

Seeker From Four Worlds

Harsh Streinveldt bred Mass, the only one of his breed with the vision to look beyond its dreary skies.

The hive-mind of Manolka expelled one of its units, the construct called Ike – and set him on his way to becoming fully human.

Tapper, Prince of Concourse, adrift in time for 400 years, sought a cure for the worst disease of all – bad luck.

And on Liadne, last outpost of the heritage of the Empire, Edelith, a woman of ice and fire, finally gave a direction to the insane quest for whatever remained of its splendors.

Their goal, and the strange ship they rode, united them – and almost destroyed them!

SPACE SKIMMER

David Gerrold

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A Del Rey Book

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The author would like to thank Larry Niven for allowing me to "borrow" an idea.

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FOR STEVE GOLDIN AND KATHLEEN SKY Two of the best.

First:
The man. *Mass* – a name and a description.
Product of a high-gravity world and a genetically

engineered strain, he stands but four feet high. He weighs 318 pounds, all of it muscle and bone and bristling strength.

His body is hard, a sturdy boulder of flesh with a density uncommon to living creatures. His blood boils through veins like copper and his nerves crackle with electricity; his body pulses with vibrant life. His legs are tree stumps; his arms, thick sinews of corded wood; his torso is a sturdy trunk of *iron-oak*, hardened with age.

His skin is like leather, bronze touched with crimson. His hair is coarse brightness, red and brown, streaked with gold. His mouth is a wide slash, his nose is flat and broad, his cheekbones high. His eyes –
– his eyes are deep, and colored with the brooding black of the night. They gaze out from beneath shaggy eyebrows and a grim forehead; they have a veiled sense of watchfulness, impassive and silent. They tell nothing of the man within, reveal no secret sorrows, no guilty burdens. Neither do they laugh – there is no

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twinkling joy in these eyes. The tiny lines which crease their corners come from years of squinting into hot winds. These eyes are careful and dark – deep like bottomless pits.

A millennium of adaptive breeding and racial selection has made this man. He is a native of Streinveldt.

Streinveldt. A planet – and a curse. Perilously close to a white-hot star, it borders on the unlivable. A young planet, small and dense, its surface is pocked with volcanoes and racked by hurricanes. Its atmosphere is more than thirty per cent dust and hot volcanic ash. The sun is perceived only as a swollen red vagueness, a patch of sky slightly brighter than the rest. Moonless, the nights are black and brooding – so black they have driven men insane. Sudden death stalks the shadows and only the strong survive on Streinveldt.

Its gravity is two and a half times normal.

Normal?

On Streinveldt, 2.5 gees *is* normal.

On Streinveldt, normal means unnatural.

– means *not* resembling the conditions in which man evolved, *not* resembling the un-engineered species still known as *Homo sapiens*.

Homo densitus has been bred and tailored for his world. He has been made for it.

Things were given up in the process. For instance, the average life span of *densitus* is seventeen per cent shorter than that of *sapiens*; he has a greater tendency to arteriosclerosis and high blood pressure and diseases of the heart and kidneys. His back and leg muscles break down sooner under the increased strain they

must bear, and his lungs are easier prey to disease than they should be – mute testimony to the daily ache of breathing Streinveldt's turgid air. Emphysema and cancer are not uncommon.

Homo densitus is prone to hearing problems and troubles with his inner ear. His bones tend to calcify

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at an earlier age, leading to problems of ossification and deformity – and certain rare blood diseases. *Homo densitus* also suffers from bursitis, fallen arches, bow legs and sinus trouble.

Despite that, he is still stronger than any other strain of human being in the known galaxy.

Streinveldtians are descended from miners. Mining is their culture, their heritage, their life. They are downward-oriented. The sky is only one more roof, a ceiling of no importance. It is roiling ash and churning sulphur, a thick, red cloak.

Streinveldt means *strength*. Without it, a man is nothing. With it, a *man*. There is cruel beauty to a Streinveldter: his massive chest; his arms and legs like trunks of a tree; his neck, thick and corded.

It is a world where strength is the only measure of a man – who could honor a person who could not even hold himself erect?

And Mass had left it.

He was the first of his family-group to leave Streinveldt in four hundred years.

He did it because –

– let's just say because of a dream, and leave it at that.

Mass was sixty years old and still didn't know what he was going to be when he grew up.

Dead leaves crunched underfoot, swept by the wind into yellow and green piles at the base of each pylon.

Dust and wind and dead leaves. Dark ivy crept over low broken walls. A pungent and cloying scent spoke to Mass of things he had never known –

– of sunlight in a dream and a shimmering bright day. Hot summer sky and the tinkle of –

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But the building was deserted now. Empty. *Not maintained.*

Mass was disturbed. *Where were the robots? Where were the people's* He had never seen a building abandoned before. He had never seen one *decaying*.

The building was a shell, the artifact of a vanished Empire, the only Empire artifact within ten light-years. Tall pylons stretched overhead to suggest a dome, but they broke midway in their reach. Few of the colored sky panels were still in place; those that remained were shattered and cracked. The dome was an arena, with tumbled stones and

creeping jungle the only audience to its vanished splendor. And everywhere there were dead leaves.

The forest was deep and limey-green. It surrounded and enfolded the building, it caressed and absorbed. The forest had all the time in eternity and it held the building lovingly. It was a many-faceted texture with a dark and hungry lining. Its odor was sweet and true and penetrating.

Mass moved through the structure with a wary step. The afternoon blue was fading, the air was cooling, and he did not entirely trust this echoing empty dome.

The sun, a bright yellow glare, dipped behind the tall palms; they were slender fingers reaching up from the rest of the forest. The light slanted yellow and dusty through the trees, through the ancient pylons. Motels swam in the golden radiance.

Somewhere a bird shrilled and Mass whirled at the sound. There were no birds on Streinveldt, nor any creatures that sang with the sheer joy of living. On Streinveldt, noise meant death. Either a creature was killing – or being killed. The only things that flew were the vampire kites and the airfish; both were evil creatures. The kites were leathery gliders that hung on the wind and the airfish were tenuous bladders that swam

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in it, howling mournfully. Neither was a bird in the sense of self-controlled flight.

Birds were a novelty to Mass and he was startled by them. Unsure of their intentions, he had spent long nervous moments watching out for them. This was an alien world, and dangerous precisely because it was alien. Everything was an unknown quantity. Even these fluttering shrillnesses were suspect. Whenever he heard their cawing cries, he automatically glanced at the sky. Curiosity mingled with dread. How much danger – ?

The shadows moved.

He slapped at his weapon, a cold firm thing in his hand. He looked about him.

But it was only a light-globe, a baby one, coming out for tile night. It drifted toward him from behind a fallen wall, throwing off a pale blue radiance. The shadows spread outward from its glow. Mass relaxed and reholstered his weapon. There were light-globes on Streinveldt. Light-beasts, rather: they crawled and clung instead of floating.

He chuckled and clucked at the light-globe, and held out his shovel of a hand. The creature started at the sudden motion, jerking in its flight. It was the size of two fists held together, a milky blue sphere. As it grew, its color would mature to a dusky yellow.

Mass continued to cluck at it. Reassured, the light-thing floated over to him and perched gingerly on his arm. It clutched with gentle claws and surveyed this red man carefully. Its three tiny eyes were actually heat sensors; the creature was thermotropic and would approach animals and human beings to bask in their warmth. In return, it gave off

gentle light. Harmless pets, and useful.

"Did you bring a family with you?" Mass rumbled at it. "The sun is disappearing, little one, behind the edge of the world. You think you alone can hold back the dark?"

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The creature only looked at him. It sighed, a gentle sound, a whispering susurrus of air, and resettled itself on its perch, its two tiny claws shifting carefully on Mass's forearm. Slowly it began to puff itself up again and its light glowed stronger.

Mass scratched the creature gently at the base of its eyes, then held it aloft to light his way through the shadowed ruins. He moved carefully through the open debris toward a low cluster of rooms, occasionally stopping to examine artifacts and markings. The short days here made him uneasy. Dusk was a gray-blue sky and black palms outlining the horizon.

Abruptly the light-globe left his arm and sailed up into the air. As it rose, it cast its aura across the tumbled stones and dead leaves. The marble tiles reflected back the glow. Mass watched as it danced across the breeze toward a clear pool of water.

He smiled, a great creasing of his granite features. It was only thirsty; water was one of the substances out of which the little creature manufactured the hydrogen which kept it afloat. Mass imagined the light-globe's hollow tongue dipping into the water and generating a tiny electric current. The molecules of H₂O would separate into their respective gases; the oxygen would float free, the hydrogen would be funneled up into the light-globe's bladder. At least, he *thought* it worked that way. He could be mistaken.

The creature's departure made Mass conscious of the dusk. For the first time he realized how dark the day was getting and how fast. He peeled a glowplate off his toolbelt and thumbed it to life. Its glare was bright, almost harsh. He tuned it down.

The glowplate had been synthesized on Streinveldt, where all things were harsh and heavy. Here, on this world, things were delicate and muted. It didn't seem right to hit them with such heavy light. He thumbed the glow down to the same intensity as the light-globe's and crunched onward through the leaves.

