course of many years, does the solar wind, the cosmic radiation, break down our melanin.

Then we gray out. Then we can travel in space no longer on the decks, in the masts and the rigging of the membrane ships. Then to venture outside the protection of a passenger tank we would need to wear spacesuits, like other men. The decks are still open, but in a spacesuit one cannot work the lines properly, and even if one could—what point in thumping about like a leaden automaton in the midst of grace and freedom?

Sail in a spacesuit? No sky-hero has ever so chosen. Space is not closed even then to us. We can travel with the meat, we can loll in the comfort of the passenger tank along with the men and women whom we carry like freight in the passenger tanks of our membrane ships.

We can—but who would travel with the meat, who had ever sailed the night between the stars?

You have never done it and never shall. You cannot know one minnow's worth of the experience. You have seen representations, re-creations, of membrane ships, but they are feeble attempts to communicate the experience.

Start with a rod of collapsed matter, matter incredibly dense yet drawn so thin that it cannot exercise the usual property of its kind, of capturing all matter nearby and even all radiation, and crushing them to itself. The rod that lies at the heart of each membrane ship is so thin that it is barely visible—beside it a pencil lead is an incredibly fat cylinder, even a fine electronic wire is a gross and clumsy thing. A rod of collapsed matter drawn so thin that it is virtually invisible—straight as a plumb line and two hundred meters long.

At each end a matter converter, a small device using the agonized matter principle to convert a tiny chunk of the rod into pure energy, enough energy to start a membrane ship on her way from port-orbit upon her interstellar journey, or at the end of that journey to brake her from interstellar speed and permit her to achieve port-orbit and unload.

Around that rod, place a structure of flat decking material, arbitrary in width, a hundred eighty meters in length, making a triangle in cross section, and around it a cylinder of this radiation shielding running the length of the ship. That makes the passenger tank: three gigantic rooms, flat of floor, their floors mounted at three-hundred degree angles to one another, sharing a common, curving roof.

There the meat stays during a voyage. They can come onto the deck to inspect cargo if they wish—some shippers insist on riding with their cargo and inspecting it periodically throughout a voyage—but what good is that? Clad in huge and cumbersome spacesuits like the repair crews of ordinary ships, they peer at us sailors in amazement and envy—we return their stares, our faces showing our pity and contempt—and then they crawl clumsily back through the airlocks into their tank.

When I am grayed-out—if I am grayed-out, I should say, for I am not in the least certain that I will live that long, that I will choose to live that long—when I am grayed-out I will ration out my last melanin carefully, making certain that I can sail back to Yurakosi as a man, not as a piece of meat. I will debark at Port Bralku, I will turn, still wearing sailor's garb, and wave farewell to the Kunapi and the Aranda aboard whatever membrane ship I have sailed. I will board a little shuttle craft and return to the surface of Yurakosi, and I will find myself a little house, perhaps at Snake Bay or Blue Mud Bay, and I will build myself a sailing canoe, and I will be a water sailor when I can no longer be a space sailor.

Never will I travel as meat.

Perhaps I will go to visit Wuluwaid's Bunbulama if she is still alive by then. She will be very old then if she is still alive. I will sit by her side holding her grayed-out hand in my grayed-out hand, and we will speak of her Wuluwaid and of her beautiful dead Miralaidj, and together we will weep. Perhaps my Kunapi half Dua will be with us then. Bunbulama will hold me and say, "Ah, Jiritzu, now we are alone. Now whom have we to love?"

Childlessness is unusual among us. There is rivalry between the Aranda and the Kunapi to grow more numerous, but there is no serious wishing of ill between the tribes. There is need for us; no other race of mankind can sail the membrane ships. Without us there would be only the huge clumsy sealed ships that other men can manage, ships constructed all of sealed and shielded tanks where men travel between the stars like bits of canned dingo-meal.

Bunbulama does not know that she is alone. She thinks that her man and her daughter are sailing the *Djanggawul* on the great path from Yurakosi to N'Jaja to pick up passengers, thence by way of Yirrkalla to make the great tack at the place of the triple suns, from there to Nala to deposit our burden of meat, and onward by way of old earth before returning to Yurakosi.

Djanggawul will brake as she approaches our sun, will swing into docking orbit at Port Bralku, sailors will make planetfall along with a cargo of trade goods, families will be reunited. Bunbulama will await sight of Wuluwaid her man and Miralaidj her child, but they are in the Dreamtime and she will not see them again on Yurakosi.

If I return to Yurakosi, I will bear her the word of what took place on this voyage. Otherwise the duty will fall to Dua, Kunapi, my friend. That I would not envy him.

I will not flee, I will not transfer to another ship nor make planetfall at any world other than Yurakosi. Not even at old earth, although I would like to set foot on the soil of Australia, would like to sail a ship on an ocean of old earth. But I will bear news to Bunbulama if I am not myself by then in the Dreamtime. If I am, Dua will carry word to Bunbulama on our world.

Our journey started well enough. On their little mudballs the meat were warring again. Old earth remained aloof, her concern turned inward as it had been since the fast ships had first permitted the escape of her nations to the stars, to find new planets of their own on which to plant their banners of nationhood or religious tyranny or politics.

The great nations of old earth had been dismembered, their petty successors had seen opportunity for new glory out among the stars. Whole worlds had beckoned, an infinity of planets among which to choose. No matter that on nearly all the climate was too cold or too hot, the atmosphere poisonous, the land too dry or too rocky or the sea too deep.

Move on, seek another world, seek another star. Great Mother had made enough worlds in the Dreamtime; man could now seek and find as many homes as he wanted.

But where men went, except for the Aranda and the Kunapi, it was as meat only.

Old earth grew more and more deserted, save for those few tribes whose tradition made them love the land itself. These stragglers spread out of their ancient home, what they called the Middle East, and covered the globe. Their interests were inward. They set a satellite dock above their world, called it Port Hussein, and did some trade with the new worlds.

As they still do, of course.

But their interest is the earth.

And the *Djanggawul,* like the other membrane ships, plied between the stars, carrying meat, carrying freight, faster and cheaper than the clumsy sealed ships of other men.

If the meat on their little mudballs went to war, it was of little concern to Yurakosi. The ships of the Aranda and the Kunapi traded with the meat, carried the meat about as they wished. Their money was good; with it we obtained the trade goods that made life on Yurakosi comfortable for the old people who spent their grayed-out years there and for the children whose early days were passed also on the planet, husbanding their precious melanin against the day when they might sail the membrane ships.

We braked to docking-orbit at Port Upatoi, the satellite of N'Jaja. The port workers were of course meat, tending their tasks as much as they can within the sheltering walls of their little artificial moonlet, venturing out from those walls into the vacuum and radiation of space only when they must, only when clad in the clumsy sealed suits that meat always wear in space.

The sailors of the *Djanggawul* scurried about on the masts and the spars of our ship, glorying in the beauties of space. Of course our sails were furled—no need for membrane when the braking power of agonized matter is used, any more than there is when that same power is used to break orbit and commence an interstellar journey.

And of course the delicacy of the membrane is such that we would hesitate to leave it unfurled during docking or undocking maneuvers.

It is only when the journey is once under way that the

matter converter is switched off—the use of the converter is little more than an auxiliary in any case—and the sails are unfurled.

Tall and thin, the masts rise from the passenger tank, standing far above the body of our ship. This, I think, is what makes some antiquarians compare our craft to the clippers of earth's seas. But while they rested atop their watery medium, their masts rising only upward from the sea, our ships are immersed in their medium of space, and we are free to build our masts out in all directions.

The masts rise, ringing the passenger tank like spokes from a hub, and from the masts there spring spars, and from the spars are hung the membranes with which we catch the star winds and sail between the suns.

Sailors is what we are, sailors and the sky-heroes of our people's tradition. Still we affect the scarification of our skin in the traditional maraïin, the sacred patterns of the Great Desert, of Arnhem Land whence our ancestors came to space. And still we dress in the garb of old earth's sailors—some think this vain affectation. Wuluwaid clung fiercely to it and was pleased that I showed willingness to wear the woolen cap, the heavy sweater and white duck trousers of tradition.

With both Wuluwaid and Miralaidj gone to the Dreamtime, will I be a sailor longer?

As we made dock at Port Upatoi, N'Jaja, I was off watch. I climbed a tall mast and sat on a spar, careful of the furled membrane even in its protective case—membranes are expensive as well as fragile. My sweetheart Miralaidj was beside me, it being her time off watch as well as mine.

Even now I can see her face as it was at that moment—the light upon her was the reflected light of the dayside of N'Jaja, a world of mottled green forestation, red earth and blue oceans. Miralaidj sat beside me on the spar, hundreds of meters above the passenger tank. Her face was the blackest of black, rich with the generous melanin of youth. Her hair, long and glossy, hung in braids that would be no handicap to work or play. Her body filled her thick-knit sweater and tight trousers, every graceful line filling me with love for her, eagerness for our wedding and the days of the birth of our children.

Had we been other than sky-heroes we would have worn the heavy protective spacesuits that other spacemen need. But we of Yurakosi, protected from the radiation by our al-

tered melanin, breath and pressure provided by our close-air generators, we alone of all mankind enter space as ourselves. As creatures to whom deep space is very nearly a natural habitat.

For as long as our melanin lasts, we can penetrate to the deepest part of the void—naked if we wish, although that is not the custom of our people. In most ancient times, in old Australia's deserts, our ancestors went naked. But once we became sea sailors on earth we began to wear clothing of the sort that still we wear as space sailors.

I placed my hand on the face of my sweetheart Miralaidj, with my fingertips tracing the maraiin raised there in her infancy, its swirls and symbolic patterns bearing their secret meaning known only to her, different from those of any other person. When we were married, she would tell me the meaning of her maraiin and I would tell her the meaning of mine.

Both of us had turned off our radios—we were out of touch with the rest of the crew of the *Djanggawul* and out of the communication net that by now would link our ship with Port Upatoi. We could speak with each other only by leaning close so that our close-air envelopes overlapped, carrying ordinary sound waves between us.

I checked the dial on the close-air generator on my leg. The miniature digital clock face indicated that there was an ample supply of close-air for me. Miralaidj smiled as I leaned over her own generator, checking the security of its straps, the digital indicator on the face of the generator, to see that she too had a safe margin of air with her.

She placed her cheek beside mine, her mouth close to my ear, and said, "You take good care of me, Jiritzu. Without you I would surely forget my air!" There was irony in her voice, but a sweet warmth as well. She drew back laughing, the sound that carried through the close-air to my ears disappearing as our air envelopes separated.

I seized her hands for a moment, a trace of the laughter returning as the sound waves were carried through her air envelope into mine where they were joined at our hands, and thence to my ears. "I will always take care of you," I said, knowing that my words were reaching her only faintly after traveling through the air down my arms and up hers.

"If harm befell you," I said, "I would have to contend with the vengeance of Wuluwaid!" As if it were her father whose

favor mattered to me and not my sweetheart's own. It was a standing joke between us.

"You know old Wuluwaid," Miralaidj rejoined. "He is so caught up in duty and tradition, he cares more about meat than about the Aranda."

"I know," I said—and there was some truth in that. Wuluwaid often said that the care of passengers was a sacred trust, that it was a charge to the Aranda and the Kunapi from the Great Mother herself, to transport those less fortunate than ourselves safely from one little mudball to another little mudball. Only we could know the joy of living in space—let the little crawlers have their safety and their wars.

"Look!" Miralaidj cried, holding her hand to my ear to conduct the sound. "Look, the shuttle!"

There beneath us a triangular craft had made its appearance. How long it had been climbing through the atmosphere of N'Jaja was of no concern: now it had burst from the air envelope, achieved orbit, and was itself approaching Port Upatoi to dock. Its thick body, its carefully rounded edges, its airfoil design all spoke of the clumsy hybrid duty which it served, rising through the atmosphere of a planet, entering orbit, carrying passengers or trade goods to the port . . . then dropping away, falling back into atmosphere, skipping across the top of the planet's air globe, constantly losing speed until it could fully re-enter the atmosphere and glide to a landing.

Neither true aircraft nor true spacecraft, the shuttle served as both, served clumsily but performed its task.

And now, where Miralaidj pointed her slender black finger, I could see the shuttle from N'Jaja approaching Port Upatoi. Behind it sputtered a tiny tail of reaction stuff—not even agonized matter for these little trips—and from time to time there would be a tinier spurt of vernier engines to make a minor course adjustment.

Wuluwaid, as his daughter had said, was down in the passenger tank, awaiting the arrival of the meat. He would know, as we all did, that the meat would be dressed in their heavy space suits, that they would clump through the airlocks and corridors of Port Upatoi and make their way to the airlock and the passenger tank of our ship, the *Djanggawul.* Normally this would be a slow process with halts and delays and the filling out of forms and stamping of documents, but not this time.

This was the assemblage of diplomats from a number of

planets, ambassadors plenipotentiary and their staffs and flunkies who would be attending some sort of war conference with many more of their ilk at our next stop, N'Ala.

Little concern to us. Let the planet-squirmers have their squabbles and fight their wars.

Miralaidj tapped me on the shoulder and pointed down the mast we had both climbed. Scrambling up its meager handholds I saw the form of little Bildjiwura, Miralaidj's Kunapi half, her closest friend, a girl just making her first sail. It was unusual for our people to permit halving of two persons so disparate in age—Miralaidj a full woman nearly ready for marriage, Bildjiwura a slim little thing more than five years her junior—but as a child Miralaidj had astounded her family and friends in their town of Kaitjouga by declining to select a half from among the Kunapi.

Miralaidj was a child of five, long since talking and reading, learning now her simple sums in school, when she saw the newborn Kunapi, Bildjiwura. "She is my half," Miralaidj had said, and that was the settling of the question.

She had helped in the raising of her little half, an unknown thing among our people where halves were always expected to be of an age. When Miralaidj's parents, Wuluwaid and Bunbulama, had sent for her to be taken into space with them, Bildjiwura had remained behind in Kaitjouga on Yurakosi. For five years the halves had been apart, another thing amazing to our people.

But now Bildjiwura was sailing aboard the *Djanggawul*, the halves were reunited, and I found myself occasionally burdened, more often delighted, with the presence of little Bildjiwura.

I stood on the spar Miralaidj and I had been sharing, lifted one foot and locked my ankles around the spar. I turned my radio on and tight-beamed a quick call to Bildjiwura.

Then I threw my weight forward, falling toward the passenger tank of the *Djanggawul* (and toward the bulk of N'Jaja below). My ankle swung me around the spar. Bildjiwura pushed herself upward from her handholds, flinging both arms straight ahead.

We caught hands. I swung on around the spar, Bildjiwura's mass adding to the momentum of our swing. When I was standing upright again I clutched tighter with my ankles, released one of Bildjiwura's hands—she was straight over my

head, now, feet uppermost—and grabbed the mast with my free hand.

Bildjiwura clutched my one hand even tighter, swung around our wrists as a fulcrum and landed on the spar beside me. She threw her arms around my waist and hung on, giggling and gasping for breath. For a moment it crossed my mind that she had a childish romantic feeling for me, but of course she was of the Kunapi, Miralaidj and I of the Aranda, and that was all that there could ever be of that.

We sat down on the spar again, Miralaidj, Bildjiwura and I. We all had our radios on now, and we could hear the proceedings down in the passenger tank even though we couldn't see what was going on.

Wuluwaid's voice we could hear, attending to the mechanics of the airlock and getting the meat inside; Captain Nurundere was of course present too. Everyone knew it would be old Wuluwaid's final sail—he had no intention of letting himself be treated like ballast; he was going to work every leg of the voyage. Captain Nurundere, of course, was duty-bound to welcome the meat aboard and see to their welfare.

Captain Nurundere and Wuluwaid had their radios on even though the atmosphere in the passenger tank would have carried their voices directly. Using their radios, they could be heard by the meat even before the passengers had removed their helmets—and also, our two officers, Nurundere of the Kunapi and his half Wuluwaid of the Aranda, could be heard by all of the crew of *Djanggawul,* a method of keeping us informed of everything that transpired. Our officers hold their positions by merit and experience, but officerships are merely jobs of sailors, no different from being a membrane rigger, a mess chef, or any other job. They are of no different class from other sailors, and have no right to special comforts or to keep secrets from the rest.

High on our spar, the blackness of space stretching above us and the radiance of N'Jaja below, Miralaidj and Bildjiwura and I listened to the actions in the passenger tank. We could hear the turnings, scraping and clanking of the airlock door, the hiss of free air moving from the tank into the lock, then being replenished from the reserve supplies of the tank.

Heavy metallic footsteps sounded as the meat emerged from the airlock into the passenger tank, their thick shoes rattling against the hard flooring, sending echoes off the curved metal roof. The number of clanks surprised me—the

N'Jajans and their allies were a far larger party than I had expected us to transport. But all for the best. The tank was large, more passengers meant more fare revenue for *Djanggawul* and ultimately more trade goods for Yurakosi.

When the last of the meat had come through the airlock and it had been resealed, Wuluwaid and two or three duty sailors moved to help the meat out of their helmets and suits. I could hear them working at this task, made needful by the clumsiness of the meat's protective garb and by the problems the meat would have in seeing inside the tank, through the heavily shielded faceplates of their helmets.

The first of the meat had his helmet off and (I could hear him clearly) exclaimed something as he caught sight of the sailor who had helped him off with his helmet. The meat's accent was thick and made understanding him difficult, but his words were something to the effect of "Bigawl Hands offa me, boy!"

I wondered who had been helping him. Baiame? Kutjara? Young sailors, but strange that the meat would think either of them a child. Well, perhaps a custom of N'Jaja.

Rasp! Thump! Other helmets came loose from their collars, more meat were helped from their clumsy protection. I heard Captain Nurundere address himself ceremoniously to the leader of the meat party. His voice correct, his words those dictated by the serious custom of Yurakosi space sailors, Captain Nurundere spoke:

"Welcome, honored passengers, to our ship, *Djanggawul.* Place yourselves in the care of sky-heroes. The Great Mother will guide and assist us in protecting you from demons."

I heard the brushing sound of Captain Nurundere drawing from his waistband his captain's rangga; in my spirit I could see him draw a maraiin in the air with his magic stick.

To my amazement I heard the voices of several of the strangers raised in laughter! Not that I myself believe seriously in the magic of the rangga, the sacredness of the maraiin patterns or the picture stories etched on our tjurunga. Not to believe is one thing, but to insult the sacred traditions of one's hosts by laughter—this was scandalous.

"You boys pretty funny!" I heard a stranger's voice speak. "Owzbow gettin an officer down hya swikn talk seriously?" It was difficult to understand parts of his speech.

But our officers seemed to understand. I heard our cap-

tain's voice. "I am Nurundere," he spoke formally, "I am the captain of *Djanggawul,* your protector and transporter, sir."

"Ya?" the stranger's voice came. "Ya? Ya bunch a nigras," he said, great astonishment sounding in his speech. "Zevvabody on this ship nigras?"

There was a moment without speech, only the sounds of shuffling feet and persons continuing to remove space suits, then the stranger went on, "Hey, you!"

I could not see his movements, but clearly he must have addressed himself to the captain's half, for the voice of Wuluwaid came through our radios. "I am the half of our captain," the old man said. "If I can assist our charges they need but explain their requirements."

"Yeh, you old boy," the stranger said. "You don't look lacka nigra. Wha's going on heeh?"

"Nigra?" Wuluwaid said. "I do not understand."

There was the sound of more shuffling, some murmuring among the new passengers, then I heard their leader speak once more. "You mean to tell me"—I wondered that his accent lapsed and resumed as it did—"that this whole ship . . . that the black boy is really the captain of this ship?"

I heard Wuluwaid make a sound in his throat as if deeply hurt by the words of the passenger. Then he said, "I regret that I am as grayed-out as you see me. My half Nurundere is more fortunate in his blackness."

"Ahdoe get it, ahdoe get it," the stranger's voice said. "But oreye, oreye."

Then there was some confused speech, as several of the meat spoke at once, men and women tumbling over one another's words. I heard chunks of sentences, words merely. "Na really nigras," one voice said, and another used the word "Australia."

I heard Captain Nurundere explain to the passengers, briefly but courteously, the background of the sky-heroes, a bit about our world Yurakosi and our ancestors on old earth.

Very shortly our sailors set about to withdraw from the tank. Wuluwaid made arrangement with the leader of the meat, a man called Ham Tamdje, to provide a mess chef for the tank. This is a negotiable part of any journey—we prefer to leave the meat to their own devices as much as is possible, but if they are willing to pay, and desire extra services such as cooking, we will provide the service.

Soon Captain Nurundere, old Wuluwaid, Baiame and

Kutjara were settled in the airlock. Through my radio I could hear the door sealed from the passenger tank. Then, from my post high on the spar with Miralaidj and Bildjiwura, I could see the airlock open, giving onto the deck of *Djanggawul*, and the four sailors emerge, one after another, Captain Nurundere first, his woolen cap pulled over his head, his face as he looked upward for a moment clearly showing in its partial grayness, then old Wuluwaid looking nearly white of skin, so far grayed-out was he, then the two young sailors Baiame and Kutjara.

They separated to their posts. I heard radio communication links becoming activated, the *Djanggawul* clearing with Port Upatoi control center. Every sailor on the ship must have had radio contact going with the net at that point, for without any command being issued from the captain or any other office, I could see the forms of sky-heroes swarming up and down masts, scattering across the decks of our ship, checking equipment, moving to duty stations preparatory to getting under way.

Miralaidj touched me in parting, dropped hand-under-hand down the mast, little Bildjiwura following close behind. She threw one glance quickly back to me and I could not restrain a smile before the two of them reached the deck.

Then I flung myself off the spar, diving headfirst for the deck below. There is no regulation against this kind of diving, and of course it is quite safe in deep space. A bit riskier in port, to be sure, but I was confident that I could gauge my acceleration and I flipped above the deck, landing with flexed knees, rolling once and springing erect again on the deck, my breath coming fast in my close-air envelope, my blood racing with the involuntary response of my body to the few seconds in free-fall.

This was the life of the sailor, the crewman of the membrane ship! The ground-squirmers who never leave their little mudballs, the seal-ship spacemen who man the heavy agonized-matter ships—what can any of them know of this moment?

I ran to the dogging locks that held *Djanggawul* to the lock of Port Upatoi, and with other Aranda and Kunapi worked the heavy locks and seals open. Our task completed, we moved to our voluntary stations as the *Djanggawul* made ready to move.

For myself I selected a handhold near the bow of our ship.

It was slightly precarious, and here in port where we hung momentarily within the gravity fields of both the artificial moonlet and N'Jaja itself there was none of the assurance that I would be carried along with the ship should my hand lose its purchase.

But no membrane sailor has ever been known to be lost under such circumstances—we of Yurakosi do not rely upon mechanical devices or elaborate regulations to assure our safety. Every Aranda and Kunapi is thoroughly schooled in the ways of space, everyone is expected to keep his or her body in condition, reflexes fast and mind alert, and to take responsibility for his own safety. Every sailor on *Djanggawul* knew that, from little Bildjiwura to old Wuluwaid, and each bore responsibility for himself.

At the stern of our craft I could see the agonized-matter conversion taking place—the converter at the tip of our rod of super-dense matter chewed off a microscopically small bit of the stuff, passed it through the terrible process, and gave off the brightly glowing cherry exhaust I had seen so many times before. *Djanggawul* began to move.

We pulled away from Port Upatoi. The gigantic disk of N'Jaja below us began to slide away. We were still in orbit of the planet even though we had broken dock with the artificial satellite. Now we moved faster and faster around the equator of the planet, pulling into higher and higher orbit as we swung around the globe.

By the time we reached the center of the nightside, cities gleaming like distant suns across the continental mass below us, we were ready to swing away. *Djanggawul* pointed her prow straight up, her tail directed at the center of the planet's mass, and with a final spurt of agonized matter the converter was switched off.

The ship was coasting now, N'Jaja's sun eclipsed for us by the bulk of the planet. Without need for any signal, the membrane riggers began scrambling up the masts to unfurl *Djanggawul*'s sails. By the time we had cleared N'Jaja's shadow, coasting on the speed of our matter-converter push, the sails would be spread and ready to catch the solar wind that would carry us to our tacking point near Yirrkalla.

But even before I began my work in the rigging I stood for a moment on a spar, one hand braced against the mast, gazing straight ahead of *Djanggawul* in the direction of Yirrkalla. The sight was one I had seen countless times in my

life as a sky-hero, but still it brought my blood to a rush and made my heart pound with a sheer thrill.

The far stars and galaxies were spread before us: the seven stars that early sky-heroes had seen as the beak, eye, fins, gill and tail of the Baramundi fish; the swirls of glowing intergalactic dust whose colors had suggested our legendary Rainbow Serpent; the formations of the Greater and Lesser Wallaby. I stood for a moment with my radio switched off, a mere score centimeters of close-air separating me from the endless void, the silence of the galaxies filling my ears and their splendor my eyes, and I wondered.

What is it like to be an ordinary man?

Were one not born to sail a membrane ship, were the cells of one's skin not blessed with protective melanin that permits us of Yurakosi to do without radiation shielding, what meaning would there be in life?

And in that distant time when I was fully grayed-out—how could I face the life of a ground-squirmer, even on Yurakosi where sky-heroes could retire with honor? I saw myself, then, husband to Miralaidj, father of many sons and daughters who would sail membrane ships. Perhaps Bunbulama lived through her child; Wuluwaid would do the same after this voyage was complete. But to be an ordinary human, to travel as meat on a membrane ship, knowing sky-heroes, knowing of their lives but unable to share their experiences—what could it be like?

I looked back at the deck of *Djanggawul,* saw my fellow sailors working busily to rig our sails for the solar wind. I switched on my radio, caught the flow and rhythm of work, joined in. Our work was strenuous and precise, a joy to perform. By the time it was finished the crew were ready to assemble on deck for the day's ration of grog.

There is no day or night in deep space, so deck lights and rigging lights glow throughout a journey. To keep the ship working the crew are divided into watches, each watch with its own officers and the captain, a member of no watch, held responsible for the conduct of all.

Sky-heroes are few and precious to humanity; their safety on voyages is placed above all else except the welfare of meat, for the tradition of Yurakosi holds that the host must extend himself to any degree to safeguard his guest, and passengers are our guests aboard the membrane ships even though they pay for that privilege.

The annals of Yurakosi bear no greater shame than the

story of Elyun El-Kumarbis, a Pan-Semite of old earth who bought passage on the membrane ship *Makarata* sailing the great ellipse route from NGC 7002 to Al-ghoul Phi. A black man of Ghanaian descent, Elyun purchased sailor's garb and a close-air generator and donned them in a private room at Port Hussein.

When he boarded *Makarata* along with the other passengers, wearing a standard protective spacesuit, no one could tell the difference. Inside the passenger tank of *Makarata* he found an inconspicuous corner, removed his spacesuit, mingled with a group of crewmen who had entered the tank to perform routine tasks, and exited to the deck along with them.

Elyun El-Kumarbis managed to stay on deck for nearly a quarter-hour before he collapsed from radiation and was found out. He was carried below deck and treated at once by the ship's medical officer, but of course he died within the hour. The captain and watch officer responsible for the incident were immediately ordered by vote of the crew to spend the rest of the voyage as meat. When they reached Yurakosi they were immediately shuttled down to the surface and never again permitted to leave the planet, although both had many years of melanin still in their skin.

But Elyun El-Kumarbis, tradition tells, spent that last hour of his life raving over the beauty and the joy he had experienced. His last words were given to begging that he be permitted upon deck again, which was not done, or that he be buried in space, which request was met.

Three standard days—merely a matter of watches, of course—after *Djanggawul* left Port Upatoi the captain announced a ceremonial dinner in honor of the ship's passengers. The tank had been furnished, in accord with the passengers' wishes, in luxurious style. One deck was devoted to dining salons, a bar, a lounge and an entertainment area. A second was partitioned into private quarters for the N'Jajans and their guests. The third was set up as an artificial outdoor environment, with thick plant life and even a small constructed lake.

With Nurundere at our head, wearing ceremonial crimson plumes in keeping with the ancient Aranda practice, a group of men and women from the crew trooped through the deck airlock and emerged into the passenger tank. Our chefs had taken over the passenger galley for hours before the meal, preparing a lavish dinner of old-style dishes.

The table was set with places for Aranda and Kunapi on one side of a long white-covered board, N'Jajan and other meat on the other.

Captain Nurundere's seat was at the center of the long table, on a small dais; opposite him sat the senior member of the party of passengers, a N'Jajan ambassador called Ham Tamdje who was traveling to the big war conference on N'Ala.

Captain Nurundere stood at the beginning of the meal: a tall, imposing man, still with the mark of the sky-hero on his face despite the loss of most of his melanin, his clothing a set of common sailor's garments with only the head-plumes of the ancient Australian chieftain to mark his rank.

Opposite him stood the N'Jajan Ham Tamdje, a man with too much flesh on his face, pale skin marked with red veins in his cheeks and on his nose. He wore a suit of some local cloth from his home world, a sort of yellowish vanilla color, with a white shirt and a piece of colored cloth knotted around his neck.

The crew women in our party were dressed as were the men. Those of the meat wore odd gowns that hung to the floor, most of them also coming only partway over their bosoms; the effect was altogether as if their clothing was hung three or four handbreadths lower than intended, and threatened to fall off them at any moment.

Nurundere made the same welcoming speech I had heard captains make on membrane ships for years—the pleasure at having distinguished guests aboard, concern for the comfort and safety of passengers, sacredness of the sky-heroes' trust, and so on.

Ham Tamdje looked a little uncomfortable during the captain's remarks, then he said the passengers appreciated our hospitality and the good food and everybody sat down and the food actually came.

I was seated opposite a woman who introduced herself as Missy Julietta Cadle. She was an administrative assistant to the plenipotentiary from N'Tensi. She had wavy yellowish hair and a great deal of pale flesh that seemed to quiver anytime she moved. She asked me what it was like to be a sailor.

"Work," I told her. "Sometimes it is lonely, sometimes companionable, and very beautiful when we are outside."

She wanted to know if she could go outside.

I explained why she could not.

She said we sky-heroes were being unfair to the passengers just because we were black and they white.

I tried to explain again why passengers could not go outside without protective suits. I told her the story of Elyun El-Kumarbis.

She said, "But he was just a dirty nigra."

I said, "It would happen to anyone who ventured outside without protection. Anyone except a pure-blooded descendant of the old Australian aborigines. Not even hybrids—there have been a few, there were some in the early days of the membrane ships, deliberate attempts to increase the number of sky-heroes, but they did not have the protective melanin.

"Only we may go."

"You're as bad as a Jew," Missy Cadle said.

I said, "What's that?"

"They were an old earth people. Full of uppity notions, thought they were better than anyone else. And full of nosy do-good ideas about nigras bein' equal of whites. We learn about old earth races in school on N'Tensi."

"What happened to the Jews?" I asked Missy Cadle.

"Oh, they got together with some of their neighboring peoples and formed that Pan-Semitic Empire that took over old earth when all the other nations went out to colonize new worlds."

Somehow I didn't understand what she was driving at. We kept up our meal—ship's rations basically, but served as fancy as a top Kunapi chef could make it. The meat provided us with beverages from their home worlds, mostly whiskey. The meal wore on. Down at the far end of the table some of the meat and some of the crew were leaving their seats, disappearing to other parts of the passenger tank.

Missy Cadle said, "What I mean is, you Yurakosi people seem to think you are all so special because you can go into space the way you do, and you won't let anyone else do it!"

Again I tried to explain that it wasn't our choice that kept others in their tanks or in their suits. It was a quirk of nature, a dirty trick on the other ninety-nine-point-odd percent of humanity and a lucky break for the Aranda and the Kunapi.

Missy Cadle turned to a man sitting beside her. "Tell this boy," she said, pointing at me, "tell him what's going to happen if they won't give up their secret!"

The man drained a glass of his whiskey and tapped himself on the shoulder. There was something hard and bulky under his jacket. His speech was slurred and hard for me to understand. He said, "Breakin' bread with nigras. Julietta, if Ham din' tell us himself back in Upatoi I'd never have thought any of us could do it. But Ham says"—he stopped and wiped his mouth with his sleeve—"Ham says we could really do a job if we could have our own membrane ships, so we gotta find out how to sail 'em.

"Or else!" he said, and reached for a bottle and filled up his glass again.

I said, "There is no secret!"

Missy Cadle and the man beside her just looked angry and didn't say anything else to me. I wanted to talk to Captain Nurundere about what they had said. I thought of radio, but we had all turned them off during the banquet; there was no need for them, and the noise would have been terrible.

So I rose from my place and walked to Captain Nurundere's place, and put my hand on his shoulder and said very quietly into his ear that I needed to talk with him. Such requests do not come often among sky-heroes, and when they come they are treated seriously and quickly.

Captain Nurundere said a word to Ham Tamdje and rose, and he walked with me a distance from the table, and I told him what the two passengers had said to me. While I spoke with the captain I scanned the table. There were many empty places on both sides. Nurundere said, "I suppose the meat have invited our people off to try to get our secrets from them. Hah!"

He turned from me and strode back to where Ham Tamdje still sat in his yellow-white suit. I saw the captain speak to him, and although I could not hear what he said, Ham Tamdje's face grew for a moment very pale, then an angry red as he replied to Nurundere.

The captain said something more to Tamdje.

The N'Jajan rose from his seat. Captain Nurundere took a step backward. From the seat beside Nurundere's his half Wuluwaid rose.

Ham Tamdje reached inside his jacket and pulled out his hand with a small, old-type explosive gun in it. He pointed it at Nurundere.

"All right," Tamdje spluttered. "All right, if you damn nigras are gonna keep your damn secrets, some white men

will show you your place!" He pointed his gun straight at Captain Nurundere.

It was a moment of shock. My mind very nearly refused to accept the reality of what was happening. The meat were—were what? Were attempting to seize control of *Djanggawul!* But why? We were transporting them to their objective, we were, in a sense, nothing other than their hirelings anyway. What did they want?

They wanted something that did not exist: the secret—the secretl—of survival in deep space without protective suits. Anyone could survive the vacuum—that was possible ever since the invention of the close-air generator—but the hard radiation would kill any human not of Yurakosi stock. There was no secret—it was a simple fact, a part of reality—yet these people were demanding that we share the secret with them, demanding at the point of a gun.

"Ya'll tell me right now or you're one dead nigra!" Ham Tamdje slurred at Nurundere. The captain began to explain still again that there was nothing to tell, he gestured to emphasize his point, Ham Tamdje raised his gun higher. I saw the gray face of Wuluwaid, emotions flashing one after another across his features. As Ham Tamdje squeezed his trigger old Wuluwaid launched himself at the N'Jajan, arms outstretched toward his gun.

The weapon fired with a roar that echoed off the curving roof of the passenger tank. Old Wuluwaid crashed down on the white linen that covered the long table. In the moment that Wuluwaid had thrown himself at Tamdje's gun, I had flung myself also after him.

Ham Tamdje stood, clearly shocked by the result of his own rash action. In an instant I had seized his gun and wrenched it out of his grasp, holding it pointed not at the passengers but at the floor to show that I had no intention of firing it.

Captain Nurundere ignored both Tamdje and myself; he was bending over his half Wuluwaid. He turned him over so that he lay face-up on the table, but it was clear that Wuluwaid was dead or dying. He had taken the heavy old-fashioned bullet in the middle of his chest. Blood was pouring from the wound, and his face had faded still further, from its customary gray to a deathly white. Even in those few seconds his rasping breath ceased.

Up and down the length of the table something resembling

a miniature war had broken out. The passengers had come armed to the dinner. The crew were without exception unarmed—membrane ships are craft of commerce, not of war, and Yurakosi has made neither pacts of alliance nor warfare in her history.

Within a matter of only minutes the rattling shots had ceased. Sky-heroes lay dead on the deck of the passenger tank. Meat armed with old-style guns rounded up the surviving sailors, Captain Nurundere included. For an instant I considered using Tamdje's gun to continue the fight but did not fire a shot—I thought, perhaps, of the sacred concern of sky-heroes for passengers, but chiefly I saw no gain in firing a few shots against so many armed enemies.

Ham Tamdje stepped before me, took his gun back from me and whipped it across my face, ripping open my cheek. His face held contempt.

"Cowardly nigra!" he snarled. Should I have shot him, then, while I had still had the chance? To what end? To kill a passenger? His own conduct might have forfeited for him the right of hospitality, I might have been held blameless—but it seemed to me at that moment that the battle, such as it was, was over. To have killed him would have been gratuitous.

At any rate, within minutes all of the captured sailors were forced into two cabins, men in one, women in another. Our radios and close-air generators were taken from us by the meat. We were told that armed guards would await us outside the door of the cabin in which we were held. Then the door was slammed behind us.

I looked about the cabin to see who was with me—over a dozen men including my half Dua. Captain Nurundere and Wuluwaid were not there. Wuluwaid, I realized, could not be there. He was by now in the Dreamtime. Nurundere, when last I had seen him, was unharmed. I called out to the others, "Does anyone know what happened to Nurundere?"

A Kunapi machinist I knew slightly, Watilun, said, "I saw him as we came in here, standing with the meat Tamdje. He seemed not to be hurt."

Of the crewmen in the room I determined that I was the most senior. Sky-heroes are an egalitarian lot; we pay little heed to rank or position, as you may already have noted. Still, for the purposes of the moment we needed someone to lead, or at least to coordinate our energies.

I assigned two men as door-watches and called the rest of

our group to confer in a far corner of the room. Of us all, most were too shocked to contribute very much to the discussion, but my half Dua and the machinist Watilun put in their shares.

"We had best think this through," I suggested. "Can we assess the situation up to now, and decide how to respond?" I felt pompous speaking thus, but Dua and Watilun took me seriously.

"We men seem uninjured, Jiritzu. Apparently those not killed outright are unharmed," said Dua. "Probably the same is true of the women. We are divided, now, into these two groups, plus Nurundere. Tam Hamdje must have wished to parley with him; that was why he was kept out of this cabin."

Watilun said, "Some of us and some of the meat had left the dinner before the fight began. They may still be off fraternizing on the nature-deck."

"Unless they were lured away for a purpose," added Dua.

"I think not," I said. "The meat were carrying weapons, but I doubt that they expected a fight like the one that happened. Some of them seemed as surprised as we were."

Watilun said, "And there are still the duty watch, outside the tank."

"They must know that something is wrong," Dua put in. "Even with our radios turned off, the sound of the shooting must have been carried by the decking. Then if they tried to reach us by radio they would either have had no reply at all, or would have got a passenger."

"That is as it may be," I said. "But what should we ourselves do now? We can wait for one of Tamdje's people to come in and tell us what they want, or—"

"No! No!" both Dua and Watilun interrupted, echoed by several others in the group circled around us. "We have to act!" said Dua.

"Good," I answered him, "I agree entirely. Now, what *can* we do?" Dua looked at a loss, so I turned to Watilun. "Have you worked inside the passenger tank? Is there anything we can do to get out of here, either into the rest of the tank or back outside?"

He rubbed his head with both his hands, concentrating. For the first time I studied this Kunapi: strong features, bushy hair, his skin still dark with unused melanin. He seemed a competent man, resourceful. He said, "I have

worked on the collapsed-matter rod, adjusting braces for the tank and decks. I have worked on the converters."

"How do you get to the rod?"

"Hmm." He rubbed his chin. "Normally from the deck to the converter at either end of the ship, then along the rod from the converter. But there are service ports for access to the rod. Let me look over here."

He stood up and walked to a bulkhead near the corner of the cabin. He knelt and worked for a few moments on the base of the wall. It came away from its place, and a section of flooring with it. Beneath was a large rectangular plate, heavily sealed at its edges. There was bright-colored lettering on the plate.

"Mother," Watilun spat. "The meat took my close-air. I can't go down there without it. For that matter, I can't open the seal without this cabin losing its air!" He sat back on his haunches and closed up the floor and wall sections he had removed.

"All right," I said. "That won't work. What other ideas do we have?"

"We can try to overpower the meat when they open the door," Dua suggested.

"That's a desperation plan," I said. "We should be able to do something on our own, without waiting for the meat to do something first."

One of the sailors nearby asked, "What if we just wait? What will happen? What do they want?"

I sighed, not at the questions but at the irrational meat whose actions had provoked them. "These passengers," I said, "refuse to accept the fact that they can never be sky-heroes. They want the secret of how we can stand the radiation of space. I suppose as soon as Captain Nurundere tells them the secret they will free us and go on with the trip."

"But there is no—" The sailor stopped himself.

I nodded.

In the silence that followed we could all hear a stealthy sound of someone beneath our feet. Watilun ran to the bulkhead and again opened the section leading to the seal beneath the floor. There the face of little Bildjiwura looked up at us, full of youth and excitement, with no sign in it of fear.

Watilun and Dua pulled her into our cabin. She said, "One of the women knew how to get under the floor from our

cabin. I came first as I am the smallest. The rest will follow when we send for them."

"That will do it!" Watilun exclaimed.

We all faced him, our question needing no words.

"You go ahead back," he said to Bildjiwura. "I think we may yet be saved, but we will all have to be in this cabin first."

"How can it be?" I asked Watilun.

He turned to me, very solemn in mien. Very solemn in mien.

"If we do not regain control of our ship," he said, "what actually will happen? How serious the result? What price can we justify to save our ship?"

"I think the N'Jajan Tamdje is little short of mad," I said. "If he finally realizes that there is no secret, he and his fellows might do anything. They will be enraged. Crazy. But if they refuse to accept that truth, they'll be equally desperate; they will try anything to learn what they think we are concealing from them."

"What should we do?" a crewman called out.

Watilun said, "We can kill them." He looked around. No one spoke. "We can assemble in one cabin—either this or the one the women are held in now. The meat didn't clear these cabins of furnishings—I can easily booby-trap a cabin to open that floorplate when the door is opened.

"Once that happens"—he made a sweeping, downward gesture with both his hands—"the air from the entire passenger tank will go out in a matter of seconds. The only safe place in the tank would be in a sealed cabin, and as far as we know the only people in sealed cabins are ourselves."

"What about Nurundere?" Dua asked. "And what about all of us who are off with passengers, who had already gone off before Tamdje showed his weapon?"

Watilun said, "They will be lost with the passengers."

We sent Bildjiwura back to the other cabin for the women.

When they arrived we repeated the entire discussion. Some were for proceeding, others wanted to wait and hope for a less lethal solution. The crew on watch, it was hoped, would use radio and realize that something serious was wrong. They would seal the airlock to the tank and make for port.

While we were arguing the door to our cabin was flung open and the captain was shoved in. The meat didn't even look in and see that we had doubled our population!

With the door slammed behind him, Nurundere advanced to the center of the cabin and seated himself. There was blood on his face, his clothing was torn. He said, "They're mad. They absolutely refuse to accept truth."

"What happened to you?" I asked Nurundere.

"I was questioned by Tamdje and a few of his associates. This doesn't mean anything"—he wiped some of the blood from his face—"just some scratches in a scuffle. But they intend to take this ship to their port, back to N'Jaja, if we won't give them the secret of protection in deep space. Make us hostages of some sort. It's totally senseless, but we could be held for years."

"Watilun has a plan," I said.

The captain asked what it was, and Watilun told him.

Nurundere sat for a long time unanswering. "I would prefer to avoid that," he said at last. "Killing passengers, even these, and losing sky-heroes as well. If there is any other way, we should seek it."

"I agree," said Watilun. "But what other way?"

Nurundere faced me directly. "Your thought, Jiritzu?"

"Captain, they took your close-air and your radio?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear any attempts at communication between the deck and the tank?"

"I did," he said. "Several times the deck tried to call. Tamdje ordered his people not to reply."

Dua said, "But what about our fellows who left the dinner early? They would still have their radios and their close-air!"

I said, "They would! Then they would have heard the deck call! And they would have heard the shots! What can they be doing?"

For a reply the lights in our cabin flicked out. In a single instant we went from bright lights to total darkness.

"That must be it," Nurundere's voice came through the blackness of the cabin. "The deck must be acting now to help us. Watch officer now is, mm, Uraroju. Good, she'll do a good job."

From the tank beyond our cabin there came shouting and the sound of running and tumbling. "Uraroju cut the power to the tank," a woman's voice said. "That means that the door seals are open!"

We must all have started at once, headed for the door, but

the voice of Nurundere stopped us. "Wait!" he shouted. "Before we go out, what will we do?"

There must have been ten confused replies at once. Nurundere said, "We mustn't just run out. That will serve no purpose." As if to emphasize his words, there was the sound of shooting once more from the tank outside.

"What should we do?" someone asked.

"From the sound outside, the meat are disorganized. Get out of this cabin as quietly as we can, in case they decide to slaughter their prisoners. If only we could get our close-air equipment back . . . but we don't know where they have it.

"Just get away from here, get away from the concentration of their weapons. Spread yourselves, head for the nature-deck. We can count on Uraroju to rescue this situation. Until she does, we have to stay away from the meat and their guns."

We got out the doorway well enough. The meat who had been guarding the door was gone. We could see practically nothing—the tank is completely sealed, a total environment. Panels for space-viewing are built into its roof, but Uraroju had had their coverings closed when the power was cut off.

The meat had not planned for total darkness, and I could hear them stumbling and crashing about, shouting to one another. We of Yurakosi had a great advantage over them; equally blinded by the darkness, yet we knew the arrangement of the tank, we were completely at home aboard *Djanggawul* with its odd gravitic effects as one moved from the center of a deck toward its edges.

I led Bildjiwura by the hand, she the only member of the crew making her first voyage. We found our way from the cabin, moved across the deck. By the varying strength and pull of the dense rod that provided the ship's gravity, I could gauge our distance from the angle where the decks joined.

With the passenger tank's power system completely shut off, the air we were breathing began to become stuffy. At once the plan of Uraroju became clear: if only the meat failed to recognize the signs of what was befalling them, all within the passenger tank would become unconscious. If the meat understood, they could outfit themselves with the close-air gear they had taken from the crew, but they were clearly ignorant of space, or at least of conditions aboard membrane ships.

The crew on watch could come through the airlock,

disarm the passengers and confine them to cabins, where they would recover when the power was restored and oxygen began to flow.

Dropping to the deck where I could make my way more stealthily than upright, I drew Bildjiwura down beside me. I whispered to her what was happening, then began creeping with her toward the airlock.

I detected a heavy chair, crept around it with Bildjiwura, moved across a section of open deck, placed my free hand before me and felt the edge of a heavy, hanging cloth—the gown of a woman passenger! I froze! I heard a startled gasp, the woman pulled away, clearly terrified.

After holding my breath as long as I could I exhaled slowly and again, leading little Bildjiwura by the hand, began creeping toward the airlock.

After a few more creeping meters of progress my hand encountered a still leg, wearing the tight duck trousers of a sky-hero. I pressed Bildjiwura flat to the deck, held her in place for a moment to communicate my wish that she stay still, then ran my hands up the figure I had felt lying on the deck. I moved slowly, silently, but almost at once realized three things—the person was dead, she was a woman, and she was garbed as a membrane sailor.

Explosive bullets had taken out her belly.

I felt her hair with my hands, long braids. In the total blackness of the tank I ran my fingertips over the maraiin on her cheeks. I did not know the meaning of the sacred patterns, but I recognized them nonetheless: this was the body of my Miralaidj.

Half a sob may have escaped me—I felt Bildjiwura grasp me in the dark. Miralaidj dead, Wuluwaid dead. I had no thoughts of the Dreamtime. For me they were dead.

Miralaidj's Kunapi half Bildjiwura was now more than ever my charge. I could not stop to mourn my Miralaidj. I could not wail my song of grief. I could only draw little Bildjiwura in a half-circle away from the body of my love. Surely she must wonder what had happened, what I had encountered, but I did not stop to tell.

Now we were near the airlock. Now I caressed the face of little Bildjiwura, hoping she would be quiet until the coming struggle should end. My ears were beginning to ring, my breath was short in my throat. Colors seemed to swirl before my eyes in the complete darkness of the tank.

Surely this must be the approach of unconsciousness through deprivation of oxygen. Surely all of the meat, unused to conditions aboard membrane ships, were by now sprawled unconscious in the darkness. Now Uraroju and the others from the deck watch must come through the airlock, moving quickly, to disarm and capture the meat before they should die—yet also before they could recover their consciousness.

The ringing grew loud in my ears, but before I lost all awareness I heard the machinery of the airlock working, heard the first hiss of air from within it. In my spirit I could see the airlock opening. A sailor held a portable deck light—now I could see, not in my spirit.

The light was shined into the tank. Dead and unconscious bodies were scattered about, but standing between me and the airlock I saw for a moment one silhouette: gross, weaving, the edge of a sleeve of some nearly white material highlighted by the flare from the airlock, and in the hand emerging from that sleeve an old-style gun.

One N'Jajan had divined the plan of Uraroju. One who had not been able to warn the others—or who had chosen, in his growing irrationality, not to speak. One who had strapped to his leg a close-air generator, and was ready to fire at the sky-heroes coming from the airlock.

I drew a deep breath of still-stuffy air, rose to my feet as the figure of Ham Tamdje of N'Jaja spun clumsily toward me. I flexed my knees, gauging the gravity at this point, and launched myself across the deck toward Tamdje. No person other than a membrane sailor could have made that leap, but any experienced Aranda or Kunapi could have.

For a moment it was almost as if I were leaping from spar to deck in the free-fall of space. There was a blaze of light as Tamdje fired his gun, a hot impact low on my leg, then I crashed into his fat body and we tumbled to the deck. Now there was little struggle. Tamdje was soft and unused to space, I was hard and well at home. The wound in my leg would have mattered standing, but as we rolled and struck each other, gouged and squeezed there on the deck of the passenger tank, it meant nothing.

