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CHRYSALIS 7

1979 Nebula Award Winner
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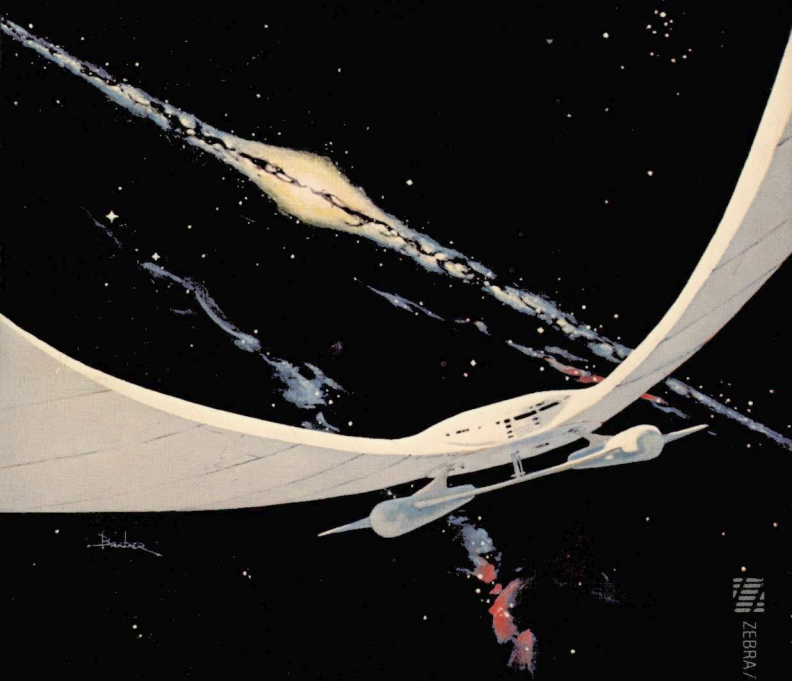
THOMAS F. MONTELEONE
MICHAEL BISHOP
AND MANY MORE



EDITED BY ROY TORGESON

"...CHRYSALIS is the most exciting thing to hit the anthology market in a long time."
—Science Fiction Review

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For Roberta and Walter
who gave me the chance
to become an editor

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INTRODUCTION

by

Roy Torgeson

The introductions for the *Chrysalis* series are getting too long. This time around I will confine myself to a brief statement on how I go about editing the series and a few words about the authors and their stories.

My approach to editing the *Chrysalis* series is quite simple. I ask authors to write good stories and then select the ones I like. These stories may be written by established professionals or talented newcomers. They may be of almost any length. They may be humorous or somber. They may contain elements of fantasy, horror, "soft" science fiction, "hard" science fiction or whatever else strikes the authors' fancy. My literary tastes are catholic and I can appreciate all kinds of stories. I select stories on the basis of excellence rather than any personal preference in subject matter or on my assessment of popular opinion. In this way I think that I am able to assemble anthologies which are filled with a rich *variety* of *good* stories. Anthologies which contain something for everyone. The authors and I then await your critical judgment.

The lead story in *Chrysalis 7* is by Leanne Frahm, a "new" writer who lives in the boondocks of Australia.

Deus Ex Corporis is her third science fiction sale. Her first, *The Wood for the Trees,* appeared in *Chrysalis 6;* her second will appear in *Galileo;* and her fourth, *Barrier,* will appear in *Chrysalis 8.* She writes beautifully and *Deus Ex Corporis* is one of the most powerful stories you will ever read. Concerned with a potentially explosive religious topic, there has been nothing like it since James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* first saw print in 1953. It's a blockbuster.

Edward Bryant had a humorous little story in *Chrysalis 3.* I loved it but Theodore Sturgeon, who wrote the introduction to the anthology, thought it was awful. Oh well, I've done it again, Ted. *We'll Have Such a* Good *Time, Lover* is another piece of light whimsy which reflects Ed's marvelously warped sense of humor. It tells what happens when one Martin Wintergreen, a man with a seemingly dormant sex life, wakes up to find a Frazetta-type succubus whispering in his ear. No doubt about it Ed, you're one of my kind of guys.

When I read the first draft of *Stretch Forth Thine Hand* by Gregory Long I was immensely impressed. I asked Greg to make a few revisions and when I read the final version I was blown away. The story's protagonists are repulsive, their interaction is gruesome and the ending is horrifying. *But,* the *story* is utterly fascinating. Greg has achieved the perfect balance between repulsion and attraction which typifies truly excellent horror stories. *Stretch Forth Thine Hand* is a science fiction horror story which left me with the same feeling I had after viewing *Alien.* Brrr . . .

Sonata for Three Electrodes by Thomas F. Monteleone is concerned with artistic creativity, in this

case music, and what might happen when medical science is utilized to preserve it. The results are very "interesting" indeed. This is Tom's sixth story in seven volumes of *Chrysalis;* obviously I like his short fiction. So does Pat Lobrutto at Doubleday who later this year will publish a collection of Tom's stories, appropriately titled *Dark Stars and Other Illuminations.*

Forests of Night by Karl Hansen is a sequel to *The Burden of Their Song,* which was published in *Chrysalis 6.* Both novellas take place in a far-future in which genetic engineering has become commonplace. Both are bizarre, both are haunting, both are based upon "hard" scientific and medical knowledge and both are superb. Although *Forests of Night* can stand by itself I recommend that you read it along with *The Burden of Their Song.* There is a novel here and I can't wait to read it. Hurry up Karl!

Al Sarrantonio's second science fiction sale, *Roger in the Womb,* was published in *Heavy Metal.* It is one of the few science fiction stories which made me laugh aloud—repeatedly. I had first crack at it, but while Al and I were discussing an alternate ending someone at *Heavy Metal* telephoned me to ask if I knew of an original science fiction story which they could publish in an up-coming issue. *Roger* seemed perfect and since they did pay eight and one-half times my rates we sold the story to them. Although rich and famous beyond his wildest dreams, Al continued to write. He wanted to get a story in *Chrysalis,* and *The Artist in the Small Room Above* is the result of Al's dedication to art, as opposed to financial reward. Like Tom Monteleone's *Sonata for Three Electrodes,* it is concerned with the creative musical process and applied science. The artist

who occupies the small room above, however, is not a human being. He is a most unusual alien with peculiar musical talents. Despite his strangeness you will relate to him and feel for him, especially if you have ever experienced the pain involved in being *forced* to be creative for someone else.

While attending the Fifth World Fantasy Convention, Orson Scott Card and I finally had a chance to talk in a reasonably private atmosphere instead of the usual smoke-filled room with wall-to-wall people. Scott, his wife Christine, and I went out to a fine, quiet restaurant (Dutch-treat) where we all enjoyed a superb crab meat salad. They drank water and stored up on fresh air in preparation for their return to the convention while I drank martinis and coffee and discreetly puffed on cigarettes. And we talked and talked and talked some more. We had a great time. Oh yes, Scott's newest story is *A Cross-Country Trip to Kill Richard Nixon.* Using the medium of fantasy Scott characterizes the emotions elicited by the Nixon fiasco better than anything I have read, seen or heard. Whatever your feelings toward Mr. Nixon might be, I think that *A Cross-Country Trip to Kill Richard Nixon* will add a new dimension to your view of the man and his times. Incidentally, I intend to send a copy of *Chrysalis 7* to Mr. Nixon. It just seems like the right thing to do.

A talented poet, Paul H. Cook is also part of the Salt Lake City science fiction *naissance.* In case you haven't heard, there is quite a group of science fiction writers living in and around the environs of Salt Lake City, and I've bought stories from all of them. They include Orson Scott Card *(Chrysalis 4, Chrysalis 5, Chrysalis 7, Other Worlds 1* and *Other Worlds 2);* Jay A. Parry

(Chrysalis 5); James Tucker *(Other Worlds 1);* and Paul H. Cook *(Other Worlds 1* and *Chrysalis 7). A Long Way from Home* tells of a small group of humans who must come to grips with life on an alien world. They are the intruders and with the passage of time they come to realize what it means to be a long way from home.

I am addicted to *lafferties* and pop them like M&M's or better yet, like Quaaludes. They offer the best escape from the squalid and mundane and they are the only medication which can control the spread of that frequently terminal disease known as "pseudo-seriousness."

Deeply troubled and taking myself far too seriously, I was beginning to think that I would have to finish compiling *Chrysalis 7* without my usual *lafferty*. Then *Of Crystalline Labyrinths and the New Creation* magically appeared in my mailbox. True, the title seemed vaguely familiar, the manuscript did not have the distinctive, arcane appearance of anything typed by R.A. Lafferty and the story was longer than what he usually writes. No matter. I immediately read it and knew that it was the real thing; a genuine *lafferty*. Filled with the exuberance which only the "seriocomic" can produce and buoyed up by the euphoria which only "diabological" reasoning can produce, I returned to the now light-hearted task of completing *Chrysalis 7*. It wasn't until two weeks later that I *saw* for the first time, the name "MICHAEL BISHOP" typed on the title page of my new *lafferty*. I was dumbfounded. No one except R.A. Lafferty could write a *lafferty*. To do this one would have to be able to *think* like Lafferty and this was patently absurd. But the familiar title, the

marks of a modern typewriter on the manuscript, the unusual length of the story, Mike's well-known admiration for Lafferty's fiction, the name MICHAEL BISHOP on the title page—and then the clincher, a letter from Virginia Kidd (Lafferty's and Bishop's literary agent) confirming that Mike really wrote the story with the full consent of R.A. Lafferty . . . I was convinced. Michael Bishop has produced the first synthetic *lafferty*. He is the author of the only genuine *lafferty* ever written by anyone other than "The Man" himself. Congratulations Mike! You are a genius . . . of sorts.

I'm starting to meander and I've run over again. Sorry about that. As always I thank the authors for allowing me to share in their remarkable creativity and special thanks to my good friend, Tom Barber, for a stunning cover.

ROY TORGESON
New York City
October, 1979

DEUS EX CORPORIS

by

Leanne Frahm

First Trimester

From time to time, small sounds broke the stillness of the laboratory as the technicians worked—the squeak of a glass slide being positioned under a microscope, the clink of glass against glass, the swirl of liquids in the sink, Lucas whistling softly against the boredom of routine.

Dom reached for the next sample and began the series of tests, automatically recording the expected results. Suddenly he blinked, and raised the phial to peer more closely into it. The clean white light hid nothing.

"Lucas," he called to the technician at the adjoining bench. "Come and look at this."

"Yes, Dom? What is it?" Lucas asked, walking over.

"It's a urine check on one of the carcinomas, but look at it."

"Lucas picked up the phial and looked. "What sort of check . . . oh, yes, I see. How long has she been in?" he asked, glancing back at the label on the sample.

"Oh, my God," he breathed, placing the bottle gently on the table. Dom gave a small nervous laugh as their eyes met.

Doctor Saldueno stood back to let the tall, elderly woman precede him from the room. He glanced back at the thin figure lying still in the hospital bed, at the machinery humming in constant attendance, and softly pulled the door closed behind him. He was not a happy man.

The woman was waiting for him. "There is no doubt?" she asked. They walked a few paces down the quiet corridor.

"None, I'm afraid," Saldueno replied. "It was picked up by chance, but it's been confirmed and reconfirmed."

She opened her mouth to speak, but the doctor forestalled her. "Your next question will be 'how'," he said, rubbing absently at his neck. "That I can't answer easily, or perhaps even accurately. We can only guess—without extensive testing—that some random combination of the new drugs and the radium treatment has produced this result. Parthenogenesis is not unknown. There have been well-documented cases of it before . . . which doesn't help your problem, I know." He looked uncomfortable.

"Problem?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

Saldueno floundered. Despite the fact that he had known precisely the course this conversation would take, he still found actually dealing with it most

disconcerting. "Well," he said, "it is . . . ah . . . it could be embarassing to your . . ."

"It could also be the will of God," she replied gently.

Irritation pricked him. Always the same answer, the one to which he could find no ready reply. He rallied his professional calm, pitting it against her intimidating confidence, and said briskly, "That may be, but this girl is suffering a potentially terminal cancer. Pregnancy is a complication which will decrease her chances of survival to virtually nil." He clasped his hands behind his back, knowing the battle was lost in advance. "I hesitate to suggest this to you, but I most urge you to consider termination of the pregnancy. My first responsibility is to the patient's well-being . . ."

Her voice cut in sharply, firm with authority. "It will not be considered," she said.

"This is hardly a normal pregnancy," he said. "Under such unusual circumstances, perhaps . . ."

"Doctor Saldueno, I am surprised to hear that suggestion from the lips of a Catholic." Reproof echoed behind her words, and he flushed at it. The innuendo stung him, aimed as it was at where he knew himself to be most vulnerable. Lapses of faith happened often in his profession, where the miracle of life and the anguish of death were commonplace. He needed no reminders of the tenuousness of the Church's hold on him. He countered with formality.

"Then you insist that she must go through with this, Reverend Mother?" he asked.

"Of course." The coiffed head nodded slightly. "Sister Anna is now, as she has been, in the hands of God. She herself would not have it any other way." She paused, then smiled, the movement hardly disturbing

the planes of her placid face. "Sister Anna is a strong girl, spiritually. We"—he noticed the slight emphasis—"must pray for her. Thank you for your time, Doctor. I must return to the convent now."

Saldueno found himself unable to return her parting smile. Part of him sympathised, he realised, with her unique predicament, and admired her ability to absorb the situation so effortlessly into the cushioning comfort of her faith. But as he watched the black-clad figure glide quickly away with only the small clinking of the beads to mark its passage, his thoughts were with the girl, Sister Anna, and the double burden her young body carried.

Sister Anna woke slowly to the wonderful sense of peace that the absence of pain could bring. She realised that it would be only temporary, that the pain would return, but at least by the Grace of God she could relax for a short time.

She opened her eyes, and smiled sleepily at the sight of Sister Margarita sitting by the bed. Always there, Margarita. Whenever she woke, while she fought the pain, while she slept. Truly an angel.

"How are you feeling?" Margarita asked in her high-pitched nervous voice.

"Warm," said Anna. "And comfortable."

"That's good," Margarita said, and smiled back, but Sister Anna thought her eyes glistened oddly. Tears? The time for tears was past, surely. Now there should only be the waiting.

"Is something wrong, Sister?" Anna asked.

Sister Margarita's pinched face twisted. "Oh, Anna, Anna," she sobbed. Anna was startled.

"What is it, Margarita?" she asked. "Tell me."
Overcome, Margarita told her.

Steve Parkes checked through his copy. He couldn't repress a wry grin. Poor little kid. But it was news, a change from the usual revolutions, flare-ups and natural catastrophes that made up the bulk of his South American reports. A little sob-story, a novelty, good for a filler. And it was bread-and-butter.

". . . It has been confirmed by medical authorities that Sister Anna, a 22-year-old nun suffering from cancer of the alimentary tract, has become pregnant by a billion-to-one chance combination of chemical and radiation therapies. This particular condition, known as parthenogenesis, is extremely rare. A spokesperson for Sister Anna's convent said that she had been informed, and that termination of the freak pregnancy was out of the question." . . .

Father Alvar de Ribera had been annoyed at the invitation. It meant a full day away from his parish work, travelling to the small country convent to conduct mass for the nuns, a day that he considered wasted. His annoyance did not fade as he took his place at the altar and gazed out at the identical rows of kneeling sisters, the spare, upright form of the Reverend Mother dominating the front row. To him, these women, dedicated though they might be, personified much of what he thought of as the repressions and prejudices of the Church's leaders.

He resented the time taken from his work in the slums, and his voice took on an edge of harshness as he began to speak. Slowly, though, the solemn words of

the Mass exerted their powerful, compelling influence over him, as they always did, uplifting him and reminding him of the true spirit of the Church, the spirit he so passionately embraced.

Father Alvar wanted nothing more than to give this spirit freely and equally to all the world, particularly to the oppressed. Father Alvar was known as a revolutionary priest.

But today the power of the Mass failed to conceal an unease, a nervousness that radiated from the sedate rows in front of him. There was not the traditional calm of the religious order. Occasionally he caught whispers, a turning of heads to one another. It both intrigued and disturbed him.

The ceremony continued, and finally the last file of nuns had moved from the chapel. He noticed without surprise that the Reverend Mother was waiting for him in the aisle, and he stepped down to her.

"Thank you, Father Alvar," she said to him. "It was good of you to come." He noted the strain in her voice, the quaver underlying the smooth voice.

"It was kind of you to ask me," he replied, waiting.

"I confess I had an especial reason for asking you here today," she continued. "I will be direct, Father. There is a problem developing here in the convent which I feel unable to deal with. I would prefer to solve it before it spreads . . . without involving the higher authorities, if possible. I would welcome your advice."

He tried to conceal his impatience. "Certainly, Reverend Mother, if you feel I can help . . ."

She took a deep breath. "I take it you are familiar with the case of our unfortunate Sister Anna?" He nodded. "Some of the sisters, a few of the younger and

more imaginative ones, are placing a more—perhaps—mystical interpretation upon the course of events than is warranted." The next sentence came out in an uncharacteristic and embarrassed rush. "In short, the rumour is spreading that Sister Anna's child is indeed the child of Christ—the prophesied Second Coming."

Father Alvar's first impulse was to laugh out loud, but the Reverend Mother's distress had erupted in her face with her words, and he stopped himself.

"Are you saying, Reverend Mother, that some of the sisters actually believe this?"

"Yes, Father. And it has spread a little beyond the convent. Some of the villagers . . . You know how quickly such an idea can move among the poorer classes."

He nodded again.

"The reason I have approached you, Father Alvar," she continued, "is that your work among the poor is so well known, and you are well-respected by them . . ." He made an automatic gesture of dissent. "No, Father, it is true. They will listen to you. I have remonstrated with them, but it has had little effect." He saw that this confession pained her. "I am loathe to inform the Bishop of such a preposterous suggestion . . ."

Was she? He looked more closely at the worried face. The Reverend Mother avoided his gaze. It dawned upon Father Alvar that this elderly, commanding woman with the full authority of the Church behind her was as unsure, as uncertain, as a novice. She wanted reassurance for herself as much as for her charges. Surely not . . .

A possibility so remotely feasible as to be unthinkable nevertheless crept into Alvar's mind. A

chain of events extended before his mind's eye, each surely impossible, but culminating in—what? Sister Anna and her peculiar, touching case suddenly assumed new importance.

"Reverend Mother," he said, his eyes alight with a new intensity, "we must talk about this in further detail. You can spare me the remainder of the day?"

"Of course," she replied, her face still troubled.

He remembered to smile at her. "Have faith, Reverend Mother. I am sure we can deal with this problem without disturbing the Bishop too soon."

Second Trimester

Steve Parkes answered the phone on the fourth ring. "Hi, Luis," he said. "Got something for me?"

He listened for a minute, then laughed. "Come on, Luis. You're kidding!"

The smile slowly evaporated as Luis continued to speak. Steve grabbed a pencil, and tucked the receiver between his shoulder and ear while he made rapid notes. "Give it to me from the beginning again, Luis."

He broke in. "Yeah, but why?" he said. "I mean, why are the priests in on it. They crazy too?"

A short reply from Luis. Steve shrugged. "O.K. Yeah. Thanks, Luis. Let me know if you hear anything else."

He stood looking at his notes for a minute. The things people could make themselves believe! It was the silly season with a vengeance. U.F.O.'s, werewolves, and now the Second Coming! At least it made a change from the usual End-Of-The-World-Is-Nigh stuff.

What a follow-up! He sat at the tyepwriter and

began to type quickly and mechanically with two fingers.

. . . "A wave of religious hysteria is sweeping several Latin American countries. . . . While most of the clergy are denouncing this belief from their pulpits, some priests appear to be caught up in the frenzy also, and are encouraging the belief among their parishioners. No official statement has come from the Vatican as yet . . ."

Father Alvar put down the paper and rubbed his eyes wearily. Despite his fatigue, he still felt a thrill of triumph. So far, it was working. He rose, and stood for a while at the window, watching the lights of the city under the night sky. It vibrated with life, but he could envisage all too well the squalor which underlay the brilliance.

He could appreciate the perplexity of the authorities. They could never imagine his ultimate goal; they lacked flexibility of mind. And the Vatican had been silent. He was not surprised. He wondered when they would play their trump card. It would make little difference to the outcome now . . .

At the discreet knock on the door, Bishop Valdivia hastily tidied the papers on his desk, and checked that the decanter was within reach.

"Come in," he called, and rose to greet the small dark man who entered the study with rapid steps. The Bishop's bulk towered over the wiry frame of his visitor.

"Cardinal Pozzebon! This is an honour, Cardinal. Please be seated." Valdivia hurried to pull a chair up to the desk at which he had been sitting, and ushered

the Cardinal into it.

"Bishop Valdivia," the Cardinal began as Valdivia lowered himself once more into his seat. "I must be brief. I have several other bishoprics to visit in a matter of days, and His Holiness wishes to receive my report as quickly as possible." His voice was light and heavily-accented.

"Certainly, Cardinal," agreed Valdivia expansively. "But you will extend your visit for the few minutes necessary for a glass of wine, surely?" He reached for the glasses.

"Thank you, no," replied the Cardinal. Bishop Valdivia blinked. He withdrew his hand, realizing that geniality was the wrong approach, and adopted an expression of solemn concern as Pozzebon continued.

"You know, of course, that the reason for my presence is to examine the current situation regarding your Sister Anna. Both her convent and the hospital to which she is confined are within your area of concern, so I have come to you first, Bishop."

Valdivia inclined his head. Pozzebon opened a black leather brief-case, and took out a leather-bound notebook.

"Now, there are certain details surrounding this case which need clarification, and I must discuss matters with you that must not be repeated, although I am sure it is hardly necessary to make that statement."

The Bishop tried to match the penetrating stare of the dark eyes, but found it difficult.

"Of course," he said.

"Firstly, the circumstances of the nun's condition. There is no doubt that it is impossible to implicate any human agency in this pregnancy?"

The directness of the question further unsettled the Bishop. "That is correct," he said. "Sister Anna was in the hospital for five months prior to the discovery of her condition, at which time she was two month's pregnant. During those five months she was continuously accompanied by either sisters from her convent or by members of the staff. I have collected statements from them." He looked for signs of approval, but Pozzebon's head was bent over his note-pad as he wrote, and his expression was hidden.

"Then that avenue is closed," the Cardinal said.

"Avenue?" asked Valdivia.

The Cardinal's head snapped up and he gazed at the Bishop. "Bishop Valdivia," he said softly, "do you completely understand the gravity of the situation?"

Valdivia shifted uncomfortably. His religious beliefs were strong and straight-forward, and he disliked any disturbance in the ordered tenets of his faith.

"Certainly I see the situation as serious, but . . ."

"It is more than serious. There is open and willful disobedience by members of the clergy in inciting the people to this belief. Precisely why they have taken such steps, and what they hope to gain, we are not sure, but the Church would prefer to defuse the situation without confrontation. Revealing a human father for the child would be the obvious way to do this, a quick and clean way. But that appears to be impossible."

Valdivia could contain himself no longer. "But Cardinal! The whole notion is ridiculous!" he burst out. "It has no grounds for support. It is a passing madness, surely. Few will entertain the idea seriously . . ."

Pozzebon interrupted. "Unfortunately many are tak-

ing the idea seriously. We live in an age, Bishop, in which men are all too ready to seek consolation in outlandish fancies. What could be more consoling than the thought that Christ will soon be with us again, and all ills dissolve?" His lips quirked as he regarded Valdivia.

Valdivia rose to the bait. "Of course the idea would be attractive if it were true . . ."

"You see," said Pozzebon. "For many in this uncertain world, the idea is enough. Proof becomes redundant."

The Bishop snorted. "Surely if His Holiness denounced it for the heresy it is . . ."

"One does not simply 'denounce' a new heresy," Pozzebon pointed out. "For His Holiness to issue a statement would be to admit a problem exists. We cannot afford to over-react. Besides, to introduce heresy would open the door to extended theological arguments which would have little effect on the basic strength of this movement, which is the faith of the people who support it. Faith makes a dangerous weapon—in an opponent's hand. Its strength is its unpredictability." He glanced down at his notebook.

"No, Bishop, we need to take a positive but unobtrusive line, one which will not involve matters of faith, questions of theology, heresy, or His Holiness. Science has created this situation, and science has also provided the counter to it."

Valdivia listened as Cardinal Pozzebon continued, feeling at the same time a sense of wonder that such a physically smaller man could make him feel so insignificant and ineffectual, and disliking him for it.

* * *

Bishop Valdivia's large, smooth face photographed well. He felt no qualms at appearing on television; the studio lights did not make him squint, the heat did not produce irritating beads of perspiration on his face. He knew he would give a pleasing and strengthening performance for his audience, both on television and through the simultaneous radio broadcast of his speech.

Inwardly, though, he was still angry. Angry and disgusted that the Church would be soiled by this tawdry episode, that the rebel clergy would use such an unfortunate occurence to confront both the dignity and the authority of Rome. Angry, too, that Rome had left him to face the cameras alone. An appearance by Pozzebon, at least, as the Pope's envoy, would have helped.

He tried to dismiss the rebellious thought that any success would be claimed by Rome, while any failure would be his and his alone. Still, failure was now impossible. Once the deluded masses realised the impossibility of their dream . . .

"Two minutes, Bishop Valdivia," a mechanical voice sounded close to his ear.

He composed his expression into one of benign comfort and understanding, and mentally rehearsed until the red light switched to green.

"My people," he began. "I am speaking to you tonight in response to the unrest and unhappiness that certain rumours have caused in the community of our Church, rumours which unfortunately the media have seen fit to publicise beyond their importance." He squirmed for a moment, as he realised that he had just insulted the very medium he was in fact using, but he

continued without a visible break.

"It is true that a nun is with child. This is a rare occurence, but one which is completely explicable in medical terms. Its causes are neither supernatural, nor mystical. The main thrust of the beliefs being promulgated by some of my brethren is that the condition of Sister Anna parallels that of Our Lady, and hence presages the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

He allowed himself to shrug and shake his head slightly in mild amusement, but his voice was firm as he went on.

"I am assured by scientific experts that this argument is completely negated by one fact—that under the conditions of such a pregnancy, one initiated without . . . shall we say . . . the involvement of a second person, Sister Anna can give birth only to a girl-child—a daughter."

He paused to allow this information to be fully realised, then went on with a gentle smile for the camera. "So you can see there is no basis for such a belief, and indeed," he allowed a touch of steel to enter his voice, "any promulgators of this belief are treading dangerously close to the verge of heresy, and will be dealt with accordingly.". . .

The cathedral was full. Bishop Valdivia congratulated himself as he looked out over the congregation. The Catholic world was buzzing, he knew, following his broadcast of a week ago. The revelation of the sex of the expected baby had brought many of the previous believers to shamefacedly confessing their sins.

Rome would be pleased with his handling of the

situation. The flare-up had been extinguished before any lasting harm could be done.

The monotonous murmur of the 'Hail Mary' drifted across this thoughts, and he composed himself for the coming service. A lulling sound, a comforting one. It seemed to him the final balm to soothe the ills of the Church.

He found his reverie suddenly interrupted. A discordant note sounded. What was it? The rhythm was broken by another chant, faint at first. He glanced around the bent heads as he sought for the source of the disturbance. The sound grew in volume as other voices picked it up.

Bishop Valdivia froze in disbelief as he made out the words.

"Hail Anna, Bride of Christ. Blessed are Thou among women and blessed is the fruit of Thy womb . . .

Third Trimester

"De Ribera! Alvar de Ribera!" Bishop Valdivia called to the figure going up the steps of the hospital. Father Alvar turned and waited as the big man hurried up to him.

The Bishop glared. "What are you doing here?" he jerked out between gasps.

Alvar nodded. "How are you, Bishop? I am here because the Reverend Mother of Anna's convent . . . You've met her?" Valdivia nodded. "Well, the Reverend Mother has asked me to visit our Sister Anna. She is naturally worried about her situation." His light eyes looked coolly into the Bishop's angry ones.

"The Reverend Mother?" Valdivia demanded. "She, also?"

Alvar smiled in answer, a tight, drawn smile.

"You have no right to be here," spat the Bishop. He lowered his voice as he noticed passers-by turning to stare. "It is well-known that you are a ring-leader in this charade. You as much as anyone are responsible for the state the Church finds herself in. If you had any true regard for your religion . . ."

"Oh, but I do," Father Alvar broke in. "It is that regard which has led me to take the stance I have. I don't think you and I share the same view of our faith, Bishop. I believe it can be made into something better."

The Bishop's face twisted with scorn. "Something better, de Ribera! When this business is over, it will be a matter of luck whether the Church remains at all! don't you realise that this thing has spread around the world? Africa, Europe—even revivalist groups in the United States are praying for Sister Anna and the second Son of God! Do you realise where your impatience with the Church is taking you?" Valdivia dropped his voice, and tried for a conciliatory tone. "The Church *is* changing, Father gradually. Be patient."

Father Alvar laughed harshly. "Aggiornomento, Bishop? Too slowly. The renewal of the Church proceeds too slowly. It needs a helping hand."

"But to play upon the superstitions of the ignorant . . . "

"*You* deplore this?" The emphasis and the insult were unmistakeable. The Bishop stood trembling and speechless with anger.

De Ribera continued. "I see this as the opportunity

many of us have sought. A chance to free ourselves from the Roman autocracy, a chance to place the Church where it belongs, in the hands of the people. And Sister Anna is our tool for forcing the inevitable revolution."

Bishop Valdivia found his voice. "And when your 'revolution' collapses, and it will do as soon as that child gives birth to a girl—you know that—all those people who have followed and believed in you and those heretics like you will turn on you! What can you hope to accomplish with this monumental untruth?"

"I think I understand mob psychology a little better than you do, Bishop," replied Father Alvar. "Yes, the people will be angered and disappointed that we have misled them—unintentionally, you understand—and yes, they will turn to someone on whom to vent their outrage, but no, it will not be on us, their friends and supporters. People who have been found to be wrong invariably attack those who were right all along. Such as yourself, Bishop. They will blame the Church for not making their dream happen.

"And," he continued, "I'll deny I ever said that, Bishop Valdivia, if you should try to repeat it. At this point, whom do you think the people would believe?" He turned to go.

"Wait," called Valdivia, his voice husky. "You would do this, de Ribera? You hate the Church that much?"

"No," said Alvar tiredly. "I love my Church that much." He continued up the steps, straight-backed.

The Bishop stood, shaken, looking after him.

The voice of Cardinal Pozzebon was thin as it crossed the world from Rome. Bishop Valdivia closed his eyes

against the dim glow of his desk-lamp and pressed the receiver closer to his ear.

"But Cardinal Pozzebon," he repeated wearily. "I don't think you understand the severity of the situation here."

"We understand it perfectly," replied the Cardinal. "His Holiness has kept a close watch on developments, and is aware that your attempts to stem the growth of this movement have failed. This 'doctrine' is not confined to your continent, of course. It has gathered momentum in many countries, including, alas, my own."

"But Cardinal . . . "

"Simply put, the case is this. We cannot endorse any supernatural causes, and the people refuse to accept the medical causes, so that we have arrived at a stalemate, until the birth of the child. Our only recourse is to allow matters to run their course, and be ready to receive our straying brethren back into the Church when this mania has died down."

Bishop Valdivia wiped at sudden perspiration.

"Cardinal," he said earnestly, "just a short proclamation from the Pope denouncing the heretics who spread this dogma . . . "

"There will be no proclamation."

"What can I do then? I am afraid, Cardinal Pozzebon, that there may be violence before this is finished. I *know* there will be. If the Church cannot support me . . . "

He stopped and waited. Was there fear behind the sudden silence?

Pozzebon's voice came through at last. "The birth will be soon now. The Church must simply bide its

time, and you, Bishop Valdivia, must be prepared to withstand any unpleasantness that may ensue. The Church will survive, as it has before."

Will it? The Bishop wondered, as he perfunctorily went through the ritual of farewell. Will it? Will I?

Sister Anna half-sat in bed. Any position now was uncomfortable, the pain was so persistent. She had not even realised that labour had begun at first, that a new dimension of pain had been added to those she had already explored.

She gripped Sister Margarita's hand more tightly. Dear Sister Margarita, so comforting with her presence, her faith.

They all had faith in her, Sister Margarita had told her. She had so little in herself. Nothing in her training had prepared her for a task as momentous as this. But everyone was so sure. The sisters, the staff, the mountainous piles of written requests for intercession, the presents . . .

She had little strength remaining, but she knew she must hold out, hold onto life until the precious travail was completed.

Father Alvar made his way through the mob outside the hospital. The size of the crowd astonished even him, as did the air of gaiety, the bright clothes. It reminded him of a fiesta, a celebration, and part of him felt sick at heart for his deception. Those who recognised him pushed at their neighbours to give him room, and murmured blessings followed him. He reached the steps, and turned to look out over the sea of faces upturned to the blank bright windows above

them. He noticed the police stationed around the edges of the crowd. They seemed pitifully few beside such numbers.

For a moment he felt a chill as he realised the power of the force he had helped to unleash. He dismissed it, wiping it from his mind with a vision of the New Church, and continued into the building.

Bishop Valdivia was in the waiting-room, speaking with Doctor Saldueno. He caught sight of the gaunt figure of de Ribera and flushed scarlet. "You!" he cried, then stopped as he remembered the presence of the Doctor.

"I," said Father Alvar quietly, coming up to them.

"Have you seen the mob?" the Bishop demanded. "Three days ago they started coming, and more arrive every hour!"

"I've called the Minister for the Army," put in the Doctor. "We may need them to control the crowd after the birth." Alvar realised the Doctor was as anxious as the Bishop, and felt a momentary qualm for those involuntarily involved.

"When is it scheduled?" he asked, keeping his voice under control.

"It isn't," doctor Saludeno smiled thinly. "We decided against Caesarian section. In Sister Anna's weakened state she would not survive the operation. She's a well-built girl, and the baby is not large. Natural birth seemed to offer her a better chance of survival—for a short time. As a matter of fact, I called the Bishop when labour began, several hours ago. It's progressing well."

"But the crowd," said Father Alvar, puzzled. "How did they know, if no date was set?"

The Bishop shrugged. "The Lord alone knows how they know. The problem is what to do with it now that it's here. A fine hornet's nest you've stirred up, de Ribera. That mob will tear us to pieces and the city as well, when your messiah is born a girl." Fury and fear ground through his voice.

Father Alvar welcomed the sudden intrusion as a nurse rushed into the corridor a few doors away. "Doctor," she called urgently. "It's coming, Doctor."

"Excuse me," Saldueno muttered as he hurried after her.

Father Alvar and Bishop Valdivia were left alone in the silence of their separate thoughts.

The Father moved to the window, finding himself again surprised by the extent of the crowd. The people of the Church, he thought, soon to govern the Church of the People. He tried to ignore the visions of violence which accompanied the thought. He knew Valdivia was also preoccupied with the coming violence, and pitied the man's fear. Valdivia was not evil, or even bad. He was simply wrong. Wrong, and out-of-date, at one with the dinosaurs. Extinct, but he didn't know it yet, wouldn't accept it. Suffering for being wrong was not new in human history, but it was no less regrettable. Alvar sighed. Ends and means, means and ends. Who could ever hope to arrange them correctly or fairly?

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Father Alvar and the Bishop turned together, tense and expectant. It was Doctor Saldueno, his face managing to look both expressionless and drained at once.

"Bishop, Father," he said. "The birth is over. It was successful.

They exhaled. Father Alvar spoke first. "It will be announced, to the crowd?" he asked.

Saldueno opened his mouth to speak, but a sudden noise from the crowd below, muted by thick glass, broke into his words. The three of them moved to the window. They could see a small shape, whom Alvar recognised as Sister Margarita, at the top of the steps. She was gesticulating and mouthing words at the people, her face twisted. In anger, thought Alvar clinically. The expected reaction to the betrayal of the birth. Or . . . His thoughts faltered uncertainly, and he strained to see more clearly. Or was it ecstasy? The distance made it hard to tell.

She stopped, and a deep silence descended. Then the crowd swayed as one beneath them, flowing towards the hospital steps. Police scurried ineffectually at the outskirts, helpless against the impetus of the throng.

Valdivia clutched at Alvar's arm. "Stop them!" he cried, but Alvar stood as though turned to stone. Only one thought, a sudden urgent need to know, to be sure, filled his mind. The rising clamour of the crowd as it greeted the news beat on his ears. Was it the roar of an unleashed beast—or the first note of a distant but mighty trumpet?

He waited in silent acceptance for the answer.

WE'LL HAVE SUCH A GOOD TIME, LOVER

by

Edward Bryant

"Hello, lover," said the succubus.

Martin Wintergreen didn't know she was a succubus, or even what a succubus was. He had led a circumscribed life. Martin saw a naked woman lying beside him in his bed, and his first reaction was complete confusion.

What are you doing in my bed? What Martin actually stammered was: "Who—how did—you?" The whole situation had a nightmare surrealism about it, yet Martin had the sickening feeling he was awake. He shut his eyes and massaged them fiercely with his fingertips. Even with eyes closed, he saw her after-image; the woman's skin was a healthy pink in the dim glow from the nightlight; her body was voluptuous, almost as plump as the Rubens nudes Martin had surreptitiously lusted after during his frustrating Sunday afternoon pilgrimages to the City Art Museum; her face

was . . . sweet, Martin's atrophied imagination described it; yet with sensual overtones, like a debauched angel.

Martin lay on his back with eyes screwed shut and frantically hoped he'd awaken. Then he felt the moist, warm hand of the dream lightly brush the thin hairs on his chest. The fingers seemed hotter than normal human body-temperature. She began to caress him.

His eyes snapped open and he sat upright. "What are you *doing?*" A note of hysteria rose in his voice; "circumscribed life" was perhaps not specific enough: "cloistered" was closer.

The woman drew back, apparently startled by Martin's panicky indignation. Then she leaned forward, pushed him gently but firmly down against the pillow, and let her long blonde hair tickle across his face.

"I'm seducing you," she said matter-of-factly in a breathless, little-girl voice. Martin identified it with TV situation-comedy caricatures of Hollywood actresses. She snuggled against him and in his agitation Martin wondered how much skin area she possessed. Insanely, he thought of the total area of the state of Texas: 267,339 square miles, including inland water. His entire body seemed to be kissed by pulsing, moist flesh . . .

"*Stop!*" Martin pushed the woman away roughly. She lay propped on one elbow, her expression surprised. He thought he saw anger flash across her features, anger and something else; something too quick to recognize. Too quick or— "Who are you?" said Martin, making a valiant effort to appear calm.

The woman smiled and for a moment Martin could see the pink tip of her tongue. "My name is Dulcinea, Martin."

'How did you know my name?"

"I know everything about you, Martin. I was given a complete dossier. You are thirty-one years old and you have never been married. You work as a junior budget officer at the National Bureau of Timber Regulation. You hate it."

"I don't hate it," said Martin. "It's just—well, dull."

"You hate it." Dulcinea looked pensive. "Let's see . . . oh yes, you had your first and last sexual affair seven months short of ten years ago. You were a college senior. It was an unsatisfactory act, performed on the fold-down passenger's seat of a 1958 Rambler American. Your partner made unpleasant remarks about—"

"Now wait a—" Martin started to blush.

Dulcinea cut off his interruption with a kiss. "Don't worry about it, Martin. I'm very glad you saved yourself for me. I'll make you forget those long years of abstinence."

Martin wrenched away from her passionate embrace. "Hold on," he pleaded. When she did, he said, "No, I mean . . . What in hell—"

She interrupted him again. "Nowhere in hell, Martin. Here. In your bed. Now, love."

He hastily grabbed her wrists. They were surprisingly slender, considering her otherwise statuesque proportions. "Martin," she said, "you protesteth too much. Now just lie still. For a while."

"The cheese blintzes," said Martin. "I knew I shouldn't have eaten them." He flung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. The clock on the bedside table indicated twenty minutes past midnight. "All I wanted was to get to sleep early. Periodontist appoint-

ment tomorrow—I mean today."

"Don't grumble, darling," Dulcinea whispered, her lips lightly brushing like butterfly wings against Martin's ear. She kissed him there.

He twisted his head aside. "Will you *kindly* stop doing that!"

Dulcinea shrugged, appearing somewhat daunted. "Sorry. Did it tickle?"

"What?"

"Tickle. In your ear."

Martin said nothing. Dulcinea let her own long legs slide off the bed and sat up beside Martin. Her shoulder and hip touched his.

"Something's bothering you."

"*Bothering me*! What could be bothering me? My God, I'm awakened from a sound sleep in my own bed in my own apartment by a—a naked person I've never seen before . . . a person who—" He swallowed, feeling pain, realizing how dry was his throat. "*Who makes advances to me.* And you guess that something's bothering me?" Martin stood up, swayed, steadied himself by grabbing the headboard.

"I need some coffee," he said. "It'll keep me awake, but I need it anyway."

"Do you have any tea?" said Dulcinea.

Martin said abstractedly, "Only instant with lemon and artificial sweetener."

"That will be fine."

This isn't happening, Martin thought. He weaved slightly as he walked across the plush carpet to his closet. "Here," he said. "Wear this. Please." He tossed Dulcinea a charcoal-gray dressing gown, without looking at her.

"It's July," she said. "It's not cold at all."

"Please."

She donned the gown but left undone the top three buttons. Martin turned at the hiss of fabric on skin and counted the buttons as Dulcinea slipped each through its respective eyelet. "Do you mind buttoning it all the way up?"

"Yes." She smiled ingenuously. "I wouldn't be comfortable."

"I would."

"You're, um, slimmer than I. This robe isn't exactly my size. Do you want me to chafe?"

Martin blushed again, feeling his face go hot, trying to stop the sensation, failing.

"May I have my tea now, darling?"

"God, if right now I'm actually sleeping through my periodontist's appointment—" His eyes focused on the print of *Christina's World* hanging behind Dulcinea's right shoulder. "Milk? Sugar?"

"Milk, please," she said. 'The sweenener's already in it, remember? Dear, don't worry about your appointment. You'll sleep very well if you'll just let me help you."

"Milk," said Martin hopelessly. "No sugar." He turned and started for the kitchen. Dulcinea caught up, grasped the limp fingers of his left hand, and followed demurely.

In the kitchen she sat quietly, the dressing gown fallen open to reveal crossed, silken legs, as she watched his reflection in the surface of the formica table-top. Martin set a pot of water to boil on the gas range.

He looked helplessly about in the cupboards; then he set a box of oatmeal cookies on the table. "Here," he offered.

"If I might have one from your hand . . . "

"Oh, my God," Martin said, trembling.

Reluctantly he picked an oatmeal cookie out of the package and proferred it to Dulcinea. She smiled and took it from him, allowing her fingers to slide against his. She devoured her prize and Martin found himself mesmerized like a gerbil confronting a cobra. He had never seen a cookie eaten so sensually.

"Darling, would you like to kiss the crumbs off my lips?"

The pot of water boiled over with a spatter and hiss. Martin turned to the stove, killed the flame, then whirled back to face the woman. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Dulcinea smiled again, sweetly. "There's something I want. A need I have."

"What do you want?"

"You, darling. Your kisses. Your—affection."

He stared at her. "I guess I'm not dreaming. You're crazy."

"No, no I'm not. I'm—" She paused. "I'm hungry. could I have my tea, please?"

"Thanks, darling. But a succubus doesn't thrive on a diet of oatmeal cookies. Did you notice they're going a bit stale?"

"What?"

"Stale."

"They're from Christmas," Martin said automatically. "No, the other thing. You're a what?"

"Don't be wearisome, darling." Martin looked blank. "You really don't know?" Martin shook his head. "What are the schools teaching these days?"

Martin poured hot water onto the waiting instant tea.

Dulcinea sighed and re-crossed her legs. Martin noted in his peripheral vision that the *bottom* three buttons of the dressing gown had somehow come undone. The woman sipped gingerly from her teacup.

"Didn't you take a mythology course in college?"

"No," said Martin. "I didn't have the time. There was too much professional preparation."

This time her sigh held what seemed more than a touch of exasperation. "A succubus," said Dulcinea, "is a female demon who tempts men in their sleep. Just as my brother, the incubus, tempts young girls. We generally target our efforts on the young and impressionable, the virgins, the . . . "

Martin's blush, which had been steadily fading, returned with a vengeance. "But I'm not—"

"You're close enough." she smiled sympathetically. "It's a comment on the times that we're having to relax our standards. There simply aren't as many virgins to tempt as there once were. Humans are becoming too liberated. It's a hell of a living." She sighed again. "Sorry, I didn't mean to sermonize."

"This is crazy," said Martin. "Insane."

"You've said that."

"All right, if you're real, then what do you really want?"

"That you *also* asked."

"But you didn't answer me."

"I did so. I said I was hungry."

He hesitated. "But not for cookies."

"No, darling." She leaned toward him and Martin noted that none of the dressing gown's buttons were now fastened. Dulcinea gently clasped Martin's hand. "Your soul, dearest. I'm a traditionalist. That's what I want."