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The rooms at the far side of the dome were pale blue, almost ghostly; the few strands of ivy across the stones made a dark contrast. There were fallen panels blocking the door. Mass had to shove several of them aside to clear it.

Inside he found what he was looking for.

An Oracle, model HA-90.

A desk, a screen, a gray scanning plate. Ahead, the wall was blank so that images might be projected on it from the machine.

Mass stepped around a tumbled column and approached

the desk. It was covered with dust; he ran his fingers across it distastefully. This had been an Empire station once.

He swept the room with his light. There was no other furniture, it had all been removed ages ago. Probably the only reason the Oracle was still here was that it was part of the building. Whoever or whatever had stripped this place had still left the main reason for its existence. Perhaps, he thought wryly, they hadn't realized what it was. Or, then again, perhaps they had realized what it was and hadn't cared.

No matter. In either case, it was, here and he could use it. Mass unslung his pack, let it slide to the floor. From his chest pouch he pulled a canteen-sponge. He sucked at its flesh. The light-globe was not the only one who was thirsty.

He seated himself at the desk, blew carefully at the dust. Great clouds of it whirled up. Coughing, he turned away. He untied the cloth he wore as a head-band and used it to wipe at the remaining layers of dust. It wasn't a very neat job, but at least he could see the screen and the keyboard.

He adjusted the chair forward then, changed its un-familiar and uncomfortable proportions to his own, shorter body.

At the right side of the desk was a plastic tray. On the tray was a shape – flat, black, narrow; it was an

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Oracle tab. Its dimensions were precise, one by four by

He picked it up. Its code indicated it was a single-message and situation-summary unit. Cool to the touch, it was a solid piece of stasis, a frozen bite of information, needing only a reader to withdraw its secrets. Mass wiped more of the dust away from the scanning plate on the desktop. It wasn't enough. He wet it with water from his canteen, wiped again.

Now – did this Oracle still work? He touched the small end of the slab to the panel

It lit up almost immediately.

On the screen appeared words. Strange, convoluted letters. Unfamiliar ones. The written form of Inter-lingua

Mass fumbled in his pouch, pulled out a stasis bite of his own similar to the one standing on the desk. He slapped it flat on the scanner. This one was a trans-lating code; immediately, the letters on the screen were replaced by Streinveld6an cuneiforms. These he could read.

EMPIRE ORIENTATION TAB FILE –
JEYRU 47585

DATED MATERIAL

Uncoded; valid through Septer 35,
988 H.C.

UNDATED MATERIAL

Coded; Y-Class authorizations and above.

Maintain for future reference.

He frowned thoughtfully. It was almost too good to be true, an actual Empire tab dated more than thirteen years after the last Streinveldtian contact. As far as

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Streinveldt knew, the Empire had ceased to exist in 975 H. C., more than four hundred years ago.

He turned the slab onto its longer edge and quickly skimmed through the index. He touched the screen at certain points and it flashed to reveal the scope of information held within the stasis bite. Part of it was overlaid by a red block that said:

THIS MATERIAL IS CODED TO ALL READERS EXCEPT THOSE WITH Y-CLASS IDENTITY TABS OR ABOVE.

A frown creased his broad features, deeper this time. Without an identity tab, the Oracle could tell him nothing of the coded material – neither its content nor its title.

As far as the machine was concerned, Mass was not to be shown that material until he laid a Y-Class tab (or above) on the scanning plate. Even if the Oracle could display the coded data to Mass, he wouldn't be able to read it; it would be in holographic series. Just as a translating tab was necessary to convert Interlingua into Streinveldtian, so was the Y-Class tab needed to convert holographics into Interlingua. The Y-Class tab was more than just an identity piece; it was a needed slab of information.

The orientation tab sat annoyingly on the scanning plate. For all the good it would do him, it might as well not have any coded information at all. He couldn't tap it. Quite probably, the last Y-Class tab had disappeared with the Empire four hundred years ago.

"Krie!" he said. It was a Streinveldtian curse.

He turned his attention back to what he could read, the uncoded material. It was four hundred years old, but it was a place to start.

The index told Mass little. He found the words familiar, but confusing in their use. Some of the meanings seemed to be ninety degrees off and there were

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references to things that the reader was assumed to be already familiar with.

Mass allowed himself a sigh of annoyance, then laid the slab flat on the panel. He tapped at the screen and it began to flash summaries.

The races of man had spread across the spiral arm and toward the great whorl of the central galaxy.

By the year 970 H. C (Calendar of the Holy Church), date of the last known Empire Census, there were more than 11,000 inhabited planets in the Em-

pire, plus a known 1,700 more on the frontier – and estimates of at least 3,000 more beyond that whose existence was known but not confirmed. How many human beings there were simply could not be estimated.

Vast fleets of starcruisers whispered through the darkness, the fastest of them journeying a hundred light-years every three hundred days.

– but the Empire spanned a thousand light-years. More.

No matter how great the speeds of the starcruisers were, the distances of the galaxy were greater. At the fastest speed known to man it still took more than ten years to cross from one end of known space to the other. And the distance was growing. For every day that passed, 240 light-days were added to the scope of man's known frontiers.

Man was pushing outward in all directions at once, an ever-continuing explosion. For every ship traveling toward the galactic west, there was another headed for the galactic east; and the rate of man's outward growth was twice as fast as anyone could travel.

At the farthest edges of the Empire was the frontier. Beyond that lay unexplored space. Every man that

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fled into that wilderness dragged the frontier with him. The frontier followed willingly, and after a while, when that particular piece of itself matured, it became a part of the Empire, and the state of mind known as frontier had moved on. Thus, the Empire grew.

Even so, there were places where the Empire was only a dim legend. The further it reached, the more tenuous was its control. There were vast undeveloped areas within its sphere, areas that had simply been overlooked in man's headlong rush outward. Communications followed the trade routes, and there were backwaters in that flow of information.

News traveled via the Empire Mercantile Fleets, synthesized as Oracle tabs. Or via independent traders, synthesized as rumor. It leapfrogged from planet to planet, not according to any kind of system, but by the degree of mercantile importance in which any planet was held by its immediate neighbors.

Every event was the center of a core of spreading ripples – unevenly growing concentric circles of reaction; like batons, the Oracle tabs were passed from ship to ship, from fleet to fleet, from planet to planet, passed and duplicated and passed again; taking ten, twenty or thirty years to work their way across the Empire. By the time any part of the human race re-ceived news from its opposite side, it was no laager news, but history.

The Empire's communications were the best possible, but they weren't good enough.

Control depends upon communication.

Weak communications means weak control, eventu-ally

no control at all.

Such was the state of the Empire at the time the skimmers became feasible. The Empire needed them.

They were the ultimate spaceship.

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AD there, the Oracle machine balked –

THE INFORMATION YOU ARE REQUEST-ING IS CODED. Y-CLASS AUTHORIZA-TION REQUIRED FOR DECODING.

“Krie,” said Mass.

He sat back in the chair and thought. *The ultimate spaceship? What in krieing hell did that mean?*

A starcruiser was a life-support shell and a stasis engine. It kept you alive and it moved you through space. There wasn't much one could add to it –

– except that an ordinary starcruiser is limited to a top speed of one light-year every three days, a speed which is fine for intra-system travel, but totally impractical for traversing the galactic distances' of the Empire.

The realization of it hit Mass like a hammer. The dark night breathed chills into his back.

The ultimate spaceship – a ship with no speed limit at all.

But, how –

If such a ship were possible –

His thoughts tumbled one over the other. If such ships had been built –

Why hadn't they come to Streinveldt? And where were they now?

And what had happened to the Empire – ?

There was more. Someone had added a supplementary report to: the tab. It was uncoded.

In the year, 974 H.C. (it said) more than one thousand skimmers had been synthesized –

(Synthesized? wondered Mass. What did they mean by that?)

– and sent out to serve the far reaches of the Empire.

By the year 985 (the date of this tab) only 314 were

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still in service. It was not known what had happened to the rest.

Something had happened – was still happening. Reports were coming in from the remaining skimmers and from conventional faster-than-light craft. Wars had broken out, strange new weapons were decimating the Beets. Both Mercantile Fleets and Empire-commissioned armadas had been attacked.

Communications with whole sectors had collapsed. There was no explanation. Had something gone wrong with the skimmers? So many of them had disappeared. Or had

man's sphere of influence finally collided with one stronger than his own?

Early in 985, a last report had been synthesized – this one – for distribution to as many planets as were still believed to be secure. Ten of the mysterious skimmers were commissioned to distribute it.

The tabs identified as JEYRU 47585 contained important coded information about the shimmers and were of urgent attention for all Empire Representatives of Y-Class clearance and above. All stations were advised to duplicate and distribute in turn.

The routes of the skimmers were also noted in the tabs. Should any skimmer fail to arrive at any point along its route, agents were requested to relay that information immediately through conventional Empire trade channels.