I struck and struck the N'Jajan, the deaths of my fellows now coming to me, the death of my Miralaidj before my eyes and my spirit. I could wail my song of grief now, could wail and scream at this fat, pale chunk of meat, could batter his flabby head against the deck of *Djanggawul*'s passenger tank

until the hands of sky-heroes pulled me away from Tamdje the N'Jajan and I saw the pulpy mass I had made of our chief passenger.

When the other meat were confined to their cabins the sailors and Uraroju found the two in which the crew had been held. Their walls were marked with scores of scars where weapons had been fired—the meat had tried to massacre their captives when the power was cut. But now began the melancholy business of recovering the bodies of crewmen and women killed during the battle hours earlier, among them the bodies of Wuluwaid and of Miralaidj. The sky-heroes were buried in space.

They were far from the first membrane sailors to die in the deep void, far from the first whose bodies were committed to the stars, to drift forever while their souls returned to the Dreamtime.

The body of Ham Tamdje was set aside for delivery to his friends. Some ground-squirming N'Missan became head of the passenger party, under cabin arrest by Captain Nurundere.

And we who survive are about to begin the great tack at Yirrkalla, near the three beacon suns, the most difficult and critical portion of the voyage. Shorthanded, Nurundere calls upon every available hand. My own trial is delayed to the end of this sail. Meanwhile I will do my share. I am one of the finest membrane riggers in the fleet!

But afterward, afterward . . .

I, Jiritzu, Aranda, killed a passenger. With my bare hands.

That he was himself a murderer, armed, and would have murdered more sky-heroes had he escaped me, is all of no concern.

Surely there will be no criminal charge against me, but equally surely I will never be permitted to sail again as a sky-hero.

The meat will be delivered in shame to their destination. We will leave them at Port Corley circling New Alabama, leave them in disgrace to be dealt with as their planet-squirming fellows see fit to deal with them.

And after we reach Yurakosi? I will be put aground. I will be sent into Port Bralku, and ferried to the surface of Yurakosi, to seek out poor Bunbulama and tell her of the end of Wuluwaid and of Miralaidj.

And then?

I, my skin still rich with melanin, a ground-squirmer on a world of grayed-out codgers and black-faced children?

More likely I will climb the highest mast of *Djanggawul,* and cast my close-air generator to the deck, and launch myself as far into the deep as my muscles can send me.

In theory, a very strong sailor can break free of ship's gravity and be lost in space. It has never been done. No sky-hero would perform so mad an act.

But I look closely after my wounded leg. It is not a serious wound, and I keep it well cleaned, and during every watch I exercise to keep my muscles in good condition. Before we reach Port Bralku my wound should be healed.

I, a ground-squirmer while still so young? I, the sky-hero who killed a passenger? I, whose beloved is in the Dreamtime?

Standing atop the highest spar of the tallest mast of *Djanggawul,* beneath my feet the starwind-bellied membrane sails, above my head only the blackness and the million glittering points, and elsewhere in space the whispered, silent progress of other membrane ships, will I climb down, return to port, ride the shuttle ship, squirm on the ground of Yurakosi?

A very strong sailor might break free of ship's gravity and drift forever in deep space. He might return to the Dreamtime.

The Bible after Apocalypse

Laurence M. Janifer

This is an era when the classic themes of science fiction are being reworked with ever greater intensity of style and vision. The theme of invaders from space is certainly one of the most familiar of the old standards, with a pedigree going back at least to 1895 and H. G. Wells' War of the Worlds; *but rarely has it been dealt with as powerfully and as concisely as in this sharp, brutal short story. Laurence M. Janifer is a New Yorker whose first professional science-fiction appearance was in 1953; he is the author of two strange, sadly underrated novels,* Bloodworld *and* A Piece of Martin Cann, *and several dozen shorter pieces.*

He (what was his name: Tom or Jenny, Lenny, Ch'en; Arthur, Dan or Bear; and a great many times one seems to be known as Juan-to-make-ready: but nobody had ever called him by his real name before)—Dismas, was not yet heavy enough with the media to chat in the staring red eyes of bloody cameras, always making their own sound; he was only using some words in common with a few friends when a part of New Jersey and a suburb of Cleveland and a small town in the state of Washington became three columns of smoke, and all of the radios and suddenly pictureless television sets in the country began to talk in the voices of the people from the Crab Nebula, using slightly stilted and unreal English, while the ships landed. No matter if a radio had been shut off, no matter the station it had meant to receive: the new people had methods of their own and all other broadcasting was blanked out. The ships looked much more like ridged

potato chips than like saucers of any design. Of course this happened all over our planet at the same time, and in eighty different languages or more, but Dismas was in New York of the United States. What he had just said was that he tried to live every minute of every day as it came to him, as a whole minute or a whole day, without regarding what had happened and what he had done in the past, or what might happen and what he might do in the future. He was not on a trip at that time but it is possible that one or more of his friends was seeing visions or hearing sounds, smelling-tasting-touching things unshared by any of the others. Mind-expanding drugs lead to a lack of discipline. Dismas and all other human beings who were down, and within hearing range of a radio or a television set (or an electric hair-dryer, which in several cases was easily manipulated by the Crab Nebula techniques), halted every bodily function except the automatic processes and listened to the Alien Broadcast. Human beings out of range, and human beings on trips, learned of it later, in various ways.

He (covered by chance in jeans and leather slippers and an open leather jacket with a white fur lining, and a Navaho hairband)—heard the voices say that the planet was to be run for the benefit of the people of the Crab Nebula from that time on, possibly as a vacation resort, and that human beings, although seventy-five in every hundred would be killed, were to continue as usual, perhaps more peacefully, and always under the direction of one or more of the new people, who would live, in their communal nonmating shells, in groups of from five to eight, in locations that would be convenient for the human beings so to be directed He heard that resistance was useless and that, if he survived the initial period (necessary: if one were to develop a less crowded planet with a slightly changed carbon-dioxide-oxygen-nitrogen-neon balance), he would be treated very well and in all probability have his lifespan and his life enhanced by techniques which would be made available to him. The radio, which had not been on, called him Dismas. It called all of the others by their true names at the same time, as did all radios, television sets and hair-dryers throughout the world, a highly unusual technical feat and one which helped to convince human beings everywhere, as did the destruction of comparatively thinsettled living-locations here and there over the planet, that the people of the Crab Nebula meant what

they said and were really capable of meaning it. When human beings began to see them and more speech and time became available these people became known to most remaining Americans as Crabs, but more often as Tone-Emp, this being as close as human throats could approach to the pronunciation of the true name of the race. Human beings continued to be called human beings, of all types. There were many different types of Tone-Emp and there were many different types of human beings, too.

He (Dismas)—left his friends and came out alone into the street. He did not think that the voices had been real; very few human beings did at that time. But when he hit the street and saw all the other human beings there he began to be confused and afraid. All of the others seemed to be confused, too, and most showed their fear, and before very many minutes had passed Dismas knew that the others had also heard the voices of the Tone-Emp, and that each of the human beings had been addressed by his true name. No human being then knew how the Tone-Emp had constructed their broadcaster so that it could single out individuals, even when several were in the same room, nor did they know that the Tone-Emp had discovered the existence of an Identity Node within the brain tissue of every human being, and were capable of detecting and interpreting Node radiation in order to know all of the true names. Animals as small as ants have this Node and can interpret other Nodes, right on this planet; and the Node is common to several other planets, where it functions in a wide variety of ways.

As he watched and spoke with the other human beings in the streets, Dismas began to believe that an alien people had truly come to his planet and could destroy him and anyone else they nominated. Some of the human beings he talked with were consumed by fright and were attempting to ready themselves for a war with the aliens; others, already prepared for war, seemed to have their fright under control and were bravely determining to eliminate as many of the alien people as possible; some few thought that human beings could even win such a war, either through their great numerical superiority or by virtue of being human in the first place. And many others had freaked out entirely, and were screaming or sitting stone-silent or crying as they walked up and down in the street, or acting out their insanities in other ways, all disturbing both to themselves and to everyone else.

Dismas came to the intersection of his street with a wide avenue. He turned onto the avenue and began to walk uptown.

Because the avenue was wider than his street, the frenzies of the human beings who had come out on it seemed slightly less disturbing, and Dismas began to think. He considered first the many human beings who had not left their rooms at all: those who were waiting for another Tone-Emp message, and those who were trying to find out more by using their radios or television sets (but no human broadcast was ever again allowed to arrive in any receiver), and those who disbelieved, those as well who were dead. Within the first hour, while Dismas had been making his way to belief and then to the avenue, many human beings had killed themselves, and some had killed their families as well, with or without belief that they knew why they had done so. Dismas felt that he had always been together with himself, and he seemed to understand other human beings well enough (for that reason) to be able to imagine all such events at once, while he walked. (He felt that his understanding was due to the number and high quality of the trips he had taken, and that it was also due to his constant residence in New York City, where he had been surrounded at all times by many different sorts of people whom he had always tried to understand.) Dismas saw that the city and all in it were at last on one great and defining trip, a trip which was both good and bad because it was a part of reality; and he was grateful, knowing not to whom, for his luck in being down, and totally in reality, from the first second of that trip.

Dismas walked for ten blocks, living through most of another hour because he stopped over and over again—to quiet this human being and then that one, to extricate himself from the many strange scenes in which he became involved—until, continuing uptown for no particular reason, he met another traveler. She was called Mary but no one knew whether or not that was her true name. She said: "Where are we going?" as she stepped out of a doorway and began to walk at his side. When he turned to look at her it was as if the two of them had suddenly been enclosed in a small bubble of silence and peace, and that the fighting, crying, screaming, all else outside, did not truly exist: it was reality, but it did not exist. Dismas neither understood nor tried to understand how such a thing could be, but lived entirely in his present, and lived

all of it that he could, glad to have found a bubble of peace with this girl at that time.

"Uptown," he said.

"That's where they are?"

"I don't know."

"They should be uptown. That's where all the power is, the rich places."

"Not the real power," Dismas said.

"Real enough," the girl said. "The broadcasting stations are uptown, mostly, for instance. And they started with the broadcasting thing."

She had never known what her true name was. Mary looked very much like Buffy Saint-Marie and had no desire to look that way; most of the girls and some boys in Armonk, New York, where she had grown, had called her Buffy, so when she was fourteen she began to use lipstick and eyeshadow and she slid on, skintight to each gentle cheek in place of rouge, a pink-red heart just one and three-quarters inches from the bottom to the apex of each doubled grand curve. At that time she had had parents but soon she left Armonk, and she took to calling herself Wanda June from a feeling of inadequacy, though always wishing to know her true name; perhaps, she sometimes thought, perhaps it was truly Mary after all; but she could not be sure. She allowed herself only tea because she felt that her true name would be obscured entirely by anything stronger. Since she walked a great deal while thinking, and did not eat much, she had become very thin. She was wearing a highschool-blue minidress and cutout sneakers, so that, considering her lipstick and eyeshadow and the two pink-red hearts, she looked much more like a groupie than she thought she was. She listened only to the heaviest of new music, and to Dylan, and to the Mothers of Invention. In her mind now music rose, *Blowin' in the Wind*, which she had known almost as a lullaby since she had been young.

"They could be anywhere," Dismas said against her music. "They could be all over."

"Then why uptown?"

"There is no why. We do because we are doing."

She asked after his name and he told it to her; perhaps, she thought, perhaps I am a part of this, the other part of Dismas-and. She thought: Dismas-and-Mary. She walked near him through the fear and bravery and insanity of hu-

man beings, in the bubble of peace. After they had walked for many blocks, she thought that they had a destination, and she thought that she knew what it was.

"Rockefeller Center," she said. "That is where they will all have to be."

"They might be anywhere. They might have made another broadcast."

"We're going to Rockefeller Center," she said, and Dismas turned to look at her as they continued their movement up the avenue.

"We are not going, we are being. Now."

"But we're heading uptown, and in Rockefeller Center, where NBC is and RCA and all of that, we can find them."

"There is not anything but now."

"Let me lead you."

Any now had as much right to exist as any other now, and Dismas was unused to such urgency. He felt neither regret nor any other emotion when the girl stepped ahead of him by two paces and turned down a street, and then after walking some few blocks turned again onto another avenue; he followed her because he walked with her in every now he could consider, and that was all. Perhaps the girl thought of a Dismas-and-future. In Dismas each present inside the bubble filled his mind. When they reached Rockefeller Plaza the bubble disappeared and Dismas began to live in the new present, as it came to him. The girl had been right: the people from the Crab Nebula, five of them, were standing in Rockefeller Plaza over the head of Prometheus. Each of the Tone-Emp was eight feet tall. They were chitinous and highly selective carnivores, in color the brightest green of your mind (or the girl's mind; but Dismas, who had no future and needed no plan, had also no past, and so needed no memory), outlined in the usual feelers and claws of chitinous people. They looked as much like lobsters as Tone-Emp sounds like the real name of their race. The only human being in the Plaza, or visible in Rockefeller Center at all, was a small man in a large uptown suit who carried a microphone, powerpack and much other equipment, on his back, in his hands and under his arms, and who crouched with his back to Dismas and to the girl, talking in a whisper to the microphone. There were distant screams. Perhaps St. Patrick's Cathedral was ringing its bells. The Tone-Emp were not making any perceptible sounds at all.

For a second the girl had stopped, and so Dismas stopped, two paces behind her. Then the girl said: "None of them are looking our way." She spoke in a whisper which Dismas found surprisingly pleasant, and she began slowly to move forward again. When she came abreast of the crouching man she stopped. She crouched as the man was doing, and Dismas walked up to both human beings and crouched between the man with the microphone and the girl whom he had met.

The Tone-Emp had so arranged their universe that it included the English language, as other Tone-Emp scattered over our planet had made arrangements to include one or more of a wide variety of other languages. The Tone-Emp, unlike some races, owned the concept of *language,* so that they could adjust themselves and their surroundings in that manner. But they did not need to face an object in order to see it, nor even turn their eyestalks in the direction of the object. They saw, all of them, what they wished to see or what seemed important for them to see (the Tone-Emp, like most races, being their own judges of importance), an attribute sometimes attained by human beings through the use of yogic disciplines and sometimes in druglike manner. Their own language was retained for them, and it was a silent language which consisted for the most part of gestures, bodily attitudes and the degree to which the upper claws were open. None of the Tone-Emp owned private names, but they do not mind being numbered—as in this instance, from one through five. It is an aid in identification for those to whom names have become important.

"I wonder if they plan to attack us," said One. "It would be a most foolish move."

Two expressed his doubt. (All of the Tone-Emp were male. They knew of femaleness only through their experience with other races. They reproduced themselves in the same way in which a highly developed computer reproduces itself: by specific construction and the use of much complex machinery. They were a highly industrialized civilization.) "We are their superiors," he said. "Surely they must know that."

"But people do not always act on that which they know," One replied.

Two, Three and Five appeared concerned. Three said: "I do not find that a digestible statement," and Five said: "I don't understand it either."

"To be intelligent," One said, "is not always to be intelligi-

ble. Indeed, a wholly intelligible intelligence is a virtual contradiction in terms, which—"

"Wait," Two said. "Motion has resumed."

The five Tone-Emp, without themselves moving, concentrated their attention on the human beings, who were taking the three-abreast position behind them.

"I believe that they will attack," One said.

Two discussions began, one on the matter of possible attack and the other on the distinction between the intelligent and the intelligible. The Tone-Emp found both equally interesting. None of the human beings heard or experienced their discussions. Perhaps Dismas would have found one or both interesting, and perhaps if they had owned neither a past nor a future the girl and the man with the microphone would have been interested, too.

The man with the microphone had never stopped his whispering. As Dismas and the girl came near to him they were able to hear most of what he was saying. He was talking about the Tone-Emp (though he did not know the name of their race and called them simply *aliens*) and inventing theories regarding other members of the race, and what had happened, and what was likely to happen. He began to describe the Tone-Emp physically, speaking very softly.

"No broadcasts are getting out," the girl said. "I've tried every station."

"I know that," the man with the microphone said. "I have a job to do. What happens after my words leave me is no concern of mine."

"But that doesn't make sense."

"I have a job to do," the man said and went back to his microphone.

"Only what happens now," Dismas said. The man turned and stared at him.

"What?"

"It's only what happens now that matters."

"You're nuts."

Dismas nodded as the man turned away again and whispered into his microphone. He had begun to describe Dismas and the girl, calling them a brave outpost of humanity.

"We've got to do something," the girl said, across him.

"We will," Dismas replied.

"But what?"

"Whatever we do. I don't know yet."

The weather was exceptionally pleasant for New York, as sunset began. A cool wind came from the west, scattering paper and leaves. The air was clearer than usual and the harsh smells of the pavement and the street were made more gentle by the smells of the nearby flowers and grasses of Rockefeller Center. The Tone-Emp continued their discussion while One became linked with several others in Washington who were talking to the President of the United States. Matters were more clear than they had been in Washington, and elsewhere throughout the world.

The Secretary of the Treasury said: "We've got to do something."

"Yes," the President's principal adviser said. "But what?"

"We can't just surrender."

"How can we fight back? Communications are out."

"We can fight back by ourselves."

"It wouldn't do any good."

"No," the President told them, turning away from the group of six or more Tone-Emp who were talking with him, in English. "It wouldn't."

"What have you decided?" the Secretary of the Treasury asked, feeling an emotion more deep than fright.

"It is obvious from the appearance of these two representatives of common humanity that the human race is not going to knuckle under to these strange and alien beings. No: we were born free and we will die free if need be. The determination on the faces of my companions is strong and sure. Perhaps we will succeed, perhaps fail; but one thing is sure: human beings are not going to surrender weakly even to such terrors as these alien horrors represent. We will remain human—fighting, hoping, free—to the end. And if we have even half a chance, we will show these monsters what it means to be human: we will drive them back to the weird nest from which they have sprung, drive them off the Earth with all our might and all our will. Looking at my companions, sure of their thoughts as I am of my own, I am proud to be a human being—proud that I am no eldritch horror like these crablike or lobsterlike aliens, but a free and mighty human being, poised at the beginning of the greatest fight in human history."

The whispering of the announcer disturbed One, who was attempting to retain his link with fellows in Washington as well as the two discussions in Rockefeller Plaza. Casually he turned and directed at the announcer a weapon which he took from a pouch slung about his upper left pod or shoulder. A beam of light, barely visible and entirely silent, made nearly a straight line between the weapon and the right side of the announcer's body, the side near Dismas. The announcer screamed and fell backward, his clothing charred, as well as the skin beneath it. He was no longer conscious, no longer whispering.

The girl screamed and stopped as the weapon moved toward her.

Dismas said very quietly: "That's wrong."

He stood up and walked toward One.

"Perhaps he means to parley," Three said, silently.

"I wish that he did," One said without explaining, and damaged Dismas with his weapon. Dismas staggered and nearly fell, badly burned along his left arm. He opened his eyes more widely, feeling all of the sensation of pain and (as briefly a past developed for him, in the moment of his decision—since no decision exists in this world without a past to give birth to it) pitying the unconscious announcer, who had certainly felt the same burning and the same sickness.

He said again: "Wrong," and continued forward. He was very close to One when the girl screamed again and got up to rush toward him.

"There is no help for it," One said. The weapon appeared to Dismas to change. He saw through a new and private mist the shifting shape of it, and he saw the new color of the light that came from it before he was killed by the light. His death, like all death, was attended by pain, and he felt all of it that he could feel for every separate second in which such feeling remained to him.

Behind him as he fell the girl reached out a hand and touched him, and, in that touch, died. Instantly. Within their regrown bubble of two and silence.

"We are assured that our normal governments, and our private lives, will not be interfered with, although of course our population will be reduced. The techniques for control of illness, and for extending active life, which the Tone-Emp have demonstrated, will certainly lead to a betterment of life

on Earth. More: we will be asked to join the Federation of Planets and Systems, and will send a representative to Federation meetings, with full voting powers, to protect our own interests—the interests of our own race. The Tone-Emp have made this entirely clear . . ."

The Presidential broadcast took place that night—during what was called Prime Time.

It was several weeks before the announcer who had been injured in Rockefeller Plaza was sufficiently recovered to analyze the speech, and its effects, for the much-reduced population of the United States, which was of course again listening to its radios and its television sets. (The Tone-Emp had cut hair-dryers out of their broadcast system, which bothered few people.)

"The population reduction is, of course, vitally important," the announcer said. "But we must remember that we are now rid of our large prison population, of the inmates of our mental hospitals, of many malcontents who would not—who could not—represent our nation, or our planet, in such an exalted arena as the Federation of Planets and Systems. The process is perhaps cruel, though the Tone-Emp assure us that each reduction is quite painless—but who shall say that survival of the most fit, the basic law of nature, is not enhanced? In this newest of worlds, engaged as we are in political and perhaps even social contact with planets and systems beyond our imagination, each of us has his or her job to do; the President has called upon us to recognize that fact, and to do our jobs—to be creditable and admirable examples of the human race. I am sure that none of us will fail to meet this challenge."

And One said: "It is always the most nearly intelligible who are useful to us. Those of true intelligence . . ."

The others, recognizing that he was thinking again of the two human growths he had eliminated just as agreement was being reached, attempted some slight comfort. "True intelligence is not useful in any race but in the Tone-Emp. True intelligence is not practical."

"No, it is not," One said. "That is why it is not intelligible. It tends toward goals or structures which do not change with circumstance. As: the human being who called *Wrong,* and the other who felt the need to touch that one, disregarding danger."

"Such judgments, such needs, are not intelligible," another said, perhaps Three or Five. The bells of St. Patrick's Cathedral were silent. The Tone-Emp stood in the great flowered gallery of Rockefeller Center, returned there to begin reconstruction of all the details of a communications-and-symbol structure.

"No, they are not," One said. "They are not intelligible even to those who have agreed with us upon this planet, or upon any other. They are not intelligible to those who might charitably be called intelligent—"

"The survivors," said Three.

And Dismas said nothing at all, but was addressed (having neither past nor present, nor having any more the limitation of space, and being therefore entirely within now, within here, entirely intelligible) by his true name, and was made welcome. And the girl was addressed by her true name, equally, and so discovered it at last, and was welcomed. For her true name was Mary, as it had always been, as always it would be: for she was named before Dismas, and she had always wanted to help.

Outer Concentric

Felix C. Gotschalk

At the moment the name of Felix Gotschalk is totally unknown to science-fiction readers, but that's likely to be a highly temporary state. Gotschalk is a tall, Aryan-looking psychologist, born in Virginia in 1929 and a resident of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, since 1962. He describes himself as "eclectic, agnostic, nihilistic, independent, revolutionary, aristocratic," and as "author, weight-lifter, pianist, composer, poet, master model-builder, inventor." He has been writing science-fiction off and on for a decade or so, but his work, unorthodox and oddly dazzling, has only now begun to find publishers. The present pair of stories will serve well to introduce him to readers of New Dimensions. *There'll be more from him in issues to come.*

I hadn't aged much since they slowed the planet's spinning speed to 10 mps; in fact, I thought I looked good to be 64 years old. I had ossification decay indices at centile 40, a great heart pump ranked at centile 87, and there were pretty fair striations in the muscle slabs that held me together. My teeth left with the calcium plagues, and my hair with the radium storms, but then this happened to almost everybody. Who would ever have thought that men could alter the speed of the earth—and by such an obvious method as reverse photosynthesis? But this was only the spinning speed, not the orbital speed.

I was sitting on the charging pod just the other day when my caseworker teleported in without so much as a preliminary azimuth beam. Henry, he said, you've had a good life,

but you're coming to the end of the trail. I thought that was a corny way to put it, but I didn't say anything. He asked me how I wanted to go, and rattled off a lot of what he called alternatives. I had ruled out demolition, the deep freeze, and embalming months ago, and had just about decided on the cerebromorph mart at New Passaic. I'd heard they'd let you relive any part of your life there, just by reeling back the tapes far enough, and feeding in the right amount of replay voltage. Boy, I had some times I wanted to savor again, and some to try to redo, or at least to get some new imprinting on. But there was something wrong somewhere, because I didn't want to go through with it at all—I mean, I wanted to keep on living. And at my age this wasn't normal.

Maude had gotten herself in apple-pie order in just a few days, and even took her terminal pill half an hour early. She didn't seem sad at all, and she looked serene sitting there, rocking in that hard wooden chair, all done up in her new velvet dress. She looks good right now in the deep-freeze files, and said she wanted to come back when there's room enough. If they ever get enough of those environmental recyclers built, maybe we could all move past the five-mile radius. It's sad to hear the people living out there on the edge tell how slimy and moldy everything is beyond the force-field dome.

Anyway, my caseworker sits down and pulls out my file cube. He hands me a nice slick plastic readout and wants me to check the trivid cube data with the scripting on the readout. So I say fine, go ahead. Let me tell you, I got a huge kick out of looking at those trivid cubes. Big as life, there I was on the viewing deck, a thick-legged five-year-old in a white sunsuit. I was smiling and playing with a big fat orange tomcat. I felt a catch in my throat and some extra wetness back of my eyes. What the caseworker wanted me to do was to verify my identity at each of the ten life-levels required by the Synod statutes. I thought it would take a long time but it didn't. He checked off his trivid cube file marked IMPRINTING and stuck another cube in the refractor. Another me came on the deck: I was ten, and scuffed up from head to toe, wrestling in the moist thick St. Augustine grass with John Flippen, my boyhood pal. He was fun, but he used to slobber and let farts in school. We rolled into some pyracantha once and got thorns stuck in us like crazy. I checked the blank by the PLAYING box and the trivid scene changed again,

this period titled LEARNING. And there I was in that 10th-grade communications class, standing soberly at attention, with my wool shirt scratching the hell out of my arms. I always wondered why our ROTC had wool uniforms and TeeJay High School's had been slick cool cotton. I looked skinny and had the purest complexion you'd ever want to see. The image was dim, but I saw Connie Stans looking at me like I was her hero or something.

And then the best part came. I guess the screwing, or COPULATION phase, is the best one for all the men, even though the way it's set up here, it only lasts from the time you're 15 to the time you turn 20. I had lots of different girls in those years, what with the conjugational matrix system, they called it, and the trivid showed me with Eva in the hayloft. We were really locktight, I was touching bottom, and on the teasing withdrawal, my dick looked like a rutabaga stalk about a foot long. I would sure have gotten horny on the spot, but all those parts of me were disconnected almost forty years ago.

I liked the FIGHTING part of my life too, more than a lot of the other men. The whole idea was to utilize and dissipate your physical power, and I liked fistfighting best of all. The trivid portion my caseworker showed me was unfamiliar at first, but I could recognize me right away, and I checked the right X on the readout. I was fighting a small man in a bar, and the guy had knucks on. He got me in the eyebrow and I felt like a bell getting rung by a hammer, and the blood was bright and warm and ran down into my eyes and around my nose and into my mouth too. I still have a little knotted scar from that fight. Anyway, I finally hit him a good one, my hand felt like it was broke, and the little guy's nose started to swell like it was being pumped up from the inside. I remember, he made the sign of the cross, and swore he would never use knucks any more. God, I was a good specimen then. I had big traps and deltoid caps and triceps that were heavy and thick. My caseworker crossed off the FIGHTING lists and so did I. One thing about fighting, though—it's hard on your fists. Don't be misled by that good splatting sound—let me tell you it hurts your hands.

Then came WORKING, and there I was, a 26-year-old apprentice draftsman, bent over the drawing board, looking intent and important, tracing steel details. I used to think a lot about those days and all the things I drew: tall spidery transmission towers, poles carefully shaded in so they looked

rounded, brick buildings, and electrical substations with important-sounding things like capacitors, transformers, regulators, OCB's (oil circuit breakers), bus bars, and my favorite, the air-break switch. Imagine—110,000 volts flowing into a sub-station, and somebody opening the air-break switch—ZOWIE! CRACKLE! ZAP! ZIP! FIZZLE! All that fire arcing and spitting in the cold air! And I remember the reams of tracing paper and the smell of artgum and sharpened pencils. Then my caseworker showed a trivid tape from the years I worked as a musician. Those were some great times, and I all but forgot that my time was just about up. There was nutty Charley Sallinger on drums and Lewis Darwin on bass, and me playing the brand-new Baldwin studio upright. There we all were, bigger and clearer than life, in 3-D holograms scaled about one foot high. I could tell we were in Chelfs—there was the plush red carpet on the handstand, the slowly undulating draperies covering the crude cinderblock walls, and the colored lights shining down on me through the darkness. I was wearing a black wool suit, a shallow rounded tab-collar shirt, and a black knit tie in a tiny knot. The tie was stretched and skinny and shiny. The song was "Little White Lies." We tried to get the Shearing sound, and we swung pretty good, but then we needed vibes and guitar to really lock in on the melody line. One Two Three Four: Sha-Dump scoodobba Doo, shadabba dabba dabba dabba dabb*a* dabb*a* Boo. Good memories—crazy times. surging, creative times, uninhibited, brash, irreverent, top dogs all. I still dream of those nights and play some great choruses in my sleep.

I was luckier than most of the guys I grew up with—I mean, in being talented and smart. Shit, Flippen went to work in the tobacco factory right at 20 years old, Owens was a pole-climber for the phone company, and Preston—I forget his last name—was an apprentice bricklayer—hod carrier was what it amounted to. Anyway, I worked—we all worked—until we were 30, then we all got promoted—peter-principled, I used to call it. And the Synod had the right name for that year-span: NOT WORKING. I felt half ashamed and half smirkful watching a few trivid cubes from that five-year span. There I was, sitting in a chair that was just too big for any one person, behind a desk with an inlaid cork mosaic top, and a gold-colored visiphone flashing on the console deck. I looked close at myself and saw that I had a double

chin and a pot belly and was getting broad in the ass. And I was a paper shuffler and a memo initialer and went to meetings all the time. Toward the end there, we were encouraged to come in to the office whenever we felt like it. Ollie and I used to play tennis and golf, take in a play, or go to Dunhill or the steam bath. My caseworker nudged me and I put the X by the right line.

GOVERNING was on the next tape cube. It was a big drag for some of us and a blast for some others—I guess there's no pleasing everybody, no matter how many alternatives you get. I was a commune chief, then sector chief, and had my six months as chief of the whole Synod. I think we all knew we were just play-acting, but it was fun in some ways. And there were no special problems to have to set yourself to anyway. I never saw a society run so smoothly. Of course, I never saw BIG DADDY, the cat who supposedly kept everything so right. They say BIG DADDY is a data conglomerate with instantaneous retrieval capacity—it's hard to say those big words—and that he knows everything that has ever happened, and knows everything that is going to happen—does it by projections based on billions and billions of trivid data cubes. Anyway, B.D. knew how to keep us all happy. We could dial any kind of mood we wanted, as long as it didn't bug anybody else. We had all kinds of bric-a-brac and fun and games, and if anybody started to drift maladaptive, happy course-correcting vectors would come zapping in and things would straighten out. Well, there I was, clear as day: I think I was about 43 then, and I was standing by a beauty queen on the ramp of a new bridge. I was waving a huge pair of papier-mâché scissors. Then I cut the force-field ribbon, the crowd clapped, and a bright orange GT-40 started across the glowing roadbed on the way to the other side of the dome. Then everybody hopped into autoreprods and drove across too. I asked my caseworker to show me another one, but he said he was too pressed for time. So he clipped in a different cube and the readout flashed PLAYING II.

I was really dumbstruck at the living reality of those scenes: I was kneeling in a rose garden and the flowers were growing all around. I was digging and sifting dark earth and peat with my hands, and wet green shoots were blipping up and unfolding and budding and pollinating, all in one easy rhythmic pace. I held a seed cupped tightly in my hand, and it sprouted a feeler that edged slowly between my fingers, just

like grass breaking softly up through asphalt. We puttered in gardens a whole lot during those years, and played a lot of electromag golf and tennis (always doubles), and squash, and sedentary things like model-building and bridge. As a matter of fact, a lot of us thought that PLAYING II should have been re-titled BRIDGE.

I could begin to feel my life systems waver every now and then, but I was about 49 years old then, and hadn't needed any prostheses. We all kidded each other about the life-segment from 50 to 55. It was called STAYING OUT OF THE WAY, and while downright unkind in connotation, it was a natural part of us being dephased and made ready for DYING.

About 100 of us 50-year-olds were left, and we got shuttled up on a graviton field near the top of the dome. The view was great and they let us use transport implants and fly around like birds in the rafters of an aviary. I remembered those years so well that I thought it was dumb to have to look at the cubes and make my mark on the readout, but that's the way the Synod wanted it and I knew it was the right thing to do. We could see the city-environ clear as day from our high cantilever perch: the central core, the radiating service ducts, and the concentric rings of life-space. The Imprinters were pressed next to the core, then came the ring of Players, then the Learners, Copulators, Fighters, Workers—until far out near the limits, the older codgers like me did their things and got wafted up and out of the way of the others. One time I thought the whole arrangement might work out better if it was done inversely, with the kids in the periphery, and moving in toward the center as they aged. But I got a clarificatory engram, maybe straight from B.D., that the energy sources of our city-environ flowed up the service core like oil up a shaft, and that the energy dissipated itself in relation to the distance it had to travel—just like the old electric distribution stations. Anyway, I'm getting off the track. My caseworker had a good shot of me flitting onto the top ribs of the dome and walking around the observation deck. There weren't many clear days any more, but sometimes I could see the World Trade Mart Towers above everything else. You know, they never finished those cozy buildings and a crane is still mounted on top of one of them. I've heard that they're all barnacled on the outside and filled with slugs and puffballs inside. Most of the landscape outside our dome is covered with pond scum and greasy-looking globules.

Well, I've been winding down for the past five years. I travel light and just try to make it from day to day. I sleep a lot and watch nostalgia cubes and drink more port than a lot of the other men. I've taken to smoking strong maduro stogies and doing the gourmet bit rather than nutritabs or blastula implants. Sometimes we play poker and try to get roaring drunk, but we usually fall asleep instead. Old Ray beamed a young girl up here not too long ago—a copulator. She did a strip for us and flared her snatch at everybody. Ray claims she stuck her finger up her pussy and then ran the finger under his nose. He said he felt something twitch deep down at the base of his spine, but he couldn't puzzle out what it was.

Well, my caseworker gave me a little packet of things the day before my 65th birthday: instructions for taking the terminal pill, release forms for the cerebromorph mart, authorizations for goods and services cloture, and a nice commendation plaque from the Synod Chief. And I just now got the warmest, fullest, most welcome vector-pattern straight from B.D. I feel like a sieve of glowing neurons being towed through honey and lava. I was beginning to get worried, but now I smell honeysuckle and female musk, and feel blood swelling the spongy caverns of my shaft. The terminal pill was easy to take, even tasted good, I hear some choir sounds far above me, and see happy vistas of people and promenades and striped gazebos. It's good not to be sad about leaving the dome. And I guess my caseworker is right. I have had a good life and done all the things I was supposed to do. It's good to have somebody in power who can keep everybody happy. I knew I could count on my big daddy to make me happy right up to the end.

Sam Duckhardt just came in and said he was supposed to take my seat. He shook my hand and said he'd see me in a few days. He put in for New Passaic too. So I said, Good, Sam, see you, and walked through the vesicle into the delivery room and sat in the energy-chaise. I'm falling asleep and feel like I weigh a ton. But I feel good. I feel happy. I sure hope things are this good in Passaic. Hey—I hear people singing. They're singing Happy Birthday. Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear Henry, Happy Birthday to you.

The Examination

Felix C. Gotschalk

Gotschalk again—with a story that begins quietly in a psychologist's office and slides deliciously toward chaos in easy, imperceptible stages.

The small black child sat on the white vinyl chair and gave off an aura of coal-stove smoke and lard. Her wool coat was too hot but she kept it on. A waxy sleeper stuck in the corner of her eye and she sniffled productively.

"Do you want a Kleenex?" the examiner asked, an edge of weariness showing through his overt kindness.

"Naw," the girl said softly. The examiner took one of the 1906 Binet forms from a stack atop a cabinet and sat down across the desk from the girl. The form bore 1937 and 1960 restandardization copyright dates.

"Do you feel all right today?" he asked.

"Yeah." The reply was flat.

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

"Naw." The examiner pushed the Binet form across the waxed formica surface to the girl.

"The first thing I'd like for you to do is write your name right here." The girl took the pencil, rotated the page 90 degrees starboard, and wrote left-handed, straight down the line, right at her navel. Her pencil grip was crablike, even hemiplegic, but she printed "PAMELA" well enough, adding a very slight stylistic flourish to the final A. The examiner took the form once more and filled in several blanks with a ballpoint pen.

"Let's see," he said, "today is April the seventeenth, 1974, and when is your birthday?"

"I don't know," the girl said faintly.

"Let's see again. Here it is. You were born February the first, 1966. So, you are eight years and ten months." The examiner wrote "8-2" in the chronological age blank. "And, you're a girl," he chuckled in a friendly tone, "I'll put that down." He printed "NF" for Negro female.

"Where do you live, Pamela?"

"You know thet wott house ova dair?" The child pointed out the window.

"I think so." The examiner was used to responses like this.

"I live ona dert road."

"What school do you go to now?"

"South Main-Jones."

"And what grade are you in?"

"Thudd."

"Did you go to kindergarten?"

"Ah went to Haidstott."

"What's your daddy's name?"

The dark face brightened at the question. "Ah got me two daddies."

"Yay—good." The examiner fell in easily with the drift of the response.

"Are they good to you?"

"Yeah." The examiner scanned the referral sheet for the name of the child's mother: PATRICIA ANN TUGGERT OWEN RAIKES.

"What kind of work does your daddy do?"

"He break up rocks at the quarry."

"Do you have any special hobbies, or things you like to do a whole lot?"

"Ah locks to watch teevee."

"What shows do you like best?"

The girl looked thoughtful. The examiner had his head down when the child's pupils swam away into pinheads, glowed a fiery white for half a second, then returned to wet black and brown cow-eyes.

"Ah locks Gilgun's eye-lun and the Frintstones," the girl said.

"Do you have to do any work around your house?"

"Ah hev to wash deeshes sometimes."

"Do you get some money to spend sometimes?"

"Yeah."

"What do you like to buy with money?"

"Canny."

The examiner filled in his name on the Binet face-sheet: PAUL MACK GRASSY, ED.D. He looked at his Nivada Grenchen. It read 9:22. Better get on with it, he thought.

"Well, I'm supposed to try you on a few little tests today, to find out something about how much you know, how smart you are. Is school hard for you, or easy?"

"Hodd."

"Well, let's try a few of these test things. Some of them are questions. Talking. Then, there are some pictures and puzzles that are sort of fun." The girl shifted in the chair and took off her coat. The examiner thought the girl's movements to be fluid and smooth and rapid. He began the testing:

"I want to find out how many words you know. Listen, and when I say a word, you tell me what it means. What is an orange?"

"Uh froot," she replied.

"Right. What is an envelope?"

"For a letter." The examiner rummaged in a drawer for a cigar. A sensor pad extended from the child's brow, rotated briefly, and retracted into the wiry black hairs. A few feet away, under a corner of the carpet, a roach suddenly ate its brood and felt its tropisms waver. The examiner looked back at the Binet text.

"The next word is 'straw.' What is a straw?"

"You suck it."

"What is a puddle?"

"A puddle of water."

"And, let's see here, the next word is 'tap.' What does that word mean?"

"You make a little noise."

"Good. A little noise. 'Gown.' What is a gown?"

"A nightgown."

"The next word is 'roar.' What does 'roar' mean?"

"Noise."

"Well, there are lots of kinds of noises. What would you say about 'roar' to tell exactly what it means?"

The child looked steadily at the examiner. "Ain't noise right?"

Grassy glanced at the text and saw the one-word response "noise" was a plus score. "Well, that's good enough. Let's try some more. 'Eyelash.' What is that?"

"Hair that protects your eyes," the girl said fairly quickly. Grassy now knew that the child was probably average in

mental abilities, having scored successes with vocabulary terms standardized on population samples of eight-year-olds.

"Well, you're pretty good at this. You say school is hard for you?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you try hard?"

"Not all the time."

"Well, the next word is, let's see, 'Mars.' What is Mars, anyway?"

"A planet." The child put a small hand on the desk and some formica molecules sundered deep in their microcosms. No blood vessels were visible in the child's hand.

" 'Juggler' is the next word," the examiner said.

"A juggler is a man that juggles balls up and down."

" 'Scorch.' What does 'scorch' mean?"

"To burn," Pamela said in a clearing and increasingly perky voice. Aft of her dextral mastoid an auxiliary cardiac pump puckered and hot proline surged across her synapses.

Grassy knew now that the girl had passed vocabulary items designed for random samplings of eleven-year-olds. He began to feel that the girl might be a sleeper, a bright but dull-acting child. He leaned in closer to her and locked in steady eye contact. He started just slightly. The girl's eyes dilated quickly, like an owl's. He looked closer. "The black parts of your eyes are big," he said gently and interestedly. "Do you have good vision and hearing?"

Pam smiled engagingly, with a charming glimmer of shyness, and said yes. Her eyes fell on a wart in the web of Grassy's hand. Her eyeballs ellipsed to 50-power magnification and 100 candlepower. The wart looked like a raised crater stuffed with pointed fleshy buds. She beamed in a micro-laser at the precise azimuth and the wart spores withered and disappeared. Grassy did not see the wart wink out of existence.

"It looks like you're going to be extra smart, Pam," he said. "You know some hard words for a girl your age. Let's try a few harder ones. How about 'lecture'? Have you ever heard that word?"

"A speech," came the reply.

"Right. A speech. Very good. Now, what is 'skill'? Ess, kay, eye, ell, ell?"

"Something you do real well," Pam said, brightening perceptibly.

"Hey, you get better as you go along," Grassy said, with

more enthusiasm than he usually expressed. "Do you have any special skills? Things you do well?" The girl's memory-trace engrams flashed in the subvocal input "3-D KINESTHETIC CHESS," but she looked neutrally at Grassy and said no.

"Well. How about this word. It is 'brunette.' Do you know what that is?"

"Black hair like mine." Pam seemed to give off some coy femininity.

"Right," Grassy said. "How about 'muzzle'?"

"What you put on a dog's face."

"How do you know that word?"

"A lady cross our road had to put one on her dawg cawz it wuz meen." The girl had reached a vocabulary level of twelve chronological years, and Grassy was beginning to be impressed and vaguely disquieted.

" 'Haste' is the next word, Pam," he said with an edge of expectancy and diffuse concern. "Do you know what that is?"

"Hurry," the girl said, and Grassy sensed a whisker of mockery in her voice. The room temperature had risen to 70.4 and an all but imperceptible hum was flicking at his auditory limens.

"Here's a hard one and it's hard to say. 'Peculiarity.' Anyone ever tell you that word?" Pam's lips parted to reveal serrated teeth. She closed her mouth quickly and gave Grassy a shy and unguarded look. "Yes," she said thoughtfully, "that means rare, or queer." *Alternate synonyms,* Grassy thought. *This little thing is at least superior.*

"Why did your parents want you to come and get tested?" he asked, thumbing through the referral notes.

"I really don't know," Pam said.

Grassy could not find the referral face-sheet. "Now I know I had that sheet. What did I do with it?" He looked up to see the girl looking at him quite intently. The look was instantly familiar. Bela Lugosi had greeted guests at Castle Dracula with the same vague expectancy. Grassy suaved off a nudging anxiety and returned to the Binet forms.

"What was the last word I asked you?"

" 'Peculiarity.' "

"Yes, well, let's try 'priceless.' " 'Priceless.' "

" 'Invaluable.' "

The reply was rapid, and the vocal nuance distantly goading, as if Pam had advance knowledge of the answers and was putting Grassy on. He looked searchingly at her. "My

dear girl," he said earnestly, "I am amazed and gratified and puzzled by your knowing that word, and by your giving a synonym. That's the most advanced way of responding to vocabulary tasks. Do you understand what I am saying to you?"

Pam dropped her chin and softly said yes. "I try to read a lot," she said, "and I learn a lot from the trivid and the tape banks."

"Well, let's see how far you can go with the words. The next one is 'regard.' What does 'regard' mean?"

"You look at something."

Amazing, Grassy thought. "How about 'tolerate'?"

"Endure."

"Here's a huge word. 'Disproportionate.' "

"Out of size—out of shape." Grassy realized that his mouth was gaping open and that his Harsh Marsh Maduro had gone out and was smelly. He lit the cigar and clenched it in his teeth. A diffuse wreath of smoke floated toward Pam, and then stopped, inches from her face. The force-field isomorph read the smoke's particulate locus and Pam marveled why humanoids chose to ignite dried leaves and allow the combusted cells' smoke to play among the lungs and the sinus pockets and the olfactory shafts.

Pam had now defined Binet vocabulary words as well as average adults, and an extrapolated IQ on this one parameter would translate to 170 plus. Grassy truly prized bright kids, bright adults, anybody who showed the secret handclasp responses which betokened optimal brain-cell number, configuration, and condition. He was rarely if ever threatened intellectually. Now Pam grew more adult and supra-adult every minute. "Have you ever heard your voice on tape?" he asked her.

"No."

"You're doing so very well that I'd like to record some of the things you say. Okay?"

"Okay."

He flicked the cassette on and palmed the record slot.

"Here's a short word. 'Lotus.' What's that?"

"A plant. A Chinese plant. And an English racing car."

"How about 'shrewd'?"

"Discerning."

How the goddam mother hell could an eight-year-old humanoid know that word, Grassy thought.

" 'Mosaic,' " he said in a fringe-stentorian tone.

"An art form in which pictures or designs are made with stone, glass, or tile. Or"—and here she looked vaguely professorial—"of, or pertaining to, Moses." The response scored at SUPERIOR ADULT, LOCUS II.

"Nobody ever gets this one," Grassy said. "The word is 'stave.' "

"A curved board in a barrel."

"How in the world did you come to know a rare word like that?" Grassy had a whining shimmer in his tone.

"Definitive corollaries of linguistic gestalten are, of course, a matter of public information." Pam sounded robotlike.

Grassy felt his jowls go flaccid and his eyes begin to blink. He felt strangely introversive. He thumbed the Norelco to rewind, then to stop, then to a replay: a 132-cycle hum spat through the mike speaker, and a wavering overlay of pulsating psychophysical tones contrapunted through the basal pitch. Pam's eyes glowed a soft luminosity and antenna buds appeared at her parietal lobes. "You're an alien." Grassy tried to sound unafraid.

"Affirmative."

"What do you want?"

"I want to continue the evaluation."

"You want to define the rest of the words?"

"Negative. I want to put the remaining words to you as a testee." Pam's silver arm spread across the desk like a chrome piston and took the Binet text.

"First," she began, "is it true that humanoid language sounds evolved from the cries of animals?"

Grassy moved toward the door, but a modstun force-field enveloped him. He felt as if he had walked into a warm gossamer membrane.

"Be seated, please," the girl said. "You are in no danger. No harm will come to you."

Grassy sat down trembling. The girl vectored in a tranquilizing matrix of oxygen dilutants. "Well?" she said, "what is your response to my question?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. I guess I'm weak in the psycholinguistics bit."

"Is it true that what you term 'intelligence' is assessed by psychologists through linguistic exchanges with the evaluees?"

"Yes," Grassy answered, "although verbal expression, or

particular verbal facility, is not a firm requirement. We can test mutes."

Pam's tungsten helices whirred in ambergris gelatin. She scanned the remaining Binet word lists. "How was word number twenty-six selected as a linguistic gestalten held to measure intelligence? The word is 'bewail.' "

"The words are weeded out on statistical difficulty curves during the test standardization process. Intelligent people seem to know harder words than unintelligent people. 'Bewail' ranked as one of the tougher words, because the standardization sample showed that a middle locus of superior adults knew the word."

"But, since the term 'superior' is taxonomic and dependent on performance, are you not talking circularly?" Pam asked. Then she passed quickly on: "What does the term mean to you?" she asked Grassy.

Grassy realized that his daily access to test items had not made him as test-wise as he might have thought, and the realization was a kind of double-edged sword. The specificity of his own mental abilities seemed preserved, yet the blind spots he had were being revealed; i.e., access to intelligence tests had not made him any more intelligent. And, he thought, this is somehow goddam good. " 'Bewail' means something like being sad," Grassy ventured.

"Deplore. Lament. Bemoan," Pam said quickly. "How about word number twenty-seven. 'Ocher.' Oh-Kerr."

"That's a mythological monster, a kind of troll that lives under bridges," Grassy said, trying to be playful. Pam smiled.

"I can read your ideational dynamics, your subvocal engrams. And I see much dissonance there—cognitive dissonance, one of your colleagues has called it. You think and feel one way, look and act another, and talk yet another. Do you really know what the term 'ocher' means?"

"As far as I know, it's a monster."

"An earthy clay with iron ore in it," Pam said.

"Oh yeah," Grassy said, "now I remember." He dropped his cigar on the rug beside the telephone. As he bent to pick it up, he lifted the receiver from its cradle, knowing that the local operator would come on the line in a few seconds. Pam's ears had sprouted tufts of crystalline cilia, and her eyes rotated to show at least a dozen wetly glowing facets. Her lip line had become more compressed, like a surgical slash on a bloodless cadaver. Her teeth meshed together like

ring gears. Grassy wondered if she actually ate, in the sense of placing foliage or flesh or carrion in her mouth and ingesting it in some way.

"What does 'repose' mean to you?" she asked.

"To lie down, crap out, get supine," Grassy replied.

"Rest. Inactivity. Tranquillity. How about 'ambergris'?"

"Hello? Hello." The switchboard operator's voice came on the phone.

"Excuse me," said Grassy, and reached for the phone. He tried to tell the operator to ring the police, but Pam read his thoughts and masked out his laryngeal striations.