"Oh." Martin looked nonplused. "My uh, soul."

"Well, not exactly your soul; that sounds a bit melodramatic. The term is simplistic, anyway. I should have said something like soul-energy. Um, charismatic residue, essence of aura. All this, of course, synergistically speaking. Does that help?"

"No," said Martin.

"Psychic vibrations, then? My employers and I receive a—a certain nourishment from the catalyzing of your innermost emotions."

"My soul," Martin mused. "I didn't think I really had one. It's been years now . . . Souls and trading with the Devil and Daniel Webster and all that thing's supposed to be pretty passé, even for bad movies, isn't it?"

"Oh don't be silly, baby. This isn't anything as absolute as trading with Satan for keeps. Do I look like that kind of girl?"

Martin looked at her smile, saw how even and white and sharp her teeth were, and felt a chill of apprehension. "What do I get out of this?"

"I just want you to have a good time."

"That tells me next to nothing."

"Could I have some more tea, please?" She spooned fresh instant from the jar of tea.

"You're not answering me!"

"Don't shout, love. Please?" Her tone was conciliatory, gentle. Martin's hand shook slightly as he poured her another cup of hot water.

"That's better," she said, daintily adding the milk. "You've got to realize that we demons aren't malevolent, dear. There's nothing sinister about this. Just accept me as I am, please." She looked down into

the box of oatmeal cookies. "I'm just a succubus who likes you very much, Martin. I want to give you pleasure and take pleasure in return."

"Dulcinea." She didn't look up; didn't meet his eyes. "I don't think you're telling the truth. At least not all of it." He shoved back his chair and stood. "Whoever you are, whatever you are, I'm tired. I want to sleep. My gums ache and I have to rest. Do you mind?"

She shrugged.

He turned to the telephone. "I'll get you a cab." There was no dial tone. He clicked the cradle up and down. Still no reassuring hum. He looked back and Dulcinea was laughing; but softly. Martin strode purposefully into the living room.

The succubus heard him trying the door. She called, "No good, darling. It isn't locked, but you won't be able to open it." Martin reappeared in the kitchen doorway.

"I'd really like you to leave." Stress made the pitch of his voice rise.

"Resign yourself, sweetheart. You can't be rid of me. Oh, you could fast, pray, and go to confession—that's the old way, Martin—but in your case I doubt it would be too effective."

"Listen, this is insane."

"Third time's not a charm, dear. Don't be a bore." She had taken off the robe and draped it carelessly over a kitchen chair. She pressed herself against Martin; at the same time, she flipped the light switch and Martin had a final glimpse of her face.

My God! What's happening? The room reverted to night and Martin felt only Dulcinea's skin, smelled a strange, musky perfume, listened as the succubus

whispered strange soft things in his ear that seemed more obscene than any words he had ever read. Vertigo overcame him. He felt fear—the gut-level, wrenching thing—the falling helplessly from an endless height, the weight of pursuit through dusky swamps where muck clung tenaciously to every leaden footstep. Fear, fear, and he screamed.

"Oh baby, poor baby," she whispered, holding him like a child, kissing his face and neck, comforting him. "Come here."

She led Martin to his bedroom and undressed him as he began to cry; then lay beside him. He stared through dilated pupils at the darkness of the bedroom—the night-light seemed to have gone out.

Above him—up there? Martin could no longer trust his sense of equilibrium—up there where the ceiling ought to be was a deeper darkness, a shadow more *black* than black, a sucking penumbra that pulsed in and out, in and out, in . . . Mostly in.

No! Martin knew he was screaming only in his mind. Screaming, hating what was happening, screaming, fearing, fearing . . . what?

Dulcinea spun skilled dreams for Martin. He swam with her in an ice-green, coral-floored lagoon. The water temperature was higher than that of blood. They dove slow arabesques through the satin fluid. They met teasingly, tantalized, hovering like inquisitive dolphins.

No!

They sat opposite each other across a rough plank table, each staring into the other's eyes. The table had been laden with a decadent selection of aphrodisiac delights. No longer. She leaned toward him, took his

hands in hers, slowly drew him down upon the table, swept the empty dishes aside with an impatient sweep of hand . . .

No!

It was a carrousel of moist, slick flirtations; of superheated fleeting touches . . .

Scenes from harems and ski lodges and sensual seascapes and small boats rocking and plush-carpeted stair landings in a New Orleans gaming house and a sunny mountain meadow and—

No! No! Nononono!

Fight! he thought. He fought and found strengths he'd never suspected were inside. *No! I don't want you or need you get out get away go!*

And he won. Somehow, some way he pushed the darkness back. He felt it recede until it hung sullenly just below the ceiling again and he felt Dulcinea move away from him. Startled, he realized he was looking at a pair of blue eyes—hers. The night-light was glowing again. He could see Dulcinea and the maple bed-table and the tacky wallpaper that had been there when he moved in—and the rest of the bedroom.

The succubus closed her eyes and seemed to capitulate. "Martin dearest, I don't believe this . . . Never before, in eleven thousand years, has anyone so frustrated me. My lord, Belial, I'm horny!"

Martin felt very tired. "You just don't understand."

"Oh, but I think I will," said Dulcinea sulkily.

"Maybe, like you said, it's the times." Martin touched the drops of sweat on his chest and used the blue chenille spread to blot them. "Maybe people are, well, different now."

"Some people," said Dulcinea. "We're desperate.

Believers seem to be fewer each century. each decade; even each year." She watched him with an expression he interpreted as desperation.

"I'm sorry," said Martin, "really. But no."

"I *wasn't* pleading." Dulcinea shook her head and let a smile soften the hard set of her mouth. "My colleagues and I will make it. Survive, that is. We are learning to adapt to the times."

"Good luck," said Martin. He felt he could afford to be magnanimous.

"It could have been nicer," said Dulcinea, "but—" She smiled again, this time rather ferally, and silently vanished.

Martin stared. The depression where the succubus had lain began to smooth out. One of the bed-springs made a steely noise. Martin rolled onto his back among the rumpled, sweat-stained sheets and stopped, shocked. The fain umbra of the black cloud was still up there, perceptibly pulsing.

"Why aren't you gone?" Martin whispered.

Something beside him cleared its throat.

Martin slowly raised his head, looked, stared unbelieving. He took in the soft sheen of leather, the gleam of metal, the rippling oiled musculature. The features were not those of Dulcinea; but the family resemblance was undeniable.

Martin wanted to shout for Dulcinea to reappear. He couldn't; his vocal cords were frozen.

The voice was silver, like the jangling of chains. "Hello, lover," said the incubus. "We're going to have such a *good* time."

STRETCH FORTH THINE HAND

by

Gregory Long

The decapitated head plummeted down the ten floors of the elevator shaft. Death is a process, a series of methodical steps that lead to a point of irreversibility; the brain cannot survive oxygen starvation for more than a few moments. There were only seconds left to Oskar von Reyn's consciousness. Terrified, he struggled to release his mind, to project it, to reincarnate it. As his head fell, the blackness of the shaft seemed like an unending tunnel.

Dama Kroger was on her hands and knees on the tenth floor, stripping the stubborn film of wax. Keys jingled in her pocket. It was late afternoon. Except for his secretary, all of Dr. von Reyn's assistants had gone home. The doctor was alone in his private consultation room with a client.

Dr. von Reyn leased the entire floor. On one end

there were labs and dream and sensory-deprivation chambers; on the other end, the secretary's office and the consultation room. The doctor always spoke to his female clients there—quietly, undisturbed.

Kroger spat violently on the floor, then furiously scrubbed the brown spittle into the yellowing suds. More than once, she had heard von Reyn faintly grunting behind the closed door as he "counseled" his female clients. Kroger would creep near, emptying the hall ashtrays, listening. At first, he always grunted like a spoiled child, ill-tempered, demanding—then, as he became further aroused, morbidly, like a whining, spread-eagled dog.

Kroger loathed him. She didn't know why—or care to know. She was an angel of judgment, the hand of God's testimony against evil. Three weeks ago she had come across his picture and an article about his institution in a newspaper discarded on a rubbish heap. She had recognized the face after forty years; the soft, pampered skin, the greedy, sensual eyes. She half-understood retribution; she half-understood nothing altogether. She was a blind agent of nemesis, like a devouring worm in a soil-black universe. Not knowing why, she took a job as cleaning lady on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors. The characteristic of a psi event is spontaneity; she did not know it but she was waiting for a psi event to occur.

Kroger loathed von Reyn. She had loathed him during the trip across the Atlantic in 1938. Wrapped in furs, he had been carried about on the ship's blustery decks in fawning, aristocratic arms. At the age of six he already knew how to wring forth pity and tears from innocent bystanders; they saw his pale cheeks and sad,

gray eyes; it was thought that he had a weak heart.

And she loathed her so-called fellow citizens on board the ship. Uprooted by the Nazi tyranny from the legendary land of their noble "fathers," they remorselessly prowled the decks, searching for the remnants of an imaginary, protective past. They stared longingly at Jewish intellectuals, at wrinkled Hapsburgers, at the nearly extinct faces of old and plumed military grandeur. They described among themselves the sensitive, high-minded mental agonies of the bored rich, as if the pampered ennui of the upper classes made their own shattered and deluded middle-class condition more bearable.

Kroger wanted none of it, neither the envy nor the luxury. She was simple, direct, and without illusions. She came from rugged Lutheran stock. The justification for her life and actions was blind faith in the darkness of herself and a violent God.

She disembarked the contemptible ship in New York. It was a disgusting monument to German middle-class disillusionment: the rich had received preferential treatment during the immigration procedures. Kroger wasn't surprised; the upper classes had never given her anything, in her school books or in life. She knew they never would, and she was too optimistic about herself to care. Here she was, a survivor of the work camps, an orphan, self-righteous in her faith, and a virgin. She walked onto American soil defiantly, never dreaming that in her failed old age she would meet von Reyn again.

Dama Kroger's right hand throbbed painfully as she gripped the handles of the clear plastic shopping bag

decorated with faded yellow flowers. Inside the bag a scrap of brown paper was wrapped like a fist around a fish sandwich made with black bread and wilted lettuce. The old woman listened pleasurably to the muffled flush of plumbing in the apartment building and pictured in her mind thousands of little dark boxes which contained drug addicts, fornicators, and witches. The boxes swayed like a great entangled web of suspended shadows beyond the ceiling. Inside the boxes were voices; inside the voices were moist cavities; inside one cavity, a human brain burst spontaneously into flames.

Her chest seemed to be squeezing her throat. Hunched, she scraped over to the closed door of her bedroom. She never slept in the bedroom. Bedrooms were for dirty sex and naked mirrors. She slept in the front room on a broken-down cot that smelled of cats and squealed under her rump like a throttled bird.

Her trembling hand touched the doorknob. She feared this bedroom; she feared herself. The air in her lungs was thick and heaving. She knew that in this room someone would die—forever, again and again.

She stepped inside. The white void of the room sprang around her, enclosing her mind. There was nothing here; no furniture, no wall decorations, no windows, no rugs. Only a set of wall shelves. She had emptied the room a long time ago.

She was trembling now, staring at the two objects she had taken off the shelves. She did not fully understand the two objects in her hands. Any thoughts she had came from a certain rabid afternoon newspaper. All she could grasp about herself was a constant anguish. If asked, a wizard would tell her that she was

being chastized by the invisible forces of earth, air, fire, and water.

Vaguely, she seemed to know one thing: she was despised by mankind; she was a martyr crucified on the blood of the world. Once she had been conscious of her beauty and hope; now she was unconscious. God was permitting her to live only because her life was nothing more than the permission to know death. She held in her hands the remedy of her misery.

She turned the objects in her hands as if they were rare stones. Somehow, dimly, she believed that an event would take place. Of course she did not know the event. It was being secretly prepared, fertilized, nurtured; the event would be spontaneous and without cause.

Her withered right hand dropped one of the objects. She bent, creaked, retrieved it, then held both objects aloft and screamed a mad, Southern homily.

The empty walls echoed. She returned the objects to their shelves and moved quietly from the room. Standing hunched over at the door, she looked back blankly at the vacant white cubicle. Air wheezed through her nose. She fumbled at the ring of keys in her pocket, thrust the right key into the lock. No. She removed the key. No. There would be time for the lock, she throught brokenly. Soon there would be time. She closed the door and picked up her bag.

Outside in the hallway, she stopped. She found the key for the apartment door. That's right, she thought, turning the key in the lock. That's right. She went rapidly down the hall. And now the film of wax on the tiles had to be stripped; that was most important.

The sun outside was blinding; the brightness ate her mind.

* * *

Dama Kroger's gnarled right hand folded up, screaming in pain. She nearly blacked out. She ground her molars and spat on the tiles. She had no memory; she had no thoughts.

In 1943, Dama Kroger had slipped and fallen in front of a trolley in Philadelphia. The crowd which had gathered around her listened sullenly to her cries. Only reluctantly did someone help her. Somehow, doctors put most of her hand back together. But the surgery was crude and purposely unprofessional, a comment on the prejudices of war. She learned to hate the title "Doctor." Handicapped, she gained no real employment; she gained no friends. For the last thirty-five years of her life she bore the cross. She spent her life on her knees. inflicting agonies on her hand. She bent over brooms and vacuums. She forbade sex to enter the temple of her body.

She heard the familiar door close at the far end of the hall, the click of female heels. She thought dumbly, like an animal, of the patch of fresh wax in front on the elevator door. She muttered the denunciation she had learned by heart listening for years to late-night Sunday radio: "I lifted up mine hand against them, saith the Lord God, and they shall bear their iniquity."

The sharp rap of von Reyn's shoes. She looked up from her bucket. The couple was passing by, von Reyn's pale jeweled hand placed politely on the back of the young woman's belted waist. She was blonde, sleek.

The couple continued down the hall. As they neared the elevator gate they both slipped awkardly. Von Reyn tightened his arm and seized her hand, steadying

them. Annoyed, he looked back at Kroger, then, glaring, pushed the elevator button.

It was a peculiarly un-American characteristic for von Reyn to establish his Dream Therapy Laboratory in a staid, old-fashioned buiding in an antique section of Durham. But von Reyn had his reasons. The location was fashionably Old Europe. There was a proud hint of German racial memories that had passed through old branches of colonial families. Buildings here were dark and imposing. The large walnut salons of the houses held old masters and first editions. Everything in the vicinity, the trees, streets, parks, was in ripe decay, gray and brick and stained. And above all else, von Reyn's mental preoccupations bred fruitfully in the sensuous, moldering air. His rich, female clients found his narcissism irresistible.

Von Reyn's right hand dropped lower on her flank; Kroger heard the old car creaking slowly up the shaft. Brown fingers appeared gripping the black rococo car gate. There was an iron rattle, the gate was opened, and the young black man returned to his seat on the stool. In half an hour, Kroger thought dreamily, she would relieve the operator and run the elevator as she always did until nine o'clock.

The woman turned in front of the open space of the car and clasped von Reyn's hand firmly in her slender fingers. Her eyes were dusky, succulent. A thin, wry smile crossed von Reyn's face. He bent militarily at the waist, the bright hall lights streaking his ash-blond hair. He whispered a long moment in her ear. Kroger stared, hating the light gray ripple of his temple, the pale blue shadow of his jaw, his blond goatee.

The young woman released his hand and stepped in-

side the car. The car lurched and she squealed, falling against the handrail. Von Reyn shouted at the operator who leaped to attention. "Suh, they say it's the hoist cables. They was s'posed to fix 'em yestiday . . . "

The young woman composed her hair and smiled tightly at von Reyn. "My apologies," he said grimly. Hastily, the operator closed the gate, and as the car lifted up, the cables grated, whined. Kroger smiled instantly. Ah, the car is suspended in the shaft, the winch frozen. A pleasant shudder played along her spine. But before she could laugh, the whining ceased and she heard the familiar rattle as the car continued up the shaft.

Von Reyn muttered to himself; the car should have gone down, not up. Then, as he turned on his heel he saw Kroger. Ever since this old woman had begun working on the flood, he had been startled time and again by her presence. He walked toward her. He would clear up this matter of the dangerous wax on the floor; and her constant silence, he had no time for games . . .

But when he reached her, he was distracted by her hand; the fingers were spread apart, frozen stiff, like five red sticks. Unexpectedly, his face warmed. He said haltingly, "You—you disapprove of something?"

She stared at the tips of his shoes, silent. Her body seemed to swell with the salty, fresh odor of his semen, with the smell of imported tobacco, of stale perfume. Kroger hated inherited wealth and the shallow men and women who sucked on it, who wallowed in moneyed neuroses and played at science for the benefit of their narcotic egos. Only von Reyn's assistants at the

other end of the hall practiced real science. In contrast, von Reyn was in the lucrative and subtle business of seduction. As director, he reaped acclaim from his assistant's work while soothing the bodies of the jaded rich.

She thought silently: *And the man that commiteth adultery with another man's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.*

Flustered, von Reyn stepped backwards, muttering under his breath. He hurried quickly down the hall toward the consultation room. She stared at his retreating back and lifted her right hand; it tore at an invisible shape directly in front of her. The door slammed behind him.

She had never been loved by a man. As a teenager in Germany, the drip of her lonely tears had been the implacable pulse of love. Sex had always been an image of darkness, an empty closet where the imaginary lover roosted; her heart on the end of its claws. As she lost her childhood in America, her tears dried up. She was husked of open gestures, of trust. Her torn hand gathered up the shock and grief of her life and preserved it. Old country memories turned to sediment, then stone—memories of her father killed in the First World War, told to her by a stranger; the death of her mother; the solitude of her orphanhood in unmapped cathedral towns.

She stood up, the can of wax in her left hand. She wanted to scream at the pale blue walls of the hall. She wanted von Reyn at the end of her right arm, caught like a rat in her convulsing fist, dying, strangling. Von Reyn was the diseased heart of the universe; his filthy money and educated manners fed on flesh, drank the sweat of lust.

She started down the hall toward the elevator, hunched over and uncomprehending. She was the agent of chance, elusive, without cause. And now, unknown to her, the psi event was beginning.

"According to thy name, O God, so is thy praise unto the ends of the earth; thy right hand is full of righteousness."

She dropped to her knees and unscrewed the cap on the square can of wax.

Von Reyn's decapitated head hit the hard-packed earth at the bottom of the shaft. A white, transparent light shuddered around him. Distantly, he felt his memories and senses slipping from him, passing through a hole he couldn't locate. Then millions of brilliant images streamed into him, each image glowing with its own inner character. The universe was flooding him, an immense geometry of manifold light and color. A pleasant tide lulled him, and he began drifting on a directionless, multidimensional wind that broke apart and reformed endlessly. Then he knew: his brain cells were finally dying from lack of oxygen. Desperately, he gathered together the fading pieces of himself and fought against the temptation to die utterly. Then faintly, near and far, he sensed something alive and warm moving next to his head, and as darkness swept through him, he balled his broken mind together and flung himself blindly into space and time.

Von Reyn slammed the consultation room door behind him and pushed the negative-ion generator switch on the darkened wall. Discreetly hidden ceiling

and floor ducts began humming. He sat tiredly in the dimly illuminated leather chair and lowered the reading light. The spacious room was soft and cool, but he felt hot, temperamental. He needed to calm himself. The ion bombardment should raise his serotonin level, his body's natural hormone tranquilizer. He looked at the white sheet crumpled as in a spasm on the dark therapy couch. At least the ion bombardment always helped his female clients.

Sighing, he lay his head back against the smooth leather and massaged his closed eyes between thumb and forefinger, small finger crooked. The old woman outside, he thought; she was dangerous, unstable. He felt oddly ashamed about his behavior in front of her. And what was even more ridiculous, he felt suddenly ashamed about what he did to his female clients in this room. No, no he caught himself, that was foolish, unreasonable. He unknotted his tie.

He stared at the blank ceiling, trying to empty his mind through auto-suggestion. He failed. The ceiling was like a white bone, and the familiar depression was returning. He both enjoyed and disliked the depression. Today the depression seemed unduly complex and contradictory, as if, he mused, the depression was tied up with the old woman. No. Impossible.

Von Reyn was certain that he knew everything about himself. Or did he? He was forty-six, a bachelor. He knew all about the forties syndrome—the stagnation of the middle years, the sudden burden of loneliness in the face of inevitable old age, the obstinate, adolescent need to regenerate the self before it was too late. And the dark admission of dwindling sex. But the old woman, how was she involved in all this?

He went over to the walnut, glass-paneled bookcase in the shadows and removed *Post Mortem Alterations in the Human Body*. He brightened the reading lamp slightly and sat down. The book was his common obsession. He studied it greedily. There was nothing really new in its contents, but he believed in stimulated intuition, in precognitive insight. *Something* was there.

He read the book because of the hormone changes in his body and the irrepressible need to understand what his psi colleagues called the "survival problem"—the existence of the human personality after death—if what existed *was* the personality. And lately he discovered that he couldn't separate his preoccupation with his own death from the clinical analysis of bodily death. Death wasn't really his specialty, but he had to know: what happened when the organic processess of living tissues ended? What after biological death?

He went to his broad, gleaming desk and removed a rare bottle of Chateau Beausejour from the bottom drawer and poured himself a glassful. Self-absorbed, he took off his coat and flung it on the desk top. He remembered the precognitive event that he had experienced in 1938 on the cross-Atlantic ship as a boy. That event, and one or two others, had taken him to Duke University and discussions with Rhine. In the last week von Reyn had gone over the precognitive event endlessly, seeking its undiscovered significance—a practice itself which made no sense, because the precognitive vision had already materialized years ago.

The vision had first manifested itself at the outset of rheumatic fever. His parents had never suspected the seriousness of his symptoms, the high temperature, the aching joints—they were distracted by the crowded,

barbaric conditions of the ship, the rude, inquisitive eyes of the passengers, the frantic cables sent back and forth—at his father's insistence and the ship captain's ready approval—between the radioman and the caretaker of the estate in Mannheim.

At death, heat is lost from the body by radiation, conduction, convection, and evaporation. The muscles relax and pass into a flaccid, highly extensible condition, then become rigid, a condition called "rigor mortis."

The wine warmed his chest and loosened his neck. He scraped the lip of the glass gently against his teeth and stared into the disturbing blankness of the ceiling.

On the ship during a storm, von Reyn had awakened, sweating. The cabin was empty and suffused with a pale, clear light. He heard the distant sounds of a mournful dance band, the tired drumming of rain. He remembered his parents kissing him goodnight, the swish of elegant clothing, the clicking of the door. Faint, he had sat up.

An image of his father materialized like a ripple of moonlight at the foot of von Reyn's bed; he wore a blood-red smoking jacket. He stared directly at von Reyn, smiling peacefully through glazed eyes, then gestured with a glass sloshing with golden liquor. Von Reyn tried to speak. His father shook his head and turned away, lurching in front of the image of a windowsill. He lifted his leg over the edge and fell down a gaping, black tunnel, swirled, shrank, vanished.

The iridal muscles that support the eyes relax and the pupils fully dilate. A deposit forms on the surface of the cornea. The eye fluids become cloudy and dull.

Distracted, von Reyn rubbed the edge of the page

between his fingers. Primitive beliefs of survival after death, he thought, were direct and straightforward: the soul left the mouth or nostrils and was reborn in an insect. But what happened to the soul when the insect died?

He caressed his beard absently and retrieved a cigarette from his coat. He held the burning cigarette between his teeth as he rolled up his sleeves, sensing the subtle, exhilarating effect of the ions.

His father had died instantly in the dead of winter, 1943. The doctor's report: suicide due to schizophrenia. And homesickness, simple homesickness. Von Reyn remembered reacting to the death with singular tranquility. Because of his young age? Because he could see it as the inevitable destiny of a hypersensitive, medieval and spoiled European who refused to adjust to the high-pressured world of American business?

Soon after the funeral, von Reyn came down with a streptococcal infection and had a recurrence of rheumatic fever, his second attack. He experienced a premonition—of a young man in his mid-twenties discovering the easiest way to wealth and fame—through charlatanism.

A real premonition? Von Reyn laughed. Not likely.

But true psi events did follow soon after his father's death. They came during sudden rheumatic fever attacks. Their meanings were never very clear and far from the classic forms recorded in the literature. Perhaps they were nothing but coincidences, anomalies of chance. But they were spectacular and beautifully spontaneous, and always occurred in the presence of fellow professionals. World-renowned investigators waited at his bedside and returned from the

field to confirm the reality of the precognitive events. The publicity gave him credibility—and continued to produce momentum for his career when the attacks vanished in his mid-twenties. By then von Reyn was a star, an academic whiz, a scholar and a showman. Using his inheritance and gifts generated from his fame, he was able to institute his dream laboratories, a revolutinary step which predated by ten years Ullman and Krippner's work at the Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn. Von Reyn was established, recognized, deferred to. Then what was bothering him? And the old cleaning woman? Who was she?

He sat down in the chair and nervously picked up the glass of rich, red wine.

With cessation of blood circulation, the blood moves to the dependent portions of the body. Small vessels and capillaries of the lower skin surface become engorged with blood and bluish-red discolorations occur called postmortem lividity—or "livor mortis."

Despite the ions, von Reyn felt worn out. It was because of the central question that constantly ate at him. Was the soul some kind of pure unchanging substance, eternal and fixed from the beginning of time—or was it a complex of psychoenergetic elements which changed from moment to moment, like electron wave-particles in shifting energy states?

He transferred the cigarette expertly to his last two fingers and downed the rest of the wine. He felt the old lassitude and chronic fatigue of the climacteric of middle-age. Wasn't this the climacteric? The moodiness, the vague lethargy, the need to find new meaning in his life?

He thought about the Hindu transmigration of

souls. The "soul" can escape the eternal, karmic wheel of reincarnation by destroying all cravings and desires and becoming one with Brahman, the ultimate ground of all Being—total, universal energy. Total psychoenergy? But was such a psychoenergy in any way human?

He stood up and poured more wine. He wasn't feeling the alcohol, he thought. That was it, he wasn't getting drunk. He froze; something was scratching on the other side of the inner door of the consultation room. There were rats in the building; sometimes they came up from the basement. He hesitated, heard nothing.

He stared numbly at the burning end of his cigarette. Matter and energy are interchangeable, he concluded. Einstein. The unverse is the ultimate ground of all Being. All matter is energy—the stars, the sea, the human fingernail. Energy, von Reyn concluded, which is totally nonhuman. His heart fluttered. Feeling sick, he picked up the book.

Through enzyme activity, complex cellular constituents split into simpler products. Putrefaction begins. Bacteria spread from the digestive tract through the vascular system to all the tissues. The body organs change color due to fecal. . . .

He threw the book on the chair and raked his hair with his spread fingers, pulling nervously on the cigarette. The shadows in the room seemed to be swarming. He recognized the churning dizziness that preceded a precognitive vision. Could the rheumatic fever be recurring, after all these years? Impossible. Recurrences were uncommon after five years of well-being. It had been over twenty years since. . . .

An undeniable truth loomed inside him. The "sur-

vival problem" had to be a form of metensomatosis, the reincarnation of the "soul" in bodies—psychoenergy inhabiting living bodies. Out-of-the-body experiments in his own labs were confirming it.

Suddenly, selfishly, von Reyn knew that he wanted to live, to live forever. He looked at the therapy couch and his groin tightened in a thrill.

There were numerous out-of-the-body experiences recorded in the psi literature—involuntary or deliberate projections of the "personality," the "soul," whatever, into external space. There were stories of "crisis apparitions"—the apparent psychoenergetic elements of human bodies and minds projected outside at the point of sudden bodily death or violent injury. If such psychoenergetic complexes could enter fresh, living bodies. . . .

Von Reyn stepped over and picked up the sheet. It was still damp. The trembling memory of her warm, scented skin ached in his thighs. He loved her body, her sensitive, tender mind. He loved all of his women.

He folded the sheet and put it in the bottom desk drawer, then returned to the couch. On a low table was the plethysmograph. He used the box-like device to monitor the subtle variations in the blood volumes of his clients during their psi-conducive syndromes. In addition to being anxiety-ridden, his female clients were psi sensitive. By attaching a sensor to one of their index fingers, he could measure their physiological changes while they underwent preparation for therapy. He analyzed the vulnerability of their muscle relaxation, the slowing of their brain waves, their peaceful breathing. Then, as he hyponotized them, he coaxed forth their dreams, unearthing the seeds of their

anxiety, their hidden anger, their clairvoyant visions in which their lovers and husbands continued to inflict sexual abuse and repression on them. And as the women spoke and played out their sexual needs, he listened to them and soothed them, and then carefully, gently, he touched them . . .

Scratching at the inner door. His pulse jumped. The old woman, he thought wildly, his heart caving in. He unplugged the plethysmograph and quickly shoved it inside the drawer. He steadied himself against the desk, staring numbly at the closed door. Could it be her? Why did he keep thinking of her?

He walked forward unevenly, suddenly fascinated by the flat, dark surfaces of the wood panels. the utter emptiness of the door terrified him. He closed his fingers on the knob and swayed. This terror was a premonition, he felt; it was the final fear. What if the out-of-the-body "soul" did escape the wheel of eternal deaths and rebirths and join Brahman—Brahman, the ultimate ground of all Being—*pure, inhuman energy*?

Von Reyn's body went slack; he rested his shoulders against the door. He didn't want to die; he didn't want to lose the feel of the living, warm body. Why, in the last few weeks, had he turned inexplicably to the study of Hindu reincarnation? What if reincarnation did not end in a living, breathing body . . .? He felt suddenly that his indulgent, cheating life had been a mistake.

He opened the door.

"I'm leaving now, Doctor."

He blinked. His secretary. Yes. Only her. The office light behind her head was bright. He squinted uncomfortably at her dusky eyes, her clever, sensuous mouth. She knew what went on in here.

"Yes, yes. The—old woman, she'll be cleaning?"

"She has the passkey."

"Passkey?"

"Yes. For the consultation room. It's standard procedure. Is anything wrong, Doctor?"

Then the old woman knew. The sheets. Sometimes he forgot to lock the drawers. He rolled a sleeve down. "No." He cleared his throat. "No, everything's quite all right. Until tomorrow . . ."

Hungrily, he studied her long legs as she left the office.

Dammit, he told himself, he had to stop it. He was experiencing the climacteric. Preoccupation with sex, morbid entropy of his emotions. He had to fight it.

He went into the consultation room and grabbed his coat, then locked the drawers. He looked frantically around the room. Something happening. Something. A premonition. This time a real psi event. He turned off the ion generator, opened the door a crack, inhaled, then stepped quickly into the hall.

As he locked the door, he thought how schizophrenia was biogenetic. His father had suffered from a chronic form. Maybe this instability of von Reyn wasn't a psi event. It was possible that he was experiencing a sudden psychotic episode, a form of reactive schizophrenia; nothing chronic, just an unexpected, violent freak-out. Various neurotransmitters could be affected by biochemical mechanisms put under stress.

He went rapidly down the hall. No, there weren't enough symptoms. No hallucinations, no delusions, no extreme mood shifts. Nothing but the oppressive fear that all matter was made of nonhuman energy. Why did he fear that? Because most of his life had been

chicanery and voluptuous living? He heard screaming. The elevator. Someone trapped. Instinctively, he broke into a run.

As he approached the elevator doors, he saw the car suspended half way up the shaft; he saw bluish ankles and a gray dress. No. My God, the old woman! He tried to stop his motions. Too late. His feet flew out from under him; he reached out an arm and hit the tiles on his right shoulder, spun around, and slid across the waxed floor like a puck across ice. He noticed the air fade into a pale, clear light. Then this was it: the premonition had come, was materializing. Alarmed, he threw out an arm to brake himself, and a free hand slammed against the opened, iron gate; the gate was folded up, incapable of closing. He gripped, stopping his momentum, aware of a rush of cool wind blowing up from the depths of the exposed elevator shaft beneath his head. And above him he heard a loud clanking, and as he looked up he saw a dark, relentless mass moving. A flat, black edge came into view—the monstrous form of the elevator car descending on him—and cold metal crashed into his face, ripping his head off at the neck. Inside his shocked mind, he looked down into an endless, gray tunnel that spiraled into inexhaustible depths. He saw an image of his father turning like a leaf in a whirlpool. Then this was the final materialization of his boyhood precognitive vision: his father had fallen to his death, and now von Reyn . . . .

As von Reyn's head plummeted, he thought rather simply, *I am dead.*

. . . *I am alive!* von Reyn thought, flinging himself

from his head. A liquid wound opened around him, a rent in space and time. He felt himself melt into the warm, breathing body of an animal, an instinctual animal he had felt beyond his dying brain. Space and time closed like a fist around his mind, and he knew instantly, as if foreordained, that he had entered the skull of a rat.

He felt the rat's limbs react; he experienced an abrupt fear. Trapped in crazed throes, the rat tried to escape the foreign intrusion; it wrenched and tore at von Reyn's mind. Frightened, driven by an incomprehensible urge to live, von Reyn resisted the attack and reached out image fingers and found the bright core of the rat's psychoenergy. The core was predestined with insatiable hunger and unthinking self-preservation. Von Reyn flushed out the rat's will and captured it, grinding down the focus of his own will. The rat's mind struggled, foundered, then subsided, withdrawing into a turbulent shadow at the far edges of von Reyn's mind.

Through two glassy moons, von Reyn looked out on dark smears of water. His vision was cloudy, crooked. He thought of walking and the rat's long tail flicked nervously behind him. He thought of running and the rat's legs began moving. He seized the uneasy balance of the rat's excited muscles and scurried across the wet basement floor. The rat's head bumped into a warm object, and as the rat sniffed greedily at blood, von Reyn recoiled in horror, racing the rat in wild circles. Finally, the rat knocked against a concrete block. Von Reyn scrambled up the side of the block and touched the metal supports of the elevator buffer, jumped and scraped against the cables. The cables were moving.

He heard a rumble. He looked up through murky light and saw a square shape falling toward him. He jumped off the concrete block and landed in a puddle.

Shivering, he stared, frozen, at the descending car. Metal squealed and the car settled onto the hydraulic buffer. Then, as the car lifted off the buffer to start back up the shaft, von Reyn leaped onto the concrete block and in one swift motion jumped onto the undercarriage of the car.

He lay on his side, soaking wet, shuddering. He felt the automatic pulsations of the rat's pounding heart; beyond his mind, he could feel the rat's dislocated mind pacing. As the walls of the shaft drifted away beneath him, von Reyn tried to order his thoughts. He had to explain to someone, tell someone. Wax on the floor. The old woman had murdered him. Madness! He was inside the body of a rat. His own body was dead, but his mind . . . . Out-of-the-body projection did exist! At the moment of crisis, the "soul" can leave the body. To think that theories of reincarnation were—

He stood up, feeling the car slowing. Bright light blinded him. Suddenly he was terrified. It was an old recognizable fear. A fear of death; a fear of being swallowed into a great, heaving sea of pure, unthinking energy.

He squinted his eyes and walked cautiously to the precipice of the undercarriage. The car had stopped. Below him was a flat shape cut with squares. Tiles. And his body. In detached, unbelieving horror, he looked at his headless body. Then the car shook and broke his reverie. The car was hanging above the exit space; now the car was moving downwards. He would

tell someone . . . somehow. Before the undercarriage passed the drop-off point of the floor he jumped.

He hit the slippery tiles, tumbled, slid on his side. He managed to upright himself on his claws, and as he did, he heard a sound, a loud, savage screaming. Cowering, he looked up. A human shape was rushing toward him.

As Kroger worked the erratic controls of the elevator, she forgot the wonderful pleasure she had experienced when the car had landed on von Reyn's head. Stubbornly, the car was overshooting the tenth floor. She fiddled with the lever; the car jolted to a stop. Ah, there was von Reyn's sprawled body below. Blood had ceased spurting from the doctor's neck stump; a red streak stained the drop-off precipice. She looked, feeling a vacant peace. Then she pushed the DOWN button, and as the car dropped, a big, dripping rat skittered and fell onto the tiles next to von Reyn's left shoulder. She did not know what the appearance of the rat meant, but she felt that somehow the rat and the dead body were connected. Her senses went mad.

She ran shrieking from the car. Instantly, her feet slipped under her. She fell flat on her back and slid across the tile.

She got to her knees, her head numb and swirling with darkness. Her right hand clenched, searching. She felt the cold handle of an empty bucket and squeezed. When she stood up, her eyes adjusted. She saw the rat scurrying along the unwaxed tiles toward the consultation room.

She ran with the bucket in her right hand, shouting.

She was the angel of retribution; she was flying on flaming wings. She reached the consultation room. The rat's claws were tearing madly at the undercrack of the door, hunting for escape. She thought sharply of von Reyn; a senseless hatred gripped her hands; she knelt down and lifted the bucket over her head. *In hell, the worm never dieth,* she thought, and she struck. The rat squealed and fell over, then stood up, dazed. She struck again, this time across the rat's head. There was a loud crack. She loved the sound. The rat fell over on its side; a red substance oozed out onto the floor. She thought of von Reyn again, and the thought compelled her to squeeze the handle tighter. She lifted the bucket above her head.

No, something inside her stayed her hand, and words came to her in a glowing stream: *Every branch in me that beareth not fruit, He taketh away,* and suddenly she staggered to her feet, enraptured. There was something else she had to do. The rat was dying, but there was something else. Nausea in her throat, she bent down and scooped the stunned rat into the bucket. An electric buzz flooded her bones; she ran with the bucket down the hall toward the elevator.

At least he was alive, von Reyn thought, marveling. He had witnessed the old woman's hand, her bucket, the murderous blows. And he had screamed in pain, had retreated deep into the rat's brain. All around him now was a throbbing red roar. The rat was dying, but von Reyn was alive.

He tried to move and explore the confines of the motionless rat, but there was nothing to experience but jumbled sounds that bumped and flowed against one

another. He was embedded in unflinching rivers of blood and chemicals, and he felt the distant, mad bellows of the rat's struggling lungs.

And what would happen to von Reyn when the rat died?

Frightened, he beat his mind against the formless confines of his prison. Through a reddish haze, he sensed the rat's dim, laboring will hammering desperately against the wail of encroaching death. Likewise, von Reyn threw himself against the invisible flux of matter, blind and bodiless and deprived of his senses. When the rat died, he would have to project himself, he thought, have to project into a living, human mind. If he could only see beyond the boundaries of this shapeless medium.

Suddenly a change occurred. The intricate nets of pressure, the positions of empty and filled spaces in the swarming matter around him altered. Something terrible was beginning. He was certain. He could feel space and time beginning to crack, to rupture. It was happening again, as it had happened at the elevator, as it had happened on board the ship.

He thought quickly how all psi events were spontaneous, how they loomed mysteriously out of darkness and then returned to darkness. During his boyhood, the premonition of his father's death had been spontaneous. And that premonition had harbored the seed of his own death, a death that had been spontaneous, violent, horrifying. And now an event, another link in the causeless chain, was about to take place—not a psi event, because he had never experienced during his lifetime a precognitive vision that had predicted *this* event. Unless this new event was a psi event of

unimaginable proportions, so terrible no human being could conceive of it. Perhaps, von Reyn thought, perhaps this new event was the materialization of an inscrutable destiny that he had always feared during his life but never knew he had feared.

Yes, that could be possible, he thought. Because von Reyn realized now that his whole life had been a mistake, that he had lied, deceived, and cheated men and women for years; that he had selfishly fed a beast within, had grown lewd, engorged, flabby. And for the last three weeks, barely aware of it, he had been trying to face this truth. Now another part of the universe was beginning to burst open, to prepare a massive bloody wound for him. He would pay spontaneously for all his sins.

Then, without any apparent reason, he envisioned a flat, dark surface, an unoccupied desert void of all color and sound. The desert was dessicated, inhuman, a burning plain of unending, cyclic fires. Was this searing image his final precognitive vision?

He balled his mind together, aware of the final hiss of the rat's lungs, its penultimate shudder. He readied himself for instant projection beyond the dying body.

Kroger entered the empty, white bedroom. The walls were flat and lifeless as dried desert bones. She dumped the rat onto the floor and threw the bucket against one of the walls. The metal clanged, rolled, and lay still. She looked down at the rat for a long, empty moment. The animal's ribbed side was heaving; the gaping red mouth was sticky with dark foam. A small, lusterless eye fixed itself on her, pleading.

She thought of von Reyn for a moment, but the im-

age was misty, fleeting. There was something more important to consider now. Yes, von Reyn was someplace in her mind, but he was hidden, he was more of an intangible omen than an invincible resolution. And now, at this special moment, she was destined to commit a greater act than loathing and decapitation. It was an act driven by random fate, not hatred of von Reyn. Besides, how could she continue to hate von Reyn when von Reyn was dead? No, she was controlled by a disgust she could not fathom, and there was a presence in her right hand, an itching, haunting pain.

As she walked insensibly toward the shelves, she remembered Chapter 12 of Matthew. She had been reciting Chapter 12 to herself for the last three weeks, ever since she had started working on the tenth floor. She did not know that she had been reciting Chapter 12 until now. And now something was wrong. Today wasn't the Sabbath as was the day in Chapter 12. Today was Friday. Or Thursday. Or—

What did anything matter? she thought stupidly, doing the bidding of the energy that composed her body, taking the two objects off the shelves and sitting down on the bedroom floor next to the rat. One of the objects was an axe.

Kroger knew nothing; by chance she was the agent of chance. She spoke because a voice compelled her. The voice was not hers or God's; the voice was from a thousand radio broadcasts; the voice was all the voices that mumbled and wept and screamed in the dank, lonely apartments around her. The voice was no voice—only bleating, agonized sobs of misery.

Methodically, she recited out loud verses 9 through 13 of Chapter 12 of Matthew. There was hope in the

verses, a personal and violent hope—they held the future for her, the consummation of an ultimate, private affliction.

She recited how Jesus went into the synagogue to heal a man who had a withered hand, and the Pharisees challenged Jesus, saying that healing on the Sabbath day was unlawful. Jesus answered by giving a parable.

"What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it and lift it out?

"How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days."

Kroger finished the rest of the parable, speaking into an empty hole in her mind: *Then saith he to the man, "Stretch forth thine hand." And he stretched it forth. And it was restored whole, like as the other.*

Then she spread forth her right hand and wrist on the other object which was a chunk of wood, and she lifted the axe in her strong, left hand and struck at her wrist as hard as she could. She laughed as she shrieked. Events happen of their own accord; the man von Reyn, the man she had loathed, had only haphazardly instigated this act of courage.

Bone splintered and cracked. Again. Again. She was elated; she was compelled by accidental destiny, and she cried another verse now, a verse not from Chapter 12:

"And if thy hand—and if thy hand offend thee, cut it off! It is better for thee to enter life maimed than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire—the fire that never . . . shall . . . be . . . quenched. . ."

She swayed at her waist, on the verge of blacking

out, and she struck many times, over and over. She was determined to restore the rupture of the universe, to make space and time whole, complete, finished. Above all, she wanted to end the days of her pain.

In a few moments her hand was amputated; bright blood gushed in waves from the stump; the room turned in circles around her. She picked up the lifeless, mutilated flesh in her left hand and carried it with her as she crawled to the door. She had only a few seconds, and she looked back at the rat. The animal was a frozen lump of gray fur; it had stopped breathing.

Then she looked at the flat, smooth planes of the door in front of her, at their dark, unreflecting surfaces. There was something unusually pleasant about their shape; like tiles in a hallway, like linoleum to be endlessly cleaned, buffed, waxed. She found the knob, turned it, dragged herself into the front room.

She slammed the door shut with her foot, a wavering curtain of darkness enveloping her eyes. She turned back to the door. The bedroom key was already halfway in the lock. Using her forehead, she pushed the key all the way in. The key filled the hole of the lock; she did not know why but there must be no holes in the door. She pushed a dirty throw rug against the undercrack, and fell onto the floor, gasping, shivering from shock.

Von Reyn was terrified. The rat had died seconds ago. He had felt the last rise and fall of the animal's lungs; had felt the impulsive, scrambling will of the rat dwindle, fade, vanish. And now his own mind was dimming, paling into a mist, into an amorphous, devouring blot of darkness.

He recoiled, contracting into a dazed, red point. He sensed a shape beyond the darkness, a warm, human form; it was far away yet close; it seemed concealed behind a barrier but within the distance of thought. If he could only find it, if he could project toward it. But the barrier, it seemed so vast, so inhuman. What if he couldn't reach the human being? What if, after projection, *what if there were no body to enter, if reincarnation didn't end in a living, breathing body?*

He waited until the last moment, waited until his mind was nothing but a compact point of red light pulsing in collapsing waves of night; waited until his conscious mind reached the threshold of death. Then, possessed by implacable hope and wordless fear, regretting his life and asking forgiveness of no one, he projected.

As she lay on her side, dying, she looked dully at her stump. An image seemed to surface on a pool of scarlet. The image might have been of von Reyn, a reflection in red of the hate that had spawned her death. Or was it her own face there on the slick surface? Or . . . something more?

Because now a trembling withered hand seemed to be reaching down into a measureless abyss, through a crimson tunnel, down down where a labyrinth of boxes swayed. And the boxes were voices, and the voices were rooms that towered in a maze, and in them were faces, and the hand was clutching, strangling a reflection. But really, Dama Kroger thought, there was nothing there in the scarlet pool to touch, really nothing there at all.