(Mass tapped at the Oracle keyboard, This tab had not been delivered here by a skimmer. Rather, it was a duplicate of a duplicate, four times removed from the original. The skimmer hadn't passed within ten light-years of this system. Still –)

The closest planet the skimmer had touched was Arias. From there it had gone to Climpitch and Slye and Goathe and K'nay. And Eirenychs and Triclyn and Granther and Groab and Castola. And Graben and Grane and Alt and Ribber and Kacklyk and Karnyk.

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And Dawer and Phane and Tetra. And Bovelik and Tabsor and Abbov. And –

The list seemed endless. There were more than four hundred planets on it.

A sound made Mass look up.

He switched off his glowplate and listened to the darkness.

It breathed in velvet silence. The occasional cry of a bird was like a glittering stone on its soft, soft surface.

Still...

He eased himself out of the chair, listening.

Nothing.

In one hand he had his weapon; in the other, his glowplate. He moved on short legs toward the door.

A rustle –

He paused. He readied his glowplate, thumbed the control

Another rustle –

– light!! Blazing light!! Glaring and white!!

DAZZLING BRIGHT BRIGHT LIGHT!!!

ALL WAS WASHED IN SHADES OF WHITE!!

He swept the plate around the room and caught a hurried glimpse of something loping through the shadows. It was black, skinny and misshapen – long claw-like arms, clawlike hands; a hunchbacked shape. It had leathery-dark skin and glittering red eyes set on a lump where the head should have been. Then it was gone.

A night creature?

Or one of the natives of this planet?

Mass didn't care to find out. He listened a moment, but the thing, whatever it was, had scuttled off into silence. Evidently the light had scared it off... he hoped.

He went back to the Oracle machine and pocketed

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the two tabs of the scanning panel. He had what information was to be gained out of this one anyway. He lifted his pack from the floor, glanced around once more to see if there was anything he had missed. No, he guessed not.

He slid the pack onto his shoulders and stumped toward the door. On Streinveltdt, his walk would have been halfway between a shuffle and a stride – lithe in the gravity his body had been designed for. Here, it was faster, but it was a stumping lope. He found he was developing a tendency to rock from side to side to compensate for the lighter gravity. Rock to the left, increase the length of the right stride. Rock to the right, increase the length of the left. Rock and stump, rock i'd stump. Mass felt uneasy, and for the first time in his life, bulky.

He paused at the door and listened. No doubt the thing was waiting for him outside. The night was silent, but that could mean anything. Alien is alien.

Mass looked at his glowplate thoughtfully. It might be dangerous to be so brightly delineated in such a potentially hostile situation. He muted it down. The night seeped back into the room, darkness crept in at the corners.

Still too much light. He thumbed the glowplate off and slipped a pair of night-goggles over his eyes instead. The world turned green and white, with shadows of deep blue.

He jumped through the door, weapon ready, looking each way –

Nothing. He felt foolish.

He was under the open sky again. The stars were bright pink dots in the green-white ceiling. The ruined dome around him was a green-blue shell. The marble floor was blue, the shadows were blue-black.

Something red moved in them.

He whirled, his weapon arcing crimson-white fire –

It was an orange-red sphere drifting slowly in a

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green-white world. Pierced by the beam, it flared in soft explosion, then wrinkled in flame.

Even as he was firing, Mass knew what it was.

It was the light-globe, the innocent floating light-globe. It had been coming back to him, seeking out his warmth again. His nervous fear had killed a harmless creature.

"Krie," he rasped. The word was hollow, devoid of meaning. Angry with himself, Mass switched on his glowplate. The world went orange; he lifted his night-goggles and looked at the still hissing embers. Like fragile skin, the

bladder-creature shriveled on the tiles, smouldering and turning into ash. "Krie."

Mass was not a religious man – but he believed in the Commandments of the Holy Church, especially the principle one: *Thou Shalt Not Waste Energy*.

"Little one –" But the rest of the words stuck in his throat. How do you say, "I'm sorry, forgive me," to one you have killed?

You don't.

Mass mumbled, "I have taken all you are – and without purpose. May I gain the strength never to re-peat that error." It was the only prayer he knew.

He swept the ruins with his light. There was nothing there. Apparently, the black creature had fled. Mass scowled in disgust at himself and at the whole situation. It wasn't good to be out in the dark anyway.

He touched his pouch to reassure himself that the Oracle tabs were secure. They were.

Then he left the ruins.

Mass knew what he was searching for now.

That is, he thought he knew. He was on the trail of the Empire – and his search was for the mythical skimmer.

He went to Arias. From Arias he went to Climpitch, and from Climpitch he went to Slye and to Goathe and K'nay.

There were times, those lonely moments when ° the ship seemed to hang motionless between the stars, that Mass felt foolish. *What am I doing here? I might as well be searching for the Holy Grail.*

Then he'd remember Streinveldt, and he'd remember why he had left. It was enough to make him change his emphasis.

Yes, I might as well search for the Holy Grail.

From K'nay he went to Eirenychs.

The journey took forty-two days. Had he had one of the mythical skimmers, he could have done it in hours. Perhaps less.

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His ship was a squat little tub shaped like a score of gunbarrels lashed together. Cannon-shaped, it hung in careful orbit while Mass studied the planet's surface. Eirenychs was gold and green and brown, she was swept by yellow clouds. Her cities were few – tiny fireflies across the night side, minute gridworks against the day. They looked peaceful enough.

After a while, he decided to land.

He came down on a high dusty steppe overlooking a sprawling bright town that had once been walled, but wasn't anymore. The plaster walls of the houses were white, the roofs were flat and red. Above, the sky was disturbingly, impossibly blue. The wind whispered cold across the plain, tugged at his battle tunic with icy fingers.

A wagon came trundling out from the town; others

followed it. They disgorged crowds of laughing people, tall, incredibly tall; Mass's neck hurt from the strain of looking up at them. And pale – their skins were pearly and translucent. He could see the veins beneath the surface, tracteries of delicate blue lines. And thin! He could not believe how thin they were.

They greeted him with smiles and open hands, but they looked at him with awe – and perhaps a healthy amount of fear. He was a massive red dwarf to them, strong and thumpingly fearful.

They spoke a strangely accented Interlingua, and they asked him questions about the Empire. He shook his head and asked them the same questions. They shook their heads and mumbled among themselves.

Finally they led him to their library and left him alone.

The library at Eirenchys had been a Regional Co-ordinating Center in the days of the Empire. Most of

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the tabs synthesized within a fifty-light-year radius eventually passed through the Eirenchys library – and aU Empire-originating tabs too; all tabs which either had come from this area or were destined for it, they came through the library and left duplicates of themselves for future reference, stored in the stacks and again within the Oracle machines.

It was the most complete collection of human knowledge this side of the fabled Library of the Empire itself.

It unnerved Mass totally.

He wasn't prepared to grasp the concept of so much written knowledge. He picked tentatively at its surface, afraid even of the vast indexes. The library had a comprehensive history of the Empire, including information as recent as 987 H.C. He wanted that, but unfortunately, most of the writings that late were spotty and incomplete. Mention of the skimmers was minimal. He learned nothing about them that he hadn't already guessed.

With his translating tab he could have read any tab in the library, but he didn't – there were so many, many tabs, more than he would have believed possible; the sheer magnitude of their numbers frightened him –

– made him realize that he was not a literate man; Streinveldt was not a major planet and Streinveldtians were not a literate people. Ignorant was the word.

Ignorant.

He found himself gazing at the stacks and stacks of Oracle tabs in sheer wonder. What information could possibly be so important as to need all that space and all those tabs?

He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

After a while, he fled the library. Curious, he prowled the city ceaselessly. This was a place of wide buildings and wider avenues. Everywhere there were

gardens. He had never seen so much green before.

Or so much blue. The sky was tall and empty,

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He could not get used to it. He had seen it on Arias and Climpitch and Goathe and K'nay. A bright yellow sun in a bright blue sky. He didn't like it, yet he knew it was the kind of sky seen on most human-inhabited planets.

They called it "the sky of home." Wherever man went, he took it with him – or rather, he went mostly where that kind of sky could be found.

There was a song about it in the library. He'd stumbled across it by accident.

*I don't want their crimson skies, nor their weeping,
bleeding suns,
Nor their haunted glowing auras, nor their atmo-spheres
that run,
I won't breathe their rusty airs of colors not like blue,
The sky of home has a yellow sun; the yellow sun is you.*

*I'll stand erect on a cloudless day beneath your yellow
light,
I'll bare my head and breathe deep breaths; the colors will
be bright,
No goggles dim, no breathing mask, no pressure suit to
bind,
I'll take my home-plied sky with me, I won't leave it behind.*

*But ere I go, I'll pledge to you this timeless bright
blue dream,
Home is for the wanderer an ever-changing stream.
He never drinks from it so sweet a draft as sweet as
this –
As sweet and tumbling easy as love's first tender
kiss.*

The memory so deep and dear, it must be taken with,

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*And kindled into life again, by sunlight and by myth.
On hills so far from you that your light has not yet
roamed,
I'll keep your bright blue sky, for the bright blue sky is
home.*

The words were meaningless to Mass. Alien. To him the sky of home was red and brown and black. The bright blue sky of the "home-filled sky" only made him uneasy. He liked the feeling of a roof over his head.