Her arm telescoped across the desk and her ball-socketed hand rotated to replace the receiver. "My dear Ducktoor Grassy," she said, "I am totally superordinate in relation to you. Please permit me to complete the questioning. As a scientist, or a quasi, or para-scientist, perhaps you are interested in my motives: they include the assessment of humanoid verbalizations as they differ from their supposed ideational bases. In other words, I know what you are thinking. I want to hear what you *say*. Now take this term 'ambergris.' "

"It's a puller, put in perfumes."

"True, but definitively diffuse. My data banks read the term as denoting a waxy gray substance excreted by sperm whales. It is actually an excretory lubricant. 'Limpet,' " Pam continued.

Her voice had lowered and softened, so that she sounded like the Lonesome Gal from old radio days. She still hummed softly, like a diapason cipher.

Grassy felt just enough playfulness to nudge against the force-field periodically, but he also felt quiescent and interested in Pam the alien. Grassy gently rotated the waxed tips of his mustache with his thumb and forefinger. "Limpet, limpet. I believe that relates to a quiet pool—a limpid pool, a calm dark pool."

"Shellfish. Mollusks. Conicals." Pam sounded computerized again. "Such a term is communicatively esoteric. Have you truly found that this is a utilitarian word? Do you need to know that the word denotes a generic group, a taxonomic cluster?"

"Intelligent people often seem to know esoteric things. But, the Esso Terrier per se is defined as a statistical or actuarial norm. In other words, a person who is bright or who tests as being artifactually or psychometrically bright is not that way

because he has scavenged for nits or groveled compulsively. He is rather like the teevee receiving stations that monitored the 1970 moon landings: powerful, rich, self-actualizing, high in perceptual sensitivity."

"You pretty well imply an hereditary or structurally invariant basis for intelligence," Pam said.

"We have wrangled over that for at least seventy years," Grassy said, half-waving off the questioning nuance of the tone, "and never got it adequately resolved. Historically, aristocrats have claimed an attendant right to high intelligence, while the serfs assumed a yoke of stupidity. There were people who felt that they had no *right* to be bright because they were poor. There now seems to be a measurable hierarchy of intelligence groupings, which is only partially related to socio-economic class."

Pam seemed to listen attentively, her cilia waving like anemone sepals and her eyes now showing a more assuring humanoid warmth. Her charisma index wavered with her persona variations, so that she seemed both child and god, both small and overpowering, both human and suprahuman.

"What does 'frustrate' mean?"

"To feel bugged, miffed, or irritated."

"Foil, baffle, defeat, ineffectuate," Pam clacked out. " 'Flaunt.' "

"If you've *got* it, *flaunt* it," Grassy said in weak camaraderie. "I think it means something like bragging or teasing."

"To make a gaudy, ostentatious, or defiant display," the succinct definition clacked out again. " 'Incrustation,' " she continued neutrally.

"Like barnacles all over a ship."

"A hard outer layer or coating." Grassy began to feel stirringly dumb.

" 'Retroactive,' " Pam continued.

"Applicable to recent events, like retroactive pay raises," Grassy said.

"Having application to or effect on things prior to its enactment or effectuation." Pam stood up. She was now about six feet tall. "Would you stand, please?" she asked. "I want to get your somatotype parameters and your brain mass relative to total organismic displacement."

Grassy got up awkwardly, his chair rolling off the beaverboard template and onto the red carpet. Pam now looked like the Statue of Liberty. Grassy felt the barely liminal com-

fort of the forcefield, as if he were dozing before a lingering hardwood fire.

The alien seemed to center herself in front of Grassy, like a surveyor's rod man. "Be quite still, please," she said, increasing the force-field density. A segmented antenna appeared at her waistline and she moved around the desk to Grassy's side. Standing closely ventral-ventral, she embraced him with eight chrome pseudopods. His body was yoked to hers. He closed his eyes. "Do you feel anything when I do this?" she asked, somehow sweetly.

"No," he said. "What is it you are doing?"

"Getting a holographic mold of your body. The pseudopods are vectoring in isomorphic tape measures, so to say. It will take just a few more seconds." Grassy opened his eyes inches from the alien face. It was smooth, like wetly polished marble.

"Your vertical spine and curved horizontal ribs must cause you discomfort," she said. "Do you sometimes move like quadrupeds, to ease the feeling?"

"No. Never."

"Did you evolve from quadrupeds?"

"I don't really know."

"Do you ever regress to quadruped or anthropoid behaviors? For instance, do you groom or preen one another?"

"Occasionally, but such behaviors are considered in questionable taste."

"Do you smell your armpits or axillary vellus areas?"

"Rarely," Grassy replied.

"Are you capable of self-fellation?"

"An anatomic impossibility. But no, I recall one case reported by Kinsey, of a man who utilized this method for several years."

"Are you in any sense cloacal, like serpents?"

"No, but urinary fluids and seminal fluids do share a single distal ducting, so that we are probably more cloacal than we would care to admit."

"Is it true that orgasm is held to be the pinnacle of humanoid experience?"

"I think yes." The pseudopods retracted and Pam spun slowly, like a heavy periscope, and glided off a few feet.

"Would you like to question me any more?" she asked.

Grassy looked sheepish. "I am too sedated to do much good. Do you fear capture by us?"

"No." Pam sat down and her appearance changed wispily. "I can alter my appearance from raw diffusion to lead monoliths. I am impervious to physical harm. You could not capture me. Come, complete the few terms left on the test, and you can ask me anything you wish." They sat in their original positions as testee and tester and exchanged long neutral looks.

"This is ironic, or humbling, or something," Grassy said. "My intelligence, however you wish to define it, plus my educational credentials and professional experience, accord me a statutory sphere of competency, and a certain implied superordinacy in assessing people's behaviors. I naturally bring this reinforced orientation to you, an overtly deprived member of a racial minority group, and you obliterate it as an alien. Now you want me back in the examiner's role. Do you feel sadistic motives?"

"We feel no such motives. We have no need or wish to express aggression. Come, the appointment span will be over soon. Ask me the last few words and I will tell you something about my organismic grouping."

Grassy looked half-heartedly at the Binet text. He felt like he was about to read *The Readers Digest* to a national Mensa group. "Word number forty-three is 'philanthropy.' "

"Love of mankind. Desire to help mankind. Something that helps mankind."

" 'Piscatorial.' "

"Of fishes, fishermen, or fishing."

" 'Milksop.' " Grassy felt disgusted and somehow ashamed.

"Unmanly man or boy. Mollycoddle. Sissy."

"Do you have sexes among your people?" Grassy put in.

"No. We do not reproduce. We are made of insoluble crystalline matrices, held in quasi-permeable colloid states by reverse parity."

"Parity in the sense of right-handed and left-handed atoms?"

"No." Pam smiled through her little-girl physiognomy. "Two Oriental physicists won one of your prizes years ago by showing experimentally that atoms are not handed."

"Are your crystalline units homogeneous? Are you reductionistic?"

"Your celestial galaxy is a macrocosmic homology of our crystalline structures. We have homogeneity in the sense of spinning spheroids, a space medium or host environment, and inertias born of centrifugal force. Try the toughest Binet words."

" 'Harpy.' "

"Mythological bird-woman creatures, perceived as an inverted major detail on Card Nine of the Rorschach plates."

"How did you know that?"

"It is bold in your subvocal engrams."

" 'Depredation,' " said Grassy.

"Plundering, laying waste, robbery."

" 'Perfunctory.' "

"Done without care or interest or as a routine form."

" 'Achromatic.' "

"Colorless."

"Do you have a light spectrum in your perceptual world?" Grassy asked.

"Yes," Pam said, "but we are able to see the bands of coloration all along the angstrom unit abscissa. You humans are really quite limited, what with your range of visible light equal to about one-twentieth of the total actual light. For instance, I can see the alternating current in your stereo system, the radio waves in the atmosphere, as well as gammas and ultraviolets and all the rest. You are really unable to protect yourself from such things as X-rays."

" 'Casuistry' is the next word," Grassy continued. He heard the muffled steps and voices of several people outside his door. Pam was fully in the guise of the little girl.

"Some sheriff's deputies are outside," she said. "The switchboard operator got my wavelength when you picked up the phone receiver. These frequencies are enough to make birds wake up screaming and hippopotami burst from the surface of their quiet pools. Listen to me now, don't make a fool of yourself. They will not believe your reporting that I am an alien life form. I can be totally Pamela. So be cool, as you say. *And*, casuistry is a philosophical term denoting the solving of special cases of right and wrong in conduct by . . ."

A heavily authoritative knocking rang through the cheap beige paint and thin pine wood of the door. "Dr. Grassy? Are you all right?"

Grassy scrambled up from his chair and all but wrenched the plastic knob from the door. Two fatly dumb-looking deputies filled the framing space.

"She's a goddam alien!" Grassy sang out to the men, his arms flailing the air, his eyes white-wide and rolling, "she's got spaghettini oozing from her ears and an antenna in her navel! She's got teeth like bank-vault hinges, her eyes glow like coals, and she's got eight chrome-plated goddam fucking arms!"

A small but determined social worker winced, then moved easily between the ballooning hulks of the deputies, and all but sprinted to the small sobbing form of the dull-looking negroid girl.

"Look out!" Grassy trumpeted. "She's pure, raw, crystalline-matrix colloid! She just looks like a lidda durl. Don't touch her, dammit."

He felt fingers big as hotdogs close around his arms and he was held very firmly against a wall. "Man, this fox has really flipped," one of the deputies said, getting a ham-sized hand inside Grassy's Sansabelt. Pam was crying little shudders of fear and being hugged and cooed over by the social worker.

"Idiots!" Grassy grated broken resonance at the gathering group of staff members. "I tell you that girl is an alien being. She is not humanoid. You can find out for yourself, just take her clothes off! She's a labyrinth of data storage tiers! She knew every one of the goddam Binet vocabulary words!" Pam was crying louder and being hugged closer.

"Let's get this dude out of here," the deputy said. "He's blown all his fuses." They hustled Grassy down the hallway.

" 'Homunculus'!" he called back to Pam. "Hoe-Mun-Kew-Luss. Tell them what that means, Pam. 'Sudorific'! 'Sudorific'! 'Parterre'! Goddamn 'parterre'! No priest-prodding, nun-knocking fair, Pam! You didn't finish the test!"

Grassy heard Pam's voice close at his ear as he was trundled into the car: " 'Homunculus.' A little man. Dwarf. A model of a human body used for demonstrating anatomy."

"See?" He sat up intently. "She knew those answers. She's talking to me now. I tell you she is an alien organism."

"Relax, Doc," the deputy said, "we'll get it all straight."

Grassy jumped slightly as the alien voice returned: " 'Sudorific': causing or increasing sweat. 'Parterre': part of a theater beneath the balcony and behind the parquet."

"See? See?" Grassy said. "She's still talking. She knows about dwarfs, and sweat, and theaters. These are things most of us don't know about. Nobody ever gets those words right. You believe me, don't you?"

"Sure, Doc," one of the men said. The deputies exchanged tight, knowing smiles as the car drove off.

The Colors of Fear

Terry Carr

This is the third of three stories of alien invasion in this issue—and it is as different from the Gotschalk as that one is from the Janifer. Quietly told but vivid, it depicts a collapsing world with economy and simplicity.

Colors exploded in the sky like dreams. They were all around us, above our heads, over the city and the plain beyond. There was no noise because of our defense screens, but those bursts of yellow, crimson and blue, and their traces falling through the night air ... you couldn't watch them without hearing them inside yourself.

The sound of colors exploding is a scream of terror.

"Five nights in a row," said Karl. "I don't understand it."

He was sitting across the room from the wall where we watched the sky; he said he couldn't stand to go closer. Karl's apartment was even smaller than ours and he wasn't used to the size of the holographic images in our wall.

"They're trying to get in," Jean said. "They've been trying for months and months. It's pathetic."

"Those bastards," Karl said. "Bastards."

I shifted in my chair to look over my shoulder at him. Karl was a small slender man, and his angular face flickered green and gold as ghost colors burst in the dimness of the room: he looked like a harlequin.

"If you called a Threnn a bastard I wonder if he'd even know what you meant," I said. "Assuming you could talk to one."

Jean was scooping dinner dishes into the slot; soft whooshing noises came as they were sucked in. Jean was dark-haired

and fiercely energetic; now her gamin face was tight with anxiety. "It doesn't matter whether they understand what they are," she said vehemently. "Call them anything. Anything."

I started to say something, but I was distracted when several color bursts went off at once. The room lit almost as bright as by daylight, and my eye was drawn back to the wall. One, two more burst as I watched, and their light fell fading through the air. My thought went in a different direction.

"You could even call them beautiful," I said.

"Beautiful?" Jean stopped and stared at me.

"Only visually," I said. "But there's a long tradition of the closeness of beauty and pain—"

"Oh God, Stephen, don't get philosophical again," Karl protested. He wasn't looking at me; his eyes were steady on the wall, as though he'd given over one of his senses to what was happening outside and was only operating on the other four inside the room. He sat tensely, but trying to keep loose; he'd crossed one leg over the other for body-calmness, but his foot moved in small nervous jerks.

"They're not beautiful," Jean said. "Not visually or any other way."

"People get philosophical so they won't have to react emotionally to something," Karl said. "You do it all the time, Stephen."

Colors burst and shadows moved in the room around us.

"No, it isn't as intellectualized as you think," I said. "If you can keep from associating the colors of the Threnn with death, then you can feel real beauty in them."

In the dimness I saw Karl's eyes widen a bit. He seemed dazzled tonight by the intensity of the colors. But even as his eyes stared unmoving he said very deliberately, "They are not beautiful. They hurt."

"That's right," Jean said. "They make people into mindless neon paintings, then they bring them to the city to explode them in front of us. They're monsters."

"Of course they are," I said, turning off the beauty in my head. I reached out my hand to Jean, and she came to sit in the chair beside me. "We could watch something else," I said.

"What else is there to see?" she asked.

"The London station is still broadcasting. Maybe there's still someone there."

Jean shook her head. "No. It's just the station—automatic. There hasn't been anyone alive there for months."

From across the room Karl said, "Why not skip around from the cameras outside the walls? There might be something more interesting down nearer the ground."

"Do we really want to watch what's going on outside?" I asked. Colors continued to burst in the depths of the wall, and our faces were lit strangely in the dimness.

"I hope no one's out there," Jean said. "Let's turn to the outside walls and see if it's all right, Stephen."

I pushed buttons on the arm of my chair, and the wall changed to a desertlike plain stretching out into the night. It was largely featureless, nothing to see but some abandoned work equipment that someone must have dropped when the Threnn got him, and no one had had the courage to try to bring it back. Other than that, there was only rock and dust and colored shadows splashing across the ground.

"I don't see anyone," said Jean. "Do you, Stephen? Karl?"

"No, there's no one," I said.

"Change to a different camera," said Karl.

More buttons, and the wall was a hilly area, north of us. Here were really black shadows to contrast with the sky's colors, because most of the Threnn and the other lights—the barely human sacrifices—stayed out over the plain rather than going into the mountains to the west. They came in from the plain every night, like an imitation dawn after darkness had fallen.

I stared out into the darkness and for the first time that evening I felt the sharp edge of real fear. And I recognized it for what it was—a childish fear of the dark, nothing more. When you're afraid of the dark, it's because you're imagining that things can creep up on you unseen; but lights can't hide in the dark. Still: fear isn't a rational thing.

We'd only known Karl for a few months; he worked with Jean at her electronics lab. He hadn't made any friends there—a lot of us had become less social now, withdrawn into our fear—but Jean with her restless energy had managed to bring him out of his shell and we'd all become friends. Karl played a good game of chess. He came to dinner once or twice a week and we talked about whatever we could find for light conversation—but we usually ended up talking about the Threnn.

Karl was obsessed with them; he worried and theorized constantly. He pointed to the fact that Moscow had been among the first cities to fall to the Threnn, and he kept bringing up the experiments in parapsychology that the Russians had been conducting since the last century. He said, "They've never had enough scientific discipline in their work. They were only interested in making new discoveries: telepathy, psychic-energy augmentation. Sloppy work, all of it; they've never been careful. And look what's happened."

I wasn't convinced of anything about the Threnn's origins; I wasn't even sure they were living creatures, as everyone assumed. When those lights had begun attacking our cities, swooping down to capture and transform people into spheres of light like themselves, we thought of them as a strange new form of life come to capture our world. But we knew very little, really, about this enemy, and there were a lot of wild guesses made.

The mystic-minded looked on the Threnn at first as angels from God, or from some higher plane of being, come to deliver us from the worries of our aching world. But that hope quickly turned to fear as more and more people were taken, eaten alive by insubstantial spheres of dazzling color. Soon the credulous were saying that these creatures were agents of Satan—rites of exorcism abounded, congregations everywhere prayed for deliverance. In some places human sacrifices were even offered to the Threnn.

All useless. Priests were taken as they chanted, churches and covens were swallowed en masse.

Bombs, bullets, lasers, gases, all were tried; and none affected the Threnn at all. By the time we discovered that vibrational frequencies could drive them off, our cities were half empty. We fashioned vibrational networks quickly around our cities, but we found that the Threnn could slip through the slightest gap in those screens. We worked frantically to improve them, as more and more people were lost. Entire cities were emptied of human life; the bright colors of the Threnn swarmed through city after city, and left now only when the streets and buildings lay silent and empty as death.

But we built a new city, one last city for human defense, with its back against the forbidding Rockies and an impregnable network of screens over it. And those of us who could

get here came. We lived in hastily erected apartments as small as prison cells—but we were thankful for our safety at last.

"I don't think I see anything there either," Karl said, staring into the darkness of the holo wall. "But if anybody's out there he'd be in the shadows anyway. Can you see anyone?"

"No," said Jean. She stared fearfully into the dark.

"Let's switch again," I said, and pressed the buttons. Outside we saw the shelves of cliffs rising like giant steps. The city had its back hard up against the west wall of mountains, and they loomed above us. It was very dark out there; there seemed to be no drifting, shining colors here in back of the city. I had to wait for my eyes to adjust in order to make out the details of the rising cliffs, and the walkway leading into the higher levels which no one used after dark.

There was silence, all of us staring out.

"Someone is out there," said Karl. "By the steps—there." He might have been pointing, but it was as dark inside as out.

I searched the dark around the walkway. It was hard to see anything, but then movement caught my eye and there was a man crouched halfway up on the first flight of stairs.

Once I'd seen him it was surprising how easily I could make him out. He was young, maybe only a boy; the expression on his face, as he stared back over the city at the lights in the sky, was so open, so naked, that he might have been many years older and looked that young. It wasn't even fear, exactly, though there were remnants of that in it. He had been in terror recently, but he was past it now. Looking at the colors of the night sky he seemed to have surrendered. I thought: *He's waiting.*

Karl left his chair and moved past me, went right up to the holo wall. He stared out at the man, or the boy. "Why isn't he running?" he said.

"Why is he out there at all?" Jean said. "He should stay inside. Why do people keep going out?"

"I don't think he's afraid," I said. "Look at him."

The boy or man wasn't moving. He just crouched there on the steps with nothing but darkness to hide him.

We all looked at that open expression he had, and his face slowly became clearer to see, taking on a golden glow. It seemed very late that I realized there was a light coming

toward him from somewhere behind us. I jumped and almost looked back—but we were inside, and this was just a picture of outside, no more.

"Oh no!" said Jean. "Oh no, Stephen, do you see? There's a light, it's a Threnn—"

"I know; I see it. Let's switch to something else."

"Switch it away? No, you can't!"

I said, "Do you really want to see this?"

"Leave it on," Karl said. "I've never seen this clearly before."

The boy—it was a boy, we could see that now—didn't move as the light came toward him. He didn't move at all; he just waited.

Then the Threnn was on him, a bright globe of golden light that seemed to drop instantly from above. The light was a quarter the size of the boy, but when it touched him it grew, it settled around his head, on his shoulders, covered his chest and then down to his legs—finally all of him. We could still see the boy inside for a while; he looked foolishly surprised, he opened his mouth to laugh, and maybe he did laugh, we could hear nothing. And then the light was all around him, and he seemed to dissolve into it.

He was light, nothing else. A giant globe of inhuman light that rose into the air and disappeared above, leaving only traveling shadows behind.

"I don't understand it," Karl said. "He wasn't even afraid." He set his coffee down, his hand still shaking. Jean had turned on all the lights in our room and it was almost glaringly lit. The wall was turned off, the curtain drawn across it.

"He was crazy," Jean said. "Do you remember his face, how he looked? Completely . . . he didn't realize what was happening."

"What do they want from us?" said Karl. "There are hardly any of us left. For God's sake, a hundred years ago there were too many of us; the world was crowded. Now we're the only city left alive on Earth."

I thought of San Francisco, Moscow, Johannesburg, New York City, Tokyo—and Rome. Rome had been one of the first to go, and I remembered the scene in St. Peter's Square when a hundred thousand souls had been enveloped by the lights, had melted beneath the colors and drifted away into the sky—scores at a time, hundreds, till the square was com-

pletely empty. For three weeks after, we'd tuned in to the Rome channel and looked at that deserted scene, hoping to find some sign of life—but there had been none, only empty darkness in front of the ancient cathedral. The very absence of the Threnn's colors told us the city was deserted: they weren't even searching for survivors. And finally the broadcast equipment had failed and there was no scene at all.

They had all gone that way, the cities, the towns, the helpless and frustrated military bases. Only our city, built impregnably on the flanks of the Rockies, a new city built for defense and using all of our modern technology, still lived. Our screens held; the Threnn couldn't get at us.

But some of us went to them, went outside. And were taken.

I sipped my coffee and remembered the lights that had taken the boy. I had thought they were beautiful, but to see one of them just *consume* a person—

"At first it was like a halo," I said. "Remember? When the light first came down around his head."

Jean shuddered. "Stephen, don't."

"I'm sorry. It just struck me—"

"A halo; my God," said Karl. "That wasn't an angel come to carry the boy off to Heaven—it was a Threnn. You saw what happened to the boy."

"Yes, I saw it. He died. But you know, he didn't show any pain and he didn't seem afraid. A lot of them are like that."

Karl's eyes flashed anger with so much intensity it startled me. "Then they're crazy. That's all, Stephen, just suicidal maniacs. Why else would they go outside?"

He looked from me to Jean, and I realized that he wanted an answer, some answer.

"Of course they're crazy," I said. I got up to lower the lights to their normal soft illumination, bringing safety and peace back to the room, and Jean nervously busied herself punching an order for a tranq dessert. But Karl sat where he was, looking silently at the curtained holo wall.

Later, after Karl had gone home silent and obviously shaken, I said to Jean, "Maybe it isn't a good idea for us to have him over so often. He always wants to watch the holo, and it upsets him. He was worse tonight than he's ever been before. And it isn't doing you any good either, being with him when he's like that."

She looked at me in surprise. "Not doing me any good? What does that mean?"

"You catch his fright," I said. "Look at you, you're still tense as a wire."

She sighed, and visibly tried to relax her body. "It's not Karl," she said.

I nodded. "But he doesn't help, does he?"

"Stephen, he's a frightened person, just like everybody else! Look at us, a few thousand people barely managing to stay alive in a city that's really a prison! It's the end of the world, and you think he shouldn't be afraid? You think *I* shouldn't be?"

"No, it's not that," I said. "Of course you're afraid; so am I. But we've got to keep our sense of proportion—"

"Proportion? Oh Christ, sometimes I think *you're* the one who's crazy!" She strode to the couch, began to open it out for the night with furious energy. She turned back to me and said, "You know, I don't think you're afraid of them at all. Good God, you think they're *beautiful.*" She laughed softly, then shuddered. "Beautiful. Oh, they're just so pretty it makes you want to hug them, doesn't it?"

She stood glaring at me with angry dark eyes. But I'm the rational one of the two of us, so I sat down at the table and waited for her anger to fade. Once or twice she opened her mouth to flare at me again, but she reconsidered. And after a few minutes she sat on the opened couch and began to shake.

I went to her, held her around the shoulders silently till I could feel her calming. I kissed the back of her neck and said, "I think you're pretty too, you know."

"Don't make jokes about it," she said softly. "And don't blame poor Karl when I get frightened. I'm terrified of those creatures whether or not he's here."

"All right," I said. "All right."

But we watched the holo by ourselves the next night. I didn't want to watch, I wanted to read a book or run a tape movie or play chess till midnight. I wanted to push the Threnn from my mind, get some distance to keep my own fears in control. It was Jean who turned on the holo wall, and she sat tensely in front of it. So we watched.

It was the same as last night, the same as all our nights now. Overhead the lights drifted and flashed brilliant colors of blue and crimson and gold. Some were pure white, daz-

zling. The plain outside the city was empty and shadow-haunted beneath them.

"Jean, this is morbid," I said, but she only shrugged.

She switched to another view, and the room was flooded with green light as one of the human-Threnn burst right in front of us. It took me a while to clear my vision, and in my mind I was hearing the fading cry of that creature. I wished momentarily that I could hear it more clearly, and was frightened at the thought. When I could again make out the scene in the holo I saw that this was the western view, the wall of mountains and the silent stairs leading to the higher levels. After that one burst of light, darkness settled onto the scene and in the room with us.

The phone rang.

It seemed so loud in the stillness of the room, as though it were another burst of light from an unexpected direction. I started, my heart pounding; then I saw Jean punch the button next to her and she said, "Hello?"

Karl's voice came from the speaker overhead: "Jean, I'm going to do it."

"Karl? Is that you?" Voices sounded harsh in the darkness.

Red and golden radiance burst somewhere above; the stairs reflected soft colors.

"Yes, it's Karl. I'm going outside."

Jean said, "Outside where?"

"Outside the city. I'm going to go outside the city, and I wanted to let you know."

I jumped up. "Karl! Karl, this is Stephen. Listen to me—"

"I wanted to tell you that," Karl said, "and I want to tell you one thing more."

Jean cried out, "*Karl!* Don't—"

"Jean, did you know that they're calling to us?"

The scene outside flashed blue, and streamers of light ran down the sky.

"Karl!" I shouted. "*Karl!*"

I heard the phone click off.

"Wait!" Jean cried, and again, "Wait, Karl!" But the phone line was dead. Jean fumbled with buttons, there were clicks, then the steady even hum of an open line.

I started for the door. "I can catch him before he leaves," I said. "I'll tie him down if I have to."

"No," Jean said. She pointed to the holo wall. "He's already going out the door."

In the holo I saw a splash of pale light as Karl came through the door, moving easily, more calmly than I'd ever seen him. He let the door swing shut behind him and started out into the dark.

"He called from a phone out near the wall," I said, feeling helpless. "He didn't want us to stop him."

Karl was in an open patch of ground now, standing near the top of the stairway where he would be visible to the hordes of Threnn that swarmed the skies over the city and the plain to the east. Already I thought I could see the scene growing lighter as the Threnn moved toward him.

Karl stood still and spread his arms wide. He was smiling, and looking up at the converging lights of the sky.

Jean jumped up and ran to the holo wall. "Karl, no!" she shouted, and pounded on the screen as though she could break through it to pull Karl away.

Silver light descended from above him. Karl looked up at the Threnn, his face more and more clear to us as the creature came near; there were tears on his face, but his expression was simple joy. The creature came down into our view and almost at once it seemed to reach Karl, to attach itself to him, covering his head and shoulders, expanding. Karl threw back his head and laughed as the silver light covered his entire body. The brightness was dazzling, and Karl disappeared into it. He became light himself, he was a pulsing ball of silver, and he rose swiftly into the sky and was gone.

The empty stairway grew dark before us as Karl, or what had been Karl, moved away. Finally the scene was empty and lifeless again, and the shadows were black.

Jean stood leaning against the holo wall; the only sound I could hear in the room was her harsh, uneven breathing. She was crying.

I made my way across the room and switched off the holo; the room lights came up. My head was whirling; I hardly knew what had happened, though I knew too well what had happened.

"Not Karl," Jean said softly. "No."

I started to go to her, wanting to hold her, but she spun away and began to walk agitatedly around the room. "I could believe it of anybody but him," she said. "He was afraid of them, so afraid of them!" She shuddered.

Our room seemed startlingly normal to me after the vivid-

ness of the scene outside: cool light in a compact apartment. I said, "Sometimes it works that way—the people who are most afraid of something can be the ones who are most drawn to it."

And suddenly Jean exploded at me: *"Stop it, stop it!* You're so *rational* about everything! It's not an intellectual puzzle, it's *horrible!"*

She stared wildly at me, then crumpled into a chair and tried to curl into a ball. "Please stop it," she whispered.

I wished I could.

Ariel

Roger Elwood

Roger Elwood is that indefatigable anthologist whose collections of short stories have been appearing with astonishing frequency over the past couple of years from just about every publishing house you could name, and then some. From his headquarters near Atlantic City, New Jersey, he sallies forth telephonically and postally to enmesh scores of editors and authors in an incredible web of literary projects. Before he turned to anthologizing, though, Elwood was a free-lance writer, operating in a variety of fields, and somehow he still manages to find time for some writing of his own today. The elegant little story that follows seems to be, amazingly enough, his first science-fiction piece.

> *. . . leading thus to the inevitable finding that the potential of the blacks can be judged solely in terms of how the outer civilization is advanced.*
>
> Newsweek, 4/20/2002

Sounds. [Voices?]
"He's coming back now into contact. He—"

In the park, twenty blacks were murdered. Napalm. They had gathered for a peaceful demonstration but whites had crept up on them and sprayed their bodies with liquid fire.

> *"How can you tell if one of them is burnt bad?" the rookie asked. "Who knows?" replied the old cop. "They all look the same to me. Dead, alive, burnt, bruised . . ."*

"—back in cycle. We can proceed now."
A woman. Her voice [trembling?]
. . . *familiar.*
Where? When? Oh, God—!

He'd heard about the Park Massacre when he was nine. His mother took him to that place. "But why?" he wanted to know. "Did it change things at all?"
She said nothing. She—

Momma! Momma! That you! Answer me—answer—
And she did.
And she said, "You should be dead."
Dead!
Was that what had happened? Had he died and come back? A nigger Lazarus? Had he—

> *The old cop went home that night and his wife asked, "How was it today?" "Routine," he said, "just routine, honey." And his kids ran to him and—*

—He saw light. A pinhole, then opening up. Opening. Bigger. Filling the world.

The trip was routine at first. He had followed his instructions well. He knew what he was supposed to do. And to relieve the inevitable boredom there was—

Your
mother's
a whore
and she conceived you
in sin
and you ain't got no father
and you ain't got no brothers
or sisters
and now your momma's dead

Tears.
He felt them. He felt them on his cheeks, tasted them on his tongue. He— The light. Opening up

Stars. Top Bottom. Left. Right. Back. Front. The craft was going. To think of it! Through space. The first man to spend time in—

He looked around. Not much room. But that was okay. All his life he had been living without room.

Jamie was his friend. A great-grandfather of Jamie's had died in the Park Massacre and he had had three generations of bitterness ground into him.

"What happened later?" he asked.

"Anger. Everybody got real angry. Investigations and arrests. But the death penalty had long since been abolished, so—"

"—So what then, Jamie?"

"War."

> *WASHINGTON, D.C.—U.P.I.—The three organizers of the Park Massacre were sentenced to life imprisonment today. In an impassioned rebuke of the forces of violence in society, Judge Jacob Weinstein said—*

Jamie died.

Some whites trapped him in an alley to see if he was black through and through.

He wasn't.

—The light was a room.

His mother's voice went away. There had never been any voice. He had imagined it.

His mother was a dead whore. . . .

PARK MASSACRE AND ITS SOCIOLOGICAL OUTCOMES, SESSION THREE: "We will, of course," the instructor said, "investigate the complex social results of the Massacre and Weinstein's decision which, in retrospect, is known to have been disastrously out of accord with the public temper. To begin quickly, since all of you have previously had the survey course, which one would care to summarize, concisely, the outcome?"

"The niggers were put in their place!" someone shouted from the back.

"As always," the instructor added meditatively as the class laughed.

"You're lucky to be alive," the nurse said. She smiled, adjusted some dials and left him alone again.

They do smell, you know. Like rotting flesh. Or a cesspool that's—he looked around the room. Instrumentation. Wires from the instrumentation. All connected to him.

No windows here. Walls, a ceiling, a floor. [*Sky the same? You still there, you old bastard, filth hanging, dropping little gas-masks on the pedestrians like feces? Hang in there, you old son of a bitch.*]

Tired. He slept. It came back to him again.

Something had gone wrong. He had passed through some sort of meteor cloud. And he was taken somewhere else. On a plain with—

—people coming toward him

singing happily, their voices lilting like an old cop's, like the birds which had died.

They embraced him.

One smiled. "Welcome, brother," he said.

That one was white.

But some were red and a few were even black.

As he was.

They held him. Where is this place? Where am I?

That does not matter, brother.

[His heart leapt at that word.]

Is it heaven?

No sir. And it isn't hell either.

[*He remembered what had been told him. That they didn't know what would happen this time. Man had never gone out that far. And there were in space holes through which*—]

Not heaven or hell then. . . .

He met Ursula there. She was lovely. And like the others, naked. And they made love on golden sands.

We are free here, she said. We know no hate.

Not possible.

Here it is.

Where I come from—
Forget that, she said and held him.

But he did remember.
In bursts of agony. And flesh aflame. And—

The hole worked both ways. Eventually, he fell out of it. Moving up and down and through and to see no more until—

—he was in a room with instruments and wires where he lay unmoving and the nurse adjusted—

"What it all comes to is this," the doctor said. "You survived an exploratory probe into space . . . deep space. Deeper than we've ever gone before."

"But why all this? The wires. The—"

"Because while you were out there, something happened. You were nearly dead; we had to get you in by remote. These instruments are keeping your heart beating and your kidneys working and all the other bodily functions necessary to survival. Without them, you wouldn't last ten seconds."

"And I should be thankful?"

"Of course. To be alive rather than dead? To be able to give us the data we need to continue? To serve? Of course!"

Ursula and he had had two children and one was black like him and the other white like her. . . .

After a while his memory slipped. He couldn't remember Ursula or her world. And he became less and less rational, his mind—

The doctors were sorry but they didn't know what he was talking about.

And he forgot the name they had given him.

NOVEMBER 24: Patient appears catatonic, recall fading, and appears to have reached the limit of ability to yield useful information. They're—

> *—all the same, the black bastards, you cannot trust them or depend upon them and their subhuman perversity but we can send up another and another and—*

"You are Caliban," someone told him as though in a dream. The nurse?

He remembered that name. Yes . . . once he had read it somewhere and another time his mother had called him that. Caliban. Half-man, half-beast, all fool.

Caliban. He held onto that name.

—there wasn't much flesh on Jamie. His exposed body organs were slimy-wet and flies—

—a naked white woman on the sands of a magic island; locked against her he had driven himself up and through; Prospero's wand deep within her, that spirit, Ariel—

C

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N

Into focus. Rarely now, the reality slipping. Good. Good. If he were fortunate he might know no more.

The doctors came one after the other. Whispering. *We'll have to hurry if we want any more from him. It's a shame.*

Don't worry. We'll just get us another.

Don't you think they know that?

I doubt it. . . .

It was coming back to him. Faster now. Not the poor wispy visions like badly focused Tri-D shows. But something harder and more insistent. Calling.

Return.

He felt and for the first time understood the word *hope.*

"I don't know what you're saying to me," Caliban said

with his eyes open. "I don't know what I'm saying either. But I have to tell you this. There's a place out there—"

He's dying, someone said.

He wrenched free of the wires. Pain. He was suddenly very cold. And wet with his own fluids.

"I am Caliban," he said, "and if you have taught me hate, they have taught me love. I am hate. I am love. I am Caliban! And now—"

They fell away and he followed. Through a doorway and into a corridor. It was long, and lined with other doorways. And, above, another level with another corridor and other—

His insides collapsed.

They disposed of the first black man in outer space in a super-elaborated garbage-removal unit that used a laser beam and chemicals, first the beam so that the pieces would be neatly cut and then the chemicals poured over these to hasten the decomposition, the pieces of flesh breaking down into their nitrogen components and all of it blown away then as in a mystery, as a puff of—

And, later, going again through the wrecked spacecraft, they found buried something called *Collected Works.*

Caliban. Caliban.

The tape recorder in the instrumentation of the last room of his life sputtered and muttered and then spun off the reel.

The technicians filed it away. You never knew.

State of the Art

Barry N. Malzberg

Barry Malzberg—author of such dark and fascinating books as Beyond Apollo, The Falling Astronauts, *and (as "K. M. O'Donnell")* Universe Day—*is one of three writers who have appeared in every issue of* New Dimensions. *(The other two are R. A. Lafferty and Gardner R. Dozois.) Malzberg's offering this time steps outside his usual territory—paranoia—for an elegant, delectable excursion into playful surrealist fantasy.*

Here we all are, at this elegant sidewalk café perched on the edges of what appears to be a ruined Paris. Hard to tell; outside of this circle of brightness, much is opaque. Originally we were supposed to gather in the Algonquin, but that hotel was demolished seventeen years ago to make way for Intervalley Seven. "Disgusting," Dostoevski says, thudding his heavy tumbler against the table, "the ruination of the environment, the nature of man to impress his internal corruption upon the landscape. I tell you, we are fast approaching the end of time."

Dostoevski is gloomy. The twenty years in Siberia have warped his soul and given him a somewhat grimmer outlook on humanity than, perhaps, events will justify. Nevertheless he must be attended to. All of us attend to one another with extreme courtesy, but Dostoevski deserves our good wishes. He contributed many important works to the literature and besides the change has discombobulated him. Siberia was not good for his personality; I must concede that. "Of course," I say gently, draining the last sparkling dregs, "but still, technology is not an absolute. A neutral quality like sex can be

turned in any direction; so can machinery. Watch; the environment may change but it will also become more pleasant." I signal for a waiter. The service is abominable in this café, but then they have not been on the main line for years. Something about deliveries being undependable; the impossibility of getting good staff. A waiter shuffles over, his clothing glistening with dirt, and shrugs as I give him the order. Another mug for Dostoevski, an apéritif for Gertrude Stein, a little more wine for myself. Hemingway will pass this round. Shakespeare is now in the men's room having more difficulty with his bowels; perhaps a little cheese and crackers. The others, another round as previously. We make quite a group hunched around this small table, blocking the aisles, giving the café a reputation for seediness and disruption even beyond its wont, but we are customers, and the waiter, grumbling, goes off to the kitchen. "But you've certainly got a point, Fyodor," I add pleasantly, "and you're entitled to your opinion. I *defend* your opinion."

"The hell with all of it," Hemingway says. He stands, tucks his writing pad under his arm, heads toward an exit. "I have listened to the merde. All this afternoon I have been possessed by nothing but merde. Now it is time to go off and do good things. To feel richly, to know greatly. To conquer feeling with hope." He is in one of his sulks again. Really, despite all our efforts, we have been able to do very little with him. The man is simply not companionable. "I am off for sunlight," he says and staggers through the aisles, leaving us with his share of the check as usual, and stepping off into the Rue de la Paix is hit by a passing streetcar which dismembers him thoroughly and leaves him in small pieces on the sidewalk.

Gertrude Stein giggles a little and raises a napkin to her lips, fondling Alice Toklas' hands. "Ernest never did have any taste," she says, "and all his gestures fail as gestures." She shakes her head, puts the napkin down, leans over toward Alice's ear and disappears into some intense conversation as pedestrians and gendarmes outside gather around the ruins of Ernest. The streetcar has stopped and from its windows, faces look out incuriously, mumbling. "Like petals on a wet, black bough," Ezra says, speaking for the first time this afternoon, and goes back to his jottings. Now the crowd covers Ernest and it is difficult to see what is going on. I assume that in due time they will put him into one of the conveyors

for reprocessing. It hardly matters. None of this matters. My relationship with Ernest has not been a happy one, and although I am embarrassed to admit this, I am not entirely sorry to think that he is dead.

Shakespeare returns from the men's room simultaneously with the appearance of the waiter carrying our glasses, and they almost collide. "Bloody fool!" Bill says, collapsing into a chair. "You stink up everything!" And the waiter, with the air of a man who has suffered greatly and has now passed tested limits, balances the tray on one hand, takes off a glass of wine and throws it into Bill's face. "Bastard!" Shakespeare says, but his expression does not change, his eyes revolving flat and dead above his cheekbones. Incontestably, the man is drunk. In any other condition he would knock the waiter unconscious.

But nothing will happen this afternoon. The moment of tension passes, the waiter looks toward the sky and, recovering his control after a moment, puts the glasses before us. As he bends near me, I ask him quietly for the check. The waiter's face suffuses with rage, but somehow I am able to convince him that I mean no insult and he says that he will go off to the kitchen and see what he can do. Truly, I am the only one of us who is able to deal with the common, ordinary realities of the afternoon, the others being abstracted into their private roles or sorrows, but in all honesty I am getting somewhat tired of this and for the first time it occurs to me that I am becoming bored with my companions and our afternoon routine and that I may bring it to a halt. I would hardly be missed if I did not appear at the table at one o'clock. But if I did not, I wonder, who would order the drinks?

I think about all this, looking out idly toward the street where, even though only a few moments have passed, there is no sign of Ernest's recent tragedy. Pedestrians whisk by quickly, automobiles honk their scattered way past, a fat patrolman with a cheerful expression paces in front of the café, hands on hips, looking at the sun. The one conveyor clanking its way on the street-edge is clean and empty; Ernest is already gone. It is depressing to think that for all of his bombast his death has had so little effect upon the world, but then, as most of my companions would advise me, it is very difficult to make any kind of permanent change in the landscape. Technology has done this to us, and also the alienation

effect which progressively separates men from the consequences of their acts, the products of their labor.

As if catching my thoughts, which have taken a rather stricken and metaphysical turn, Dostoevski looks up at me and winks. "It is difficult, is it not, my friend," he says, "to see so much and do so little, eh? The Czars would have had a word for this kind of condition, but I call it refractory."

"He's just pouting," Gertrude Stein says. "He thinks he's sufficient when he is really insufficient, is that not so, Alice?" Beaming Alice nods; the two old lesbians clasp hands again and recommence their incessant laughter. Really, I cannot stand them—their presence at the table is a constant embarrassment and most of the waiter's hostility, I know, is directed toward them—but what can I do? Paris was their idea, after all, and a good suggestion it was. If we had not gone to Paris we might have ended up meeting in New York or Berlin and with the Algonquin demolished, how many places are there left which are really good for our discussions? I nod judiciously and turn my gaze from them. It is better at most times not to see too deeply, as my friends have advised me, and with some difficulty, I have made progress with this advice.

"I believe," Shakespeare says heavily, "I believe that I am suddenly very ill, oh you fools," and to our astonished gaze—Bill never complains; he has always been the heartiest of the lot—stands swaying in the dense little spaces of the café, his skin turned a sudden vigorous orange color. "It must be the wine, the heat, the afternoon, the pain oh my friends," he says, "oh let me unbutton here," and tugs at his waistcoat; in the midst of his struggles, however, a spasm of some violent kind hits him and he collapses heavily over the table, bringing it to the floor in an incandescence of cups, saucers, glasses, beer, wines, liqueurs. Into the middle of this he plunges, and rolling once on the floor lies still.

Standing, Fyodor eyes him with disgust and then takes a large watch out of his pocket. "I believe the old bastard has died," he says, checking the time, "but if you will excuse me, I really have had enough of this. There is a great deal of work to be done and I hope to conclude an important subsidiary deal on *Crime and Punishment* before sunset." He turns to leave.

I am offended by his coldness, by the total lack of regard which it is now clear was his only true feeling about our af-

ternoons, but before I can ponder this further or remonstrate with him, the waiter has appeared flanked by two police and a large angry man who must be the owner of the café and who looks at Shakespeare's corpse with revulsion. The waiter whispers desperately into the owner's ear; he seems to be trying to explain that he had nothing whatsoever to do with this occurrence. The owner shrugs him off. "I'm quite sorry," he says to us as the police stare solemnly, "but we cannot allow this anymore. You have been stinking and drinking up my café, the last café of Paris, for many weeks now and the disgrace is intolerable. My staff is at their wits' end and my wife threatens to leave me." He kicks the corpse. "You are all impounded for further investigation," he says.

"This is disgraceful," says Gertrude. "Alice, help me!" And Fyodor, with the ancient cunning of the prison camps, tries to slink toward the exit, but the police are efficient and determined in the way that even post-technological gendarmes can be and before I can quite grasp what has happened we are all in handcuffs, Fyodor too, and being led away.

"We will give you a full report," one of the police says to the owner, "we can give you our assurances of that."

"This is an outrage," Fyodor says. "You can slap chains upon us and your machinery but you will never, never, imprison the free, lunging, human soul," and flings himself at the nearest police but is knocked unconscious by one mild blow—Fyodor is quite frail for all of his bombast—and topples to the floor, dragging all of us with him. We seem to be hooked on the same chain.

I feel Shakespeare's corpse, already cooling underneath me, to the left and right I absorb the struggles and kicks of Alice and Gertrude, I raise my head to see that old Count Leo too, just returning from a brisk walk, has somehow been hooked and chained, but my gaze passes through and then beyond all of them; looking upon the street I see with precision I have never had before the movement of the conveyor and then, as the mass around me begins to roll in that direction, I understand that in the absence of proper police procedures, we are all going to be taken there instantly, and it is with relief—how I always knew in the deepest of my Fyodor's aspects that it would be with relief!—that I feel Gertrude's dark kiss upon me and in that way we are all carried out.

Among the Metal-And-People People

David R. Bunch

For the past fifteen or twenty years, David Bunch's strange, prickly little stories have been appearing in an oddly assorted group of publications, ranging from New Mexico Quarterly *and* Shenandoah *to* Amazing Stories, Galaxy, *and* Dangerous Visions. *No matter where he's published, Bunch remains very much his own man, painstakingly carving out a bizarre and disturbing portrait of the future in rollicking, idiosyncratic prose. Many of his stories concern a world of robots called Moderan; a few dozen of them were collected in a remarkable book of that title a couple of years ago. Now he is working on a new cycle of Moderan stories, and* New Dimensions *is pleased to present one of them here.*

We went without scouts out, I and my hinge-joints walking; no reconnaissance cleared us to safety. When it came to aid, we were as lonely as God. Of Old Days. No help! But if we made it, if we pulled it off, we could, in victory, throw our Stronghold into one big green plastic snake factory of defiance; we could sit in the gleaming fine hip-snuggie that was big and built like a throne; we could push our phfluggee-phflaggee button on our talker at them each and every one and laugh and laugh. We could say HA!

So we eased out fast from our Stronghold that vapor-purpled day of the big-effort morning. We caught them napping. We had prepared it with a maximum-weapons fire so severe they were sure we had come up with that new multiple launch we had threatened them with for more than a hundred days. When the hint of a truce went round they snapped

the white flags up with such dispatch that I could just see them racing to their lever beds to lie there, take a peace break and be thankful old Stronghold 10 (that's me!) had deigned to be merciful. I, be merciful? Ha, I just DID NOT have that multiple launch! That's all. And if they had borne the battle out another day, or even another few hours, I would have paid dearly for having thrown up all that ammo at one time, on a big blow, on a gamble. But if you have the large mailed fists in your arsenal of reputations, the ammo stacked in heaps round about and some good bogus ordnance camouflaged nicely, and are ready to hazard a little with the stern gruff voice of the launchers, they'll snap the white flags up. They'll give you the truce for a journey.

I had my truce, so I stood out bold from my Stronghold. I turned me five times around, there under the purple vapor shield of September with the vague sun hinting at autumn. I tapped my steel finger ends together in a little manner of cornball nonchalance and really hammed up my studied indifference to let them know old Stronghold 10 (that's me!) was a pretty special dog, and don't tread on that multiple launch. But mostly I just tried to act like a man out to stroll in a rose garden. In Old Days. Because I didn't want them to suspect I was going for the Big Transformation, all the marbles and the whole game. Let their silly faces build up to have that supreme agony of the Big Surprise; let them get out the green-envy paint and paint their foiled gnashing selves green-envy-green after I had accomplished the Big Stolen March. Silly old bogus guys; little old Stronghold masters! MEN!

Sure, we were the great ones of Moderan, the new-metal people, the metal-and-people people, the peotals! We had all been "replaced." Up to a point. Standing around in a truce time we could all clink our steel eyeballs at one another with the threats on, clench our big mailed fists in unison with the spikes up and pull our flexi-flex new-metal lungs full with arrogance and pride. But what did that prove? Tigering around in a battle time we could all rush to our War Rooms and press the launcher buttons at each other for a big max-shoot of hate. But what could that say? When all was clinked and launched, when all was said and done, we still had that tinge of flesh-strip yet about us, holding our shapes in place and causing us to vary and have rivalries. For example, even after the most disastrous of max-shoots, I was willing to wager

all my ten new-metal fingers, with my ten toes and some ears thrown in, that I had new-metal parts and good green factory blood superior to any of theirs. They were prepared, I knew, to wager just as vigorously against me. How human, how fleshly, and how expected. And how unnecessary it would all be after I had consolidated this Big Startling Gain.

Perhaps there were reasons. I wasn't surprised when the air started filling with recon. The first one came up lazy-wing style, just eased out from a neighboring Stronghold like a housebird airing its feathers in Old Times, stroked about a little on some vagrant breezes passing through and then sat there, high on its tin lifters, waving them ever so slightly to keep airborne, but mostly just riding quietly on the air passing by and watching me like a cat might watch a mouse hole. In Old Barns. I didn't mind. And then all the Strongholds for miles about started putting up their own tin house-vultures, all by coincidental accident, you know, nonchalant, casual, as though time for some tin buzzard exercise. I thought a little grimly of the comment this was on the flesh-strips. Silly little old Stronghold masters, curious, bad, prying men. Flesh-fouled! Jealous! The tin buzzards were their watch-birds, don't you see? For all their planned we're-not-looking the tin ones hung high and watchful on my trail all the long way, to report my progress. I, to move on Big Dream with a cover of spy birds watching? What a dreadful comment on the world!