Only a cloudy skein of light, the room whirling as

her head fell; her shoulders slumped. The abyss was closing around her; warm blood kissed her face as her head hit the floor. And for a brief moment Dama Kroger thought she heard a thin, gurgling cry. Ah, just a momentary thought. Perhaps the cry was from herself, an inhalation of bloody bubbles, her lips open, a glassy eye focused on the floor. But what did anything matter anymore?

Because at the compressed moment of her death, as all oxygen ceased entering her brain, how could her mind hear anything at all? Unless her mind was an echo—an echo that heard what the mind had not—an echo of the door shaking violently on its hinges, of the door bursting into flames.

SONATA FOR THREE ELECTRODES

by

Thomas F. Monteleone

Because the brain controls the whole body and all mental activities, Electro-stimulation of the brain could possibly become a master control of human behavior by means of man-made plans and instruments.

—Jose M. R. Delgado

The pianist played brilliantly. Some might say *too* brilliantly.

His stage-name was Eberhard Guderian; he had just finished accompanying the Berliner Philharmoniker in Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2. The third movement, the *allegro scherzando,* had been stunning, majestic, haunting. A work of genius. The performance, having been recorded by the master technicians of Deutsche Grammaphon, would become *the* standard against which all others would be measured.

The concert ended with the Rachmaninoff selection,

and Guderian now stood before his grand instrument, smiling and bowing to the thundering Lincoln Center audience. He was the music world's latest *infant terrible,* with his long, blonde hair and schoolboy smile, he was all that the media required to make him a star. Not yet twenty-five, he was the first concert pianist within anyone's memory to make the covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek.* He was what the world loved: gifted and handsome. An unbeatable combination, or so he thought.

As Guderian took his final bows before the standing applause, he did not notice the lone figure sitting quietly in a second row orchestra seat. The old woman sat without clapping, without showing any emotion. When the pianist left the stage for the final time, and the audience began filing out, he did not know that an old woman would still be sitting calmly in her seat, waiting to be alone.

He hurried quickly downstairs behind the stage to his dressing room, silently accepting slaps on the back, brief words of praise. He was very tired. It had been a long tour, the concerts had been long, and he had a burning headache. Reaching his dressing room, Guderian entered quickly and closed the door. There was a pitcher of water and a glass at his dressing table alongside a prescription of Fiorinal, and he automatically shook out two pain-killing capsules and took them with the water. He wanted a cigarette, even though he knew it would not help his headache. Getting up from the table, he paced for a minute, then changed clothes, his tuxedo giving way to a brown turtleneck and tan corduroy jeans.

There was a light tap at the door.

"Come in," he said, reaching for a pack of Marlboros and lighting one urgently.

The door opened and he saw an old woman standing on the threshold. She wore a black dress with a shawl, a small velvet hat with a pearl hat-pin and large, serviceable low-heeled shoes. Her hair was a silver-blue and her eyes were a deep, bright blue. The lines on her face were untraceable and the years were hidden in the folds of her flesh. She could have been anywhere from sixty-five to ninety. She said nothing for a moment, preferring to simply stare at him with her cold, bright eyes.

"Can I help you," he asked, finally.

The old woman forced herself to smile. It was an odd, obvious effort. "I wanted to stop by and tell you how . . . how fascinated I was by your performance tonight," she said in a strong voice.

"Why thank you. Thank you very much." He did not know what else to say, and for an awkward moment there was silence between them.

"I followed your tour with great interest. Everything they say about you is true."

Guderian stood up and smiled graciously. "Again, Madam, thank you." The woman did not react, nor reply. The silence in the room seemed heavy, oppressive, and he did not know what else to say to her.

She stared at him for a moment longer, her eyes boring into him. Finally she spoke in an ugly tone: "How can you be doing this!"

Guderian tensed and he crushed out his cigarette. How could she know, he wondered.

"I'm afraid I don't understand . . . doing what?" He spoke the words with great effort, unconsciously

reached for another cigarette and lighted it.

"I know who you *really* are," said the woman, her voice wavering with anger and a touch of triumph.

"You do?" Guderian looked at her for a moment. How could she possibly know? Who in the hell was she?

"You imposter! Of *course* I know!" The old woman almost shouted out the words. Her lips trembled, her body tense and rigid.

Guderian inhaled nervously. "What are you saying? What do you know about me?"

"Your real name is Francis McKenzie. Born in East Orange, New Jersey. Educated at Rutgers with degrees in Biochemistry and Physiological Psychology. Until last year you were employed by the Rheinholdt Institute for Brain Research in Carbon Ridge, Illinois. You have had *no* musical training . . . *ever* in your entire life."

The words slammed against him like hammer blows. *How could she know!* McKenzie tried to think of something to say, but no words would come to him. He could only stare at the old woman.

"It's true, isn't it?" she asked. "Did you actually think such a secret could be kept?"

McKenzie sat down and crushed out the cigarette, instantly wanting another one. He looked away from the woman, lighting a new cigarette.

"All right, all right . . . but how could you possibly know?"

The old woman allowed herself a brief smile. "You don't know who I am?"

McKenzie shook his head. "No . . . perhaps I should?"

"Perhaps? Yes, I would think so, Mr. McKenzie. I

am *Emma Wallenstein!*"

He looked at her for a moment as the realization hit him full force, then looked down at his hands. "Oh, no . . ." he said softly.

"Yes. Oh *yes*, Mr. McKenzie. My husband was Heinrich Wallenstein—the greatest pianist the world has ever known. We were married fifty-seven years, Mr. McKenzie. *Fifty-seven* years. Do you have any idea what it's like to live with someone that long? Of course you don't! Do you have any idea how many times I've listened to Heinrich play? Could you possibly have any conception? No one has heard Heinrich as I have heard him!"

McKenzie looked up at her. There was a tightness in his chest, in his throat. He felt lightheaded. *What the hell was going on? Where was Escudero?* "I'm . . . I'm sorry."

"Sorry? What an odd thing to say under the circumstances, Mr. McKenzie. You should feel ashamed! Didn't you ever consider me? Couldn't you realize how close I had been to Heinrich? When he played, my heart would soar! My soul became part of him, of his playing. Can't you understand that? Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Chopin! *No one* played them like Heinrich!"

Emma Wallenstein paused, as if reliving precious moments of her past, and a smile fleeted across her face. Then she looked back into McKenzie's eyes, again full of revulsion.

"But Heinrich is dead, now . . . and almost two years after his death, after the critics have said that there will never be another such as Wallenstein . . . after all that, along comes a total unknown—someone

who calls himself Eberhard Guderian—who sets the music world on its ear . . .?"

"I can explain . . ." said McKenzie, wishing that Escudero would show up, would save him from this mess.

"The *music* critics," said Emma Wallenstein, ignoring him. "What did they know of talent? Of the life-wrenching hours? The pain and the discipline that made up Heinrich mastery? They knew *nothing*, less than nothing! But *I* knew, Mr. McKenzie. I was there, by his side for fifty-seven years, for the hundreds of thousands of hours. The fools! They couldn't recognize Heinrich's playing as I recognized it!"

McKenzie stood up, inhaled upon his cigarette, paced about the small room. "I should have expected . . . I'm sorry." He shook his head, unable to look her in the eyes.

"Yes, you *should* have, Mr. McKenzie. When I listened to your playing tonight, I knew that it was not you up there on the stage. It was Heinrich! I knew it the first time I heard you in London, I knew it even then, but I could not believe it was possible . . . but it obviously was. I knew it in my heart, which was being twisted in my breast. I knew that it was Heinrich."

"I can explain everything, Mrs. Wallenstein . . ."

"Yes, I'm sure you can."

McKenzie faced her, determined to be honest with this old woman, who was obviously suffering greatly because of what he had done. He felt responsible for her, and he truly wanted to ease her pain.

"Mrs. Wallenstein, please understand that we did not intend for this . . . project to be anything evil or monstrous."

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions, Mr. McKenzie . . ."

"Yes, so I've been told," he said, putting out his cigarette. "Do you have any idea what . . . what process is involved in this thing?"

"I told you I have had you investigated . . ."

"Yes, but do you *understand* what we have done?"

"I would like to hear it from you, Mr. McKenzie. After all, you are the one who has tampered with my memories . . ."

McKenzie shook his head. "I was not alone, I assure you. Let me start at the beginning, all right?"

Emma Wallenstein nodded.

"To begin with, your husband knew that he suffered from a terminal illness for several years before he died. You knew that, didn't you?"

Again, she nodded.

"When your husband first went to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore for treatment, he met a doctor there, a Jaime Escudero . . . have you heard the name?"

"Yes, it is familiar to me. Heinrich mentioned it several times."

"Doctor Escudero was not a member of the staff at Hopkins, but at the time he met with Heinrich he was there doing some independent research. Doctor Escudero had been a great fan of your husband, and they became close friends while both were at the hospital. They struck an . . . agreement, I suppose you could call it, about which, it appears, your husband didn't tell you."

Emma Wallenstein shook her head. "Heinrich and I were . . . closer than any two people could ever be, Mr. McKenzie. I had no secrets from him, and he none from me."

"Please let me continue, Mrs. Wallenstein. I ask you to reserve judgment until I have explained everything."

"Very well."

"When your husband realized that he was dying, he made several . . . ah, preparations, with Doctor Escudero, who is one of the foremost experts at the Rheinholdt Institute in the area of ESB—electrostimulation of the brain. Doctor Escudero has been perfecting a technique which allows physiologists to 'map out' certain areas of the brain. Do you follow me?"

"Please go on, Mr. McKenzie."

"Let me try to explain this. You see, when we learn something, anything . . . playing a musical instrument, shooting a basketball, even using a knife and fork, it is recorded in the brain, specifically, in the cerebellum. It is done through a series of repetitions which eventually establish what physiologists call 'pathways' in the neuroelectric circuitry of the brain. You might imagine a knife cutting grooves into a piece of wood, and each time the blade follows the same groove, the impression is made deeper, the activity is more thoroughly learned and stored."

Emma Wallenstein nodded. "Yes, I can see what you mean, Mr. McKenzie, but I don't think all this is necessary. You see, . . ."

McKenzie waved her silent with an impatient gesture. He was warming to the topic now, and it was important to him that she hear the entire story. He believed that she would not feel such pain and anger if she understood what had been done.

"The important part of this," he continued, "is that Doctor Escudero not ony had perfected a way of de-

tecting these pathways in the brain, but of recording them in a matrix-computer, and then—and this is the important part—*recreating* them in another brain."

"But *why?* Why would anyone want to do that, Mr. McKenzie? Have you ever questioned such motives?"

He smiled. It was a familiar question among non-scientific people. They did not, it seemed, share the vision and the enthusiasm for the pursuit of knowledge that true scientists like himself obviously felt, obviously believed in.

"Perhaps I can give you an example," he said. "Do you know about the practice in the late 1800's and into the early decades of this century, in which many of the great composers of the day—Debussy, Ravel, Granados, and others—used a German invention called the *Welte-Mignon?* It was a mechanical device, something like an automaton, which absorbed the manner in which a composer played his own compositions, and then without anyone at the keyboard, the machine would play back the piece with all the nuance of the composer. It was a rather crude recording device, but it worked, just the same. Later, these performances were transferred to recording discs, so now we have recordings of the masters from a time when there was no means of electronically preserving them."

"I'm not sure I see the connection, Mr. McKenzie." Emma Wallenstein's face remained hard and grim.

"Heinrich Wallenstein was very much a believer in posterity. He also believed in science. When Doctor Escudero approached him with the possibility that his brain research might be able to ensure that the talent and virtuosity of Heinrich Wallenstein would survive his death, your husband was overjoyed at the prospect."

"And my husband's talent is surviving through you, is that it?"

"In essence, yes. Doctor Escudero spent several months with Heinrich at the Rheinholdt Institute, making path-scans and recordings in microprocessor memories. The data was reconstructed by a computer and then encoded into another human brain. The results were successful, as you have witnessed." McKenzie smiled, but Emma Wallenstein did not react. He cleared his throat before continuing.

"At first the transmissions were accomplished by a direct wiring harness to the subject's skull, then permanent electrodes were implanted and attuned to receive low-frequency, micro-wave transmissions. Look, I'll show you what I mean . . ."

McKenzie walked over to her chair, bent over, and pushed his long blond hair away from the back of his head, revealing three small silver discs surrounded by scar tissue.

"Do you see the electrodes?" he asked, sounding like a young boy proudly exhibiting bruises from a playground fight.

"Yes, I see them." Emma Wallenstein did not sound impressed. "How could you let them do such a thing to you, Mr. McKenzie?"

"I did it for the sake of science, and for your husband's art . . . I think that—"

"You take away another man's soul, and you let them tamper with your own body . . . Look what they have done to you!"

McKenzie looked at her, truly confused. He had thought that a careful explanation of what had been done would help the old woman, but she seemed to be

totally unaffected by what he had told her.

"To me? What do you mean?" he asked.

"You are nothing more than a robot. You are like a player-piano. Doesn't that bother you?" There was an odd smile forming on her thin, colorless lips.

"Of course it doesn't bother me," said McKenzie, lighting another cigarette. "I'm advancing the field of scientific knowledge, and I'm helping to preserve your husband's virtuosity, which many considered to be an artform in itself. All artists strive for immortality of *some* kind. Heinrich was no different."

"No," she said, nodding slowly. "He certainly wasn't."

"I'm glad that you understand, now," said McKenzie. "I never intended to hurt you . . ."

"I'm sure that you didn't, Mr. McKenzie. You see, when I first learned of this . . . this project. I thought it was quite inhuman. But as you say, there are some benefits to such things." Emma Wallenstein smiled the smile which had been building at the corners of her mouth, but it was not what McKenzie would call a warm smile.

He took another drag on his cigarette, trying to understand the odd, old woman, and wondered why Doctor Escudero was so late.

"Tell me, Mr. McKenzie, my reports on you said that you were a pipe smoker. Is that correct?"

He looked down at the cigarette in his hand, and laughed self-consciously. "Oh, you mean this? I'm sorry, does the smoke bother you?"

"Not at all. Heinrich smoked all his life. In fact, I became quite accustomed, almost fond, of the smell of cigarettes. But you did not answer me. I thought you smoked a pipe . . ."

McKenzie nodded. "Well, I do. At least I *did*, until recently. Ever since I've been on this tour, I've been so busy that my pipe was getting to be too much trouble. I guess I switched to these."

"I see . . ." Emma Wallenstein smiled. "Have you ever thought about composing?"

"Me? Why no, of course not. I couldn't possibly . . ." He paused and smiled self-consciously again. "Well, it's funny but while I'm warming up, doing exercises and things like that on the keyboard, I *do* get some ideas. They just seem to come to me, you know? Short musical lines. Phrases that might make good themes for a sonata or two."

"And why do you think you do that, Mr. McKenzie? You have no musical training, isn't that correct?"

McKenzie nodded and smiled. "It's part of a phenomenon called 'print-through.' Something which has been observed in previous experiments. Doctor Escudero feels that it's caused by subliminal material only vaguely acquired from your husband's memory. It's a difficult concept to explain, and I wouldn't want to offend you by sounding cold."

"You are not offending me, I assure you of that. I ask the question because I know that Heinrich had always wanted to compose, but he had never been able to find the time. Did you know that?"

McKenzie put out his cigarette. He didn't like the tone of voice Emma Wallenstein was using. She sounded so smug, almost distinctly condescending. "No," he said finally. "I wasn't aware of his wish to be a composer. Why?"

"My Heinrich was a very headstrong man, Mr. McKenzie. He was a driven, dedicated artist. A powerful man."

"I am sure that he was." McKenzie looked away from her, absently scratching the scar tissue about the electrodes.

"He *still is*, Mr. McKenzie."

"What's that?"

Emma Wallenstein smiled. "I'm afraid I have not been completely honest with you. My husband, as I said before, had no secrets from me. Heinrich and Doctor Escudero had been extremely close friends for more than twenty years . . ."

What the hell was she talking about? An idea spiked in his mind, but he tried to reject it. He looked at the silver-haired old woman, and felt the first twinges of fear tightening in his stomach. "I don't think I understand what you're getting at," he said slowly.

"I'm afraid Doctor Escudero has not been completely honest with you, young man." Emma Wallenstein sighed dramatically. "Surely you must have suspected something."

"Suspected *what?!* What are you driving at?"

"That pacing back and forth. The almost chain-smoking of the cigarettes. Little speech mannerisms. Didn't you ever stop to think what might be happening to you?"

McKenzie stood up, shaking his head. "No, no! That's ridiculous! The print-through phenomenon is well-documented. We expected some of that . . ."

"Then you truly do not understand?" She shook her head in mock sadness.

"Understand what?"

"Simply this: that you are no longer completely Francis McKenzie. In fact, you are in the process of *becoming* my husband, Heinrich Wallenstein."

He forced himself to laugh at her as he began pacing about the small room. "That's absurd! You're talking like a crazy old woman with a crazy fantasy. That's what it is—some crazy wish-fulfillment, that's all."

"You wish that it were, young man. Doctor Escudero contacted me this morning with his latest progress report. He has been monitoring your 'progress' a lot more closely than you might have imagined."

"You are mad! That is so totally absurd that—"

Emma Wallenstein shook her head. Reaching for the telephone, she punched out a number, paused until the receiver at the other end of the line was picked up. "Jaime? Yes, I think it's time for you to come down now. What's that? Yes. All right. Good-bye." She replaced the receiver in its cradle and looked up at McKenzie coldly.

"What's that all about?" He felt slightly dizzy, lightheaded. His mind was crammed full of crazy images, random thoughts, which refused to make sense.

"Your tour has ended, Mr. McKenzie. There are other plans now, and Doctor Escudero is anxious to begin a new phase in the 'project,' as you so aptly called it."

"*What* plans?" McKenzie tried to swallow, but his mouth had become suddenly dry.

There was a short knock on the door. It opened quickly and Doctor Escudero appeared, followed by two men in overcoats, whom McKenzie did not recognize.

"Doctor! What's going on here? Tell this woman what we're doing . . ." His voice faded away as he correctly read the stoical expression on Escudero's face,

the sad shaking of his head.

"I'm sorry, Francis, that we could not tell you everything. But you see, it would have interfered with the progress of the entire project."

"You can't mean that!" said McKenzie, backing against the far wall. "It can't be possible. . . !"

The two overcoated men advanced and stood on each side of him. One of them placed a large, strong hand on his left shoulder.

"It's time to come with us, Francis," said Doctor Escudero.

McKenzie swallowed with great difficulty, forced out his words. "Where are we going?"

"We are going away for awhile," said Emma. "To the mountains. Heinrich always liked to work in the mountains. It relaxed him."

"But I'm not Heinrich!"

"But you *will* be," said Doctor Escudero. "You *will* be."

Some time later, the world of classical music was given an unexpected gift: the discovery of heretofore unknown compositions for piano written by the late Heinrich Wallenstein. His widow told the media that she found them while moving from Campo di Fiores, the late virtuoso's favorite Alpine retreat.

"It's almost like Heinrich is still with us," Emma Wallenstein told reporters on the scene.

FORESTS OF NIGHT

by

Karl Hansen

Lamia dwell in the cold empty.

They are neither alive nor dead, but exist in a limbo between life and death. Their being is only an artifact of time—a parodox caused by their agonal thoughts being caught up in a space/time warp, to give them the appearance of existence, as the flickering images of a mutable hologram give the illusion of motion. Where lamia dwell, time has no meaning. Past and future are fused into one interminable present. Lamia have always been, will always be. Their dying takes forever, so can never happen. Through this paradox of time, they have immortality of sorts.

Lamia are creatures of darkness, inhabiting the deep space beyond Pluto where the sun is only a brighter star. They once were sailors; they know what fears sailors hold deep inside. They remember their comrades and call their names in

graveyard voices. Their songs return to haunt the dreams of living sailors, heard through the empty 21 meter hydrogen hiss like a dirge lost to ocean spray: enigmatic snatches that tease and tempt. But sunlight scatters their songs. Lamia cannot be heard during the day.

At night, a cone of shadow extends from the darkside of each planetary body. Tendrils of lamial song can drift through this zone of shadow, protected in darkness from dissipation by sunshine. During the night, these tendrils swirl across the night-time surface to disturb each sailor's sleep. Only at night, can lamia enter dreams.

It is said that a sailor who blunders beyond the life-barrier into the cold empty, does so in desperation, trying to quiet the sound of his own voice singing the songs of lamia.

A cat's scream mingled with daylight filtering into his room.

Luellan kept his eyes closed, trying to push morning light away. Images of a dream persisted in his mind: a woman stood alone on a bleak promentory of rock. Ice-wind blew through her hair. She looked out across the icesea. A gleaming space needle curved into the sky. *Did she wait to watch a gravship catapult up it into orbit? Was her lover leaving? Would he forsake her for lamia? Would she mourn his loss?* She faced away; her eyes could not be seen. The sheer fabric of her gown was blown around her body.

Again the cat screamed: a long rumble of anger.

Luellan clapped his hands over his ears. Sleep drifted away. Dream images faded. He tried desperately to hold them in his mind. It seemed important that he should do so. Dimly, the dream returned. A high-pitched whine hurt his ears. A dark shape melted into darkness. His mind clouded briefly. When it cleared, the woman was no longer silhouetted against the sky; she was toppling over the cliff. She screamed as she fell from the edge. Her fingers left bloody streaks down a sheer rock wall as she frantically clawed at it, trying to slow her fall. Her screaming stopped abruptly as she thudded among jumbled rocks at the bottom. Dull eyes stared upward. Luellan saw his own face reflected in their wide, dark pupils. Why was his face the last thing she should see? A smile was frozen on bloodless lips. Why did he now stand where she had stood, peering over the precipice at her lifeless form? There were no answers in her eyes. Only the fading image of his own face. Then the dream was gone, lost to the depths of subconsciousness. He could not make it surface again.

Outside, a big cat roared defiantly at sunrise.

He breakfasted with Gordon's other guests outside on the lawn. Long buffet tables were heaped with food: fresh fruit, sausages, smoked salmon, pastries, baked ham, eggs benedict, steaming urns of herb tea and aromatic stimulants. For some reason he preferred to sit by himself on the lawn and not share their witty colloquy and laughter. He had been melancholic since returning from space. Six years in space as a sailor had changed him. He wished he could go back. But he could not. And the dream still disturbed him. He

looked for Firiel, but the chimera was not to be seen. He had sought surcease from the songs of lamia with the euphoria that only her peptide-laden tongue could bring. But he found her joy exacted its price. So he had fled both his tormenting dreams and her claws, leaving the outer moons to return to his childhood home in the desert, along the shores of the icesea. His memories were easier to live with now. But Firiel followed to haunt him further. She had come to earth with Gordon. But until now he had been able to avoid her. He was afraid her lure would prove too strong to resist, her blue saliva too tempting. He also suspected he was afraid she would tell him the meaning behind the dreams that troubled his sleep. And he knew he was not yet ready for that understanding.

But he could not avoid meeting her for long. They had been paired for the morning's shoot.

He overheard snatches of conversation: *Did you hear the beast roaring all last night? . . . Somehow escaped from its pen . . . Has been loose for several days . . . A tiger! How quaint . . . No, not real. Real tigers have been extinct for centuries. A simulacrum. One of Edbryn's best . . . Three meters long . . . Fast as a racehorse, (yes, they're extinct too) . . . Wouldn't want to meet it alone in the woods, must be hungry by now . . . No, no accidents yet . . . Is someone missing?* Luellan found Gordon kept a collection of simulacra of the great cats. Apparently one had gotten loose. That explained the noise that had awakened him that morning.

His musings were interrupted by a trumpet sounding, calling the shooters to their stations.

* * *

When Luellan arrived, Firiel was already at their station waiting for the drive to begin. She was facing away from him. In bright sunlight, her hair cascaded down her back, with touches of spun gold highlighted among the jet. She turned as he approached. Between her breasts hung a large singing diamond in a platinum pendant. The stone was suspended within a matrix of spidersilk-fine wires, repulsed on all sides by a field of pseudogravity. The facets of the stone picked up light and scattered it into a thousand hues. The white metal and blue fire of the pendant were conspicuous against her black skin. As she turned to face him, the pendant swung, brushing against her chamois tunic. She smiled and took his hand, then kissed his lips. Her tongue touched his. He tasted bitter endolepsin. He resisted the urge to spit. The neuropeptide could not affect him orally; it would be degraded by digestive enzymes. But he had too long suffered the addiction of it applied to his CSF stud. Already the temptation was great to return to her. She could banish his nightmares. She could make him forget the voice that swirled into the darkside from beyond the barrier. But then he would languish under a worse curse; he would have to seek her every night or risk peptide withdrawal. And he had gone through that once. Another time would kill him.

Firiel was a chimera—a hybrid bioengineered centuries before to serve as a medic in an almost forgotten war. She had been designed to resuscitate wounded soldiers. Each finger was equipped with a hollow claw that could inject a different neuropeptide hormone. Between her hands, a dipole could be formed from eel electric cells, to deliver defibrillating shock to a heart

in arrest. Her saliva was laced with the most potent neuropeptide of all, endolepsin. Small doses would produce euphoria intense enough to banish any kind of pain; large doses would produce pleasant euthanasia. Sailors whose lovers called to them as lamia sometimes sought relief from her. For Firiel's lover sang lamial songs to her also; a lover she had yet to meet. And she could do nothing to help herself. Even the kind of peace her kisses brought were denied her. Yet Luellan knew it was better to suffer with only one torment.

She looked deep in his eyes. Hers were hidden behind occular membranes that could close to protect them from both vacuum or radiation. Luellan glanced away too late. She had seen.

"You carry the burden well," she said. "Better than almost any I've known. You've learned. But you'll come to me again. They all do. No one can hold out for long. There's only one other alternative." Monomer sweat gleamed from skin black as obsidian with anti-radiation pigment granules.

"How long will I be cursed to hear her sing?"

She shrugged. "Maybe for always. Lamia are not constrained by time. But maybe you'll meet her soon. Then at least you'll know who she is. I have yet to find that out. Maybe you'll be lucky." A claw extended from her fingertip. How well he remembered that claw. Luellan licked his lips. He could feel fire coursing up his arm. "Maybe you'll be lucky," she said, "or maybe not. I can help, if you like. Pain will vanish before the warmth of peptide. You'll be able to laugh at her songs again."

"You ask too great a price."

The chimera smiled. "But we haven't yet set a price."

Luellan laughed. "I paid once, remember. I paid. Not again."

"We'll see." She touched her tongue to the edge of blue teeth. "We'll see."

The sound of drums could be heard faintly.

Beater machines were already in the woods and thickets of the low hills that lay to the west. A shooting line stretched the length of a carefully groomed green, perhaps a hundred meters from the edge of the wood. To the east, were sandy moors that ended in steep bluffs butting the icesea. Usually shots were at birds coming directly toward the shooter—flying low, barely skimming the ground, then flaring up at the last moment, when their dim brains finally realized the real danger was not behind. But sometimes a bird would veer completely away, and either fly parallel to the line of shooters, or it would reverse itself and fly back toward the beaters. Soon the early morning air was filled with the flapping of wings and the sound of gunfire along the line.

At first, everything went well for Luellan. He made several good braces; the pair of doubles that had once been his father's were superbly balanced and perfectly matched. The birds flared at just the right moment, and never into the sun. He was having a splendid time.

But then the birds began to behave strangely. They seemed to fly toward him, as though they were trying to hit him. He became convinced if he did not shoot them, they would successfully impale themselves upon him. But for each one he shot, another one rose from the brush and flew in a straight line low to the ground heading straight toward him. A fantasy built in his mind; he imagined a bird striking him in the face,

clawing at his eyes. Then others joined the first—pecking at him with their stubby beaks, lapping the blood welling from his macerated face. He became frantic, began shooting desperately, grabbing the gun from his loader, snapping two quick shots at the birds, flinging the empty gun back at the loader and quickly grabbing the loaded one. He began to see faces on the birds—misshapen human visages that leered at him, mocked him with cruel smiles of long yellow teeth clicking together.

Suddenly, the beaters broke out of the wood. The few remaining birds scattered before sporadic gunfire. The green was littered with fallen birds, which the beaters began gathering. Luellan felt silly about his overactive imagination. The birds were just simulacra of grouse, bioformed from sparrow stock. You could only be hit by a bird if it blundered into you by mistake.

He noticed that Firiel was standing beside him, watching him. Blue fire dangled between her breasts. Her mouth was parted as if about to speak.

Then she looked to the east.

Luellan also heard something—faint shouting carried by ice-wind.

People began running across the moors. He followed them. Soon they reached the cliffs. There was a crowd milling about the edge of a bluff, peering over it. Luellan pushed his way through the crowd, hearing a confusion of mutterings: *What happened? . . . Who knows? . . . Does anyone? . . . Who is she . . . A dancer from Nyssa . . . Didn't come to breakfast this morning . . . Who would notice if she wasn't in her room, and if anyone did they'd assume she'd arranged*

a liaison . . . She must have lost her balance, slipped on loose soil . . . See how unstable the edge here is . . . You don't suppose the tiger . . . No, don't be silly, it would have eaten her . . . Maybe it wasn't hungry.

He reached the edge and looked over. A woman lay sprawled on the ice. Blood had trickled from her nostrils to cement her gown to the ice with frozen splotches of bright red. Her eyes remained open. Frost formed a filigree on her eyelashes. Luellan looked away, afraid he would see an image frozen within them. For she was the same woman he had glimpsed in his dream. And there was only one way that could be possible. He shuddered.

He turned and ran blindly from the cliff's edge. He collided with someone. Strong arms held him. His vision cleared. Firiel looked at him. Nictitating membranes were dilated wide. Finger suction pads gripped to his skin. She laughed. "Don't believe too much in night-dreams," she said. "Sometimes the truth becomes obscured in darkness. I can chase away your demons, exorcise your soul." She released him.

Luellan ran back across the moor, away from the rigid face he couldn't push out of his mind. If only he could remember clearly what happened at night. For some time he had suspected more than dreams did. Now he knew that when her songs came to him at night, more than his mind wandered to their urgings. She drove him to desperation. He would be capable of anything when his mind was filled with her madness.

He must not let sleep take him unprepared again.

2

A swimmer glided through dark lake water: her body was concealed beneath the opalescent surface; to all appearances only a disembodied head surged nearer with each hidden stroke of her arms. The water rippled out into a vee behind her—spreading vibrations lured hunters near.

Did the killer stalk tonight? Would she be his next victim?

Luellan sat at a table near the lake shore, on white sand of an artificial beach, enjoying for a moment the quiet of evening, resisting for a moment the lure of the faint laughter he heard coming from the house. Before long, though, he would be drawn back to share the laughter, and later, to share the bright illusions of mnemone dust—to drive away with vivid images the dark reality of his own dreams; to drown out with lyre notes lamial songs. And to push further away the unpleasant suspicions that bothered him. He must find a way to stop his nocturnal wanderings.

To the west, stood the towers of Nyssa, ablaze with light. Stars were bright overhead in a clear sky. Not until 0400 would the weather beacons begin beaming the sky; then clouds would form and it would begin to drizzle for a few hours, to wash the air of the city clean. To the east, moonlight streaked the night sky.

The voices of couples strolling came to him faintly from across the lake, stirring almost forgotten memories. There had been a similar night, a long time ago. He pushed an image out of his mind. It still hurt too much. Laughter came to him. But there seemed to be an edge to it, as if they too waited impatiently for even-

ing and the dreams of night. *Had Firiel warned them also? They must realize the dancer had not fallen by accident. Did they realize the danger lurks in my dream-time?*

The water ahead of the swimmer was mirror smooth and reflected an inverse image of Nyssa's skyline. The dazzling towers were even more lovely reproduced on the dark, cool water. Causeways connected the towers like gossamer cat-walks. Fliers flitted about between them, with navigation lights winking like busy fireflies. Lost somewhere beyond the shimmering reflections was the hemisphere of his home, at the margin of the desert, on the shores of the frozen sea. Even more distant, protruding from the icesea and drawing heat away from the water, was the curving space needle. From his dome, he often watched sailships being hurled away from earth, wishing he was inside them.

The glimpse of a dream disturbed him, then faded. Something about the desert. But he did not see a clear image. Then it was gone.

The swimmer passed in front of him; flashes of white skin showed as her arms and legs moved gracefully underneath the surface. But there were other flashes of white in the water. A dorsal fin broke the surface, then another one. He saw broad heads with wide-set black eyes and long torpedo bodies. White ghosts flanked the swimmer, trailing a little behind, crossing and recrossing her wake. She continued her leisurely course, barely making a ripple in the smooth skin of the lake. Her passage hardly disturbed the city's reflected image—only a short iridescent wake of tiny bubbles, with long hair streaming behind. She appeared to float among towers; a strange specter haunting the edge of

civilization—a sand wraith arising at night from wind-disturbed desert to protect it from further intrusion. And with long white ghosts for companions.

The swimmer turned on her back and headed away from shore. She smiled when she saw Luellan. Her eyes flashed with a sudden reflection of starlight. He imagined he could see the blurred image of breasts and a darker shadow of pubic hair against her light skin. But the lake water distorted the image too much to be sure. A name moved his lips: *Deirdre.*

As he watched her swim, a vague uneasiness bothered him. There was something about her face—some partial familiarity tugged at his mind. He knew he had seen her before, but could not remember where. He closed his eyes. A fragment of imagery flashed. Something to do with the shark simulacra that flanked her. He opened his eyes and watched the swimmer gliding through the dark water. The sharks followed. The wake from their dorsal fins wound around her wider slip-stream like ravelling wires. He felt dread apprehension. About the sharks: gaping mouths rimmed with long, black teeth; tiny bubbles swirling into vortices from fin tips. The feeling was irrational—there was no danger from the sharks. They were simulacra, bioengineered from Chinese goldfish. The bioforming had retained their gentleness. They followed the swimmer from curiosity only. Yet as he watched, his uneasiness persisted.

Sand crunched behind him. He turned slowly, reluctant to look away from the swimmer, still afraid for her.

Gordon stood close. Luellan wondered how long he had been watching. His eyes were hidden in shadow

beneath bushy red eyebrows.

Luellan gestured for Gordon to sit with him at the table. He sat down.

For a while, they both were silent, quietly watching the swimmer in the lake.

"There is talk of strange happenings out in the desert," Gordon said without looking at Luellan. "You still live on the desert's edge, don't you? Have you noticed anything unusual?"

"What do you mean?" Luellan felt a touch of panic. His nights were lost from memory. But he knew he wandered about the desert sometimes.

"Oh, just idle rumors. Stories of gliders that don't reutrn, of sand-yachts that are missing. Nothing definite. Nyssa-folk are rather foot-loose, are they not? Prone to take off to the resort islands without telling others. Or even to leave for space without packing. It happens all the time. Nothing unusual."

Luellan nodded. But he had heard an unusual noise at night sometimes—a high-pitched whine. He had assumed it was made by a faulty grav-turbine in a flitter. One flying without navigation lights.

"And of course, there're the livestock mutilations."

"What are those?"

Gordon arched his eyebrows. "My lord, you've kept yourself totally isolated, haven't you. Edbryn keeps a collection of simulacra of desert ruminants—you know, ibex, oryx, eland, camels, barbary sheep, desert bighorns. Some of them have been found dead with their bellies slit open and entrails strewn about. He's quite distressed over it. He is quite proud of his collection. He even has the harmless conceit that his collection of simulacra rivals mine."

Luellan remembered touring Gordon's simulacra museum as a child. It *was* impressive. The building was an imposing granite monolith that stood apart from the other estate buildings. Inside, there were tiers of crystal chambers holding simulacra in frozen storage, ready to be thawed and returned to life for their master's amusement. He was fascinated by Gordon's collection of extinct creatures he had bioformed: lions, tigers, bears, deer, cattle, horses. But he remembered most vividly the mythical beasts: griffin, harpies, sphinx, basilisks. And in one cryochamber that stretched three stories high, there were two great dragon-like creatures with transparent wings and long abdomens, each tipped with a sharp stinger. A bronze plaque told him what they were: *Wyvern—ancient symbol of pestilence and destruction.* Black teeth surfaced in memory.

"Any ideas about who is responsible for the mutilations?" Luellan's palms were sweating. If only the songs would stop tormenting him.

"Not really. I'm sure he'll blame me. Especially since my tiger has escaped. He'll think I'm trying to ruin his collection. But the mutilations started before he got loose. People have become rather aberrant lately. Maybe someone on the verge of Lady Blue's dementia. Who knows? It could be anyone." He looked at Luellan. "And now one of my guests has the impertinence to fall off a cliff. I guess the poor tiger will be blamed again. But I didn't see any tiger tracks in the sand at the edge of the cliff. Tiger's can't fly. They must leave tracks. All I saw were human footprints."

Was there suspicion in his eyes? Luellan wished he knew what he did when he wandered at night. He was

ready to believe himself capable of anything. He still remembered the face of the woman found dead on the ice. He had seen her in his dreams. He must have been wandering near the cliffs then. But he could not dredge from his memory what had actually happened.

For a while they sat silently, watching the swimmer break apart reflections of Nyssa on the lake.

Luellan thought he heard the sad lamentations of lamia, coming to him across the lake. *Did the swimmer hear also? Is that what drew her farther from shore?* Occasionally one of the sharks broke water near her to send ripples spreading out. He imagined her sleek body buoyed on the surface, silhouetted by the meniscus of air and water, with arms and legs moving in long, slow, even strokes. The sharks prowled the water below, twisting their heads side to side, with mouths agape. They were perfect simulacra—exact in every detail save one; their dim brains still thought they were goldfish; their behavior was still patterned by the thousands of years their parent stock had spent swimming endless circles about ornate pools with white ducks for companions; they had no realization of the potential destruction contained in their bioformed bodies. But their teeth were real; their jaws were strong; their broad tails were capable of propelling them torpedo fast.

A reflection of light caught his eye. Gordon was wearing a ring set with a singing topaz. The stone sparkled prismatic shades of yellow. He turned his hand, looking into the stone. Amber fire was picked up by his eyes, like mirrored hate. Subsonics came to Luellan from the stone, sending a chill into his belly. The ring reproduced the songs of lamia exactly.

Luellan felt the cold of space again. Goose-flesh rose on his arms. He remembered again why he had to get away from space.

The songs of lamia represented the disembodied thoughts of sailors whose gravships had gone past the life-barrier beyond Pluto's orbit. Their minds were doomed to haunt the edge of the solar system, trapped forever in all of time. For the barrier was a space/time warp. Once a mind was caught up in it, it was forever, had always been. Lamia were driven to call to their living comrades, constructing wild fantasy in song, promising endless delight to anyone who would follow. It was thought both their apparent sentience and their immortality were illusions of the time warp. There was not a sailor alive who had not heard their songs and been tempted. But sometimes a particular lamia became persistent in bothering a sailor, and its songs could not be pushed away. It was said then the sailor heard the voice of a lover he had yet to meet, a lover trying to tempt him to follow into the purgatory of the time warp of the barrier. The sailor knew a future lover would eventually desert him, but he could not know who she would be, nor when she would leave. But he had the certain knowledge he would eventually mourn a lover. Lamia existed throughout all of time; had always been, would always be. The paradox was that the thoughts of a lamia could be heard before the voice of the lover from which it became.

Now Luellan heard again the songs that tormented his sleep emanate from Gordon's ring. An image flashed: two sailors in a trigee racer, lying naked within acceleration chambers, shaved heads gleaming without need of navhelmets, with the ship in a pre-

programmed orbit, almost floating against the edge of the barrier, while lamia sang endlessly: pleading, begging, cajoling them. They listened helplessly to a voice blended from two. Gordon had learned their songs and remembered them, and sang them to Luellan in fleeting subsonics. Luellan felt again the compulsion to join his mind with theirs, to let his voice mingle with the sad songs of lamia.

And faintly, teasingly, he heard another voice.

Luellan had known Gordon for a long time. When he was a child his parents used to take him with them to Gordon's estate for the shooting. The years he was too young to carry a gun, he had to stay at the estate house and amuse himself watching the few guests that eschewed the hunting, and preferred to amuse themselves in other fashions. His presence did nothing to inhibit their behavior; it had been so long any of them had been around children, they had forgotten there were any restrictions. By the time he was old enough to ride with Petraltr and Saraltr on a hunt, he had seen most every form of diversion.

Gordon took him as his charge when Petraltr and Saraltr approached the inevitable dementia that Lady Blue had passed to her immortal progeny, and chose to avoid lingering mental infirmity by entering the ascetic limbo of the gestalt consciousness of mindmech. Luellan then went with Gordon to the outer moons, where they learned to sail trigee racers. For five years Luellan and Gordon and a woman named Laura had raced together. Then Luellan bought his own sailship. Laura became his leftsail and her new lover, Damiel, became his right sail. They raced against Gordon. An image surfaced in Luellan's mind: trigee racers were

strung out in a smooth line, each jockeying for the best position, trying to find the tightest curve around the pylon. Hard sunlight gleamed from their billowed gravsails and reflected silver from the tiny pods suspended between. The memory hurt. His racing days had been one of the happiest periods in his life. Sometimes he wondered if things would have been better if he hadn't bought his own ship and had stayed with Gordon instead. But he knew that wouldn't have made much difference. He would have heard her sing anyway. He could not avoid that.

Gordon's ring blazed amber. His eyes opened wide, but did not see. Luellan saw the bright images of dreams within them. He knew what Gordon dreamed. He knew why Gordon sought out Firiel. For he and Gordon had sailed beneath the barrier together, in a pre-programmed flight, with their minds paralyzed so they could not over-ride the ships' synthebrain no matter how much they were tempted. There Luellan heard his own lamia sing; there he knew a lover he had yet to know—a lover who would someday hurt enough to seek the cold solace of the limbo beyond the barrier, leaving Luellan to mourn alone, but calling for him to follow, to join her. Her voice came to him in the dream-time. He looked into Gordon's ring.

Cold space was near; the sun was far behind. She soared ahead, gliding on wings of sheer pseudomembrane. Other lamia sang loudly from the darkness beyond. Their hollow voices sent an ache into my bones.

I shouted to her.

She turned. Her eyes caught fading sunlight, shining briefly like a binary system. Then her full face was il-

luminated. Thin skin sagged in loose folds, dry as parchment. Her cheeks were sucked hollow against smooth gums. She looked away, fleeing toward the dark reef and the calling lamia.

Luellan opened his eyes. Yellow fire had ebbed to glowing embers. Lake water lapped sand. Who would she be? he asked himself for the thousandth time.

He had been surprised when Gordon called him and invited him to the shooting.

They had not seen each other, nor spoken, since each came back to Earth separately.

Luellan supposed Gordon thought the ritual of the fall shooting would bring some familiarity back to their lives.

Sand squeaked as Gordon leaned back in his chair. He lay his hands in front on the table. There was something wrong with them. The singing topaz glowed faintly. Finally he spoke: "I wonder what she is tonight, where her mind dwells." He looked out across the lake, to the lone swimmer and the vee of ripples stretching behind. But they both knew he thought of someone else. "She cleaves the stars upon the water, as we did once, and has no further place to go."

"Do you know her?" Luellan asked, as lamial songs waned.

"What?" he answered, momentarily distracted. "Oh, her. I don't suppose. I mean, I don't really know. I thought you did. I thought I saw recognition in her eyes when she saw you. You mean you don't know her? Oh, well. There are so many to be known." He looked away. "And it doesn't matter who she is. You will know her. See the reflection become confused; see how easily the city blurs." He laughed. "Sometimes I forget which

is real. Which is what we want, is it not? To forget that night. But we know someone waits to be loved. Someone waits to be hurt beyond endurance. Who will she be? Will this one do?" He paused. "Listen . . ."

The night had been quiet, with only soft laughter and the splash of shark fins. But somehow Gordon knew what would happen. A deep cough rolled across the lake. Sweat chilled on Luellan's skin. He waited. The cough came again and built in volume, becoming the throaty rumble of a great cat sounding. Then it eased into a fading growl. A tiger prowled dark woods, stalked the forests of night. Would it find prey? Luellan's primal instincts were intact. He saw an image of himself frozen in terror, waiting wide-eyed to feel talons rake across his skin. His heart pounded in sympathetic reaction, then slowed as the growls ceased.

"How did your encounter with Firiel go this morning?' Gordon asked when the cat had quieted. His hands trembled, as though he, too, feared the tiger.

"I think I escaped her once more. We'll see."

"It's not her fault. She really is only interested in helping ease the pain." But it sounded like self-justification to both of them.

"Have you tried to leave her yet?"

"No. There would be no point to that." Luellan looked quizically at Gordon, but he did not elaborate. Instead he said: "Sometimes I think I understand her madness. Sometimes a glimpse makes sense." He laughed. "I wonder about my own sanity when that happens." He looked out over the lake toward Nyssa.

Luellan saw brightness in his eyes. A remembrance.

"Already the dream changes," Gordon said. He watched something intently.