But these people – these beautiful pink people in their tall yellow togas seemed not to mind at all. They chattered easily among themselves and laughed in green gardens.

He went back to the library. The thin old men there were very helpful to this strangely deformed creature from the

stars. He looked like a demon to them, he stumped through their halls and spoke in a voice like gravel, but he was human. The Holy Church was very clear on that:

Human is as human does.

own. Cleave to him as unto yourself.

Or:

Humanity is mutable. He wears a shape unlike your

Or:

Let him prove his intentions by his deeds. Do not lift your weapons needlessly.

Or even:

Welcome me into your house, for I am your God.

The Empire had always been unwieldy and unman-ageable. By the year 970 H.C. it was not so much an empire as a loosely organized confederation. Lip service was paid to the idea of a unified central government

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for all the races of man, but the Empire was only as strong as its local representative.

Where that representative was only one agent with an Oracle machine and a twice-yearly visit from a trading ship, the Empire was a distant myth. Where that representative was an Imperial Fleet, the Empire was law. And there were all the possible variations in between. Some were just, some weren't.

The Empire passed no laws; they could not guarantee uniform enforcement. Instead, they wrote suggested codes of moral behavior for use by representatives of the Imperial Council. Agents of the Empire were free to apply them – or not apply them – as they saw fit. Or, at least to the degree that they could enforce them.

The Empire maintained few fleets of its own – and these stayed close to home. Instead *letters of marque* were issued.

Member planets and systems often had their own armadas to police their own territories. Often, those territories consisted of as much volume as those armadas could effectively patrol. Armed with letters of marque, these fleets were automatically acting in the name of the Empire. As agents of such, their duties were whatever their admirals wanted them to be. In return, the badge of the Empire made them – and their control – legal.

The local governments controlled the fleets, and in so doing, they wielded the real power. Some were just; some weren't. The Empire didn't care – as long as they paid their taxes. Most of them did.

In return, they received the benefits of Empire.

In addition to the implied legality of their regimes, they were automatically privy to the vast scientific and cultural library represented by the sum total of humanity. The Empire continually collected and distributed. It functioned as a gigantic clearing house of knowledge, literature, art and music. Member planets disseminated their contributions freely through the system – part of

the price they paid for being able to tap the system in return. The exchange was always a bargain: the knowledge of one planet traded for the knowledge of a thousand.

Of course, there was a communications problem.

With eleven thousand inhabited planets (at last known census), that implies eleven thousand local languages. At least.

More than a few of those planets were divided into nations. More than a few of those nations were multi-cultured. Many of those cultures had several different languages – technical, literate, colloquial and argot. Plus subdivisions. Not to mention dialects.

So the Empire distributed the Oracle machines, gave them out freely to its member states. The standardized keyboard-and-scanning-plate configuration of the machines was familiar from one end of known space to the other; anyone with access to an Oracle and a translating tab could read information out of any other stasis bite in existence.

It worked. More or less.

The Empire had grown too fast, too far. And it was still growing. The typical growth pattern of mankind. Cancerous.

One way to control an empire is to control the pulsing of its lifeblood – its interstellar commerce, the huge ships that swim between the stars.

Indeed, it was the *only* way to control the recalcitrant government of a far distant planet – threaten to cut it off from its interstellar brothers, especially those beyond its immediate reach. Expel it from the Empire altogether –

– at which point it becomes fair prey to any armada bearing the Empire insignia. After all, wasn't it a matter of restoring order? And weren't the armadas legal representatives of the Empire itself?

An Empire ship would *never* attack another Empire ship or planet; that would be a violation of the sacred

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trust of the Empire. But an attack on an independent ship or government – well, that was something else altogether.

The Empire insignia was a license – but only to be used against those who did not bear it. Neat. Effective.

The Empire held that one trump card, and it was enough. It was the card of mutually recognized legality, an insignia recognized by all mankind and one that indicated its bearer subscribed to a known code of behavior. It was a safe-conduct pass through troubled spaces and a basis upon which any two humans could meet for trade, or news, or simply for the exchange of pleasures. It was the card of the open market – and few would endanger their right to participate in that market by defying the Empire. They feared

their neighbors too much.

And the Empire could do things for them that they could not do for themselves – recognition of that fact is the foundation upon which many secure governments are based. As long as a government can do things for the taxpayer that he cannot, or will not, do for himself, then that government is relatively safe.

Let that government stop meeting its obligations to its constituency, and it is in danger. Or let its constituency gain the power to do for itself...

In the year 970 H.C., the Empire held the power – but it was the kind of power that was hard to exercise. It was the kind of power that was terrifying only in its absence. Men needed the Empire, if only for the continual reassurances it gave them that they were not alone. That somebody or *something* was standing behind them.

One could not pay homage to a government that might take ten or more years to respond, but at the same time its distant existence was comforting in the same way the existence of the Holy Church of Mankind was. It was one of those eternal institutions that one could measure one's life against. Indeed, sometimes it was

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only because of those eternal institutions that a life had any meaning at all.

(That the Holy Church had been born with the Empire and had grown with it was more than coincidence. The two were complementary entities, mutually inter-dependent. Their motives were purported to be dissimilar, but their goals were alike. Both were aligned toward power and control over men.)

The Empire, like the planets it ruled, was of man – made up of men.

And some were just. Some weren't.

Some of them had a vision of what the Empire could be. Some didn't.

The Empire itself was neither just nor unjust. It existed simply to fulfill a purpose – communication between all men; but whenever action was taken in its name, that action reflected the men directing it. If they were just, then so was the Empire. If they were un-just –

The Empire had been a corporation that had grown – a trade corporation that had swelled into a proper government simply because it was there when the time came. It had the tools and the abilities to fill the needs of trade between the stars. It issued its own notes, backed them by its trade, and was unsurprised when they became the standard against which other coinages were measured. Because it was a business, it responded to the wants and needs of those it served. By the time it was two hundred years old, it had become a fair and benevolent government – in fact, if not in name. Another two hundred years and even the name was honored.

The Empire Trading Corporation first, later the Empire Company. Finally just the Empire.

– and then it collapsed.

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The Empire hadn't collapsed overnight, but just how long the collapse had taken and to what extent it had occurred, no one knew.

The collapse of the Empire meant the collapse of organized communications.

A few straggling ships every now and then, some un-reliable rumors, and the occasional wisp of years-old ra-dio waves – too many member planets knew too little of what had happened.

But even as the Empire died, it was proving its power. It left as its legacy a universal standard for all men – the Oracle machines and the language.

Interlingua had been the language of trade and the language of science. Without the Empire, it was a dead language – but like a language called Latin known millennia earlier, it continued to be taught and used, first in the hope that the Empire might be resurrected, then later with the realization that the language was now the only link left to the other worlds of men. A man who spoke Interlingua could travel anywhere and survive. He could make his wants known, he could converse and he could trade.

Without the Empire, trade still continued – not on the same vast scale, of course, but between neighboring systems. It was enough to keep the language alive.

Interlingua was also the language of the Oracle machines; they still remained. The cultural heritage of mankind was not lost; it merely lay scattered across the galaxy in a thousand thousand machines and in a million million tabs. It was there for the asking – it needed only a man to reach for it. The knowledge waited for a man to begin the arduous task of once more gathering it all together.

As the years wore on, many of the old habits re-

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mained; the Empire insignia was still put on ships of peaceful intention: the traditions continued because there was nothing to replace them with. In some places the conventions broke down; in others, they endured.

There were more than a few planets that didn't miss the Empire at all. Streinveldt, for instance. The Empire had been gone for four hundred years before anyone on Streinveldt noticed. At least, enough to get curious about *why*.

By that time, the *why* had faded into dust, crept into the past and wrapped itself in riddles and memories and enigmas. It disappeared down the corridors of time, leaving behind an occasional haunting artifact, but more often than not, eluding the persistent searcher.

The clues were tantalizing, but the information Mass wanted simply wasn't there.

He sat before an Oracle machine in a low room with walls of yellow plaster and a ceiling of dark-beamed

wood, peering into a glowing screen.

One thing was apparent, the death of the Empire had been somehow connected with the skimmers. The two were too close in time for the situation to be otherwise. Yet –

– the skimmers had been synthesized to *aid* communications. *Why had the Empire fallen apart?*

According to the tab, the skimmers had been capable of traveling one light-year every two hours. They could cross from one end of the Empire to the other in three months. And there were hints of even greater speeds.

More than four hundred of them had been synthesized and sent out. By the year 985 H.C., only 74 were left.

What had happened to the rest?

Ha went to Triclyn.

A few of the people of Eirenchys came out to see

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him go. They wished him well in his quest for the Empire, but they did not suggest that he should return to Eirenchys if his quest were fruitless. The wind whistled across the empty steppe.

Mass thanked them dourly. His neck ached from looking up so much. He climbed into his ship and sealed the hatch. '

There was no skimmer on Triclyn.