About halfway out, at the point of fully committed, at the place of no-turning-back, questions rose in my throat and a metal fog whirled in my brain. I was cut with doubts like fire throwers. Had I brought enough introven for this journey? Would the hinge-joints hold? How about tears? Yes, how about tears? Would I encounter the big frustrations and need tears, many tears, a multitude of tears more than I had provided for in the little plastic bag clutched down from a new-metal hand? What if the stay-at-home Stronghold masters, seeing their chance, and craven as I know, should pick this time to sweep the countryside with a maximum weapons fire? Of course my head weapons man, left in charge of Stronghold-10-at-home, would answer them back rocket for rocket. But where would I be then? Picked clean and utterly gone, blasted. Oh, there were things to give one pause out on that stark homeless plastic, with the tin buzzards riding as hostile escort and the mutants about one's feet.

But when you go for the Big One, the Cool Victory, the Whole Show, you must not count the reasons for not going. The one overriding and incontrovertible reason for going must slash at you like a peeled sun. Let the fears stay in the vapor shield where the dark is. Those jealous teeth of all your enemies do not gnash easily; you'll have to go like a star; you'll have to hold them with some benumbing cool and fixed reason why you should be aloft there shining higher than they. You'll have to believe it yourself, believe it so much that all your not believing it will be hammered down to a flat nothing place, or better, a smoothed walking-road for you to stride on. You'll have to believe it so much that you could be roused out of any despair, or questioned awake from deepest darkest sleep, and you would still somehow reach down for something, some little last ounce of resolve, and say, "Yes, I'm best, much better than they. I must stir about to arrange it. I, a king deserving the homage of them all!"

In a little valley I saw his little building. After the long time on the plastic, the hard walking and the miles under the hostile cover of spy birds, it seemed I had made it, with my tears still unused in the plastic tear bag and with enough introven left in my portable flesh-strip feeder to see me through another day and a night, if need be. But there should not be that need.

Slowly, deliberately—as a man should moving down on his final dream—I strode across the few yards of plastic that separated me from the white building; it was shaped somewhat like half a ball, I thought, except the arc it sat on was much flattened, dug in the ground quite a bit and surrounded by steel curls, as from lathes, and scrap pieces of statues. The tall metal man at the forge I could glimpse through an open door had a big arm flexing, going hard, working a tiny bellows, and I wondered at the smoke coming out of an old-fashioned tin smoke flue. Could it be the wrong place after all? Was the Dream to elude me once again? But no! There on the floor, playing like a small dog, was the little flesh mutant man who had first told me of this good chance.

It had been a truce time and I, in a hip-snuggie chair, lounging just outside the eleventh, outermost Wall of my Stronghold, had been waiting for a war to flare up, to break the monotony, when he had scampered across from a tenth rise on my left to tell me of the Big Deal. I was surprised

and unbelieving at first, and then I was believing and trustful. His clear blue eyes had sparkled with such a clean bright light; his laughter had seemed so bubbly and fine. "You'll be a king!" he had said. "Come at the next truce time. I'll tell no other. And do not ask me why." I hadn't asked him why. If a small mutant man I hadn't even seen before recognized a king from the full-blown distance of a tenth rise on my left, and that king was I, I'd never press him for reasons. Oh, he had seemed so true-saying in his blue-eyed innocence; his laughter was so tinkly and sweet. I loved this guy, loved his discernment. And it made such sense to me, this picking me for the very ascendant thing.

But hey now! and here now! This, except for the tall metal smith, the small mutant man and the cleanness of the walls, seemed more like a cross between a common smithy of Old Times and a place where they sculptured statues. It didn't, somehow, seem like a place where a man of Moderan would receive the Final Miracle; it didn't, somehow, seem like the spot where a man of Moderan would become the One Only, having outstripped all his fellows toward a goal.

Wondering, I moved through the open door. I drew myself up, worked my hinges and braces to stand me to tallest tall. I cleared my throat, hawked up a little flick of new-metal windpipe and said, speaking, I hoped, as a king should speak, "I am come! —It's about those flesh-strips."

He leaped to his feet, scampered over to shake my new-metal hand and said, "Your crown is ready, the 'replacement' strips are forged and all you have left to do is pick your style in pedestals." His clear and guileless eyes splashed sparkles of that strange laughing innocence that had so reassured me before.

Yes, I may as well tell you, the trip back home was hell. The tin buzzards went a little past the white building, did their one-eighties and were ready to hang on my trail all the long road back. About halfway up on the tedious and galling hard way home I stopped and fed myself introven. And over by some tin flowers—all knelt down as though admiring the tin petals, to fool the enemy watch-birds—I used all the tears I had brought. Then I went on home, tall-up and like an armed king moving—slow, slow as we go working our hinges and braces, but with glares out and stares all about and holding them with my dare. And already in my mind I was making plans again to open on all the enemy Strongholds a massive

Max Fire in the old ways of the contests for supremacy. Never must they know how I was taken in by the little blue-eyed mutant, how my plans to steal a march on them all and be the One Only man had ended in such a keen disappointment. In Moderan.

All that the tin buzzards had seen was a new-metal-and-flesh-strip peotal man going into the white building working his hinges and braces, and a new-metal-and-flesh-strip peotal man coming out the same way. They could not have known of the bitterness, the harshness, the total rage, the complete anger with which I had denounced the little mutant man as I flung the crown to the floor. Or how as a final act of contempt I had gone into his back room and, moving agilely as I could among all his "princes," had kicked each and every one of his iron pedestals five times each with both of my new-metal feet. When I went past him on my way out, working my hinges and braces furiously as I could, and ready to strangle him, except he was beneath my notice to that extent, I hissed, "What in the world led you to imagine I'd take plain iron bands for my flesh-strips? And what could have caused you in the first place to believe I'd want to stand on a pedestal? And what, WHAT!" I screamed, with the high blasters turned on in my voice box, and a rising windage going, "could it possibly net me in distinction to become the ONE ONLY man, all 'replaced' and tall and hard in Moderan, if I have to be dead!? Dead!! DEAD! as a statue?"

Animal Fair

R. A. Lafferty

Lafferty? Lafferty? He's that Oklahoma troll who's been bamboozling us for years with his indescribable and impossible stories. (Who but Lafferty would write a story whose main characters are a ghost, a sawdust-filled doll, and an Australopithecus?) His work has been published all over the lot, though he's best known outside the science-fiction world for his powerful novel of the American Indians, Okla Hannali. *An issue of* New Dimensions *wouldn't be complete without him.*

1

Mostly the animals understand their roles, but man, by comparison, seems troubled by a message that, it is often said, he cannot quite remember, or has gotten wrong.
—Loren Eiseley, *The Unexpected Universe*

An anarchist of shaggy trees,
A great red gleam that flies,
A rearing buck, a rampant breeze,
A girl with really eyes.
—*Eco-Log*

"That anarchist of yours has ruined my grass," Mrs. Bagby said to Barnaby Sheen as I walked with him one morning. "It looks so shaggy all at once that I give up on it. I trim it and edge it, but it's no use. And my trees! Just look at my trees!"

"I look at your trees," Barnaby said. "They do seem to

come on a little stronger than they used to, which I like. But what anarchist are you talking about?"

"That anarchist that you keep in your house and that wanders everywhere. I don't know whether he's an ape or a man."

"Oh, he's a young boy," Barnaby told her. "I believe that he will be a man when he's grown, though some of his species may grow up to be ape: the theological implications of this baffle me. But why do you call him an anarchist?"

"Because he looks at my grass and makes it sick."

"It seems exceptionally healthy to me," Barnaby said.

"Well, it's turned wild is what it's done," the lady insisted. "There's so many things in the neighborhood now that look different after—"

"—after he's looked at them? Yes, I know, Mrs. Bagby. Or rather, I don't know; I don't quite understand it myself. I ask Austro about it and he just grins. He's getting to say a few more words now, but he isn't going to find words for such an ontological subject as this. It seems that I'm not going to find them either."

"Well, get rid of him, Mr. Sheen," Mrs. Bagby said. "This neighborhood isn't a zoological garden."

"It should be, Mrs. Bagby," Barnaby said seriously. "The whole world should be a zoological garden; that is, a living and omni-species garden. Once, I believe, it was. It's a mistake to remember the first garden as small. It was worldwide. It *was* the world. Get rid of your own husband and children, Mrs. Bagby. Only then will I get rid of Austro and Loretta and Mary Mondo. They are *my* family. And Austro is not anarchist. You are."

We went away from her, knowing that she was angry, being sorry for it. And the grass and trees *did* look more shaggy and living than used to be the case.

(Austro, the houseboy and bartender of Barnaby Sheen, was of the genus *australopithecus*, which is either ape, or ape-man, or man, the middle one of these being impossible. The genus was supposed to be extinct long since, but Austro was proof that it wasn't.)

(Loretta Sheen was a life-sized, sawdust-filled doll: Barnaby insisted that this object was the undead body of his real daughter Loretta. We had all known Barnaby well all our

lives, yet we couldn't remember for sure whether he had ever had a real daughter or not.)

(Mary Mondo was a ghost, the schizo-personality of a girl named Violet Lonsdale who was long since dead. But Mary Mondo was not dead.)

These three have been explained in other places on other days, but they must be explained all over again now and then. They take a lot of explaining.

Barnaby was gazing at an odd movement in that wooded draw behind his house. We both saw it then, in the middle of those little willow trees and nearly hidden. But if it was what it seemed to be, it was a little too big.

"Austro wants to hold a meeting of some different kinds of people, Mr. Sheen," Chiara Benedetti said suddenly. (She had not been the movement in the draw: she had appeared from some other direction, or she had simply materialized there.)

"Certainly, certainly, Chiara," Barnaby said. "My home is Austro's home. He can have whomever he wants there. But why did he ask you and not me?"

"He doesn't know how to ask you some things," she said. "And some of the people, well, they aren't quite people."

(Chiara was, oh, somewhere between ten and fifteen years old: who can tell how old a girl is? She was somewhat younger than the now permanent stasis age of Loretta Sheen and Mary Mondo. She hadn't been old enough to be in that Participation Psychology class taught by Edmond Weakfish, the class that had cost Loretta and Mary-Violet and several others their normal lives.)

"Chiara, we just saw a movement down in the draw," Barnaby said. "I believe that there is a buck deer down there. It's strange that he should be inside the city when the woods and meadows are still lush. Chiara, there's something rampant about the breeze."

Really that draw was a bit of woods and meadow inside the city. Barnaby Sheen had two and a half acres. Cris Benedetti, the father of Chiara, had an equal area backing onto it, and the woody draw ran on the land of both of them.

"Yes, he's a buck deer," Chiara said. "There's a buffalo in there too."

"No, Chiara, you're just saying that," Barnaby admonished her.

"Yes, but saying it will make it so. Saying it and seeing it. How do you think that buck deer got there? They are some of the people who have come to Austro's meeting. It will last for three or four days. You'll have to furnish accommodations for all of them, and that won't be easy."

"Why then it will be uneasy, Chiara," Barnaby said, "but I will do as well as I can, and you and others will help me. Oh, Mrs. Bagby says that Austro ruins her grass and trees, makes them shaggy-looking."

"She used to say that I did that same thing to them, Mr. Sheen. I guess I did, but not as well as Austro does it. She said that I spooked them just by looking at them. She said that I made them look like the grass and trees in paintings by Rossetti, not like real grass and trees. And I do. I have really eyes."

"Chiara, Rossetti had a better understanding of reality than has Mrs. Bagby," Barnaby said. "And you, I believe, *can* actually affect with your seeing and feeling. But you couldn't turn a sewer into a clear stream."

The charge was true about the wooded draw, whether it was true about Mrs. Bagby's property or not. The draw *was* like a Rossetti painting. And this was caused by Chiara wandering there and looking at it with her blue-black eyes till it was impossible for anyone else to see it differently than she had seen it.

"If growing plants respond to sympathy and seeing, why not a sewer?" I asked.

"Ah, Laff, there is not a lot of sympathy to spare for sewers," Barnaby said, "yet it's true that the, ah, brook is practically a sewer when it enters the draw, and it is a clear Rossetti stream when it leaves. Chiara, see that broken flash skimming through the trees and bushes. He follows the blue shadows, and he breaks behind the trees so deftly that he can hardly be seen. But he's a cardinal bird, and he's as big as a tom turkey."

"Yes, he's the king cardinal," Chiara said as if she knew all about him. "He's another of the people coming to Austro's meeting. And if you think he's big for a cardinal, then you just haven't had a good look at how big that buck deer is for a buck, or how big that buffalo is for anything."

"Have you any idea, girl, just how many 'people' are coming?"

"Oh, it's only a regional division meeting, so there won't be many. A few dozen or a few hundred."

"What is it a regional division *of*, Chiara?" Barnaby asked, worried a little.

"Sometimes regular people who know about it call it the Lower House. But the delegates say that it should be called the Broader House."

"Do these rather mixed delegates understand what they are doing, Chiara?"

"Yes, mostly they do, Mr. Sheen. Do you?"

2

> Looking at evolution from below we see emergence—from above, Creation.
> —E. I. Watkin, *The Bow in the Clouds*

> First came the answers far ahead,
> Then tumbling question-hordes—
> ("I may not stay," the seed-man said,
> "Nor take my ease with lords.")
> —*Eco-Log*

"Now *arche* means the beginning, the origin," Dr. George Drakos was saying. "Then it means the principle which is the same as the origin. It means the right, the rule, and as a derivative it means the authority or the office."

"And anarchy?" Barnaby Sheen asked too innocently.

"You know its meaning. It's the exact opposite of *arche*. It is not from the beginning; it is never original in anything; it is without principle; it cannot be of real authority; and it cannot ever be official."

"But what if anarchy came first?"

"Then all words are meaningless and everything is backwards. But it isn't so."

"Not anarchy at world dawn? Not primitive chaos? And principle and order and purpose and authority later appearing and developing?"

"Never, Barney, never. Anarchy cannot pertain to anything old or primordial. Anarchy is always modern, which is to say 'of the mode,' that most narrow and fleeting of states."

"I heard a rather primordial person, though young in years, called an anarchist today," Barnaby mused.

"Then someone was mistaken," Drakos insisted. "There is a wide misconception as to what happened in the beginning and as to what unfolding or evolution means. There is nothing new under the sun, and the sun itself was never so new as some have said. Too many persons have looked at the world as if it were indeed the product of natural-selection evolution, as if it were the result of purposeless chaos rather than purposive order. Enough persons have seen it so as to make it to be so for all impractical purposes. But every thesis, if acted upon widely enough, comes to its in-built conclusion. The only possible conclusion to the natural-selection thesis is total pollution unto suffocation and death: the effluvia of organized and widespread idiocy brings always this suffocation. And the last choking voice of the chaos-origin believers will croak, 'It is the fault of the others, of those who said that it began in order; they caused the whole breakdown.'

"But we must see the whole thing with more valid eyes, and enough of us must see it as it is to reestablish its validity. Seeing it and feeling it as it should be are creative acts; they will bring it again as it should be. Too long we have been flawed lords. Now—"

A seedy little professor, known as an eccentric, came into the room where we were met. Someone had to have let him in. He couldn't ever have found that interior private bar-study room otherwise. It was Austro, playing the butler but with many bewildering gestures, who had brought him in. Then Austro vanished, scooted, scatted.

"Austro wants to give a bash for some of his friends and associates," the seedy man said. (I forget his name: everyone always did forget his name.) "Ah, they aren't all of them human," the little man finished lamely.

"I know a little about it," said Barnaby, "but I seem to know less and less about it as I go on. Ah, Mary Mondo, just what sort of hotel or guest accommodations would you offer a badger or beaver or prairie dog or vulture or sexton beetle?"

"Manure. I think we will need lots of manure," she conveyed. "Oh, there are so many things that can be done with manure! The tumble bugs love it, and the beetles. Whole life cycles can be built on it, and it will make all sorts of creatures feel at home. It's the old and unanswerable question, you know: which came first, the horse or the horse manure? But manure is very necessary."

"I agree that it is. It's a fact too often forgotten, and the world forgets it to its peril. Thank you, Mary," Barnaby said, "we'll lay in a store of horse manure and several horses."

"You already have several horses, Sheen," the seedy professor said. "Rather large and rough-looking horses. I don't believe they belong to anyone around here. I don't believe they come from anywhere around here. Say, where is this Mary you're talking to, and why can't I see her?"

"You can't see her because you have incomplete eyes, man," Barnaby said. "And for that reason you are, as I had suspected, an incomplete delegate to whatever that meeting is."

"I can see her a little bit now," the seedy professor said, and he said it honestly.

We were met there that night in Barnaby Sheen's barstudy, Barnaby himself, Harry O'Donovan, Dr. George Drakos, Cris Benedetti, those four men who knew everything, and myself who didn't: and now the seedy professor who didn't either. And there was Austro who came and went; and Loretta and Mary Mondo who were and weren't.

"I'm here in a second capacity tonight, Barney," Drakos said, "as a doctor and observer, as well as a friend. The Board of Health is worried about certain strange and perhaps unsanitary animals which have been appearing around your property today. The Board is having a meeting tomorrow morning, on you, and I'm to sit in on it. And this evening, I'm to pick up what information I can here."

"You're certainly welcome to try, George," Barnaby said. "Myself, I don't understand it at all. There are animals in that back draw tonight that aren't often to be found in the city: porcupines, beaver, chipmunks, prairie dogs, badgers, skunks, rabbits, foxes and kit-foxes, wildcats, weasels, fishers, martens."

"And martins," said Harry O'Donovan, who was a bird-fancier. "They aren't a night bird, but they are out back tonight. And catbirds, scissortails, roadrunners, jaybirds. I have seen as many birds in as small an area before, but not as many species of birds. Plovers, herons, ducks, mergansers, geese. There is even a swan: it must have flown from Swan Lake."

"It flew from further, so my daughter Chiara says," Cris Benedetti whispered softly. He seemed to be in awe of some-

thing. And the little interloper professor, he rolled in his hands several of those seed-filled sacks that were made of brown-green leaf that always remained flexible as leather. Seedy he was called, for he always carried and scattered seeds. Oh, he wasn't seedy in the other way: he was neat enough, in an inconspicuous manner.

"Insects, worms, snakes, snails, frogs, I don't know where they're all coming from," O'Donovan said. "And fish! There couldn't be such big fish in that little creek or sewer ordinarily: it just wasn't deep enough before. Now it is, or it looks as though it is."

"Does anyone know the answer?" Barnaby Sheen asked.

"Certainly," said Drakos. "I was expounding on just that when the little professor came in. *'En Arche en ho Logos,'* as John writes in scripture: 'In the Beginning was the Word.' I have already told you that *Arche* means the beginning, the origin or the original, the principle, the order and balance, the rule, the authority, the office. And *Logos* not only means the word; it also means the account, the discussion, the study, the reason; and it means the answer. So the phrase really says, 'In the Beginning was the Answer.' But the opposite of *Logos, Alogos,* means the unreasonable, the babble, the absurdity."

"Logos also means the logic," Barnaby said. "But come off it, George, talk is cheap."

"No, real talk, discussion, logic as you say, solution, is the *Logos,* the pearl beyond price. It is not cheap. And I am correct when I say that *all* answers were given in the beginning. That beginning is hard to attain, though, especially in a world that says it is impossible to turn back or even to look back."

"You are lords," the seedy professor said. "I'm not at my ease with you. I will go now, for the night session, and Austro will go with me. I assume that you lords will also remain in continuous session for the several days and nights of it. You have your own part to play."

"I doubt that we'll remain in any such continuous session as that," Barnaby said. "Why should we? How have we a part to play in this Animal Fair?"

"Oh, you are the four men who know everything," the seed-man said, "besides a scribbling scribe who keeps the log on you as Austro will do for this regional division meeting of the Broader House. You are the lords, the uppers."

"That we know everything is only a literary convention of

the scribbling scribe here. He's right, Laff, you are a little bit like Austro. But we don't know everything, man, we don't."

"Nevertheless, those of the Broader House have heard that you do and they believe it. They need a counterpart. They find no other manageable center. They look to you to be that center, and several of us couriers between the two houses have pointed you out for the role. There might be violence, animal violence, if the delegates of the Broader House should labor and discuss and then discover that the lords will not bother about it."

The seed-man professor went out then, and young Austro went with him.

We were silent for a while.

"Well, *are* we lords?" Cris Benedetti asked the room.

"Aye, lord, we are," said Harry O'Donovan, "lords of creation."

And we were silent again.

"We're not going to need that manure after all," Mary Mondo conveyed, coming in easily from outside as persons in her state often do. "I should have known the answer: the horse came first. The cycle is operating nicely and we already have a fine name for our hospitality."

"Thank you, Mary," said Barnaby Sheen.

3

If ever I shape the World again,
I'll liven the laughter and liven the pain.
—*Song of the Shaper*

An Animal Fair that grunted and yelped
Confronted its Upper Brother
(It's part of the doings that can't be helped
That the delegates ate each other).
—*Eco-Log*

There were several most interesting days and nights then. Most of the interesting things centered around that wooded draw or ravine that ran behind Barnaby Sheen's place, between his place and the property of Cris Benedetti.

Quite a few people came there. Some of them were official

and some of them quasi-official; others were of no office at all. But they did not always find the same thing there; people see things differently from each other. Some folks saw the draw as full of animals. Others saw nothing unusual there at all, just a cluttered ravine that should be cleaned out or filled up. I could see most of the creatures, but I had had practice with Austro and with Chiara Benedetti and with Mary Mondo.

Barnaby had had two hundred bales of hay hauled in there; then a couple of fifty-pound blocks of rock salt, a great quantity of supplementary mineral pellets, a hundred pounds of bird seed, and a thousand pounds of dog and cat food.

"That should give something for everyone," he said, but he sounded doubtful. "It should give food for the herbivorous and for the carnivorous beasts as well, for the cattle of the earth and for the birds of the air, for the—ulp—I forgot—" He sent for a hundred pounds of fish food then; and that stuff is expensive, especially when you pour it right into the water that seems sometimes clear and shining and sometimes cloudy and putrid.

There was sniggering, there were guffaws just off the edge of the ear, there was animal laughter, slashing, fanged laughter.

"I try to be the good host, at great personal expense, to guests I do not know and did not invite," Barnaby intoned sadly. "And I'm laughed at for it. Bedamned to you beasts! Growl at me, will you? I'll show you what real growling is like!"

But we all knew that the dog and cat food was not acceptable, that it had been a mistake. Nothing was likely to eat it except domestic dogs and cats, and the domestic dogs and cats of the neighborhood had been disappearing down the maws of larger and fiercer animals. And the fish food was not acceptable. Did you ever hear a fish snigger?

The draw seemed, at times, much larger than it could possibly have been. That block was only an eighth of a mile long, only half that wide; and the draw or ravine that snaked down the middle of it between the two properties was seldom more than thirty feet wide or eight feet deep. But now it seemed much larger, as though it were superimposed over a greater area: or, more seemly, as though it underlay a large

region and was shining through. It was occupying space that belonged to something else. There were unaccountable grand vistas of—

"—vistas and vastas and verdi-gris lands
made with my really eyes, shaped with my hands."

Where did those unspoken dog-eared words come from? Oh, partly they came from a tawny puma that was just finishing off a dog, eating the ears last; partly from a wolverine, that fierce devil-animal; partly from a horned bull of uncommon size; partly from a snake in the grass. Austro was into it, hand and muzzle; and the seed-man, and a stranger. But mostly it was given its verbal form by Chiara Benedetti. She was alive and vibrant in a darkish glade there, singing silently within, with fox-fire coming from her in waves, and sparks from the tips of her toes and the tips of her ears. Oh, she was alive, and she was spirit-animal! And the cycle of creatures maintained each other in being by their attention and their sensing.

The most valid of scenes may be created, or maintained in being, by the forming eyes and minds of no more than seven persons, so one of the old Greek philosophs told it. And Charles Harness has implied nearly the same thing.

But real scenes cannot be so maintained! Can they not now? The most real scenes are but those maintained by the most real eyes and minds. It must be confessed, though, that quantity does often preempt quality in this field of the various realities.

Oh well, the dullest eyes could now see that there were a few stray and strange animals lying around and standing around in that draw. There was, for instance, a glare-eyed ox chewing its cud, and what was it doing there anyhow? There were a couple of skittish horses; there was a buck deer. There were other shapes that might have been animals, or might have been stumps, or boles of trees.

A belching buffalo—it must have escaped from the Blue Hills Ranch: they have the only buffaloes around; they try to cross them with cattle to fix certain traits, but mostly they get only sterile hybrids. Then a fish leapt in a great arc, ten feet long and thirty-six inches high. How can a fish leap thirty-six inches high from water not ten inches deep?

"You have not yet got rid of that anarchist, Mr. Sheen," Mrs. Bagby was complaining: and Austro was shambling about, grinning, and drawing cartoons in a large drawing tablet. "I really believe that he brings about these strange scenes and effects by looking at them and drawing them," said Mrs. Bagby.

"The mark of a great artist, Mrs. Bagby," Barnaby commented.

"But he is rude, and he has made a rude picture of me," she complained.

"Let me see it," Barnaby ordered. And Austro brought the tablet and showed the cartoon with a half-sly, half-shamefaced manner. We looked at it. It was the picture of a witch on an incredibly worn-out broomstick, and she was just going into a tailspin from the failure of a broom. She was saying something, in a cartoon balloon, but it was in Austro notation which was impossible to read.

"How do you know it's intended to be you, Mrs. Bagby?" Barnaby asked.

"Oh, I know it is, I know it is. Just look at that anarchist grin!"

"If only I could read the words you've written in the balloon, Austro," Barnaby wished out loud. "What are the words the witch says when her broom finally gives out?"

"Oh, they say, 'That's the last straw,' " Chiara Benedetti said as she came to look. So Chiara could interpret Austro's scribbles.

"Austro writes and otherwise expresses in an intuitive language," I said. "A few persons can comprehend it, but most cannot. And no one could be instructed to comprehend it."

"Oh shut up, Laff!" Barnaby growled. He was too intelligent to believe that, even though it was true.

"Actually, Austro's cartoon drawings, and the things shown spoken, are the minutes of the Broader House session," the seed-man commented as he came by.

"Ah, is the belching of the buffalo, as shown in the balloon over the animal drawing here, a part of the speaking at this session?" Barnaby wanted to know.

"Oh yes, of course it is," the seed-man said. "The buffalo is one of the most respected spokesmen here."

Barnaby gave the big drawing tablet back to Austro: and that person began once more to draw furiously and well the minutes of the session, the snortings, gruntings, roarings. All

was not amity, but the rabbit did lie down with the wildcat, and there was certainly an attempt at meaningful discussion. The wildcat made a statement, and Austro could be seen recording it. Then the rabbit made a statement; it was the antithesis to the statement made by the wildcat. Then the wildcat ate the rabbit: that was the synthesis. Well, what sort of procedures do you have in your own Congress? And Austro was recording it all faithfully.

"Reality," said Harry O'Donovan with an unreal look in his eyes, "must remain a subjective thing to each individual person, though we have it on Faith and also from the Schoolmen that there *is* an objective reality. Cris, your daughter Chiara was playing Animal Crackers this afternoon, and for a while I shared a subjective reality that she had created. We used to play Animal Crackers when I was a little boy."

"I don't remember playing any such game as Animal Crackers, Harry," George Drakos said, "and I was a little boy with you."

"I was a sissy. I played it with my sisters," Harry O'Donovan said.

This was probably the second evening after a certain Congress of Creatures had assembled; or after the game of Animal Crackers had begun to be played (should one see it from that viewpoint). We were met in Barnaby Sheen's study again for a pleasant evening's libation and talk, or perhaps we were met for a session of the Upper House (should one see it from that viewpoint).

"Animal Crackers is a very sophisticated game for children to play," Harry O'Donovan was saying. "But it is, paradoxically, almost impossible for adults to play and absolutely impossible for sophisticated adults. It is based on self-hypnotism and group hypnotism. One sees a shape of rock or tree or bush. No matter what shape it is it will resemble the shape of some animal or group of animals; it will resemble the shape of *something* anyhow. There is no shape so poor that it does not own two or more viewpoints. Your boy Austro, Barney, can draw these things on paper so that you look at them, then look at the picture, then look at them again and see the animated and animal picture in them. It's enough to make the hair raise up on your head to see wild, fierce, ravening beasts not five feet from you, to feel their body-heat wafted to you on the rampant breeze, to smell—"

"—their manure," Barnaby interrupted. "There's so many things that can be done with manure and it is so very necessary, as Mary Mondo pointed out. And, as I myself pointed out, it is too often forgotten or swept into the sewer, so much so as to imperil the world. It isn't the waste that causes pollution. It's the attempt to take the waste out of the cycle that pollutes. Go on, Harry."

"—to smell their hair-smell and their fur-smell, and the green breath of the foliage-eaters and the red breath of the meat-eaters (who said anything about smelling manure, Barney? It hasn't really any smell when from animals unpenned and uncrowded); to hear the gurgling in the gullets of the beasts and the growling in their stomachs! Your girl Chiara, Cris, abets in this game with her wonderful imagination. She made one mistake this afternoon, though—"

"And what was that, Harry?" Cris Benedetti asked him.

"The lynx, she got it a little wrong when she created the impression of it. She forgot the enormous paws that go with the comparatively small body; she forgot the tufted ears, and she gave it a tail too long and too bushy."

"There are no native lynx around here," Drakos said. "You may have observed the lynx out at Mohawk Zoo, but this was a simple wildcat or bobcat of our own region (there's many of them around if you've the sharp eyes to see them: you haven't). And she got it right. So did Austro."

"You also were caught up in the Animal Cracker game, George?" Harry asked.

"No. I don't know the game. But Austro showed me a drawing he had made of a wildcat, not a lynx. And once today, when I watched Chiara, she had wildcat eyes and not lynx eyes."

"Imaginary animals or group-hypnosis-sustained animals must eat a lot of hay," Barnaby Sheen said. "I received a couple of delivery-slip copies in the mail today. I don't understand them at all, but they are from several different firms and it is clearly my signature on each bill. What am I doing making purchases from a grain and feed company, from a wholesale grocery firm, from Uncle Dan's Country Store and Farm Supply, and from a pet shop? What am I doing buying fish-food in quantity? I'm certainly not in the habit of that. There is something particularly fishy about the fish-food."

Loretta Sheen sat up, winked (and a little sawdust trickled out of her eye when she did this), and lay down again. Ani-

mal Crackers indeed; people Crackers rather. One was always in danger of self-hypnotism when in the same room with that life-sized doll.

"I have the feeling of invisible empires these last several days," Cris Benedetti said. "And they seem to interlock as if they had common roots in a common ground. I'm reminded of a parable somewhere in Chesterton. It's about a sad-looking weed in the desert, but it happens to connect with the roots of the world. A boy tries to pull this weed up, but it is very strong for a small weed. He cannot pull it out of the ground, but he pulls many other things down into the ground in the attempt. Distant orchards are pulled down into the earth by his attempts, for they all connect to his weed. Vineyards are drawn down into their soil, and olive groves. Meadows and vegetable gardens go down, and wheat fields, all leaving bare desolation where they had grown. Then sections of dams are pulled down, and levees, leaving swamps that are neither sweet nor saline, but rotten. Canals and rivers are unbottomed and fall into chasms, and their places are taken by noisome sewers. Buildings totter and topple and crash. The earth quakes, the mountains melt, and scorching fires break out everywhere.

"Then the boy notices that what he is pulling on is not a weed at all. It's a noble plant, and the name of it is the truth-from-the-beginning plant. After the boy stops pulling on the plant, the world begins to mend itself. But from time to time someone else tries to pull up the plant, believing (on account of perverse vision) that it's a weed. So the world becomes clogged and poisoned and awry again. I believe that someone is trying to pull up the little plant at the present time, and with the same sad consequences all over again."

"And I believe that I read something in Chesterton that might serve as the germ of that parable," Drakos said. "But he did not write it as you give it."

"Actually I didn't read it at all. My daughter Chiara read it, and she told it to me; she was quite excited about it. She doesn't falsify things when she changes them while filtering them through her mind. She makes them more true: I would say that she verifies them, if verify hadn't taken on a different meaning. Barnaby, why don't we do something about that damnable sewer that runs between our properties?"

"Yes, why don't you?" Harry O'Donovan asked. "Pollution begins at home: at your home, Barney, and at Benedetti's,

not at mine. The water is foul and rotten, and the banks are trashy. I can smell it strongly right now."

"I am doing something about it," Barnaby said. "I'm thinking about it."

"And thinking about it will make it less of a sewer?" O'Donovan asked with irony in his high voice.

"I don't know," Barney confessed dismally. "I believe that thinking about it is the first step in making it less of a sewer, yes. It's possibly something else to other eyes. And a beaver I talked to today said that he had some good ideas about righting it. He showed me, or someone showed me, what it could be made into: quite a pleasant little brook flowing into a clear-water grassy pond, and going out in a small waterfall over a dam that was a beaver warren inside. The banks were lush, and the trees and bushes were clean and rich. He also told me (which I had somehow forgotten) that every brook, pond, dam, waterfall, tree, and bush has its own spirit and that these in the personification age were called nymphs.

"What am I talking about?" Barnaby raised his head suddenly in alarm. "Am I mad? I never talked to a beaver in my life. My mind must have blown. Say, does anyone know why I signed a delivery ticket for two hundred bales of hay? Whatever would I do with hay? What in the world did I *think* that I was signing? And where would the hay be now, if there ever was any hay involved?"

Barnaby took a drink from his drink. Mary Mondo, that kook spook, had just poured something into that drink and Barnaby hadn't noticed. Now Barnaby yawned and then he nodded. He was getting sleepy.

The seed-man came into the room. Then Austro came in. Austro had come in by the door, but the seed-man hadn't.

4

Three objects, bright as burning brand,
Are fixed beyond recall:
The starting word; the Shaper's hand;
The writing on the wall.

—*Orthcutt*

The weighing vane swings very far,
And how the time does go!

Oh sharply, sharply! for you are
Replaceable, you know.
—Eco-Log

"The children of the world, and it is written that in their generation they are wiser than the children of light, say that a surplus of people is the cause of the suffocation and pollution. They are wrong, and yet they sound as if they were right," Harry O'Donovan said, and then Mary Mondo poured something into his drink. He didn't seem to notice it at all.

This was probably the following evening. Something had largely wiped out one evening and day, and Mary Mondo had been pouring something into the drinks for several evenings. The seed-man and Austro had just entered again.

"The children of the world are wrong," Drakos said. "Augustine uses the phrase 'the number of saints fit to complete this most blessed city,' and that number has not been reached yet. When the peopling of the world reaches a certain stage, then the world will transcend itself. It hasn't yet." And Mary Mondo poured something into Drakos' drink.

Loretta Sheen sat up. She put a finger to her lips and made a hushing sound. A bit of sawdust dribbled from the corner of her mouth. Then she lay back down again.

"I always have a lot of prodigies about me," Barnaby said sleepily. "My 'family' consists entirely of such. But these last several days there have been prodigies out of the ordinary. I seem to see animals where there cannot be such animals. I get the impression of a Congress of Creatures or of an Animal Fair. I see and talk with a seed-man. Then I watch him come through a wall, so I know that he's no ordinary seed-man. But I feel that all these things are trying to tell me something."

"These things are like the ouija board or the Olduvai Gorge, Barney," Cris Benedetti said (and Mary Mondo poured something into his drink). "They tell what is already in your mind. They give you back your own thoughts and beliefs. But there wasn't any Animal Fair. There was only O'Donovan's game of Animal Crackers that got out of hand because of the forming imaginations of several children, my daughter Chiara, and your stepson Austro, perhaps others. And the seed-man is pure wraith: I don't know who it was who made him up."

"You know more about me than I do about myself?" the

seed-man asked, but Benedetti hardly heard. The seed-man had various sorts of seeds in those leathery leaf pouches, even fish roe.

Mary Mondo poured something in my own drink. I tasted. It was a strong and not quite bitter additive. It tasted a little like licorice. It comes in very small black-label bottles, and many bars do not have it at all. It's named Lethe. I didn't drink much more of my drink.

"The creatures of the Broader House are putting you on notice," the seed-man said. "You must do much, much better with your sessions." But we didn't pay much attention to him.

"Stevenson said it right," Barnaby mumbled. " 'There is no duty we so much underrate as the duty of being happy.' " And on that profound note Barnaby fell into deep sleep (Mary Mondo had been needling his drink again tonight).

"You lords do not seem to understand all the alternatives," the seed-man said, "though you are on friendly and not too patronizing terms with a member of one of the races involved. You see, one or more early races of humans, as human as ourselves, may have been set aside and held in reserve. Perhaps they'll be called into the game soon now, like a second team when a first team is unable to move the ball."

Austro grinned and pointed at himself. Then he clasped his hands high over his head like a victorious prizefighter. But the funny thing about it was that none of my four friends seemed to see or hear the seed-man at all tonight; and none of them noticed Austro's antics.

"I've just had the most droll notion," Harry O'Donovan said sleepily. "What if there were one or more early races of humans, as human as ourselves, who had been set aside or held in reserve? What if they'll be called in to take our place if we don't do a little better at our problem-solving? How does that strike you as a speculation?" And O'Donovan suddenly fell into unsound and twitchy sleep.

What was this? Was the seed-man sometimes inaudible and invisible to these lords, the while he conveyed his message to their minds? That certainly seemed to be the case.

"One of the things that has gone wrong is that you no longer recognize the spirit in things," the seed-man said. "The spirit of the Shaper, of course, is in everything, whether living or unliving, in every person, animal, plant, tree, pond, rock, house, factory. But your minds are not able to comprehend this. Once you saw a nymph in everything, every tree,

every stream, every stone. At another time you saw an angel in each thing. Now you the lords do not see the spirit in any thing at all. You are not holy enough to see the Shaper, not holy enough to see the angel, not even holy enough to see the nymph. Ah, most of you are not holy enough to see the stone."

But neither of my two waking friends seemed to hear or see the seed-man at all.

"I've just had an idea," Cris Benedetti said with creeping sleepiness in his voice. "My daughter says that seeing a thing in a certain way will sometimes make it so. These are the metaphysics, the things beyond or behind the physics. I believe that we should see a nymph in every tree and stream once more, in every field, ah, in every factory. If only we could realize that every object contains the whole of the spirit! But since we cannot, then why can we not see a personification of the spirit in every object? What we need is more nymphs. Even the sewers should have nymphs: then they would realize that there is no shame in being a sewer, not in being a good and transforming sewer. Ah—"

Ah, he was asleep.

"So you've put another one of them on the doze," I told the seed-man. "But there aren't any nymphs, you know."

"Chiara is one," he said. "Mary Mondo is one of a different sort. Loretta is one of still another sort: she is the nymph or spirit of this cluttered house. And the sawdust that trickles from her does not even tell her father that this holy house is being turned into sawdust by termites.

"But why, lords, do you not mine the richest mines of all? Your rotten waters are real treasure-rivers of chemicals and minerals. Your junk heaps are the most concentrated metallic ores to be found on Earth. Your neglected and unkempt and polluted brains contain such masses of sheer intellect as would ensure that you be lords of the world almost forever. Ah, use them, plant them, grow them, harvest them again and again."

Dr. George Drakos did not hear or see the seed-man, and he had the hearingest ears and the seeingest eyes of any of them.

"The answer," Drakos said in a drowse, "is in recycling and recycling again till we restore each thing to its proper life. We will recycle animal waste and plant waste, factory waste and mining waste. We will recycle (restore is the

proper word) provinces and towns and personalities and persons. Let the chips fall where they may! We're only dead once. We'll bring things back to their beginnings. We will remember the meaning of the words 'I am the resurrection and the life.' " Then Drakos was asleep.

George Drakos had known by insight that the answer was given in the beginning: but he had started the book backwards, like an Arab or a Jew, on the last page, and he had never got to the beginning.

"No, no more, Mary," I told Mary Mondo. "That stuff makes me sleepy and it makes me forget."

"Oh shoot!" she conveyed. "I like to slip them to the fellows, and it's my job for a while. Besides, you *have to* forget. This has to be buried down inside you, like one of the seed-man's seeds, before it will grow."

"What is your name?" I asked the seed-man.

"I am Seminator the sower, one of the sons of Tellus," he said.

"Then you are not a professor?"

"Yes. I'm a professor. I profess."

There were noises downstairs as though creatures were coming in. There was the hair-smell and the fur-smell climbing up from the lower floors; there was the green breath of the foliage-eaters and the red breath of the meat-eaters; there was the feather and foot-smell of birds. It was a complex of creeping, crawling, scuttering, hopping, fluttering, flying things down there. There was the rattling of antlers and the squeaking of nonretractable claws on wooden floor. There was turkey gobble and badger hiss.

"Go down to them, Austro, and record their decision, inasmuch as they have made what can be called a decision," the seed-man said. And Austro went.

"Each of these local chapter meetings is a small thing," the seed-man explained to me then. "A couple hundred of significant animals, a half-dozen or so of lords. But multiply one of these local meetings by ten thousand times world-over and it isn't so small a thing. You are scribe for the sleeping lords here, but I doubt if you'll be able to follow this. Well, all that anyone can do is his best. Now then, sleeping lords—"

The seed-man talked to them, to Barnaby Sheen and George Drakos, to Harry O'Donovan and Cris Benedetti. He

talked to them at great length, and they sound asleep all the while. But, asleep as they were, they were plainly understanding him on a profound level, and I wasn't. It isn't given to everyone. *They* were the men who knew everything. I was only a scribe, like Austro.

Austro came up to the room after an hour or so. Downstairs there was the shuffling and scraping and scratching and stomping of animals and birds going out. The seed-man looked questioningly at Austro, and Austro drew a drawing for him.

"Ah, those of the Upper House are put on notice," the seed-man interpreted. "The Animal Fairs here and all over the world have put you on very short-term notice. Your unwritten contract will not even be on a yearly basis now. It will be on a weekly, even a daily basis. The creatures have been doing all the work, they say: they have been furnishing the forming eyes, and you the deforming. You must see with more valid eyes, with more interlocking eyes. You can be replaced, you know."

"Just what should we do?" I asked the seed-man.

"I have told the sleeping lords," the seed-man said. "I have told them some certain things; and for the rest, they must tell themselves and this world. It isn't pleasant for me, you know, to have to come back every several centuries from my well-won rest. It isn't pleasant for my ten thousand brothers either. I leave now. I'm not allowed to take my ease here."

Then the seed-man was gone, and not by the door.

Really, had he ever been there at all?

"What is really the situation, Austro?" I asked. He drew a hand in his drawing tablet. Somehow he had the perspective all wrong, for the hand was a million times bigger than the drawing tablet it was drawn in. It was the Shaper's hand, and it looked as if it might come down on us at any moment.

"Serious, is it?" I asked.

He nodded that it was. Then he grinned. He pointed at his head and made a circular motion with his finger. He looked at the dozing men who knew everything and he shook his head. Then he winked. "They'll not remember that it happened," he said in his seldom-used English. "They'll have to work it out without remembering."

"How serious, Austro?" I asked.

He made big graphs on the wall with a luminescent red

pencil. He could write a few English words when he wanted to, but the sentence on the wall was in that intuitive picture language of his. There were a couple of discs or scales in almost balance. There were some lumps on one scale (and I knew that I was part of one of the lumps): there were what appeared to be tongues of fire on the other scale. And there was a line of writing.

Even as I looked I saw that the balance beam in the drawing was moving slightly on the wall.

"Ye are weighed in the scales?" I asked fearfully, and he nodded that I had read it correctly. Then he wrote the second line and I was still more uneasy.

"And are we found wanting?" I asked.

"Carrock. Don't rush it," he said. Then he rewrote this last line in English, making glowing red words below it all:

"Sure is going to be close," the words said. I thought I saw the balance rod in the drawing on the wall move just a bit more.

Austro mixed himself a drink and sat back in an easy chair. Why, I wondered, could I come near to understanding Austro; and the four men couldn't, for all the deeper things they knew. They couldn't intuit his intuitive language, and they could never recognize his occasional English for what it was.

(Austro motioned to Mary Mondo, and she came and added to his drink. He drank. "Neither will we," he said in that slurry voice of his. He meant that neither would we remember that the happenings had happened.)

I decided that it was because I look and act a little more like Austro than those others do. So we drank together, the two of us, the youngish man of the species *Homo australopithecus* and the oldish man of the species humorously called *Homo sapiens*.

"I'll also have a little of that now, Mary," I said: and the kook spook poured a bit of the additive into my glass.

"Cheers," I said. And I drank.

"Fchoinoeachlyuntrqu," Austro toasted in turn, and drank deeply.

Folks of the scribbling trade often drink unto the state and stuff of Lethe when they're together. There's a touch of necessity to it.

Strangers

Gardner R. Dozois

This is the longest story New Dimensions *has ever published—virtually a full-length novel. Its author is a Philadelphia-based writer in his twenties who produced the first story in* New Dimensions' *first issue, "A Special Kind of Morning," which was a Hugo and Nebula candidate in 1972. Since then he's gone on to a notable career as author and anthologist, and at last report was at work on several large-scale projects. Here he unfolds with unhurried grace an intricate and melancholy tale of love and biological mystery on a distant world.*

Joseph Farber met Liraun Jé Genawen for the first time during the ceremony of the *Alàntene,* the Mode of the Winter Solstice, the Opening-of-the-Gates-of-Dûn, that was observed annually in the ancient city of Aei, on the North Shore of Shasine, on the world of Lisle. "Lisle" was the Terran name, of course, after Senator Lisle Harris, the first human to visit the planet, and had come into common usage among the expatriate Terran population of Aei because the Earthmen professed great difficulty in pronouncing the native Weinunnach, "Fertile Home."

This was about two decades after the Expansion, when a team of Silver Enye had opened Earth up for trade by "inducing" her to join the Commercial Alliance, as cynically, and with as little concern for the inevitable impact on native culture, as Perry had opened Japan.

As a matter of fact, the impact of this on Earth—whose technology had not yet freed man of the solar system when the Enye arrived, whose cities were scarred and half-ruined

by a series of major and nearly terminal wars, whose biosphere was scummed and strangled by pollution—was immense. Governments toppled, amalgamations were formed, and the Terran Co-operative was hastily created to go out and get a nice juicy piece of the pie in the sky for impoverished Earth. Earthmen went forth to the stars, first as paying passengers on alien ships, then, later, in human-crewed ships purchased at staggering cost from other worlds. In spite of everything, they took quite a load of arrogance along with them. And as they traveled from world to world, farther and farther from Earth, that arrogance slowly died; some of it was drained away at every planetfall, like an intense electrical charge being grounded, and with it—oh, so gradually and grudgingly!—went the expansionist dreams of Empire, went even the more modest hope of financial dominance, fading from them as it had faded in turn from every star-faring race. Space was too *big*. Everything was too complex, the distances were too vast, the travel times too great, the communications halting at best. Even the Commercial Alliance was the loosest of organizations; some of its members had not had contact for hundreds of years. Establishing dominance—or even too much continuity—across that gaping infinity of night was something that seemed possible only from the provincially narrow viewpoint imposed by looking up from the bottom of a gravity well. The vastness swallowed everything; it was too much for any corporeal creature.

Joseph Farber's personal state of mind, on the eve of *Alàntene,* reflected the racial experience. He had left Earth, two years ago by his own subjective clock, as a cocksure and confidently ambitious man. Now, as he walked the broad ceramic streets of Aei New City, he was sad, apprehensive and bewildered. Two years of contact with creatures who were not necessarily superior but who *were* alien—inherently different, inherently strange—*alien*—had stripped him of much of his original assurance, and given him no real knowledge or wisdom to replace it. He had been on "Lisle" for about three weeks, and had only been outside the Enclave —the exclusive Terran district, or ghetto, however you wanted to look at it—on rare occasions. Tonight boredom and despondency had combined finally to shake him loose; he'd gone along with a group of expatriates who were walking down to the *Alàntene,* partially because Brody had assured him that "the Cian always put on a good show," and partially

because he was afraid of getting hopelessly lost without guides.

It was a wet, chilly night, just this side of actual rain. Gray mists, up from the river, wound slowly through the high-walled streets, like sluggish snakes, or drifted in glistening, billowing curtains across the wide porcelain squares. The wet air carried the smell of spices, pollen, incense, musk. Sharp, sour, sweet, heavy and rank—the odors slid across the moist night like oil over water, most unidentifiable, all evocative. Occasionally the wind would rise, scooping the mists and cloud-scuts aside like an invisible hand, revealing the million icy stars of Aei's night sky, dense and blazing against velvet black. None of the moons had yet risen, and the constellation of Winter Man was just thrusting its frosty, nebula-maned head up over the close northern horizon. Old City loomed there, to the north, on top of its three-hundred-foot-tall sheer obsidian cliff, silhouetted against the blaze of Winter Man's upper body, with His head rearing terribly above its tallest towers. Its lights shone silver and yellow and deep, secret orange, glinting coldly from that cold stone place in the air. To Farber, it was as if Old City was watching him; not necessarily with disapproval, or even with interest, but just watching, staring down inscrutably, as if to drive home again the fact that this was not Earth.

New City was friendlier, with its rounded ceramic homes, its tiles and mosaics, its glazed earthenware and pottery walls. Its lights were soft pastels, blinking and diffusing wetly through the languid mists. But still, the underlying ambience was unsettling, and strange. They had been walking through New City—a small, nervously giddy group of humans, too loud in the alien hush—for an hour that had seemed like a year, and they had seen no one, no natives, no living thing at all. Farber was just beginning to wonder if the streets were always so empty, echoing and still, and if so, how anyone could ever stand to go abroad in them, when they sighted a group of Cian ahead, walking in the same direction they were. And at the same moment, they heard the first faint and distant mutter of the *Alàntene*. They were near the eastern outskirts of New City now, and the streets began to slant rapidly down toward the River Aome. The natives ahead slowed down—they had fetched up against another group of Cian, and in front of that group was another, and another, and Farber saw why New City was deserted. The whole pop-

ulation of Aei was on the move, down to the banks of the River Aome for the *Alàntene*, and the Earthmen had just caught up with the tail of the immense crowd.