Luellan followed Gordon's eyes across the water. Something was wrong with the swimmer in the lake. She was nearly to the lake's center. But now the skin of water was not smooth; instead the surface was rippled with waves that originated from the struggling woman. He caught glimpses of slender arms flaying against the water and of her head bobbing up and down as she thrashed about, grappling against something in the water: *an image of a shark pack.*

"The substance of her dream changes," Gordon said. "It is no longer such a pleasant fantasy. See how she fights." He looked at Luellan. Yellow fire blazed from his ring to rise between them. The flames were held in his eyes. Such brightness. "Do you remember?" he asked with strange longing in his voice.

The swimmer's struggles became weaker and she slipped further beneath the water.

As Luellan watched, his nightmare returned: *I saw her floating in deep space. Black space. She held her arms extended; sheer membranes billowed out between each arm and leg, filling with solar wind. She sailed before the terrible wind, tossed carelessly upon its currents. Silver hair drifted in vacuum and stood out from her head like dandelion fuzz. For a moment, I shared her joy of free flight, felt too the tickle of hard radiation between my body hairs, soaring outward in wild abandon, lured ever on by gentle singing. We rode the crest of each wave of solar flare. Too late she noticed how far she had gone. Already the long white ghosts assembled between her and the warm sun. She could not return. She was trapped. Her only escape lay toward the cold. She opened her wings, catching the wind, fleeing toward the darkness. Which was exactly*

what they wanted. More white sharks lurked in the obscurity. They drove toward her, huge mouths gaping. Long teeth. One after another they struck, tearing chunks of flesh, shredding her wings. Blood puffed from each wound and formed a haze around her. A huge shark struck, gripped her leg tight in its jaws, and began shaking her back and forth. He saw her face frozen in a still frame—the eyes were filled and opaque blue beneath. Her lips whispered something lost to vacuum.

Luellan remembered the familiarity of the swimmer's face. Did Gordon know something? He felt cold dread: *was she the one?*

Luellan wondered what had caused the woman to drown. He knew the sharks had not attacked her—that image had been induced in his mind by the subsonics of Gordon's ring. Something else must have happened in her mind. Not that it mattered. Already the shark simulacra had sensed the disturbance in the water caused by her drowning. One had surely reached her just as she slipped beneath the surface for the final time. Arms had sprouted from its sides and were pulling her against its body. A mouth had formed and pursed against her face, forcing oxygen into her waterlogged lungs. By now, the simulacrum was swimming back to its post, toward the waiting medmech who could complete the swimmer's resuscitation.

But Luellan was still disturbed. What was Gordon trying to tell him with the subsonics? What did Gordon want? Why did he cast suspicion on this swimmer whom Luellan had not seen before?

They sat by the lake for a time, watching the water quieting. Neither spoke again.

Once more the cat sounded, before they walked together up to the house. Somehow, Luellan heard admonition behind its cry.

3

At the doorway, Gordon left Luellan to mingle among his guests. Luellan stood near the door for a moment. The persplex dome was opacified, cutting out the stars, and reflected compressed images of the people from its mirror-bright concave surface. He was overcome with a sense of nostalgia—as if he was once more on the outer moons, and hard vacuum lay outside the dome, not warm summer air; as if they had gathered after a race, to re-live each leg in arguments concerning the subtleties of racing technique; but laughing with the other crews now, rivalry forgotten, remembering together the endless fall, the whispering around pylons, the warm melding of minds touching. Some of the faces of the guests were familiar—he had known them during his racing days. All the faces were beautiful, with bright smiles and sharp eyes. Gowns shimmered through a rainbow of color and into the non-visible spectra as well, appearing intermittently bright as novae, black as a hole in space. Jewels glittered in flaming circles around young breasts and trailed along abdomens to end tantalizingly short of pubic areas, instead outlining navels. Fingers and toes were adorned with blazing rings of silver and gold, set with singing stones, whose subsonics were low and persistent and subtle—tugging at the subconsciousness, molding emotions, promising delight unrestrained.

And some still had the shaved skulls of sailors, with oiled skin stretched taut into a reticulum by e-wires underneath.

Looking closer, he saw a difference in the faces; they had some quality he had not noticed on the moons. (Or was it that his perception had been altered?) He wondered if they too shared his dream, or his apprehension of the coming hunt.

A hand touching my shoulder, a memory from before.

"Hello, Lue." Remembering her voice from what seemed a long time ago. A body slipped into his arms, pressed against his body; lips kissed his, wetly. Then Geoffry kissed him more solemnly.

"Greta . . . Jeff." He stood looking at them, holding their hands. Greta with soft downy fuzz already growing out of her scalp, as fine and white as ermine, and sapphire eyes; Geoffry no taller than Greta, but stocky, hard-muscled, with black eyebrows touching above his nose. Both with skin as black as obsidian. "When did you get in?" he finally asked. There was a waver in his voice. He coughed to remove it.

"Not long ago." Greta laughed, stroking the down on her head. "It still itches." Which was the way sailors said: too long earthbound. She ran her fingers through Luellan's hair. "Is it true? Are you going to stay earthside?" She bunched the hair in her hand: "You've been away too long already."

After Laura and Damiel left him before the final leg of the Terra Cup race last year, Greta and Jeff had crewed with him. Afterwards, they tried to get him to stay with them out among the outer moons, and futilely, tried to keep him away from Firiel. Sometimes he

wished he had stayed, when he remembered the joy to be found in the utter silence of deep space, or he longed again to see the fire-storms that played in the upper atmosphere of Jupiter—seeming so close as they swung past in augmented orbit, that a flare would surely engulf the trigee racer. And he wished he had stayed away from Firiel. Then he remembered the cold. The hurting always returned.

"We still need a berth for this year's race," Jeff said. He saw the panic in Luellan's face, because he quickly added: "Maybe it's still too soon. No hurry. There'll always be another race." All sailors had heard lamia call. Jeff knew the fear.

"How long are you going to stay?" Luellan asked, and coughed again.

Geoffry rubbed his own black stubble. "We'll be gone before the itch stops."

Greta had gone, unnoticed, and now returned, carrying three glasses. Luellan took one. The wine was so dry it was almost bitter.

"When it's time for you to shave again, find us." Greta smiled.

"Maybe. If that time comes again for me." He wondered how he could tell her about it—about lying alone in the desert, listening to the ice-wind, letting sunlight soak warmth into his flesh, dozing from fatigue because he was afraid to sleep at night, afraid that lamial songs would enter his mind if he slept at night, afraid of what her voice would make him do at night.

Greta kissed him again. "Find us later." They moved away.

Luellan saw Firiel. She seemed to stand alone.

Chimerae are like that. She wore a simple gown of free-flowing white polymer that was clasped at both shoulders and trailed behind her like wings, leaving her chest bare and dipping low in back, and draped carelessly around her legs so glimpses of dark skin flashed as she walked. She still wore the singing diamond around her neck.

She looked at him.

He looked back.

There was something in her eyes, hidden behind nictitating membranes. Something he had also noticed earlier. A dream returned: He was in the desert. Mnemone dust had changed the desert from bland starkness to a rich, vivid landscape. All that remained of the day's heat was a feeble red sunset. Already lamial songs were drifting into the darkside, melting into dreams. The flowers of cacti were opening around him. He was locked by mnemone into a reptilian pattern—swimming in the sand, gliding back and forth. The lingering heat glowed from rocks in soft pastels. But the heat he wanted would be the white blaze of life. His long split tongue darted out, tasting sandwind. Dust flowed smoothly beneath his long body, caressing each flat scale.

He reached the top of a dune and began the long coast down with sand motes swirling over him and staying suspended momentarily to form a wake behind him, before the wind sifted them back into ripples across the dune. Halfway down, he saw a rabbit crouched at the bottom, frozen in terror. Its body heat shone against the ebbing sand. Its eyes were locked into his, mesmerized with fear. He bore down, opening his mouth wide, extending sharp fangs in anticipation of

the hit. Fur rustled, sending out silver tendrils of heat. Amber eyes stayed fixed to his. The distance closed; he recoiled tightly, then struck, aiming his twin needles at the eyes. But instead of feeling the wonderful jar of the hit and tasting soft fur, his mouth filled with dry sand. He felt paws holding his head against the ground. Before needle-sharp teeth pierced his skull, he saw its eyes once more, now black and beady, with a brightness behind. (And with another part of his mind, he remembered a kiss, breasts touching his back, he rolled over to see a slender figure running away across the dunes, with white flecks of sand glittering from black skin.) If only he knew what the memory meant, what meaning was disguised in its distorted images.

His eyes refocused. Firiel was no longer in sight. He meandered through the crowded room, nodding a greeting sometimes. She was not to be seen. He found himself outside, wandering in the garden. Cool air seemed to clear his mind. He sat on a bench, taking deep breaths. Below, lake water was still and dark.

As his eyes adjusted to dimness, he noticed he was not alone. Someone was sitting on another bench, partially concealed by shadow. She turned to face him. There was familiarity in her face—in the eyes.

They sat across from each other saying nothing. Now she was wearing a sheer chemise, naked underneath. Her hair was not yet dry.

"You were standing near the lake," she said after a while. "I recognize your face. You watched me swimming." She turned. Starlight caught and was held briefly in her eyes. She laughed. "The water was lovely tonight."

"Something happened to change that?" A rhetorical

question. He noticed a brightness in her eyes.

"I was a leopard," she said. "I mean, the seal, a leopard seal, cruising the antarctic reefs. Have you ever been to Antarctica? I come from there."

"No. There's lots of places I haven't been to yet."

She arched an eyebrow, then smiled to herself. "They have people there that live beneath the ice, who have been adapted to the cold water. I almost was, you know. They have webbed fingers and toes. Their bodies are smooth and sleek, with a thick layer of brown adipose beneath the skin, and a fine covering of blue velvet fur. There's a man there that swims alone; no, I imagine not alone anymore, but I was the one supposed to be swimming with him." She looked at Luellan and smiled. "Quite romantic, wouldn't you say. Very quaint. But I'm here, am I not?"

"I once knew a nereid," Luellan said, thinking of Sharlyn holding him close when a frost-giant bothered him in dreams. He wondered briefly how her life in the sub-sea colonies was going. Many times he thought of joining her. But he knew he could not go back.

"Don't you wonder why I forsook romance?" she asked.

"I suppose I should ask."

"Certainly. I thought how dull it must be to always be the same. For I can be a leopard whenever I want, or anything else. And tonight I was a seal, sleek and swift. The water was pleasing as it swirled over my body. Who wants to live forever under ice?" She looked toward the lake. "But the dream always changes: they nibbled at me, tearing pieces of flesh from me with tiny needle-teeth. To me, the water was red with blood, and was boiling with the thrashing of their little silver

bodies. What did you see?"

A low moan came from the direction of the wood. Then a deeper rumble. Luellan flashed to the shark pack of *his* dreams. "Just you struggling in the water," he said.

Another rumble, waning. *Waiting for night to deepen.*

"Come inside," he said, feeling cold. She let him take her hand, but paused to listen when the cat coughed. "Deirdre," he heard himself say.

Lights were dim inside. Now the dome was transparent, revealing stars overhead. High above, suspended from the vertex of the hemisphere, a singing crystal glowed with multicolored fire. Music generated within the lattice of the crystal drifted down as gentle as dust motes in warm air, to swirl among people dancing in the center of the room.

They found Greta and Geoffry sitting at the periphery. They joined them among cushions on the floor. Deirdre snuggled against him and he pulled her close. *Deirdre: how did I know her name?*

Gordon stood across the room. He nodded to Luellan, then ran his hand over the top of his head in a gesture that always betrays a sailor, as he unconsciously checks to see if he needs to shave his scalp to maintain proper contact with his navhelmet.

Dancers began to leave the floor. Music continued to well from the facets of the crystal, to become shining sheets undulating in the air.

Firiel stood in the center of the room. One by one, her pepheads detached themselves from the others along the periphery, to scurry across the floor and kneel before her, arms held out in supplication. Music

gleamed from her claws as they extended from her finger pads. Drops of peptide clung to the tip of each claw, glistened with their own blue fire. The chimera skillfully probed antecubital fossae, easily sensing when the tip of her claw was within the lumen of a vein. Then she injected carefully metered amounts of neuropeptides: endorphine, endophetamine, endocybin. The tiderider would then stagger away, to be replaced by another. A dozen times the ritual was repeated. Then no more came. Firiel glanced around the crowd expectantly. She held her hands high, extending all ten claws. Luellan remembered blinding warmth coursing through his veins. He wavered. Conditioned reflex almost sent him out to her. But Deirdre held him close. And he remembered the agony of withdrawal.

Firiel released the clasps of her gown and stepped free of the fabric as it bunched about her feet, naked save for the diamond pendant around her neck. Music shone from polished claws, appearing like burnished finger knives as she opened and closed her hands. She danced.

Luellan saw himself in self-conscious adolescence, watching a naked woman dancing in one-half G, pretending to be no more aroused than his older companions, whose senses had been jaded by thousands of other dancers over hundreds of years. He had suffered dread fear that the hard bulge in his trousers would be noticed. The faces he saw along the periphery of illumination were the same faces he remembered: clear eyes, mouths shaped in easy laughter, skin young and taut, still unaffected by Firiel's dancing. Only he had changed, was changeable. *Was I the only one to truly hear them sing?*

Music spilled from the singing stone. Firiel appeared to dance on the strands of music, leaping from one to the other, suspended in the air on silver wires. Sweat beaded from her black skin and formed droplets that dripped from her breasts and buttocks and brow, to cling to the tendrils of music like dew drops on spider web. Fire began to play across the facets of her diamond, building slowly, only a diffuse glow at first, then becoming stronger.

A crystal pipe passed among the people sitting beside Luellan, then was handed to him. He inhaled the vapor deep into his lungs, tasting momentarily the fruity essence of *Pseudomonas* media, then passed the pipe to Greta. With a sudden start, he remembered his vow to abstain from mnemone, hoping to better resist the urgings of the lamia in his dreamtime with a mind free of illusion. But when the pipe was passed to him, habit caused him to take it, without thinking. It was too late now. Already the virus had swirled into his lungs' alveoli, had entered their capillaries to cause transient viremia, had been pumped into his brain. He wondered which illusion the mnemone would bring him this time, or if he would remember what he would do in his wanderings. Who would he hurt tonight? Was Deirdre to be his next victim? Maybe he wouldn't know. The illusions of mnemone could be subtle or gross distortions of his own memories. There was no way to know which it would be. Only that in some way his perceptions would be altered. The phage-virus inserted into hippocampal cells and replicated, taking over control of RNA synthesis. There was no way to predict the nature of the subsequent chemotransmitters. Only that they would be different. There was no

way to be sure what was a valid memory, what was an illusion, and what was total hallucination. He briefly wondered if his lamia would goad him into hurting herself. Would the paradox come full circle? He knew he was destined to hurt a lover deeply enough to drive her into becoming a lamia (by sailing past the life barrier). Would she, in turn, be the ultimate cause of her exile into purgatory, by driving him mad enough to attack her before she became a lamia? The concept made his head hurt. Time paradoxes were never pleasant to contemplate, particularly if one was personally involved. His senses began to spin as mnemone took hold of his brain.

Firiel still danced: muscles flowed beneath black skin gleaming with wet monomer; hair swirled with quick jerks, frozen in stop-motion; tendrils of music surrounded her; red fire flared from the diamond pendant around her neck.

Deirdre slipped her hand inside Luellan's shirt and kissed him. He leaned back into the cushions, pulling her with him. Mnemone continued to intrude gently into his mind: blue sky, white clouds, cool air flowing across his skin. (Deirdre was easing him out of his clothes. She was already free of her chemise. Her skin was soft against his, her lips teased against his face.) They wheeled in the air, soaring high together, wingtips almost touching. Far below was the icesea, gleaming as green as a cracked emerald set in gold, pierced in its middle by a silver needle. To the west, were mountains shrouded in mist. (Luellan recognized the images. As an infant he had often been carried aloft by his aunt, Alelis. She had escaped the inevitable ennui of Nyssa's immortals by undergoing transforma-

tion into a hybrid, in her case, a whisperbird. Before he grew too large for her to carry, she would take him soaring with her, singing ancient ballads to him as they drifted effortlessly in the thermal updrafts. Those memories now returned, distorted by the illusions of mnemone.)

He marvelled at the feel of the wind flowing smoothly over his feathers, how lightly he floated in the air. It was just as he had imagined it would be to be a whisperbird. The sky was empty, save for him and the girl. As they soared together and drifted in the hot updrafts rising from the desert, his eyes admired her: yellow beak, sharp and cruel; bright, glittering eyes; smooth feathers with the lustre of burnished wood; clawed talons held close to her body.

He moved closer to her. She moved away. He edged close again. She peeled away, diving toward the ground, taunting him to follow with haughty eyes. He too fell groundward, gaining velocity rapidly, with air buffetting him. Below was red sandstone wind-sculpture: spires, convoluted columns, fluted balustrades, misshapen statues of beasts.

She darted among the rocks, twisting close to their granular stone sides, with her wing-tips brushing against them, disturbing grains of sand and sending particles drifting in the air after her passage. He followed, more cautiously. They flew up a narrow, twisted canyon. He saw only glimpses of Deirdre as she dodged back and forth, but he heard her thudding against the walls and could have followed her by the claw marks she made as she used her legs to thrust away when changing directions. Near the summit, the canyon straightened, and its walls converged to blend

into a sheer wall of sandstone, pierced by a wind-sawn orifice obscured by shadow. Deirdre flew straight for the dark opening and entered it without slowing her flight. Luellan followed, hearing her sharp cry of surprise too late, as he already was blundering into the sticky strands strung across the dark tunnel.

They dangled in mid-air, feathers caught and held in a tornado of web. Deirdre cried out again. The web began to move with cross-vibrations to the undulations caused by themselves. Deep in the stone recess, a dark shape detached itself from the other shadows and began carefully advancing along the strands of web. (Somewhere, vaguely, Luellan saw Firial. She danced, surrounded by filaments of music, suspended in the air by pseudogravity. Bared claws clicked against each other. Occular membranes reflected the crimson glow of her singing diamond. Somewhere else, Gordon stood waiting. The sweat of peptide withdrawal beaded from his forehead.)

A ponderous body stepped out of shadow, came closer, was seen clearly. Her black hemithorax glistened, supported on tapered legs too slender and delicate to hold such a mass. A bright red hourglass on her underside flashed. But those noticings came incidentally, because his attention was fixed on the great mandibles. He watched them move back and forth, and he heard only the harsh sound of chiton clicking against itself. Her poison fangs were extended, gleamed wetly. She continued to advance, now hardly disturbing the movement of the web.

Deirdre screamed shrilly and began thrashing about. Luellan concentrated his efforts on one wing. He twisted his body slowly to get additional leverage, ap-

plying steady pressure against the sticky monofilament strands of web, trying to ignore the pain as feathers were pulled from skin.

Deirdre continued to thrash back and forth, unable to break the tough webbing. (Somewhere she writhed on the floor, lying spreadeagled beside Luellan, covered in tendrils of music that were only unbreakable in her mind, while he struggled to lift himself from the floor with one elbow. Firiel stood over them. She pointed with the claws of both index fingers. Peptide gleamed from their tips. She looked at the two prostrate forms before her. Ridges above her eyebrows held viper pit-organs. Their infrared sensors traced the course of blood vessels. She found a vein of her liking. Her lips smiled. Blue endolepsin shone from them. Gordon stood behind her. He clutched a stomach cramping in withdrawal.)

The spider drew nearer, loomed over Deirdre.

Luellan pulled one wing free, and started working on the other, trying to loosen it. But he knew there would never be enough time. Already poison fangs were about to pierce skin.

Then a small brown male dropped from where he had been hiding. He held his pedipalps high and waved them and swayed his body. The female looked away from Deirdre and watched him. Light broke into prismatic colors from her eyes. The male held something aloft in his pedipalps—a silk-wrapped bundle. He backed away. The female followed, lured away by the male. (Gordon stood next to Firiel with his hands caressing her, pulling her away from Luellan and Deirdre. Veins bulged from his arms.)

The male backed to the rear of the cave. The female

stood upright, exposing her abdomen and genitalia. The male advanced beneath her, stroking her underside with his free leg. Genitalia quivered, then opened. He placed the sperm packet deep inside her, then darted away. But he was too slow. She had anticipated his flight and grabbed him with two forelegs. She lifted him high. Her poison fangs entered his flesh. (Claws slipped easily beneath skin, probed and entered veins. Gordon and Firiel's naked bodies were locked together in the embrace of chimera and tiderider. He lowered his head. She kissed it. Blue saliva flowed.)

While the spider was occupied with her male, Luellan managed to free his other wing from the web. He beat both wings against the air, gradually pulling his body away, leaving a considerable number of feathers stuck tight. He gripped Deirdre carefully with his talons and pulled her free, then carried her out of the tunnel and back into the high air outside. Far away, another pair of whisperbirds circled, waiting. (Luellan carried her in his arms, leaving the room, having to get away. Greta appeared in a doorway and pulled them inside. Geoffry was there.) For a long time he held Deirdre. Then her breathing smoothed; she opened her eyes. As he held her, he could not help wondering: *will she be the one; is she the one?* He knew he shouldn't take the chance she was. He should leave her, run away from her, before it was too late and he hurt her. She would get hurt if she stayed with him. Mnemone dreams warned him. She was already within his dreams. And the substance of dreams was always changing. Firiel knew. Had she tried to tell him? But Deirdre was too warm not to hold. Her body felt too nice against his. He told himself she would be safe from

him. He almost believed his lie.

From somewhere far away, a tiger's raspy scream settled over them.

Later that night, Luellan heard lamia sing, as their voices drifted into his dream-time. Their songs filled his head with madness. He ran from the house, trying to escape their torment. But that is what they wanted. They wanted him to run. He thought he heard Firiel's voice among them. And as always, *she* sang. Mnemone still cast its bright light over perception. Which was real? he shouted.

The sky was light with dawn when he crept back into bed with Deirdre. Without waking, she held him close. He looked carefully at his hands, wondering whose blood they were stained with tonight. Sleep was a long time coming. And he had not slept long when a dream woke him screaming. For a dead face once more stared at him from darkness. Waves washed over her, depositing strands of hair across her face. Again, the eyes were open. Fine sand had silted over them. A sprig of sea weed protruded from her nose. An image of himself danced from the depths of her eyes.

Then he remembered something. There had been someone else wandering in the night also. She was standing alone in the darkened forest. Luellan had almost passed without seeing her. But he'd caught the faint fragrance of mnemone. He stopped and looked. A mnemone stick fumed. Fire burned in her eyes. Then she moved. Monomer sweat gleamed from skin dark as oiled teak. Moonlight shone from alabaster hair. She touched his arm, looked deep into his eyes. A chill crept up his back.

"Did she call for you tonight?" Greta asked.

He nodded. "And you? What brings you out at night?"

"Haven't you heard him. I listen for the tiger. He has a lovely voice." Then she laughed. There was something wrong with her laughter.

Luellan closed his eyes and held Deirdre close. She smoothed away cramps in the muscles of his back. The face was not hers yet. But whose was it? Who could it belong to?

He dozed fitfully, until again wakened by the tiger roaring.

This time, it was in warning of dawn.

4

Golden savanna stretched for miles in every direction: tall grass browned by hot sunshine; thorn trees bristling with needles; termite mounds; muddy water holes.

Mech had spent months getting each detail perfect.

They had succeeded marvelously. The air reeked of an Africa that now only existed in memory, or in similar enclaves resurrected for brief amusement. With holographic projection, even the horizon had been altered. The snow-covered slopes of Kilimanjaro rose to the west. Icesea became Lake Victoria. Mech were molded into native bearers and carried bulky loads balanced on their heads. Clouds of dust rose from the flight of simulated herds of wildebeest.

But today Gordon's guests hunted kudu. No other simulacrum would do. A long line of hunters walked

the savanna. They waited for kudu to flush from thickets of brush. Their hands sweated into the wood of restorations of ancient firearms—Winchester's, Weatherby's, Mauser's. They wore khaki bush shorts and chamois shirts. Pith helmets shaded their eyes from the glare. When they stopped to rest, tumblers of iced shandy were placed in their hands.

Every detail was perfect.

Except one—they had seen no kudu. No shots had yet been fired. Guests were becoming irritable. They wanted to know where were the kudu they'd been promised. Their mutterings grew louder. They drank more and more shandy.

Luellan walked beside Gordon. Sweat beaded from his forehead and dripped into the dust. Dry grass rustled as they walked. Bluebottle flies dotted the ground, rose lazily into the air to avoid being stepped on, then settled back like raisins sprinkled on pudding as they passed. High above, a whisperbird made slow circles in the air, riding thermal currents. It watched without interest as great flocks of pink flamingoes passed beneath it. It was not fooled by holographic projections.

Ahead, water gleamed. Heat rippled in waves over a water hole. They approached cautiously, with rifles ready, waiting for kudu to bolt away. But it remained quiet. The only sound was that of their own feet crushing dried grass. Muddy water stirred, swirled with movement underneath its surface. Twin nostrils surfaced, followed by two eyes blinking away a film of mud. Dour reptilian eyes surveyed them briefly, then sank once more beneath the surface. Crocodiles also waited for kudu. They were not tempted by the flesh of

men. Or had they feasted already?

As the hunters walked out of the surrounding thicket into the clearing containing the water hole, there was a flurry of movement. Rifles were brought to shoulder, swung and pointed. Then hesitation before they were fired. For the tawny shapes slinking away were not kudu. They were jackals and hyenas. Then shots did ring out when it was seen what the carrion were, but they hit harmlessly into the dust. Four-legged ghouls were difficult to hit as they zig-zagged across the savanna. Soon they were out of range.

Two kudu lay sprawled at the edge of the water. Their eyes were open, their sclerae wrinkled dry. Each magnificent head lay askew on a twisted neck. One of the great spiral horns had been broken clean at its base. The detached horn was not visible. The wild dogs had chewed away the beasts' genitalia and gained egress to their abdominal cavities. Entrails were strewn about.

Hunters crowded around the carcasses of the quarry they had hoped to kill themselves. Bare toes prodded soft flanks. Hands adorned with singing jewelry shaded eyes that scanned across rolling savanna in search of movement. No one spoke. Tumblers of shandy were drained. Each hunter thought of the trophy out of which he'd been cheated.

Luellan looked at Gordon. He was smiling.

They again formed a long line and walked across the plain.

"Did they do it?" Luellan asked, pointing to the jackals that waited out of range.

"The dogs? You know better than that. They rely on other hunters to do their killings. They eat dead meat.

Why do you think I had them bioformed? In their master's image." He laughed. Across the veldt, a hyena heard and answered. "See, they know their kind." Gordon laughed again. There was someting unpleasant about it.

At the next waterhole, and the next, more kudu lay dead in the mud.

Angry whispers passed among the hunters: *That damned cat . . . Cheated us of our fun . . . Look at those wasted trophies . . . Enough is enough . . . Yes, a tiger hunt . . . It deserves no better . . . Run it until it drops . . . Let it feel the pain of sharp lances . . . Teach it to kill our game.* Pretty feet stamped defiantly into the dust. Haughty lips curled into sneers.

Then they turned to trudge the hot, dusty way back to the estate house. Shandy supplies were depleted. And they would need to prepare for a tiger hunt.

Gordon and Luellan remained behind. They stood together near a waterhole. Flies began to blow the carcass of a kudu. Jackals waited in the distance.

"Do you think the cat killed the antelope?" Luellan asked.

"The others do. Don't you?" He glanced at Luellan. "What else would have done it?"

"There were no cat tracks in the mud."

"You noticed too. The others didn't."

"And there were no slash marks on the carcasses. A cat would have pulled the kudu down with its claws."

"I suppose."

"And how could one cat kill two antelope at the same waterhole?" Luellan touched Gordon's shoulder. "What is happening? Something more than a tiger prowls the night."

"Maybe the dogs ran them down."

"Not kudu. They are too strong, too big. It would have to be something large to bring one down."

"Maybe the mech made a mistake. Maybe there are poisonous plants around. Maybe the water holes have been poisoned."

"Why would anyone do that?"

Gordon was silent.

They left, following the other hunters back to the house.

They came to the river that fed the estate lake. They walked along its grassy bank, grateful for the coolness produced by the shade of trees that grew beside the water, and the wet coolness of the water itself. The river originated in high mountains to the west. It was fed by glaciers there, and was still cold when it tumbled from the mountains. The river made a meandering path through wide meadows before running past the estate house and filling its lake.

An ancient cottonwood tree had fallen across the stream, damming a deep pool of water behind it. Gordon stopped and sat on the bank and dangled his feet in the cool water. Luellan joined him, letting the swirling currents cleanse his skin of dust.

A feeling of *deja vu* touched Luellan. It was as if he had visited this pool before. Perhaps in his dreams. *Was that it?* He looked into the water. Green currents swirled. A patch of white flashed quickly, then sank beneath obscuring layers of water again. Cold fingers clenched inside Luellan's bowels. *What do I fear?*

He wanted to look away. But he could not. He found his eyes held by a fading after-image he dreaded to

glimpse again, but knew he must.

Again a flicker of white beneath the water: a face rose to break the surface, then sank again. But the image persisted. A woman's face: strands of copper hair were pulled wire taut across the skin; fine sand, sparkling like gold dust, had been deposited in the hollows of her eyes; algae dripped from each nostril like green mucous.

He had seen her before.

He had glimpsed her in the dream that troubled his sleep the night before. He dared not imagine how that was possible.

Luellan noticed Gordon looking at him. He too had seen the drowned woman float up from the deep of the pool. There was something unpleasant in his eyes. He spoke: "Another missing guest has surfaced." He laughed at his own pun. "A lovely thing." Pausing. "I wonder what happened to make her drown. There are no sharks in this river. Not even simulacra. What could have happened to her?"

"Why should I know?" Luellan answered sharply.

Gordon arched his bushy red eyebrows. "Touchy, aren't we? I wonder why? Did you know her?"

"Of course not." Too quickly. "Why should I? She was your guest."

Gordon smiled. "Firiel was right. But then she always is in such matters. You are almost ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Nothing much. A little favor I want you to do for me. Nothing much at all. I'll explain later." He laughed. "Just a little favor. It's almost time."

Then the woman buoyed to the surface again. Sand had been washed from her eyes. They were open.

Luellan imagined a face could be seen trapped in their depths.

Gordon was talking again. "She must have sat on this very log to bathe her feet. The water felt wonderfully cool. She decided to take a swim, even though it was dark. She removed her clothes. Where can they be? Ah, there they are. Strewn carelessly on the far bank. What happened then? Did she stand on this very log, preparing to dive into the pool? Did she hear the noise as he approached? Did she have time to turn and see his face? If only her eyes were cameras? But then they are, aren't they? Traces of neurotransmitter will linger along the synapses of optic cortex. Medmech can develop their latent images. Mindmech can see what she saw last. What story will her dead thoughts tell?"

Luellan quickly pulled his legs out of water tainted by death. He clambered up the river bank. As he ran away he heard Gordon singing to the drowned woman.

It was a song he had first heard when he was a child; the same song he now sang to himself in the loneliness of night.

But even Lady Blue could not drive away the voices of lamia.

5

Luellan and Deirdre sat together in darkness.

When mnemone passed among the guests that evening, Luellan had declined the pipe, and so had Deirdre. As the others drifted toward their synthetic dreams, they went outside to be away from the brightness found in dreamers' eyes.

From darkened woods, a tiger coughed and grumbled.

"They plan to hunt the cat tomorrow," Luellan said.

Deirdre nodded: "I heard the talk at dinner. Everyone is quite excited."

They listened to the big cat's voice rumbling off the surface of the lake.

"I wonder if he knows?" Luellan asked in a quiet voice. "He doesn't sound afraid. But he wouldn't be scared even if he knew. I wish there was some way to warn him though, to send him away to safety. I don't want to have him gone."

Gradually the roars faded, as though the tiger had heard. Deirdre took Luellan by the hand and led him to their room.

They made love without talking, then slept.

Luellan woke with sweat cooling on his skin. Deirdre lay asleep beside him. Momentarily he forgot what had awakened him, but then the images of the nightmare returned, to send his heart pounding in wild palpitation: he rode astride a dark wyvern as it soared above the countryside, straddling its black scutum. Wings blurred into invisibility beside him. Below, the ground burst into flame wherever their shadow passed. Smoking wreckage lay in a meandering path behind them. A figure ran across a wide lawn. They swooped low. The figure paused, then looked up. A woman's eyes stared into his. Fear held her frozen. The wyvern struck; its terrible stinger pierced her body like a needle through a voodoo doll. They soared high once more. Luellan looked back. The woman lay crumpled on the ground. Finally he recognized her, despite her contorted

features. A name moved his lips—Deirdre.

He felt movement beside him. Her body shifted in sleep. Would she be next. Is that what the dream meant? He got up and stood before the open window. Cool air dried sweat from his skin. Deirdre continued to sleep. He knew what waited for him in the forests of night, what he must seek there.

Luellan walked quietly through dark woods, pausing occasionally to listen to the night noises. Crickets chirped. Bat wings fluttered as they swooped for insects. Wind whispered through trees. But he did not hear what he sought. Did the tiger wait? Was it hesitant? Or was it already in its silent stalk?

He closed his eyes. He imagined he could hear its roar as the cat charged. He stood frozen in his tracks, too startled to move. Only for a moment, perhaps, but long enough for the tiger to close the distance between them in swift bounds. He wouldn't feel the talons as they entered his flesh. His neck would already be broken. Unless the cat chose to maul him for a bit before killing. Play the game of cat and mouse. A chance he would have to take.

He crossed a clearing in the trees.

A twig snapped.

Luellan paused, straining to hear. His heart pounded like a trip-hammer in his chest. Blood roared in his ears.

Footsteps came toward him. He waited, watching the wall of dark forest. He listened. At last he saw movement through the trees. A figure stepped out of obscuring shadow into the brighter, moon-lit, clearing, and came toward Luellan. But it walked on two legs, not four.

"Trouble sleeping?" Gordon asked. "Or are you in the habit of taking moonlight strolls?"

"A little of both, I suppose. I hoped you were the . . ." Luellan paused.

"Then you've guessed my secret."

"That you freed the cat yourself. An obvious assumption for someone who has known Firiel's blue joy."

"I suppose." Gordon looked around the clearing. "But don't think that's all. There's something more." He stared intently in the dark. "I've waited for him each night. But I fear he is not going to cooperate. He must be getting hungry though. I hoped hunger would make him hunt. But he has yet to show himself."

"Then I'm wasting my time."

"Maybe not." Gordon looked to the night sky. "There are others that prowl the night. Guests *have* been found dead. Something killed them. Something besides the tiger."

For a time they were quiet. The forest was still.

"Will the dreams never cease, the lamia never stop singing?" Luellan asked.

"I think not for you." Gordon laughed. "I found my lover, yet still she sings to me. Yours will do the same. Don't think that when you find her it will change anything. You'll still hear her singing dead songs. I know that. You'll soon know as well. Only Firiel can give you peace of a kind. You know her gift. There is only one escape from either. The same escape. I'd hoped it would be the tiger. But there are other ways." He laughed again, then looked toward the sky. "I may have done something rash. But my cat refused to hunt. I had no other choice. I can't leave Firiel. I need her

blue medicine each day. I'm not strong enough to go without." Moonlight shone on his upturned face. "I had no other choice, did I?"

Luellan left Gordon standing in the clearing. As he entered the trees at the clearing's edge, the wind changed momentarily. The strong musk of a cat was carried to him. Two eyes winked like fireflies as they caught and held starlight. A long body was concealed in shadow.

Luellan approached it slowly. As he drew near, he saw the cat was sitting with its tail wrapped around in front. The tail's black tip flicked back and forth. The cat was watching the clearing.

Luellan continued his cautious advance. Finally, he stood beside the tiger. Yellow eyes stared into his. He saw kinship in their depths. He reached out to stroke the massive head. The fur was soft and smooth. A low rumble formed in the tiger's throat. It was purring.

When Luellan left the tiger, it still watched Gordon. Its tail continued to flick back and forth.

Luellan passed the museum on his way back to the estate house. On impulse, he entered the grim building. He wandered the tiers of cryochambers containing simulacra. He spent a long time watching his reflection from the glass of a darkened, empty chamber, before he finally left to return to a sleeping Deirdre.

Outside the museum, someone waited for him.

She stood in shadow. Her skin blended well with darkness, but ermine hair stood out like snow on coal. When she smiled, he could see her teeth.

"We meet again in the night," Greta said. "Did you enjoy the mythical menagerie. A strange time to look

at frozen creatures, wouldn't you say."

"Why are you here?"

"Maybe I was looking for you?"

"Were you?"

"Maybe. I saw you find your tiger. Lovely, isn't he? A little timid. I don't think he's killed anyone. A shame. But something kills. I wonder what?"

"You know." He did not ask a question.

"Maybe."

But he knew then that Deirdre was safe from him.

Later, when he held her close, he was seeking the warmth of her body. A chill had settled deep into his bones.

6

In the morning: touching, kissing, whispering together. The wind was warm, rustling through open curtains, with bright sunlight spilling on the floor of burnished wood.

The night not yet forgotten: Deirdre there holding him when he woke screaming from a dream, helping him push away images of his lamia and a long white ghost closing its teeth on her, amid the mocking laughter of other lamia. And of a wyvern cruising the darkness, with him astride its back.

Now they lay together, with Deirdre running her finger over his chest, tracing muscle lines.

"Are you really that young?" She laughed. "I've never before known anyone so young. Not for a long time, anyway. And your genome was mixed in the old-fashioned, random manner? Incredible! I feel a wicked

old crone, to be with such a babe."

"Don't say that." Remembering. He placed his finger against her lips. She took it between her teeth. "You're really no older than I." Feeling her body long and soft against his, seeing her eyes holding sunlight.

She kissed his hair. Her lips moved against the hard ridges in his scalp. "Will you teach me to sail sometime?"

"Maybe." A glimpse of two bodies cradled in acceleration chambers, with starlight shining from skin wet with conductive gel. A fragment of lamial song hurt somewhere deep inside.

"Is it hard to learn?"

"Sometimes."

Deirdre shook her hair forward and bunched it in both hands, then pulled it tight behind her head. "How will I look with my head shaved? That *is* how you like your women, is it not?" She smiled. He saw her with long incisors and flat ears, covered with dense grey fur. Then her image wavered, dissolved. When she reappeared, she had long leathery wings, long black teeth. A mouth without lips sang to him.

"Hair always grows back," he said, shaking his into his eyes. Tears blurred his vision; he closed his eyes. When he opened them, she was Deirdre again.

Then they heard a trumpet sound the call to the hunt.

Guests sat impatiently on their mounts. The steeds felt their riders' excited anticipation—they milled around the green, stamping their feet with manes bristling and nostrils flared. They spoke to each other and their riders in low horse-voices, with speech

distorted by hybrid throats. Luellan rode a centaur mare named Anian. A long time ago she had been a woman bored with the endless existence of Nyssa's immortals, and had become a hybrid, a centaur, hoping to avoid ennui by shaping her mind with equine DNA. As a manimal, her life was no more interesting, perhaps, but she was incapable of being bored by it. Platysmal sheets quivered beneath Luellan's legs.

Deirdre was beside him. She gripped the sides of her centaur with bare legs and feet. Her body was wrapped in a silken burnoose. Her brown skin was half-visible through the sheer fabric. Waves of hair cascaded down her back. Her eyes sparked amber.

Greta and Jeff were also near, astride their own centaur mounts.

And there were others: gold arm bands encircled lithe limbs, tiers of hammered silver were stacked on legs, vanadium steel chains were wound into coils and locked into mail, brass breastplates gleamed, brightly beaded leather jerkins and leggings smelled of tannic acid, camouflage coveralls rustled of new fabric; some were naked—they were sleekly furred, or covered with green scales fused into skin with dermolysin and with tall dorsal fins outspread to catch sunlight, or with ruffled feathers and crests with long plumes trailing in the wind.

Whispers and laughter were heard: *Now we hunt the tiger . . . Now his tranquility ends . . . Three meters long I heard . . . And with big lungs, so he will run a long way before he turns to bay . . . Ten centimeter talons . . . Black fangs, as sharp as shards of obsidian.*

From the wood, a roar: eyes turned toward the trees. The guests were quiet. A cough rumbled over them.

Horse-flesh fasciculated in quick jerks. Air whistled from wide nostrils. Tails were held outstretched. Sphincters relaxed; horse-apples plopped on grass.

The rumble quieted. No further sound came to them. But they knew he was there, waiting. As he waited each night.

Firiel rode out on the green on a misshapen centaur—a simulacrum of a unicorn, with a great spiral horn as long as a lance. She wore only a long cape clasped about her shoulders. Pseudomembrane undulated behind her, only minimally stimulated by the subsonics from her singing diamond. Sunlight gleamed from skin like oiled teak.

A trumpet sounded.

Firiel urged her mount toward the wood. Great shaggy airedales surged between the horses' legs, and then ran before them, noses to the ground, voices silent for now. A few wolf-men ran with the dogs. Luellan though he glimpsed one that could have been Dondk, but he wasn't sure.

Silk fluttered from the shafts of lances. Their sharp tips glittered. The other guests followed Firiel toward the wood and entered it. There, the grass was tall enough to brush against the centaurs' bellies.

Momentarily, Luellan felt disturbed. Something was wrong. Something else was happening besides a tiger hunt. A shiver tingled along his spine. He wondered if any more guests were missing. He knew the tiger had killed no one. Now he knew who had, who prowled the dream-time. Or at least he suspected he knew. His suspicions had yet to be confirmed. But something else bothered him. He remembered something Gordon had said the day before when they found the drowned

woman: *You are almost ready . . . a little favor I want you to do for me.* There had been a disturbing tone in his voice.

Luellan closed his eyes.

He thought of Cossacks riding across the steppes to hunt wolves, of Mongols on sturdy ponies tracking snow leopards, of a lone *Bedawi* tribesman facing a lion's charge astride his Arab stallion. Would he fulfill his heritage when the tiger turned? He wondered. He felt empathy for the cat. He didn't want to see it killed. He would prevent that from happening if he could. If he could find a way. That's why he rode on the hunt.

Deirdre rode beside Luellan. Her bare leg touched his. They cantered their centaurs through the trees, following the quiet dogs as they searched for the spoor of the cat.

Whispers continued: *So primitive . . . too, too exciting. . . How much does a tiger cost? . . . How far will he run? . . . My bottom is already getting sore . . . No, it was not sore from last night, thank you . . . I want to be on the point when he turns . . . Which of us will he kill today?*

Luellan looked for Gordon, but could not see him in the crowd. Before, he would have been in the lead. He enjoyed hunting more than anyone. Or he had, a long time ago. Luellan remembered the first time he'd been allowed to participate in a hunt. He was twelve years old. Lorriel had just been taken to sleep with Lady Blue. It was during Gordon's African period. Gordon had stocked his estate with simulacra of the old African mammals: lion, leopard, cheetah, eland, impala, kudu, gnu, Cape buffalo, rhino, and even a bull elephant bioformed from swine stock. He obtained

reproductions of antique shoulder firearms. The night before the hunt, while the adults amused themselves, Luellan wandered down the row of rifles stacked against a wood-paneled wall. He picked up each one. He worked each action, placed each butt against his shoulder and sighted down the barrel. He felt blued steel and dark, burnished wood, smelled gun-oil and nitro-solvent, read inlaid script by firelight, marvelling over the rich old names: Holland & Holland, Griffin & Howe, Winchester, Weatherby, .465 Nitro Express, .416 Rigby, .375 H&H Magnum. He imagined himself standing under a fierce sun on the parched grasslands of the veldt, rifle to shoulder, sighting calmly, waiting for the charging Cape bull to break free of the underbrush so his bullet would not be deflected, squeezing the trigger only when he was close enough that drool could be seen spraying from the nostrils, with the ivory bead held firmly at the base of the bull's broad, shaggy neck. The imagined roar of the rifle deafened his ears. The bull lay dead. His charge had stopped scant meters from where Luellan's father stood, still desperately trying to free the jammed action of his rifle. Luellan saw proud surprise fill his father's eyes as he looked first to the fallen bull and then to him, standing ready, in case the buffalo should rise. If only the imaginary joy he felt could have been realized, could have lasted. For in the morning, there were no charges. The only shooting he did was at the dead carcass of the elephant, and that just once. The heavy magnum's recoil knocked him from his feet amid the laughter of the adults. He never quite forgave his father for that.

From far ahead, the dogs began baying. They had

caught the cat's scent trail. Luellan wondered if Dondk's voice was among the others. He thought he glimpsed a flash of yellow from a sparsely wooded hillside ahead.

Centaurs were urged to follow the dogs. They blindly jumped fallen logs, brushed against tree trunks as they weaved through the wood. The guests were quiet. The only sounds were those of the centaurs: hooves thudding against ground, snapping fallen branches; leather harnesses creaking; lather crackling. And the distant voices of the dogs.