He went to Granther, to Groab, to Castola where they fired upon him. He limped back to Groab where they repaired the damage. He went to Graben, to Grane, to Alt and Ribber and Kacklick and Karnyk. To Dawer and Phane and Tetra. All empty.

Rovelik. Tabsor. Abbov. Empty.

He was thirty-seven light-years from home and he knew barely more than when he had started.

He went to Slith, Fairchile, Krick, Crillin, Nusa and Alsace.

He found it on L'bor.

From space, L'bor was blue and white. Most of the planet was ocean and cloud; streaks and smears marked the movements of the winds. and a great whorl in the north indicated a churning storm. Magnified on the screen, the clouds boiled restlessly

Mass floated in the tiny cabin of his ship and peered at the viewplates. The land masses here were small and rocky, and they were unevenly scattered across the face of the planet.

Abruptly, the scanner flashed a word: SINGULARITY. Mass frowned. A planet was a singularity; a giant one, a gravity well, a dimple in the stress field of space. What singularity was the scanner referring to?

He swam over and tapped the keyboard below the screen. The word was replaced by a flowing circular graph. There was indeed a singularity, a singularity within the singularity of the planet. A dimple within a dimple. Or rather, a bump – a negative dimple; a place where something was keeping the stress field from being

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as depressed as the area around it; a place where the effect of matter on space was not as severe –

– but it was such a small place. Tiny, maybe less than a hundred feet across. Were it not for the extreme severity of the effect, the scanner would not have called his attention to it.

Mass hung there for a long moment, the graph shifting before him. He scratched thoughtfully at an ear. At last, he swung himself into his couch and punched for descent.

He had to circle the planet once, heading eastward, dipping in and out of the atmosphere to burn off his excess velocity; he came down across a glittering black sea and headed for a boulder-strewn island, green and yellow on the horizon.

He hovered over it for a moment, less concerned with the anomaly in the stress field than with the difficulty of finding a place to land. The island was lumpy and misshapen. He slid across a hill where something glittered brightly, then headed for a sliver of ochre beach on the lee side. He touched down there.

The air smelled salty; the surf lapped at the sand. Mass dropped easily to the ground and crunched toward the rocky range of hills. Gravity here was only 1.45 gees. He was having no trouble at all.

He climbed across a tumble of craggy basalt and surveyed this place. The island was obviously volcanic in origin, but it had been millennia since it had known the feel of lava and hot ash.

The sea surrounding was blue, dark and intensely still. It brooded, patient and morbid; it lay unmoving on the shore.

The sky was a flat white plane, glaring and close, a mirror to the dark sea. The sun was not quite yellow-white, a staring eye in the east.

Mass turned away and kept climbing.

Over one slope, then on toward the crest of the next. Here and there were pillars of a fallen temple,

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and once, a disconnected set of wide marble stairs. He passed tumbled statues of bleached stone; some were still standing, others lay grotesquely on the ground. Graceful men and lithe women, frozen in postures of ease and languor – but ghosts and goats were the only inhabitants of this island now.

Mass was moving up a goat path; he could hear their distant bleating. Once, he saw two of them bound across a higher crag. After a bit, the tiled staircase resumed. It led directly to the top of the hill. Despite the easy gravity, the climb was awkward, the shortness of his legs hindered him,

and these stairs had been designed for a longer stride than Mass's. He had to climb one stair, then take a step to reach the next, climb one stair, then take a step to reach the next; he was climbing with his right foot and stepping with his left. It was awkward and annoying. He was gasping when he got to the top.

At first he didn't realize what he was seeing. Some kind of an altar, he thought. Six giant slabs spaced equally around a

–

Starflake.

That was his first impression. Something bright and gold and glimmering, Bashing shades of yellow and red and flickering white – copper, bronze, and platinum highlights; dazzling vanes of silver and emerald, amethyst and opal, moonstone and ruby and diamond – something sculptural, clustered, reaching, stretching, describing and kg the shape of a spherical sun-burst –

A frame of some kind – big, more than a hundred feet high –

“*Gottenheim*,” gasped Mass. “What have I –”

He took a breath. Slowly, he stepped forward. One step and then another, past the slabs and down into the shallow bowl, toward the broad raised platform where – *it* rested.

His tentative hand stretched out, reached and

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touched... slid up along the cool (oh, so cool) surface. His gaze traveled up its height.

A core of silvery shimmering vanes, flashing all colors, diamond-bright; they reached outward in all directions, some farther than others, but almost all ended in planes set at odd angles, no two the same. There were suggestions of platforms and hints of terraces, broad balconies and graceful ramps, places where stanchionlike shapes arced smoothly across from one vane to another. On one of them, he thought he recognized curving steps, but they were upside-down.

After a long moment, Mass released the breath he was holding; his sigh was the sound of awe.

He turned his attention to the single bright vane before him, slid his hand back and forth along its still cool, cool surface. It was smooth, almost slippery, so icy and almost greasy to the touch – and so cool, so cool; the touch of his hand warmed it not a bit.

He stood there looking at it for a long time. A long, long time. The white sun glinted along its surfaces.

On impulse, he started climbing. He swung himself up into it, arm over arm until he reached one of the wider vanes –

– tripped and fell sideways – found himself lying flat on his back, a wall of stone and earth to his left, wide emptiness to his right –

His hands clutched for a hold – slipped along the greasy-feeling, frictionless surface – and realized he wasn't falling –

Tentatively, he sat up –

The emptiness on his right was the sky; the wall of stone and earth on his left, the ground. The horizon was a vertical line ahead, straight where the ocean hung in impossible balance, jagged where the land jutted from it.

The juxtaposition of earth and sky didn't hit Mass at first; he was too used to the disconnected orientations of space to be startled and he was too intrigued

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with examining the surface where he sat. It was un-tarnished; not a spot of wear or discoloration, no dust, no scratches; just an even, bright plane. The feel of it

– like the feel of a stasis-bite information tab –

He put his head down close to the surface holding him and looked along it. He straightened and gazed about in wonder – yes, there it was, all around him – the familiar shimmer of a stasis-field, a minute and telltale vagueness describing the edge of every vane and terrace and platform. This metal – if it was metal – would never wear out; it couldn't – it was motionless in time. This – thing, whatever it was, was indestructible for as long as the stasis endured.

Mass stood up slowly. Usually a stasis-field was spherical; to generate one that would match the shape of this incredible framework –

Abruptly he caught sight of the ground below/beside him. He sat down again, suddenly pale.

He wasn't falling, he told himself. He wasn't falling. Logically, he knew he wasn't falling – but his eyes kept telling him he should be. His stomach contracted in fear and confusion. Somehow the ground was twenty feet below him – twenty long feet. A lifetime of conditioning in Streinveldt's desperate gravity told him a fall that far would be fatal. He clenched his eyes, his fists, his whole body; he went rigid – ı,

He didn't fall –

He sat frozen, his eyes tightly shut, and listened to his inner ear. *Down* was where he was sitting, not where he was looking. He was already *down* – he wasn't falling – wasn't falling –

He opened an eye.

He wasn't falling.

The sky was to his right, the ground was to his left, the horizon was a vertical division ahead; but he wasn't falling.

He forced himself to unclench, forced himself to

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breathe again, forced himself to swallow. Cold sweat trickled down his side. He relaxed carefully, stifling his fear.

He even laughed at himself; a hint of a smile on his broad features, embarrassed, almost sheepish. Creases appeared at the corners of his wide mouth. He swallowed

and his throat still felt *tight* – and that made him smile some more. He must look silly as hell sitting on the side of a wall and shaking.

I'm not falling, he told himself again, and stood up slowly. He listened to his inner ear; he let that be his guide as to the direction of *down* and ignored the insistent, but contradictory, information of his eyes. Gradually he became used to this new, surreal orientation. On one side was a wall that stretched up and down, reaching for infinity in each direction. On the other side, nothing whiteness. He swallowed, took a breath, then a step.

Slightly surprised that he didn't fall, he took another. What had happened was obvious now; there were field-generated gravities here; probably a man could stand on any plane of this framework, at any angle; this "starflake" must be independent of the planet's influence. Yes, he realized, that would be the source of the singularity he'd detected from space.

He turned around slowly, surveying the starflake from his vantage point within it. He began moving "upward," toward its center, walking carefully along a narrowing ramp. He closed his mind against the distorted topography of the planet; he had to. The ramp curved upward, bent through forty-five degrees – but beneath his feet was always *down*.

He walked around a twisted shape of sharp metal and suddenly he was at the center. Now, the ground loomed over his head. The empty sky was below the platform on which he stood; he hardly noticed, his attention was focused on –

An Oracle. Model HA-90.

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He gasped, a sharp intake of breath. Slowly, he approached it, unbelieving. He touched its keyboard and it flashed to life. The scanner plate glowed. Almost without thinking, he slid the translating tab from his pouch and onto the glowing panel. The cuneiforms on the keys became their Streinveldtian equivalents.

He tapped out carefully, fingers like wooden pegs: WHERE – WHAT IS THIS?

And underneath the question, the answer appeared: AE'LAU.

He typed, WHAT IS AE'LAU?