Ahead, as far as the eye could reach, the streets were packed solid with shuffling ranks of Cian. Most were walking, carrying children on their shoulders, holding baskets of fruit, or strangely shaped garlands of flowers, or various implements of polished wood and metal and obsidian whose function the Earthmen were unable to divine. There were numerous other objects, half-seen, that defied definition altogether. Some of the Cian were riding in six-wheeled carts pulled by huge, brindled animals that looked something like enormous boar hogs; their reins were hung with star-shaped black flowers, and with tiny crystal chimes, so that when the boars tossed their heads, the air was filled with tinkling melancholy music, and their spiral tusks flashed white in starlight. A few Cian—and Farber blinked, startled—were riding bareback on big, sinuous things like many-legged snakes, or reptilian centipedes. The crowds seemed to make the things skittish; occasionally they would moo, long and mournfully, and, looking around at the assemblage, blink their sad, intelligent eyes. The Cian themselves—short, slender humanoids, uncannily graceful of movement—were dressed mostly in dark colors, but in rich and fantastical costumes, of the finest fabric and workmanship. Jewelry of silver and amber and obsidian glinted here and there throughout the crowd, and the entire slow-moving procession had about it a curious mood of somber celebration.

It took about another half-hour for the bulk of the remaining crowd to filter down into the place of ceremony. In that time, the sound of the *Alàntene* grew from a murmur, a whisper, to a vast rhythmical sea-surge that filled the night, that filled the blood, and brain, and bowels, until Farber found that he was breathing in time to the huge slow booming of the drums and the deep-throated susurrus of the chant, and he suspected that his heart was also beating in rhythm. Janet LaCorte said it gave her a headache. Sometimes the wind would bring them a snatch of faster music—crystalline, ringing and staccato—that was being played as counterpoint to the giant beating of the World-Heart. There was no other sound, except the whisper and scuff of a million feet over tile, the creak of wagon wheels, and the occasional plaintive lowing of the snake-things. The Cian around them did not

speak at all. Brody was off on something—like many of the Earthmen, he was of the opinion that the Modes, the native ceremonies, were more enjoyable if you went to them stoned—and he was giggling constantly now, his eyes rolling from one object to another, never quite focusing on anything. Farber had been quarreling bitterly with Kathy Gibbs for the last fifteen minutes over some trivial matter, their voices growing ever louder and more heated, and as they reached the bottom of the slope, Farber, stung by some final gibe of Kathy's, broke away and whirled fiercely to face her.

"You fucking bitch," he said. He had gone pale, and he looked as if he was going to hit her.

Kathy laughed in his face. She was flushed and bright-eyed from the argument, but she seemed in no way perturbed by his rage. "You're no fun at all tonight, are you?" she said. Some of her hair had become plastered to her forehead with sweat, and Farber could see her breasts clearly through the semitransparent blouse; her nipples were hard against the fabric. A sudden rush of desire mixed with his anger, confusing him. His mouth worked on words, but she laughed at him again, and they died in his throat. She had read him well enough. "See you later, sweetheart," she said, brushing the hair out of her eyes, giving him a knowing, cutting smile. "Here, about midnight. All right?" He said nothing. She looked at him with hard, taunting eyes, smiled again, and walked quickly away, mingling with the crowd. She vanished from sight within seconds. Farber stared after her, his fists balled impotently, his jaw tight.

Brody giggled. He had listened openly to the whole exchange, without embarrassment, apparently getting a kick out of it. He slapped Farber on the shoulder. "Fuck her," he said, in a voice that was a dreamy parody of hearty man-to-man comradery. "Fuck 'em all, I always say. There're millions of cunts in the world. Always another one along in a minute."

"Why don't you mind your own goddam business?" Farber snapped.

"Fuck you too, Jack," Brody said pleasantly, without any hint of rancor. He was almost jovial about it. He giggled abruptly, seeming to startle himself, as if it had popped out before he was ready for it. He squinted at Farber. *"You'll* find out," he said, with listless, languid wisdom. Then he said,

"Oh my!" plaintively, and tracked to follow something moving down on the beach. And he smiled and smiled.

The other Earthmen had been hanging back while the fight went on; now they came up, and Fred Lloyd gave Brody a shove to get him walking in the right direction again. Ed Lacey and two friends went by, sniffing narcotic atomizers, followed by Janet LaCorte, who gave Farber a disapproving look as she passed; she was Kathy's friend. Lloyd was wearing a complex expression of condescending boredom that—it occurred to Farber—must have taken him years of diligent practice to perfect. "You coming?" Lloyd asked. Farber shook his head. Lloyd shrugged, and the Earthmen went on. Farber was glad to see them go. Soured by the futility of the Terran enterprise, they were all self-consciously cynical and bitter, and liked to think that they were projecting an air of *fin de siècle* decadence. Actually, they were boring.

Farber plunged into the thick of the crowd and started worming his way through the dense mass of bodies. He was filled with disgust and self-contempt. Kathy had only been his lover for a little over two weeks, and already she was so sure of him that she could laugh at him and walk away into a festival crowd, sure that he would be waiting for her when she chose to come back to him. And he would be. Once he'd swallowed that, his anger died to a dull resignation. Light-years from his home and his people, he had to hang on to something—and she was it. Sullenly, he kept walking. He had run out of road. He was on sand now, and it shifted and whispered under his feet. A row of sand dunes rose up in front of him, interlaced and overgrown with tough sea-grass and ironwood shrub.

He came up over a dune, and saw the *Alàntene* spread out below him. He paused, swaying, a little drunk, alone in the alien night. He was a big, slow-moving man, bullet-headed and bull-necked, with dark eyes and a shaggy mane of blond hair. He had a blunt, big-boned face, dominated by thick flat cheeks and a massive, stubborn jaw—square, jutting and truculent. It was an arrogant face, touched permanently now by a shadow of wistful puzzlement. His eyes were incongruously lost and vulnerable, set against those rough-hewn, brutal features—as if there was a frightened child inside, peering out, running the massive body by manipulating pedals and levers. The long, bone-deep soughing of the chant came up and hit him in the face, and the patient elemental thunder of

the drums shook the dune under his feet, sending little rivulets of sand whispering down toward the beach. Listening now, as his anger died, he was submerged again by that endless sea-sound, drowned, dissolved, whirled away like a grain of sand in the tide, to be rolled across the secret places of the ocean bottom and then washed back to the shore after a decade or a thousand years. Calmly, he began to descend the dune, digging his heels in. He felt that if he should fall, or jump, the huge noise of the *Alàntene* would puff up to meet him, bearing him up, and he could ride the sound as a gull rides the currents of the air—

Here the River Aome, rolling out of the west, met the sea, Elder Sea, the Great Northern Ocean, the World-Ocean. The Aome was a roaring gray turbulence to the right, a streak of lighter darkness rolling through a dead black night, more sensed and heard than seen. To the left, and at right angles to Farber's path, the dunes stretched away in an unbroken line to the north; they, and their fringe of beach, extended for more than three hundred miles, ruler-straight: the North Shore of Shasine. South, beyond the Aome and invisible now, were endless leagues of saltwater marsh. Ahead, straight east, the night opened up into a feeling of echoing, infinite space. Ocean was there, behind the mists—the smell of its salt was in the wet wind that slapped Farber's face, the hissing of its swells and surges could be heard under the derivative sound of the chant, and—beyond the ceremony—its waves gleamed in torchlight as they foamed against the beach.

Farber passed the L-shaped bulk of Ocean House/River House, and made his way down as close as he could to the water. The Cian were packed in shoulder to shoulder here, by the thousands. Smoky red torchlight glinted from teeth and eyes—the large-pupiled, large-irised eyes and needle-pointed canines of nocturnal predators. They were all swaying side to side in a slow, ponderous rhythm, and doing a kind of shuffling dance step—one step forward, a step back, a step to the side, a step forward again, stamp, stamp, stamp, *stamp*. None of this seemed deliberate; the motion was an unconscious, instinctive response to the music, almost a tropism. The Cian were preoccupied with the ceremony, all their attention focused outward, and perhaps they were not even aware that their bodies were swaying and stamping in the wet smoky dark. After a while, Farber discovered that he was doing it too—without volition and in perfect time, as if

he had been practicing all his life. At first Farber found that frightening, then oddly exultant, and then both emotions died, and there was nothing but the chant, the steady mesmerizing motion of the crowd, the enveloping heat of a hundred thousand close-packed bodies, the pungent stink of alien sweat.

Beyond the crowd was the ceremony, the *Alàntene* itself. The musicians, playing drums, flutes, and tinkling stringed instruments like dulcimers and mandolins, sat crosslegged in a huge semicircle just beyond the first row of spectators, facing the Ocean. Their hands pounded and strummed and plucked with unvarying, unwavering, inhuman precision, as if they were all motley close-robed robots, and they rocked back and forth rapidly in time to their own music. To Farber's extreme left, massed in between the musicians and the sea, were the chanters, the singers—more than a hundred brightly clothed Cian, all male, all *old*: snow-white hair, gleaming silver eyes, their faces intricately meshed with lines and wrinkles, expressionless as rock. They were doing a more complex, studied version of the crowd's step-and-sway, some of them also making ritualized gestures and sweeps with their hands and arms, others periodically tossing handfuls of powder into the torches so that they flared up silver and amber-green and scarlet. Some of them were standing up to their waists in the water, as the tide rose; they continued to chant, unperturbed. On the far right, almost out of sight, another group of old men were involved in what seemed to be a kind of highly stylized dramatic performance, reminiscent of a Terran Nō play—their voices, speaking instead of chanting or singing, cut flatly across the rest of the ceremony from time to time.

But the center of the ceremony, the heart of the *Alàntene*, were the dancers. They took up most of the torchlit stretch of beach, dancing next to the edge of Elder Sea on wet, hard-packed sand. There were perhaps two or three hundred dancers, of all ages, men, women and children. Some of them were naked, and the flaring torches played strange light-and-shadow games with their gleaming skin and the flashing motion of their limbs. Others were dressed in fantastic costumes, towering, nodding plumes, brilliant jewels and feathers, grotesque swollen-headed masks. Gods and demons danced on the beach, and their reflections danced with them across the glossy sand. Platforms had been built out into the ocean, only an inch above the surface, and the glittering creatures danced there too, half-awash, sometimes leaping into the air to tum-

ble and jackknife down into the water. They sported and plunged there like solemnly drunken porpoises, as at home in the sea as on the land. The dancers were sure-footed, lithe, incredibly agile. They spun, pranced, stood vibrantly motionless for a long moment, twisted, somersaulted, leaped high into the air. They had been going on like this for hours, since sunset, and they would continue without pause until sunrise. Farber watched them for a long time. Only afterward, away from the beach, would he be able to estimate that at least three hours must have passed. Now, there was no time, no duration. Occasionally the crowd of onlookers around him would sigh or moan all at once, a vast articulate *Ahhh* going up to the coldly watching stars, sinking back under the chant, then welling irresistibly up again. *Ahhh.* As with their swaying motion, it was not a deliberate thing, a planned response as in a Terran religious ceremony. Rather it was a reaction, a muted, reluctant sound of awe, pulled from them—almost against their will—by the power of the *Alàntene.* Farber did it too, his lips opening as though yanked by fishhooks, the sound coming jagged and low from his throat, *Ahhh, Ahhh.* And as he watched then, it seemed as if everything was knitted together—the motion of the dancers, the singing, the snapping flame-banners of the torches, the ecstatically pained crying of the instruments, the reflections in wet sand, the heat and sweat of the bodies around him—and the universe was crimped, a corner of the World folded over, and earth and sky and water became one, indistinguishable.

And Farber pulled away, frightened. He pushed his way up from the beach, shoving and scrambling, until the sound of the ceremony was less overwhelming and some of his panic died. He had taken it too far, come too close to something alien, too near to intuitively grasping a thing he was not equipped to understand. He was shaken, dizzy with incense and torchlight and strangeness, and his legs were like jelly under him. Slowly, he staggered up the beach toward Ocean House. The *Alàntene* had spoken to something wild and sad and desperate in his blood, conjured up longings that he could neither name nor satisfy. There was a ghost-horde of chaotic, unidentifiable emotion in his skull now, peripheral, mocking, insistent. Their voices had faded somewhat by the time he reached the portico of Ocean House, but he was still dazed and unsteady, and more helplessly bewildered than

ever. A group of Earthmen were standing out in front of the building, holding native drinks and atomizers, watching the ceremony down on the beach with amused tolerance, as if it was a fireworks display. Farber avoided them, and went inside.

It was an enormous, L-shaped building, situated just to the north of the Aome's juncture with Elder Sea. The side that faced south, overlooking the Aome, was called River House; the side that faced east, to the sea, was Ocean House. Both faces were glassed in floor to ceiling, so that they were actually two huge windows, divided horizontally by the building's second story. It was purely a secular establishment, and had no real connection with the *Alàntene,* or with any of the Cian Modes, although it had been built—by the Cian—because of them. Here you could come in out of the weather—and there were Modes that were carried out in the middle of blizzards, or in the broiling, near-fatal heat of high summer—and watch the ceremonies through glass for a while; here you could relax on loungers and hammocks and refresh yourself with the variety of essences, liqueurs and foods that were on sale. The Modes had been around for a very long time, and the Cian were well aware of their entertainment value, and the possibilities for commercial profit that were created thereby. And had been so aware for hundreds of years, long before the first outworlder had arrived. It was not a matter of the Modes being exploited by crass aliens; the Cian exploited them themselves, cheerfully, and no one seemed to be upset by it. And yet there was a depth of solemn belief, a feeling of pure religiosity to the Modes that had died out of Terra generations ago. It was a point of contention among the Earthmen: whether the Modes were religion, or were considered by the urban Cian to be merely a body of quaint and charming tradition.

Your opinion on this, Farber now believed, would be determined by where you stood during the Mode. Here in Ocean House, surrounded by Cian who were relaxing and watching the show through the huge window-walls, or chatting with their friends, or strolling on the portico, or devouring essences and batter-fried blackfish, as easy and sophisticated as any crowd of city people anywhere, one would certainly opt for tradition. Down on the beach, packed in with the indefatigable mass of swaying, stamping, groaning devotees, you would come to quite a different con-

clusion. But there were not two separate groups of Cian; they mingled indiscriminately—often the chefs and concessionaries of Ocean House/River House would come down to take part in the Mode after their work shift, and some of the sweating, earnest spectators would eventually drift up to the big building for rest and essences. It was a dichotomy that no Earthman understood, and now Farber intuited dimly that it was only the tip of an iceberg.

He purchased a *fuge*—a gelatin concoction something like a cross between chocolate pudding and raw jellyfish—from a concessionaire, and strolled slowly through the corridors of Ocean House. Most of his terror had passed, leaving him sad and contemplative. He made his way up to the second story, which had a better overview of the beach. The lighting here was dim and diffuse, and Farber felt as if he was walking in a glass tunnel under the sea. He drifted over to the window-wall. The *Alàntene* glittered far below, the tiny figures swaying and whirling, a masque performed by animate, passionate dolls. Its flaring light struck odd reticulations from the vaulted ceiling of Ocean House, sent hunched shadows capering wildly across the stone floor. After a while, Farber became aware that someone was there with him, watching the fire and the night. The other had been there all along, hidden in the gloom at the bottom of a pillar, silent as a shadow, with only its presence to grow patient and gradual in Farber's mind, until at last he must turn his head to look, not knowing why he did. He squinted. It was a woman. She felt his gaze and turned away from the window. The *Alàntene* washed half her face with fire-shot light, left the other half in shadow. One eye glinted clear silver, the other was a pale ember in darkness. She looked at him.

"Hello," she said. "I, do not speik, this, well." Her voice was low. Her English—a tongue that this group of Earthmen had the audacity to represent to the Cian as the *Terran* language—was halting and heavily accented.

"Në, it is of no circumstance," Farber answered, in her own language, which he had learned by subcerebral techniques. It seemed a curiously evasive tongue to him, its simple grammar and syntax masking a million quicksilver shifts in meaning that he could never quite grasp. He wondered if he had impressed the woman with his cosmopolitanism. She did not speak again, and at last he said, "Hello," belatedly, to break the inscrutable silence. He felt inane.

She nodded to him with somber formality. Then she smiled, quick and startling. "Do you"—she gestured with her head at the beach— "enjoy the Mode?"

"Yes, I do," he answered. Then honesty made him add: "Although I don't understand it."

"Ah—" she said, wisely, squinting a little. "There are many things about the Modes that are not easy to understand, even for us perhaps, *në?* But still we must cope, as best we can." Her tone was both mocking and melancholy—she was laughing at him, surely, but at the same time he sensed that she was pleading almost desperately for his company, for his regard. She seemed lonely, and yet ineffably remote. She spoke with economy, almost brusque, and yet her manner was relaxed and easy. Her smile was intense and abrupt, *flash,* striking like a chisel, gone—and yet, somehow, wistful. Her eyes turned to him again and again. He could see the liquid flash of them as they moved, to him, away, back. She fascinated him—almost in the old sense of *fascinare,* to bewitch, striking him motionless as a charmed bird. She was wild and sad, and she looked at him sidelong through the complex, shifting light-and-shadow cast by a thing that was older than either of their civilizations.

Her name, he learned, was Liraun Jé Genawen. She was taller than the Cian average, which brought the top of her head up to Farber's breastbone. She was resting against the window ledge, one long leg tucked up on the stone and under her, sitting easy and supple on her own calf. She seemed even more slender than the majority of her slender race, sleek and lithe—even in the minuscule movements of her head and neck as she sat otherwise motionless on the ledge there was apparent the sureness and total muscular control that marked the dancers on the beach. Her face was sharp-edged, angular, her nose straight and heavy, her lips long and full, her eyebrows like startled black brushstrokes. Her eyes were enormous, fierce and staring as an owl's or a hawk's. Her skin held something of the rich, breathing tone of mahogany, though muted and with more brown in it. Her hair, black, was long, thick-textured and glossy, and fell heavily about her shoulders. She was dressed in silver and black, and she wore a tight necklace of amber and obsidian. Looking at her, Farber realized for the first time—although he had known it intellectually all along—that *Cian* translated as "The People."

They talked for a while. She tried to explain some of the

ceremony to him. "It is also called the Opening-of-the-Gates-of-Dûn," she said. "Dûn is the otherworld, the Other Place, and it lies out there, deep below Elder Sea. The bones of the Ancestors rest there, naked, on the floor of Ocean, the Place of the Affliction—but it is not just that, not just the bottom of the water, *në?* It is a world in its own right, the place where some of the dead go, but more than that—there are demons, and People of Power, and *opein,* and they live there in Dûn." She shrugged, and smiled her somber smile. "*Alàntene* marks the end of the Summer World, the heat, the growing things, the reign of the Warm People who govern in that season. It is the end of the year—after *Alàntene* is the Winter, the snow, the ice, the withering of life, the reign of the Cold People at the start of a new year. The Gates of Dûn open then, under Elder Sea. Then the ghosts of those who died in the old year, and who are to go into Dûn, they rise up then on the wind and go into Dûn, for the Gates are open and the otherworld is touching this Earth. And also, those demon and *opein* who wish to come into the world of men, they come in then. And the Cold People come up through the Gates, and the Fertile Earth dies and turns to frozen ash, for the House of Dûn holds influence during this season. And so, the *Alàntene.*"

"That's—not quite what I expected," Farber said, a little dismayed. "In fact, it's kind of frightening. Why in—" he had been about to say *hell,* realized that the only possible equivalent would be Dûn, "—the world do you have a festival, a holiday, for such a thing? A ceremony I could see, maybe, but a *celebration?*"

She shrugged again. "For all the cold and death to come, at least the old year is gone, drowned, taking all its old problems and sorrows with it. An old year gone, a new year born—however malign. That is something to celebrate perhaps, *në?*" She looked intently at Farber. "And time does not exist, during *Alàntene.* It is the pause between the fading of one rhythm and the beginning of another, the motionless unmoved center, the still place wherein the syncopations of the World wind up and wind down. Uncreated and eternal. So we are told. *Në,* would you like that? It means that we two have always been here together, talking on *Alàntene,* and always will be here. No matter where else we have been on *Alàntene* in other years—we are there too, always, yes, but we are *here* too, always. Yes! Do you find that pleasant?"

And she laughed, her face somber and set, her eyes unfathomable.

It was impossible for Farber to determine how much of this she took seriously; every time he thought that he had pinned down her mood it would shift dramatically, or seem to, and the words she was speaking, and had spoken, would be open to a new interpretation. It was also impossible for her to tell him more than the barest surface of the Mode, and not all of that. Time and again she would lose him in trails of allegory and language and symbolism that he could not follow, and she would have to shrug and smile and say that he did not know enough to know. They fell silent for a while, until finally she said, speaking to her reflection in the window: "The *opein* come into the world at *Alàntene.* They are spirits who possess men and drive them to evil deeds. Or they take the shape of men themselves, and walk abroad in the World in flesh, or what seems to be flesh. You could be an *opein,*" she said, after a heavy pause. Then she broke into sudden silver laughter. "And so could I!"

Silence again. She watched her reflection in the window, and did not look at him any more. He could see the tiny, rhythmical jerking of her belly as she breathed, the pulse in the hollow of her throat, the way her hair was sticking lightly to her skin at the temple, the cheek, the side of the neck. It was hot here, perhaps, but not that hot. She turned farther away from him then, as if to look at something way out on the beach. With her head averted and bowed, the buttons of her spine stood out taut against the material of her costume, and he could see her shoulderblades work slightly under her tight skin. She did not turn back, or speak. He had moved much closer, without volition—almost touching, but not quite. His blood had been speaking to him for some time, clearer than her words, and now it was the only sound that he could hear. He was intensely aware of her heat and her smell. He lifted his hand, slowly stretched it out—some distanced part of him thinking in horror: *You don't even know if she's got a husband or a lover, or what their miscegenation laws are, prison, murder, castration*—and closed it over her shoulder, feeling the flat muscle of her back under his palm, fingers brushing her neck, digging into the hollow of her collarbone. She stiffened—while he thought, *That's it!* in tranced dispassionate despair—and then she slowly relaxed, muscle by muscle, and settled her long warm weight back against his

chest, her head coming to rest against his cheek with a muffled *bump,* and she said "Ahhh—" in a whisper, a tiny sighing echo of the devotees on the beach. They stood quietly for a while, listening to each other breathe, and then he said, hoarsely, "Will you come home with me?" And she said, "Yes."

They fell in love.

Farber himself never quite understood why, or how, this happened. Like everything else about "Lisle," and the Cian, it was to him a thing that could only be seen out of the corner of the eye, that could only be intuited and never analyzed rationally. Love came to him subliminally, seeping up from some hidden wellspring and soaking imperceptibly through his mind. It was a peripheral thing, and Farber was not even aware of it until after it had happened. Later, when he had become irreversibly committed, he spent a good deal of time trying to puzzle out the reasons for it, but they did not admit of delineation.

Sex was good with her, certainly, but no better than it had been on occasion with other women. Their lovemaking that night was not a blaze of transcendental pleasure; like any other couple, they needed time to adjust to each other, and their first attempts were not without a certain element of clumsiness. It was the usual sweaty business, full of small mutual discoveries, disappointments, elations—not much different from his first night with Kathy, on a purely sexual level. Liraun *was* different, though, and the night was steeped through with her strangeness, as the air of Farber's bedroom was soaked with the musky, erotic smell of her body. She spoke little. She would laugh or sob at unpredictable times, for—to Farber—unanalyzable reasons. She was playful, and at the same time intently, almost grimly, serious; Farber could never be sure which mood to respond to, and couldn't master her apparent trick of mixing the two. Physically, she was odd, although not enough so as to be repugnant—rather the opposite, in fact. She had no breasts, or rather she had only vestigial ones, like Farber himself—the Cian men nursed the young, not the women. Her nipples were also vestigial—three pairs of them, spaced 2×2, down along the rib cage, flat and almost unnoticeable except for large, smoky-dark aureoles. Most of her body was covered with a light, fine down that might once, millennia ago, have been fur. Her pubic hair was unusually thick and heavy, stretching down

her thighs and up along her belly. Her canines weren't really too much longer than a human's, and she was very careful not to bite too hard; to Farber's relief—and, almost, regret—as he had been half-expecting her to slash him to ribbons. She was perhaps not as expert as Kathy—although she was by no means unsophisticated, sexually—but there was an exquisitely restrained desperation to her responses that puzzled Farber even while it delighted him. At orgasm—their second try, finally working their slow, patient way up to it—she hugged him with a strength almost greater than his own, nearly cracking his ribs, and cried out harshly, as though terrified and elated by something that he could never understand.

In the morning, Liraun got up and dressed without a word. Watching her pad around his apartment in the cold, slate-gray dawnlight, shrugging herself into her skintight outfit, Farber felt a rush of idiot desire and would have been ready to tackle the night's business all over again, eager as a schoolboy, although he was probably too drained and exhausted physically to take it. Liraun looked much less frazzled than Farber; her movements were still crisp and supple, her face was fresh and unshadowed. He asked her if she would come back, but she would not answer him. She smiled and shrugged, still wordless and noncommittal, and departed—leaving Farber bemused, to say the least. He didn't even know how to find her again.

His mood persisted throughout the day. He managed successfully to avoid Kathy and most of the other Earthmen, although Janet LaCorte gave him an indignant glare in front of the Terran Cooperative offices. After the passion and mystery of *Alàntene* night, the day seemed unreal—flat, insubstantial, dull, the colors less vivid, the vistas of Aei less inspiring, the air itself stale. The routine minutia of his work seemed incredibly boring. He achieved nothing even remotely of value, and gave up on it in the early afternoon. His mind was divided. Half of it was moronically happy, and tried to keep him whistling and humming when the other half wasn't paying attention. That half was filled with increasing anxiety, almost with fear, as the afternoon wore on. It was quite possible that he'd never see her again. Suppose she didn't come back?

But she did.

And she returned the next day, too.

And the next.

And the day after that.

On the sixth day after *Alàntene*, Farber got a little scared. He decided, coldbloodedly, that he was becoming too involved with Liraun—certainly they were seeing too much of each other—and he set out to remedy the situation. He had an intense, tearful reconciliation with Kathy, and within two hours they were back in her apartment, and in bed. Kathy spent the rest of the night inventing exotic ways of making love, in order to seal the bond. Farber worked at it grimly, but it was no good: he kept thinking about Liraun, he kept picturing her, he wanted it to be her instead. In spite of his resolve, he found he could only relate to Kathy absentmindedly; he kept fantasizing that she was Liraun, and it was this that sparked most of his desire, not Kathy herself.

Early the next evening, Liraun appeared at Farber's apartment, as though alerted to the change in Farber's thinking by telepathy. She didn't say a word about his absence the previous night; she never mentioned it at all. Neither did Farber. He relaxed gratefully into the familiar strangeness of her company, suffused with a feeling of having come home again. Kathy rang the bell about ten, and kept ringing incessantly until Farber was obliged to shout for her to go away. Liraun said nothing about that either.

After this, Farber stopped trying to avoid further emotional involvement with Liraun, although if you had mentioned the word *love* to him at any one point he would have denied it quickly and emphatically. In fact, though, he was coming to depend on her presence more and more. She was a prop; she held him up, she kept him going. She was a tranquilizing drug to assuage the loneliness and horror of exile on an alien earth. She helped him forget that he could stare at the stars here forever, and never once see a configuration he could recognize from a thousand boyhood nights spent dreaming on a hill in the Fränkische Alb near Treuchlingen. He had been set up for Liraun, certainly, by that loneliness and bewilderment. Much of his pride had been leached away by contact with races like the Enye, who treated Terrans like animals—or, even worse, with creatures so different they could barely interact with humans at all—and he was unable to retreat behind a wall of defensive snobbery and cultivated disdain, as had most of his fellows. The path of his life, once so straight and obvious, had been lost in a morass of confusion and futility. His career—once the vital, central thing in his existence—now seemed insipid, unimportant, meaningless. But over and above

these factors, it was Liraun's character itself that seduced him. He was drawn powerfully by her enigmatic and bottomless nature. With other women, his interest had ended at the moment of sexual conquest—the affair might coast on for weeks or even months afterward, but that was only momentum: the tension was gone. With Liraun, sex was only a beginning. Her mind and spirit were still masked from him, as by a thousand thicknesses of distorting semitransparent gauze, and physical intimacy was only a means to strip away the first of those layers. The prospect of peeling the rest of them was one of the things that held him. Also, Farber, who had been used to the aggressive, self-assertive women of Earth, was delighted by Liraun's apparent submissiveness. He quickly became comfortably accustomed to having her defer to his will, cook his supper, serve him in a hundred little ways.

Three weeks after *Alàntene,* he asked Liraun if she would move in with him. She would not answer him—with that unshakable stubbornness that came over her occasionally, she refused to acknowledge that she had even heard the question. The more he persisted, the more blank and unlistening she became, until finally he gave it up. She was abstracted and withdrawn the rest of that night. In the morning, as she was preparing to leave, she told him quietly that, yes, she would come to live with him.

She showed up that evening with a backpack of possessions, and moved in. It only took her about fifteen minutes to get settled. As Farber watched her moving around his apartment, putting away her things, he was overcome by a feeling of amazement that was almost awe. Even after three weeks, he still knew next to nothing about her. Getting personal information from her was like pulling teeth. He didn't know what she did during the day, after she left him, where she went or why. He didn't even know where she lived—they had strolled around Aei innumerable times, but she had never taken him there, or said anything about its location, and something in her manner had discouraged him from asking. She was quite willing to talk about her people and their society, but only on the most general and theoretical of grounds. The philosophy, sometimes and to a limited degree, but the specifics, never. He really knew nothing about her life at all. And yet, here she was—moving in with him. This alien, living in his house, day in and day out. It was incredible and wonderful. Already—as she put supper on to boil, unasked, and

sat tranquilly playing the *tikan,* a mandolin-like instrument—he could feel her neat, quiet, calming presence spreading throughout the apartment, seeping into his body like radiant heat, thawing his hopes, loosening his fears.

They fell in love.

That was the easy part.

The next month was probably the happiest part of Farber's life. Certainly, it was the period during which he produced most of his best work. Farber was a graphic artist, although, like most artists of his generation, he had seldom even touched paints or oils or clay or bronze. He worked instead with a sophisticated device—exported by the Jejun, master craftsmen for this entire section of the spiral arm—that enabled him to transpose his internal fantasies and visualizations directly onto holographic film. The results of this process, rather inevitably known as "sensies" in popular parlance, could be exhibited either as a movie or as blown-up stills—there were conflicting views as to which was the proper method—and were gradually replacing the old arts of painting, sculpture, and photography, now regarded as passé and intolerably primitive by the young turks, among the highly civilized nations of Earth. With the advent of the sensies, and the concurrent exodus of men to distant starsystems, the old school of landscape painting crossbred itself with the travelog and regained something of the prestige and popularity it had enjoyed in the eighteenth century—with the additional advantage that these visualizations of alien lands were filtered through and colored by the perception of the individual sensie artist, giving rise almost overnight to critics and connoisseurs who would argue endlessly over the precision of Tunick's eye as contrasted to the passion of Frank's. It became common practice for sensie artists to be sent along with the outbound trading missions and exploratory expeditions, to record them for the folks back home. This was Farber's position with the mission to "Lisle," and during the beginning of his affair with Liraun he produced several stills which would later attract a moderate amount of attention on Earth, among them *Woman at Rest, Alàntene Night, Riverman,* and the fairly well-known *Esplanade—Looking East to the Sea.* He was as content as he had ever been. He had the pleasure of work that he enjoyed, the satisfaction of that work done well, a reasonable prospect of future success—and Liraun. And, as

men are always ready to disregard the most painfully learned lessons the moment they think the wind has changed, he even began to regain some of his old cockiness.

Naturally, it could not last.

It would take a book to explain in detail why Farber became determined to marry Liraun, and much of it would be guesswork at that. Again, it was not so much a conscious decision, but rather something that—he realized, in retrospect—he had become committed to at some point along the line. Exactly when that point, that moment of commitment, had been reached, he himself did not know. But there were seven specific things that took him toward it, seven long steps into deep water.

Perhaps the first step occurred when he realized that Liraun was unhappy.

Or if not unhappy exactly—for they still took much delight in each other—then troubled at least, and divided of soul. Even in her gayest moments, there had always been an edge of melancholy to her, but now it seemed to deepen and widen daily. He noticed it, responded to it with concern, but couldn't find out why it was happening. As usual, she was intensely reluctant to talk about her feelings, and would either change the subject when Farber questioned her, or become withdrawn if he pressed her to answer. It wasn't until they attended the monthly Co-op mixer—still referred to as a "cocktail party," although amphetamines and hallucinogenics were served as readily as alcohol—that he began to understand what was wrong. Prominent members of the Cian community were regularly invited to the mixer, and some of them actually came; they called the parties "Little Modes," and seemed to regard them with tolerant, amused condescension, as one would an absurd play put on by kindergarten children. The Cian were very chilly toward Liraun. They didn't quite snub her—as it was impolite to ignore any living being—but there was a thinly veiled hostility behind everything they said and did; it was clear that they disapproved of her. Liraun was strained and silent that night, and kept to herself as much as possible.

It took Farber a few more days to dig it up, but at last, after much persistence and persuasion, the story came out in disjointed sections. Pieced together, it looked like this: Cian morality saw nothing wrong with an unmarried girl taking a

lover, as long as she did not conceive; there was no special premium on virginity. Until she was married, however, she was expected to live by herself. There *was* a special symbolism to this—a girl was said to go "from under her father's roof to her husband's." It was a matter of ownership, of transference of title, and there was no room in the equation for her accepting the protection of any other male. So Liraun's sin was not that she was sleeping with Farber—a matter of utter indifference to the other Cian—but *that she was living with him,* "under the roof" of a man who was not her husband. Odd as this seemed to Farber, it was serious enough to get her ostracized.

All this gave Farber a sleepless night. If he had been born twenty years earlier, or ten years later, he probably wouldn't have worried about Liraun's welfare at all, but amorality had gone out of fashion, as it periodically did, and his generation had rediscovered humanism and a sort of studied naiveté. So he stayed up to figure out the Decent Thing To Do. On the one hand, he sincerely loved Liraun, didn't want her hurt on his behalf—but didn't want to lose her either. On the other hand, he was as terrified of marriage as most young men of his day, especially the artists and the intelligentsia, among whom it had long been a truism that "marriage" equated with "trap." But no matter how he nagged it, it always came down to that: he should either marry her, or leave her; nothing else would help her situation.

Toward dawn, he decided—rather callously, but a man can often identify coldbloodedness as practicality if he squints at it hard enough—that the best thing to do would be to marry Liraun, but only under the Cian rites. That would make her a respectable woman again in the eyes of the Cian, and yet, as far as his fellow Terrans were concerned, it would be only a native marriage: it wouldn't be binding on Earth, and if his relationship with Liraun soured, he could leave at the end of his hitch without worrying about legalities. In the morning he sent an application to the Cian Liaison, and a note to the Co-op explaining what he was proposing to do.

Then he went to sleep.

He hadn't thought to tell Liraun about it yet.

Liraun's eyes, when he asked her. The second step.

The next afternoon, Farber had an interview with the Co-op Director.

Most of the Earthmen played at being embittered because it was the style of their times, but with Raymond Keane, the Director, it was not an assumed thing. He *was* embittered. He was a bitter, troubled, cynical, beat-out, burnt-up man, with just enough energy left to him to form a reservoir of weary malice. He had been here since the very beginning of Terran involvement with "Lisle," in one capacity or another. In all that time, he had been unable to come up with a really viable trade commodity. The last great white hope had been a native drug—used for an entirely different purpose on Weinunnach—that the Co-op had imported to Earth as a serum to overcome organ rejection in transplant cases, and which had turned out to have the unfortunate side effect of dissolving all the cholinesterase in a user's body two years after the initial dose, something that had never happened here in years of testing. Apparently the reaction had been triggered by something in the environment of Earth; something had switched on an episome that remained latent on "Lisle." That was the trouble with interstellar commerce: too many wild factors, and the rules of the game shifted constantly and unpredictably. Keane, a minor executive at the time, had been swept into the Director's office by the cholinesterase scandal, but had not been able to get out from under its shadow. Time after time, his experts went wrong, soured, failed of their expectation—never as spectacularly as the first fiasco, never drastically enough to shake him out of office, but consistently. This had been going on for almost five years. It had eaten him. He looked like a man who no longer had the strength to go on, but who must, and so goes on without strength, held together only by a set of complex and rigidly interlocking weaknesses.

He kept Farber on the carpet for more than an hour.

Farber had not been passionately attached to his matrimonial plans when he came to the office—it was the day after, and he was beginning to see some of the difficulties involved. He had half-expected to be talked out of it, and half-wished that he would be. But instead of persuading, Keane had chided, threatened, fumed, ranted, finally working himself into such a red-faced rage that he had almost begun to scream. At first, Farber had been amazed. He worked for the Co-op on the loosest of contractual bases, with effectively no supervision at all, and he wasn't used to this type of vicious dressing-down. Then he began to get mad. Keane blustered

on—the marriage would stir up bad feelings among the Cian, it would be a step toward diluting the cultural identity of the Earth Enclave, it might encourage other Earthmen—or worse, women—to do the same, it would split Farber's loyalties, take up too much of his time . . . a plethora of reasons, some good, some bad, all of them false. Farber watched Keane's face as he talked. The Director's face was flat and dull, his skin the seeming texture of horn, crosshatched with shiny dead places, like scales of congealed lard, where a dream had died and turned to chitin. No matter what he said, the real reason he was against the marriage was that he hated the Cian. That was something that went beyond logic, or duty, or even self-interest. He hated the Cian, he hated the Co-op, "Lisle," his job, Farber. Most of all he hated himself. It was a weary, helpless hatred, all the blacker because it was impotent. It could not even destroy. All it could do was negate.

Farber could be a very obstinate man indeed when aroused to it, and now that mulish streak became dominant. He began to flush. Unconsciously, he braced himself, settling down more firmly in his chair, flattening his feet against the floor.

Keane ran down at last, and the room filled with a silence that went on and on. Farber sat perfectly still. He had not said a word since Keane began his tirade. He did not speak now. He just sat motionlessly in the center of the office—a gleaming antiseptic cave, steel, plastic, chrome, shiny tile, glass, filled with oddments, plaques, framed certificates, charts, stacked banks of files, a huge computer terminal, a hologram tank that filled half a wall—and stared levelly at Keane.

Keane fiddled with the litter on his desk.

"The Cian Liaison has granted you an interview tomorrow," Keane said, after an uneasy pause, "to discuss this proposal of yours. My advice to you is not to keep it. If you do keep it, then you must assure the Liaison that this has all been some sort of mistake or misconception on your part. Do you understand that?"

"My personal life is none of your business," Farber said flatly.

"Under no circumstances will you pursue this matter any further, Mr. Farber."

"Your authority does not extend to my private life," Farber said, with a touch of heat. "I'll do what I like with it."

"Farber—" Keane said, and Farber, simultaneously said, "It's none of your business!"

Another pause.

"I can make a great deal of trouble for you, you know," Keane said.

That was the third step.

Doggedly, Farber took the following afternoon off and went to see the Cian Liaison to the Terran Mission, Jacawen *sur* Abut.

Jacawen had his office in Old City.

Farber had been up to Old City before, but he hadn't stayed long because he didn't like it there. It was a place of precipitous cobblestone streets, towers and spires and domes, steep stairways, terraced balconies and plazas, long narrow alleys that wound claustrophobically between high walls of black rock until they opened onto sudden startling vistas of the wide country or the restless sea below. It was a place of levels, of shafts that dropped down deep into the rock of the cliff itself, going down and down with lights and windows sparkling silver and orange in the depths like phosphorescence at the bottom of an old dry well; of honeycombed bluffs of more adamant rock that rose like cliffs atop a cliff from a terrace or a square, looming up like the stern of a great dark ship and lifting a twinkling freight of windows high above the rooftops of the level below, with more buildings built atop it, and still more built atop them, mazy roofs climbing up and up into the deep blue-black sky. It was a place that was banded by little vertical jungles, growing right up and over the city like creeper vines. All of Aei was crisscrossed with Feral Strips, kept wild to provide the citizens with relief from urban existence, but the Feral Strips in Old City were almost straight up-and-down, weeds and ropy bushes and little stunted trees that clung to fissures and slanting crevasses in the outer walls, full of shaggy agile creatures—something like goats, something like squirrels—that leapt in serene silence from hummock to hummock, pursued by little mewling predators with needle-tipped tails and perpetually apologetic grins on their fox muzzles. It was a place of little commerce or overt activity. There were no shops or stores in Old City, although there were many administrative offices and private homes. There were two open-air markets during the daytime, and hot-food vendors along the Espla-

nade, but only a few small restaurants that operated after dark, and no commonhouses or entertainment places at all, unlike New City. It was a restricted place, in some ways. Any Cian could visit Old City, but only a member of one of the Thousand Families could live there. In New City, you would often see nulls or clones or genetically altered beings in the street—the Cian possessed an immensely sophisticated biological technology, and their genetic surgeons, the "tailors," produced strange creatures to order as one of Weinunnach's major exports—but they were not allowed to set foot in Old City. Offworlders like the Terrans were allowed to visit, but reluctantly. It was a place made primarily of rock and dressed obsidian, interwoven with wood, iron, glass and slate. Its predominant colors were black and silver, with a few slate grays and reds, and an occasional startling patch of orange or earth brown. It smelled of clean naked rock, and ozone, and sea-wind, with a lingering undertang of musk. There were few loud sounds, but the silence was a vibrant humming one—as of a million constant voices a bit too subdued to be heard. The mood of Old City balanced on the razor edge between "brooding" and "serene."

Today, to Farber, it was brooding. He took the cablecar up, walked along the Esplanade at the edge of the great cliff, went up a stairway, along an alley, through a tunnel, up another stairway, along another alley, penetrating ever deeper and higher into Old City. At last he was so deep inside it that he saw Fire Woman, the sun, only occasionally and at a distance as it peered over the jumble of high roofs and down into the narrow warrens and passageways. Everything was bathed in shifting half-light now, and he walked on through alternating strips of bright hazy radiance and shadows so deep that they looked like glistening black solids. He felt like a worm inching his way through black rock and wet earth, until he came out onto a staircase that led up and across the domed roof of a building on a lower level, dizzying and sun-dazzled, with a sheer unprotected drop on one side, and then he felt like an insect crawling across the naked shoulder of a mountain. Jacawen's office was nearby, in a building that jutted out from the city mass like a gable, its windows opening on nothing except air and distances.

Jacawen's heir-son, Mordlich, showed Farber in. He was a tall, taciturn young man with a face like a scornful angel: remote, handsome, full of pride and disdain. He moved like a

tiger, like a warrior gliding into battle; his eyes blazed with feral intelligence and an almost fanatical intensity. It was obvious that he disliked Farber on sight, that Farber's very existence was somehow an affront to his conception of the universe. With a stiff, self-absorbed face, like that of someone who smells a bad odor, he took Farber to the inner office and departed quickly.

"Sit down, Mr. Farber," Jacawen said.

Farber sat down. The floor here was carpeted with what appeared to be a kind of pale fungus, and he sank into it as he would a cushion. Jacawen sat on a low dais a few feet away. The office was roomy, neat, uncluttered, with stone walls and a half-timbered ceiling. There was a window in the east-facing wall, looking out over the tidelands of Elder Sea; it was open, and they could hear surf and the crying of seabirds, brought near by the wind, then fading away again into distance as the wind died. That wind, whistling in through the window with its freight of ocean sounds, was thin and cold, and tasted of salt, which tasted in turn of blood. Some sunlight leaked in with the wind, also thin and cold, but pure as clear crystal—it played on the rich tapestry covering the opposite wall, meticulously picking out gods and men, cold-eyed demons and beautiful women, births and battles, deliverance and death.

Farber and Jacawen looked each other over, silently.

Jacawen himself was a small, somber, self-possessed man, with the jet-black hair and wide golden eyes of most of his race. He was sleek as an otter, giving the impression of sturdiness, of a compact and supple muscularity. His breasts were no larger than those of an ordinary Earthman, as he was not in lactation at the time, but his thin shirt showed the impression of three pairs of nipples, spaced two by two down along his ribcage, and six small bumps to go with them. His face was calm, almost dispassionate, but it looked somewhat satanic to Farber because of the tiny points of the canine teeth that protruded beyond the lips. Jacawen was even more intelligent and adamant than his son, but in him the fanatic intensity had been banked down into a more assured, controllable, useful force, a steady, smokeless flame. Both were Shadow Men, a quasi-religious sect that ran much of the government of Shasine, but Jacawen had the maturity and the wisdom of experience—Mordlich was still full of worldly pride, but Jacawen had passed beyond that to the curious ar-

rogant humility of a senior Shadow Man, and he aspired to be, like the angels, beyond shame and pride. With that, he had varying degrees of success.

"Did you know that Liraun is my half-niece?" Jacawen asked abruptly.

Oh Christ, Farber thought.

After a moment, he managed to say: "No, I didn't know that."

"I tell you this," Jacawen said, with equanimity, "not because it is important in itself, but because it is proof that I know her mind, that I have had much time to observe her. On Weinunnach, it is the custom to have our children in surges, Mr. Farber, four years apart. Liraun was born in the fallow period between surges, one and a half years after the previous surge, two and a half years before the surge to come. It almost never happens that our women conceive when they are not supposed to conceive, but sometimes it happens regardless, and this was one such time. Do you understand, Mr. Farber? Liraun grew up alone, with no age group to fit into, with no companions. Not even wombmates—the Mother, who did not realize for months that she had conceived, did not have time to cherish the growth in the proper way: most of her wombmates were stillborn, one sister died in early childhood. Liraun survived, but she grew up sad and wild, and she still is so. She has been out of Harmony on other occasions." He stopped and stared at Farber. "Do you understand, Mr. Farber? I am talking openly to you of private matters, against the custom of our people, and it is distasteful to me—but I wish you to understand."

Farber scowled. "It seems like you're telling me that Liraun's—affair—with me is just one more wild prank in a life of unfortunate rebellion."

"That is oddly put, but basically accurate."

"And that's all you think it is?"

Jacawen sat impassively for a moment, then started again. "Mr. Farber, I don't think you've understood me after all," he said drily. "I am not talking about your proposal of marriage to Liraun. What I have been saying to you is in the way of an apology for the strain and disharmony this thing must have caused you, and an assurance that it was not your responsibility. This mating between Cian and Terran should never have happened at all, but if it was going to happen,

then it does not surprise me at all that Liraun should be the one woman in all of Shasine that it happened to. Who *caused* it to happen, Mr. Farber. That is all I wished to convey to you."

"What about my proposal of marriage?" Farber said, in a tight voice.

"That, of course, cannot be. It is unallowable."

"Why?"

"Because your race and mine are not interfertile, Mr. Farber!" Jacawen said, a hint of passion in his voice for the first time. "Can't you see that? A marriage between you and Liraun would be a sterile one. A marriage that does not produce children is an abomination in the eyes of the People of Power, it is an offense to all Harmony. There has never been such a thing on the face of Weinunnach! There never will be!" All the intensity had flared up, the steady flame roared and swelled behind his eyes. Then it slowly guttered, leaving him shaken. "No, I'm sorry, Mr. Farber," he said. "It cannot be. I speak to you frankly now, Mr. Farber, perhaps to my own dishonor: even if the marriage were not impossible, I would be against it, I would disapprove, but by our custom I could not stand in the way of your free choice. However, as it is, I have no need: all Weinunnach stands in your way and prevents you. It is unallowable. I cannot say that I am sorry."

That's it, then, Farber thought, and felt only a vast wave of relief. But even while it was washing over him, some distanced part of himself that he did not understand was making him say: "Are you sure there's no way around that? Are you *sure?* No way at *all?"* in a tone of petulant, chivvying desperation.

Jacawen stared at him, and something new came into his face, disgruntlement, annoyance, malice, reluctance, regret—all of these perhaps. He said: "There is a way, Mr. Farber. If you wish, you may have our Tailors adjust your karyotype, change it to match with ours. Then you could marry, Mr. Farber. Making that adjustment would not change you into a Cian in the gross physical sense, but it would effect your cytological material, and it would change the number and morphology of your chromosomes. It would have little real effect, except on your offspring. It would change your seed, Mr. Farber, it would change your seed. You see? You and Liraun would no longer be sterile. If you impregnated her,

your children would be full-blooded Cian, with no trace of Terra in them at all." He smiled cuttingly at Farber, the malice now only thinly veiled. "Well, Mr. Farber, do you want me to put you down for an appointment with the Tailors? I assure you that is the only possible way you could marry Liraun, and I'm *sure* of that, Mr. Farber. Well?"

Farber was flushing with shame and puzzled anger. In an attempt to save some semblance of face, he let his voice say: "Yes."

"You do wish to see the Tailors, then?"

Flatly: "Yes."