A strange perception flashed: he was far ahead of the bothersome dogs, scrambling up a slope in long, fluid strides. Their barking was behind him. But he was still strong. He could run for a long time.

The dogs ran deeper into the wood, toward the mountains. The tiger instinctively headed for the rugged, rocky terrain of the hills, where he could better elude the noisome dogs. Luellan leaned forward over Anian's neck into the wind. Her hooves threw clumps of soft soil into the air behind. Coarse mane flowed around his face. Sweet dust rose from musty horsehair. Luellan coughed, but his lungs tingled.

"We run again, little master," Anian said, curling horse-lips around the words. "How long has it been since we raced before the wind?"

"Sixty years."

"That long? Time passes quickly for me. No more than a sand mote in an hourglass. But not so for you." She turned her head to glance at him. "You are a man now. And quite handsome. Have you broken any hearts?"

"Not yet." He thought of a disembodied mind

waiting for him at the fringes of deep space, trapped forever in a time warp. He would do something beyond simple cruelty to drive his lover to that fate. He looked at Deirdre riding beside him. Her brown hair drifted on the wind. Her eyes were amber. *Was she the one?*

"Not yet," he said again.

"Then you will. So handsome. Almost makes me wish I'd waited for hybridization." She laughed. "Aren't I wicked, though. I suppose I'll have to content myself with feeling your bottom on my rump. You can't imagine how jealous I was of Alelis when you were a baby. She had you to herself almost all day, carrying you with her above the clouds. Have you seen her since you came back?" Luellan shook his head. "Where did you go? My memory lapsed again. No, it doesn't matter. You're back now. We can go riding every day."

The air was heavy with the smells of the wood-rotting bark, crushed pine needles, fungi growing in moist, shady places. And another smell, faint, ever so faint—a scent that thousands of centuries ago drove men scurrying into trees in terror, and still caused clammy sweat to bead along Luellan's spine—the acrid musk of tiger.

Again he flashed: clawing up a steep hill, loose gravel tumbling down behind him. Dogs barking below, coming near.

Deirdre still rode beside Luellan. The hood of her burnoose caught in the wind and filled with air, as the rest of the fabric billowed out from her body. Her dark skin was outlined by mottled sunlight. Her teeth flashed as she shouted something to him, but the words were too faint to distinguish. *Not her, please not her.*

Geoffry and Greta were on both sides of Luellan and

Deirdre. They rode their centaur mounts with the innate grace of sailors, seeming a part of the manimal. Their movements were coordinated with the centaur's movement, as though coupled with hydraulic fluid. Greta looked at Luellan. There was something in her eyes, glimpsed briefly before occular membranes snapped shut. Ermine hair grew from her scalp like eiderdown. Sweat shone from ebony skin. An alarm triggered in his mind. His subconsciousness was disturbed. He remembered finding her in the night. How long had she watched him wandering about with his mind overcome by lamial dreams? At the time, he had thought it only coincidence. A touch of insomnia, a desire for a breath of fresh air. He had been too relieved that he had not harmed her while somnambulating. He'd not questioned her reason for being there. But was there something else? If so, what? What favor could she want from him? Greta had been his first real lover. Greta and Jeff. She was still a lover of sorts. But there was something hidden in the depths of her sapphire eyes.

He pushed away his suspicions, ashamed of his doubts. *Not Greta.*

Far above, a raspy whistle sounded. A whisperbird rode the thermal currents, drifted effortlessly in the air. Long wings were held outstretched. Terminal feathers fanned out like fingers. The bird's head swiveled back and forth, scanning the ground below. Briefly, Luellan wondered if it could see the tiger. He wished he could signal it to warn the cat of what would happen to it. But he could not cast his thoughts into the wind.

Firiel was no longer in the vanguard of riders. In-

stead, she had drifted to the side and was a little apart from the main group.

Luellan looked about. He still could not see Gordon. Strange of him to miss his hunt. *Unless his tiger had caught him.*

Firiel turned her mount sharply and began to race down a meadow. Luellan slowed Anian and watched. Firiel stood upright, balancing herself on the unicorn's broad rump. Her singing diamond blazed with inner light, as bright as novae in the night sky. Luminescence flowed through her cape. Pseudomembrane stiffened and shook itself, then spread out to grip her ankles and wrists. She bounced in stride with the animal. Her cape slowly conformed to the shape of an airfoil.

Luellan looked beyond Firiel to the end of a meadow. A stag stood there. He had magnificent antlers, with polished white tips and bases almost black, with at least five points on each side. Luellan wondered why Gordon would free him the same day as the tiger hunt. He should have been saved for another hunt.

The stag stood his ground and watched Firiel approach. Her pseudomembrane's conditioning was complete; the subsonics from her singing diamond held the membrane rigid in the shape of an airfoil. She leaped from the unicorn's back, arms and legs outspread, catching air under her pulsating cape, which lifted her upward. She climbed high in wide, lazy circles, until she too rode the thermal currents.

The stag watched curiously, then turned and bolted from the approaching unicorn, even though he was now riderless.

Luellan found himself turning Anian to follow the stag. A strange haze seemed to have enveloped him. Perception became detached from reality. Mnemome colors intruded into drab actuality. The others seemed to recede. Their centaurs' hoofbeats became as faint as the baying of the dogs. The stag bounded through the wood, unconcerned that he was followed.

Luellan had a sudden flash of cunning. He would never be able to overtake the stag now; as soon as he wanted he could elude the centaur. But it appeared the stag was heading toward a canyon that dropped down from the mountains. Apparently he was planning to use it as egress to the wild high-country. Perhaps he could be cut off in the canyon.

He circled Anian around a small hill and rode the centaur at a gallop across the flats beyond. The canyon's mouth lay a kilometer distant. He urged Anian up a steep slope that led to the canyon's rim, whipping her flanks furiously to goad more speed from her tired legs.

He left the centaur gasping for breath, tethered to a tree a hundred meters from the edge of the gorge. He crawled carefully to the rim, belly scraping in dirt. He crouched on a rock ledge, poised and ready, watching the sandy stream bed at the canyon's bottom. He could feel his long tail twitching in anticipation. The black tuft flicked back and forth. Otherwise he held absolutely still, muscles tensed, ready for the spring.

He heard the rattle of sharp hooves on gravel. Coming closer, ever closer. Excitement built to a frenzy inside as he waited. But he held still. Except the tail—its beat quickened. He knew the stag would pass close enough. His position was perfect. He waited, knowing

what he would do when it passed, and not knowing: a deep part of his mind knew exactly what would be necessary, but on a non-verbal level, almost unconsciously; while on a conscious level he was in wide-eyed amazement, unsure of what would happen next. He briefly wondered how he'd breathed mnemone. He had no memory of taking it, but he must have to have such altered perceptions. Then he remembered fragrant dust rising from Anian's mane. *But who would lace her hair with dream-dust?* Who would want him to have a dream? But puzzlement was pushed away by the sound of hooves coming closer: Loudest, the stag's hooves, and fainter, centaurs'. Then he saw the stag climbing up the bottom of the canyon, scattering rocks as it came.

His hind legs bunched beneath his body. Claws opened from his toes.

Overhead, almost unnoticed, a great condor sailed on outspread wings. Something glittered in sunlight beneath it.

The stag passed below.

Luellan leaped into the air, front claws extended, voicing his scream. The stag stopped for an instant, startled, and looked up, exposing its neck. And it did a strange thing then. As Luellan leaped, it had time to lower its head and direct its antlers toward its attacker. But instead it exposed even more vulnerable neck. Luellan landed on the stag's back, wrapped his front legs around its neck, and sank his long fangs into its flesh. They fell to the ground. He held his deadly grip on its throat with his jaws clenched tight. The stag's legs thrashed wildly. Its hooves kicked dust into the air. But his grip was strong on the neck. He persisted. Soon

the flailing of the legs became weaker. And stopped. The stag lay still.

Luellan slowly relaxed his grip. He stood over the stag, licking warm blood from his whiskers.

A group of jackals already surrounded him and his kill. They were cautious, respecting his strength, and formed a wide circle, taunting him with laughing voices. One would dart in, trying to tempt him to chase it. But he was not fooled. He knew all their tricks. He would not leave his kill. He stood over the stag, guarding it, and snarled with rage.

Then he flashed to somewhere else: standing at bay, winded, he backed against a sheer wall rock. The bothersome dogs snarled in front of him. One came too close. He reached out with a lightning-fast slash and tore a long, bloody rent in its side. Another one sneaked in to nip at his side. He hooked it in the soft underbelly and flung it from him. Entrails dragged in the dirt. But he had regained his wind. He leaped high up the rock wall and somehow found enough cracks and niches in its face to allow him to scramble up to the plateau above. The barking of the dogs was left behind. They could not follow.

The condor settled on the bare branch of a thorn tree. Its eyes gleamed with blue light, then coalesced into a fading star. Beyond was darkness.

In the cold empty, she hung limp and helpless. Her membrane wings were shredded. Frozen plugs of blood dotted her body where chunks of flesh had been torn. The killers circled near, with long streamers of membrane clenched tightly between their jaws. Her eyes found me. Her lips moved in whispers; soundless, her words remained devoid of meaning. The eyes widened

as I approached. They tried to warn me away. She could not help herself. Her mouth twisted into a grimace. Ice melted in her eyes. Her hair stood out straight like silver wires. I came too near. Shreds of membrane wrapped around me, pulled me close. As my long black teeth entered her flesh, her screams became audible.

Suddenly he understood.

He knew what favor Gordon had wanted, but could not ask of him. His tiger had not been cooperative. He needed the services of another killer, someone who knew the burden of the song and had already been driven to desperation by it. Someone who would try to kill one he loved. A little mnemone dust would add deception. Maybe an incipient killer could be fooled, his guise unmasked.

For Gordon would do anything to be freed from Firiel. Anything but suffer peptide withdrawal. But there was only one other way. Only in death could he escape her blue prison.

Luellan saw Gordon lying on the ground beside him. A centaur stood near, contentedly cropping grass. Firiel sat perched in a cottonwood tree. Folds of pseudomembrane hung limp from her body. She had known. Her madness allowed her to understand what no sane mind could. She had heard the songs too long. She had become what he would eventually. She saw him as he would be, as she saw herself: worn teeth grinning from a lipless mouth; empty eye sockets, as dark as a hole in space; white bone face; singing the endless dirge of lamia.

A paper tiger? A tissue dragon?

But Gordon lay dead beside him.

Perception began to clear.

He noticed Deirdre pleading with him. Geoffry and Greta stood a little apart. Again he noticed something hidden in her eyes. Something he had seen before in another's eyes. *What was it?* Greta looked at Gordon's body. *Longing? Perhaps.* He let Deirdre lead him away and climbed on her centaur behind her. He wrapped his arms tightly around her waist and held his thoughts close, afraid to think about the time coming. Because Firiel was not his lamia. He would hurt someone else. He would yet drive someone to the cold empty. And Luellan had only killed a stag today. He had not killed the other guests and neither had the tiger. He knew that now. Another killer stalked the dream-time.

As they cantered away, he saw the great condor swoop down and begin picking at the stag's eyes. Then his vision cleared. It was only Firiel, holding Gordon's head in her lap, bringing her lips close to kiss him. More than a kiss! She forced her breath into his lungs. She placed her hands on his chest. Blue electric fire jumped from her palms, blistering Gordon's skin. His body convulsed with the shock. Her claws were bared. They easily slipped into his veins. Blue vitriol coursed along in sluggish blood. Luellan realized it had not been more than four minutes since Gordon had died. And he had only been choked. Firiel could easily resuscitate him. She had brought soldiers back from surer deaths. She had been designed for that grim duty. Living cells could not resist her potent peptide hormones. Gordon's muscles quivered, then his limbs thrashed about. He'd been cheated from his escape. He opened his eyes. There was something within their depths Luellan wished he hadn't seen.

Later, deep in the wood, Luellan again heard the tiger. This time it mocked him with its roars.

7

Centaurs galloped across white desert.

Forest lay behind, its coolness forgotten. Now there was only sand—shifting dunes, moved about by the caprice of the winds, but trapped in a hollow between mountains and icesea. Ebbing sunlight scattered from silica crystals. Sand creatures slipped unobtrusively away—drifted over dunes' crests, slithered into burrows, crawled beneath outcroppings of rocks, or lay still, flattened out on the ground. Eyes watched as the centaurs passed. The sun was almost down; the air was cool with dusk. With darkness different creatures would be about; the desert would be left to the inhabitants of night.

Three centaurs skimmed over wind-packed sand. Sand spray rose from their hooves, then slowly settled back to ground. Greta and Geoffry each rode their own mounts, Luellan rode double with Deirdre. He rested his hands on her bare thighs and pressed his pelvis against her buttocks. Her burnoose billowed in the wind, enfolding him in its fabric. His lips nuzzled her neck.

Lost amid the glare of the setting sun, a tawny shadow flanked their path, racing silently across the sand. Not noticed, the dark shape disappeared behind a dune. A high-pitched whine lingered briefly.

Soon icesea glimmered. They ran free along its shore. Ahead, the glowing dome of home appeared.

* * *

Geoffry and Greta reclined in bonsai. They appeared like two black wood nymphs: long and lean, smooth and graceful. They were naked save for sonic jewelry, having shed their clothing almost as soon as they came inside. Sailors spent too much time immersed in acceleration chambers where nudity was a necessity, to ever feel comfortable dressed. Besides, their bodies were nearly impervious to extremes of environment; they had no need for clothing as protection. They lounged in the embrace of trees groomed for hundreds of years for no other purpose.

Luellan and Deirdre lay together on a fungoid couch. They too were unclothed. Luellan was a sailor inside, with a sailor's feelings. As for Deirdre, she had never known modesty.

A fountain splashed soft light.

"You were a tiger." Deirdre said, "How absolutely exciting! I've never had that mnemone. How wonderfully primitive. No wonder you leaped on poor Gordon and choked him. What tiger wouldn't? Lucky that chimera was there to bring him back."

"There are two kinds of luck," Greta said and laughed. "Gordon knows which his was." She looked at Luellan.

He didn't like the way she did.

"I've been lots of things," Deirdre continued, "but never a tiger. I think I might like to try that sometime." She turned Luellan's head and looked deep into his eyes. "There was a wild look I liked. Maybe I would eat you up." She laughed. "Would you like that?"

Luellan heard the song, saw a winged creature waiting in the cold. Black teeth pierced his heart.

"Be careful of who eats whom," Greta said. Again there was something hidden behind her nictitating membranes.

"You can be sure I will," Deirdre answered.

Geoffry jumped down from his tree and stood before the fountain. Multicolored light played across shining monomer on his skin. He held a vial between two fingers. "There's something better than mnemone," he said, "for those brave enough to try it."

"You mean . . ." Deirdre paused.

"Of course."

"Endocybin." Deirdre let the word hang in the air. "The most potent hallucinogen known. Do you really have some?"

"Certainly. Will you try it?"

"Why not? Let's all of us take it. What do you say, Lue?"

Luellan tried to keep panic from showing on his face. It was difficult. He was afraid of what might happen if the lamia in his dream-time should metamorphose. He might recognize her then. But instead of objecting, he let Deirdre lead him to the upper level to the room beneath the vertex of the dome. Greta and Geoffry followed.

They sat close to each other on pulsating wombskin. Stars were bright overhead, clearly visible through the persplex dome. They entwined their legs to get closer together. Geoffry dipped his tongue in the vial.

Greta leaned toward Geoffry, offering him her head. Her vitalium CNS stud glinted beneath blond filaments of new hair. Jeff bent toward her. A tourmaline drop hung from the underside of his tongue. He touched it to her stud. Her occular membranes

snapped shut. She nodded her head.

Deirdre had no CNS stud; she was not a cyborg. There was no easy access to her brain. So she lay on her back, cradling her head on Jeff's crossed legs. She opened her eyes wide and stared into his face.

Geoffry again dipped his tongue in peptide. He lowered his head carefully until his tongue was positioned a few centimeters above Deirdre's opened eyes. Saliva flowed, coalescing with peptide. A blue drop formed, clung for a moment, then dripped onto her eye's conjunctiva. She blinked, then closed her eyes and held her breath.

It was Luellan's turn.

His heart pounded in his chest as he leaned over. His mouth was dry. Deirdre reached up and pulled him to her. Her breasts pressed against his chest. She kissed him, exhaling her breath into his lungs. Held in her embrace, he waited.

He felt the wet touch of Jeff's tongue. Warmth flowed inside his skull. Colors imploded within, brighter than electrons collapsing around nuclei. His skin melted. Bone and muscle fused and liquified. Then he felt himself evaporate. The vapor of himself mingled with that of the other three. Four became melded into one.

A cloud drifted over the countryside. Multihued currents swirled within its substance, in harmony with each other. The cloud fed on sunlight and water rising from the green earth below. The cloud had no worries, no need for worry. It was a creature of air. It frolicked with the other creatures of the wind: birds, butterflies, bees, dirigibles. And new creatures. Gravships hurled up the space needle to be cast into orbit. The cloud

allowed itself to be pulled along behind one. It was buffeted by solar wind scouring the upper atmosphere. A solar flare picked it up and flung it into space, where it bobbed on waves of radiation. There it found new companions: comets, meteors, moons, asteroids. For a long time it was as happy as only the very young or the very foolish can be happy. But danger lurked in space. The cloud developed a pain. Only a little ache at first, but it became steadily worse. Before long, the cloud realized it had a cancer. The raw radiation of space had been too intense, too damaging. But the cloud knew what to do. It pushed the bad part to the edge of its substance. A furrow formed. Slowly, carefully, the cloud pinched off the wildness that disturbed its order. Soon its pain would be gone.

Luellan wavered back and forth between consciousness and unconsciousness. An image flickered too rapidly to be recognized at first. But then his lucid intervals lasted longer. He saw Greta's face. Something was wrong with it. Her skin was mottled and splotched. Her eyes protruded. Bloodless lips screamed silently. Her face began to fade again. Luellan had to know what was wrong before it was too late. He looked down. His hands were around her neck; his thumbs were crushing her larynx. They had a will of their own, as though controlled by someone else; he could not release their grip. Greta's image dimmed further. He had to do something. And soon. She was nearly dead. Occular membranes dilated. Her pupils were wide. With one last effort, Luellan successfully relaxed his hands. Blood returned to Greta's face. Air whistled through her nostrils. But he was still disturbed as he lapsed back into narcolepsy. Because he had seen

something in her eyes. When he was choking her, he saw his own nightmare mirrored on her azure irides. But when he let go, he thought he saw something else. He didn't want to think about why she would look disappointed.

A morning breeze rippled curtains. The air was cool, a sea-breeze bringing a touch of ice.

Deirdre stirred against Luellan, waking. Her arms reached out to pull him close. He lay half-dozing.

Sunlight streamed in from transparent panels in the dome overhead.

Deirdre lay back. Her body was long and angular, smooth and lithe. Long brown hair fanned out beneath her head on the pillow.

Luellan remembered how she had held him during the night, when he awoke in terror, remembering Greta's eyes. Geoffry and Greta lay near, still asleep. The bruises around her neck were not apparent in her black skin.

"What time is it?" Deirdre asked. Her voice was low.

"Does it matter?" With forever waiting. With the cold so near. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, famished. I seem to remember we missed dinner."

After breakfast, they walked together outside, leaving Greta and Geoffry still asleep.

"You live here alone?" she asked. "So far away from Nyssa."

"Usually. Sometimes it's easier to be alone. I've been spending my time in the desert, or on the sea. Time passes too slowly sometimes. And I can see the stars

more clearly away from the lights of the city."

"What is there to see in the stars?"

He paused before answering. He remembered the colors that swirled from energized gravsails, the firestorms that raged in the Jovian atmosphere. There were crystalline forests on Titan, glaciers of hydrocarbon to ski on Iapetus. Iceflowers grew in the darkness of day on Pluto. There were those, and a thousand other things she had not dreamed. But there was a song to listen to also. "Nothing," he said. "There's nothing to see there. Only something to forget."

"Someday I must go out to the far moons. I've just never gotten around to it. There was no reason to go. Maybe you'll take me. I'm not afraid of dreams."

"Maybe . . ." he lied.

They walked down the beach to the shore of ice. A boathouse lay like a bunker before them.

Sunlight shimmered in blue waves over the glassy surface of the sea. The ice was self-renewing; it continually sublimated into vapor to rise in the dry air and be carried over the mountains where the water vapor coalesced into clouds. Rain from the clouds then fed the streams and rivers that fed the sea. So the surface was always as smooth as glass.

They stopped before the boat-house.

"What's in there?" Deirdre asked.

"An ice-boat. I sometimes sail upon the ice, as I once did between the moons. Wind is much like gravity."

But pale, so pale.

"Sailing." She laughed. "I've never met anyone as rustic as you. I find it incredibly exciting."

"Would you like to try ice-sailing?"

"Of course." She laughed. Unnecessarily.

* * *

Kestrel I ran before the sand-wind. Her boom and mainsail were swung out to one side, her jib was set to the other. Her spinnaker billowed out ahead. Both desert and mountains were distant; the shoreline was blurred by distance. Ahead, in the center of the sea, but still almost on the horizon, was the curving needle of the gravchute. The wind was still warm—a wind of day and desert—and dry. It collected water from the ice, becoming heavy as it was saturated with vapor. Yet it was forced to rise by the pressure of the incoming wind. A clockwise vortex formed around the gravchute. Cold air swirled high to slip over the unrelenting sand-wind to become ice-wind returning water to the mountains.

Ahead, blue sky melded to the deeper blue of a sea of ice.

Permasteel blades squeaked as they sped across the surface. The wind pushed *Kestral* ever further out to sea. Soon she would catch the first of the currents of the vortex. Then real sailing could begin.

"So silent," she said. "So quiet."

"Just the whisper of ice crystals melting beneath the blades," he answered, "or maybe it's a muted scream."

The wind played with her hair. Stray strands were pulled across her face. Wind resonated through taut rigging in a song of metal.

Then the sails began to flutter as they luffed close to the wind. *Kestrel* had entered the quiet transition zone between the incoming sand-wind and the rising vortex of ice-wind. Luellan swung the boom around and set the jib beside it. He pulled in the spinnaker. Now they could quarter against the circular currents.

The mainsail filled with turbulent air. Fabric strained. *Kestrel* leaped forward with sudden acceleration, almost leaving the ice. Their speed increased steadily. The speedometer blinked toward fifty km/hr. That meant a wind velocity of thirty km/hr. They would go faster as they approached the needle. Wind speed increased to a peak of around 100 km/hr, before it fell to a relative calm near the needle itself. Luellan had sometimes hit 150 km/hr in the ice-boat.

They hurled toward the center of the sea. Velocity continued to build.

"We'll have to hike out over the side," Luellan said, "or otherwise the lateral forces will tip us."

He helped Deirdre into a trapeze harness, then fastened himself into one. They swung out on the wind side, bracing their feet against the hull. They were suspended in their harnesses by cables that ran down from the mast, using their body weight to counterbalance the upsetting force of the wind. With one hand, Luellan held the tiller extension; with the other he grasped the boom line. They rocked in their harnesses each time a gust of wind hit the sail.

A whisperbird hovered briefly beside them, watching them with crimson eyes. Whisperbirds sometimes drifted on the wind currents of the vortex, preying on other birds that had become trapped in it. It could have been Alelis; whisperbirds were difficult to tell apart. The coloration was the same. It screamed shrilly. Luellan could not distinguish what it said. It screamed again. This time he thought it was in warning, but could not be sure. It screamed thrice, then left, swept before the wind. Its cries of foreboding rang in Luellan's ears, unheeded.

Deirdre spoke. But her words too were lost.

Speed was perceptible. Ice whined beneath runners. Wind rushed past, resonated in rigging. Crystals of shattered ice rose behind in a roostertail, before scattering across the surface of the sea. Velocity was almost unnoticed in the vacuum of space—just a silent falling, with minds linked in a gestalt, and the soft beeps of the ship's clock marking time. But here, velocity was a wonderful sensation.

Their speed finally slackened when they cut their perpendicular radian and headed back toward the edge of the vortex. Before long, they were once more in warm sand-wind, tacking toward the shore.

Sunlight was trapped in bubbles in wine.

Deirdre held a glass before her eyes. "That was wonderful," she said. Then laughing: "I mean the sailing. The other is always good. But I think I know why you go sailing now. Next, you'll have to take me out in the desert."

Doesn't she know? Shouldn't she be afraid to get too close to me? Maybe she isn't the one. Then who? "If you like," he said.

They lay together on the beach, letting the sun warm them. They drank wine from the same glass.

Lunch was finished, the left-overs packed back into the boat's locker. A wine bottle was open, sitting in ice chipped from the sea. *Kestrel* was beached on the sand below them.

Deirdre lay back. Sunlight caught in her eyes.

Luellan again wondered how he would hurt her. He was sure she was the one. Although he really knew almost nothing about her; only who she was and that

she was from Antarctica. He realized he was afraid to get too close. He didn't want to know her better. It would be hard enough anyway. So he tried to protect his feelings, to insulate himself, knowing he would be hurt as much as she. Firiel had said that would happen.

Deirdre rose on her knees. Sand stuck to her skin, then sifted down to drift across the ice. She kissed him. Her breasts pressed against his chest. He pulled her tighter against him and kissed her hard.

Later, they slept on the sand, in the warm sunlight.

When Luellan awoke, Deirdre wasn't there.

He lay on the beach for a while, watching clouds drifting away from the mountains. It was almost dusk. The air was becoming cool. They would have to return soon. They had sailed at least twenty-five kilometers away from home.

There was still no sign of Deirdre.

He stood up and pulled on his overalls. He saw her footprints meandering along the beach. He followed them. They led toward a sandstone bluff facing the sea.

He saw her standing next to the rock wall. She had not put on her clothes. When she saw him approaching, she ran down to meet him, throwing her arms around his body and holding him close.

She shivered. Then she trembled with more than cold.

He held her until she stopped shaking. He rubbed warmth into skin puckered into goose-flesh.

She looked into his face. "Thanks," she said. "I mean, I'm glad you're here."

"What happened?"

"I woke up and decided to walk along the beach. I found something unusual over there." She pointed toward the bluff. "Then suddenly I was afraid, really scared. I don't know why."

"What did you find?"

"Come with me and see."

They walked over to the wall. She showed him a round opening in the face of rock. A tunnel led deep into the bluff. Higher up, more openings could be seen. At least a hundred. But only this one was accessible from the ground.

"What do you think they are?" Her voice still wavered.

"I don't know." But he did know. The lie was for her.

The lips of the opening were sharp and crisp, but somewhat irregular. The tunnel was obviously artificial. And Luellan knew what had chewed the bore.

"Let's crawl inside and see where it goes." Sweat beaded from his back.

"I don't think we should. I'm spooked over something."

"Come on. There's nothing to worry about." Again the lie.

Luellan reached up to the edge of the opening. He pulled himself up and scrambled inside. He extended his hand to Deirdre and helped her up. Her hand was wet with cold sweat.

They crawled along the tunnel, heading into the sandstone bluff. There was an unusual odor in the tunnel. A disturbing odor of decay, one he had smelled once before. The light from the opening only extended

a few meters inside, but the walls of the tunnel glowed with faint phosphorescence and produced enough illumination for them to see.

About thirty meters in, Luellan stopped abruptly. Deirdre bumped into him. There was something hanging from the upper curvature, blocking the tunnel.

"What is it?" Deirdre asked. Her voice was frightened.

"I haven't the slightest idea." Truthfully this time. He crawled closer. He saw a body covered with fine strands of glistening fiber, wrapped like a mummy or a cocoon. He reached toward it tentatively, almost expecting it to move, but it did not. Movement had long since ceased. Silk coverings felt soft. And there was warmth inside.

"I think it's still alive."

"What?"

"There's something alive, wrapped in silk." He felt an ache deep inside, a quickening of pain.

"What is it? What can it be?"

"Let's see." He started raveling the fibers of silk; they were sticky and adhered to his fingers. At first, he thought it must be a human body; the shape and size were about right. He remembered Gordon telling him about people disappearing in the desert, abandoned sand yachts, crashed drift-gliders without bodies. It began to make sense. As the fibers came away, he saw this was not a missing person. The muzzle and head of a sand-wolf were revealed. He cleared the head of sticky silk.

"It *is* still alive."

"But how can it be?"

"I don't know. But there's air moving through its

nostrils." The eyes were dead though. They stared wide open; their surfaces were wrinkled and dry. Eyelids had not blinked for a long time.

Deirdre turned and crawled back toward the opening and fresh air. Luellan followed her.

They were quiet as they walked back to the ice-boat. She held his hand tightly. Dusk settled around them.

They heard a whine from overhead. They stopped and looked back to the sandstone bluff. Dark shapes could be seen leaving the openings in the rock. The shapes detached themselves from shadow, only to blend into the dark night sky. They were invisible as they passed overhead.

For long minutes, the air was filled with a noise that hurt Luellan's ears. Then it was quiet again. But only for a moment. A low rumble rolled across the beach, followed by a crashing roar. A great cat could be seen silhouetted against the sky as it stood atop the bluff. Luellan imagined its long claws slashing the air futilely.

"What are they?" Deirdre asked.

"You don't want to know that," he said. Because he did know. He had known since he stood beside an empty cryochamber in Lord Gordon's museum.

She snuggled close to him in *Kestrel.* They paralleled the coast, sailing in the lingering warmth of sand-wind.

They heard the noise once again—a high-pitched whine that made their teeth feel gritty, passing unseen overhead.

In darkness, light sparked beneath the runners, as ice shattered under permasteel blades.

8

The dark had deepened to night when they arrived home, but the domes were unlighted. Luellan berthed the ice-boat. He and Deirdre walked up to the house. She held his hand again.

As they walked in the door, Greta and Geoffry appeared as images in the air. They spoke their recorded message: they had gone to Nyssa for dinner and asked Luellan and Deirdre to join them at a cafe there.

"Do you want to go to Nyssa?" Luellan asked.

"OK. If we can come back here, after?"

"If you want."

"I want."

In the skimmer, she lay her head on his lap, watching the stars through the open roof. Sand glittered in the beams of the headlamps.

"Who would do that to a wolf?" she said. "Are you sure it was still alive?"

"Yes, I'm sure." But he knew who would do it.

"Maybe we should have killed it. That thought's bothered me since we left. I wonder if it's in pain. Can we go back and try to do something? You know, put it out of its misery."

"I suppose. If you want."

"Can you find that same same spot?"

"I think so."

"But who would do that?"

He didn't answer.

"Let's go back now," she said. "The least we can do is kill the poor thing."

"No. It will have to wait until morning. I don't think I can find the spot in the dark." Nor would he want to

be there in darkness.

"OK. But we'll go there in the morning; promise."

"Sure," he said, knowing he would not go back.

She closed her eyes. Her face was highlighted by dim illumination from the instrument panel. Luellan watched her breathe quietly. He knew then he was lost. He did not want to lose her. He could not give her up. He wanted more than anything to be with her. He had tried to keep his feelings insulated, himself protected, but he'd failed. For the first time since Lorriel and his parents had left him, he was going to trust someone. He knew the risks. He'd have to take the chance she was not his lamia. There was nothing he could do about that, anyway. Maybe Deirdre could help him chase away the songs of night.

His mind became lost to pleasant reverie.

Then the lights of Nyssa brought him back to Earth.

Deirdre and Luellan found Greta and Geoffry waiting for them at a table on the outside terrace of the café.

Over wine, Deirdre told them what she and Luellan had seen. As she talked, Luellan watched Greta's face. He did not see surprise in her features. He remembered meeting her in the night.

Geoffry was nodding his head. "We rode our centaurs up into the mountains," he said. "We found something strange there. A canyon floor was littered with dried husks of silk—hollow cylinders that crumbled under the centaurs' hooves. I wonder if they're the same as the wolf you discovered. But there were no bodies in these—just empty hulls."

"Lue can tell us, can't you?" Greta's voice was hard.

"He knows where the bodies went."

Luellan was quiet. But she was right. He did know. He'd even seen the husks himself, as he wandered about the desert. But not in the numbers Jeff described. He'd just seen one at a time, blown across the dunes like a tumbleweed skittering before the wind. He should have guessed what they were then. But he'd been too distracted by self-pity.

"Tell us what they are," Greta said.

But Luellan didn't have time to answer then. They heard the first of the screams. They crowded along the balcony, trying to see what was happening.

On the street, there was confusion, with people running madly about. Voices shouted. Geoffry yelled to a woman as she ran past. She pointed to the sky and screamed incoherently.

Above, the towers of Nyssa floated in the air. Paralyzed force shimmered. Causeways spiraled into night. Spheres of light darted about. Everything was normal.

Then he heard a high-pitched whine again. He turned in time to see a dark shape, a blur of wings. A hard body brushed past, knocking him over the railing of the balcony. He hit the ground hard.

Briefly, he was stunned. Lights swam before his eyes. He sat on the ground with his head held between his legs. After a bit, his vision cleared. He looked up at the cafe's balcony. He couldn't see the others standing there. Panic touched him. He pushed it away. He stood up and looked around. People were running about in pandemonium. Everywhere was the whine of wings. Wyvern darted down out of the sky to pluck up the runners with their legs. Starlight glinted from their

black scutae. Multifaceted eyes glittered. Long stingers protruded from their abdomens' tips, gleamed darkly. Great mandibles gnashed back and forth. They were the wyvern of his nightmares, the mythical creatures Lord Gordon had bioformed for amusement. Now they were loose.

He began shouting Deirdre's name, trying to push away grim thoughts.

Then he saw a solitary figure standing in the middle of the plaza. At first he thought it was Deirdre, but his mind was only playing tricks with perception; this person had short hair and the lithe stature of a sailor. But she seemed unconcerned with the menace of the wyvern. She stood casually as they swooped around her. Luellan shouted. She turned. He recognized her face.

Luellan ran across the plaza toward Greta. Maybe she'd seen what had happened to Deirdre. Besides, it looked as if she'd been hit on the head also and was still dazed. Why else would she stand out in the open that way?

As he drew near, he saw a wyvern approach Greta. He shouted a warning to her. She must have heard, but did not seem to care. She stood unmoving, unworried. He could see that her eyes watched the wyvern as it bore down on her. And he saw something in her eyes he had seen before.

He shouted again.

She did not look away from the wyvern.

He ran faster. If he could reach her before the wyvern did, maybe he could knock her down and make the creature miss its grab. He had to try. Greta was just standing there, waiting. But it would be close.

He seemed to cover the last few meters in slow motion. The wyvern set its wings and extended its legs. Clawed tarsi opened wide.

Luellan dove across the final three meters, holding his arms out in front. He planned to tackle Greta's legs.

Too late, he heard another whine of wings, then felt segmented legs wrap themselves around his body. Another wyvern had plucked him out of the air. He saw Greta enfolded by legs, grasped close to a shining thorax. Wings blurred with motion. The air hummed. Wind rushed past.

Soon Nyssa was far behind, the dunes of the desert far below.

Luellan lay quietly in the wyvern's grasp. He had tried to struggle at first, but discovered it was futile. His skin only became abraded and bruised. He couldn't loosen its grip. Looking up, he caught glimpses of transparent wings beating rapidly. Moonlight shone from black exoskeleton. Mandibles clicked against each other.

Below, desert drifted past monotonously.

He tried to keep from thinking about the stinger sheathed in the tip of the wyvern's abdomen, but he couldn't help but wonder why he'd not felt its stick already. If he struggled too much, he might. But then, he would eventually, anyway. That was a certainty.

From a long time past, he remembered Gordon proudly telling him about his latest acquisition of simulacra for his mythical menagerie: *Edbryn has surpassed even himself this time . . . cost a fortune, but worth it . . . Look at them . . . ten meter wing span, weigh fifty kilos . . . Of course they can fly, can even*

carry more than they weigh . . . xenohybrids . . . a little reptile, bird, bat DNA blended with a lot of insect DNA . . . they even have a life-cycle . . . they could reproduce themselves.

They could reproduce, Luellan repeated to himself, and he thought of the stinger with its powerful neurotoxin that paralyzed but did not kill, and the yellow egg that was deposited in the belly of its living incubator, because the larvae must have nourishment when they hatched. Yes, Edbryn had surpassed himself this time.

He thought of a valley floor littered with husks of silk. Many must have hatched already, for them to run out of prey in the desert and be forced to brave the bright lights of Nyssa in their search for hosts. And they were losing any fear of man they might have had. He must have scared them as he wandered mindlessly when somnambulating, startling them before they could carry away the guests they had stung. He doubted they would be as timid now.

He thought of a long time waiting for the egg to hatch. At night, his lamia would still sing to him. It would be pleasant relief when the larva began gnawing at his insides.

He took grim comfort knowing she was not Deirdre. For he was sure Deirdre would suffer the same fate as him. She must have been caught by wyvern also.

Air cooled as ice-wind blew. The wyvern flew lower, seeking the warmer air that pooled over the desert. Luellan saw another one flying beside them, carrying another victim. Who? he wondered. He couldn't tell. Not that it mattered now.

Then he heard a faint cry that trailed out to become

a raspy whistle. He looked up. He saw the long wings of a whisperbird silhouetted against the moon. It soared far above.

The wyvern dipped even lower. They skimmed close to desert dunes. Perhaps it was tiring, its wings were weakening. Or maybe it feared the whisperbird circling above.

Again the cry sounded. But closer, bending with doppler shift.

He looked up in time to see the whisperbird dropping with wings folded, talons spread wide. Crimson eyes glittered.

The whisperbird thudded into the wyvern's scutum, directly between its wings, sinking long claws deep into exoskeleton. With one quick slash of her beak, she severed the wyvern's head. Her wings unfolded, caught air. She released her claws' grip and soared, gaining altitude rapidly.

Luellan was released by legs flaccid with death. He felt himself falling. He flexed his legs, ready to roll with the impact. He landed with a burst of sand around his feet. But as he rolled his head hit a protruding rock.

Darkness closed once more.

When Luellan woke, he was lying beside the carcass of a wyvern. A whisperbird was perched on it. She was singing to herself. Luellan recognized the song.

He stood up slowly. His head spun about at first, then calmed. He went over to stand beside the fallen wyvern. He looked into the eyes of the whisperbird. She was Alelis.

"Did you know it was me you saved?" he asked, stroking her feathers. "Or were you just out doing good deeds?"

"Of course I knew it was you." She laughed. "Don't you think I've been watching over my little one? I trust you've learned your lesson and will be more careful in the future." She lifted her foot and scratched the carcass with her claws. "These things are quite slow. Rather dim-witted too. Hardly a fair fight. Barely worth the effort to kill one."

"How long have you known about them?"

"Not much in the desert escapes my scrutiny."

"You said nothing. You warned no one." He remembered her shouting into the wind of the vortex. But that had been about something else.

"No one asked. Nor listened."

"Did you notice anyone else being carried by them?" He spoke carefully. He dared not hope. There wasn't a chance in a thousand.

The whisperbird pointed with a clawed toe. "I managed to free your lover as well," she said casually.

Luellan looked to where she pointed. Another wyvern lay crumpled fifty meters away. A smaller form lay beside it. He felt his heart racing. His stomach tightened nervously.

He ran across the sand between them and kneeled beside her body. Black skin contrasted against white sand. Occular membranes were closed tight. Greta, not Deirdre. The wrong one. Not the lover he'd hoped to find. Where was she? Was it too late already?

He felt Greta's throat. Her carotid pulse beat strong. Air whispered in and out of her nostrils.

Alelis glided over to sit on the other wyvern.

"The stinger?" he asked.

"I think not," she answered. "Her head is not as dense as yours. She has been knocked out a little

longer. She'll be OK. Why don't you leave her. You have a long walk back. I'll stay here until she comes to."

"No. I'll wait too." He sat beside Greta and held her wrist in his hand, feeling her pulse throb.

After an hour, she had still not regained consciousness.

Alelis sat patiently on the dead wyvern.

Luellan pulled Greta into a sitting position. Her head lolled to the side. Her arms hung lax.

"Leave her here," the whisperbird said. "Go now. Alone. While you still have the chance."

"What are you saying?"

"I tried to warn you before. Save yourself."

"I can't leave her."

"Leave her to the desert. I shouldn't have saved her from the wyvern. But the choice must be yours. The decision has to be up to you. Leave her, I say."

"What do you know?"

"Nothing that you don't already. You have the power to choose your destiny. Don't intrude into hers. She made her choice. Honor it. Leave her to the scavengers."

"Tell me why?"

But Alelis had already launched herself into the air. She skimmed across the rising dunes. Soon she was lost to darkness.

Luellan swung Greta across his shoulders. He thought he knew what Alelis had meant. But he couldn't leave Greta behind. Not while wyvern still hunted. He couldn't leave her to that fate.

He trudged across the desert. His feet sank deep into the sand. Her body became heavier and heavier.

Three times he lost his footing and slipped to his knees; not once did he drop his burden.

Before the light of dawn touched the eastern horizon, he made it home.

He lay Greta on his bed. Wombskin caressed her body with synthetic peristalsis. He was exhausted from carrying her through the desert. He could barely stand. All he wanted to do was to sleep for a long time. But there was something he should do first. Medmech. He should call the medmech. Maybe Greta was seriously injured. He should get help. But he was so tired. If he could only sleep. They could wait until morning. Greta would be fine until morning.

He lay beside her and closed his eyes.

Soon he was asleep.

Dreams waited for him in the cold empty.

When Luellan woke, he knew Greta was gone. The wombskin beside him had already given up her body heat.

Still, he searched the house. But he was not surprised when he did not find her. He knew where she had gone, where she had to go. He'd guessed the shape of her destiny, and how it meshed with his. There was nothing he could do about it now. It had been too late for some time.

He spent the rest of the day moping around the house, waiting for Deirdre or Geoffry to come back. If they had escaped the wyvern, they would return to his house. He thought. He hoped.

It was almost dusk before he gave up hope.

He took the skimmer into Nyssa.

He went back to the café. It was deserted. He

roamed the empty streets of Nyssa, calling her name. He knew she would not betray him. He knew she need not fear he'd ever hurt her. He'd be able to trust her now. But he couldn't find her.

Eventually he found himself sitting before a lake in a park. Starlight glittered from the surface of the water. A figure walked along the shore, coming closer. Red stubble grew from his scalp. He moved with a sailor's swagger. Luellan knew him.

Gordon stopped to stand beside Luellan. His topaz ring glowed amber. Tremulous fingers made it dart back and forth like a solitary eye with nystagmus. "You've seen my little pets," he said. "Aren't they lovely creatures?"

Luellan nodded. He even knew why they had been loosed.

"If only the tiger had cooperated. Edbryn said he was the finest money could buy. Insisted he'd put in all the authentic instincts. But he didn't remember how to kill. I was desperate. I am no longer a brave man. Maybe I never was. I needed help. I couldn't do it myself. I was frantic . . . a little mad, I suppose. I freed the wyvern one bleak night a few months ago, thinking they would free me in turn. But they flew away to the mountains. Only two. There were only two at first. They seem to have flourished, though. There are more than two now. Many more than two." He laughed. "They seemed such frivolous creatures when I had them bioformed. Such silly hybrids. A rich man's folly. Who would have thought they could survive on their own?"

"What will you do now?" Luellan asked.

"Wait for them each night. They'll find me even-

tually. That is my prayer, anyway."

Luellan noticed other figures moving near the lake.

Firiel held court. She danced naked: black skin shone with monomer sweat; bat-ears stood out from her head; viper pits glowed within her eyebrows; lithe arms beat air like wings.

Tideriders cavorted at her feet. Bared claws slipped into veins, injecting blue warmth. Her tongue touched the cold metal of CNS studs. Its wetness lingered as flame on top of their heads.

"You almost freed me from her," Gordon said. "And I thank you for that. It was not your fault she was able to bring me back to life to be her dancing doll again. I must be patient. They will find me."

Firiel called.

For a fragile moment, Luellan had the urge to go to her, to let her push away the night with blue fire. But he resisted the call.

Not so Gordon. He left Luellan to dance with Firiel. She designed to kiss his proffered brow.

Luellan left them dancing amid the whine of wyvern wings beating overhead.

He parked the skimmer on the beach below the house. To the east, the gravchute curved into the sky. Wyvern already hovered about. But he would be safe from them inside the skimmer.

For a long time, he watched sailships being catapulted into orbit. Greta would be aboard one of them. Her destiny lay in the cold empty beyond the life-barrier. Her thoughts would be caught up in its time warp. He laughed. Because of the paradox, her thoughts already resonated there, had always done so.

Last night's dream came back: he saw her waiting forever. Her hair was white as cobwebs, her eyes blue as shattered sapphires. She was doomed to call to him, thinking she loved him more than love. But when he came, she had to hurt him beyond hurt. Cycles recycled. Endlessly. He saw Greta's easy laughter trapped within a scream of rage. He had finally seen her as she would be.

For she was his lamia.

He should have known from the beginning. She had. She'd introduced him to Firiel, knowing he would seek her surcease when the pain grew intolerable. Greta had known she would become the lamia that haunted his dreams. She tried to stop herself.