And the Oracle answered, SKIMMER NUMBER 312.

Skimmer number 312!

Mass jerked as if stung –

Re whirled about in confusion; the shattering vanes dazzled around him –

Skimmer!

Of course, he realized, staggering with the suddenness of it – he stared at the skimmer anew. Understanding blazed fierce in his eyes. Of course, of course

The skimmer is a stasis-field ship. It doesn't need metal walls – the field is both the hull and the means of moving it. All a man needs is a place to stand – these shimmering balconies! There's neither reason nor need for all of them to

be in the same up-down, vertical-horizontal orientation. Any field-generated gravity can be manipulated and *up* and *down* can be wherever you want them to be; take advantage of that and make maximum utilization of the stasis-enclosed volume – fill it with a spherical framework.

Mass imagined the craft hanging in space, men standing on both sides of these wide platforms, standing at odd angles throughout the craft, each man carrying his own up-down orientation with him; wherever one was standing, that was *down*.

“Yes, of course –” he breathed in awe. Now he

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knew why they called it “the ultimate spaceship.” No walls, just a framework and a stasis-field hull. Both fear and wonder surged through him as he realized –

The skimmer was simply sitting here in the bright white sunlight, at the center of an arena of hard bleached stone; an altar at the crest of a bleak island jutting from an acid ocean –

Why – ??

There is an old Streinveldtian fable about a man who tried to trick Toke, the death-god. The man demanded one million credits worth of precious metals. Toke gave it to him – all in one piece, a massive mountain of glittering brilliance.

At first the man was delighted, .he danced in happy circles around his towering treasure; all too soon, however, he realized what a terrible trick Toke had played on him. This solid boulder of copper and silver and gold was too big for him to move – but he couldn’t leave it where it was. He didn’t dare leave it alone long enough to go after the tools necessary to break the metal into smaller pieces; somebody else might come along and discover it. He might come back to find others hammering and chopping and picking away at his fortune; he had no way to prove that this mountain of metal was actually his. But he couldn’t stand there with it and guard it forever –

At last, in krieing frustration, he summoned Toke again and demanded that the death god take away this cursed burden and instead give it to him in a form that he could carry. Toke smiled and snapped his fingers. The looming fortune vanished. In its place was a million-credit note.

That should have pleased the man – but it didn’t. He had his fortune concentrated all in a single scrap of

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paper; but now there was no way for him to spend it. Who could change a million-credit note? If he took it to a bank, they might take it away from him; he still had no way to prove that it was his. That the treasure was now in such a portable form made it even *easier* to steal than the mountain of gold.

He summoned Toke again. This time, the man demanded that the money be both portable and defi-

nitely identifiable as belonging to him. Toke took back the million-credit note; he smiled, sat down, and wrote out a check for the same sum. At last the man was pleased –

– until he tried to cash it. Have you ever tried to cash a check signed by Toke, the death god?

Mass knew exactly how the man felt. Great wealth is either too big to carry or too portable to be safe; in either case, other men can take it away from you; and if you try to put it into a form that is distinctly and identifiably yours, you'll find that ownership is all an illusion anyway.

Mass had that same problem with the shimmer.

He wanted it, but he couldn't take it with him; he didn't know how to pilot it. He couldn't leave it here; somebody else might find it and fake it away.

Even if he could pilot it, he still couldn't take it – where would he take it to? Anywhere he went, it would be recognized as a skimmer." Who could he trust? How could he prove that the ship was his?

He couldn't, of course; that was the rub. Ownership was all an illusion – the skimmer would be his only until someone else took it from him.

Fortunately, he didn't have to consider this problem long.

A shout made him look up.

Above him, a crowd of men like shambling bears, big and brutish-looking, swarmed across the stones of the arena. They seemed to hang like flies from an un-

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even ceiling. Mass was the one who was upside-down, but the gravity of the skimmer told him differently.

One of the men, a husky chieftain of some sort, was gesturing and shouting. He wore a plumed headdress and waved a totem-topped spear. Mass suppressed an urge to laugh.

Something clattered onto the terrace where Mass stood. He took a step toward it, then backed hastily away. It was a slim, deadly-looking shaft. He looked up again, realized the other savages were armed with very efficient crossbows. They surrounded the skimmer quickly, each trying to get the best angle for a shot at him.

Mass looked around quickly. There was little he could hide behind; there was only the Oracle machine and himself on this inverted platform. Another arrow struck nearby.

He tapped at the Oracle keyboard. WHERE ARE THE CONTROLS TO THIS SKIMMER?

The screen lashed: WHEREVER YOU WANT THEM.

Mass didn't stop to think about it. I WANT THEM HERE.

IN WHAT CONFIGURATION?

STANDARD STREINVELDTIAN.

SORRY. THAT DATA NOT AVAILABLE.

Two more arrows clattered to the deck. Mass ducked, even though they struck at a distance. He tapped at the keyboard again. CAN YOU ACCEPT INSTRUCTIONS

THROUGH THIS CONSOLE?

YES.

THEN MOVE THIS SHIP.

IN WHAT DIRECTION? WITH WHAT VELOCITY?
RELATIVE TO WHAT?

RELATIVE TO THIS PLANET. MOVE AWAY FROM THE
SURFACE FAR ENOUGH TO BE OUT OF RANGE OF
THOSE PRIMITIVE PROJECTILES.

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ACKNOWLEDGED.

The oppressive looming ceiling that was the surface of the planet lifted one hundred feet and stopped. The arrows of the natives fell easily short; they dropped back to the stone floor of the arena. Screaming, the savages began hopping angrily up and down; their cries of outrage rose in pitch. The chief himself seemed close to apoplexy.

Mass grinned at their frustration. He tapped at the keyboard, WHAT CONFIGURATIONS OF CONTROLS ARE AVAILABLE?

The screen flashed in reply:

EMPIRE ALPHA SERIES

EMPIRE BETA SERIES

Empire GAMMA SERIES

UNIVERSE THREE VARIATIONS

INTERLINGUAL VARIATIONS

PLUS TRANSLATIONS

Mass frowned. He recognized none of them. LET ME SEE THE SIMPLEST CONFIGURATION.

Just forward of where he stood, something shimmered on the deck, solidified, became an elliptical disc standing on a single pylon. Mass strolled around the Oracle console to examine it. The stand was a featureless podium, the same material as the platform on which he stood, apparently growing right out of it: The surface of the disc was blank, like the surface of an Oracle scanning plate. He ran his fingertips across the empty surface. Nothing.

He went back to the Oracle. WHAT CONFIGURATION IS THIS? HOW DOES IT WORK?

THIS IS THE BASIC SKIMMER CONTROL, replied the Oracle. IT ALLOWS A ONE-TO-ONE CORRESPONDENCE WITH SPECIFIC PILOT ENTITIES, THUS ACHIEVING THE MAXIMUM POSSIBLE INTERFACE OF SKIMMER AND PILOT.

HOW DO I WORK IT?

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APPLY YOUR STATOR TO THE PLATE AND ACTIVATE. BECOME CONGRUENT WITH THE SKIMMER PATTERN. PILOT THOUGHT PATTERNS WILL BE SUPERIMPOSED ON SKIMMER ABILITIES.

Mass frowned, his shaggy red eyebrows creasing together. Stator? Plate? Pilot thought patterns superimposed on skimmer abilities? WHAT OTHER CONFIGURATIONS ARE AVAILABLE? SHOW ME.

The podium flickered. It raised itself upward and its disc grew slightly. The Oracle screen noted, EMPIRE ALPHA SERIES. The podium began to transform itself – a hectic series of shapes and sizes; the disc became a square, a triangle, a rectangle, an oval, a variety of regular and irregular polygons; the pylon rose or shrank in height for each variation. On all of them, the panel remained blank and featureless.

After a few moments, the dizzying transformations paused. The Oracle noted, EMPIRE BETA SERIES. The podium disappeared, became a flat elliptical plate on the floor. It began transforming itself too, much as the podium had. It flashed through the same dazzling series of regular and irregular polygons.

When this series was completed, the EMPIRE GAM-MA SERIES began. This consisted of the pylon without the plate atop. Mass didn't even bother to watch as the pylon flashed through its various heights. He tapped the Oracle. CANCEL. Then, ALL THE CONTROL CONFIGURATIONS ARE THE SAME IN PRINCIPLE?

YES.

THEY ALL REQUIRE A STATOR?

YES.

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE A STATOR?

THEN YOU CAN'T USE THEM.

WHERE CAN I GET A STATOR?

THE QUESTION IS MEANINGLESS.

Mass pursed his lips. WHAT IS A STATOR?

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A STASIS-READING COMMUNICATION AND SYNTHESIS DEVICE. IT EXISTS IN SEVERAL DIFFERENT FORMS AND VARIATIONS.

WHY CAN'T I GET ONE?

YOU WEREN'T BORN WITH IT, the Oracle re-plied.

Mass considered that. He scratched his head thought-fully. WHERE CAN I FIND SOMEONE WHO HAS A STATOR?

MANOLKA.

A PLANET?

YES.