"Excellent!" Jacawen said. His hand broke a light beam. A control panel, of compact Jejun make, slid up out of the floor. Jacawen studied a dial, turned a switch, hit three keys, and said something in a dialect too swift to follow. The panel slid back into the floor. Jacawen looked at Farber. "Now," he said, "you have an appointment at the Hall of Tailors, here in Old City, tomorrow, at 1125 by your time. I wish you good luck." And Jacawen smiled with calculated blandness, with aloof contempt, mocking Farber, pouring his scorn onto him—a scorn so much more devastating than Mordlich's, because it was so much less automatic, and so much more earned. Farber had tried a bluff, and it had been called; he had been forced right out of the game. Jacawen knew that Farber would never keep the appointment, that the price was too high, that Farber never had any intention of going at all. Farber had tried to brazen it through, and had lost face enormously. Jacawen knew that Farber would not have the courage to go through with it.

He was right. Farber knew it too.

The shame that Farber felt as he pushed out of the office, that was the fourth step.

It was late afternoon by the time he reached the Enclave, so Farber stopped off at the Co-op Mess to have a drink. He found Dale Brody at the bar, already well on his way into a stinking, falling-down drunk. The Co-op grapevine must have been working as well as ever, because, after a few minutes of silent, cold-shoulder drinking, Brody leaned over to Farber, and said, in a hoarse malodorous voice: "You can fuck niggers if you want, but don't you think about marrying them! We don't marry our niggers back home."

Farber raised his big fist—feeling like a character in an

old-time movie, but doing it anyway—and knocked two of Brody's teeth out.

That was the fifth step.

When Farber checked back at his office at last, there was a note waiting for him, asking him to call on Dr. Anthony Ferri, the Co-op ethnologist.

Ferri was a phlegmatic, reclusive man, but his cool reticence was a mask for voracious ambitions of a sort that must have burned themselves to slag in Keane years before. He worked for the Co-op, but he was simultaneously doing field work for Cornell—*really* doing field work for Cornell is the way he himself would have put it, if you caught him in a confiding mood—and all his dreams were centered on the marvelous monographs he would publish, on the books he would write, on the honors he would earn, on grants and university chairs and lecture tours and tenure. He wanted to be famous, to be well respected, to be a giant in his field. That was his one passion; everything else had been sublimated into it. And it was possible that he would yet translate dream into reality. He had a brilliant mind, an enormous—though somewhat specialized—store of erudition, and enough practicality to realize that he would have to work like a demon every moment of his stay on "Lisle" if he were ever to realize his ambitions. All that was on the credit side of the ledger. On the debit side was his own personality. Most men found him cold, distant and unfriendly. Actually, he was a fairly sociable man, and, when he noticed them, sincerely liked people. But he seldom noticed them—he was too absorbed by work, too haunted by the sense of time ticking by and taking him no closer to his goal. He was taciturn to the point of insult. That was because, basically, he had nothing to say about most things. But when he judged that a bit of communication might advance his career, and especially when the subject under discussion fell within his own sphere of expertise, he could suddenly become affable, loquacious, enthusiastic, persuasive, even glib.

He was all of those things that evening.

He wanted Farber to work for him. More precisely, he wanted Farber to be a "research assistant," gathering the type of data that he was unable to get himself. Ferri was too much of a cold fish—although he didn't put it quite that way when he was explaining it to Farber—to become really

friendly with the Cian, to be accepted into their homes; he had tried, in his most ingratiating manner and with all the professional wiles he could command, and he had been rebuffed—with characteristic Cian politeness, but decisively. That meant that some doors were forever closed to him in Shasine. But Farber was already intimately involved with a Cian, and if, as the gossip had it, he was going to marry her, then the chances were that he'd eventually be able to penetrate even deeper into Cian society. Ferri, seeing that Farber was getting angry, admitted hastily that it was none of his business whether Farber married Liraun or not, but if he did, if he *did*—The job wouldn't be very demanding, Ferri explained, mostly a matter of keeping his eyes open, surreptitiously recording conversations—here Ferri exhibited a bracelet containing a hidden microminiaturized recorder—and telemetering the stuff back to Ferri. Just the raw data; he wouldn't have to try to analyze it or draw conclusions. Ferri and his semantic and anthropological computers would do that. But only Farber could get the data in the first place.

"Joe, listen to me," Ferri said urgently. "You're new here, you don't realize yet what a godawful *secretive* culture this is. On the surface it looks like a pretty open and relaxed society, everybody friendly and polite, almost stress-free when compared to an Earth society like America or Russia, low incidence of neurosis, lower incidence of insanity, suicide relatively rare, stress-induced illness infrequent, psychosomatic illness almost completely unknown. But they're so completely obsessional in guarding their privacy! Their private lives are sacrosanct, they won't talk about them, they won't let us investigate them. We've been here more than a decade, and we still don't know anything about them, except what they let us see. Nothing, not a damn thing! We've never even been able to put a Cian through a physical examination, let alone dissect one. Joe, you *have* to cooperate."

"I don't know," Farber said.

"I can pay you for your help, out of my Cornell budget. Middling well."

"It isn't that."

"What, then?"

"I just don't know if I'd want to do something like that. I don't think I would."

"There're one hell of a lot more questions about this world than there are answers, you know that, Joe?" Ferri said, as if

he hadn't heard Farber, as though the possibility of a negative response just didn't exist. "As far as I can tell, the Cian have the capability for spaceflight if they'd put all the pieces of their technology together in the right way, and've had that capability for thousands of years. They just don't put the pieces together. They don't want to—it doesn't interest them. And yet their genetic science is one of the most sophisticated known, and they get plenty of interstellar trade—it doesn't square. Look at the primitive way they live. They don't have to! They have efficient mass communications and high-speed transportation, but they use them so sparingly. There isn't a public phone system in all of Aei, except for ours at the Enclave. That doesn't interest them either. What kind of cultural development produces a psychology like that?" He wiped his face, almost angrily. "They don't even have the same conception of time that we do. They're not as prone to think of time as a linear flow. Verbs in their language don't even have tenses, just aspects and validity forms, like Hopi. You can say 'remembered eating' or 'eating expected,' but you can't say 'He ate' or 'He will eat.' For Christ's sake, they shouldn't have sent men like us to deal with these creatures! They should have sent Asians, Yaquis, Polynesians, Amerinds, Eskimos, even Bushmen—somebody who'd have a chance of understanding the Cian!"

"You know the situation back home," Farber said, shrugging.

"Yes, I do," Ferri said. He was silent for a moment, then: "The women have a strange role in this society. You're living with one, maybe marrying one! Don't you want to learn about them? Don't you want a fair chance of understanding the motivations of your own woman? I don't understand them, now. You won't either. Unmarried women are the property of the father. Married women, at least at first, are the property of the husband. No status, few rights. A textbook patriarchal society. But it doesn't stay that way—somehow some of the wives change their status, and go right to the top; they're almost worshipped. Why does that happen? I don't know. I do know that a woman changes her surname three times in her life. Your woman's surname is Jé Genawen, I think I remember. Right? That means, approximately, 'belonging to Genawen,' her father. If she marries you, her surname will change to Jé Farber, believe it or not: 'belonging to Farber.' If she makes the status-leap, however

it's done, her surname becomes 'belonging to—' whatever the name of the female First Ancestor of her line is. What is all this rigmarole for? I don't know, but you could help me find out." He put his hand on Farber's arm with studied sincerity. "Joe, this is the first time a Cian has ever become intimately involved with a Terran. In a decade or more. It might never happen again. That's why this is so important. Don't you see, you're in a better position to learn about them than any man in the history of this mission! You must help me."

"I'll think about it," Farber said, and brushing aside Ferri's protests, he got ready to leave.

He had already made the sixth step, although he didn't realize it yet.

He went out.

On his way back to his apartment, Farber ran into Kathy Gibbs among the early-evening strollers on Washington Street. Kathy was by no means as much of a bitch as Farber would've liked to paint her, but she was an aging, unmarried, disillusioned woman who had been hurt by too many men, Farber the latest of them, and if she fought to draw blood, she might not be commended for it, but she could hardly be blamed.

Her weapon this time was a smile that cut to the bone like a flensing knife, a contemptuous, knowing, humiliating smile that said *You'll come back to me, whether you want to or not,* that said, *Wait and see!* with evil ancient patience.

That smile was the seventh step.

And Farber spent another night of years.

The next morning, Farber rose very early, and, prompted by some obscure instinct, dressed in his best suit. Liraun lay in the big bed and watched him, her eyes following him as he wandered through the apartment. She didn't get up to make breakfast for him, as she usually did; nor did he ask her to. She did not speak at all. Her expression was unreadable. Farber was equally mute; he finished dressing as quickly as he could, although he was far from being in a hurry—he wanted to avoid her patient, thoughtful eyes. Those eyes did not pressure him at all; that was why he couldn't stand them. The pale red light of Fire Woman bled in through the blinds, polarizing dust motes in the air, throwing slats of radiance

across the opposite wall. The Terran furniture that filled the apartment looked cheap and shabby in that pitiless light—plastic and machine-stamped, as indeed it was. Everything was bland, precise, artificial. Only Liraun was real here. Without moving or speaking, she remained the vital, vibrant center of the place. The apartment was filled with her presence, and with her warm musky smell. She was the extenuating factor, she lent the room what validity it had. Without her, it would be a stage set—flat and unreal. He pulled on his coat and left quickly, still wordless.

Outside, it was very cold. Farber walked hurriedly through the wide streets of the Enclave, hands in his pockets, his feet making a hollow *click-clack,* his breath steaming in plumes and tatters. There was no one else about. Fire Woman was dipping in and out of corrugated gray clouds, and hoarfrost glistened over everything. The tall Terran-style buildings rose on either side, prefabricated glass-and-plastic hives, jarringly out of place. They were surrounded by lush groves of black feathertrees, a half-hearted decorator's touch which only succeeded in increasing the contrast. A hidden something was singing in the cold morning hush—it sounded like a bird, but it was a lizard. Some of the streetlights—another Terran touch—were still on, looking wan and sadly pointless against the lightening gray sky. He reached the huge wall that surrounded the Enclave—*What do they think they're keeping out?* he thought. *With a wall?*—passed the sleeping gate guard in his glassine booth, and struck out into Aei. The streets turned from asphalt to porcelain, and, as he cleared the horizon-swallowing Terran skyline, Old City loomed up on its obsidian cliff, way in the middle of the air.

Twice, he stopped and turned back. One of these times, he retraced his steps for about a half-mile back toward the Enclave, until shame and indecision stopped him, turned him around again, and set him stumbling off toward his original goal. He couldn't do it—he couldn't go back and tell her that he was afraid to do it, that the marriage was off. She wouldn't cry, she wouldn't reproach him—she would accept it with patient, unaccusing despair, and *that* was what he couldn't face, that was what he wouldn't be able to stand. If he backed down, he wouldn't be able to face any of them: Keane with his angry contempt, Jacawen with his cold scorn, Kathy with her smug complacent belief in his inevitable return to her. Not one of them believed he would go through

with it, and if he proved them right, that would be the death blow to the surviving tatters of his pride. And without that pride, he would not live. It was the last thin membrane between him and a gaping black pit of futility; he could sense that pit very clearly, the depth of the fall that awaited him. So he continued to walk, jerky, gray-faced, like a clumsily made automaton.

He took the high-speed line up to Old City. There, surrounded by high stone walls and steep cobblestone streets, the enormity of what he was about to do hit him with redoubled impact. He found a small terrace at the foot of a winding alley and stood there for almost an hour, looking out over the alien lands below. The Aome glinted like a silver-scaled snake as it wound through New City—it hadn't frozen over yet, although it certainly wouldn't remain clear too much longer. He flicked a pebble down toward the river, and was appalled to see how fast the pebble disappeared. Lost, lost. *You have to be crazy,* he told himself. *You have to be crazy to think of doing a thing like this. Nothing's worth it, nothing.* He was shaking, and his throat was dry. His skin felt feverish to his own touch. He started walking again, without volition. After a while, he noticed, in horror, that he was walking toward the Hall of Science. *I won't go in,* he told himself. *I'll just take a look at it, and then go back.* But he did go in, walking as though in a dream. For all his procrastination, he noticed, numbly, he was only five minutes late for his appointment.

Jacawen *sur* Abut was waiting there for him. With a face like stone, he led Farber through the busy, echoing corridors to a room filled with unobtrusive machines and polite Cian technicians. Jacawen said nothing. Farber's presence said all there was to say. Jacawen muttered to the chief technician, nodded to Farber, and left.

The technician smiled politely at Farber, revealing even wet teeth, and bowed.

Then they shut Farber off, put him into the machines, and did what they were supposed to do to him.

Four hours later, they switched Farber back on again. He blinked, and sat up groggily. He was on a roll-away bed. His vision was swimming, and his head felt fuzzy, as if it had been stuffed with cotton batting. There was a horrible taste in his mouth. The technician, standing at Farber's elbow, gave him exactly the same polite smile, tooth for tooth, and handed him a glass of the fiery native liquor. It sent him into a

coughing spasm, but it cleared his head. The technician took Farber's pulse, looked into his eyes, pressed a tubular machine against his upper arm and read the result off a dial, and then told Farber that he was to go now.

Somehow, Farber found himself outside, stumbling through the streets of Aei Old City. He kept looking at his hands, turning them over and over, holding them up to his eyes. He pressed his palms against his cheeks, feeling the warmth and solidity of his flesh. He pinched himself, digging his fingernails in. Everything felt the same, looked the same, but it was not. Alienness was swimming inside of him, ticking inside of him, waiting in his seed. Numbly, he kept slamming into that terrible realization, over and over again.

He was no longer human.

Joseph Farber and Liraun Jé Genawen were married late that afternoon, on the Esplanade of the Terrace, with the towers of Old City above them, and the expanse of New City below them. The ceremony was short, simple, and incomprehensible to Farber, who couldn't follow the dialect. The wind swept the length of the Esplanade to lash them, and it was bitterly cold. The thin voice of the Cian Elder, the Singer or *twizan,* sank under that wind, and then rose stubbornly above it once again. He was braced against the wind like a weathered gray rock, almost toothless, white-haired, very old. His bright ancient eyes gave no indication that he found this marriage unusual, though it had never happened before in the history of his race. There were no Earthmen present. Jacawen was there, standing silently to one side, looking cold and disapproving. Genawen *sur* Abut, Liraun's father, was there. He was a fat, good-natured old man with huge floppy breasts and a heavy bristly beard. He was trying to take his cue from his half-brother, Jacawen, and look stern, but he kept forgetting and letting a big happy grin spread over his face—he had been afraid that his daughter would never marry, and he was glad to see her wed, even to an alien. Several other Cian men were present, but no women. That struck Farber as odd, but he was still too numb to think about it. He was devoting all his energy to putting up a good show for Liraun. Liraun was radiant—there was no other word for it. Several times Farber thought he saw a burst of light out of the corner of his eye, and turned to find that it was only Liraun's face. The flash of her smile drew reflexive

radiance from everyone, even dour Jacawen. As the ceremony ended, Fire Woman broke through the clouds on the horizon, and the world opened up. You could see all the way up the North Shore now, mile upon mile, the glinting bulk of Elder Sea, the dunes, the tidy checkerboarded fields and orchards of Shasine, Fire Woman sending shafts of smoky amber sunlight stabbing down into the rolling landscape below. Liraun turned to him, and put her hand into his.

Her name was Liraun Jé Farber now.

They spent their wedding night at Farber's apartment, the last night they would spend there. He went to bed drunk and woke sweating and sober, with the full realization of what he'd done beginning to come home. Panicked, he sat up and started to swing himself out of bed. The touch of his hot, sweaty feet against the cold tile floor was nauseating; it froze him in mid-motion, as if his flesh had congealed, and he sat dispiritedly at the edge of the bed in a sagging, sweating, hunch-shouldered lump. His thoughts probed and gnawed at his situation, seeking a way out. There was none. There were no alternatives. It was too late. The finality of that was as cold and sick in his stomach as the evening's sour wine. He lay down again. He catnapped feverishly, and woke again and again during the night, lying still and blinking at the darkness, listening to the small sounds of his apartment. They were all cold sounds, artificial sounds, dry sterile tickings and clickings and buzzings. The clock, the lamp post outside the window, the temperature control, the air filter—all dead things. They were loud enough to keep any sounds from outside, any living sounds, from reaching his ears. Each time he woke and listened, they seemed to grow more loud and distinct, until he felt as if he were closed up in the cold mechanical womb of some indifferent and unliving creature, he himself already dead before he could be born: a stone fetus. He rolled over, and tried to concentrate on the sound of Liraun's breathing, setting that warm purr and bumble against the too-precise whispering of the clockwork things. After a while, he slept.

Raymond Keane called in the morning, as expected. Farber felt better by then, clearer-headed and calm, as a man may when he has irreversibly committed himself. Resignation was almost a relief after the long interval of doubt and indecision. He watched without fear as Keane's flushed waxen

face swam into focus on the phone screen—he had used up all his apprehension the day before. Indeed, he was almost amused, Keane looked so hot and so earnestly angry. Farber had turned the volume control nearly all the way down, but the voice of the aging putty-faced zealot in the hologram still scritched unpleasantly loud in his ears. The Director was definitely not *gemütlich* today. Once again, Keane was demonstrating his basic incompetence, this time by peppering Farber with insults and threats in a ragged voice full of personal pique and vindictiveness that would never be used by a good administrator. Under any provocation. It was plainly evocative of a lack of control, and shattered the image of impartial omnipotence that men of Keane's position were expected to cultivate. *Another fool,* Farber thought. *I wonder if we all are?* For a moment he had a vision of the snobbish, overbearing Earthmen as they might appear to Cian eyes. It was not a flattering thought. He was aware of Liraun standing somewhere behind him, out of sight of the hologram cube. She made no sound.

The gist of Keane's tirade was—expulsion from the Terran community. Farber had dared to step across the line that Keane had drawn, and he would be struck down for it. None of this was surprising to Farber either, although "struck down" was a rather strong way to put it. Farber had broken no Terran laws—in fact, laws covering this situation did not as yet exist—but only the directives of the Co-operative. Keane had judicatory power over the Terrans in certain special circumstances, but they were sharply limited. He could not prosecute Farber. Nor could he exile him from Earth; as a Terran citizen he was entitled to eventual passage to Earth if destitute, although it might take him a couple of years to make the connections to get there. Nor could Keane keep from Farber a small regular stipend to be paid toward his support. The law—pushed through by Labor—insisted on this to keep the threat of firing by the Co-operative, and the possibly fatal abandonment of the discharged man in an alien society, from becoming the undefiable weapon it could have been. But Keane did have the power to dispose over the operation of the Co-operative on "Lisle," and he could bar Farber from the use of any Co-operative facilities. As this included the Enclave and most of the Terran establishments on the planet, it was trouble enough for Farber.

Effectively, it cut him off from all of his own people.

Now he was really an expatriate.

"—traitor to your race," Keane was saying, pious and prissy, when Farber finally told him to go fuck himself.

Without ceremony, they left the Enclave.

That afternoon, they moved up to Old City.

As a member of the Thousand Families, it was Liraun's privilege to live in Old City, and, as her kin-by-marriage, it was also Farber's. He would have preferred to waive privilege and live in New City, which he found a much more pleasant place, but Liraun was uncharacteristically adamant on this point. Too emotionally drained for a fight, Farber gave in to her.

They moved into the same house Liraun had vacated when she'd come down to live with Farber—it had stood unclaimed and uninhabited all the weeks she'd spent at the Enclave, there being little population pressure in Aei as a whole, and none at all in Old City. The house stood just a little behind and above Kite Hill, fronting on a broad cobblestone alley known as the Row. In one of the dominant architectural styles of Old City, it was a slate-roofed oblong building of black rock, narrow across the base, consisting of three large rooms stacked directly one on top of the other, connected by stairs and ladders, with the topmost room used mostly for storage. It was already furnished, so moving was only a matter of bringing their small personal possessions in, and their clothes, putting them away, and then cleaning the house. It was done to the last detail within two hours.

In the morning, Liraun returned to her old job, running a lathe in a precision machine shop in Toolmaker Way, near Cold Tower Hill in the New City. She picked up her work as though she had never been gone. Of course, no one commented on her absence, and, except for one or two polite words of greeting, no one remarked her return.

Farber was left alone in the house.

He had the uneasy feeling that everything had happened too fast.

Farber was left alone in the house every day, from sunrise to sunset.

Gradually, he began to go to seed.

His deterioration was a slow and subtle thing, so imperceptible

tible that it could not have been seen from day to day. Certainly he himself was not aware of it, and would have denied it if it had been pointed out to him. Nevertheless, every day he became a little bit more lethargic, did a little bit less. Every day—very gradually—his mind became a little bit duller.

If he had been another man—if he had even been Ferri, with all of Ferri's faults—it might not have happened. Another man might have tried to master his new alien environment, or analyze it, or let himself be assimilated by it; another man might have gone out and found things to do, found ways to occupy his mind, he might have manufactured new passions for himself, new interests, new tasks, new ambitions, new goals. But Farber was not another man. He was himself, and it happened. He went to seed. He was not a stupid man, or an insensitive one, but his mind and talents had been trained in the rigid, narrowly specialized way of his times, discouraging spontaneity, and he couldn't deal with a situation to which none of the old learned answers would apply. Furthermore, he was in serious emotional trouble—having just gone through a series of long, slow-grinding shocks that had ground his identity to dust.

He was himself, and he deteriorated. There was nothing to do. There was no point in trying to get a job—Liraun's income plus his Co-op stipend was more than sufficient to support them both. He had wandered the city in a brooding daze until he was sick of it, Old City and New, up and down, east and west. So he stayed home, stayed indoors, more and more frequently. Stayed inside a week, and only realized that he had in retrospect, when he suspiciously counted up the days. He shrugged and smiled, and put it out of his mind.

He went down.

After a month of this, he roused himself and made an effort to break out of his dull flat purgatory. He would paint. He no longer had access to his sensie equipment, but artists had created by hand once, and he could do the same. So he bustled around for a while with a great forced show of artificial energy, going down to New City—the first time in how long?—and contacting Ferri, getting Ferri to buy easels and canvas and oils and brushes for him at the Co-op commissary, where they were stocked for the swarming hobbyists of the Enclave whom Farber had sneered at a few weeks before.

He got his bootleg equipment, and spent the next three

days trying to paint. He failed. He'd had a small amount of sketching in school, but nothing else helpful, and after working with a machine that could translate his thoughts into images, his fantasies into film, he didn't have the patience to spend thousands of hours trying to coordinate hand and brush and eye. He failed miserably. He failed abominably. His colors were either sick and rancid, or totally insipid; his proportions were all wrong. His people looked like frogs, his trees were wilted featherdusters, his buildings were daubs of unmolded clay, his mountains were great slimy masses of broken-egg browns and yellows. Panting with rage, he broke the easels, tore the canvases, and burned everything in the fire-pit.

That night he woke crying from unremembered dreams.

He slid further downhill.

The horror and isolation of his situation began to hit home with exaggerated strength. They had been jabbing at him since his first moment on the planet, but now that he had been cut off from his fellow humans, and now that his career was gone, they were hitting him squarely and solidly, and Liraun's companionship and love were no longer enough to shield him. She had been his prop, and now even she had been kicked out from under him.

He woke screaming every night for a week, not knowing why.

Then—and this was much worse, this was horrifying—he began to remember his dreams.

He dreamed often of the *Alàntene,* long slow-motion nightmares full of blaring, ear-grating, slowed-down sound and dead, inching, almost imperceptible zombie motion, full of horrible sluggish avatars of himself and Liraun, intolerable because the *Alàntene* was the center of time and all this would go on forever, as it already had.

He would dream of Treuchlingen, the farms, the smell of mown hay, the mountains, the dusty white town asleep in the sun, the red-tiled roofs, the tall church steeples, the people in the marketplace, the chalk cliffs, the Danube coming through those cliffs at Kelheim—and then the dream would change. Earthquake! The ground smoking and sinking as if struck by a great cloven hoof, the earth opening, tossing, grinding, the neat, tile-roofed towns being kicked to flinders, going up in flames— War! Only minutes from the border, the gleaming

silver needles flashing down, nothing left but ash and ghosts and fused puddles of quartz, fused ashen ghosts, quartzite bones— Nova! That burst of clear light stripping the air away, flashboiling the seas, baking the land to slag— The meteor pulverizing the globe; the toppling axis whipping the world away; the moon falling like a pregnant porcelain cow; the seas marching over the land in war; the Ice Age making the planet safe for silence; the fungus whispering over the Earth in a rusty bronze shroud— Any or all of them, night after night. Even in sleep, his reason said that none of those things was likely to be happening, but his gut said, Who knows what's happening to an Earth lost among the stars?, and it was the gut that ruled the dreams. It had an unreasoning solipsistic bias that made him feel the Earth couldn't continue to exist without him; now that he was gone from her, his protection would be withdrawn, and all the disasters he had been keeping from Earth by personal force of will would *happen,* all at once. They did, in his dreams. And he would twist awake to the ugly sound of his own screaming.

He would dream that he was awake, and he would get up and walk to the foot of the staircase on his way upstairs, and the mirror on the wall there would give him his reflection— distorted, twisted, slimy, skin running with pustules, scabs, horns, claws, demon eyes: a monster.

He dreamed that Liraun gave birth to a worm that howled.

He began to drink.

Farber had never been averse to an occasional drink, but now he started to drink in earnest—moderately heavy at first, then heavily, and then very heavily indeed. It helped; it definitely helped. Deaden the nerves enough, numb the brain sufficiently, and he didn't worry about bad dreams. He didn't worry about much of anything. He kept drinking. He began to buy pills from the Enclave black market, rationalizing it magnificently every step of the way, and from then on chased his liquors with downers, and vice versa. He experimented with native brews. With wines and whiskeys fermented from odd alien substances. He found a soapy native root that looked something like a yam, and which, when dissolved in wine, was even better than the pills. It was cheaper too.

He was blotto most of the time now.

He was beginning to get fat.

Thanks to an iron constitution, he was still amazingly healthy, considering what he was inflicting on his body every

day. But his hands, he noticed, were just starting to develop a fine tremor.

How long until he pushed himself beyond the chance of recovery?

A little more wine.

At least he was a courtly drunk, he told himself. Although he might get maudlin when he was sloshed, he was never abusive or discourteous to Liraun. He never beat her up or bullied her around. He didn't let himself get mean with her, pulled himself up sharp if he saw it building in himself. Least he could do. Least he owed her. She deserved better than having some drunken fool slap her around when she came home from working to support them. Don't let that happen! he told himself, feeling like he was shouting into a deep dry well. Liraun still seemed fairly happy, although she must be disappointed in him—she still treated him the same way she always had, comforting him when he'd wake up screaming, cooking for him, ignoring his delicate condition. Putting up with him, poor woman, he told himself. Poor woman.

A little more wine.

Somewhere in his head, the first sly, insidious thought of suicide.

A few days later, Liraun suddenly became withdrawn, nervous, and rather grim. Farber wondered if she hadn't finally gotten fed up with him, and cut back visibly on the booze for almost three days, in a half-sly, half-sincere effort to placate her. But this was wasted effort on Farber's part—it wasn't his drinking that was on her mind.

Early in the evening on Farber's third night of semi-abstention, she told him what really was on her mind. It was the beginning of *weinunid,* she explained, one of the times that came every four years when a wife was allowed by custom to conceive. If Farber wished to "start" children to be born in the current surge, he would have to impregnate her within the next four days. Otherwise he would have to wait four years to the beginning of the next surge, when she would be required by custom to conceive anyway—four years being the maximum time a couple could remain childless. Most couples waited the maximum four years before starting children. But by custom, the decision was Farber's—he could make her conceive now instead, if he wished.

All this was explained in a halting, reluctant voice, as if

the words were being yanked out of her on a string, against her will. The taboo against discussing personal matters—even with your husband, apparently, or was that because he was Terran?—was a powerful one. Most of the time it was satisfied by discussing such things only in the most circuitous and symbolic of speech; when bald words were necessary, as now, it was enough of a strain to make a normally loquacious woman into a tonguetied stutterer.

But there was something else wrong, this time. He studied her closely. She was still nervously grim. She was standing stiffly, feet braced. Her eyes were narrowed, a muscle in her jaw was tensed. A few beads of sweat stood out on her forehead. She was still trying, clumsily, to talk about the *weinunid.*

So that's it, he suddenly realized. *She wants a child! and she knows if I don't opt for one now, she'll have to wait another four years. And of course it would be against custom to try to influence my decision. That's the reason for this grim waiting silence. She wants a child.*

He stared at her, waiting for the idea to sink in.

When it did, his first reaction was, *Well, why not?* She had to have something for herself. God knows, she got little enough out of him these days. If she really wanted it, why not let her have it? He owed her that much, or more, putting up with a sad fool like himself all this time. Besides, maybe it would settle her down some. Settle things down all around. Even him? Well—if he got better they'd have a family, and if he got worse at least the baby would be some comfort to her.

"Would you like to have a child, Liraun?" he asked her in a careful voice.

Her face went blank.

"My husband," she said, after a considerable pause, "at the *Alàntene,* do you recall a group of Elders at the far end of the beach, *twizan* who spoke instead of dancing or singing?"

"Yes."

"Those *twizan* were enacting the story of the First Woman. And this, in different words, is that story." She struck a posture, and began in a subtly altered voice: "In the First Days, before the world was wholly made, and before Harmony had yet been established, there was no life on the land. All People who then lived dwelt in Elder Sea. Among them were the Ancestors, for at this time the Ancestors were still in the Womb of the Sea, for the world had not yet been

born from out of it, and time had not begun. Now the Ancestors went up and down in the Womb of the Sea, and they went to and fro in it, and in their pride they called themselves the Lords of All Things, for they were yet ignorant, and thought that the Womb was already the World-to-Be. And they named the Womb the World-That-Is, and themselves masters of it. This was an offense against Harmony Unborn. So the First High One, perceiving this, sent an Affliction upon the Ancestors from beyond space. So it struck them down, and the manner of the smiting was this: that the Womb of the Sea, the Womb-That-Was-Ocean, became blighted and shriveled, and the Ancestors were every one of them killed, save two. The bones of the dead Ancestors were sunk to the Place of Affliction on the bottom of Elder Sea, but the two who were spared were cast up naked on the land, because the Womb would hold them no more. They were the First Man and First Woman. They stood in barren desert, and nothing moved in all the World though time had begun, because the land could bring forth no life. Seeing this, the First Woman knew what she must do, and she said, 'I will give of myself, and infuse the World with the life of my blood.' And so then the First Man took the First Woman's blood, and with it he made the clear rivers that run over the land, and the pools that lie in the land. And he took the First Woman's dung, and with it he made the Fertile Earth that covers the land and is the house of life, and with the First Woman's hair he made all the plants and the trees that are in the World and grow in the Fertile Earth. Then the First Man broke the First Woman's body into parts, and she cried out in great pain, but he sculpted the parts of her body as clay, and from them he made all the beasts who roam abroad in the World, and all the People who dwell on the Fertile Earth. But the First Woman's cry of pain shattered and escaped, and the four shards of it became the four winds that wander forever about the World, looking for a surcease of pain that is not in it. And so it has always been the duty of the descendants of the First Woman to replenish the World with their bodies, and to bring forth life out of themselves with pain."

Liraun stopped talking.

That, apparently, was that.

Farber almost laughed.

He had triggered her "circuitous and symbolic" circuit again, and away she had gone on it. He had gotten little out

of her speech, other than the fact that she considered it her duty to God to bear children. He assumed that meant that the answer to his first question was "yes."

Liraun was watching him intently.

"My wife," he said with great seriousness, meeting her gaze, "I have decided that this is the time for you to conceive, and to bear your children."

Her eyes went opaque.

"I hear you, my husband," she said, mechanically. There was a considerable pause, long enough to make him wonder if she had fainted or fallen asleep on her feet with her opaque eyes open. Her expression was unreadable. At last, in a voice that started in a whistling whisper very far away, and slowly rose into audibility, a squeaky voice that quivered with strain as though it was brittle enough to snap in two, a drugged voice like that of someone being tortured, slowly being torn open to emit each word, she said, "My husband—*oh my husband, I'm afraid!*"

Farber took her in his arms and held her until he felt some of the tension go out of her body, and it slumped a little in his grip. Then he said: "There's no need for you to be afraid." And, very gently: "You're a woman; this would have come to you eventually no matter how long you waited. You shouldn't be afraid of it."

"I hear you," Liraun repeated, ritualistically. She pushed herself away from him. "Let me be by myself now, for a small while," she said wearily. She walked slowly away into another part of the house.

He didn't see her again the rest of the evening.

By bedtime, Liraun seemed to have regained some of her composure.

She padded in from the upper room, gave him a half-challenging, half-plaintive look as he stood washing at the basin, wordlessly pulled her frock over her head and off in one smooth motion, and then lay down naked on the bed in front of him, inviting him with her eyes, her mouth, her opened knees. She was trembling even before he touched her, and when he lowered himself down on her, skin touching skin all along the length of their bodies, a little muscular twitch went through her, as if they were magnets clicking together.

Their lovemaking that night was more violent than it had ever been before, a desperate pitched combat with nothing of

leisure or tenderness to it—rather it was a thing of harsh noises, slamming bodies, hard and hurtful hands. She seemed to be trying to rip him apart, and it took all of his considerable strength to prevent her. He was torn and bleeding in a dozen places in the morning, and his sides and buttocks were drummed raw by her knees and heels. She wore the marks of his fingers on her body for a week. Once she did something she'd never done before—she bit him seriously hard in her passion, drawing blood from his shoulder. The next moment she had rolled him completely over, and was riding above him like a succubus, like a mad thing, her head thrown back, the muscles corded all the way up the side of her body to her jaw.

When he came, he could feel his seed shoot up deep, deep inside her, going home.

Afterward, she assured him that she had conceived.

At the end of the month, Liraun went off to the Hall of Science for her tests. There was a great deal more involved than a simple pregnancy test, however, and Farber understood little of it. The testing was interwoven with an elaborate mesh of ritual and symbology that Liraun was reluctant to explain. She had fasted and practiced total abstinence for the past three days, sleeping alone on a hard pallet near the hearth. Indeed, although she continued to cook and clean for him, she refused to touch him, or even come near him, and she spoke almost not at all. Farber kept at her until he had convinced himself that her sullen iron absorption could not be broken, and then he submitted to the situation with as good a grace as he could muster. He spent the evenings trying to catch up on his correspondence, writing letter after letter that he would almost certainly never send. *Things are different here,* he would write, and then pause, sometimes for hours, staring at the paper, mesmerized by the homogeneity of the banal and the inexpressible.

Across the room, his wife would be scooping warm ashes from the hearth, adding powdered bone, charcoal dust, a few drops of an unknown viscous liquid from a vial, kneading the mixture into a dark oily paste. She now painted herself with this substance every night—transforming her face into a tragic ashen mask, rubbing it into her scalp until her hair became a dull dead gray, painting gaunt-black starvation shadows under her eyes. She looked then like a grimy, desolate

ghost, and, before she went to sleep, she would sing a ghostly little song to herself in a shivering, keening voice that seemed to avoid any key familiar to Farber's ear. On awakening, she would wipe her face clean and start again with different substances. This time her face would become a frightening—almost insectile—mask, done in streaks of dull green and blue and black, with little spots of sullen red. Fierce resignation, righteous rage, religious ecstasy, sexual frenzy—Farber could never decide which of these, if any, the face was intended to represent. She would also paint concentric circles around her nipples, cabalistic swirls on her flat belly, stylized arrows thrusting down her loins into her pubic hair. Her canine teeth would gleam against the dully glistening face paint, suddenly seeming much longer, suddenly—shockingly—becoming fangs. She would remain naked all day, unself-consciously, paying no attention whatsoever to Farber's periodic attacks of prurience.

She hadn't washed in days, and she was beginning to develop a rotting-sweet smell that was not entirely unpleasant.

Neither was it entirely unpleasant to awaken to intense cold, as Farber did on the morning of the test: a cold more sensed through the sleeping-furs as yet than actually experienced, giving him a shuddery, almost pleasurable intimation of the discomfort to which he would be subjected when he finally did get up. He drowsed for a while, relishing the warmth he was wrapped in. Then he stuck his head up above the furs. The cold stabbed glassy talons into his cheeks, and shocked him a little more awake.

Liraun was moving noiselessly about the room. She had opened the wide, low window in the east wall; that explained why it was so cold. Through that window, he could see a maze of low roofs stairstepping away and down, and the fall of heavy new snow that was settling onto them. There was no sky, only the snow—line after steady line of it, coming down with ponderous, unstoppable grace, filling all the air. Silent, furry, soft, like a slow fall of caterpillars. It blotted up sound, and softened Fire Woman's harsh glare into an even, directionless, undersea light. Occasionally the snow would gust in through the window, swirling and dancing across the polished silverwood floor, spiraling into the air again, vanishing. Some of the flakes struck Liraun, clung, and melted, leaving shiny wet spots on her skin. She ignored them. Naked, she moved to the stone washbasin, broke the scum of ice

on the water, and began to wash herself. Her movements were slow and deliberate, and she evinced no discomfort with the cold. Her face—the first time, Farber realized, that he'd seen it bare of paint in days—was serene and contemplative. The water was already beginning to freeze again, and there was a glaze of ice in her hair.

Farber dozed, wrapped in his cocoon of warmth, and opened his eyes in time to see Liraun leaving the house. She had put on her ferocious daytime face, although this time there were streaks of orange and patches of bright yellow in among the green and blue and black. He wondered sleepily what the brighter colors represented. Hope? A somber hope, then. A fierce, cruel hope, rooted in despair. Liraun's painted mask seemed too harsh and hard-edged a thing for such a furry, filtered morning. He called to her, drowsily, but she did not answer. She seemed a completely isolated creature now—mysterious, self-contained, unreachable, gliding through the external world without touching it or being touched by it. Like oil over water, Farber thought. Not mixing at all. He didn't call to her again. She was above him, in this moment—or beyond him, anyway. He wondered if there was anything he could do that would make her respond to him, if she was aware of his presence at all. He thought not. That made him very sad, although drowsiness blunted the pain into a poignant, drifting wistfulness. She wrapped herself in a gray cloak, and, without looking back at him, went out into the storm. The door closed solidly behind her. He was left alone in a room that was filled with muted white light as a mountain lake is filled with clear icy water, and he sank slowly down through the light, and through the whispering hiss and murmur of the snow, until he bumped against the bottom of the lake, and then he slept.

He woke to a silence that was composed of many small natural noises just too far away to be heard. Occasionally one of the noises—doors slamming away down the Hill, footsteps, a voice—would become momentarily distinct: a sound made up of the many small silences that enabled it to be heard. Sunlight glinted from wall and ceiling, dazzled his eyes. Farber got up and hopped across the cold floor to the window, clutching one of the sleeping-furs. The storm was over. The sky was its usual intense blue-black, the roofs and towers of Old City outlined starkly against it. There was a three-inch crest of powder snow on every flat surface, on tree branches

and window ledges and roofs. Hoarfrost glistened over everything, and sparkled in the air like tiny crystalline fireflies. It was incredibly cold. Farber closed the window, and, cursing and sputtering, hurried to struggle into his clothes. Goddam, it was cold! By the time he got a fire going in the hearth, he was shivering, and his fingers were numb. How did Liraun stand this? Not for the first time, he entertained the uneasy suspicion that Liraun was much hardier than he. The nutlike, leafy smell of the smoke filled the room, followed, more tentatively, by an expanding wedge of warmth. Farber began to thaw. He stood by the fire awhile, flexing his fingers, and then returned to the window. The glass was coated with frost. He hand-warmed a hole in the frost, and peered out. Nothing was moving in Old City. The snow in the streets was still smooth and unmarred. Windows were shuttered, or blinded by frost. The black rock walls of the ancient houses were sheathed in ice. The world was a stark composition in black and white, ice, black rock, white snow-capped roofs, black sky: an overdeveloped monochrome photograph, all jagged, unrelieved masses of light and shadow. There was no color, no chiaroscuro, no shadings of gray. The Cold People had taken over completely now. This was their world and their season, ruled by the House of Dûn: harsh, frozen, silent.

Shuddering a little, Farber turned away from the window.

He spent the morning doing nothing. That was not unusual—he did nothing most days. He had become quite adroit at it. But the almost supernatural hush and suspension of the morning somehow made him ashamed of his own lethargy. For the first time in weeks, be began to find his sloth distasteful. *What good are you to anybody like this?* he asked himself bitterly. *What kind of a life is this?* But the habit of lassitude was hard to break. He sat near the window and brooded, feeling like a man who cannot wake all the way up from an uneasy dream, feeling stale and dull and useless, and listened to the silence. Occasionally, one of the silverwood trees outside would snap in the cold, a sharp *crack* like a rifle shot, or there would be a whoosh and thump as a branch gave way somewhere and dumped a load of snow into the street. Once a swarm of shiny-scaled flying lizards perched under the eaves and exchanged trilling arpeggios that clashed and shimmered through the frozen air like showers of a cold liquid metal. But mostly there was silence, and it seemed deep enough to drown.

Going down in that hush for the third time, Farber was snagged by a persistent fishhook of sound. He had been hearing it without hearing it for a couple of minutes, but now it registered. Slowly, the sound drew him up out of stagnant pools of thought. The hammering of stone on stone. *Klak klak kadak. Klak!* Unsteadily, Farber got to his feet.

It was right outside.

Feeling strangely apprehensive, Farber went to the door.

Two Cian men were struggling to erect a stone eikon in front of the house. As Farber stepped outside, one of the Cian was driving it home with a big stone hammer. *Klak! Klak! Klak!* the hammer went. The noise rang frighteningly loud in the silent street, and sparks flew at each blow. Then they were finished. The two Cian stepped aside, wiped their foreheads, rubbed their hands, and looked at the eikon with satisfaction. It was a St. Andrew's Cross, about four feet high, carved from a milky, fine-grained stone. Some small furry animal had been quartered, raggedly, and the quarters had been lashed to the arms of the cross. The animal's head had been tied upright atop the upper right hand arm. It stared reproachfully out at the world with blind agate eyes. Blood had seeped into the pale stone, and stained the snow around the base of the cross.

Farber stared at the eikon in bewilderment.

The Cian men were watching him intently. Their faces were contorted into terrifying, fang-glinting snarls. Their hands were covered with blood.

Farber started toward them, repressing an urge to run away instead. This grotesque kind of rictus was, with the Cian, indicative of extreme good will and pleasure—although they were an undemonstrative enough race that it was an expression seldom seen in public. The Terran equivalent would be to leap and shout in unrestrained joy. *I have no idea what this is all about,* Farber thought, numbly. In spite of the cold, his brain had not cleared at all. He felt confused and stupid, and couldn't imagine how he was expected to act in this situation. His feet crunched through the snow, sinking up to the ankle with every step. The brilliant sunlight dazzled his eyes, and made his head ache. He was sickened by the glassy stare of the dead animal, and by the blood, which was already beginning to freeze into tarry, glistening streaks. He came to a stop, blinking, baffled, shivering. *What do I say now?* he wondered.

"Good wishes to you," one of the Cian said, saving Farber the strain of initiating conversation. "You are one with the People of Life, the Ones Who Rule the New Earth. May Their radiance fill you, and warm your dreams."

He fell silent. "Thank you," Farber said.

"You are a vessel for Their Light," the other Cian put in. "Through you, It refracts into the Thousand Warm Colors. You help to harmonize the radiance in the Place of Turning Silence, the Motionless Unmoved Center."

Farber searched for the correct response. "Your light illuminates my darkness," he said at last.

"Në, it is of no circumstance," the Cian replied. Then, less formally: "No obligation here. It is pleasure to inform your happiness."

"Sa!" the other injected, enthusiastically, "This is a great moment for you! My soul chimes in sympathy."

They snarled joyously at him.

"I don't understand," Farber did not say. He wanted to, though.

By this time, the ceremony had attracted the attention of several of Farber's neighbors from up and down the Row. They gathered around, five or six more Cian males, and added their own polite praise and congratulations to those of the two emissaries. There was much low warbling and snapping of fingers, which was applause. Someone produced a glass flask of the potent native liqueur, and it passed from hand to hand. If their social construct had included the slapping of backs, there would have been back-slapping as well.

Farber saw the light, belatedly, at about this point.

Bemused, he stood in the alien street and drank with his well-wishers, the ancient ice-sheathed black walls rising sheer on either side, a narrow swath of sky visible at the top, like a cold blue-black river that flowed over the world.

A wind came up and ruffled the fur on the dead animal's head, made the head appear to be nodding in a deliberate, grisly fashion. There was an inscription on the eikon that Farber could not translate. He memorized it for Ferri's semantic computer.

And, after a while, they went respectfully away, and left him alone.

Liraun came home about an hour later. She wore no paint, and her skin looked fresh and scrubbed. She was dressed in a long, bright-green frock, embroidered with designs in yellow

and orange, but bordered by a heavy somber black. She was obviously naked beneath it. Her long hair had been put up, and fastened with pins of silver and obsidian. The fanatical tension that had possessed her for the past few days was gone. She seemed calm and happy. She also seemed, as she paused in the doorway to stare at him, a totally aroused and totally erotic creature, almost feral, as though she were a female animal in estrus. He could feel the heat come up out of her, and smell the hot musky scent of her body. It struck him like a wave, drying his throat and tightening his thighs.

She stared at him for a long, intent moment, as if she had never seen him before, as if she was trying to memorize every line and detail of him.

Then, slowly, she smiled.

"My husband," she said quietly.

And she closed the door behind her.

Sexually, Liraun had always been somewhat passive, but that night she was aggressive, inexhaustible and demanding. She wore Farber out, she used him up. She drove him to the limits of his endurance, and then somehow urged him beyond them. She was relaxed and cheerful about it, but there was no arguing with her insistence. She seemed happy enough. Her play and pillow-talk were full of excitement and gaiety, and she was intensely proud of her pregnancy. But, beneath this, there was a sadness so deep and intense that it could only be called despair. With her there in the darkness, experiencing her slow rhythmical cries, the desperate spasms of her body, her legs crushing the breath from him, the muscles in her neck cording like taut wire cables, her head beginning to lash violently from side to side—as if she was in pain so great she must seek surcease by dashing out her brains—Farber felt curiously alone and disassociated, a spectator at someone else's bittersweet apotheosis. It was that inexplicable storm of joy and despair that fueled her, that drove her, that was, in this moment, her lover more than he.

Just before dawn, a party of Twilight People, Those Who Have Influence with Dreams, arrived for a Naming ceremony. The party was composed of a male Elder, a *twizan*—Farber couldn't decide if this was the same Singer who had married them; if not, then he was certainly struck from the same archetype—five young Cian women in varying stages of pregnancy, one so huge that her time must certainly be almost at hand, and a soúbrae, or Old Woman. The Old

Woman was old indeed, even more ancient, by the look of her, than the *twizan*. She gave Farber the impression that she kept herself alive only by a conscious effort of will—that if she turned her mind away from the task for even a moment she would crumble into dust and ashes. She was also, Farber realized, the only really old Cian woman he could remember seeing. She had a snow-white robe, eyes like ice, a face as hard as winter-frozen earth, and she was definitely the person in charge of the Naming. Under her taciturn direction, Liraun was specially dressed and painted, the east-facing window was opened to allow the first rays of Fire Woman's rising to strike into the room, and a roaring, oddly pungent-smelling fire was built in the firepit. The Twilight People and Liraun gathered close around the hearth, and the ceremony began. It seemed to go on forever. There were many ritual exchanges between Liraun and the pregnant women, especially with the woman closest to term, while the Old Woman chanted responses, and the Singer sang a haunting, minor-filled song so desolate-sounding that it might have made a banshee sad. Farber sat in the far corner during all this, wrapped in a fur. He was exhausted and bedraggled, and the noise and smoke of the Naming made him irritable. Everyone ignored him. So he sat glumly by himself, watching the chanting, gesticulating figures, feeling caught up in some mechanism that he could not understand, and which was sweeping him toward a conclusion he could neither predict, forestall, nor comprehend.

The Old Woman passed around a series of unidentifiable—to Farber—objects that were touched and handled reverently by the participants, the first rays of dawn flashed from a coronet of tiny silvered mirrors that had been placed on Liraun's head, and the ceremony was over. She was no longer Farber's chattel. From that moment on, legally and by ancient custom, she belonged to no one save herself and her Ancestors. For the first time in her life, she was her own person.

Now her name was Liraun Jé Morrigan.

Liraun was now a Mother of Shasine, and her elevation from chattel to the highest caste in the society drastically changed their lives. She had discussed the subject with Farber when they had first decided to have children, but, as usual, much of what she said was enigmatic and couched in obscure

allegory, and none of it had prepared Farber for the totality of the change.

By law, Liraun now became the head of their household for the duration of her pregnancy, representing it in its relations with the body of Cian society, and holding title to all its goods and property. This did not mean that Farber had been reduced to a chattel; his status had not been diminished—Liraun's had been tremendously enhanced. In theory, Liraun now had some authority over Farber, but, in practice, it was the custom to let the husband and wife work that problem out domestically, and most of them came to an equitable compromise. But while Farber was married to Liraun, and while Liraun was a Mother of Shasine, none of his actions were binding on the household. They carried no legal weight. He was not allowed to negotiate contracts that affected the entire household, nor could he dispose of or transfer any of their property, or rent a house without Liraun's consent—just as, before her pregnancy, Liraun herself had been forbidden to do any of these things. In fact, Farber was still better off than Liraun had been. Before her elevation, she had enjoyed almost no legal rights at all, being considered a minor and under Farber's absolute rule. Farber, at least, maintained his rights as an adult citizen, but was expected to defer to Liraun's judgment in communal matters, as she was now a superior creature, "One Who Has Been Translated to Harmony."

This was disconcerting.

Also, Liraun was no longer allowed to work to support herself. As a Mother of Shasine, she was part of the Council that, in conjunction with the Elder's Lodge, ruled Shasine. One of the first things she was required to do, after her Naming, was to quit her job. She was on call to the Council at any hour of the day or night, and could have no other duty that might interfere with that single overriding concern. Her husband, therefore, was required to support her, and was subject to severe penalties if he did not. And Farber's regular stipend from the Terran Co-operative was not enough to keep them both, even added to the small amount Ferri was able to pay him for "research assistance."