Damn the paradox of the time warp. Damn predestination. Damn us as pawns of fate.

For Greta had tried to die, to keep from becoming one of them. Luellan had prevented her death, thus assuring her fate would be realized. What greater cruelty was there than that? No wonder she hated him enough to come back to torment his dreams.

He climbed out of the skimmer and darted into his house, easily eluding the wyvern that waited for him. Yes, they were ponderous and clumsy.

He lay in bed alone, with the dome clear. The sky was dark overhead. Wyvern walked upon the persplex. Their claws clicked against the hard surface. They waited. He imagined a dark shape flying through the air, blotting out stars, carrying a limp figure beneath it, with long brown hair streaming in the air.

When he closed his eyes, he saw a silk mummy hanging within a dark tunnel. The body wrapped in silk was still alive, would stay alive for a long time, despite

paralysis. Because the yellow egg that had been deposited in her belly would need living nourishment when it hatched. He raveled the silk. He saw Deirdre's lax face.

Luellan clapped his hands to his ears.

Greta sang to him in a lamia's voice. And Deirdre's screams now blended into harmony with the song of pain.

He opened his eyes.

Moonlight gleamed from the barrels of his grouse gun.

There was something he could do, after all.

He opened the gun and loaded its chambers, then snapped the action back together. He brought the butt to his shoulder and placed his cheek tight against the stock, sighting along the rib. The gun felt good there.

Luellan stepped outside. A wyvern stirred atop the dome, lifted into the air, and came toward him. He shot twice, quickly. The wyvern crashed to the ground and lay still.

Luellan smiled.

That night, the roar of gunfire in his ears kept away his lovers' voices.

9

Luellan stood alone on a bleak promentory of rock. Ice-wind blew through his hair. He looked out across the icesea. The space needle curved into the sky. He no longer watched his lover leave.

His ice-boat was beached on the shore below.

Dusk settled around him.

There were many round openings in the cliff over

which he stood. A high-pitched whine hurt his ears. A dark shape melted into darkness. He shot quickly. The wyvern fell in a crumpled heap on the ice. Several other carcasses already lay there.

He reloaded. There would always be more to shoot.

A cat's scream mingled with ebbing sunlight. Luellan looked across the moors to the west. A tawny shape moved, gathering speed.

Again the cat screamed: a long rumble of anger.

Luellan flashed to someplace else: he ran across the moor in long fluid strides. A figure stood at the edge of a cliff, silhouetted against the sky. He'd stalked it for a long time. Hunger gnawed deep in his belly. He had not eaten for a long time. He had forgotten how to kill. But the memory now returned. It would be easy. The man could not escape. There was no place for the man to run. He roared, then charged across the last of the moor. The man held his ground. He brought a gun to his shoulder. A tongue of flame shot from the barrel; pain burned through his chest.

Luellan stepped aside.

The tiger charged past him, but managed to turn around before he reached the edge of the cliff. Blood streamed from a ragged hole in the cat's chest, matting yellow fur with red. He paused on the cliff's edge, standing on his hind legs, towering three meters high. Something shone within his eyes.

Slowly, the tiger toppled over the cliff. His claws tore long rents in the sheer rock wall. He screamed once more before he thudded into the jumbled rocks at the cliff's base.

But it was a scream of agony, and not in a tiger's voice.

THE ARTIST IN THE SMALL ROOM ABOVE

by

Al Sarrantonio

I

I wait for Bates to make me create again.

He sits in the small circular room above me, resting. I hear him tap at the keys of the console with his fingers, making dissonant, unformed sounds, but he does not continue. I am restless to finish; he has been working almost constantly for two days and I know he has deadlines to meet. The cable pads pulse warmly at my temples.

Finally I feel the urging through the pads.

The console in the room above hums contentedly as Bates urges me on at the usual setting. Impatient, tired, I want to finish; I close my eyes and shout up to him through the ceiling, telling him to increase the setting. I have never done this before and he is surprised; but he does so. He turns it up too high. The console's hum increases to a modulated whine.

Suddenly pain bursts throughout my body. My

hands clutch at the arm rests of my chair; my eyelids snap tightly closed; my throat convulses.

I begin to scream, hoarsely. Life surges through and out of me. My body jumps and tosses crazily in my chair. The console above drones loudly, and above it I hear the music . . .

Then abruptly it is over. The work is completed. I sink back, exhausted. Above, the console shuts angrily down and I hear Bates give a small cry of astonishment; he is breathing heavily.

My mind drifts off into blackness.

II

Later, Bates descends the curving staircase to my room and wakes me. He helps me remove the electrodes and pads. He helps me to my feet and says he must take me for a drink. I nod weakly and follow.

It is night, and a low-lying, yellow mist has descended. This world is perpetually covered with thin, shifting clouds and sickly fog. As we step into the damp street I turn to look at our working place, a two-room, two-floor silo capped with a black dome. The part above the fog resembles an ugly, rimless derby. Other derbys rest on the fog on this street and the streets adjacent—this is the area where most artists live. Bates motions impatiently and we move along.

It is dark and smoky in the drinking place. Bates orders two drinks—tall, slender goblets filled with roiling liquid as yellow as the fog outside—and steers me away from the somber bar to the back room. We find a booth and sit down facing one another.

Bates looks at me queerly across the table. "You've never done what you did today before," he says. "I didn't know you could." His eyes are two white questioning orbs in the darkness.

"I was tired," I respond quietly; "I thought you could finish the work faster if you increased the setting. But you set it too high."

"But do you know what you did?" he says, raising his voice. "Do you know what I composed?" He pulls a recording chip from his pocket and pushes it across the table at me. "Listen."

"No," I say tiredly, pushing it back at him, but he says again, "Listen."

I bring the chip up to my ear and it activates. It is set near the end of the composition. At first there are only the standard, bland sounds that characterize most of Bates's work. Then suddenly I detect a change, and the music becomes more stately. A theme, low, insistent, tragic, begins to weave itself around and through the blandness, enfolding it and gradually overcoming it. Now the theme begins to fold around itself, the high notes beginning to fight the basses head-on, building in intensity, crashing against itself and climbing—

I pull the chip from my ear and place it before Bates. My stomach has tightened itself into a small knot. "I won't do that again."

He gives me a measuring look. "I . . . don't know," he says. "You've been contracted to me for three months now, and I never realized you could do this sort of thing. I'm going to have to think about this."

"Let me remind you," I say firmly, "that the contract you have with me states that you will compose only popular forms of music. There's no provision in it

for other forms of work."

He looks hard into my eyes. "I'm aware of that," he says, "but don't forget that it was you who deviated from the contract today. I didn't expect to have the end of that piece turned into . . . well, serious music. There was something there which I may want to explore. If you read the contract carefully, there isn't really any provision restricting me on what type of music I can compose. There's no clear restriction on what I can do."

I look at him coldly. "I wouldn't tamper with the contract. And besides, you know that money lies in what you're doing now."

"I know that," he says, "but there are a few people willing to pay for this sort of thing. There might be money in it. I couldn't afford to abandon the other composing, but it just might be worth my while to make use of your other talents." He smiles across the table; it is an empty smile. "And remember," he says, "I still control the cables and you're still my Muse." His smile widens into a sharp, white grin. "For ten years."

We finish our liquor and leave the drinking place in silence.

III

He is right; I am his Muse. I was brought here from my home planet and, like many of my fellow beings, I contracted myself to an artist. The artists on this world are little more than machines. These creatures have somehow lost the ability to transfer their feelings and experiences. It is as if their fingers have somehow been

disconnected from their souls. They seem the most selfish of beings: they possess emotions, but those emotions are land-locked. Each being of this world is an island, a world unto himself, and it is nearly impossible for one of them to even touch another. The only social contact they effect takes place on a formal, businesslike plane; even their meeting places are cheerless, murky and cold. But though these people are alienated they are not dead; each lone mind craves nourishment and pleasure. That is where we, the so-called Muses, come in. We supply the machine-like artisans to which we are contracted with transmutable creative energy for their work. In return we are supported by the writers. There are Muses contracted to painters, writers, sculptors, as well as musicians and other artists. Our contracts range from one to twenty years and can be renewed.

On my home planet things are very bad—there is severe overpopulation and the governments are harsh and restrictive. If I had not become a Muse I would have been judged unnecessary and eventually eliminated. There is a trade pact between this world and my own and Muses are valuable commodities.

Something in me, of me, is being tapped, siphoned out by the cables and utilized. My emotions are being sucked dry, for a price. I have thought of running away but I have seen the crucifixion poles jutting through the yellow fog. I've seen what is done to Muses who run away. If anything, the governments of this world are even more ruthless than those on my home planet. If I did escape, where would I run to? There is, in fact, no escape.

There is much pain within me, but at least I am alive

and can express myself, unlike the lonely monsters of this world.

Unlike Bates.

IV

Days have passed; I sit in my gray cylindrical room in my chair and Bates composes above me. He has begun another piece; he has been working at his usual pace at the normal console setting.

Someone climbs the stairs and enters Bates' room and suddenly he stops. I can hear muffled voices through the ceiling. Perhaps it is Trevor, Bates' business contact. The day, as usual, is bleak; sickly yellow mist drifts by the small window.

There are shuffling sounds above me; the visitor departs. Bates leaves his room and hurriedly descends the stairs.

I swivel around in my chair to face him as he enters the room. His silent eyes are bright.

"Trevor was here," he says, holding out something in his hand. "He gave me this—a check for five thousand credits. He listened to the composition and wants me to write more, immediately. He especially liked the ending."

"Bates—" I begin.

"He says that if I write a piece that's like the ending of the other one all the way through he'll double the number of credits I got for this one. He says there's an audience for this type of music at the moment. We must start immediately." His eyes stare through me.

"Bates," I say, "I told you the other night it can't be

done. The contract doesn't call for it. It's a terrible strain on me."

"I don't care. If you could do it once you can do it now. I'll make you do it. We'll begin immediately."

"Bates—" I say, but he closes the door behind him.

I swing around in my chair as he reaches the console upstairs. His stool grunts as he settles himself on to it, and I can hear him strapping the wires from the console to his arms and legs. The cable pads are hot on my temples. He has obviously turned the console to a high setting. He replaces the chip from the composition he was working on with a new one, and begins to urge me through the cables.

I try to hold it down but the console setting is strong. I begin to sweat. The urge increases to a forceable level.

Suddenly the dam breaks and a tide of feeling rushes out of me. The tones of the console above form an harmonic boom and then settle, after a moment of silence, into a slow, ominous crescendo. A theme forms, then another and another, and they begin to grind against one another, each building in intensity and each fighting against the others. I grit my teeth; the strain is unbearable. Tears burn my eyes. The room around me begins to tremble as the music builds to a feverish pitch. The three themes converge into a monstrous, tortured strain as my soul tries to tear loose from my body . . .

Hours later it is over. The ceiling above me rumbles quietly and I can hear Bates struggling for breath. The cable pads have burned my flesh and my arms and legs are very weak.

Just as I begin to calm down the pain comes again.

Bates has put a new chip in. I hear him shout through the ceiling, to himself, "More!" The ceiling shakes; my arms fly about madly, uncontrollably. My head is thrown violently about.

He composes continuously for the next two days. I can barely catch a gasp of breath between cries of pain.

Finally he shuts down the console. I can dimly hear it wind down as the power decreases. I can hear Bates pull the wires from his arms and legs and stumble from his stool to the bed.

The room above me is silent.

V

Bates continues this type of work for the next four months. The days drag by. Occasionally Trevor visits him; after these visits Bates' fervor climbs to an almost manic level. Even the console seems to plead for rest. My mind is driven to emotive heights for prolonged periods of time; I am forced to survive on bits of food and water fed to me by Bates at odd and infrequent hours—he will not even allow me to remove the cable pads in fear that I may do something drastic despite the threat of horrible punishment. I could not leave my chair even if I were allowed, my body is so weak. Bates, above, pauses only for food or snatches of rest. Composition after composition is completed.

One day Bates comes to see me. It is after a visit from Trevor, and Bates bursts into my room. He comes to my chair and stands before me. He, too, is wasted and yellow; nevertheless he smiles.

"Trevor has just left," he says in a low, weak voice. "Everything I've composed has received tremendous acceptance."

I stare at him mutely.

"Look here," he continues, pulling small bundles of credit notes from his pockets. "And there's much more coming. But that's not what I wanted to tell you." He pauses. "I've had your contract amended."

My gaze is unmoved.

"There was nearly trouble. It's been all right up to now, but for what I want to do next I had to be sure. I'm ready to do something larger."

"Bates," I say hoarsely, from deep within me. "Bates, it can't be done. I haven't eaten, slept—"

"I know," he says, "but that can't be helped. It's in the contract and this thing must be done now. Trevor says—"

"To hell with Trevor!" I cry brokenly. "You're destroying me. I can't think anymore, Bates. I can't *feel*. I need rest, time to think, time—"

"Never mind your needs! You work for me. Trevor says the public is ready for a symphonic cycle, something magnificent." His eyes are aflame in his dead, blank face. "We must begin."

"Bates—"

"You're my Muse," he snaps. "Amending that contract cost me a lot of credits; you won't disappoint me. It's time to begin." He turns to leave.

I stare weakly at the curved gray wall framing Bates' back. Words rise and die in my dry throat. Bates shuts the door and goes upstairs.

The pain hits me unexpectedly. Bates has done something to the console—some sort of modification

has been made to give it even greater power capabilities. I am not even able to resist; the machine reaches right to the core of my emotions and begins to such voraciously at them. Upstairs the console announces the opening of the work with a gigantic chord in brasses, and then settles immediately into a wrenching, twisting theme in the strings. There is an ominous percussive beat in the background, insistent, ponderous and funereal. The beat increases suddenly to a pounding, terrifying level, nearly excluding all other sound. The strings begin to lash at the beat, in staccato fashion. Now the horns join in. It is as if a hundred thousand instruments have been squeezed screaming into the console and are fighting each other and themselves to get out. The level increases, and I can hear Bates howl through my own agony. The cable pads have welded themselves to the red, raw flesh on my temples. Being, existence, is torn from me by the machine above.

I don't know how much time passes. Existence itself is one continuous, emotive cry. The cable pads rip into me, and the console level, incredibly, is still rising. The music has become one immense, flagellating note, self-destructive and unstoppable. It is out of control. There is a roar of thunder, a burst of unbelievable pain—

I am thrown back against my chair; there has been an explosion in the room above. The wall shakes; the ceiling cracks and plaster chips flake down upon me. I lay, stick-like, broken, in my chair. There is silence.

Plaster dusts the room.

After a few minutes I am able to pull myself up. The cables break away: the wires are fused. I walk, trembling, to the door. The hallway outside is twilit; I

can see the dark outline of the curving stairs against the grayness. I slowly make my way up the steps.

The door to Bates' room is open and unhinged—it has been blown outward by the explosion. Inside all is smoke. There is a sickly smell of burnt meat and wiring. I approach the console.

Bates is slumped over the typewriter, arms outstretched, charred. He is dead. I pull him back, away from the machine. Broken black wires hang from his arms and legs. His huge white eyes are turned up into his head. His fish-like mouth is open in a frozen, lifeless cry. His tongue is black.

Slowly, with effort, I pull Bates from the stool. He collapses and tumbles to the floor, twitching. I sit down, slowly, on the stool.

I am racked with sobs.

VI

Soon someone, possibly Trevor, will come and find me here. I will not be harmed; I am a valuable product. Bates' contract with me will be destroyed and the chip he was working on will be sold—an unfinished work. The wrecked console, the debris, will be cleared out and another artist will move into this silo. A new console will be installed. The new artist may bring his own Muse; if not, he may contract me. Otherwise, I will be put back on the market. There is nothing else for me to do. The quality of my work with Bates will be a factor in my next contract—because of my sudden notoriety I may be able to contract myself to an artist who will allow me to work under better conditions. It is this or death.

Outside the window the day is bleak; the far-away sun makes this world sallow. I place a new chip in the console and turn it on to a very low setting. It coughs, then purrs haltingly. I hold my fingers over the keys and a tear beads in my eye and makes its slow, ragged way down my face.

I begin to play.

A CROSS-COUNTRY TRIP TO KILL RICHARD NIXON

by

Orson Scott Card

Siggy wasn't the killer type. Nor did he have delusions of grandeur. In fact, if he had any delusions, they were delusions of happiness. When he was thirty, he gave up a good job as a commercial artist and went down in the world, deliberately downward in income, prestige, and tension. He bought a cab.

"Who is going to drive this cab, Siggy?" his mother asked. She was a German of the old school, well-bred with contempt for the servant class.

"I am," Siggy answered mildly. He endured the tirade that followed, but from then on his sole source of income was the cab. He didn't work every day. But whenever he felt like working or getting out of the apartment or picking up some money, he would take his cab out in Manhattan. His cab was spotless. He gave excellent service. He enjoyed himself immensely. And when he came home, he sat down at the easel or with a sketch pad on his knees, and did art. He wasn't

very good. His talents had been best suited for commercial art. Anything more difficult than the back of a Cheerios box, and Siggy was out of his element. He never sold any of his paintings. But he didn't really care. He loved everything he did and everything he was.

So did his wife, Marie. She was French, he was German; they married and moved to America on the eve of World War II, bringing their families with them, and they were exquisitely well-matched and happy through both of Siggy's careers. In 1976, at the age of fifty-seven, she died of a heart attack, and Siggy took the cab out and drove for eleven hours without picking up a single fare. At four o'clock in the morning, he finally made his decision and drove home. He would go on living. And sooner than he expected, he was happy again.

He had never dreamed of conquering the world or of getting rich or even of getting into bed with a movie star or a high-class prostitute. So it was not in his nature to imagine himself doing impossible things. It took him rather by surprise when he was chosen to save America.

She was a Disney fairy godmother, and she came in the craziest dream he had ever had. "You, Siegried Reinhardt, are the lucky winner of exactly one wish," she said, sounding like the lady from Magic Carpet Land the last time she called to offer a free carpet cleaning.

"One?" Siggy answered in his dream, thinking this was rather below standard for godmothers.

"And you have a choice," the fairy godmother answered. "You may either use the wish on your own

behalf, or you may use it to save America."

"America's going to hell and needs all the wishes it can get." Siggy said. "On the other hand, I don't really need anything I haven't got already. So it's America."

"Very well," she answered, and turned to go.

"Wait a minute," he said in his dream. "Is that all?"

"You asked for a wish for America, you get a wish for America. Which is a waste of a perfectly good wish, if you ask me, for thirty years America hasn't been worth *scheisse*. Try not to mess things up too badly, Siggy. This wish business is pretty complicated, and you're a simple type fellow." And then she was gone, and Siggy woke up, the dream impressed on his memory as dreams so rarely were.

Crazy, crazy, he thought, laughing it off. I'm getting old, Marie dragged me to too many Disney movies, I'm too lonely. But for all that he knew the dream was nonsense, he could not forget it.

I mean, what *if*, he told himself. What *if* I had a wish. Just one thing I could change, to make everybody in America happier. What would it be?

"What's wrong with America?" his mother asked, rolling her eyes and rocking back and forth in her wheelchair. To Siggy's knowledge she had never had a rocking chair in her life, and compensated by moving in every other kind of chair as if it were a rocker. "Everything's wrong with America," she said.

"But one thing, Mother. Just the worst thing to fix."

"It's too late, nothing can fix it. It all started with *him*. If there is such a thing as reincarnation, may he be reincarnated as a fly that I can swat. May he come back as a fire hydrant for all the dogs to pee against." Siggy's mother was impeccably polite in German, but

in English she was crude, and, as so often before, Siggy wondered why she still lingered on at a ridiculous ninety-two when Marie, who was delicate and sensitive, was dead. "Don't be crude, Mother."

"I'm an American, I have the papers, I can be crude. Nineteen sixty-eight, that's when everything went to Hell."

"You can't blame everything on one man."

"What do you know? You drive a cab."

"One man doesn't make that big a difference."

"What about Adolf Hitler!" his mother said triumphantly, slapping the arms of the wheelchair and rocking back and forth. "Adolf Hitler! One man! Just like Richard Nixon, may his electric razor short-circuit and fry his face."

She was still laughing and cursing Nixon when Siggy finally left. Fairy godmother, he said to himself. What do I need a fairy godmother for? I have Mom.

But the dream wouldn't go away. The fairy godmother kept flitting in and out, hovering on the edges of all his dreams, wordlessly saying, "Hurry and make up your mind, Siggy. Fairy godmothers are busy, you're wasting my time."

"Don't push me," he said. "I'm being careful."

"I've got other clients, give me a break."

"I resent being pushed around by figments of my imagination," he said. "I get one wish, I want to use it right." When he woke up, he was vaguely embarrassed that he was taking the fairy godmother so seriously in his dreams. "Just a dream," he said to himself. But dream or not, he started doing research.

He took a poll. He kept a notebook beside him in the cab, and asked people, "Just out of curiosity what's the

worst thing wrong with America? What's the one thing you'd change if you could?"

There were quite a few suggestions, but they always came back to Richard Nixon. "It all started with Nixon," they'd say. Or, "It's Carter. But if it hadn't been for Nixon, Carter would never have been elected."

"It's the unions, driving up prices," said a woman. And then, after a little thought, "If Nixon hadn't screwed up we might have kept some *control* in this country."

It wasn't just that his name kept coming up. It was the way people *said* it. With loathing, with contempt, with fear. It was an emotional word. It sounded evil. They said *Nixon* the way they might say *slime*. Or *spider*.

Siggy sat one night staring at the results of his poll, unable to get out of his cab because of the thoughts that had taken over his head. I'm crazy, he thought to himself, but his thoughts ignored him and went right on, the fairy godmother giggling in the background. Richard Nixon, said the thoughts. If there could be one wish, it must be used to eliminate Richard Nixon.

But I voted for him, dammit, Siggy said silently. He *thought* it would be silent, but the words echoed inside the cab after all. "I voted for him. And I thought he did a damn good job sometimes." He was almost embarrassed saying the words—they weren't the kind of sentiment that made a cabby popular with his paying passengers. But thinking of Nixon made him remember the triumphant moment when Nixon said Up Yours to the North Vietnamese and bombed the hell out of them and got them to the negotiating table that one last time. And the wonderful landslide elec-

tion that kept the crazy man from South Dakota out of the White House. And the trip to China, and the trip to Russia, and the feeling that America was maybe strong like it had been under Roosevelt when Hitler got his ass kicked up into his throat. Siggy remembered that, remembered that it felt good, remembered being angry as the press attacked and attacked and attacked and finally Nixon fell apart and turned out to be exactly as rotten a person as the papers said he was.

And the feeling of betrayal that he had felt all through 1973 came back, and Siggy said, "Nixon," and inside the cab his voice sounded even more poisonous than the passengers'.

If there was something wrong with America, Siggy knew then, it was Richard Nixon. Whether a person had ever liked him or not. Because those who liked him had been betrayed, and those who hated him had not been appeased, and there he was out in California breeding the hatred that surpassed even the hatred for the phone company and the unions and the oil companies and the Congress.

I will wish him dead, Siggy thought. And inside his mind he could hear the fairy godmother cheering. "Make the wish," she said.

"Not yet," Siggy said. "I've got to be fair."

"Fair, schmair. Make the wish, I've got work to do."

"I've got to talk to him first," Siggy said. I can't wish him dead without he has a chance to say his piece."

Siggy had planned to travel alone. Who would understand his purpose, when he didn't really understand it himself? He told no one he was going, just pulled five hundred dollars out of the bank and got in

his cab and started driving. New Jersey, Pennsylvania; found himself on I-70 and decided what the hell, I-70 goes most of the way, that's my highway. He stopped at Richmond, Indiana, to go to the bathroom and get something to eat, then decided to spend the night in a cheap motel.

It was his first night in unfamiliar sorroundings in years. It bothered him; things were out of place, and the sheets were rough and harsh, and there weren't a hundred reminders of Marie and happiness. He slept badly (but, thank heaven, without the fairy godmother), and when he left in the morning he realized that he was lonelier then he thought possible. He wasn't used to driving without conversation. He wasn't used to driving without a fare.

So he picked up a hitchhiker waiting by the on-ramp to the freeway. It was a boy—no, in his own eyes doubtless a man—in his early twenties. Hair fairly long, but cleaner than the usual scruffy roadside bum, and he'd be somebody to talk to, and if there was any trouble, well, Siggy had always carried a tire iron beside the seat, though he was not quite sure what he would ever do with it, or when. It made him feel safe. Safe enough to pull over and pick up the boy.

Siggy reached over and opened the car door as the boy ran up.

"Hey, uh," the boy said, leaning into the car. "I don't need a cab, I need a free ride."

"Don't we all," Siggy said, smiling. "I'm from New York City. In Indiana, I give free rides. I'm on vacation."

The boy nodded and got in beside him. Siggy moved out and was on the freeway in moments, going at a

steady fifty-five. He put on the cruise control and glanced at the boy. He was looking out the front window, his face glum.

"Where are going?" Siggy asked.

"West."

"There's lots of west in the world. Wherever you go, there's still more west on ahead."

"They put an ocean at the end, I stop before I get wet, OK?"

"*I'm* going to Los Angeles," Siggy offered,

The boy said nothing. Obviously didn't want to talk. That was all right. Lots of customers liked silence, and Siggy had no objection to giving it to them. Enough that there was someone breathing in the car. It gave Siggy a feeling of legitimacy. It was all right to drive as long as someone else was in the car.

But this couldn't go on all the way, of course, Siggy realized. When he picked the boy up, he figured on St. Louis, maybe Kansas City, then the boy gets out and Siggy's alone again. He'd have to stop for the night, Denver, maybe. Did the boy think a motel room went along with the ride?

"Where you from?"

The boy seemed to wake up, as if he had dozed off with his eyes wide open. looking out on Indiana as it went by.

"What do you mean, from?" the boy asked.

"I mean *from*, the opposite of *to*. I mean, where were you born, where do you live?"

"I was born in Rochester. I don't think I live anywhere."

"Rochester. What's it like in Rochester?"

"I lived in a Mafia neighborhood. Everybody kept

their yards neat and nobody ever broke into the houses."

"A lot of factories?"

"Eastman Kodak and Xerox Corporation. There's a lot of shit in the world, and Rochester exists by making copies of it." The boy said it bitterly, but Siggy laughed. It was funny, after all. The boy finally smiled, too.

"What are you going to do in California?" Siggy asked.

"Find a place to sleep and maybe a job."

"Want to be a actor?"

The boy looked at Siggy with contempt. "An *actor*? Like Jane Fonda?" He said the name like poison. The tone of voice was familiar. Siggy decided to try him out on the Name.

"What do you think of Richard Nixon?" Siggy asked.

"I don't," said the boy.

And then, madly, knowing it could ruin everything, Siggy blurted, "I'm going to get him."

"What?" the boy asked.

Siggy recovered his senses. Some of them, anyway. "I'm going to meet him. At San Clemente."

The boy laughed. "What do you want to meet him for?"

Siggy shrugged.

"They won't let you near him anyway. You think he wants to see people like us? Nixon." And there it was. The tone of voice. The contempt. Siggy was reassured. He was doing the right thing.

The hours passed and so did the states. Illinois came and went, and they crossed the Mississippi at St. Louis. Not as big as Siggy had expected, but still a hell of a lot of water, when you thought about it. Then Missouri,

which was too wide and too dull. And because it was dull, they kept talking. The boy had a bitter streak a mile wide—everything seemed to lead to it. Siggy found it more comfortable to do the talking himself, and since the boy kept listening and saying something now and then, it seemed OK. They were beginning to pass signs that promised Kansas City as if it were a prize when Siggy got on the subject of Marie. Remembered things about her. How she loved wine—a French vice that Siggy loved in her.

"When she was a little drunk," he told the boy, "her eyes would get big. Sometimes full of tears, but she'd still smile. And she'd lift up her chin and stretch her neck. Like a deer."

Maybe the boy was getting tired of the conversation. Maybe he just resented hearing about a love that actually worked. He answered snappishly. "When you ever seen a deer, Manhattan cabdriver? The zoo?"

Siggy refused to be offended. "She was like a deer."

"I think she sounds like a giraffe." The boy smirked a little, as if saying this were somehow a victory over Siggy. Well, it was. It had worn down his patience.

"It's my wife we're talking about. She died two years ago."

"What do I care? I mean what makes you think I give a pink shit about it? You want to cry? You want to get all weepy about it? Then do it quiet. Jesus, give a guy a break, will you?"

Siggy kept his eyes on the road. There was a bitter feeling in his stomach. For a moment his hands felt violent, and he gripped the wheel. Then the feeling passed, and he got his curiosity back again.

"Hey, what're you so mad about?"

"Mad? What says I'm mad?"

"You sounded mad."

"I sounded mad!"

"Yeah, I wondered if maybe you wanted to talk about it."

The boy laughed acidly. "What, the seat reclines? It becomes maybe a couch? I stuck my thumb out because I wanted a ride. I want psychoanalysis, I stick out a different finger, you understand?"

"Hey, fine, relax."

"I'm not tense, shithead." He gripped the door handle so tightly that Siggy was afraid the door would crumple like tinfoil and fall away from the car.

"I'm sorry," the boy said finally, still looking forward. He didn't let go of the door.

"It's OK," Siggy answered.

"About your wife, I mean. I'm not like that. I don't just go around making fun of people's dead wives."

"Yeah."

"And you're right. I'm mad."

"At me?"

"You? What're you? A piss-ant. One of twelve million piss-ants in New York City. We're all piss-ants."

"What're you mad at?" Siggy could not resist adding the figures to his checklist. "Inflation? Oil companies? Nuclear plants?"

"What is this, the Gallup poll?"

"Maybe yeah. People get mad at a lot of the same things. Nuclear plants then?"

"I'm mad at nuclear plants, yeah."

"You want 'em all shut down, right?"

"Wrong, turkey. I want 'em to build a million of

'em. I want 'em to build 'em everywhere, and then on the count of three they all blow up, they wipe out this whole country."

"America?"

"From sea to shitting sea."

Then silence again. Siggy thought he could feel the whole car trembling with the young man's anger. It made Siggy sad. He kept glancing at the boy's face. It wasn't old. There were some acne scars; the beard was thin in quite a few places. Siggy tried to imagine the face without the beard. Without the anger. Without the too many drugs and too many bottles. The face when it was childish and innocent.

"You know," Siggy said, "I can't believe—I look at you, I can't believe that somebody loved you once."

"Nobody asked you to believe it."

"But they must have, right? Somebody taught you to walk. And talk. And ride a bicycle. You had a father, right?"

Suddenly the boy's fist shot out and slammed into the glove compartment door, which popped open with a crash. Siggy was startled, afraid. The boy showed no sign of pain, though it seemed he had hit hard enough to break a finger.

"Hey, careful," Siggy said.

"You want me to be careful? You tell me to be careful, asshole?" The boy grabbed the steering wheel, jerked on it. The taxi swung into another lane; a car behind them squealed on its brakes and honked.

"Are you crazy? Do you want to get us killed? Get mad, wreck the car, but don't kill us!" Siggy was screaming in anger, and the boy sat there, trembling, his eyes not quite focused. Then the car that had

honked at them pulled up beside them on the right. The driver was yelling something with his window down. His face looked ugly with anger. The boy held up his middle finger. The man made the same gesture back again.

And suddenly the boy rolled down the window. "Hey, don't get us in trouble," Siggy said. The boy ignored him. He yelled a string of obscenities out the window. Siggy sped up, trying to pull away from the other car. The driver of the other car kept pace with him, yelled back his own curses.

And then the boy pulled a revolver out of his pocket, a big, mean-looking black pistol, and aimed it out the window at the driver of the other car. The man suddenly looked terrified. Siggy slammed on the brakes, but so did the other driver, and they stayed nearly parallel.

"Don't!" Siggy screamed, and he sped up, leaving the other car in the distance. The boy pulled the gun back into the car and laid it on his lap, the cock still back, his finger still on the trigger.

"It isn't loaded, right?" Siggy asked. "It was just a joke, right? Would you take your finger off the trigger?"

But it was as if the boy didn't hear him. As if he didn't even remember the last few minutes. "You wanted to know if I had a father, right? I have a father."

At the moment Siggy didn't much care whether the boy had been born in a test tube. But better he should talk about his father than wave the gun around.

"My father," said the boy, "spends his life making sure enough Xerox machines are getting sold and put-

ting more ads in the magazines when they aren't."

They crossed the border into Kansas, and Siggy hoped the incident with the pistol wouldn't get reported across state lines.

"My father never taught me to ride a bike. My brother did. My brother was killed in Mr. President Nixon's war. You know?"

"That was a long time ago," Siggy said.

The boy looked at him coldly. "It was yesterday, asshole. You don't believe those calendars, do you? All lies, so we'll think it's OK to forget about it. Maybe your wife died years ago, Mr. Cabdriver, but I thought you loved her better than that."

Then the boy looked down at the pistol in his lap, still cocked, still ready to fire.

"I thought I left this home," he said in surprise. "What's it doing here?"

"I should know?" Siggy asked. "Do me a favor, uncock the thing and put it away."

"OK," the boy said. But he didn't do anything.

"Hey, please," Siggy said. "You scare me, that thing sitting there ready to shoot."

The boy bowed his head over the pistol for a few moments. "Let me out," he said. "Let me get out."

"Hey, come on, just put the gun away, you don't have to get out, I won't be mad, just put the gun away."

The boy looked up at him and there were tears in his eyes, spilling out onto his cheeks. "You think I brought this gun by accident? I don't want to kill you."

"Then why'd you bring it?"

"I don't know. Jesus, man, let me out."

"You want to go to California, I'm going to California."

"I'm dangerous," the boy said.

Damn right you're dangerous, Siggy thought. Damn right. And I'm a doubledamned fool not to let you out of here right this second, right this minute, very next off-ramp I'll pull over and let him off.

"Not to me," Siggy said, wondering why he wasn't more afraid.

"To you. I'm dangerous to you."

"Not to me." And Siggy realized why he was so confident. It was the fairy godmother, sitting inside the back of his head. "You think I'm going to let anything happen to you, *dummkopf*?" she asked him silently. "If you knock off before you make your wish, it ruins my life. The clerical work alone would take years." I'm crazy, thought Siggy. This boy is nuts, but I'm crazy.

"Yeah," the boy said finally, gently letting down the hammer and putting the gun back into the pocket of his jacket. "Not to you."

They drove in silence for a while, as the plains flattened out and the sky went even flatter and the sun went dim behind the grey overcast. "Richard Nixon, huh?" the boy asked.

"Yeah."

"You really think they'll let us get near him?"

"I'll see to it," Siggy said. And it occurred to him for the first time that fairy godmothers might fulfill wishes in unpleasant ways. Wish him dead? I should wish Nixion dead, and this boy goes to prison forever for killing him? Watch it, fairy godmother, he warned. I won't let you trick me. I have a plan, and I won't let you trick me into hurting this boy.

"Hungry, Son?" Siggy asked. "Or can you hold out till Denver?"

"Denver's fine," said the boy. "But don't call me Son."

It was hot in Los Angeles, but as Siggy neared the sea the breezes became steadily cooler. He was tired. He was used to driving, but not so long a stretch, not so far. In a way the freeways were restful—no traffic, no guesswork about where the car to the right would be a few minutes later. People actually paid attention to the lines between lanes. But the freeways went on, relentlessly, mile after mile, until he felt like he was standing still and the road and the scenery played swiftly past him and under him. At last they had brought Los Angeles to him, and here the scenery would stop for him and wait for him to act. San Clemente. Richard Nixon's house. He found them easily, as if he had always known the way. The boy, asleep beside him for the last few hundred miles, woke up when Siggy brought the cab to a halt.

"What?" asked the boy, sleepily.

"Go back to sleep," Siggy said, getting out of the car. The boy got out, too.

"This is it?"

"Yes," Siggy said, already walking toward the entrance.

"I gotta pee," the boy said. But Siggy ignored him, and kept on walking. The boy followed, ran a little, caught up, saying softly, "Shit can't you even wait a minute?"

Secret Service men were everywhere, of course, but by now Siggy's madness was complete. He knew that they could not stop him. He had to meet Richard Nixon, and so he would. He had parked a long way from

the mansion, and he just walked in, the boy at his heels. He didn't climb fences or do anything extraordinary. Just walked up the drive, around the house, and out onto the beach. No one saw him. No one called out to him. Secret Servicemen seemed always to have their backs to him, or to be on an urgent errand somewhere else. He would have his meeting with Richard Nixon. He would use his wish.

And he was standing where the water charged up the sand, always falling short of its last achievement as the tide ebbed. The boy stood beside him. Siggy watched the house, but the boy watched Siggy. "I thought they had us," the boy said. "I can't believe we got in here."

"Sh," Siggy answered softly. "Sh."

Siggy felt as nervous as a virgin at her wedding, more dreading than longing for what was to come. What if Nixon thinks I'm a fool? he thought. He needn't have worried. As he stood in the sand, Nixon emerged from the house, came down to the beach, and stopped at the waterline, staring out to sea. He was alone.

Taking a deep breath, Siggy walked to him. The sand kept slipping under his feet, so that every step forward tried to turn him out of his path. He persevered, and stood beside Richard Nixon. It was the face, the nose, at once the heavily shadowed evil face of the Herblock cartoons and the hopeful, strong face of the man Siggy had voted for three times.

"Mr. Nixon," Siggy said.

Nixon did not turn at first. He just said, "How did you get here?"

Siggy shrugged. "I had to see you."

Then Nixon turned to him, his face set to smile. Siggy watched as Nixon's eyes met his, then glanced

over his shoulder at the boy, who was walking up, who stopped just behind Siggy.

The boy spoke. "We've come to kill you," he said.

And the boy had his hand in his pocket, where the gun was, and Siggy felt a moment of panic. But the voice of the fairy godmother sounded gently in his ear. "Don't worry," she said. "Take your time."

So Siggy shook his head at the boy, who frowned but did not shoot, and then Siggy turned back to Nixon. The former president was still smiling, his eyes narrowed a bit, but not showing any fear. Siggy felt a moment of satisfaction. This was the Nixon he had admired, the man with such great physical courage, who had faced mobs of Communists in Venezuela and Peru without flinching.

"You wouldn't be the first to want to," Nixon said.

"Oh, but I don't want to," Siggy said. "I have to. For America."

"Ah." Nixon nodded, knowingly. "We all do the most unpleasant things, don't we, for America."

Siggy felt a stab of relief. He understood, which would make it all so much easier.

"You're lucky," Nixon said. "I came out here alone, this once. To say good-bye. I'm leaving here. Tomorrow I would have been gone." He shook his head slightly, slowly, from side to side. "Well, get on with it. I can't stop you."

"Oh," Siggy said. "I'm not going to shoot you. All I have to do is *wish* you dead." Behind him Siggy heard the boy gasp a little. And Nixon sighed slightly. For a moment it sounded to Siggy like disappointment. Then he realized it was relief. And the smile returned to Nixon's face.

"But not today," Siggy went on. I can't just wish for you to be assassinated now, Mr. Nixon. Or for you to die in bed or in an accident. The damage is done. So I'll have to have you die in the past."

The boy made a soft noise behind him.

Nixon nodded wisely. "That will be much better, I think."

"So I've decided that the best time will be right after you're sworn into ofice the second time. In 1972, before the Watergate thing got out of hand, right after you got a peace treaty from the Vietnamese and right after your landslide victory. Then an assassin picks you off, and you're a bigger hero and a greater legend than Kennedy."

"And everything since then?" Nixon asked.

"Changed. They won't keep after you, you see, after you're dead. You'll be a pleasant memory to almost everybody. Their hate will be gone, mostly."

Nixon shook his head. "You said your wish was supposed to be for the good of America, didn't you?"

Siggy nodded.

"Well, if I had been assassinated then, Spiro Agnew would have become president."

Siggy had forgotten. Spiro Agnew. What a bum. There was no way that could be good for the country. "You're right," Siggy said. "So it'll have to be before. Right before the election. It'll be almost as good then, you were leading in the polls."

"But then," Nixon said, "George McGovern would have been president."

Worse and worse. Siggy began to realize the difficulties involved in carrying out his responsibility. Everything he changed would have consequences. How

could he fix the country's woes, if he kept increasing them with the changes he made?

"And if you have me killed in 1968, it's either Spiro Agnew or Hubert Humphrey," Nixon added. "Maybe you'll just have to wish for me to win in 1960."

Siggy thought of that. Thought very carefully. "No," he said. "That would be good for *you*. It would have made you a better president, not to have those bad experiences first. But would you have taken us to the moon? Would you have kept the Vietnam War as small as it was?"

"Smaller," Nixon said. "I would have won it by 1964."

Siggy shook his head. "And been at war with Red China, and the world might have been destroyed, and millions of people killed. I don't think the wrong man won in 1960."

Nixon's face went kind of sad. "Then maybe it would be kindest of all if you simply wished for me to lose every election I ever tried. Keep me out of Congress, out of the vice-presidency. Let me be a used car salesman." And he smiled a twisted, sad smile.

Siggy reached out and touched the man's shoulder. "Maybe I should," he said, and the boy behind him made another soft sound.

"But no," Nixon said. "You wanted to save America. And it wouldn't make any difference to keep me out of government. If it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else. There would have been a Richard Nixon anyway. If they hadn't wanted me, I wouldn't have been there. If Richard Nixon hadn't existed, they would have made one."

Siggy sighed. "Then I don't know what to do," he said.

Nixon turned and looked out over the water. "I only did what they wanted me to do. And when they changed their minds, they were surprised at what I was." The beach was cold and damp between waves. The breeze from the land carried the air of Los Angeles with it, and it made the beach smell slimy and old. "Maybe," Nixon said, "there's nothing you can wish for that will save America. Maybe there's nothing you can do at all."

And the noise the boy made was loud enough that Siggy at last turned to look at him. To his surprise, the boy was no longer standing up. He was sitting cross-legged in the sand, bowed over, his hands gripping each other behind his neck. His body shook.

"What's wrong, Son?" Nixon asked. He sounded concerned.

The boy looked up, anger and grief in his face. "You," he said, and his voice shook. "*You* can call me Son."

Nixon knelt in the sand, painfully as if his leg hurt, and touched the boy's shoulder. "What's wrong, Son?"

"His brother was killed in Vietnam," Siggy said, as if that explained anything.

"I'm sorry," Nixon said. "I'm really sorry."

The boy threw off Nixon's hand. "Do you think that matters? Do you think it makes any difference how *sorry* you are?" The words stung Nixon, clearly. He shuddered as if his face had been slapped.

"I don't know what else I can do," Nixon said softly.

The boy's hand shot out and grabbed him by the lapels of his suit, pulling him down until they were face to face, and the boy screamed, "You can pay for it! You can pay and pay and pay—" and the boy's lips and

teeth were almost touching Nixon's face, and Nixon looked pathetic and helpless in the boy's grip, flecks of the boy's spit beginning to dot his cheeks and lips. Siggy watched, and realized there was nothing that Nixon could do that would pay it all, that would give the boy back what he had lost, realized that Nixon had not really taken it from the boy. Had not taken it, could not return it, was as much a victim as anyone else. How could Siggy, with a single wish, set it all right? How could he even up all the scales?

"Think, idiot," said the fairy godmother. "I'm losing patience."

"I don't know what to do," he said to her.

"And you're the one with the plan," she answered contemptuously.

The boy was still screaming, again and again, and Nixon was weeping now, silently letting the tears flow to join the spittle on his face, as if to agree, as if to make it unanimous.

"I wish," said Siggy, "for everyone to forgive you, Mr. Nixon. For everyone in America to stop hating you, little by little, until all the hate is gone."

The fairy godmother danced in his mind, waving her wand around and turning everything pink.

And the boy stopped screaming and let go of Nixon, gazed wonderingly into the old man's eyes at the tears there, and said, "I'm sorry for you," and meant it with all his heart. Then Siggy helped the boy to his feet and they turned away, leaving Nixon on the beach. The world was tinged with pink and Siggy put his arm around the boy and they smiled at each other. And they headed back to the cab. Siggy saw the fairy godmother flying away ahead of them, north and east

from San Clemente, trailing stars behind her as she flew.

"Bibbity bobbity boo," she cried, and she was gone.

A LONG WAY HOME

by

Paul H. Cook

"And what about the kyrie? Do you think they'll come out of the hills tonight?"

Carrie Blandon stood with her arms folded, hands tucked in her armpits for warmth, and considered Captain Folcroft's question.

The two of them were stragglers to the funeral party which had already returned to the village below. Zeta Tuscanae's bleary glow on the western horizon seemed like a crimson bruise spilling blood and a primitive light on the world. They stood alone in the approaching cold.

"I don't know," Carrie said. Her voice sounded bleak. The whole thing seemed unbelievable to her, and she felt drawn inside for an adequate answer. "He always talked about the kyrie. And now he's dead. He knew more about them than any of us."

Carrie shuddered when Captain Folcroft wrapped her in a sturdy arm drawing her beside him.

"Blake was certainly a strange one."