WHERE IS MANOLKA?

RELATIVE TO WHAT? asked the Oracle.

RELATIVE TO HERE.

USING EMPIRE- STANDARD REFERENCES, MANOLKA IS 433.7 LIGHT-YEARS FROM HERE ON COURSE 87 MARK 112.

CAN YOU TAKE ME THERE?

YES.

Mass hesitated. He was not yet ready to type that order. He thought about his ship – his *own* ship – still standing on the beach; it had a comforting solidness about it. This skimmer had nothing. It was a shimmering starflake open to space.

Its flimsiness disturbed him.

Logically, he knew it had to be stronger than any-thing in

his previous experience, but it didn't look it; he was too used to the Streinveldtian definition of strength that you can see.

And Manolka? What kind of a planet was Manolka? Would he be greeted with friendship or indifference, or would he be fired upon as he was when he approached Castola?

He typed, WHAT IS THERE THAT I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE OPERATION OF THIS SHIP BEFORE I START? WHAT IS THERE THAT I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT MANOLKA?

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YOUR QUESTION IS MEANINGLESS. WITHOUT KNOWING ALL THAT YOU ALREADY KNOW, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO DETERMINE WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW AND SHOULD.

ASSUME I KNOW NOTHING. TEACH ME.

THE INFORMATION YOU REQUEST IS AVAILABLE. PLEASE ADDRESS YOUR QUERY TO SPECIFIC POINTS OF INFORMATION.

"Hm," said Mass. He tapped the Oracle off. "I want to think about this erst."

Slowly, he unshouldered his pack and lowered it to the deck. He sat down on it thoughtfully. Above him, the natives still mulled about. Occasionally one would stare upward for a moment or two, then would go back to conferring with the others. They seemed to be planning something.

Mass pulled out a ration pack and cracked it open. He ate slowly, his fingers picking at the fibrous and mealy substance. As he chewed, his jaws moved carefully back and forth.

He couldn't use the skimmer without a pilot – well, he could, but he wouldn't be using it to its full capabilities. He needed a stator-equipped pilot for that, someone who could "become congruent with the system."

Would he find such a pilot on Manolka? Or would they take the skimmer away from him?

How could he prove that it was his?

He couldn't, he realized – precisely because the skimmer *wasn't his*. He could use it, but he could never own it.

It was Toke's million-credit check – wealth that was too big to hide and too portable to be safe. It was the greatest treasure any man had ever folded. It was –
– one hell of a problem.

Night seeped upward from the emptiness below.

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Something went *thunk* into his pack

Mass sat up suddenly, shaking the sleep from his head. The day was already shimmering with heat. He looked at his canvas knapsack and the arrow sticking out of it. At first he didn't realize –

Another arrow came from above, this one going

sfft past his left ear. Startled, he scrambled back; he looked upwards.

Hanging just above the skimmer, an upside-down archer was taking careful aim at him. Mass stared. During the night, the natives had built a tower; it reached down from the planet above, a stiff construction of wood and vines. Mass ducked away as a third arrow came sleeting down.

He scrambled suddenly for the Oracle console, thumbed it quickly on. TURN THIS SHIP AROUND. NOW.

ACKNOWLEDGED. The tower, the island, the planet, all slid off to the left; the horizon and the white sky swept by overhead – Mass exhaled in relief – followed by the opposite horizon and the planet again. The skimmer *continued* to turn; empty sky alternated with planet, each sweeping majestically past from right to left.

And each time the pointing tower swept by, a flight of arrows came feathering down at him; there were several warriors on the tower now, and more climbing up every minute. Their eyes were riveted to the spinning skimmer and the evil red dwarf who was usurping it.

– white sky swept past, followed by the stretching blue plane of the ocean, broken by jutting crests of the island and the stabbing tower – flight of arrows! – the receding land dipping away into the ocean, was swept

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away by a white horizon turning past; white emptiness abruptly became blue horizon, the flat wrinkling of the sea again, the land, the tower – flight of arrows! – hills turning away into ocean and sky and ocean and land and – flight of arrows! – and ocean and sky and ocean and land, over and over and over again.

Mass reached for the keyboard –
– and hesitated.

If the Skimmer/Oracle could so easily misinterpret a command like TURN THIS SHIP AROUND, what might it do with a more complex instruction?

Carefully he typed, CANCEL TURN. RAISE SHIP ONE MILE ABOVE SURFACE OF PLANET.

ACKNOWLEDGED. The planet became a blue wall in front of him with a rocky green patch on its surface. Quickly it began to recede. The blueness stretched outward; other patches of land appeared.

A whistling pressure at his back and a hollowness in his ears told Mass he had made another mistake. The wind of the skimmer's passage upward pressed him hard against the Oracle console. His ears popped and popped again with the sudden change of altitude. He reached for the keyboard, but before he could type CANCEL, the skimmer stopped.

Mass touched his ears carefully; he swallowed and yawned and swallowed again – anything to equalize the

pressure and reduce the sudden ringing.

He shook his head ruefully. "I won't do that again."

He straightened at the console. Before him hung the bright wall of the planet. The sun dazzled brilliantly off the distant ocean; here and there a dark land mass blotted its glaring sheen.

Mass touched the keys. ACTIVATE LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEM.

ACKNOWLEDGED.

Mass looked about him. Nothing.

IS THE SYSTEM ACTIVATED?

YES.

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HOW DO I KNOW THAT IT IS?

IT IS CONFIRMED BY THIS ORACLE.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEM?

THERE IS A STASIS FIELD AROUND THIS SKIMMER. IT PERFORMS CERTAIN MOLECULAR AND SUB-MOLECULAR PROCESSES BOTH WITHIN AND WITHOUT TO MAINTAIN A CONSTANT LEVEL OF ENTROPY WITHIN.

Mass peered around. Certain types of fields were invisible to the naked eye. Apparently the skimmer had put up a field of that type. The planet hung unchanged before him; there was no telltale shimmer across any of its details.

WHAT ARE THE NATURE OF THOSE PROCESSES?

PLEASE ADDRESS YOUR QUERY TO SPECIFIC POINTS OF INFORMATION.

WILL THE FIELD KEEP IN THE ATMOSPHERE OF THIS SHIP?

THIS SHIP HAS NO ATMOSPHERE PER SE. THE FIELD WILL MAINTAIN THE ENVIRONMENT WITHIN AS IT WAS AT THE TIME THE FIELD WAS ACTIVATED.

Mass frowned. THE ATMOSPHERE WILL BE MAINTAINED AT ITS PRESENT PRESSURE, DENSITY AND TEMPERATURE? EVEN IN SPACE?

YES.

WILL THE AIR BE REFRESHED? WILL CARBON DIOXIDE BE REPLACED WITH OXYGEN?

YES.

TRACE ELEMENTS AND INERT COMPONENTS OF THE ATMOSPHERE TOO?

ALL WILL BE MAINTAINED.

Mass rubbed an ear thoughtfully. Had he forgotten anything? "Perhaps I can keep myself from making a

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third mistake," he said. IS THE FIELD ALSO OPAQUE TO RADIATION.

YES.

Abruptly, he had an idea –

CAN YOU MATCH STREINVELDT NORMAL CONDITIONS?

YES.

DO SO.

Immediately, he found himself sagging under the additional gravity; 2.53 gees to be exact. His ears popped again as the air pressure rapidly rose. He gasped, "I knew there was a reason I left –"

He tapped at the console again, REDUCE GRAVITY TO 1.75 GEES AND AIR PRESSURE COR-RESPONDINGLY.

ACKNOWLEDGED.

"There. That's better." He massaged his ears pain-fully. The two sudden changes of pressure had left them stuffed and ringing. The sound of his own voice was faint, almost distant. "I guess I made my third mistake after all."

He turned back to the console, IS THERE A SPACESUIT ABOARD THIS SHIP?

NO.

CAN YOU SYNTHESIZE ONE?

A SPACESUIT IS NOT NECESSARY ON A SKIMMER. THERE IS NEVER ANY REASON TO GO BEYOND THE STASIS FIELD. THE FIELD (OR FIELDS) CAN BE MANIPULATED TO BRING ANY DESIRED OBJECT INTO PROXIMITY WITH THE SKIMMER; THE FIELD (OR FIELDS) CAN BE MANIPULATED TO ENCLOSE ANY DESIRED OBJECT. THERE IS NEVER ANY NEED TO GO BEYOND THE STASIS FIELD.

NOT EVEN FOR REPAIRS?

A SKIMMER DOESN'T NEED REPAIRS. ALL PARTS OF THE SHIP ARE WITHIN THE FIELD.

Mass was frowning deeper now. BUT COULD YOU

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SYNTHESIZE A SPACESUIT IF YOU HAD TO?

YES.

THANK YOU. He could not resist typing it.

Pleased with himself, he stepped away from the con-sole, strode forward to the edge of the terrace and stared at the mile-distant surface of the sea. The sun had edged off slightly now and its glittering sheen had faded. Instead everything was brightly delineated. He searched for the island where he had first landed –

He couldn't find it.

He went back to the console. WE'RE MOVING! he accused.