That was alarming.

Surprising even himself, Farber rose to the challenge. He put away the bottle, and he put away the pills. He pulled

himself together with an almost audible click. And he went out and got a job.

It was down at the River-Docks, a manual job unloading ice-skimmers.

The Cold People had settled in to stay—the Fertile Earth was locked in ice, and shrouded in snow and silence. At night, Winter Man blazed high in the sky, His full terrible length above the horizon now. The River Aome had finally frozen over. Every morning on his way to work—cold and still as death, a pink flush of dawn just beginning to dilute the jet-black night sky, the last of the tiny moons rolling down toward the far horizon like thumb-flicked marbles—Farber could see it gleam in a long, dull gunmetal line, a soldered seam that held the invisible world together. By the time the cablecar had brought him down from Old City, he could look through the growing blue light and see the first of the big black iceboats skimming up out of the west, up on four long legs, like water beetles from a Terran river grown mechanical and great. When the Aome froze it froze all the way to the bottom, and remained that way until the Thaw. River traffic thereafter went on the ice. That ice was as solid as stone, and mirror-smooth in most places, save where the wind had dusted the surface with snow. No better road to the West could be asked. The Aome skirted the foot of Aei New City for twenty miles, and every mile of that twenty bristled with docks, and every dock in every mile buzzed with commerce, deep winter or high summer.

By midmorning, with the sun as high as it ever got in that season, the ice would look green-gray, instead of the blue it had been in the dawnlight, and intricate hieroglyphic patterns would have been scored into its surface by the runnerblades of the iceboats. Sometimes, if Fire Woman was particularly intense that day, the top half-inch of ice would melt, and the fast-skimming iceboats would throw a wake of water and half-frozen slush high into the air on either side.

Once, Farber saw a skimmer hit a freak irregularity in the ice, a jagged, tilted block that protruded three feet above the surface. The impact jarred two of the runners into the air—the iceboat skidded along precariously on the remaining two for an endless moment, but the task of keeping it upright was too much for the boat's gyrostabilizers, and it went over. The boat rolled twice, very fast, snapping its runners, making a noise like a million tin cans tail-dragged by a multitude of

dogs, bounced into the air and came down hard, skidded, and rolled again. Then it exploded. The burning wreck melted a hole in the ice, and settled into the slush to a depth of six feet. When the fire guttered and the ice refroze, the boat's bow was left protruding from the surface at a forty-five-degree angle, and flags and flares marked the wreck for two days until Cian work crews could remove it.

That was an exceptional incident, but more commonplace accidents were avoided by inches—if they were avoided at all—every day. Most of them involved pedestrians. The people who worked on the river started their tasks well before dawn, but by noon there were many individual citizens of Aei out and about on the ice as well, many of them on their way to the great saltwater marshes on the far side of the Aome, for one reason or another. Hunters out after lizards and snappers and mud-devils. Potters hoping to collect certain rare clays and earths needed for special ceremonial glazes. Holy Men on the Shadow Path, seeking solitude to facilitate their efforts to find Syncopation with Harmony. Madmen, failed men, on the Lightless Path, seeking degradation and pain. Parties of young women, off to gather lizard eggs and fungus and winter mushrooms. Strollers and sightseers. All walking across the traffic lanes on the River, all oblivious to any danger from the hurtling iceboats, which occasionally came quite close to splattering them all over the ice.

Most endangered—and most oblivious—were the hordes of young children who appeared in the late afternoon to play on the frozen river. They would scatter out across the ice, tobogganing on their stomachs, skating, playing at curling with long stick-and-twig brooms and flat-bottomed ceramic disks—none of these pastimes imported from Terra, as Farber had first suspected, but independently derived, as will almost inevitably happen on a world where there is a juxtaposition of playful, humanoid biped children and ice for them to play on. Inevitable or not, the playing children were nearly invisible during the long hours of twilight, and were a terrible headache to the iceboat pilots. It was an odd quirk of racial psychology that the Cian, living in what was in many ways an intensely regulated society, made no attempt to keep private citizens off the ice, or to interfere with their right to amble across the busiest traffic lanes. Of course, this meant that the ice-ambling pedestrians were left to take their own chances, but if they didn't mind risking a collision with a ten-ton ice-

boat, then the pilots weren't going to worry too much about it either. They contented themselves with sounding their fog-whistles if children ventured too near the major lanes, and the children, unperturbed and unimpressed, shouted happily back. The low, mournful hooting of the iceboats and the faint, shrill cries of the children floated constantly at the edge of Farber's hearing as he worked.

It was hard, heavy, fast-paced work, loading and unloading the iceboats, hauling cargo to warehouses and staging areas. It was the kind of work that would have been performed by robot machinery on Terra, but nothing in Shasine was automated unless it was absolutely unavoidable. Farber had always been a powerful man, but his robustness was the product of spas and intramural athletics—he'd never had a job that required prolonged physical labor, day after day. To his shame he found the work amazingly hard. The first week was a blur of fatigue, a nightmare that he stumbled through like a leaden-limbed automaton. He was head-and-shoulders taller than the biggest of his Cian workmates, and could lift a heavier weight than they, but their endurance was incredible. Any of them could outlast him with ease, and keep working smoothly and efficiently while he slumped in exhaustion, blown, gulping at the needle-sharp arctic air. He was stronger than they were, but he didn't have their stamina, and that was what counted.

Instead of deriding him, Farber's workmates were friendly and encouraging, sympathetic without being condescending. They gave him advice on cold-weather working, and tips on how to load and unload heavy cargo.

Grimly, Farber kept at it.

Weeks went by, and Farber gradually settled into his job. He grew more used to the pace, and the work went easier. He burned off his excess fat, and became more lean than he'd ever been before—in fact, he was almost gaunt. But what meat he did keep was tough, firm-packed, and hard as iron. He had never been healthier.

He was also happier than he'd been since leaving Earth, although it took him a long time to realize it. At first, Farber had regarded his job as a grim, degrading necessity, but he had slowly become reconciled to it, and now drew a good deal of satisfaction from it. It was hard, honest work that kept him out in the sun and the clean air—more important, although he never verbalized this, it gave him something con-

crete to do, something he could accomplish with his own hands, a way to carve order from chaos. It gave him the feeling that he could manipulate his destiny, and that assurance—illusion or not—killed some of the panic of existing in a milieu he did not understand. For the first time, he stopped fighting Weinunnach quite so much. In fact, he started thinking of it as Weinunnach, instead of mentally insisting on "Lisle." A lot of the tension went out of him when he did, as though he had set down a load he hadn't been aware of carrying. He stopped seeing his workmates as remote alien figures, and began to form friendships with them. They were a relaxed, equable crew—although Shasine had a sharply defined caste system, you didn't get that feeling of fastidious class-consciousness from the individual Cian that you got from an Englishman or a Hindu. Manual labor was not a despised, menial thing here, as it was on Earth; for the most part, it imparted no more and no less prestige than any other profession. Thus, the equanimity of the crew, who were given no reason to feel inferior to anyone in their society. Farber found them easier to get along with than the Thousand Families, or the brooding Shadow Men aristocrats like Jacawen. He found himself looking forward with pleasure to the day's work.

He was content, he realized.

Liraun seemed happier too, although there was still an edge of sadness to her. Much of the inexplicable dissatisfaction and wildness was gone, or banked down to embers, at least. She had accepted—resigned herself to?—the role that she was to play. With that had come a new serenity. Their marriage had settled down. They were more relaxed with each other, and more tolerant. Liraun's duties with the Council kept her busy, but not so busy that she couldn't spend plenty of time with her husband. In the early months of her pregnancy, they would often borrow mounts and a pack of coursers—long, lean carnivores something like giant shrews, but without a shrew's viciousness—from Liraun's father, Genawen, and go hunting in the great salt marshes south of Aei. They rarely caught anything, but it was pleasure enough just to ride through the sprawling marshland, the air crisp and cold and the sky dazzling, listening to the plaintive mooing of their snaky mounts and the shrill *yip-yip-yip* of the running coursers, cantering with a hollow iron clatter across the rude stone bridges that connected the strips of higher

ground, surrounded by polished green ice, snow, and endless miles of gaunt, winter-stripped reeds, meeting only the vast flocks of silver-scaled lizards that would thunder into the sky at their approach to soar and circle and sob petulantly until the intruders were safely past. Sometimes they would go without the coursers, penetrating deep into the marshes to avoid hunters and mushroom-gatherers, and Liraun would go swimming—it was always well below freezing, but Liraun would casually pull off her clothes, knock a hole in the milky ice, thinner here because it was over sluggishly moving salt water, and churn through the shallow pools like an ice-breaker, disappearing into the reed-ceilinged tunnels that formed over the tidal channels, sloshing into view again on the far side, splashing and whooping and making a terrible uproar, dozens of tiny otterlike creatures scattering in panic before her, lizards and redfins screaming hysterically skyward, Farber holding the mounts and watching her, laughing, affectionate, bemused, his breath steaming in the cold air and condensing into frost on his lips. When she emerged from her swim, she would shake herself free of water like a dog, using a piece of rough cloth to scrape away the patches of ice that had formed on her skin.

Sometimes then they would make love, on a bed of crackly reeds strewn over the frozen ground. Occasionally, when they were on their way back to Aei, they would see a marshman, distant cousins of the Cian: a gnarled, dwarfish man with bone-white skin, wearing ragged furs and artfully worked iron, his hair lacquered into two enormous upthrust beehives, his face painted a garish blue and orange, a string of freshly killed snappers and redfins hanging head down from a belt slung over his shoulder. His eyes very bright and sharp, like black volcanic glass. Calm and solemn, with great dignity, the marshman would watch them ride by. Then he would raise his fist in a salute of—not adulation, exactly, but rather an unbowed but respectful acknowledgment of their presence. The marshmen believed that the Cian were ghosts. What they believed Farber to be, there is no telling. The ghost of a ghost, perhaps.

The weeks passed, and Shasine shouldered deeper into Winter. Snow piled up in the streets of Aei, and there were stretches during bad blizzards when no one ventured outside for a half a week—the city then seemed desolate and desert-

ed, only the yellow and orange gleam of the windows to hint at life. Farber got Ferri to buy an arctic skier's mask for him at the Co-op commissary. He wore it to work, and the Cian gaped at him in the streets. His co-workers at the Docks were delighted by it. They began, jovially, to refer to him as "No-Face." Farber didn't care. His nose would almost certainly have become frostbitten without the mask, and the snow goggles sewn into it helped him tolerate the glare Fire Woman kicked up against the icefields.

It had finally become cold enough to make Liraun admit to discomfort. They obtained a featureless, four-foot sphere that was placed in the corner of the downstairs room. It radiated heat and a smoky golden light, without any fuel source that Farber could discern, and was apparently inexhaustible. Here was a viable trade commodity for Keane! Certainly, this device was almost supernaturally efficient. Too efficient for Liraun—sometimes the room became too hot for her and she would retreat to one of the upstairs rooms that still held the evening chill. She spent much of her time there anyway. Her pregnancy had finally caught up with her. She was just entering her fifth month, and Cian women usually came to term in six. Her stomach had hardly swelled at all, but suddenly she had become ponderous and weak. She moved painfully now, carrying herself with slow caution, as if her belly was a membranous sack of water that she feared would rupture and spill. And in a way, it was just that. She still answered the summons of the Council, but now when she returned home there would be no expeditions to the marshes, no strenuous bareskin swims, no rambles around Aei. Instead she would sit in the upstairs room, sometimes for hours, and stare out through the open window at the hilly winter streets of Old City. She was sinking into her old melancholia again. This time it was deeper and more fully in possession of her than ever. She spoke little. She laughed not at all. Her face was drawn, and her complexion pale, as if she was continually in pain.

It seemed to Farber that pregnancy was not so stark and debilitating a thing with most healthy women, and that worried him. But those were healthy Terran women, after all. Who understood the quirks of Cian physiology, who knew what to expect? Certainly not Farber. None of Liraun's relatives seemed worried, and Farber decided that he had no choice but to accept their assessment of the situation. Liraun

herself was not worried, although she was deeply sad. Whenever he asked her, she assured him that everything was proceeding normally. These were about the only words he did get out of her—she became more uncommunicative by the day. But now it was Liraun who would wake up crying, and who would need to be held and comforted. She would not say why. She was ashamed of it, refused to talk of it, and would have liked to pretend that it did not happen at all. But it did. And when it did, she would cling desperately to Farber, as if by pressing hard enough she could weld their flesh together inseparably.

One afternoon on his way back from work, Farber dropped in on Anthony Ferri. The ethnologist seemed delighted to see him. In fact, Farber had never known him to be so animated, so crackling with energy and good humor. Ferri's eyes were alive and sparkling, and his long, horsy face was radiant. His arms were stained with blood to the elbows, and he was grinning like an unrepentant ax murderer the moment after his crime.

Farber stared at him. Ferri seemed unable to stand still. He shifted his weight continuously from one foot to another, unconsciously doing a shuffling little dance of joy. Dancing vigorously, Ferri explained that he had finally, after months of complex and delicate negotiations, managed to obtain the corpse of a male Cian for dissection.

"You have to see this!" Ferri exclaimed. "The things I've found! I've learned more today than I have all year." Enthusiastically, he grabbed Farber's arm and began hustling him toward the rear of the apartment. "You just have to see this!"

Reluctantly, Farber allowed himself to be dragged along.

The long corridor leading to the kitchen had been set up as a dissecting room, jammed with lights and machines, a jury-rigged tangle of extension wires snaking across the floor. It smelled strongly of blood and formaldehyde. There was a roll-away bed against the wall, doing duty as an operating table, and, on it, a carved, flayed thing that no longer bore much resemblance to human or humanoid. Ferri seized a scalpel and jabbed at the body. "See? There's a real thick extra layer of subcutaneous fat. Cold adaptation, of course. But there's more to it than just that, I think. There's real hair only on the head and the crotch, and the underarms. This other stuff,

this down, is really a kind of fine-textured fur, very close-meshed fibers—it's water-resilient, like duck feathers. Look at the musculature here. And the bone structure in the legs. The dorsal ridges aren't quite as pronounced as they are in a human. The ilia in the pelvis aren't quite as flared, and the hips are a tiny bit longer and narrower. The shoulders are narrower, the chest less rounded. See? The forearms are just a bit shorter. All minuscule things, but, taken together, they might be significant. And the feet, they're not as broad and clublike as ours, not as good a weight-carrying base. I'll bet there's a lot of foot trouble among the Cian! And look! Here, the most interesting thing of all—I found the remnants of an inner eyelid, a transparent, aqueous-filled lid. Atrophied, of course, but there."

Farber shrugged. "So what does this mean?"

"I don't know," Ferri said. "I suppose we may never know for sure. But I've been dreaming up half-baked theories all day. The way I read it is that the Cian evolved from aquatic mammals—or amphibious ones, anyway—a remarkably short time ago. Short in a geological sense, of course. The layer of fat, the waterproof down, the transparent eyelid, they all point to that. If they didn't start out as a land animal, then they haven't had as much time to adjust to an erect posture as *Homo sapiens sapiens* has had. The musculature, the bone structure, the hips. Most especially, the feet. Naturally, all this is speculation. I've got another specimen on ice, and tomorrow I'll go over it with the medical computer at the Co-op Hospital, see if I can't get some evidence to confirm some of this stuff."

"Interesting," Farber said, in a neutral voice. Actually, he was not interested at all. It was hot and close in the corridor, and the stink of blood and death was overpowering. He was hoping that Ferri would get off this jag so that they could go back into the living room.

Ferri glanced quizzically at Farber. "You're not very impressed by all this, are you?"

Farber shrugged. "It's interesting. But don't expect me to jump and shout, Tony. I don't have the bias of your specialty, to make it exciting for me, yes? And it doesn't seem to be anything of immediate relevance."

"No?" Ferri arched an eyebrow, and then waved his blood-stained scalpel at Farber. "You might be surprised!" Some of the aggressive bounce went out of him. For the first

time, he seemed to realize that he and his clothes were heavily splattered with blood. "Hell," he muttered, "let me get some of this muck off of me." He disappeared into the bathroom. A moment later, Farber heard the shower come on.

Farber went back out into the living room. He found the chair that was the farthest away from the corridor, and sat down. Even there, a faint smell of blood reached him. He waited.

A few minutes later, Ferri came out, dressed in slacks and a sweatshirt. He switched on the exhaust blower to carry away the blood odor, and then went to a portable bar and built them drinks. He gave one to Farber and sat down in an opposing chair.

"Christ!" Ferri sighed, settling in, letting the foam cup itself to his shape. "A long day." He sipped at his drink. Now, he looked tired. Evidently Farber's lack of enthusiasm had brought him down from his manic edge. "Sorry to've rattled all that gibble-gabble off at you, Joe, but God! This means a lot to me, and I guess I'm kind of wound up, you know? If you had any idea how hard it is to get any kind of cooperation out of the Cian, how damn suspicious they are, how much sweet-talking and doubledealing I had to do to spring these two lousy specimens—" He sighed again, and took a bigger drink. "You think this is all a bunch of doubledomed pedantry, don't you?"

Farber smiled noncommittally. He swirled the murky stuff in his glass. Strange to be drinking Scotch again. At last he said, politely, "It does seem a bit academic."

"Not at all," Ferri said, emphatically. "I'll bet on it. This might be the key to everything. Hell." He paused. "There's something very odd about the Cian culture. Goddamn it, there's something almost *artificial* about some of this. This business of the males nursing the young, for example. I hooked the specimen in there over with a diagnosticator, and the enzymic and hormonal changes in the basic male system needed to make it possible are incredibly complex. And the thing's complex in execution too—lactation in the males is triggered by the secretion of musk by the pregnant female, and by minute amounts of hormones that osmose through her skin and are transferred to the male by touch. Dammit, a system like that could *never* evolve naturally. I don't think so, anyway. Not in a sophisticated mammal. It's way over-

complicated. And it's unnecessary. Why can't the females nurse? They do in the low-order mammals I've been able to examine, so it isn't some universal quirk of this planet's ecosystem." He shook his head. "No, everything points to the idea that the Cian were faced with some sudden, drastic change—they adjusted themselves to meet it, and that adjustment warped the development of their whole culture."

"What change?" Farber asked.

"That's where today's findings come in," Ferri said. "Lisle's now in a major interglacial. According to my figures, the last big glaciation would have dropped the level of the oceans by quite a significant amount. Get it? This assumes that, before the glaciation, the Cian were amphibious hominids, living right on the shoreline, in the shallows. Probably they were almost as highly evolved as the modern Cian, intelligent, but not culture-transmitting in the same way that the Cian are now—I doubt if they'd have fire, or tool making, living in the water most of the time. Probably they had speech, and an oral tradition. I get the chilly feeling that some of the Cian myths are older than humans can imagine, that they've come down in an unbroken line from the days before the Cian left the sea. Spooky." He finished his drink. "Anyway, the ice age comes, and the sea level drops, drastically. The continental shelves fall away very rapidly here, and very steeply. Drop the sea level enough, and you wouldn't have any shallows, anywhere. So it was either adapt to life as a fully aquatic mammal again, or adapt fully to life on land. So they adapted to land life, some of them anyway, and they did it very quickly. The pressure on them must have been enormous, and the situation unbelievably harsh. I imagine that the majority of them died, but some of them made it. Think of it! I doubt if Terran life would have been capable of meeting the challenge in time, but the Cian did. They adjusted themselves."

"How'd they adjust?" Farber said harshly. "You make it sound like they tinkered around with their bodies and custom-modeled themselves to fit."

Ferri grinned. "That's just about what I do mean. Fire Woman spews out a lot more ultraviolet than Sol. This planet is drenched with hard radiation. That makes its biomass a lot more fluid than Earth's. *Lots* more mutations in every generation, and more of them viable." He paused, and looked at Farber significantly. "Hell, you should've gotten a hint of that

from your own experience. A lot of their legends seem to point to the fact that their females practice voluntary natural contraception. Reabsorption of the embryonic material. Your own experience with your wife seems to confirm that, and I have other instances. And, if they can do that, I don't doubt that they've got a lot more control over their genetic material in other ways as well. There are hints of that, too. So, they were forced to live on land, to adapt to it in a very short time. For some reason, the transition interfered with the ability of the females to nurse. But their genetic fluidity saved them. Necessity jury-rigged this system with the males nursing the young. And that distortion was reflected throughout all the rest of their cultural development, until by the time their society reached the point where they were able to fix it—and they could, don't kid yourself; their genetic technology is sophisticated enough now so that they can do just about anything they want—it'd become such an intrinsic, integral part of their culture that they couldn't rip that thread out without destroying the rest of the weave as well."

"I don't know." Farber toyed with his glass, set it down. "It all seems very complicated to me. *Ja?*"

"And so it is," Ferri said. "That's one theory. Here's another. The Cian deliberately engineered these alterations in their own biological systems, within historical times. This is a very stable culture, Joe. Almost static. From the evidence, I'd say that they've had a biological technology more advanced than ours for at least three thousand years. A long time, right? Sometime during those three millennia, after they had developed the capability to do so, they 'tinkered' with themselves, to use your phrase. Why? Jesus Christ, I don't know! But the minds of the Shadow Men aristocrats are so dark and unfathomable to us—who in hell knows why they do anything? They're *aliens.* Right? What do we really know about the Way, what its goals are, what its motives are, what its dictates are? Nothing."

Ferri got up and made himself another large drink. His movements were a little unsteady—he was rapidly getting sloshed. "So that's my second theory," he told Farber. "I don't like it as well as the other one, but I have to admit that Occam's Razor favors it. Don't forget, though, that the Razor often doesn't cut it, when it comes down to real-world situations." He chuckled at his own wit, finished his drink,

made another. Farber refused a refill. Clutching his drink carefully, Ferri returned to his seat.

The two men sat in silence for a moment. Ferri's face had acquired a puckered expression, as though he was tasting something that had spoiled. It was obvious that his manic enthusiasm was souring under the influence of weariness and whisky. He grinned lopsidedly at Farber. "Two theories, and neither of them really accounts for all the weird sociological quirks of this society. So fuck it. I can spin a dozen more, if you want. What else have I got to do in this vacuum but sit here and make up fairy stories for myself?" He took a ferocious swig of his drink. "If the Cian would only cooperate!" he said bitterly. "If I could just get a female specimen to work on, get her down on the table and open her up, I might be able to figure this out. But they won't let me dissect a female—it's such a sacrilege to them they hiss in horror if you even hint at it."

Farber watched him in silence. Scientific objectivity was all very well, but, goddamn it, the man knew Farber's situation, and there was such a thing as discretion. Farber's mind insisted on flashing him a vivid picture of Liraun laying flayed and gutted on the rollaway bed, split from stem to sternum to satisfy Ferri's curiosity. Farber's jaw muscles clenched, and a pulse began to throb at his temple.

"This doing you any good?" he said in a thick, harsh voice, tapping the telemeter-bracelet at his wrist.

"It's doing me too goddamn much good," Ferri grumbled. He crossed to the bar and came up with a narcotic atomizer, pressed it into his nose, and inhaled deeply several times. When he spoke again, his voice was high-pitched and dreamily remote, as though he had gone away somewhere and left his body behind on automatic pilot to deal with Farber. "It's driving me to distraction, it's doing me so much good," he said in his new passionless voice, waving his hands mechanically, looking like a robot programmed to act out emotional turmoil. He drifted back to his chair, walking with the leisurely slow-motion strides of an astronaut in low gravity, and proffered the atomizer to Farber. Farber refused, with a sudden twinge of distaste—he was just beginning to realize how much his life among the Cian had estranged him from his fellow Terrans. Ferri shrugged, gave him a dreamy scornful smile, and gave himself another long snort of the narcotic. When he came up from it, his eyes were opaque,

and his voice was even further away. "We've known all along that the Cian language depends heavily on shifts in tone and inflection to convey meaning, like Chinese. Now it appears that words and sentences spoken exactly the same way can take on alternate, and usually totally different, meanings, just by the social construct of the moment in which they are spoken. Or maybe by infinitesimal hand-and-body gestures too, although that's hard to prove. But Christ! I'm surprised we've ever understood *anything* these people have told us."

"How'd you know we have?" Farber said.

Ferri grimaced, and stuck the atomizer back into his nose.

After that, Farber didn't see Ferri again for a while. He and Liraun were increasingly forced to depend on their own company. With Liraun in her present mood, that made it a lonely time for Farber. He was leading a celibate life again, but this time he accepted it with real equanimity, as he tried to accept Liraun's sullenness, and the sudden apparent deterioration of her health. He was still content, he realized, in spite of everything. His old unrest, his Earthsickness, was gone. He didn't want to be anywhere else, he didn't want to do anything else—that knowledge seeped from the inside out, and left him in peace. When he looked to the future, he was full of confidence. He had his feet on the ground now, and he and Liraun had been working out fine. The pregnancy was upsetting everything at the moment, but after she'd had the kid things would settle down again, and they'd get back to normalcy. He was not a particularly patient man, but he could summon up enough patience to last until then. And then they'd be all right. Then they'd be fine. And the child—he found himself looking forward to that with a keener pleasure than he'd known he could feel.

Wait until the child is born, he told himself. *Wait until the child is born.*

Sometimes Jacawen *sur* Abut, Liraun's half-uncle, would come to visit them. Apparently this was motivated by polite custom more than by familial affection, as both Liraun and Jacawen were very formal with each other, most of their exchanges seeming to conform to a set ritual. But Jacawen didn't know what to do with Farber. There was no ritual there to tell him how to act—the situation was unique. Ingrained Cian courtesy kept him from ignoring Farber or

treating him as if he were invisible. The cold shoulder did not exist in Jacawen's psychocultural set—the man was there, he must be treated with, an interrelation must be formed. But what? Jacawen knew how to relate to outworlders: it was part of his job, and appropriate custom had evolved. But, like it or not, Farber could no longer be considered an outworlder—he was now tied by blood to Jacawen's own House and Tree, he was, by law, a relative. Jacawen, however, found it impossible to accept him fully in that role either. Try as he might, Jacawen could not wholeheartedly attune himself to familial ritual with this huge, obstreperous alien. And Farber's ignorance of the proper forms made things even more difficult. There was nothing left but to attempt to deal with Farber on an extemporaneous, one-to-one basis, unguided by custom or ritual, neither knowing what the other expected of him—a horrifying prospect for a Cian, especially one of Jacawen's aloof and aristocratic caste.

To give Jacawen his due, he made a conscientious attempt to do it. Jacawen was a Shadow Man. Like the Apache *Netdahe* or the *Yaqui-Yori* of Old Earth, his philosophy was one of unwavering hostility to all outlanders, to all intruders. Unlike the *Netdahe,* he was not obliged to kill them on sight. Social contact with outlanders was regarded, by the Shadow Men, as a distasteful but unavoidable condition of interstellar commerce, which in turn was acknowledged as a necessary evil. Cian *Angst* rarely worked itself out in violence, anyway—not socially directed group violence, at least, though there were many duels. Nevertheless, the hostility was there. Jacawen was trained to regard outlanders with polite scorn and bristling suspicion. He did. He would have had difficulty reacting to them in any other way. He did not like Farber. He did not approve of Farber—everything about the Earthman reeked of an offensive and contaminating unorthodoxy. He had been outraged by Farber's marriage to Liraun, and was forever estranged from them by it. It was a wound that could never heal. But, by the custom of his people, he was obliged to seek synchronization of spirit with the despised outlander. It was unthinkable that he do this by increasing his tolerance of Farber's unorthodoxy—ignorance of the Way was no excuse; its Harmony lay waiting to be discovered at the heart of all creatures, of all things, and if Farber had not found it, then it was a sin of omission on Farber's part. Therefore, if they were to synchronize, it was Farber who

must change. To this end, Jacawen spent long hours patiently explaining to Farber what, in his opinion, was wrong with the Earthmen's way of life.

"You go too fast," he said once, unconsciously echoing Ferri's words. "You have no patience. You do not understand what you see, and you will not wait for understanding to come, you just rush ahead, so *fast*." He blinked, shaking his head, groping for expression. "You are all so hungry. You are *aggressive*—" he used the Cian term, which translated as "The Mouth (Which) Is Always Hungry." "You are *ambitious*"—he used the English word here, as this concept could not be translated into his language at all—"and you go so fast that you cannot watch the ground under your feet, and so you smash what is around you. Like wild things, you are dangerous even when you are not overtly hostile. You are too much enmeshed in the external world, the world of flesh and duration, and you do not perceive the inside of the world or of yourselves. It is a disease with you, a contamination, this thing that lets you see only the one aspect." He paused, and his expression shifted from somber to grim. "We, the Shadow Men, have that disease too, although we suffer from it much less. That is why we can deal with you, why we can understand you at all. We are aberrant, abnormal, but we have our purpose—the burden of earthly government is left to us. We serve as buffers for the rest of our people. We are barriers against the contamination of corporeality that creatures such as yourself spread. This is our pride and our sorrow—honor to us that we guard our people so, shame to us that we are tainted enough to be able to do so."

And so on, throughout the night.

Farber did not understand. Jacawen did not understand Farber.

After a while, in spite of tradition, Jacawen stopped coming at all.

The last month of pregnancy began, and Liraun underwent another sea-change. Although still physically weak and shaky, she seemed to tap some inner source of serenity and strength. She was at peace with herself, once again the old Liraun. But now the Council began to take up more and more of her time, as if they were getting as much use out of her as possible while she was still a Mother of Shasine, and Farber was left to himself more than ever.

He began to spend time with Genawen *sur* Abut, Liraun's father, and Jacawen's older half-brother. Although one of the Thousand Families, Genawen was not a Shadow Man—you had to become one, you could not be born into the cult—and didn't seem to share Jacawen's dislike of aliens. He was a shrewd, jovial old man, and he ran a large household with benevolent firmness. His house was a rambling stone structure fronting the Square of the Ascension, at the far end of the Esplanade.

Genawen's wife was a Mother at the time, and that gave him and Farber some common ground for conversation, although Genawen seemed to want to spend most of his time complaining about how his wife was simply ruining his household staff during her period of authority over them. But what was disrupting Genawen's household the most at the moment, it seemed, was what looked to Farber like a circus parade, sans elephants, in the inner courtyard.

"What in the world is that?" Farber asked, as Genawen led him around the flagstone rim of the courtyard.

"It's the rehearsal for my wife's Procession," Genawen answered.

"But what's a Procession, anyway?"

Genawen stopped dead. He stared at Farber in amazement. "What's a Procession?" he murmured blankly, and then he said: "What's a Procession! Oh, ho ho ho! By the First Dead Ancestor, Mr. Farber, do you know that I'm not really sure how to tell you what it is. I've never had to explain it to anyone before. Oh, ho ho ho!" Genawen always laughed by saying "Ho ho ho!" like Santa Claus, with perfect enunciation and never an extra "ho!"—or a missing one. He even looked something like Santa Claus, minus the beard: bushy eyebrows, ruddy cheeks, fat jelly-bowl stomach. Since his wife was pregnant, he was in lactation, and his six pendulous breasts flopped up and down when he laughed. "Well, let's see, how do I explain," Genawen began, becoming more serious. "You know that my wife, Owlinia, is a Mother, and she's pretty close to term. She should be delivering any day now, as a matter of fact. Well, these people will escort her to the Birth House when she's ready—you do know about the Birth Houses, don't you?"

"Yes, Liraun mentioned them just the other day."

"Well," Genawen continued, "the Procession will escort

her to the Birth House, sort of like a—" he groped through his small stock of Terran referents.

"—an honor guard?" Farber suggested.

"Yes," Genawen said, "that fits well, although you must realize that there are solemn religious aspects to it as well. That's why those men are in costume, and why some are carrying Talismans, or idols, as you people would have it—although that doesn't quite get the concept across. Many represent People of Power, or symbolize natural forces."

"What does that one represent?" Farber said, nodding toward a Cian who was dressed head to toe in an odd gray costume, which was covered in turn with soft downy hair—he had big staring circles of red and black paint around his eyes, and gilded false canine teeth that were almost a foot long.

"That's one of the Fetuses," Genawen replied, "and it is ill luck to talk of what they represent, especially for men in our position, with Mothers almost ready to go on Procession. The proper forms must be observed in these things. That's why there are always at least two of the Twilight People with a Procession, a *twizan* and a *soúbrae.*"

As if responding to a cue, a *soúbrae* picked that instant to come out of one of the encircling buildings and enter the courtyard. This was the same emaciated, hatchet-faced Old Woman who had presided at Liraun's Naming, Farber realized. She glided like an iceberg through the sea of brilliant costumes, giving orders with a word, a nod, a curt gesture. They were instantly obeyed. The *soúbrae* stopped momentarily, and stared at Farber. Farber returned her gaze. It was obvious that she recognized him. She flared her nostrils, gave him a look of cold disapproval, and moved on. She seemed to leave a chill behind her even in the dusty afternoon courtyard.

"I don't think she likes me," Farber said.

Genawen shrugged.

"What does *soúbrae* mean anyway?" Farber asked.

"It is an archaic word," Genawen said. "It means 'Sterile One.' "

"She looks it, too," Farber said. "Sterile as a rock."

Genawen grinned. "Oh, ho ho ho! You had best be careful, Mr. Farber. Some of them have power. She might curdle the milk in your paps!"

"I'm not worried," with a lazy grin.

"Eh?" Genawen said. Then: "Oh, ho ho ho!" again as the joke hit him.

Farber was counting. "How many men in this Procession, ah, twenty?"

"Twenty-five in this one."

Farber whistled, then clicked his lips for Genawen's benefit, as the Cian did not whistle in surprise. "That must be expensive." He suddenly looked worried. "Am I supposed to pay for Liraun's Procession?"

"No, the government, by custom, will always finance at least a small Procession for any Mother of Shasine. Of course, if you want extra marchers, or expensive costumes, then you must pay for it, as I have here. Oh, ho ho ho! Though I won't be able to afford it for long, by the Second Dead Ancestor, if Owlinia keeps mismanaging the budget—"

But Farber wasn't listening. There was a thought in the back of his head that kept itching for attention, but he couldn't quite reach it to scratch.

He forgot it.

A week later, Farber met Genawen again in a little park at the foot of Kite Hill. Genawen and a young Cian woman were strolling six babies in a complicated, crowded wheelbarrow-wagon.

Farber greeted them, and Genawen insisted on picking up one of the babies and thrusting it enthusiastically under the Earthman's nose. The baby began to cry, just as enthusiastically.

"Oh, ho ho ho!" Genawen said. "A fine litter, don't you think! Just listen to him squall!"

"They look very healthy," Farber said.

"Too healthy," Genawen replied. He had switched the baby to one of his fat, glistening breasts, now left exposed in the fashion of nursing fathers. "They hurt when they suck too hard."

Farber suppressed a smile. They stood in silence for a moment, looking down over the sprawl of New City below, while Genawen fed another insistent baby. The young woman remained in the background, looking on.

Finally Genawen noticed her. He beckoned her forward, and put a meaty hand on her shoulder. They both smiled at Farber, Genawen enthusiastically, the girl shyly. "Mr. Far-

ber," Genawen said enthusiastically, "I'd like you to meet my new wife."

The next time, Farber managed to catch the elusive thought in his head.

He instantly wished that he hadn't.

Farber left work early the next day and went in search of a Birth House. They were not easy to find—the Cian sense of propriety dictated that they must be unadorned, nondescript buildings, and there was no Cian equivalent of a telephone directory. But one of Farber's workmates had taken his wife to the Birth House a few days before, and although he had stonily refused to answer any of the Earthman's excruciatingly impolite questions about the process, Farber had overheard him describing the route of the Procession to his friends. Farber had a vague idea, then, as to the location of one of the Birth Houses anyway.

He set off on foot through Aei New City, following River Way along the bustling Aome waterfront. There were no Birth Houses in Old City, he had picked up that much information in the past few days—apparently it was forbidden. He doubted that there would be any in this district either; as he understood it, Birth Houses were located in quiet, out-of-the-way pockets of the city, not because they were considered shameful, but because they were so sacred that they must not be unduly contaminated by the mundane flow of urban life. So he walked rapidly, almost at a dogtrot, until the city began to dwindle and fall away on either hand, and he turned onto the North Road. Here he must walk slowly and keep alert. The Birth House could be anywhere.

The North Road paralleled the shore of Elder Sea, about a quarter-mile inland from the unbroken wall of the Dunes. Farber followed it up the coast for miles, while the scattered clumps of buildings that served Aei for suburbs became less and less frequent. They had all been places with some obvious utility—truck farm, heavy machine shop, pottery works—and none of them could be the Birth House. Doggedly, he kept walking. The towering monolith that was Old City had been looming ahead and to the left; now it pulled abreast, and then slowly fell behind him, its mazy roofs and towers glinting against the muted afternoon sky. As it fell behind, the world opened up, as the city had opened to suburb

when he turned onto the North Road. He had the feeling that the Eye of God had just done a long slow dolly-back, like some preternatural television camera, reducing him to a tiny black spot toiling across an immense field of white. The wind now tasted of distances, of all the places he had never been, the unimaginable expanses of an alien world, open to the horizon. It was both daunting and madly exhilarating. He realized that he had never been out of sight of Old City on this world, that his experience of Weinunnach was bounded by a twenty-mile circle. Now, as the obsidian cliff and its burden of stark towers began to sink under the horizon behind him, like a skeleton-masted ghost ship going down, Farber felt a sudden overwhelming urge to just keep walking, heedless of his original goal. To keep going on and on across the snowy plain until Aei disappeared, until everything he knew was gone—to forget about Liraun, about their child, about Ferri, about Earth, to put away and forget all of his old life, to go on until he came to a new place, a new city, to start again. That went through him like a sexual thing, like an electric current, like a hot drugged wind. It shook him and staggered him. For a moment it straddled and rode him like a succubus, then he tore it free. The wind whipped it away, and it was gone. He blinked. He shook his head.

He kept walking.

Still no Birth House.

The countryside around him was buried under at least ten inches of snow, although the North Road itself had somehow been kept spotlessly clear. Nothing grew here now, except for the snowtrees that were scattered in groves over the low hills to the west. These were tall, lustrous, translucent plants, something like giant asparagus, something like wax beans, with spiky ebony-leafed heads. They were heliotropic, and they hunted the sun as it slid across the horizon from east to west. They flourished in this season, in the deepest winter, and the air was full of the drifting white clouds of their pollen. For a while then, walking the road, Farber underwent a strangely pleasant attack of *déjà vu* that persisted until he had puzzled out the reason for it. The bright sunlight, the hazy blue sky, the drifting pollen, all combined to reproduce for him—if you ignored the snow—the effect of a balmy spring day on Earth, shirtsleeve weather, birds singing invisibly behind the bright sky, sweet-smelling clouds of cherry blossoms on the wind, probably a crowd of raucous children

playing soccer somewhere ahead. The illusion was so real for him that he nearly took off his coat, absentmindedly. But the "birds" were lizards or small winged marsupials, the pollen had a pungent, rusty smell, and whatever lay ahead of him would certainly not be a game of soccer. That hit him in an eyeblink, dissolving the illusion. Again and again he fell into the trap of preconceptions, of old ways of thinking and perceiving that could no longer apply, and repeatedly Weinunnach betrayed him, brought him up short, snatched the ground away, kicked his teeth in. How long would it take him to realize, emotionally, that this was not Earth?

Suddenly, he was shivering. There was a bitter, bone-deep chill in the air that the direct sunlight could only momentarily disguise. A sudden turn in the road brought him to a roadside shrine, deserted, open to the road and sunk a bit into the ground, the crescent wall that cupped it made of patchwork sections of marble and porcelain and ceramic. The shrine was crowded with stone deities, squat, staring gods about four feet high, with grotesque faces and knobby hands, vaguely Aztecan in style and execution. He recognized some of them. The Warm People, carved jade inlaid with silver and bone, had been turned so that their faces were to the wall. For the remainder of the winter, they would look away from a world whose destiny they no longer controlled and whose suffering they could in no way abate. The Cold People, weathered rock and polished obsidian, had been moved to the front of the shrine, and glowered out over the road. Their faces were dour, unhappy and fierce. Their blank, black obsidian eyes seemed to follow him as he passed.

A quarter-mile beyond the shrine, Farber gave it up. He stopped, defeated, on a small rise and tried to catch his breath. Behind, Old City poked up like a stump, up over the edge of the world; away to the west, he could see the winterstripped trees of an orchard, tiny as twigs with distance; ahead, to the north and east, were the snow-shrouded Dunes—like a mountain range in miniature—and Elder Sea. The water was cold and metallic and sluggish, and the beaches were locked in ice. The only sounds were the wind, and the groan of the pack ice breaking and reforming under the slow shrugging of the waves. The light was beginning to die, and it was growing colder. The desolation of the scene was unbelievable—it was more than could be borne. There was nothing left to do but pack it in, and go back to Aei. He

had failed in the search anyway; he'd come almost four miles from the junction of the North Road, and the Birth House couldn't be this far out. Reluctantly, Farber turned around to go back. He raised his foot for the first step. Then he hesitated, not quite letting his weight down on it.

The wind brought him a ringing crystalline music.

For a moment, he thought it was in his mind, a waking return of his old dream of the *Alàntene*, but it grew steadily in volume and distinctness, shimmering staccato arpeggios that nailed themselves to the air with the vivid authority of silver spikes through jet-black wood. Under that was a slow walking thunder of drums.

Farber watched the road to the south, back toward Aei, and in a little while he saw the dusty sunlight flash from bronze masks and iron hauberks, shimmer across rich fabric, pick out the tall nodding silhouettes of plumes, wink back brilliantly at him from onyx and amber and amethyst. At this distance, the figures of the marchers were small and close together—they looked like some fantastical centipede, cloth-bodied and varicolored, dozens of tiny legs scissoring rhythmically, scores of booted feet slapping stone in step. Flashing, rippling, stamping, swaying, casting a clangorous music up before it, the centipede wound out of the hills toward him.

He sat down on a rock to wait for it.

Ten minutes later, the Procession reached him. He sat and watched it pass, expressionless and unmoving as any of the statues in the shrine, although the cold stone had numbed his buttocks and the chill was spreading down his legs. This was the Procession of a rich household, probably one of the Thousand Families—it was made up of over twenty marchers. First came the Impersonators, carrying the Talismans on tall poles or wearing them over their shoulders as false heads, then the cluster of Twilight People around the Mother; following them were the musicians, with their drums and *tikans* and nose-flutes. Everyone seemed fresh and unfatigued. The marching was crisp and well coordinated, the musicians played steadily, the Talismans were held high and erect on their poles, apparently without effort, although some of them must have weighed thirty or forty pounds. In spite of his obvious age, the *twizan* was doing a complicated step-and-sway as he marched, darting from one side of the road to the other, whirling and leaping, scattering handfuls of fine brown powder into the air—it smelled something like nut-

meg, something like onions, and it made Farber want to sneeze. The *twizan* was not even breathing hard, although he must have been eighty years old. Farber had not taken the incredible Cian stamina into consideration. A forced march of five or six miles through subzero temperatures would certainly have killed or miscarried a Terran woman in the last month of pregnancy, but, somehow, the Cian Mother was still on her feet, walking between the *soúbrae*—this Old Woman was fat, strapping, and nearly bald, but equally cold, equally ancient—and the silent, costumed Fetuses. The Mother's face was drawn and blank, and as gray as putty. Her skin was shiny-slick with sweat, in spite of the cold. Occasionally, she would stumble, and the *soúbrae* would put out a hand to steady her. But she kept going.

They all ignored Farber completely, and he made no attempt to attract their attention. He sat stolidly on the rock, saying nothing, and in a little while the Procession had passed down the hill and out of sight, into a snowtree grove.

He gave them five minutes, and then got up and followed them.

The Birth House was another three-quarters of a mile down the Road. It was a low, long, flat-roofed structure, made of rough gray rock, fronting on the road and recessed into a low hill that rose up behind it to the west; probably the hill was excavated inside. There were no windows, and only one door that Farber could see. It was a most unremarkable building, and he might easily have taken it for a warehouse, except that the Procession had drawn up in a semicircle before it. As he arrived, they were going through the Ritual of Imminence, celebrating the Translation-to-come. Farber watched from a position about thirty yards away, standing hunch-shouldered against the cold. Again he was in plain sight, and again he was ignored as if he did not exist—Farber had no business here, and if he chose to snoop, then that was a manifestation of *his* poor taste, his boorishness; no one else would take a chance on contamination by deigning to notice him. The ritual was short: after heing anointed by the *twizan*, the *soúbrae* escorted the Mother up to the Birth House, up to the tall iron door of the featureless stone wall. The door opened. There was a glimpse of someone inside, white-costumed, vague. The Mother entered the Birth House. The door closed behind her.

The *soúbrae* turned away from the Birth House, and the

Procession was over. The marchers ceased to be a precision unit, and became again an informal aggregation of individuals. They straggled back toward Aei in no particular order, talking, laughing at a joke, the musicians with their instruments slung over their backs, the Impersonators resting their long poles across their shoulders. Most of them glanced surreptitiously at Farber as they passed. Only the *soúbrae* and the *twizan* did not look, and they radiated a chill disapproval almost tangible enough to cause frostbite. Within minutes, they had disappeared up the Road, and Farber was alone again.

He waited.

The wind moaned in from the sea, and the sun slid west across the horizon.

Nothing else moved—everything was cold silence and suspension.

He waited, freezing, hugging himself against the cold, finally doing calisthenics to keep warm, jumping jacks, squat thrusts, running in place, wondering what the Cian who were probably watching made of these unorthodox obeisances, feeling conspicuous and absurd but keeping grimly at it anyway, his feet slapping circulation back into themselves, his breath coming in violent little explosions of vapor, like an old steam engine building up working head, and still, doggedly, he waited. He haunted the Birth House for another hour and a half, while the long afternoon guttered to night around him. During that time, two more Processions arrived from Aei. These were less elaborate affairs, from poorer households—neither of them were made up of more than twelve members, and their panoplies were not quite so sumptuous. All the marchers ignored him, as the inhabitants of the Birth House had ignored him during the long intervals between Processions. While Farber watched, the last Procession delivered their Mother to the Birth House, lit smoky, punk-smelling torches—for it was full dark now—and headed back to Aei, their torches growing smaller, becoming tiny bobbing matchflames, winking out one by one. Again Farber was alone, staring at blank secret rock.

Three women had entered the Birth House.

Nobody had come out.

Shivering, Farber slid forward abruptly, off the Road, crunching through knee-deep snow. He didn't know where he was going, or what he was going to do—like an arrow held

at full draw that is suddenly released, he went because he was impelled to go. An intuition had brought him here; suspicion had kept him here, and it was suspicion, having been screwed intolerably tight, that now snapped like a bowstring and whipped him away toward the target. That suspicion was wordless, unfounded, irrational; he had not even really entertained it yet, in his conscious mind. But on some subcortical level it had been accepted and believed—now he was looking for proof. He began to circle the Birth House, thrashing through stiff winter-stripped brush. Twigs snapped under his feet like bones, and branches raked at his eyes. The snow was now thigh-deep. Now waist-deep. He floundered through it like a moose, breaking a path for himself. Off to the side rose the gray featureless walls of the Birth House. He grinned at them nervously as he fought the snow. The place didn't even have any windows.

Around the far side of the hill, he found another door. It was a plain thing of ironbound wood, almost a hatchway, set flush in the side of the snow-covered hillside. There was a tramped-down area in front of the door, and sitting in it were two or three oblong boxes, about four-by-four. *Garbage,* was Farber's first thought, so homely and commonplace was the scene. But the boxes were built of hardwood, unvarnished but planed smooth, and they looked sturdy and well made. Nobody went to that much trouble for garbage. He had started forward to investigate when there was a loud metallic click from the door, followed by a rusty ratcheting sound. Farber froze, half-crouched, watching warily.

The door swung open. Yellow light spilled out across the packed snow. Two white-coated Cian technicians emerged from the tunnel, carrying one of the oblong boxes between them. They set it down near the other boxes, talked together in low voices for a moment, their breath steaming silver and blue in the bright light from the tunnel, their spindly backlit shadows stretching out into the barren winter country. Then they went back inside. The door closed. The light went out.

Farber tobogganed down the slope on his butt, kept sliding when it leveled out—on his back, feet helplessly in the air—as he had built up too much momentum to stop, and ended up inside a snowdrift. He got to his feet, slapped snow from his clothes, and came cautiously up to see what he could see. There was, he noticed, a faint trail leading back from the cleared area before the door, and winding away to the north

and west, into the remote, winter-locked hills. It was hardly more than a path trampled in the snow, but Farber was willing to bet it was used to pack the boxes out, by courser probably, or by some other big draft animal. He broke from the drifts onto the packed snow, and stopped to listen for an alarm. Nothing. Nervously, he padded up to the boxes, and knelt by one of them. He ran his hands over it, exploring, picking up splinters from the wood. He tugged experimentally at the lid. It was nailed down, apparently, but not too tight. Abruptly, he decided to risk it. He dug his fingers in under the lid and found purchase for them. He took a deep breath, held it, and seemed to swell like a puffing toad. His big hands tensed, his wrists arched, his shoulders bent—there was the crisp sound of splintering wood, and the lid flew open. He swayed above the box, panting for breath. The two brightest moons had risen, hurtling up the sky like meteors—they cast a dim lactescent light over the evening snowscape, but it was still hard to see, and the shifting double shadows they caused compounded the problem. Farber squinted, then, gingerly, he reached into the box and rummaged around. His hands encountered something smooth and hard—it rolled under his touch, he groped for it, got it again, and lifted it quickly out of the box and up into the light.

It was a skull.