The wind had lifted up off the stagnant marsh-waters of Lake Paine, the shores on which the five landing craft had finally settled in an awkward pentagon to form their colony. Carrie recalled how Blake always insisted that five was an unlucky number. Off balance and debilitating in its magic.

Magic is the key, she thought. The key to Curtis Blake, one of their top biologists, now dead, sleeping peacefully on a wooden scaffold he insisted be built upon his death. He wanted his death to be like that of his ancestral Sioux back on earth. *Magical . . .*

His body, now nearly frozen in the stark wind of the lake, lay under the smooth pelts of slain kyrie. Pendulous, furry tails dangled in the breeze. Two brittle kyrie skulls, pretending to be the skulls of bison, rested mutely beneath the wooden structure that was held together by strips of tough hide taken from a wildebeest-like quadraped they called an *amphron.* At the four cornerposts were clusters of feathers and parts of wings taken from a seabird common to the area. Their lightness caused them to jerk about violently in the wind.

Dr. Curtis Blake was their first casualty. The first person from the Earth to perish on Zeta Tuscanae Four, or Cassandra, as they now called their home. And this was their first funeral. Their first graveyard.

The muscles in Carrie's stomach tightened. The sight of Blake's strange burial platform made her ill. But she didn't know if it was grief, or simply the cold wind off the lake. The platform was unlike anything she had ever seen in her life. Now, beyond the platform, the purple dusk was beginning to arc up from the east.

"I think we'd better head back," Captain Folcroft said inside his parka.

"No," Carrie muttered. "Not just yet."

The wind whistled around the yellow nylon coveralls she wore.

Folcroft stood apart slightly, trying to read Carrie's expression. His pale blue eyes roamed searchingly above his full red beard.

"You miss him," he said. "I didn't know." He kept his arm around her shoulder.

She gazed at the wild strips of kyrie hide twisting like ribbons in the stiff wind.

"No," she said. "It's nothing. Let's go."

She turned away from Captain Folcroft and started down the hill. He took one last look, then followed her.

The community of Alcyon had agreed to honor the request of Blake's will that he be buried on a replica of a prairie Indian scaffold. It was an unusual request; but it had become an unusual situation. No one had perished en route to Zeta Tuscanae Four, nor had anyone died in the past twenty-one months since their landing. Until now. So they decided to give Curtis Blake his last of all possible wishes far enough from the village so that the smell and rot wouldn't cause a health hazard. Blake had always insisted that a man should be creative in his dying. That a man's life could be shown in the magic of his death.

And so it was.

Carrie pulled the furred parka up over her head as she took careful, mincing steps down the hillside. Downslope, before her, the village glittered like a lone jewel pinned to the shores of the lake. And behind her she could hear Captain Folcroft's boots grate over the

crumbling shale.

It was then that they heard the kyrie for the first time that night.

Carrie lurched around. Folcroft continued walking until he caught up with her.

"It's all right," he said.

But she didn't hear him. The kyrie had begun their nightly cant, hiding in the invisible brush and rock, singing their peculiarly melodic, yet utterly *alien* songs. The cry of a kyrie sounded somthing like a cross between a Scottish bagpipe and an electronically distorted viola. The kyrie, a large quadraped that stood as comfortably on two feet as four, were always crying as if to outdo one another in the night. They would all soon join in, creating a choir of dissonance that coruscated with the shifts in the wind from Lake Paine.

Carrie poised, with her hands in her pockets, and looked around her, to the rocks and scrub brush for a sign of them.

The kyrie had been with them from their first night planetside. As soon as the brake-rockets of the final lander cooled and the wind over the stagnant lake subsided, the kyrie began singing, picking up where the colonists had only temporarily interrupted them. No one got any sleep that first night. No one knew then what the sounds were, or what they meant.

Captain Folcroft and Carrie stood and listened.

Folcroft shivered and urged Carrie back to the trail. Already it had gotten dark enough for the village lights to be turned on, and that meant that the kyrie would be about.

"Carrie, please," he began.

"No, don't." She pulled away, staring off into the

woods that topped the hills.

"We'd better keep moving. It'll be completely dark soon and they might come up on us like they did to Blake."

The howling wafted down towards the shore of Lake Paine despite the winds pushing off into the hills.

"They're louder tonight," she observed. She squinted into the distance as if trying to catch sight of one of them. "Maybe they know about Curtis."

Folcroft straightened at the thought, coughing a quick reassuring laugh. "I doubt it." They have no language. There's no way they could know one of us died. At least not consciously."

The kyrie cries began drifting into a bizarre, haunting tremolo that seemed to shift hypnotically with the play of the wind.

"They know," she stated firmly. "Listen to them."

But Captain Folcroft didn't care to listen. It was cold and he wanted to get her away from the kyrie, and away from Blake.

"Nonsense."

Carrie took one last look at the eerie burial platform that held Curtis Blake's body, erected against the darkening sky. His wish was that it should stay in place until the kyrie hides withered and the wood itself crumbled to the ground. Until nothing was left. Until everything was consumed by the natural elements of Cassandra.

Darkness fell about them swiftly in the planet's quick rotation, but they reached the stockade without incident.

Once inside, the armed guards swung the huge doors

shut. Folcroft gestured to the men. "We're the last. Secure for the night."

"Yes, sir." The guard shouldered his rifle efficiently. Folcroft faced him in the torchlight.

"Smith, have your men keep a careful watch. Tonight specially."

"Yes, sir, the kyrie. We can hear them. We'll stay awake." He smiled from inside his furred hood, his eyes alert and glittering, owl-like.

He turned to Carrie. "I'll see you to your quarters," he said. The cries of the kyrie had made them both edgy. They began walking.

"No, Dan. Wait."

They had reached the large community house. Through the glass of the wide front doors she could see Father McConnell, who had presided over the funeral rites, and their UN representative, Dass Chaterjee. The two men were conferring in the illuminated hallway.

Inside, Father McConnell greeted them cheerfully, bestowing upon them a warm, friendly smile. He took Carrie into his arms.

"Hello, hello. Do come in, please."

Father John McConnell was nearly the tallest man among them, and his smile seemed to plumb the deepest affections of everyone in the community, Catholic or not. Dr. Chaterjee, standing at his side, was their chief surgeon. He was a small, walnut-colored man, somewhat mousey in appearance with his quick, bright eyes flashing about in an attentive, amiable way. Chaterjee smiled grandly at the newcomers.

"Good evening, Captain," he began. "I'm sorry I

missed the funeral. I was with Cora Ransom, as you know."

Folcroft nodded, understanding. "How did it go?" he asked Dr. Chaterjee. "Has the baby come yet? Boy or a girl?"

Chaterjee took his arm. "False labor. Just one of those things. It could be any time now. Tonight or tomorrow morning." He winked jovially at him. "I'm letting this one take it's sweet time."

Folcroft grinned at the doctor. "How's Frank taking it?"

"Nervous as a polecat up a tree, as they say in your country," Chaterjee laughed. "Typical father, I should say."

McConnell and Carrie led the way. The community house was their first permanent building. It housed their library, a theatre, and served as recreation center as well, with its small gymnasium and tennis courts.

Carrie hung her parka beside the door of a small, comfortable sitting room. A fire had already sprouted in the fireplace.

Chaterjee brought over a steaming pot of coffee. Carrie held her cup with both hands, seeking as much warmth as the hot coffee could offer.

"I'm terribly sorry about Curtis," Dr. Chaterjee said to her.

Father McConnell smiled sympathetically. "Yes, we're all sorry that this whole thing happened. I'm sure the community feels the same way. Curtis was a great asset to us all. We'll miss him."

Captain Folcroft had not doffed his parka, and sat in the wide chair like a grand, woolly bear. He smiled thinly behind his beard.

"It's a tragedy," he remarked. "He was a good man, but I told him time after time to stay away from those kyrie, specially at night. But he wouldn't listen."

Carrie watched Captain Folcroft above the steaming cup she held. She said to him, "But the research had to be done. You know that. It's time we took risks here. It's just too bad, that's all." She lowered her eyes.

Dr. Chaterjee relaxed on the couch, elegantly crossing his legs. He smiled at Carrie in a fatherly way. "Well, dear, I don't think he would have been unappreciative of the balance he struck."

She glanced curiously at him.

Chaterjee and Father McConnell exchanged knowing looks. He said to her, "We were just talking about that before you and the Captain came by."

"What balance? I don't understand."

Hoping that a slight change in topic would alter her mood, Father McConnell began, "Well, you know how inquisitive Curtis was, how we often discussed the different religions and beliefs of the Earth. We spoke a great deal of the 'order of things'."

"Are you going religious on us, Father?" Folcroft's smile, when he spoke, was forced.

Chaterjee leaned forward. "Not at all, not at all. The 'order of things' are the laws of nature, or the laws of behavior, whatever you wish. The Father and I—and Curtis—have often spoken about Cassandra, our new home, and how this 'order of things' will manifest itself here."

The priest waved his finger excitedly. "Yes, you see, since we are here permanently, it will be interesting to see how we change or don't change. Over time, of course."

Folcroft sneered, "You *are* going religious on us."

Carrie looked at the two men curiously, rotating the cooling cup between the palms of her hands. "What do you mean by a 'balance'? What's it have to do with Curtis?"

"Well," Dr. Chaterjee started, "It's just that Cora Ransom is going to give birth to our first child, at a time when we've suffered our first loss. It's something of a balance."

"Not the one we'd hoped for," Captain Folcroft pointed out.

"Yes, that's true, very true, Captain," Chaterjee agreed quickly. "But we had to wait until we were certain that we were going to survive here before we could allow a new life to be brought into the world."

"And now we have seven women expecting within the next three months," Father McConnell added proudly.

"Well," said Captain Folcroft, "My concern is that the colony grow. We can wait ten thousand years before we have to worry about zero population growth. Right now we need all the people we can get. Blake's death affects our genetic pool as well, don't forget that."

Chaterjee nodded in perfect agreement.

Father McConnell changed the subject swiftly. Carrie still seemed to be brooding. "You and Curtis knew each other well, didn't you."

Carrie, embarrassed in a shy sort of way, said, "Yes, we did. We were on the team that captured the first kyrie. But I couldn't take the sight of them and I went back into working for the harvesters." She shivered as she recalled the first hunt. "I can barely stand their

howling after all the time we've been on Cassandra."

"Yes," Chaterjee empathized. "Blake was a brave man indeed."

As if he felt he was being left out, Folcroft jumped into the conversation. "I always thought he was crazy. A good man, but crazy. You know, he always said that he heard music in their singing. And I told him that the kyrie were dangerous, that he should've kept a small contingent of guards along with him on his excursions. But he never listened."

Chaterjee and McConnell considered one another.

"Well, you understand, Captain, I'm sure, that Blake had the right idea." Dr. Chaterjee focused an even stare at him.

"I know, I know." He fidgeted uneasily in his chair.

Chaterjee continued. "We have to know as much about them as possible. We're going to be neighbors, and it's imperative that we learn how to fit ourselves, without too much trouble, into this particular ecological network. It will be years before we can mount an expedition to the south, to establish another colony, and the kyrie appear to be widespread. They seem to be the dominant land-dwelling species."

"They're just a nuisance with their howling and all."

Carrie gave Folcroft a stiff, reprimanding glance. "But Curtis thought that their howling was singing, that it had a pattern to it. And if it was patterened, then they could be sentient beings, not beasts. And we have laws for this sort of thing."

"But they're not intelligent in the way we are," Folcroft told her. "They have no artifacts, no cities, no visible patterns of learned behavior."

"That doesn't mean a damn thing. Besides, they do

have singing."

"That doesn't count."

"It did to Curtis and the rest of the biology team. Ask any one of them. Anyway," she waved her hand enthusiastically. "Just listen to them. Their howling seems to shift throughout the night. It comes and goes. And there are even herds of them that take on different modulations and cadences. Like territorial birds. Or whales."

She darkened. "Yes," she repeated, "like the whales." She stared back into her cup.

They all understood the inference. By the time they had left the solar system in the *Ceyx* nearly a century ago, the great whales had become extinct. All of them.

"Carrie," Folcroft softly began, "I don't think we're dealing with whales here. The fact that Curtis was attacked and killed by one of the kyrie shows us that they are destructive. Without the stockade, we would have lost the sheep and the cattle. They are flesh-eaters, or at least, seem to be. We don't know why they would want to feed on alien organisms in the first place, but the fact is they do."

"But we don't have to kill them off."

Folcroft stared at the coffee table for an instant.

"We're not killing them off," he paused. "Not yet, at least. But we might have to take some kind of action soon if it happens again. The kyrie are getting braver. You heard them yourself tonight out at the gravesite. They know we're different. Maybe they've learned enough from us over these last few months to do something about it. I'll grant any kind of animal that kind of intelligence."

Father McConnell looked at the two of them, and

rose quickly. "Well," he broke in, "At least Curtis is resting peacefully. But it sure was a strange request to be buried like that."

Carrie fell silent although Dr. Chaterjee seemed buoyant in his usual way.

"It's almost mystical, ritualistic," he said, "Pagan, if you will. Back to basics."

And as Dr. Chaterjee spoke, Carrie envisioned the kyrie out in the cold moist dark air, singing around the platform, warbling from the scrub brush, crooning on the boulders and stumps.

Father McConnell leaned back, musing. "You know, it's a funny thing how Curtis always believed in a transmigration of the spirit. Reincarnation, if you will. But this is your department, Doctor, not mine." He smiled affectionately. "Maybe Blake will come back among us."

Chaterjee smiled at the quip. "Sometimes, John, you amaze the hell out of me."

"I was only kidding. Curtis was a good man. I'm sure God will find a just reward for his good works on Earth."

"But this isn't the Earth, Father," Folcroft said. "Heaven might be a long way away. Twelve light years at relativistic speeds gives a soul a couple of centuries just for transit. Might not make it."

Carrie brightened, thinking of Curtis.

"Dr. Chaterjee, what would happen if it were true?" she asked.

Dass Chaterjee glowed with embarrassment; he knew that he always stood out because of his differing faith. But his lightness of heart and good humor made him an easy man with whom to discuss these matters.

"Well, dear," he began, trying to avoid the eyes of his sparring partner, Father McConnell. "If we begin arguing as to whether or not it is true, we'll be here all night, and probably all of our natural lives I'm afraid."

Father McConnell folded his arms. "Like arguing the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin."

"Precisely. It would do no good. But if you look at evolution in terms of energy rather than physical forms, you'll notice how all of nature eventually led up to man and the higher animals." He glanced over at the priest to see how he was taking it all in. Father McConnell watched him with the eyes of a ferret at the mouth of a field snake's nest, and smiled.

Chaterjee continued, "Man became, physiologically, the most efficient organism on the earth, as far as the evolution of psychic energy is concerned. That was God's plan, I believe. So when a man dies, he moves up the ladder through a series of lives until he becomes so refined, spiritually, that he no longer needs to return to the world.

He shrugged his shoulders playfully at Father McConnell whose only concern was Carrie's emotional welfare. He knew what McConnell and Captain Folcroft only suspected: that she and Curtis Blake were, at one time, lovers. Back aboard the *Ceyx* before it reached Cassandra. Why they separated, he had no idea. But those things happened.

Carrie considered the Doctor's words. "Maybe, then, he'll come back someday," her voice was distant and detached. "Or go back to the Earth to be reborn, or just go to Heaven. I don't know . . ."

When the wind that had been whipping against the

outside awnings suddenly subsided, the four of them could hear the sounds of the kyrie in the hills.

Then she had a thought. "But wouldn't it work with them as well?"

"Them—who, dear?"

"The kyrie," she stared off beyond the walls. "If it's true, then the kyrie would be evolving as well."

Folcroft twisted uncomfortably. He broke in. "Well now that doesn't mean that they're people, you know. Only people go to Heaven."

"Well, yes," Chaterjee interrupted the Captain. "All energy is evolving towards higher states of physical form and purity. Efficiency, if you will. Evolution works here as well. That would be part of the 'order of things.' Zeta Tuscanae went through the same birth-pangs as did our sun. That's why we chose this particular system to immigrate to. And we have already found the fossil remains of an ancestor to the *amphrons*. Nothing on this planet that we've seen so far indicates that the kyrie or anything else is as advanced as we are, but they have all of eternity to work up the scale to higher consciousness. Who knows?"

Undaunted by his audience, Dr. Chaterjee smiled at his friends. And at Carrie. "Whatever God's plan is," he concluded, "I'm sure that Curtis will be taken care of. He was a good soul, and God's ways are manifold and a mystery to us on this earth."

"Well, Doctor," Folcroft started, as he rose from his chair. "We're on Cassandra now. Let's hope He is waiting in the wings in case anything goes wrong here, because we aren't getting any reinforcements."

At that moment, the communication wafer pinned to Dr. Chaterjee's collar chimed and glowed a soft

green. He reached a hand up, and squeezed two sides of it.

"Yes?" he asked.

A tiny voice squeaked, sounding like the speech of a cartoon mouse. "Doctor, this might be it. Cora's gone into labor again. She's down to seventeen minutes."

"Fine," he announced. "I'll be there presently."

He rose from the couch. "Well, comrades, I have a sacred mission to attend to. Anyone care to come along? Should be interesting."

Father McConnell reached for his jacket, setting his cup down. He said, "I know I'll be needed. Captain Folcroft, would you like to sit in on this festive occasion with us?"

Folcraft glanced at Carrie and noted the drawn look on her face. "I'll be with you in a few minutes."

They all moved into the hallway. He gestured aside to her. "Mind if I see you home?"

"Thank you," she said, feeling slightly better than when she had come in. The conversation and company did it, she thought.

"Well, you must excuse us," Dr. Chaterjee pulled on his gloves, smiling at them. Father McConnell held the door open.

While there were no clouds in the sky, the moisture off the lake had coalesced into tiny whisps of snow that brushed at them. They could now hear the kyrie above the chill wind.

Carrie drew up her furred hood as the two men briskly stalked off toward the small hospital that was built near the towering ruin of one of the five disassembled landers. Its insect-like superstructure radiated in the shimmering lights of the village sur-

rounding it.

Folcroft and Carrie moved towards the small quonset hut that she lived in.

He said, "You know, Carrie, I'm truly sorry for Curtis' death. If there is anything I can do for you, please let me know."

She considered him in the half-light the street torches cast.

"It's all right," she said. "I just have a lot on my mind."

"I know. I understand." They stood before her door. "I'll come by tomorrow. I have to get the harvest stats to the committee anyway. You can help me on it."

Her face in the darkness was a mask. Inscrutable.

"OK," she said. "That sounds fine. See you tomorrow." She stepped up onto her small, sheltered porch. She turned back.

"Dan?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for staying with me up there." She then disappeared beyond the door.

Folcroft stood for a brief moment, the small flakes of snow from the clear sky salting his thick beard.

Once inside, Carrie listened for Captain Folcroft's tread as it moved away in the darkness. Her own boots resounded ponderously on the hardwood floor as she walked to the center of her living room. There, she stopped.

She had absolutely no thoughts running through her mind, and she stood listening instead to the humming in her brain that was caused by the millions of electrical pulses that coursed up the synapses of her spine.

Energy, she thought finally. Her body began warming inside the tiny apartment. She still wore her parka, feeling the heat, feeling the sheer physical energy suffuse her entire being.

She could hear the kyrie howling beyond the walls of her apartment, and beyond the walls of the village. Like coyotes or cougars of the old American west, sitting out there in the dark, avoiding the lights of the human settlement. Yet, their plaintive cries filtered through the wooden stockade, drifting down the dusty streets and alleys, up to the very walls of her home.

The emptiness of her thoughts soon filled with the songs of the mysterious kyrie, and finally she wondered what it was about the kyrie that drew Curtis to his death. Everyone in the colony had anticipated an encounter of this sort before, and sooner or later it had to happen. Cassandra, after all, was a planet with a wide range of ecologies and was replete with a literal wilderness of plant and animal life—and no telling what else. Eventually, the people of the Earth—an *alien* planet—would have to run up against the indigenous life-cycles of Zeta Tuscanae Four. For Curtis Blake the consequences of just such an encounter allowed for his death.

But she didn't quite believe that.

Listen to them, she said to herself. *Like lonely coyotes back home in New Mexico crying at the moon.* The singing of the kyrie became the slight humming in her brain, like an over-laying of sonic matricies. She could envision them hulking out beyond Curtis' burial scaffold, singing, like the bipedal salamanders they seemed most to resemble. And perhaps there were those strange seabirds. Pecking at his remains, churn-

ing the air above him with their diaphanous, obsidian wings.

And the platform itself: *the feathers shifting in the wind, the rippling hairs of the blanketing skins, the light of the three small moons silently wearing away at the first human dead of this planet . . .*

Where are you now, Curtis? she asked. *Where?*

Thinking of him, then of the kyrie lurking out beyond her mind's eye, she unzipped the close-fitting jacket, but only to clasp around her thin waist her utility workbelt and pistol holder. She lifted the flatlamp and 'scope from her bookshelf knowing that they might come in handy. She also took her visors for night vision.

Turning the apartment lights off, she left the building quickly, moving out towards the equipment entrance to the stockade.

The hospital was on the way to the entrance of the storage pen where all the farming machines were kept. But she did not stop. She kept to the shadows, although she didn't really know why. Many people were out tonight, despite the bitter cold. *Just like a regular community,* she thought. Except that in Alcyon there were no criminals, as yet. Time and evolution would take care of that.

She passed under the legs of one of the five landers. To her, it looked like a brooding praying mantis. Nothing moved up there but the wind itself. She heard it whistle through the decaying metal lacework.

Skirting the equipment pen, she approached the gate. It was unguarded, sunk in great shadows.

Looking around, Carrie flitted into the darkness and disengaged the heavy steel lock, sliding back the well-oiled bolt. The double doors parted easily, providing a

space wide enough for her to slip through. Closing the gate behind her, she checked to see that it didn't lock automatically.

Beyond the compound, she walked briskly up the gentle slope towards the burial platform. One of the three moons orbiting Cassandra had already forded the eastern horizon with its dim window of light. It aided her somewhat in finding the trail.

She donned the visors. If all three moons were out, the illumination would have been more than enough for her to get up to the platform and beyond. But the projector above the goggles, like a purple third eye, cast out a strong infrared beam that kept her to the path.

She could tell that the kyrie were near, hiding in the brush. Every shift in the wind brought their singing to her from all directions.

Singing, she thought. *Not howling . . .*

Nonetheless, she withdrew her automatic pistol from its holster. The sounds of the kyrie were making her nervous, although she could, as yet, see no movement.

As she neared the burial platform, rooted to the slight incline that reached into the hills, she observed that the kyrie had already come and gone. In the eerie light, footprints marred the soft earth beneath the platform. *Kyrie*. She lifted the visor.

The body was undisturbed. The posts showed no signs that they had been touched. The leather thongs were as tight as before. But on the ground she noted that the tracks led back off into the hills, making their own trail. She pulled out the flatlamp. Held up in her fist, it cast out a long, crystal rod of light into the distance. The trail disappeared in the pale sagebrush,

leading towards a rift in the hills.

She banked out the lamp and buckled it to her utility belt. Preferring to move in darkness, she put her goggles back on. The kyrie probably sensed that she was out among them, but it would be much safer being masked completely by the night.

The singing that resounded from the low hills drew her on.

She paused to consider just how unusual the singing sounded. If anything ever was to convince her that she was actually living on another planet, this was it. The singing of the kyrie. Nothing could adequately describe what it sounded like, or why their two pairs of vocal chords made the sounds they did. It was hypnotic, soothing in some ways, yet oddly disquieting, the way some dreams are. And *very* alien. Still, like a fish in the sea, she swam in their oscillating melodies.

She held her pistol tighter, and edged back to safety.

The path she was on appeared to be a game trail used by the kyrie and other nocturnal animals. Softly padded, it parted the sagebrush.

Her heart began beating faster. She didn't completely understand her impulse to come out here, let alone the fact that she would be willing enough to use her automatic. But the kyrie—regardless of whatever their singing implied about them—had attacked and killed Curtis Blake only a few days ago.

That she kept in her mind.

She tried to block out the singing, which had, by now, increased to a higher pitch. She was getting closer. The wind had made the singing seem as if it was radiating from every point around her. She could tell that a large group of them were gathered in a pack just ahead.

Like a pack of wolves, she thought, *but not quite.* And her gun would probably be useless.

But she didn't care. She held not the slightest conflict in her mind as she silently came upon them in the wan light of the smallest moon.

The game trail led across a small creek and paralleled it. It suddenly opened into a run-off meadow, or marsh, where in the dim light she could see a pack of the kyrie, singing.

She crouched down, lifting her infrared visors, then froze.

She knew, as to their size, that she could out-run any of them. But a fight, if they caught up with her, would be impossible. The kyrie were an odd high-country mix of adaptive qualities. They could easily walk on their hind legs, but chose, for reasons beyond anyone in the colony, to spend most of their time on all fours. They were smooth-skinned, grayish in color, with peculiar, apparently non-functional wing-like appendages, something akin to shoulder blades, that extended when they breathed or sang. They were doing so now as she watched them.

The singing shifted like the warblings of different species of tropical birds. Then the songs went deep-throated, choral, then completely polyphonic.

The modulations and variations of timbre and color made their singing seem indeed very much like music.

Joyful, came into her mind. *Sacramental.*

The kyrie sloshed through the waters of the marsh, dragging their long, swaying forearms, singing through their dual mouths. They had apparently gathered here for a reason. She tried to see just what that reason could be.

The singing struck her as being focused; very intensely so. The dull, gray forms of the kyrie moved in a processional, turning like the waters of a maelstrom around a point in the center of the marsh. Tall trees obscured her vision, so she risked exposure for a better view.

She backed off towards a ledge of clustered rocks above the trail. Carefully, she parted the leaves of a withering, fern-like plant, and with her free hand, lifted the 'scope from her utility belt.

In the center of the ring of slogging kyrie floated a mother and its calf. While the circling kyrie kept up with the singing and chanting, the mother attended to the ministrations of the infant whose small filmy wing appendages flexed in the weak moonlight. From the tiny lips of the calf's dual mouth came a high-pitched trilling, mimicking that of the mother brooding over it.

Like a Madonna and Child, Carrie thought to herself. The adult kyrie plodded and sloshed grotesquely, forming a protective barrier surrounding the new-born.

"My God," she whispered under her breath, wondering if all kyrie births were like this. This is *ritualistic.* No one had ever seen a kyrie give birth before, and the assumption still held among the colonists that the kyrie stayed out of sight in these matters, like most animals.

But this was different.

Suddenly Carrie heard the the small snap of a branch behind her and she whipped around with her gun in one hand, the 'scope in the other.

The huge form of Captain Folcroft materialized beside the path, crouching like a stalking beast. His automatic pistol was out.

"Jesus Christ!" she uttered, heart pounding savagely like a frenzied bird in the cage of her chest.

He glided over to where she knelt, her back to the rock.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said in a whisper, turning to watch the singing kyrie through the purple eyes of his goggles.

"Neither should you. I could've blown a hole through you and not thought twice. You scared the hell out of me." She stared at him fiercely. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing." He watched the kyrie move. "But I came back to check on you, and found that you weren't home. I traced you by your com-wafer."

She looked down to her collar at the communication wafer badge, feeling completely stupid.

"You had no business," she whispered.

"Nor had you. We've already lost one of us to the kyrie, we don't need to lose you."

"You mean *you* don't need to lose me," she glared at him through the darkness that separated them.

Expressionlessly, he considered her. Turning back to the kyrie, he asked, "What's going on out there?"

She peered over the boulder, trying to slow her breathing. Too much was happening at once.

"The kyrie are singing. There's a mother and its young out there in the center of the meadow. I don't know if you can see them. Here," she handed him the 'scope. "Try with this."

He lifted the 'scope to his eyes, holding it by its pistol-grip. She continued, "Curtis said that the kyrie probably gave birth in the hills. But this is different.

Even their singing is different. It has been all night. I think that this is something like what Curtis stumbled upon."

Folcroft breathed soft easy feather-plumes of frosty air.

"I had to come out here," she insisted. "They just sounded different to me. I can't explain it."

"You could have been killed, Carrie." He rose slightly to get a better view of the ceremony. "This is just the thing animals would violently react against if they found you. Any animal. This is the largest pack I've seen of them." He thumbed the video recorder of the 'scope, playing the scanner from one end of the marsh to the other, filming everything that moved.

Carrie touched his arm. "It's not a pack. It's a community of some kind. And this is a ceremony. Can't you see?"

He turned to her. "They're completely dangerous to us, whatever they are, and however smart they are. They've raided our crops and taken cattle."

"Like marauding Indians." She stared at him hard, breathing as evenly as she could.

He looked at her. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean. Curtis knew that they were sentient, as did all of the others of his team. Ask them. Read their reports. They're like dolphins, or whales perhaps. Jusy because Curtis got killed by one of them doesn't mean that we can't live with them."

"Oh, really?" Captain Folcroft's indignant tone threw her. He continued, "Do you fully understand just what it is that we have to consider now that we're here permanently? We can't afford to lose anybody. No one. I have to think of these things."

"But this is their planet, for God's sake, and they just might be its most advanced organism. This far up above the equatorial they could be something like Aleuts or Eskimos. And that new-born down there," she pointed with a nervous finger, "just could be special to them."

"What do you mean?"

"Take a look. This is a ritual." She tried to keep her voice down. "Their singing is special. Everything about their behavior tonight is special. And we have no business interfering."

"We have all the business in the world, because we belong here just as much as they."

"Do we?" and she spoke in her full voice, enraged. "Do we, Dan? Look at them!"

Suddenly the singing stopped and sixty or so pairs of sparkling eyes turned in their direction.

"Oh, God," Folcroft stood up.

The kyrie suddenly scattered in a tumult of growls and yipes. The mother and its calf waded backwards in the chaos to a clump of marsh hedges. Several of the males lifted their long, gray arms from the mire of the swamp, parted their four lips and brayed at the human beings. Standing on their hind legs, they lunged at them, galloping and crashing through the thick, cold waters.

"Run!" Folcroft ordered as he snapped two incendiary grenades from his belt, dropping the 'scope to the ground.

"Don't" Carrie screamed, backing off.

"They're coming. We don't have a chance." He pushed her behind him further, and lobbed the first grenade. "Go!" He turned and tossed the second grenade.

Water in the meadow geysered in a muffled explosion illuminated with a fierly yellow light. A couple of kyrie were lifted skyward.

They ran down the trail as fast as they could, jumping the stream, pursued by an unseen number of bellowing, screaming kyrie. The fire in the reeds set off by the grenades gave the kyrie enough light to sight the fleeing colonists.

Carrie ran, still holding her pistol. She heard Captain Folcroft coming up behind her. He began firing at the kyrie.

"Carrie!" he beckoned. "Shoot them! Fire at them. We can stop them here!"

But she merely came to a halt. Folcroft was down on one knee taking careful pot-shots at the advancing kyrie who didn't have the sense to conceal themselves. To Carrie's horror, the kyrie were advancing on their hind legs, giving them a very human appearance.

"Dan, don't!"

Three, then four kyrie dropped, not fully understanding what the tiny shards of burning lead that pierced them meant.

Captain Folcroft rose and ran back to Carrie.

"Christ, fire at them!" His eyes were wild.

She only stood.

Folcroft jerked out the clip of his gun and shoved another one into the butt of the handle with a sharp click.

But the kyrie had stopped advancing. The two people could discern no movement whatsoever.

"Let's go!" Captain Folcroft took no time. He grabbed Carrie's arm and pulled her back onto the trail. The burial platform was between them and the

village. They could see its ghostly outline further below them on the slanting piedmont.

They slowed up when they reached the platform. The bitter air hurt her lungs, but Captain Folcroft didn't appear to be breathing at all. He was like a jaguar teased with the thrill of the chase. His large, gloved hands were paws, and one still held an extra grenade while the other grasped the pistol whose blue muzzle steamed slightly in the night air.

"They stopped. Good," he said. "That was close, very close. They won't come any closer now that we're out in the open."

Carrie looked off into the hills. For a few minutes as they waited to calm down, there was a blanket of stark silence around them. Then the kyrie, hidden in the trees and brush, began their singing again as if everything was back to normal. As if nothing had happened.

Carrie lifted her goggles back onto her forehead. The fire beyond the low hills in the marsh glowed in a soft, amber halo.

Folcroft buckled his gun in its holster. The grenade, he clipped back onto his belt. "I don't think they'll pursue us." He seemed more relaxed, as if the whole thing had only amounted to target practice.

Carrie walked around the platform. Stumbling suddenly, she noticed for the first time the ring of rocks beneath the scaffold surrounding the twin kyrie skulls.

"Look at this," she indicated. "I didn't notice these before."

"What?" Folcroft turned away from the fire beyond the hills.

The two kyrie skulls that Blake wanted placed

beneath the scaffold in lieu of buffalo skulls were now ringed with tiny, finely carved white stones. Like pearls.

"The kyrie put them here," she affirmed, kneeling, drawing back her hood. "You see? They are intelligent. To some degree, they understand what all of this means."

Folcroft merely stared at her through the blank lenses of his visor.

Just at that moment, as Carrie kneeled on the ground, his com-wafer glowed green and called out.

"Captain Folcroft?"

He reached his hand up, and squeezed it.

"Yes, I'm here. What is it."

"Go ahead," said the dispatcher. Dr. Dass Chaterjee's voice came over the communicator.

"Captain Folcroft," he sounded grave. Carrie listened.

"Yes, Doctor, what's up?"

"Where are you? I went looking for you."

"I'm out at the platform with Ms. Burden," he looked down at her severely. "We've just had an altercation with the kyrie."

Chaterjee was silent for a moment.

"Doctor?" Folcroft asked impatiently.

"I have some bad news, Captain."

"Yes, Doctor, what is is?"

"Cora Ransom's child."

"Well?"

"I don't quite understand it yet, but Dr. Williamson is still examining the baby."

"Go on."

"The child's retarded in some way."

Silence blossomed around them as Folcroft maintained his pinch on the com-wafer at his collar.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What went wrong?"

"I don't know yet. We'll have to run some tests on the baby to see if it was inherited, or if the mutation was related in some way to our presence on Cassandra."

"What are you talking about, Doctor?"

"It doesn't cry," Chaterjee groped for the right words. His voice seemed strained. "It sort of barks. Howls."

"What?" Carrie rose, pinching open her own com-wafer. It glowed green between her fingers. "Howling?"

Chaterjee took a deep breath.

"Captain Folcroft, the baby sounds like a kyrie. She looks like a baby girl, but she's not crying. She's howling the way the kyrie do."

"My God," Folcroft whispered.

"Dr. Chaterjee," Carrie opened. "Something's going on with the kyrie tonight. I saw them singing . . ."

"Never mind that," Folcroft interrupted. "It's not important. Dr. Chaterjee, I want tests run on that child, immediately. It's not a kyrie. She's obviously retarded. I want checks on both parents. There's no way it could be a kyrie or anything else."

Carrie stood alone in the darkness listening to the kyrie crying in the hidden hills. *Kyrie eleison.* Lord have mercy.

"It's an exchange," she said distantly.

"What's that?" came Dr. Chaterjee's voice over the com-wafer.

"It's nothing, Doctor," Folcroft responded.

She turned and faced him, angrily. "Yes, it is. It's an exchange. This is their planet."

Folcroft considered her through his goggles.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's a long way home," she said firmly.

"You're speaking nonsense."

"No, I'm not. And neither was Curtis." She looked over at the burial platform. "It's a long way back to Earth, or Heaven, so the energy of the spirit stays here. On Zeta Tuscanae Four."

"What's going on there, Captain?" Chaterjee's voice implored.

"Carrie," Captain Folcroft began, ignoring for the moment the calls of Dr. Chaterjee over the badge at his collar. "Carrie, you're under a terrific strain. Let's get back . . ."

He moved towards her, but she stepped away.

"And you want to kill them!" she accused. "This is their home and you want to push them off of it."

"Now, wait a minute," he yanked up his goggles. "We don't have any choice in the matter. We're here for good or ill, and they're a threat, and probably always will be. You've seen them, the way they react." He gestured behind them towards the marsh.

"No," she said. "You don't understand at all. They're evolving with our energy. They would've gotten around to it sooner or later over a few million years, but we're her to help them out. And we're so far from home, we're the ones . . .

"Carrie, please."

Suddenly, the tremendous form of a bull kyrie loomed at them from the trail. Wounded, it left a silver

stream of blood behind it. They hadn't seen it come up as they argued. And it came on them fast.

"Dan!" Carrie screamed.

Captain Folcroft whirled around, but the kyrie fell upon him.

The kyrie shrieked horribly from its four lips as Carrie brought up her gun. She shot off all eight rounds from the heavy automatic, blinking each time the pistol roared.

The beast rolled over on Captain Folcroft.

Dr. Chaterjee's voice came over Carrie's com-wafer. "People! What's going on!"

"Dan!" She dropped the gun and rushed over to the two forms.

Folcroft groaned, nearly crushed by the weight of the kyrie. He put a weak hand to the shoulder of the kyrie and tried to push it off.

He had been hit by two of Carrie's bullets. But the beast was quite dead.

"Oh, my God!" she said, shaking.

"Carrie," Folcroft coughed. "Call for . . ."

She pinched the com-wafer for the dispatcher.

"Send some men up here, quick! Please, oh God! We're out at the platform! Please!"

Folcroft pulled himself out from underneath the dead kyrie. Carrie held one of his arms, but he fell back to the ground, rolling over.

He smiled thinly.

"Good shot," he said. He closed his eyes, breathing easy.

"Oh, Dan, I'm sorry, sorry . . ."

Eyes still closed, he said to her, "That's O.K. . Just in the stomach and arm. Are they coming?"

She looked down the hill towards the village. The gates had opened and she could see the headlights of a ground car coming up fast.

"Yes."

"Good."

She sat on the ground beside him, nestling his head in her lap. The kyrie lay motionless.

She looked up at the stars. The ones she could see seemed so far away.

OF CRYSTALLINE LABYRINTHS AND THE NEW CREATION

by

Michael Bishop

There are multitudinous emanations, and sight is only one of them which is given us here in the childhood of the soul.

R.A. Lafferty

1

Ossie Safire, character,
A digger diligent and lean,
Went out one day, out searching for
Just one thalassapithecine.

Boomer Flats Ballads

On a white, gin-clear, altogether springy Oklahoma day Ossie Safire was walking down a dry arroyo on Rowdy Al LeFever's ranch when he caught sight of something that he couldn't quite see: a shimmer, a shifting, a shuffle of wind and air. O, it was bright, this shimmering, but shy; and Ossie, a seasoned hunter of

cultural artifacts and anthropological leftovers, stopped on the arroyo bank. About forty feet ahead of him that shy brightness had *unsparkled* between the gulch's clayey walls. Ossie blinked. He stuck out his cowcatcher chin, hitched his khaki trousers, blinked again, and stared upchannel. The white, gin-clear springy day was congealing, all of it pouring down around Ossie in fiery translucence, and he knew that if he didn't hop himself down into the arroyo, whatever it was that he hadn't seen would poutily disappear.

So down he hopped, Ossie Safire.

And as gingerly as he had hopped, both arms peculiarly wingcocked in that way Ossie had, his implement-lined rucksack banging his vertebrae, well, just that gingerly did Ossie walk up the sun-baked runnel.

"I'm looking for the pottery shards of gone-astray Osage," he thought. "Also for the paleoliths of the enigmatic pre-people People. And, if I am very lucky, for the flipper bones and fenurs of the elusive archaeo-okie thalassapithecines." (These last were, of course, those sea-going ape folk, of an undated inland-sea era, in whom Ossie could induce no belief among his friends and associates of the Greater Tulsa Diggers' Consortium. Though he had hopes.) "I am *not* looking," his thinking continued, "for the unsparklings of ostentatious air."

Rowdy Al LeFever had invited Ossie out to look around his ranch, saying that here on the prairie a first-rate discovery no doubt lay in wait for a dedicated rockhound. Ossie did not wholly believe this. And he wondered about the oddly named Rowdy Al, who, they said, hailed from a place called Boomer Flats and

behaved himself like a perfect gentleman. (*They* were those members of the Diggers' Consortium whom old LeFever had contacted about a man to nose around on his property, and *they* had designated to represent them that amenable crazy, Ossie Safire.) Upon arriving, Ossie had met briefly with the rancher on the porch of his yellow, many-gabled, somehow charmingly lopsided house.

More or less tongue-tied Ossie had said, "An unusual house, sir."

"A fellow down the road once tried to build one just like it," Rowdy Al told Ossie. "He came to me and said, 'Mr. LeFever, there is nothing so original as a first-rate copy.' I told him I doubted it but that he was welcome to the plans.

"The house he built fell over on him nine or ten times before he finally managed to get it to stand up. He came back and said, 'Well, it ain't an *inimitable* house you've got here, Mr. LeFever, but I could've never built one anything like it without seeing yours first. And in that there's genius.' He finally tore it down, this fellow, and put up one more like himself, saying that it was just something he had to get out of his system. He was a man, though, who appreciated the effect of a premeditated spontaneity, and I didn't think too ill of him."

"I've come to look for rocks. Or fossils," Ossie had said, trying to get back to the topic at hand.

"Well, go on and nose around. Hope you find something you like. I've heard of you, Ossie Safire, and I want you to be the first one to run across this thing." With those cryptic words Rowdy Al LeFever had retired into his huge, lopsided, yellow house, leaving

Ossie to his own devices.

Which were neither devious nor divining, but merely goodheartedly simple. "Am I being mocked?" the digger thought.

Now, wishing for the serendipitous, Ossie Safire stalked the thing he hadn't seen and, so stalking, fumbled his handpick out of his rucksack. Before him like a tomahawk he held it. A real Oklahoma hawk wheeled by overhead, and a stand of cottonwoods, like the leafy pillars of a ruined shrine, topped an ochre rise beyond the arroyo's opposite bank. A gin-clear, heady day, and Ossie wondered what the Oracle of the Cottonwoods would say about his stalking the quasi-invisible so seriously. But consult it he could not, only appreciate the long trunks and the liquid leaves: during which appreciation, by the way, it happened. All unexpectedly it happened.

Ossie ran full upon the anomaly that would shortly grow more anomalous; ran up against it and scraped his nose so that the skin peeled back and the pain flooded up.

"Eeyow," Ossie said. And stopped stone still.

And thought he saw a not-sparkle (yes, a *not-sparkle*) interpose itself briefly, briefly, between his eyes and the oracular cottonwoods. Ossie couldn't really see anything else but the absolutely-was-there earth, dusty and lacklustre, and the should-be-there sky falling into all the unearth places and congealing airily, just as April ought to congeal. A puzzle, a puzzle; a painful one. Ossie rubbed his nose. It had got banged because, upon sighting the cottonwoods, he had dropped his handpick to his side. Now he lifted the handpick again, and tapped it on the motionless wind

in the gulch, upon the airy hardness his nose had bumped.

The air blocked the handpick's blow and shivered Ossie Safire's wrist. "This is dismaying," Ossie thought. "The members of the Diggers' Consortium scarcely credit my intelligence. Why? Because I insist upon the one-time existence of the archaeo-okie thalassapithecines. Now I'm going to have to go back to them and tell them that I've discovered a pocket—of solidified air. The guffaws will be glorious, the catcalls a perfect caterwauling. On such a heady day I deserve better, O much, much better: maybe even a flipper-bone fossil."

But Ossie, whom dismay seldom deterred, set such considerations aside and examined his find. Up went his handpick-tomahawk. Ossie tapped and tapped. He tapped up, he tapped laterally, he tapped down. His handpick went over the anomaly, and around it, and even beneath the belly of the viewless crystal hanging from unknown heights into the arroyo, like an utterly transparent stalactite. Stooping, Ossie walked under it, for two or three feet of unhardened air existed between the floor of the runnel and the rounded tip of the depending anomaly. Feeling with his hands and with the edge of the little pick, Ossie walked around the oddness, and discovered that it had a radius of four or five feet. And as he measured its exposed surface, it disconcertingly kept unsparkling and not-glinting. (What these unsparklings and not-glints was like was this: Ossie had the feeling that the gin-clear, congealing day was one prolonged flashing of the cosmic Orderer while the brief, negative coruscations from the invisible rock were pieces of ordinary daylight. If this sounds complicated to you, think how hard it was for

me to try to explain. Anyhow, the heady day was clearly playing its own part in shaping Ossie's experience in the arroyo.) He ignored the rock's fickle "glitterings" and kept tapping.

A passer-by would think him a grand goofball, that he knew intuitively, but only a moony, white-faced heifer fifty or sixty yards down the cottonwoods stood close enough to pass judgment on his airy explorations. Ludicrous, ludicrous. Still, Ossie was disappointed that he could not measure to what height the invisible stalactite reached. He tried throwing dust on it in hopes that such a coating of grime might enable him to *see* what he was tapping at, but the dust would not adhere, it struck the rock's hardness, slid down the faceted planes, blew away on the Oklahoma breeze. No, that dirt just wouldn't play ball.

After a good, casually astounded thirty minutes of this, Ossie Safire rucksacked his tomahawk and sat down against the arroyo bank nearest the cottonwoods. Out came his lunch, a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich (chunky peanut butter, in keeping with his reputation as a rockhound) and a flask of mineral water. Alternately chomping and sipping, Ossie stared up at his discovery. Is this what Rowdy Al had wanted him to find? Apparently. And it hurt him that he couldn't see it, not even with his winkings and blinkings and an occasional up-from-under flick of the head. That huge, hanging rock would not be tricked into visibleness. No sir. Soon Ossie's sandwich was gone, the sides of his mineral-water flask were smeared with red jelly, his spirits were daunted. "They'll expel me," Ossie's thinking went. "Out of the Greater Tulsa Diggers' Consortium as a crank and mountebank."

The hawk he had seen earlier came wheeling back into view, majestic, imperious, as graceful as April air.

As Ossie watched, the soaring bird collided with something invisible eighty or ninety feet directly overhead. It tumbled beak over claws toward the yawning arroyo. Belatedly, it caught itself up and, flapping with grogsome flaps, avoided what Ossie's Air Force friends called a "crash and burn." A humbled, cockeyed hawk indeed, it flapped away. "It isn't fair," Ossie's thinking went. "I was hunting thalassapithecines, and it isn't fair."

The brightness above him unsparkled shyly, but even more disconcerting was the fact that Ossie felt the viewless crystal *think* something at him: *Almostal comptured of omniversilly mattessence om Aye, Ossieman, O resiever and ultimatransmender of m'eye enconquerumphing metamorphilology.*

Ossie remembered these largely incomprehensible words because, whatever his other intellectual shortcomings, he did have a good memory. And the rock had tinkled, or untinkled, this thought right into his brain and burned it there with a series of bright, *internal* unsparklings to match its external ones. "It isn't fair," Ossie said again. "Not at all." Somewhere behind him a moony heifer mooed.

2

An Indian, called Flashing Plains,
Found a diamond on the prairie:
Sammy, blessed with spunk and brains,
Became a lapidary.

Boomer Flats Ballads

One week later in downtown Tulsa, that brightsome burg, Ossie Safire sat with three of his friends in a booth of ebony Naugahyde in the Arrowhead Lounge of the Diggers' Consortium.

The three friends were Ignatius Clayborne, whom everyone called Clay in order not to get knuckled; Opalith Magmani, a beautiful, beautiful beast of a woman, whom Ossie had four times proposed to; and the richest Indian interested in archeology that Ossie had ever met, the redoubtable Sammy Flashing Plains. All were experienced diggers, dutiful and deliberate shufflers-up of telltale dirt, and, as they waited for the waiter, all three of them stared at Ossie Safire with a kind of irritated expectancy. They wondered why he had called them all together.

Ignatius Clayborne said, "Which idiocy, Ossie, must we contend with today? The pre-people People or your butterflying baboons?"

"Thalassapithecines," Ossie corrected his friend, humbly.

Opalith, the marvelous Magmani, looked up and said, "Oh, here's Charles," nodding at the bartender, who had come personally to their booth; "let's let up on Oscar for once and decide what we're drinking. Please, let's."

"And no bon mots about firewater, either," said Sammy Flashing Plains, looking at Ignatius Clayborne.

Ossie, whose fingers had been doing a nervous fandango on the formica, cut his eyes gratefully in the direction of Opalith. He ceased drumming the tabletop and spoke to the expressionless Charles. "I'd like a dry Magmani," he said. "A dry martini," he emended at once, blush-struck and fumbly. His mouth

seemed full of Oklahoma dust. "Very dry," he whispered.

No one noticed his fumble, and Charles clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, which was his procedure for ticking off an order. He never carried a notepad and could trust his memory.

They all ordered martinis. "Banish the vermouth," Sammy Flashing Plains said. "There's enough wormwood in the panelling," Not only did this Indian's billfold bulge, but a wealth of linguistic information balanced at his tongue tip. Ignatius Clayborne, Opalith Magmani, and Ossie Safire very seldom appreciated this fact, but Charles, another man who valued skill with the tongue, smiled briefly. Then he strolled off to the bar for their drinks.

"Well," Ignatius Clayborne said.

The frog in Ossie's throat croaked. "I've hesitated to talk to you," he began, covering the croak with a cough, "because of the respect and esteem in which I hold all three of you: Clay, a professional geologist; Opalith, a stratigrapher, dendrochronologist, and reader of varved clays, not to mention the greatest beauty ever to come out of Tishomingo, Oklahoma; and Sammy, a—"

"Preservationist, a preservative, and a preserve, all in the same person," said Sammy Flashing Plains. "It has been my function to lead sacrilegious palefaces away from our holy places to do their digging, and my good fortune that none of you are social anthropologists. Please do not put a technological label on me. I do what I do because it is in my bones, and in the bones of my Pleistocene ancestors who pursued the *Bison taylori*—under another name—all over the Ice Age

South-west." Sammy Flashing Plains wore a vested, navy-blue suit with a wide, white-and-blue silk tie in which a modest diamond pin gleamed warmly. An elegant headband, of Osage design, gave him the look of both politico and chieftain. But for his name, however, there was nothing flashy about him.

"Very well," Ossie said. All the others were attired in work clothes. "Anyhow, out of respect and esteem I hesitated to mention my most recent discovery. My hesitation is almost gone. Several well-documented events of this last week have made it possible, I think, for me to broach the subject."

Their martinis arrived.

"What thubject?" Opalith lisped, sipping her drink and leaning provocatively forward. Even in unstarched, khaki field clothes, Opalith was a starching creature, alert and lissome. Ossie had to avert his eyes in order to pull his thoughts together; therefore, into his crystalline, almost vermouthless gin he gazed, and recalled himself to the matter at hand.

"Have all of you been reading either the *World* or the *Tribune* or else watching the newscasts?"

Except for Sammy Flashing Plains, who eschewed the media of the technocracy, they had.

"Well, then," Ossie continued, "you have no doubt read or heard the reports of the appearance—in diverse parts of the world, please note—of sudden geological outcroppings unlike any encountered before."

"The invisible ones?" Opalith asked, pushing back her tresses and sipping at her martini with alluringly intelligent lips.

"Yes," said he, Ossie Safire.

"It's a hoax perpetrated by a convocation of world political leaders," said Ignatius Clayborn, "to take the public's mind off their governments' various domestic bumblings. Invisible outcroppings, indeed!"

"Of late even I have heard rumors of this," said Sammy Flashing Plains, "but, unlike Clay, I believe it no hoax."

"It isn't a hoax," Ossie said. "I've found one myself, 113½ miles from here." His fellow members of the Greater Tulsa Diggers' Consortium regarded him with interested eyes (Sammy and Opalith) or else burbled with blubber lips in the sky-bright gin (Clay). "It's true," Ossie went on. And he told them the story of how he had caught sight of an unsparkling on the ranch of Rowdy Al LeFever, bumped his nose, measured the seemingly hardened air, and watched a hawk go *bonk* eighty feet up. Not one whit did he embellish, not one whit. Somehow, though, he felt it not wise—no, not at all wise—to tell them that the invisible rock had communicated (well, *almost* communicated) telepathically with him; that it had unsparkled inside his head as well as outside. And, anyhow, maybe he had made a mistake. By way of epilogue he said,

"Now there've been reports, usually buried in the back pages of the newspapers or thrown off as closing anecdotes by incredulous broadcasters, of similar anomalies as far away as Jerez, Spain, and as close as Dubuque, Iowa; and it seemed I would perhaps not be laughed to scorn if I mentioned my own discovery in this context. Nine in all, there've been."

"And I can add a tenth," said Sammy Flashing Plains, "though the report will be the most recent of

all and the sighting the most ancient."

"What are you talking about, you indigent aborigine?' asked Ignatius Clayborne, in a tone not wholly bantering. He did not like to spill good spirits, and he had earlier blubbered away a good ounce or two of his cocktail.

"That's *indigenous*," Sammy Flashing Plains corrected his friend. "Which, in conjunction with *aborigine*, is in any case redundant. You see, the noun itself implies my autochthonous condition." No one knew what Sammy was talking about, but this mattered little since he went on to explain his previous comment about a tenth sighting:

"Many years ago on the Broken Bow reservation," he said, "when I was little more than what Clay would call a papoose, I saw just such an unsparkling as Ossie has described. Eventually I stumbled upon its source, but at that moment I was in the middle of a sage-grown, alkali-ridden prairie not far from my people's ramshackle dwellings. Sun, dancing mirages, dust; perhaps a skin-scorched lizard or two scrambling about in search of a rock to crawl under. Little brothers they were to me, reluctant friends; for my elders were energyless in the summer. Joy whoops withered in the air, and rain dances brought us more sweat than rain, O my palefaced brothers. And sister," he added, nodding to Opalith. "But this flicker I fixed on, this unsparkling, little rib-ringed coyote that I was, and went running home, shouting, 'The plains are flashing, my mother, my father! The plains are flashing!"

"Is this a re-telling of the Chicken Little story?" Ignatius Clayborne asked, still mouthing his martini.

"No, it is not, friend Clayfoot, for in that story the

sky is not really falling, whereas in my own experience the plains were actually flashing, or unflashing, if you will." The Indian paused. "Incidentally, the proper name of that tale is not Chicken Little, as many suppose, but Chicken Licken, a fact which has importance because of the incantatory nature of the poem's cumulative rhymes. I mention this because these cumulative reports of invisible outcroppings may very well spell for all of us the same sort of disaster that overtook the protagonist of the nursery fable."

Ossie Safire said, "We'll all be eaten by a fox?"

"No, of course not," said Sammy, "though it's astute of you to recall the ending. What I'm suggesting is that the incantatory nature of these reports may well dull us to an unanticipated impending disaster. The disaster will not be political, as Clay suspects, but—in a very special sense of the term—'natural.' Therefore, in anticipating one sort of catastrophe, we may fall prey to a totally different one: just as Chicken Licken, fearing the collapse of the sky, ends up with several of her friends as the main course at the banquet of a fox. An important contrast does exist, however. Chicken Licken's error lay in supposing a universal catastrophe, when, in fact, she and her friends succumbed to a personal one. Our error may be in assuming the collapse of a few local governments, when, in fact, the impending disaster will be universal."

"How fashionably gloomy," said Opalith Magmani.

Ignatius Clayborne uttered a sound simultaneously like both "Pshaw!" and "pfui!"

Ossie Safire said, "What about your discovery of the unflashing as a child on the Broken Bow reservation? Will you tell us what happened?"

"Indeed," said Sammy Flashing Plains. "Forgive my digression. Of course, from the words I shouted to my parents as I ran back from my discovery, you should have deduced the origin of my present 'surname.' My father, at first misunderstanding those words, however, wanted to dose me with an herbal anodyne, but my mother intervened and told me that I had seen nothing but a bit of mica reflecting the afternoon sun, or perhaps a piece of tin can. It availed me nothing to explain that the unsparkling had originated from a point *above* the ground. Alone, I went back to the prairie and encountered just what I had encountered before: I skip-danced around and around that unsparkling, O palefaced cohorts, and at last tripped and fell toward it. A small, jutting point of solidified air, just at waist height. Since I was not injured, I cupped my hands around the thing, but budge it with this cupping I could not, nor with any other sorts of a little coyote's attempted coercion. Finally, I put my headcloth over it so that I could find the thing again and skip-danced home.

"When I returned the next day, my headcloth had fallen aside and blown off into the sagebrush. Red like blood, it waved to me from the brambles. I picked it out and went in search of the invisible rock-point in the air. Skip-dancing skitterishly, I made circle after circle in the blowing dust until I again found the tiny crystal. On this occasion I *tied* my headcloth around it, but after a time, as I sat crosslegged beneath it studying that little bundle (just as you studied your discovery, Ossie), the cloth split and fell away: the rock inside had . . . grown. All my efforts to surround and confine the rock-point met with similar success: an enlarged

anomaly and a piece of split cloth. My last attempt to capture the bit of hardened air for myself ended when the intractable rock-point surgically halved the blanket I had taken from my parents' bed. At which point and upon which point, friends, I swear that it spoke with an inside-out fire-tongue in my brain and said, *Tittle Smindian, you mayan't trapture a manipphany of the Nu Cree Naschun.* I can still read those words on the inside of my head, and I know that *I* didn't think them because *I* never thought like that. And still don't. But what really occupied me at the moment was the sight of my parents' torn blanket. O, I was forlorn then, palefaced cohorts, for I suffered my father's powerful punishment and discovered the next day that the transparent outcropping had disappeared altogether, as if wearied by my assaults on its stony liberty. Never again could I find it. But that episode, as you can readily perceive, engraved itself forever upon my memory and my life: today I am a lapidary and dealer in gemstones, as well as a weekend digger, and an Indian even yet."

"That's a very interesting story," said Ignatius Clayborne somewhat civilly. (Charles, from habit, had brought him a second martini.) "Do you contend, then, that this episode of your papoosehood has some significance to what Ossie has told us about his own find?"

"And to the newspaper and broadcast reports?" Opalith added.

"Two plus two," said Sammy Flashing Plains quietly.

And Ossie Safire, grateful that so dignified a personage would corroborate his own unlikely account, downed his drink. He was grateful, too, that the others

had not thought to ask Sammy about the cerebral untinkling of the outcropping Sammy had found as a boy: Ossie, you see, still did not wish to divulge his own telepathic communication with a rock. He asked Charles for a double. He downed that, too. He luxuriated in a dudgeonless glow as gin-clear and heady as the day outside. He did not really hear Sammy Flashing Plains say, "Twenty years ago it wasn't time for what is going to happen to happen: now, O my fellows, I am afraid that it is." No horror in this for Ossie; he was mellow, mellow, mellow.

3

A bold quartet, they sallied out
Like buccaneers or reivers
To ask whose exegesis was most stout:
Why, Rowdy Al LeFever's!

Boomer Flats Ballads

Back out to the Oklahoma prairie they went, Ignatius Clayborne, Opalith Magmani, Sammy Flashing Plains, and Ossie Safire. Back out to the arroyo where Ossie had found his find. This was another week later, and they drove the blemished blacktop between the mesquite and the loco weed in Miss Magmani's jeepster (the *Miss*, by the way, was her own idea; don't blame me if you prefer *Ms.* for the ladies), and into the early-May, blast-furnace breeze they rode. How that woman could handle a vehicle! She boomed them along on the straightaways, which were plentiful; she careened

them sportily around the doglegs, which were few; and she made poor Ossie wish for a headache powder or a stoutening tot of vodka.

Anyhow, arrangements had been made. Rowdy Al LeFever now knew of his ownership of an invisible anomaly, if he hadn't known before (a point which Ossie thought of as moot), and the rancher had told the four representatives of the Greater Tulsa Diggers' Consortium that he would be waiting for them no matter on what day they decided to come.

He was, Rowdy Al.

"Howdy!" Opalith hailed him, as her jeepster hauled its green-gilled passengers jouncily up the drive before the rancher's house: that lopsided, bright-yellow house Ossie had still not shaken out of his mind. It did not shake free even when Rowdy Al, portly and proud in Stetson and range boots, shook hands all around.

Then out to the arroyo he led them. "Still here," he said, as the five of them stood on the gulley's bank gazing up at the invisible rock. It fitfully unflashed every now and again as if to confirm its presence.

"They're all over now," said Sammy Flashing Plains. "From the Kirghis Steppe to the African Sahel to Ty Ty, Georgia, U.S.A. Twelve separate sightings (if you can call them sightings) right here in this country of ours, and surely that many more undiscovered. Therefore, Mr. LeFever, we appreciate your cooperation in not publicizing this one."

"Well," said Rowdy Al diffidently, "it's been behaving itself." He took off his Stetson; he mopped his blistered brow with his forearm; he stared into the blustery, bluey white Oklahoma sky. "A very quiet anomaly," he said. Apparently it had not been think-

ing untinkly thoughts at the sweaty rancher.

"Any new developments?" asked Ignatius Clayborne.

The rancher pointed. "Well, I think there's another one out in the middle of that pasture beyond those cottonwoods." His eyes did not follow his arm.

"Why?" asked Opalith, shimmering. "Have you checked it out, Mr. LeFever?"

"N'm," he said. "Not by going over there, anyhow." He had replaced his Stetson, but he still found the sky—the fathomless, baroquely blue sky—of unbounded interest: he looked baldly into it. (How he cold refrain from peeking at Opalith, Ossie himself could not fathom. Plainly, the rancher was a man of more than mundane consciousness, a patriarch of the higher devotions. Higher even than mahjong, probably.)

"Then why do you suspect another outcropping?" Opalith asked.

"Well, the cattle have been crawling on their knee joints to reach the salt licks out there, and they don't ordinarily do that. Also, they're the quick, black blinks such as those that get struck off this one here. Adds up, you see."

"Have two of these things been 'sighted' this close together before?" asked Ignatius Clayborne.

Sammy Flashing Plains said, "I don't think so. That's why we'd better busy ourselves with what we've come for. If we can establish the nature of the composition of these invisible hardnesses, we may conceivably avert catastrophe. If not, O cohorts, then in the words of King Philip, Sachem of the Wampanoag, '*C'est la guerre.*' "

Rowdy Al smiled, tolerantly it seemed to Ossie.

"May we set up our camp among those cottonwoods?" Opalith asked.

"Welcome to stay in the house," said the rancher, staring staunchly into the wobbly white sun, his Stetson on the back of his head. "The rooms are big. They're crowded with bric-a-brac, grandfather clocks, vellum-bound books, Indian relics, and admirably stuffed easy chairs with paisley upholstery: you're welcome to wander through them until you find one you're comfortable in. May help you think. Preempt your preconceptions, so to speak; unbutton the bloomers on your brains." Rowdy Al LeFever smiled benignly.

Ossie answered for the others: "We'd certainly like to, sir, but it's probably best that we stay out here close to the outcroppings themselves."

"And you found the first one, Ossie. That right?" Rowdy Al looked out of the wobbly white sun and into Ossie Safire's ruddy round face. The man's eyes, noted the observant Ossie, struck off bits of brightness like an inside-out unsparkling: it was that sort of day, a giddy festival day on the fore-edge of doom.

"Yes, sir," replied the modest digger. "But it was an accident."

"Not at all," said Rowdy Al. "Congratulations. Now I'm going to leave you folks to unravel this thing for yourselves. Stay as long as you like, do whatever you wish. Don't you worry any about Rowdy Al." And, having so said, Rowdy Al LeFever pivoted gracefully on the arroyo bank and walked back toward his crowded yellow house. The day's downpouring whiteness turned his diminishing, not inconsiderable bulk into a somehow hieratic haze. O, did that man glow!

The others got busy. Opalith's jeepster, with that wild woman in the driver's seat, roared over the runnels to the stand of cottonwoods. Up went their camp among those trees: a tent halfway between the hardness Ossie had discovered and the one Rowdy Al had hinted at. Which second outcropping, they very soon verified, did indeed exist: a veritable floating mountain of invisibleness, an anomaly bigger than the first!

They named it The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz. (Ossie's discovery they dubbed the Hope-It's-A-Diamond outcropping.) Why, its bottom was four feet from the ground and its circumference was that of an oil storage tank; its height, no hawks having flown by, was something they could only guess at.

Little time that first long afternoon, 113½ miles from Tulsa, did they spend in their tent. Ignatius Clayborne set out stakes beneath the perimeter of The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz, strung these stakes together, and bound fluttery orange rags on the string; he even repositioned the offending salt blocks so that LeFever's cattle wouldn't crawl over his pretty pickets to get their licks in. While Clay was so occupied, Opalith Magmani took soil samples from the area inside the fluttery orange rags. Sammy Flashing Plains circumnavigated their new discovery in an unsuccessful attempt to chip a specimen or two from its flanks. Shivered wrists was all he got for his pains.

As for Ossie Safire, he hopped himself down into his familiar arroyo and discovered that the Hope-It's-A-Diamond outcropping, though still not so large as the new one, had grown: it had lengthened in parallel with the gulley beneath it and, if it kept growing, would one day abut on the one where Ignatius, Opalith, and

Sammy labored. The arroyo wound that way, you see. Mazy walls of glass would divide the ranch as certainly as barbed wire already did. "And it won't take all that long, either," Ossie thought. "Would that I had found my flipper-bone fossil instead."

Then the moon jumped up, and they all retired to their canvassy-smelling tent. Gas lanterns threw green glowings gargoylewise on the leaning walls of that tent, and down they all plopped on their bedding. A weary, sad company they were, these members of the Diggers' Consortium.

"Not a good start," said Ignatius Clayborne. "What do you think The Ritz and the Hope-It's-A-Diamond are?" Solidified air, invisible rocks, or an utterly transparant, flash-frozen liquid?"

"In this situation, Clay," said Opalith, "I would think those all equally accurate, or inaccurate, ways of saying the same thing. These anomalies—which we cannot see, or hear, or taste—affect us only on the level of their tactility, whereas we cannot affect them at all. They occupy space, they encroach, they grow. What does it matter whether we label them rocks, air, or water?"

"Well, I'm a geologist," said Clay, a bit huffily.

Ossie Safire put in, "It's not really true that we can't hear them, you know. They ping when you tap them." Ossie neglected to add that every now and again the rocks *thought* things at you: disturbing, not-quite-understandable, topsy-turvy things. Nor did Sammy correct Opalith.

"All right," said Opalith. "But let's simplify. It's their space-occupying that's frightening. That, and their sudden popping into existence, and their ability

to grow. These are properties which we may have to wage war on, if we want room for our elbows."

Sammy Flashing Plains was very quiet that night, very quiet indeed, and he rocked over his knees like a trance-taken medicine-man. The gas lanterns died when Opalith dialed them down, and the diggers bade the gargoyles goodbye. Talk mumbled off into sleep, Sammy maintaining his silence, and the night flowed down upon them like lovely, invisible lava.

The next day was business as usual, though strange business it was.

Since they could not chip away a bit of either of the two outcroppings, they determined to define the two transparent stones in space. The rag-hung cordons beneath The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz performed this function only partially, and somewhat inexactly. The banners kept the diggers from banging into it and the cows from crawling, but they didn't go very far toward clarifying The Ritz's height, nor toward suggesting the contour of its suspended underside. How high did The Ritz tower? What sort of configurations did its surface consist of? Was it regularly or irregularly faceted? Were their fearful-fond names for the outcroppings merely frivolous? Ignatius Clayborne, in particular, wished to know. Therefore, and because the eroded gulch under the Hope-It's-A-Diamond made it difficult to work there, Ossie and the others devoted their full attention to The Ritz.

"To determine the exact size and shape of The Ritz," Ignatius Clayborne said pontifically, "it will be helpful to make it visible."

He sent Opalith (who would permit no one else to

drive her jeepster) to the hardware store of the nearest gaudy prairie hamlet—which was not Boomer Flats, though Opalith wanted to go there—for an extension ladder, a gallon of paint, and a plastic bottle with a spray-attachment. "I got green," she told Clay upon returning; "that's your favorite color." And it was both fortunate and foresightful that he had directed her to buy only one gallon, for once Clay had set up the ladder, mounted it nervously, and begun to *shpritz* out a layer of watery verdigris, it became all too clear that the paint, like the dust Ossie had hurled on his first day in the arroyo, would not adhere. Emerald droplets struck The Ritz's invisible surface, then slid away and blew off into the sagebrush and mesquite. Or elsewhere.

Ignatius Clayborne, a many-speckled man, came down the ladder with a profane lack of grace.

Only Opalith got away with calling him, speckled as he was, Froggy.

"Froggy," she said, "it looked so eerie, so eerie, to see you up on that ladder, balanced on nothing." And it had, it absolutely had.

"A piece of canvas," Ignatius Clayborne said through his spots, ignoring this. "What we need is a huge piece of canvas. We'll wrap it, that unshpritzable Ritz. Wrapping large buildings was once a minor art form, you know, and we can do it here. That ought to appeal to your aesthetic sense, Opalith, warped as it is."

"It won't work," said Sammy Flashing Plains. "Don't you remember the story of my headcloth and the invisible rock-point?"

"Chicken Licken on the reservation," said Clay, reminiscently.

"Yes. Wrapping won't work. And neither will painting, as we have just seen. The only conceivable means of suggesting the mountain's size is to build some sort of housing around it: a derricklike structure or a series of scaffoldings. And that, Clay, would be impractical, and probably unwise. Both the Hope-It's-A-Diamond and The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz are growing, you know."

"Then I'm going to ask Rowdy Al for some dynamite," Clay said. And he wrote a note to the rancher and carried it down the pasture to the mailbox in front of the big, off-center, yellow house.

That evening in their gargayle-damasked tent they heard, on Ossie's transistor radio, that new anomalies had made their presence known in Illinios, Texas, Nebraska, and Utah. Other parts of the world reported additional outcroppings, too. The radio man said, "My, my, this thing's getting out of hand. But scientists are busting their britches to find out what's causing this and to make it stop. Indeed, they are."

Said Opalith, "Clap your hands, diggers, if you believe that."

Sitting in the lanterns' liquid pools of light, the four diggers lustily applauded. And that was the end of their second day on the sprawling, unpredictable ranch of Rowdy Al LeFever.

But before going to sleep Ossie Safire walked outside and stood among the clustered cottonwoods looking toward Rowdy Al's house. It lay on the opposite side of the arroyo, a house of many gables, and all its lights were on. A trick of the wind? Ossie thought he heard jig music jogging up the rise to him. Stray shadows or several flapping window shades? Ossie thought he saw

the silhouette of a heavyset man go dancing from blazing room to blazing room. If these things were true, Rowdy Al was rowdy in private: one could partake of his genial rowdiness at a distance and come to glow almost as bright as the dancer himself. Pleasantly disturbed, Ossie want back into the tent to his sleeping bag.

He noticed, even in the dark, that Opalith had again opted to sleep in her workclothes. A pity; a pity.

On the third day they tried dynamite, for when they came out of the tent that morning, Ossie groggily in the lead, the somnambulant Safire stumbled over a crate that had been left in front of their flap.

A crate full of dynamite.

On the top of the crate fluttered a little card inscribed with a brief message in an ornate, looping hand. The message said, "This is a good idea. But it won't work. R.A.L."

It didn't work. Not as they had expected it to. In spite of precautions, in spite of the care with which they set their charges. (You would have enjoyed watching Opalith and Ossie run off the cows.) But it was a different kind of failure from what they had expected, and that, in itself, was interesting. As Opalith put it, "Life is always blowing up in your face." How, then, did their failure fail? In this wise:

Beneath The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz Ossie and Clay planted four separate charges, lifting them as close to the underside of the gigantic stone as they could by means of forked stakes that they had driven into the earth. These were Ossie's idea; he had once had a semester of engineering at Oklahoma State. Then, after taking down

their tent, they all retreated to the arroyo, where they took cover under the Hope-It's-A-Diamond. From the dusty gulch they detonated their charges.

Whumpf. Whuumpf. Whuuumpf. And *whuuuumpf.* O, it was like a tubercular cow wheezing out the letters of a bovine Tetragrammaton, which is to say, no matter one's opinion of kine, Not Very Inspiring. An explosion (four explosions!) should be loud and beclouding, everyone knows that. So when the four diggers heard what they heard those muffled snorts, they scrambled like lizards from beneath their rock, clambered up and over the wall of the gulch, and saw . . . nothing.

Of course, they had never been able to see anything even when they thought they were seeing it. But now they expected something, you see: what they expected was visible proof that they had dismantled the invisible, or at least unsettled it, and what they saw was . . . need we repeat this? . . . nothing. No more than several distended balloons of dust drifting hazily through the cottonwoods; that, and the orange rags that lay all over the terrain. As they came through the stand of trees on their approach to The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz, they did see the outsized pothole beneath it: a shallow crater, with lumps of dirt still lumpily in it, explosion-sifted lumps that had not been able to blow away as dust.

Said Ignatius Clayborne, "There have to be fragments of the thing lying on the ground somewhere; chips off the old block, so to speak. Let's look for them."

Down on all fours went all four of them, much to the cud-chewing amusement of a few returning cattle. But

the diggers found nothing around the outcropping but buffalo grass, sidewinder spoors, sunflower buttons, heat-steamed cow chips, and several crazily careening dung-beetles. Chips off the old block they did not find, no sir. Not anywhere. It was a good idea, but it hadn't worked.

"Such a shame," said Opalith Magmani, who sometimes fell into an unconsciously Jewish inflection; "such a shame."

On that same day, however, they discovered that they had altered the dimensions of The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz; it was not so large as before. Whole chunks around its base had disappeared, like bites out of an invisible mushroom. This was what made their failure to obtain an apprehendable sample of the outcropping so interesting. And this was what worried Sammy Flashing Plains.

"Those missing chunks," he said, "have to be somewhere."

"Maybe they went back to where they came from, Sammy," volunteered Ossie Safire. "You know, just like the rock-point of your papoosehood. It could be that the more you fool with these whatevertheyare's, the more likely they are to, uh, take umbrage and depart."

"That was then," said Sammy Flashing Plains, as if Opalith's Jewish inflection were infectious and catching. "This is now."

"What does that mean?" asked Ignatius Clayborne, who, for once in his life, immediately *liked* a theory propounded by Ossie: after all, it simplified matters. And there was precedent, there was precedent.

"That far from ridding ourselves of the menace of

these invisible crystalline structures—if that's what they are—we may have contributed to their proliferation, their growth, and their ultimate incarceration of the feuding and fumbling human race."

"You are one gloomy Indian," said Opalith, and that was all any of them could say.

Back in their sheltered tent (which they had put up again after those four tubercular blasts) they heard a radio man tell them that during the day new outcroppings had appeared in every state, as well as in every country represented in the United Nations. "Bar none?" murmured the skeptical Opalith. "Without exception," said the radio man. Furthermore, he blithely added, old anomalies were pushing out into previously unoccupied space. Two streets in downtown Tulsa were impassable because of the monstrous, invisible hardnesses glutting their urban canyon-ways. Other cities reported the occurrence of similar clog-ups, and the radio man hinted vaguely of casualties. "We would say more," the radio man said, "but we've been asked not. Anyhow, it looks as if the Rocks . . . Are . . . On . . . The . . . March!" "Holy Cow," mumbled Ossie, although no Hindu, he. "Oh, yes," the radio man added smugly; "in accordance with a new law enacted in a special session of the joint legislatures, anyone failing to report a known anomaly to the authorities will be subject to persecution and fines."

"I wonder if there's a filing deadline," said the beauteous Opalith.

Ossie Safire went outside; he stood looking for a time at the gabled house of Rowdy Al LeFever. Tonight no lights blazed in the windows, no merry figure hippity-jigged among the rooms, the house's yellow was muted

and muddy. Even so, not totally dark was the rancher's house: the shingles had a phosphorescent sheen under the crescentic, early-May moon, and the spirit of Rowdy Al himself hovered spectrally over the entire landscape, more in control of things than he, Ossie Safire, would ever be. Things were falling apart. No, that was not it, they were growing together. Something was not quite copacetic with the world at large; no, indeed not.

Under the moon The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz unsparkled like a ferris wheel for the demonic dead. But it didn't untinkle, telepathically, and Ossie wished that it would: there was something almost comforting in those ominous, rocky thoughts.

4

Strew flowers all around about,
Heliotropes and hyacinths.
And let that yellow house draw out
Hosannas from the labyrinths!

Boomer Flats Ballads

The next morning they awoke to find that a wall of invisible glass had grown through their copse of cottonwoods. They discovered this by walking out of their tent and going *bang* against the wall. It was Ignatious Clayborne who collided first, then Ossie Safire behind him. Opalith and Sammy Flashing Plains escaped this indignity, but none of them could escape the implications of the new intrusion. The pieces they had blasted away from The Ritz had taken root in air and bloomed

into random bulwarks, all viewless and vitreous in places they didn't belong. O, it was disquieting.

"Are we trapped in here?" asked Ignatius Clayborne.

"No," said Sammy Flashing Plains, "but plainly this place is becoming a dangerous one in which to remain. Look there." It was a May morning in Oklahoma. The wind was blowing. But the leaves and limbs of only half the trees in the copse were jauntily jiggling; the others (leaves, limbs, and trees alike) neither danced nor rattled, they were static and still as if captured in Lucite molds. Which, in a way, they were, for the growing anomalies had flowed right around the cottonwoods, fixing them fast. "That could have happened to us," Sammy went on, "and now we'd be nothing at all but aphids in amber, museum pieces in a diorama of disaster."

"You are one eloquent Indian," said Opalith Magmani. "What's worse is, you're right. Shall we pack up and go?"

"A powwow," said Sammy. "Everybody sit."

In the stand of cottonwoods they made a ring and rocked over their knees like powwowing medicine-men, an invisible wall on one side, the wind-whipped world on the other. Ossie Safire wondered how many walls now wound over Rowdy Al LeFever's land and how long it would take for the walls to merge. He and his fellow diggers, he mused, looked like picnickers at a feast of potential panic. How did it feel to have stone flow around you like gin, and then congeal? With nary an olive for comfort?

"I had a dream last night," began Sammy Flashing Plains, "and in it Rowdy Al LeFever came and sat beside my sleeping pallet and told me what it is that's

happening in the wide world now. The anomalies, he said, are extrusions of a catty-cornered crystalline vulcanism taking place in the continuum next door. There's a world in the making there, he said, and it's heaving and groaning and creating so abundantly that it's running out of room inside its own seams. The abundance is spilling over to us through the rents in its distended containing membrane and, upon hitting our bountiful air, hardening: then it exerts even more pressure on the room we've got available here. These extrusions, Rowdy Al said, are extropic in nature and may not soon cease."

"What is this, this *extropic*?" said Ossie.

"Well, our system is an entropic one: this catty-cornered continuum operates on the opposite principle. It is one of endless creation rather than of unrelenting dysfunction and decay. Nothing runs down there, everything runs up. That's why its system can create matter out of the great spinning Nothing, whereas ours can only—not destroy matter, certainly, but leach away at the old creation until its substance is lost. All this, and more fabulous things, too, Rowdy Al LeFever told me last night as I dreamt and sweated. And as I slept I felt the crystalline lava of the New Creation flow into our camping area, surround the trees, and lovingly harden. Through the seams we had loosened with our dynamite it flowed, through the pressure points opened up by the blasted-abroad shrapnel shards of The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz. You see, we have abetted our downfall.

"The most fabulous thing Rowdy Al told me was this: 'Sammy, you must understand, too, that in the New Creation intelligence and nature have been

melded into an indivisible whole. Why, the lava that is flowing now, the crystals that are bursting through the seams of our two worlds, are blessed with sentience, the ratiocinative ability, and imagination! They rejoice in their ability to recombine the language of human beings into more compact and consequently more meaningful units of communication—*if only we could understand these units.* It is not rocks that are going to replace human beings in our continuum, but living, thinking, creating mineral hardnesses! In such a morphology, Sammy, death itself dies—for death cannot hope to conquer that which has no flesh to be weak. Therefore, rejoice!'

"In other words," mocked Ignatius Clayborne, whose idea the dynamite had been, "it was a good idea, but it didn't work."

"Yes and no," said Sammy Flashing Plains, "because it would have happened anyway, and it's a downfall that really isn't a downfall, frightened as we may be by what's happening. In fact, Rowdy Al said to me, 'Sammy, you are an Indian. You see yourself as a constituent element of the world's adornment, not as a meddlesome observer outside its ecology with a pair of tweezers to tweak at this and to extirpate that. And that's good, that's very good. Well, Sammy, you are a part of the New Creation, too, and it's a famous wrenching, it is, a famous drowning we'll all undergo. You of all people should be daubing the peace paint and whooping the joy whoops, in awe and in celebration.'

"So said Rowdy Al LeFever to me in my dream, and I was ashamed of my fear. We should all be schooled by this rancher, my cohorts, be we aboriginal or transplanted."

"Rowdy Al isn't your ordinary rancher," said Ossie Safire. "That's clear. But how did he come to know so much about these, well, invisible extrusions? The world at large is stumped, stymied, and stalled, and he has knowledge enough for both explanations and prophecy. This is queer, Sammy, this is unsettling."

Ossie did not mention that only two nights before, he had seen that man doing (in awe and in celebration) his own dance of joy.

"Yes," said Opalith Magmani. "Who is Rowdy Al LeFever, this man we've known without really knowing?"

Said Sammy, "One who has lived on the edge of an extrusion seam his entire life, out here on the prairie: one who finally burst with its power when the seam (one of many seams) burst with its faceted magma and flooded the earth. Just so, last night, did he burst into my dream and tell me these things, while down there in his yellow, many-gabled, bric-a-brac-crowded house he beamed with the power and ordered it for our understanding. It is a power that I had a hint of during my papoosehood, you see: now it's Rowdy Al LeFever's!"

A quietness of great pregnancy flowed around the four powwowing diggers, which Ignatius Clayborne finally delivered of a confession: 'I don't understand," he said. Then: "And if that's true, what are we going to do today?"

"Walk among the walls, and marvel," said Sammy Flashing Plains. "This is the Last Day of the Old Procession."

And so the four of them walked out of the copse of cottonwoods, half of which stood imprisoned in other-

worldly Lucite, and onto the undulant prairie of Rowdy Al's ranch. The day was gin-clear and blue, and unsparklings abounded. The diggers walked with their hands out in front of them so that they could apprehend where the Old World left off and the crystalline walls began.

They walked down corridors where it seemed no corridors were, and saw through the cul-de-sacs that brought them up short, and marveled that The-Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz had mounted the placid sky, capturing eagles and clouds, until it towered like a make-believe Matterhorn over woolly Oklahoma. But this was no make-believe. No sir. The Hope-It's-A-Diamond outcropping began to expand before their eyes: they could see it glassily snaking along by the dirt it shoved back from the arroyo bank and by the dust its irrepressible bulging entrapped in its crystals.

And seeing this happen, they also all received the message that the Hope-It's-A-Diamond outcropping untinkled at them: *Aye anno feyk-meleaved usader intrurping mannakiddies' Dominuum, but the brightful peniheritairy of the Nucleation.*

Meanwhile, the everywhere-blasted but skyward-grown Anomaly-As-Big-As-The-Ritz telegraphed this into their heads: *Conseal Ur-shelves in the krowsledge that a butte-iffal and plat-O-teaudinoose whey of execristence had come to glass.*

And henceforward as the four explored the labyrinth surrounding them, similar semi-comprehensible thoughts continued to pour out of the growing, flowing rocks. After a while, Ossie had to shut these untinklings out in order to concentrate on walking where he had to walk. But shutting them out completely was im-

possible. Unthinkable, too, since he felt certain that these incomprehensible messages were important, that they *meant* and meant fiercely.

All the world over, this was happening. All the world over, the labyrinths grew.

"Another interesting thing about the extrusions," Sammy Flashing Plains shouted from across Rowdy Al's central grazing area, from a new pocket of the labyrinth (for the four of them had become separated in their wanderings), "is that their facets, no matter at what angle within the matrix containing them, lie flush with every dimension of our own continuum; hence, their invisibility." The Indian's voice was diluted a bit by distance and the intervention of the invisible walls, but Ossie Safire, looking back at his friend, could still hear him well enough. "So Rowdy Al explained it, my late-coming countrymen, when he spoke in my dream, when he ordered his word with the processional power!"

By now it was clear to Ossie Safire, separated from his comrades, that the four of them would never come back together: never in this life.

There was Sammy Flashing Plains, over *there,* seemingly in the middle of an open field.

And there was Ignatius Clayborne, over *there,* down by the arroyo bank.

And there was that beautiful, beautiful beast of a woman, Opalith Magmani, over *there,* back by the stand of cottonwoods from which the four of them had not long ago emerged (was it this same day Ossie was thinking of?). What a stately woman, how favored of forehead, how handsome of aspect. Her hand was raised to him in a gesture of triumphant valediction: at

which sight Ossie suddenly realized that like the stationary trees she, too, had been captured in the unseeable liquid of a new extrusion. Lost, but lost to him painlessly, for here on the Last Day of the Old Procession they were joined in a marriage which encompassed every living creature.

"Opalith," Ossie Safire shouted, "Opalith, marry me!" It was his fifth proposal. She did not refuse. Her hand acknowledged him, her eyes were unsparklings of triumph.

Then, turning, Ossie saw that Ignatius Clayborne had been lifted up and engorged by the flourishing crystals of the Hope-It's-A-Diamond outflow: the geologist appeared to be floating in the air, a man holding himself aloft by sheer unfathomable will, the ecstatic victim of a queer phenomenon of his own chosen -ology.

Turning again, Ossie saw that Sammy Flashing Plains was still animate and alive, although the Indian had taken off his khaki workshirt, baring his breastplates to the sun. Now, with his arms outspread, he was staring up into the white, white sky and taking small, sacramental steps that led him around and around in a slow, wheeling dance. He was one intent Indian, one reverent creature among the many of the Old Procession.

"Farewell, Sammy Flashing Plains," shouted Ossie Safire.

And Ossie want on; he struck out through the unhardened areas remaining before him, going where he had to go. His path led him back and forth across the prairie, the partitioned prairie. Walking, he witnessed frozen cattle, suspended mesquite pods, a

jackrabbit caught in mid-leap, and many other monsters of eerie delight. The invisible walls funnelled him this way and that; he followed without protest, the smooth, viewless glass moving even as he moved, rippling with extropic power. "This is how it feels," thought Ossie, "to be between a rock and a hard place." Eventually, he came back down the ranch's whilom grazing area and found himself sixty or seventy yards from the gabled house of Rowdy Al LeFever. His head ached with all the manifold and mind-rocking thoughts that the labyrinth had barraged him with on his journey.

The house was lopsided and leaning, and its foundations no longer touched the earth. In fact, Ossie could see congealing white daylight between the house and the ground. As he watched, the house rose slowly up into the sky, as if lifted on a column of translucent fire. But no column of fire was this; instead, an enormous extrusion whose cap had hardened sufficiently to support the rancher's house and whose viscous, crystalline body was pushing up through still another of those countless seams between continuums.

"Ossie!" a voice shouted. "'Ossie, my lad!"

Ossie looked up and saw the diffident rancher, Rowdy Al LeFever, on the roof of the climbing house: he was astride one of the lopsided gables, and he was waving, waving heartily, at Ossie Safire himself. And as Ossie looked up, the rancher called down through the hardening chasms, a man glowing with a holy gleam. His burnished boots shot out stars of light, and his face was refulgent. And so he called out,

"This is the New Creation, Ossie! And this that we're seeing is only the magnificent leftovers of it, the excess

and overflow of an eviternal birthing beyone our imagining!"

"But it's only rocks, Rowdy Al!"

"Nonsense, Ossie! They have life, these rocks do! They contain life! Why, they're not only the excess of an incomprehendable abundance, they're the physical manifestations of the time-beyond-time in which that other creation is taking place! Look under my house, Ossie, look under my house! . . . ! You and Sammy heard them thinking, Ossie, don't try to deceive me. In the beginning of this world, as the Book says, was the Word. So it is at the beginning of the New Creation: The Word is what fends off death, Ossie, the Word is what creates, and right here on my ranch you can see the Word at work."

The house, tilting alarmingly but somehow secure, continued to climb. Ossie Safire looked under it. The house appeared to be pulling out of the very bowels of the earth an assemblage of unlikely, frozen-in-place creatures, and these were rising into the sky in ranks, behind that beautifully gaudy, yellow house. Actually, like Clay and Opalith, these creatures were trapped in the invisible, extruded material that was pushing the house upward; however, these creatures had come through the distended seam between continuums *from the other side!* What shapes there were! Ossie saw a sea monster, a unicornlike camel, a butterfly with three vulturine heads, a furred pterodactyl. All were perfect and beautiful, all were tigerishly frightening.

"In this other place," Rowdy Al shouted from considerably higher up than before, "creation is not evolutionary: it is spontaneous, simultaneous, and omniencompassing! Whatever the mind may imagine, that

is what you will find there! Look again, Ossie, look again! The sooner you do, the better Sooner you!"

And so Ossie looked. The house, meanwhile, went on ascending and ascending on its widening column, an uprush of solidified time-beyond-time displaying its wonders rank upon rank. What Ossie had been hoping to find on his first day on Rowdy Al's ranch, he saw today, the Last Day of the Old Procession, in that growing column. And not fossils only did he see, but the very things themselves. Right there before him, as if ascending out of the parched but very good earth.

He saw a family group of the pre-people People.

He saw a school of thalassapithecines, hairy critters with prehensile fins and eyes like intelligent tarsiers.

Everything else that he saw, he forgot: except for his vision of the jollily ascending Rowdy Al LeFever, who, astride a lopsided gable of a climbing house, waved his Stetson in ultimate farewell and sang at the top of his inexhaustible lungs a cowboy's paean in praise of the universe and its glorious abundance.

Too, he continued, as the house rose, to interpret for Ossie the almost uninterpretable, telepathic babbling of the crystals that were rapidly replacing them both.

Ossie Safire could not forget this vision because he had not the time to forget: listening to that relentlessly climbing man, Ossie was engulfed in a flow of invisible crystals and fixed for all time.

And here on the periphery of an Order of Unbalanced Abundance, it was the First Day of the New Creation.

CHRYSALIS 7

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