Farber grunted, as if he had been hit in the stomach, and dropped it. The skull hit the packed snow with a chitinous *thunk,* spun, and rolled leisurely away into the shadows. The world pulsed and time stopped—Farber hanging in suspension, his fingers outstretched as they had been when he dropped the skull, while a decade went by, a century, a millennium—then *pulse,* and time started again, the world tilting and whirling around his head as he wrenched his whole body back and away so that he sat down heavily on his heels, shaking his hand convulsively as if he had touched something very hot, screwing his eyes shut and instantly opening them again. The spasm passed, and the world stopped spinning. He put his hand to his throat, put it down again. "No," he said aloud, in a flat, almost matter-of-fact voice. He discovered that he was grinning, involuntarily, mirthlessly, grinning with horror. At the same time, a distant part of himself was saying, *You knew what it would be,* dispassionate, unafraid, and not at all surprised. He blinked. Then, grimly, he reached back into the box. Brittle dead things, rustling, rolling things

that scuttled under his fingertips. A cold, unpleasant texture. *Like porcelain,* he thought inanely. Bones. Ribs, vertebrae, finger bones, femurs, a pelvis. He lifted that into the light and examined it closely. A *female* pelvis.

He scrambled over to the next box—scurrying along on hands and feet without bothering to straighten up, like a crab—and wrenched it open, heedless of noise, hitting it a savage, splintering blow with the palm of his hand when a nail stuck, the lid rising into the air with dreamlike slowness, as if it were a butterfly, and then, suddenly fast, clattering away end over end. There was now a long splinter wedged painfully under his fingernail, but he ignored it. Recklessly, he reached into the box and scooped out a double armful of its contents. Yes—bones. And more bones. He froze again, face turned up to the sky, squatting grotesquely with his arms full of brittle white bones, like a ghoul caught gathering firewood. There was an odd, dangerous vacuum inside him, waiting to be filled by the panic and horror he knew were there, insulated from him as if by a thin layer of glass. Calmly and patiently, he crouched there in the dark, waiting for the glass to break.

Behind him, the door made a loud ratcheting sound.

The glass shattered. The vacuum filled. Before the light from the opening door could even spill out across the cleared area, Farber was off, dropping the bones and springing away in a single enormous bound, like a startled cat. Three strides took him to the edge of the packed snow, up the icy slope then—scrambling straight up it with hands, feet, knees, elbows, fingernails—and he was running and plunging away through the drifts, battering and bulling his way forward, floundering, falling, snowplowing, almost swimming through the snow as he breasted it. Up again. A hoarse shout behind him, and he ran faster, snapping his knees up as high as he could with each stride to get his feet clear of the snow. Then his feet bit air. He fell from the drifts to the surface of the road, hit jarringly, rolled, and came up running. Fortunately, when he came up he was pointed south, in the direction of Aei, because he was in no condition to navigate. His mind had whited out under an overload of panic and superstitious terror. But his body had orders to run as fast as possible, and, to it, the hard, dry pavement underfoot and the sudden release from the encumbering snowdrifts were a benediction. He ran.

Somewhere in the smothering night behind him, there was another shout. Already it was faint with distance, diminishing, left behind.

Farber kept running anyway.

Afterward, Farber was unable to remember much about the trip back to Aei. Cold, jarring motion, darkness, the stars doing a stately jig around his head, the rasping sound of his breathing loud and ugly to his own ears. He ran or dogtrotted most of the way, occasionally slowing down to a walk when he was blown, but running again as soon as he got his wind back. He didn't look behind him. Sometimes he would miss his footing in the dark and fall—rolling with it if he was lucky, rattling his teeth and cutting himself on pebbles and grit if he was not—but always he would scramble up again immediately and keep on. He ran because it was the practical thing to do, a defense against the amazing cold, but he also ran to stay ahead of the horror that ghosted along at his heels like a vast black shadow, stopping when he stopped, watching him without eyes, following after again when he ran, patient and indefatigable.

Somewhere just outside of Aei, it caught him, swallowed him in a single velvet gulp, and he was *thinking* again, the thoughts scribbling themselves unstoppably across the blank slate of his mind. My God, how could he tell Liraun! She wouldn't believe him. How *could* she believe him? How could he convince her, how could he make her see through the monstrous deception that had been perpetrated on the women of her race for—Christ, hundreds of years? Millennia? How many victims, across all that gulf of time? The horror and pity of it squeezed his heart. Think of them, the countless millions of women who had gone unsuspecting to be slaughtered, consenting happily to the rituals without realizing where it would lead them, believing the pious lies of the butchers. And then the Birth House, the door closing behind, the sudden terror and shock, the knives. Slaughter. The ignoble burial in the secret hills. And all because of some dark superstition, some god-haunted paranoia, some murderous holy flummery! The pastel lights of New City were winking languidly ahead, and, feverish and shivering, he ran madly toward them.

At the junction of the North Road and River Way, he took his last and hardest fall, skidding down the steep slope on his

stomach for about thirty yards, embedding gravel deeply in his hands and face. The impact stunned him for a moment, and he lay peacefully on his elbows in the dark, breathing raggedly. When he lifted his head, his eyes were drawn irresistibly across the low roofs of Aei New City to the towering obsidian cliff that rose up out of them—such an imperative upsweep that it eventually sucked all vision to itself, wherever else you tried to look—and then—head tilting back to take it in—up the column of glistening black rock to the cold stone place at its top. Old City of Aei. As he stared at it, he underwent a swell of such profound and complex emotion that his vision blurred, and Old City danced and shimmered on its cliff.

Then he was walking through its narrow, secret streets.

Black rock, high walls, shuttered doors. Along the Esplanade, up Kite Hill.

The Row. His own house, orange light leaking from the windows. As he made his way up to it, the door opened and Jacawen came out.

The two men stopped, and stared at each other. Then Jacawen closed the door behind him, and walked slowly forward. Until now, Farber had felt panic and terror and dismay, but he had not had time to get angry. That caught up with him now, in an enormous wave of detestation and rage, as he watched the small, somber figure ghost quietly toward him. It was all the fault of the ones like Jacawen, the Shadow Men, with their feculent darkness of spirit, and their hard, pitiless, flinty minds. They were the ones who wanted to take Liraun from him and destroy her. Jacawen stopped walking—they were almost nose to nose. Bristling, they locked eyes, each instinctively circling a step or two to the other's left. Jacawen's eyes were intense, sober, unflinching. Farber had to clench his fist hard to keep from striking him. But he could not hold that brilliant, agate-hard gaze for long; against his will, his own eyes flicked uneasily aside. As they did, Jacawen calmly said *"Hatatha,* greetings to you." Farber made a sullen reply. Jacawen nodded politely, and started walking again. Farber pushed himself against the wall to let him go by. The thought of touching him was suddenly amazingly repugnant, and Farber gave him plenty of room.

Then he was gone. Farber turned and slammed into the house.

Liraun looked up from a chair, saying, "Joseph—?" Then

she stopped. Farber's clothes were grimy and torn, he was scratched in a dozen places and there was dried blood on his face. He looked ghastly. Liraun stared at him in amazement.

"What was he doing here?" Farber demanded.

"My husband—"

"What was he doing here?"

"I don't understand," Liraun said. She got painfully to her feet. "You mean Jacawen?"

"Yes. I don't want him around here, and I want to know why he was sucking around when I was gone. You understand?"

"But—" She made a bewildered, tentative gesture, almost taking his arm but letting her hand drop before it could touch. "He was here," she said, more firmly, "to make the arrangements for my Procession. I will go to the Birth House tomorrow."

"Oh," Farber said.

"That is why I was alarmed when you didn't come home," she said, boring into his sudden silence. "You see? My time is very close now. A few days perhaps, *në?* They will not let me wait any longer. But Jacawen will take care of it all, we won't have to worry, and we have until the morning. Joseph—" stopping and looking at him in a frightened, plaintive way, not understanding him. "You are my husband. I wanted us to be together. Joseph—"

Farber groped behind him to find a chair, and collapsed into it. All the rage and bluster had gone out of him. He looked sick. "Liraun," he said, heavily.

"What is it?" she cried, immediately becoming even more alarmed.

"My God, Liraun," he said. His voice was flat and dull. He sat there like a stone, growing more sodden and inert by the second, while Liraun hovered apprehensively nearby. He raised a heavy dead hand to ward her off, then tangled it clumsily in his hair, saying, "Christ, how can I tell you!" Liraun instantly said, "What's wrong?" and Farber, not hearing her, overpowering her, at the same time said, "But I have to. We've got to face it."

After the tangled words, there was a moment of silence. He looked at her as if he was really recognizing her for the first time that evening. "Sit down," he said. She stared uncertainly at him, shrugged, and moved back to her chair. She sat down. Another stretch of silence then, with the feeling under

it that his spirit was swimming back from some deep, dank place. He firmed himself up, grimly, almost visibly. "Liraun," he said, "I want you to try to understand this, and try to believe me. Okay? I know it's not going to be easy for you. But I'm not going to let it happen to you. I'm going to protect you." Liruan, impatiently: "Joseph, what—" but he cut her off, waving her to silence, saying, *"Listen,* goddammit." A nervous silence, then, plunging in to get it over with: "Liraun, try to understand. If you let them take you to the Birth House, you'll never come back. They'll kill you."

"I know," Liraun said.

Blankness, then he ran the program again: "No, baby. Listen to me—you'll die. You'll be *dead."*

"Yes, I know."

"Oh," Farber said stupidly. His face went dead again.

"Joseph," with a hint of agitation, "do we have to talk about it *now?* Why—"

"Wait a minute," slowly, bewilderedly, floundering, "you mean you know?" He stared at her helplessly. Then something else rose up in his face. "My God! Oh my God! *You knew all the time."*

She said, "Joseph, please." And he said, "You didn't tell me!" simultaneously.

They stared at each other wildly, like things at bay.

"Joseph—"

"Why didn't you tell me!"

Totally bewildered now, and beginning to cry: "But I did. I *have—"*

And that stopped him cold. Maybe she had. When she talked philosophy, he seldom understood much of it. It was so easy to get lost in a maze of allegory and indirection, so much was oblique and subtly implied. Maybe she had. But— He had risen to his feet in his passion; now the strength drained out of him again, and he fumbled blindly for the chair. He couldn't find it—he stood in a daze, making pathetic groping motions with his hands. His mouth was working weakly, without sound.

For the first time that he could remember, Liraun was crying openly.

"But," he said, looking puzzledly at her, as if he were a schoolboy and she was a problem he had to solve, "if you knew—to go along with such a thing, to let them— Why, you must be crazy," trembling, all his defenses being sluiced

away by horror. "You must be crazy! Dear *God.* Jesus God! *Darf es Wirklich Sein!*"

Desperately: "No—it's not a 'letting.' Don't—Joseph!"

But he was not listening. He was staring at her in total fascination. He had looked at her every day and every night for months, but he had never seen her. Never. She was a stranger to him. He had never known her at all.

"Tonight we must recall and cherish what we've been together," the stranger said.

He backed away from her.

"Please, this is the last night we have," the stranger said.

He turned away from her.

"*Joseph!*" said the stranger.

Blind and deaf, he ran from her.

Stumbling, lurching, wet wind, cold rock, black earth below.

He went down to New City.

It was the night of one of the minor Modes, the Imminence of Spring, and in New City the streets were filled with light. It glinted from demon masks, flashed from jeweled costumes, and made odd amalgamations of flesh and cloth and shadow. Someone had built a bonfire in Potter's Square, and the flames ate holes in the sky. The noise was overwhelming. Music stitched through sudden silences. The ceramic streets and squares and alleys were crowded with prancing, drunken demigods. They clutched at Farber, trying to get him to stay and celebrate, and he pulled roughly away. Using knees and elbows, he forced his way through the crowd like a trickle of ink working through a rich and vibrant tapestry. The air smelled of ginger, resin, musk. A demon with a horned, wooden face offered him a half-empty bottle of wine. He slapped it aside, spraying wine. The demon face was swallowed by the crowd.

Walpurgisnacht, he thought.

By the time he found a commonhouse, fireworks were making luminous pastel novas behind the steep slate roofs. Inside, it was dusty, dark, and almost empty. What patrons there were nursed their own thoughts and ignored him. He bought a flask of strong native liquor from the concessionaire, and took it to a remote corner of the common room.

For the first time in months, he drank himself into oblivion.

When he woke up in the morning, he felt like a dead man. No part of his body seemed to be working properly. The Cian, who had let him wallow alone in his corner all night, stared at him with opprobrium. He stared back at them without shame or interest. The concessionaire, his face frozen with distaste, suggested politely that—since this establishment was far too poor to serve him appropriately—Farber might care to grace another commonhouse with the honor of his patronage.

Out into the bright morning, sweating and stinking.

"I can't help you," Ferri said. "Keane will kill me if I do."

"I'll kill you if you don't," Farber said.

Ferri glanced sidelong at Farber, and felt the blood begin to drain out of his face. There was something in Farber's voice that he had never heard before in anyone's, a hard, weary, backed-to-the-wall desperation. It was there in his face as well: cold and expressionless as a mannikin, eyes like two daubs of lead. He sat slumped in his chair as if he was too heavy to move. And yet it was that very heaviness that was ominous—instinct told him that anything with that much inertia would possess a terrifying amount of kinetic energy when it finally did start to move, the mountain coming down with the landslide. Ferri suddenly accepted that Farber might well be capable of killing him, not so much in passion as out of a sodden bitter stubbornness: because Ferri was blocking the only road Farber knew how to follow, and the man simply did not have the energy to trailblaze a new one.

Nervously, Ferri licked his lips.

"Look, Joe," Ferri said, in as reasonable a voice as possible, "this thing you've stumbled on, the ritual murder of the Mothers—that's the missing factor in the social equation here, and it explains a lot. But don't you realize how all-pervasive a thing it is? Using hindsight, it's easy to see how that one thing is reiterated throughout their whole society, art, religion, the home, everything. That inscription on the eikon, remember? The one you couldn't read? It's: "From Sacrifice—Life," as near as I can get it. There are hundreds of things like that, in front of our faces all the time, that prove—in retrospect—that the average Cian not only accepts

this killing of the Mothers, he believes in his bones that it's sacred. It's not just the Shadow Men; however much of an aversion you've taken to them, you can't say that—although they may have been responsible for this mass indoctrination in the first place, millennia ago. But by now it's a thread that's woven right through their entire culture." He glanced at Farber's face, looked away quickly. "Dammit, don't you see how difficult it would be to buck a tradition that firmly entrenched? Remember, *the women accept it too.* It's sacred to them, too; in fact, it's a transcendental thing to them, a way of becoming a god, if only for a few months. And Liraun has all the prejudices and values of her society, you know."

"It will work," Farber said. His accent was coming back, as it only did under extreme stress, so that he actually said, "it vill vork," like a comic-opera Prussian. "I had a lot of time to think about this last night." He closed his eyes tiredly. "She'll get over it. Once she has the child, and she realizes that she doesn't have to die, that a bolt of lightning will not come down and fry her because she didn't go to the Birth House— It'll be hard, sure, but she'll get over it. I'll re-educate her."

"It won't work," Ferri said flatly.

"Goddammit! It better!" Farber blazed. His eyes flew open—they were muddy and ill-tempered, like those of a snapping turtle. "I refuse to lose my wife to a bloodthirsty pagan superstition. D'you understand me, Mister? And you're going to help me, aren't you?"

Ferri wiped his face—it had gone white. Very carefully, he said: "This is going to raise a hell of a stink. You know that. I don't believe this kind of a situation has ever come up before—the Cian are temperamentally unsuited for it. God knows how they'll react to it, except I doubt if it'll be phlegmatically. If you kick that bee's nest over, Keane is going to find out about it, very soon."

"He already knows," Farber said. "You know what I did this morning?" he continued in an artificially light voice. "Before I came here? I called Keane up, and I asked him if I could put Liraun into the Co-op Hospital. I crawled on my belly to him. Do I have to tell you what he said? No, I thought not. Easy to guess, huh?" He shrugged with elaborate casualness. "So, Liraun will have to have her baby at home. And you're going to deliver it."

"I *can't*," Ferri said. He looked sick. "Joe, listen. I can't help you that openly. You know Keane has it in for you. If I delivered Liraun, he'd find out, and then he'd have it in for me too. He sends efficiency ratings on me back to Cornell, you know that. *Listen*, dammit. A really bad report from him could ruin my career, invalidate this expedition and all the work I've done. Lose me my tenure—"

"Are you going to help me? Or not?" Farber said. His voice had become very quiet, and his face had gone dead. He was not moving at all.

"Christ," Ferri said. He reached out for the drink that had been sitting, unsampled, on a sidetable, and then drew his hand back with a grimace, as if the touch of his fingers against the cold sweating glass had made him nauseous. He put his fingers to his lips, as though he wanted to suck on them. "Look, Joe," he said, coming alive, "this is what I'll do for you. Right? I've got a scanner here, on loan from the Co-op. I'll use it to give you a subcerebral course on childbirth, take about an hour. We've got a package on it in the First Aid program, 'Basic Midwifery,' or somesuch. Then you can go home and deliver Liraun yourself, and Keane won't be any the wiser. Right?" He winked at Farber, as though in relief at solving the problem, but there was a fine tremor to his hands.

Farber was silent for a long time. "What if there're complications?" he said at last.

"Unlikely," Ferri replied. "Ninety percent of the time you won't run into anything you can't handle after the subcerebral training. Christ, don't forget women did it all by themselves for thousands of years." At Farber's unsatisfied look, he said passionately, "Goddammit, how much do you want from me?" Admitting defeat: "Okay, listen. You can borrow the diagnosticator. It's Jejun work, beautiful thing, you can fold it up small enough to fit it in a backpack, though it's fairly heavy. And for God's sake, be careful with it—it's at least a century advanced over any medical equipment made on Terra, and it's as expensive as shit. I only got one because I'm doing critical field work. Now the thing telemeters, and it's got waldoes on it, surgical ones, micro stuff. I'll monitor everything, when the big moment comes, and if anything serious goes wrong, I'll take over. But *I* won't be there in the flesh, oh no! And if we're careful and you keep your mouth shut, friend, then Keane won't find out about it. Okay? I

swear to God," he added, belligerently, "that's the best I can do for you. Take it or leave it."

Another long silence, then Farber seemed to untense a little for the first time, slumping back against the cushions. He closed his eyes again.

"All right," he said. "I'll take it."

Ferri drained his glass in one fervent gulp.

Farber made one more stop on the way home, visiting a rat-faced steward who worked in the Co-op VIP Mess.

From him, Farber bought a gun.

It was an outdated, secondhand projectile weapon, one of thousands on the Co-op black market, and nowhere near as classy as the kilowatt lasers used by the honor guards at the Enclave.

But it worked.

Thinking gray, coagulated thoughts, Farber took the cablecar up to Old City. He watched the pastel sea of roofs spread out and fall away below as the car rose, and he told himself, *I will not let it happen.* He repeated it aloud, but the Cian riding with him were too polite to stare. Perhaps they edged infinitesimally away, perhaps not. Farber was oblivious of them in either case. "She isn't responsible," he announced to the air. "She doesn't know any better." Almost to the top now, and he felt his stomach and thighs tightening, as if he was unconsciously preparing himself for combat. The car ratcheted as it swung through the coupling and up to the station platform, bright reticulations shook across the windows, the walls vibrated. He rested his forehead against the cool, buzzing metal, and was instantly overwhelmed by the smell of her body, the taste of her secret flesh, the texture of her skin, her voice, her calm eyes, the soft pressure of her hands and mouth and tongue—more a cellular remembrance than an ordinary memory. She was imprinted on him; he was surprised it hadn't left visible marks on his skin. I will not let it happen, he thought. "I won't let them take her," he remarked conversationally to the alien standing next to him. The Cian smiled noncommittally, and edged away. The car stopped.

He was making his way up Kite Hill when he first heard the music.

He began to run, ponderously, weighted down by the heavy backpack, stiff from lack of sleep and hungover as hell, but

grimly covering the ground anyway. He skidded around a corner onto the Row, and there they were: a large Procession marking time in front of his house, drums and *tikans* skirling, Talismans held high. In front of the Procession proper stood the *twizan* and the *soúbrae.* Off to one side was Genawen, beaming at everyone, looking almost fatuously happy. Up and down the Row, people had poked their heads out of windows to watch, and the whole scene had the relaxed, festive formality of an old-fashioned Fourth of July parade.

Farber felt himself go very cold.

Something in the back of his throat tasted like molten iron.

He came forward at a stiff-legged walk, not trusting himself to run, afraid of what might happen if his anger should shake itself completely free. He speeded up on his last few steps, and hit the dense-packed crowd like a shark slamming into a bloodied carcass. He bulled through the Procession, shoving, hitting, scooping the little men up and tossing them aside, much rougher than he had been with the crowd the previous night, not really caring if anyone got hurt. A Talisman went over, its weight pulling its bearer down with it. Another—a huge swollen-headed grotesquerie—swooped and wobbled like a comic drunk. A nose-flute was cut off with a squawk as Farber straight-armed a musician from behind. A *tikan* clattered under Farber's feet, and he stomped on it with malicious pleasure. There was a shout, another, and a general discord of music that swept from the rear of the Procession to the front as Farber's passage made itself felt. At last, Farber broke into the open. The musicians stopped playing entirely.

The *twizan* stepped into Farber's path. "Citizen—" he began to say, placatingly, but Farber shoved him roughly aside. Farber made it to the front door of his house, and whirled.

Panting, he stared at the crowd.

The crowd stared back in stunned silence. The *twizan* on his knees, getting up from where he had fallen. The *soúbrae*—the one from Liraun's Naming—looking levelly at him with eyes of ice. Genawen, a big grin frozen idiotically on his face. The rest of the marchers in various stages of disarray. There was no sound.

Farber was trembling, falling apart, trying to keep some semblance of control. Fear and fury impelled him to speech,

but it was a while before he could get his voice working right.

"Out!" he shouted hoarsely.

Genawen's fat face collapsed in dismay. "Joseph—" he said, in a quavering, incredulous voice.

The *twizan* was on his feet and edging backward.

"*Get out!*" Farber screamed. "*Goddamn you all to hell!*" He had more to say, but what control he'd kept was slipping, and his voice, as he continued to shout, passed into strangled incoherency. He came forward in a stumbling rush, swinging his arms.

The Old Woman made as if to stand her ground, but the appalled *twizan* seized her arm at the last moment and hauled her back. Reluctantly, she allowed the *twizan* to hustle her away, looking back at Farber all the time, her face like stone, her eyes brilliant with hate. Genawen hesitated, but Farber shoved him and shouted nearly in his face, and he gave ground too, staggering and almost falling, looking hurt and totally bewildered. Farber followed them for only a few steps, and then stopped, breathing heavily. He shouted again, in derision.

Dazed and horrified, they let Farber run them off.

With the retreat of its three principals, the Procession backed off *in toto*. Within seconds, it had turned into a slow-motion rout, everyone flowing away down the Row, confused and demoralized, turning their heads to look back, their faces showing every possible degree of dismay. Farber waited until he was sure they were leaving, then went into the house.

Liraun was sitting near the hearth, looking pale and tired. Standing next to her, with his back toward Farber, was Jacawen's son, Mordlich. He was leaning over her, one hand on the arm of her chair, talking urgently to her in a low, persuasive voice. Her face was drawn. She kept shaking her head in an exhausted, baffled way, but Mordlich kept on at her, insistently.

Two iron thumbs behind Farber's eyeballs, pushing out.

Farber crossed the room in three enormous strides. He clamped a big horny hand around Mordlich's shoulder and began to drag him away.

Mordlich hissed, and spun around with terrifying speed, breaking Farber's grip. A knife grew out of his fist, like magic.

Farber stumbled backward in dismay, suddenly feeling

clumsy and slow and vulnerable, an ungainly clay-footed golem matched against a creature of tigerish grace and ferocity. He made an awkward warding gesture with his open hand. It was sluggish and ineffective, even to his own eyes, and he became suffused with a dull, incongruous embarrassment that made him even slower. He never thought of the pistol inside his pack. Instead, he took another step backward. It seemed as if he was swimming through syrup.

Dropping into a crouch, Mordlich shuffled forward, his arms low and extended, the point of the knife making slow, minuscule circles in the air. His face was intent and very serious. His eyes were opaque with rage. He began to edge sideways like a crab, coming a step nearer with every few steps to the side, turning Farber in a circle to get the sun in his eyes. Numbly, Farber let himself be turned—he felt ponderous and stupid, and he kept his useless hand out, palm open, as if he would simply push the knife aside, gently, as he would something proffered but not desired. He blinked as the sunlight hit his face. Instantly, Mordlich started to come in at him, fast and low, going for the belly.

"Mordlich!" Liraun cried.

She had found her voice, and she was on her feet. The blood had drained from her face. She was swaying.

Mordlich pulled back in the middle of his strike, as though he had been yanked by a rope. He glanced at Liraun, then stared intently at her. Then, reluctantly, grimacing fastidiously, he straightened up. He shook himself, like a cat, and was once again poised and remote. The knife disappeared—Farber could not tell where it had gone. Mordlich nodded politely to Liraun, turned, spat deliberately at Farber's feet, and then went quickly out of the house.

Farber and Liraun were left alone to stare at each other through an enormous silence.

"Sit down before you fall down," Farber said at last, with less authority than he would have liked. He was shaking, and bathed in cold sweat, and something of that had crept into his voice.

Liraun ignored him. She had braced herself against the back of her chair, and she was looking through him, not at him. Something complex was happening in her face, it was settling into new, hard lines, it was taking on determination and purpose even as he watched. At last, she focused her eyes on him. Her gaze was calm and adamant, and she came

very close to frightening him, in her moment. She let go of the chair and stood unassisted, staring levelly at him. "Listen to me, Joseph," she said quietly. "I'm going to go out to them."

"Like hell you are," Farber grated.

"You can't try to keep me here, Joseph. It's wrong."

"I don't want to talk about it," he said blindly. "Just sit down. Sit down and keep quiet, for God's sake." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I have to *think*. Oh Christ." Wearily: "*Will* you sit down?"

"You don't understand—"

"No, damn straight, I don't understand! Too fucking right!" He was amazed at the harshness of his own voice. The flare of temper took him two quick steps forward, then it guttered abruptly. He stopped, slump-shouldered. Liraun was watching him intently, looking hard as nails in spite of the soft swell to her stomach. In her last few days, pregnancy seemed to have invested her with an odd, ponderous invulnerability, a finality, an irresistible momentum. He wondered, uneasily, if he *could* stop her. "Oh hell," he said. "Look, we're going to work this out. But you're not going anywhere, understand?"

"That is a very wrong thing," she said flatly. "That will destroy all Harmony."

"But to let them throw you away like garbage, that's okay," he said sullenly. "To pack you in a box, like garbage, and scratch out a hole in the hills and kick dirt in over you, by you that's fine. That's all right."

"What is left of me after I am dead is no better than garbage," she said, with equanimity. "The flesh is boiled away; it has its uses, genetic material for the Tailors, fertilizer, other things. The bones are buried, with respect, yes, but with no need for ceremony—all the sacred parts are already gone, can't you see?"

Farber turned away from her. His face had gone slack. His hands were shaking. "You're making me sick," he muttered. "Christ. I can't— You *are* crazy. Why? How can you—"

"Joseph!" she cried, pain openly in her voice for the first time. "I can't talk about it any more. It's the most private thing in my life, between me and the People of Power, and it's so wrong to talk of it, even to you. Can't you see that?"

"Taboo," he said, scornfully.

Not understanding that: "Joseph, I must go now." Her

voice had become strained and unsteady. "Please—let me go with your blessing and your love. That would mean very much to me."

"Sit down," Farber said.

Grimly, Liraun set her lips. She began walking toward the door.

"You're my wife!" Farber cried.

"And you are my husband," Liraun said in her new hard voice as she made her way slowly, painfully and patiently across the room. "But my children belong to my people. Nothing must jeopardize them. Not even you."

Farber stepped into her path, and she kept coming. He felt tired and dispirited and bitter, and for a moment—contemplating the emotional effort it would take to keep her here—he was very tempted to give up and step aside, to let her go, to let her do what she wanted to do. In a way, it would be a relief. In a way, he would be satisfied just to get this whole thing over with, at any cost. He would almost be glad. But in the wake of that realization, triggered by it, came a surge of sharp-edged, unbearable guilt. Unable to take that, he found an ember of rage inside him and fanned it to life. All this in a second: so that by the time Liraun reached him his muscles were taut and his face was flushed, and he reached out and seized her by the arms. Something wild blazed up in her eyes. Wordlessly, they wrestled back and forth, pitting one leverage against another, their feet hardly moving. She was amazingly strong, but not strong enough to break free of him. Apparently she realized this—her face became pinched, her eyes desperate. Her lips had ridden back from her canines, and Farber wondered—with a stab of real fear—if she would try to bite him. Instead she began throwing herself back and forth in his grip, panting, thrashing as wildly as a bird in a net, thrashing with such frantic violence that Farber became afraid that she would seriously injure herself. Dispassionately, almost mechanically, he struck her across the face.

At once, she went limp in his arms. He stood, supporting her weight, too burnt out to feel much remorse. He had even enjoyed it a little. But mostly, he was possessed of nothing but a dull apathy. Liraun was getting heavy. He tried pushing her erect, and found that she would stay where he put her, her muscles reshaping like putty under steady pressure. She was not conscious. Her eyes were open, but they were

blank—fused over and opaque. There was a tarry, glistening streak of blood leaking from the corner of her mouth.

Like a doll, she let him walk her to a chair.

She would not speak. He talked to her gently for a long time, coaxing, explaining, pleading, admonishing, finally blowing up and shouting at her. Nothing worked—she would not answer. She gave no indication that she had heard him, or that she was even aware of her surroundings. She just sat there, where he had put her, not moving, her hands in her lap in front of her.

Finally, he gave it up. He bustled about the room for a while, then he came back and sat down next to Liraun. He tried to think if there was anything he'd forgotten to do. He'd set up the diagnosticator, and used it to put a call through to Ferri to make sure the remote linkage was working. He'd hired a wet nurse on the way up this morning, a crusty, middle-aged man who kept himself in permanent lactation by the use of artificial hormone injections. He had the pistol, thrust through his belt. He drew it, slid out the clip to check it. One thing in his advantage: the city didn't seem to have a police force, not the kind they had on Terra, anyway. The Cian seemed to rely mostly on tradition and taboo, and peer-group pressure: the terrible threat of ostracism. But the system was not designed to cope with a total maverick like himself. There was a core of doctor-monitors who dealt with the insane, and with the occasional berserker or rowdy drunk, but, unlike Terrans, the Cian were not hypocritical enough to judge him insane simply because he insisted on doing something they didn't like. Not yet, anyway. The Twilight People acted as arbitrators in ethical disputes, and sometimes as referees for the more formal duels, but they had no punitive capability. What did that leave? A lynch mob? Possible—but it should take them a fair while to work themselves up to that. Religion? Moral persuasion? Would he have to shoot any of them?

He pushed the clip into place, and put the gun back into his belt. He hoped that he wouldn't have to shoot any of them. Wearily, he put his face in his hands. All his rage had died, leaving him empty and sick. If he could have figured a way to back out of the situation then, he would have taken it. But there was no way.

He waited, silently, while the day began to die out of the room around him.

It seemed to him then, sitting in the gathering dusk with his catatonic wife, that Ferri had been right about them, about the Earthmen. They were the wrong people. They had come for the wrong reasons, and they were looking for the wrong things in the wrong places and the wrong time. They had brought their wrongness with them, transported it at enormous cost over hundreds of light-years—for certainly they had committed the same litany of errors at home, lived the same wrong ways: look at the shape Earth had been in when the Enye had come to give it the ambivalent gift of stars. It seemed to him that the governments at home had made a basic—and possibly fatal—racial error in sending men like the men of the Enclave out to represent Earth to the galaxy. The worst of them, these emissaries, were shallow, jaundiced, neurotically repressed, buttoned-down reflex machines, out for the main chance, proud of their efficiency even though it achieved nothing. Certainly Earth had better men than these to offer. Even the best of them—Ferri, for instance—had demonstrated repeatedly that they were incapable of thinking of the Cian as *people*, and that false objectivity had warped the very observations it was intended to protect. At the end, Ferri had not helped Farber because of honest concern or sympathy, but merely because he was afraid Farber would do violence to him. Even he, Farber, himself—so smugly proud of being an "artist." How innocuous his work must have been, for the Co-op to be unafraid of sending him to the stars as chronicler of its activities. What was another name for a government-supported artist? A mediocrity? A whore?

He heard them then, coming back. The Cian.

Unsteadily, he got to his feet, and stood blinking around him. "Liraun?" he said, aware of how flat and dull his voice sounded through the dusty silence. She did not move or answer—she sat lifelessly, gleaming faintly in the darkening room, like a statue carved of old dark wood. Outside: crowd noises, murmurings, footsteps, all drawing closer. He leaned against a wall, trying to call up the rage he knew he needed to survive this. He couldn't find it. But, probing past exhaustion, he came upon a stew of fear and guilt and sullen injured pride. That would be a good enough substitute.

Farber went outside. It was nearing dusk. At the end of the Row, framed by black rock and seeming to sit on the cobblestone street, Fire Woman peered at him down a long

tunnel of masonry—a lidless red eye staring dispassionately through a microscope at the tiny world inside. For the first time in months, it was warm enough to rain. A fine mist hung in the street, beading on windows, sweating from old stone walls. The wind that carried it smelled of spring, unlocking, wet rich earth. Spring was still a good distance off, but it was coming, fast enough to make the Cold People shift uneasily on their rock-and-ice thrones, jar them from their frozen reveries and get them to thinking about working up a last, killing frost. Farber looked down. It was Liraun's Procession, back for another try. The other instruments were mute, but the drums had been keeping up a low tattoo on the march; now, as the members of the Procession filled up the space in front of Farber's house, even they fell silent. There was no one else in sight; all up and down the Row, the doors were closed, the windows were shuttered and blind. Farber stepped forward and stopped, bracing his legs.

Scores of eyes staring up at him gleaming like wet yellow stones.

The *twizan* stepped out from the crowd. He looked nervous but determined. "Citizen," he said, "we have come for our daughter. Send her out to us."

Farber drew his pistol.

"Citizen," the *twizan* said, "you must not try to prevent us. There is no other shape for things to be. Since the time of the First Ancestor—"

"Listen to me now," Farber said in a flat, quiet voice, leveling the gun. "Liraun is not coming out to you. There isn't going to be a Procession, now or ever. Do you understand that? Now get away from my house. Go on—all of you, get out!"

The *twizan* faltered, looked at the *soúbrae,* whose face was cold and adamant, and then looked back at Farber. The *twizan* drew himself up, and took a step forward. Another. The Procession pressed up close behind him, Talismans held high—Fire Woman threw their weird twisted shadows across Farber, banding his face with darkness.

Farber raised the pistol. One of the Talismans, off to his left, was bigger than the others, a huge, ruddy, puff-cheeked head representing the Person of the Winds—it was actually a sewn leather balloon, filled with hot gas, used at only the most distinguished of Processions and needing two husky Impersonators to brace it down. Farber fired at it. The roar of

the heavy-caliber pistol was horrendously loud in the narrow, high-walled street, and it froze everyone, Farber included, into stunned immobility. Only the head of the Person of the Winds moved: it billowed, a ripple going from cheek to cheek, seemed to swell monstrously for an instant, and then, hissing in dismay, began to fold up, the puffed cheeks caving in like a consumptive's, the fierce eyes collapsing onto the nose which collapsed in turn onto the mouth, the lower lip swelling as the head was compressed, the huge, sagging face assuming an expression of bemused petulance, pouting as it hissed itself flat. The entire thing sagged down over the two Impersonators like a collapsed tent, forcing them to their knees with stately relentlessness. The crowd—no longer a Procession, after this—stared in horror. But here and there, someone took another step toward Farber.

If Farber had known more about guns, he would never have done what he did then. He lowered the pistol, aimed, and fired two quick shots into the cobblestone at the feet of the crowd. Instantly, he felt something hot whiz by his own ear; a window shattered; a *tikan* held by a musician splintered across its neck; another musician clutched his arm and almost fell; a jeweled eye flew off a Talisman—all at the same time, as it seemed. There was a sound such as a very rapidly ticking clock might make, if its gears were made of stone and iron, interlaced with little giggling echoes. In that narrow place, the bullets had ricocheted maybe thirty or forty times in a fraction of a second, from wall to wall to wall.

Everyone was dazed by this—again including Farber—but Farber recovered first. He took three quick steps forward, shouting, and firing the pistol again, into the air this time.

The crowd fell back.

Farber pressed forward rapidly; the crowd parted and fell away as the Red Sea had for Moses, and there was Jacawen, just seeming to appear in Farber's path—another conjuring trick—as the crowd fell back behind him, a small, somber, unyielding man, the only one in the street who was not in motion.

Jacawen did not fall back.

Farber stopped. He was aware that the rest of the Cian had kept retreating, leaving Jacawen to face him alone, but only subliminally aware—all his attention was fixed rigidly on Jacawen, so much so that he was losing color and detail around the periphery of his vision.

"Our ways are not your ways, Mr. Farber," Jacawen said.

Farber's fingers were turning white as they clutched the pistol grip. "Get out of here," Farber said in a voice so strained that it gave every syllable in every word the same flat, unstressed emphasis.

Jacawen said something in reply, too tight and fast for Farber to be able to follow the dialect—the only indication Jacawen gave of the intense emotional strain he himself was under. By the time his enunciation had flattened into partial intelligibility, he was saying, "know. I warn you, if you keep on with this—" mistake? sin?—too garbled—"you will be damning her to" hell?—"you will be condemning your own wife."

"I don't care about your goddamn religion," Farber snapped.

Another garbled reply, then: "(?) death. They do not suffer. At the Birth House we give them a drug that obliterates consciousness, without pain."

"I don't want to hear how you rationalize your fucking little murders, either," Farber said, a detached part of his mind wondering how his voice could possibly sound like that. "Now get *out* of here!"

"You're consigning your wife to agony!"

"Let me worry about her soul, huh?" Farber shouted.

"Mr. Farber—"

Farber pointed the pistol at Jacawen's abdomen.

A silence. Then Jacawen said, "Our ways are not your ways, Mr. Farber."

Farber jacked a round into the chamber.

A long moment, with Jacawen staring at Farber, a very odd expression on his face. Then Jacawen shook his head, and turned away. He walked off down the Row, moderately quick, a small stiff figure dwindling into the slit-eye sliver of red lidded with black that was all there was left of the sunset.

Farber was alone in the street.

When the eye on the edge of the world closed, and night was complete, he went back into the house. It was dark inside. For a moment, he thought that he couldn't hear Liraun's breathing, and then he caught it: very slow and thready. He fumbled his way to the heating globe and started it, flooding the room with golden light.

Liraun was sitting in the chair, unmoving, just the way he'd left her.

Farber stared at her. She stared back, blankly, though if

he stepped out of her line of vision her eyes did not move to follow him. He made an impatient noise. "You don't have to be afraid any more," he said. "You're safe now—I saved you, I scared them off. They won't be back any more. You don't have to die. Do you understand that?"

She didn't answer.

Sighing, he sat down. He leaned his head back against the wall.

Time seemed to stop then, or at least blur its edges. He very nearly fell into a trance state himself, nodding in and out of sleep. After a long time, someone outside in the street—possibly the *soúbrae,* from the sound—began to wail *"Opein! Opein!"* in a voice that thrilled with a kind of despairing horror. That roused Farber a little, and for a while he sat there thinking that the Twilight People had concluded that the whole mess had been caused by an *opein* who had possessed Liraun at the *Alàntene,* and how tidy an explanation that was, but the voice keening *"Opein! Opein!"* went on so long and monotonously, and it was such a droning thing even in its sorrow, that it lulled him back into his nod-and-daze, and it wasn't until after the voice had been silent for a very long time that he realized, belatedly, that it had stopped. He skimmed on, right on the borderline of sleep, aware only of the slight purr of the heating globe, the beating of his own heart, of Liraun's, of his slow breathing, Liraun's, and so on in a diminishing spiral, until he became aware, again belatedly, that he had also been listening to an ascending series of sounds in counterpoint, a series of little panting sighs from Liraun, each one the smallest fraction hoarser than the one that had come before. Then—belatedly—silence.

Huuunnn, said Liraun through the silence.

He shook himself awake, shatteringly, and looked at her.

Her thighs were drenching wet. Her face was ashen with pain.

The diagnosticator, he thought, urgently. But somehow, in spite of his urgency, he found that he had not gotten up to get it. Instead, he was still sitting there, bemused, watching Liraun.

She had turned her head, and was staring back at him. As their eyes met, another pain hit her, and she huddled herself around it, hugging it, shoulders hunched, head bowed, her lips wrenching open to emit a sound that was not quite a

scream. Then it passed, and she slumped in the chair, panting. After a second, her breathing steadied a little. She looked back up at him. Her neck muscles were corded, and her skin was shiny with sweat, but her eyes were alive and alert now in her pain-soddened face. They watched him with incongruous calm. She studied him silently for a while, and then she began to speak in an even, passionless voice, without prelude, as though resuming a conversation already in progress.

"When you came into Ocean House at *Alàntene,* and I saw you," she said, "I knew that our souls had been told to twine about each other, by the People Under the Sea, who grow men as men grow flowers and fruits and vines. I knew, then, that they meant for our lives to be wound together, like vines that grow so interlaced around a trellis that no man can say where one ends and another begins. That came to me then, in a whisper from Under the Sea, as I watched you, long before you saw me, I watched you. And I thought—I thought many things. You were alone. I knew that you were one of the Distant Men, not of this world, but I also knew that even among them, the others of your race, you would be alone, always alone. In the heart of the *Alàntene* you walked alone and no one touched you, and only I saw that, only I. I saw. Because I too have been alone always among my own people, and I thought, *Like me, he has only half a soul,* and I thought, *Put them together,* the halves."

She stopped to fold herself around a pain, her eyes rolling into her head. *Time the contractions,* Farber's subcerebral training told him, but he made no move to do so; like Coleridge's Wedding Guest, he had been charmed. When she was able to use her breath for speech, she said: "And so you took me. So I let you take me. And because you wanted me I knew that the People Under the Sea had spoken to you as well as to me, and that the night was ordained for our use. I expected no more than the night that had been given us, the *Alàntene* night. But you asked me to come back again, and I did, and another night and another, and I did. You asked me to share your hearth, and I did even that, although it was against custom and caused disharmony with my people. And during all that time I did not dare to hope for fear the hope would be taken away from me. But then you said that we would marry, and I thought, *At last I have something that I can keep.*" Another pain—this time it took longer to pass, and when she spoke again, her voice had deepened and hoars-

ened, as though she was controlling her diaphragm only by an intense effort of will: "And I was happy as your wife. But when *weinunid* came, and you said that you wished me to conceive, I was hurt, hurt that you did not want to take the full four years of life together that were ours by custom before I was obliged to conceive. I thought, *He no longer wants me;* he is tired of me and wishes to be rid of me. But these were thoughts not worthy of a daughter of the First Woman, one who must bear the Sacred Obligation. So I wrestled with my sorrow, and at last I told myself that it was, after all, an honor for you to waive our years of grace—*He wishes our children to come into the world at once,* I thought, *for they will be special children, fair and full of grace.* I told myself that this must also be the will of the People Under the Sea, Theirs the will behind your deed, and that our children would be Vessels of Power, Those-Who-Conduct-Radiance-to-Earth. And so, except for moments of unsynchronization and darkness, I was again at peace. But now—" She paused. "But now you do this to me. Now you damn me and destroy me, and I do not understand why." Her voice faltered, then grew harsh again. "Do we always love those who'll destroy us? Do we love them *because* they'll destroy us? Because only they care enough to assume the burden of our destruction, to take it from our shoulders? Do you think that's true? Because the thing that I cannot understand is, as you destroy me, I still love you—" And at that, she laughed, because it was very funny, laughing with the corroding irony of a ghost looking back over the anthill passions of its former, finished life.

She stopped laughing suddenly, and looked at him with a strange expression on her face, hard and intricate and compassionate all at once, very similar to the expression Jacawen had worn at the end of his encounter with Farber. She kept looking at him in that way until a pain hit her that shattered her face, and blew her humanity out like a candleflame.

Then she began to scream.

When Farber became aware of himself again, he was sitting against the wall, knees hugged to chest, head on knees, as far across the room as he could get from the bulk of the unfolded diagnosticator.

Liraun had stopped screaming hours ago.

He moved his head, sluggishly, and with motion came pain

and nausea, and with pain came another flicker of awareness. Instinctively, he tried to straighten up, and was rewarded with a rusty stab of agony, like tearing a scab off a wound, except that the scab was the top of his head. The pain kept coming, in rhythmic undulations, urging him back into the world.

There was a dirty gray rag of light pressed against the window. That was the imminence of morning. He blinked at it.

Are you still alive? he asked himself in mild surprise, not much interested.

More pain, as he moved.

First, he had bitten completely through his lower lip; then, when that did not prevent him from hearing the screams—and he had heard them for a long time after they had actually stopped—he had pried his teeth free and bitten deeply into his hand, locking his jaws, and then, still hearing them, he had dashed his head against the wall twice, very hard. That hadn't really worked either, although it had driven everything another step away, and at last his mind had accomplished the thing for him by simply shutting itself off, shutting him off, closing down shop.

Now I know who the opein *was,* he thought, and then stopped thinking, because it seemed a useless thing to do after he was dead, after the world had ended.

He tried to straighten up again, and, as if it had been jarred loose by the motion, an image of Liraun welled up under his eyelids: not, surprisingly, a picture of the way she had looked as she screamed, but instead her face as it had been the moment before the pain hit, suffused with that strange expression, the same kind of a look that Jacawen had given him at the end. He could name it now:

Pity.

Pity.

Pity.

He was sitting against the wall.

Liraun had stopped screaming hours ago.

Shuddering, he started again. His teeth were still half-embedded in his hand, and his hand was plastered to his face by crusted blood. Mechanically, he began to work the whole mess free, stopping occasionally to pant while the world faded in and out, for the small bones in his hand were certainly broken. When that task was done, he cast around for something else to do: stand up, instinct told him, and after a

while, taking it slowly, he accomplished that too. On his feet, then, he again cast around for something to do. This time, he could think of nothing, no activity with which to absorb himself for the next five minutes. And in that case, he thought with a kind of dispassionate panic, what could he use to fill up the next hour, the day, the year? The *years?* Standing there then, a vacuum, he became gradually aware of a sound so persistent that it had not consciously registered on his hearing until this moment.

Babies crying.

Urged by something he did not understand, he began to drift across the room. The floor felt strange and rubbery under his feet. Automatically, he stopped to turn off the heating globe, and the golden radiance. He continued on through the wan half-light of morning, through the shadows like caves and stalactites. Ahead, the dull shine of polished metal and buffed leather: the diagnosticator, opened and expanded to form a narrow table surrounded on either side by banks of microminiaturized instruments. Farber stopped, took a few more steps toward it, stopped again.

Somehow, he had gotten her into the diagnosticator, while she screamed and flailed mindlessly, and managed to strap her down. Ferri had taken over then as planned, directing the surgical waldoes by remote, and had done as much as he could. It had not been enough.

Mercifully, Liraun's face was to the wall.

Ferri had exulted over the Cian's marvelous genetic fluidity, but it had, after all, its limits. It had adapted semi-aquatic hominids into land-dwelling hominids in an amazingly short time, but the same frantic time pressure that had triggered the transition had also led inevitably to biological errors and oversights. One consequence of this forced-draft evolution was a drastic narrowing of the hips and pelvis as the skeleton was altered to allow for totally erect posture, so that as each subsequent generation was able to walk more and more completely upright its women also became increasingly inefficient childbearers—especially as multiple births were the norm. Finally, the pelvis became too narrow in most cases to permit normal births at all. In adapting for land, the species had gambled and lost: they were in an evolutionary dead end. A social adaptation had saved them for awhile, provided by the first primitive genius to pick up a flint knife and help his children into the world by inventing the Caesarean. But

the universe had one final trick to play: a slow mutational shift in the metabolism of pregnant women that killed the Vitamin-K-producing bacteria in their intestines during the final weeks of pregnancy. Now women didn't stop bleeding after a Caesarean—they hemorrhaged and died. It was an incredible price to pay, but it was paid because there was no other choice. The Cian survived.

Later, Ferri would meticulously explain all this and more to Farber. But although the diagnosticator had flashed and shrilled at Farber while he was earnestly attempting to dash out his brains, Ferri himself had not come over to help—there had been only one humane thing to do, and he had not done it. Ferri was probably sleepless, apprehensive and full of remorse, but not full enough to risk coming himself. He was still hiding behind his machine.

Farber rounded the end of the machine. It had thrust a padded shelf out of itself at floor level, and in the shelf were the babies that Liraun had died to birth. They were all crying. Using the waldoes, Ferri had gotten them breathing and cleaned them up, and they seemed healthy—born more advanced than Terran babies, they already had their eyes open and were making their first fumbling attempts to crawl. Probably they were crying from fear and lack of attention as much as from hunger: four girls and two boys, red naked things, mewing and bumping into each other like kittens. Farber studied them for a very long time, while daylight grew in the room. His face was like stone. Once he raised his foot as if to crush them—he put it down again. He was quiet for a longer time, and then, still stone-faced, he reached down and picked up one of the boys. His son. Farber lifted him into the light. He seemed to weigh almost nothing at all, but he squirmed lustily in Farber's hands. He had three sets of nipples. He was screaming furiously. Farber held him stiffly for a few moments, and then, hesitantly, he began to rock him. Tentatively at first, but his motions gradually assumed a gentle authority, and he started, unconsciously, to croon as he rocked.

After a while, the baby stopped crying.

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