The skimmer replied, RELATIVE TO WHAT?

RELATIVE TO THE PLANET.

YOUR INSTRUCTIONS, replied the Oracle screen, WERE: "RAISE SHIP ONE MILE ABOVE SURFACE OF PLANET." NOTHING WAS SAID ABOUT MAINTAINING POSITION RELATIVE TO ANY POINT ON THE PLANET'S SURFACE. IT IS ROTATING IN RESPECT TO US.

"So I discovered," Mass grumbled. CAN YOU RETURN TO OUR TAKEOFF POINT?

YES.

"All right," he said, but he didn't give the order to do so. Instead, he turned and looked at his pack. "What for?" he asked himself. "I have everything I need right here with me.

There is nothing back there in that other ship –”

Still, it wouldn't hurt to take one last look.

RETURN TO TAKEOFF POINT, he typed. ASSUME DISTANCE OF ONE HUNDRED FEET OFF SURFACE OF PLANET. MAINTAIN POSITION IN RESPECT TO SURFACE.

ACKNOWLEDGED. Immediately the distant wall of the sea rushed forward. Mass flinched at the sudden-ness of the approach. He gripped the edges of the console to steady himself; his knuckles were white.

Closer now; he could see that the sea was rushing

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sideways, streaking off to the right. A flicker of land, another, then –

The skimmer stopped, hanging off a bright blue wall with a green island across the face of it. In the stone arena below, the natives started shouting and jumping again. Several of them began swarming up the tower.

But this time, their shafts bounced harmlessly off his field. They screamed in outrage, waved their fists in frustration. Mass didn't laugh; there was still an arrow sticking out of his pack and he wasn't sure that this new protection would be permanent. He typed, ASSUME A POSITION DIRECTLY OVER THE SPACECRAFT ON THE BEACH.

ACKNOWLEDGED. The rocky landscape slid side-ways. The brutelike savages scrambled across it, keeping one eye on the skimmer above them and one eye on their footing. They reached Mass's ship at almost the same time as the skimmer; they surrounded it, gesticulating crazily.

“Well,” said Mass. “That's that. If I'd thought to save anything from that ship, I was wrong. I'd have to get to it first.”

Mass eyed the savages thoughtfully. Below, the plume head dressed chieftain was casting some sort of spell against the Streinveldtian ship. He had marked a symbol across its side in chalk and was preparing some kind of ointment. The other natives were already dancing and chanting in a circle around their chief and the ship.

Abruptly Mass had an idea. He went back to the console. YOU SAID THAT ANY OBJECT DESIRED CAN BE BROUGHT INTO THE SKIMMER'S PROXIMITY BY MANIPULATION OF THE STASIS FIELDS?

YES. THE SKIMMER IS EQUIPPED WITH SPECIAL TRACTOR FIELDS FOR THAT PURPOSE.

BRING ME THAT SPACESHIP FROM THE BEACH.

ACKNOWLEDGED. Immediately, the Streinveld-

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tian cruiser lifted from the sand. The native chief-tain gaped in surprise as it floated up away from him; the others stopped dancing and stared. Mass's ship came right up to the skimmer and stopped.

TURN IT SO THE HATCH IS FACING ME. ENCLOSE IT WITHIN THE LIFE-SUPPORT

FIELD. MAINTAIN THIS POSITION UNTIL TOLD TO DO OTHERWISE.

ACKNOWLEDGED. The Streinveldtian schooner turned and floated up to one of the outermost plat-forms of the skimmer. Mass hurried down to it.

Ho spent very little time inside; there was little he wanted and the ship held small emotional value to him. Still –,

He paused at the lock and looked backward. The tiny cramped cabin whispered of Streinveldt, spoke of Streinveldt, screamed of Streinveldt. It *smelled* of Streinveldt –

Mass remembered again why he'd left. He shouldered the single sack of belongings he'd gathered and stepped out, closing the lock behind him. He did it without regret. He'd left Streinveldt for a reason and this ship could only remind him of it. He strode/ stumped back up to the Oracle.

JETTISON THE STREINVELDTIAN SHIP, he typed.

QUERY, interrupted the Oracle. IF THE SHIP IS DROPPED NOW, IT WILL 'FALL ON AND CAUSE INJURY OR DEATH TO A NUMBER QF THE ABORIGINES BELOW.

THROW IT IN THE OCEAN THEN – NO, CAN-CEL THAT. He hesitated. That would be a violation of the Principle Commandment: *Thou Shalt Not Waste Energy*.

Put it in orbit? he thought. No – for whom?

CAN YOU STORE IT SOMEWHERE? he asked.

IT CAN BE PLACED IN A STASIS FIELD OF INDETERMINATE SIZE; IT WOULD BE AL

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WAYS AVAILABLE, ALTHOUGH IT WOULD BE NEITHER VISIBLE NOR DETECTABLE.

"What for?" he asked himself even as he typed, DO IT.

ACKNOWLEDGED. The squat gun barrel schooner vanished. A great cry went up from the natives below.

"Perhaps I will need it again," he said to himself. "Perhaps I will not be able to keep the skimmer...." He cut off that line of speculation. ASSUME AN OR-BIT ONE HUNDRED MILES ABOVE THE SURFACE OF THIS PLANET.

The ground, the island, the sea dropped away.

He spent three days in orbit, learning what he could about the skimmer.

WHAT DO YOU USE FOR FUEL?

ENERGY.

IN WHAT FORM?

ANY FORM.

HOW DO YOU REFUEL?

ANY WAY POSSIBLE.

WHAT WAYS ARE MOST CONVENIENT?

IN ASCENDING ORDER, KINETIC POWER, ELECTRICAL POWER, NUCLEAR POWER, HYDROGEN FUSION PLASMA SYNTHESIS, AND DIRECT SOLAR CONVERSION.

DO YOU NEED TO REFUEL NOW?

THE QUESTION IS MEANINGLESS. THE SKIMMER IS

CONSTANTLY REFUELING. THE PROCESS OF TAPPING AVAILABLE ENERGY SOURCES IS CONTINUOUS.

Mass considered that; he decided to rephrase the question. IS THE AMOUNT OF POWER NOW IN STORAGE SUFFICIENT FOR YOUR CURRENT NEEDS AND OPERATIONS?

THAT DEPENDS ON THE DEFINITION OF

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“CURRENT NEEDS AND OPERATIONS.” ALSO ON THE TIME PERIOD SPECIFIED. THE SKIMMER HAS ENOUGH ENERGY STORED FOR UNINTERRUPTED OPERATIONS TOTALLING A PERIOD OF SEVEN EMPIRE ' STANDARD MONTHS.

“Ah,” said Mass. “A direct answer.”

The planet turned below him, a great disc of blue and white and black. Every ninety minutes, dawn thundered impressively over its edge, the bright star glaring suddenly between a dark crescent and a darker backdrop; then a widening line of brightness would creep across the face of the globe, delineating the blue sea and the white clouds and the brown and green landmasses. The skimmer hung above it all, a glimmering starflake; the shadows within turned and moved as the sun swung up and over.

WHY ARE THERE NO RAILINGS AROUND THE BALCONIES?
RAILINGS ARE UNNECESSARY.

WHAT IF I FALL OFF?

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FALL OFF.

Mass wasn't sure he wanted to test the skimmer's certainty; but it hadn't been wrong yet.

He stood at the edge of one of the outermost terraces and surveyed the planet below; dusk was stealing across its face. Out of curiosity, he stretched his arm out. Nothing. No yielding firmness that suggested a stasis field. He took a step forward, leaned farther, stretched farther. Still nothing. As far as he could tell, there was nothing between himself and open space.

Yet, it *had* to be there. He was breathing, wasn't he?

He tied a line around one of the stanchions, the other end securely about his waist, then took a running leap off the edge of the nearest platform. Into space –

He slid gently to the floor.

After three more tries, he was convinced. An object thrown, hurled or leaping from the edge of the skimmer

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would be returned carefully to its point of origin. The skimmer was right. He couldn't fall off.

Still –

CAN YOU PUT UP RAILINGS ANYWAY?

IF YOU DESIRE.

I DESIRE.

ACKNOWLEDGED. The edges of each platform, terrace and balcony shimmered. Two golden bars, seemingly unsupported, appeared around the periphery of each. Mass smiled. “That's better.” He leaned on one of the railings and watched the sun wink out behind the planet. For a soft moment, its corona glowed against the night.

He turned around, still leaning on the railing, and looked at the Oracle console. Was there anything he hadn't asked it yet? He knew about the skimmer's life-support field, its navigation systems and refueling procedures, its top speed, weapons and defense capabilities – everything he could think of. But had he missed anything?

The skimmer was the ultimate spaceship, Mass was willing to concede the point; but that didn't necessarily make it the safest. There was still too much he didn't know about the ship and the Oracle wasn't volunteering any information. He had to know what questions to ask.

The danger was that he didn't know what it was that he didn't know. He had to ask and guess and ask again, all the time hoping he was covering every possibility. His early experiences below had shown him how easy it was to make a mistake. Fortunately, those had been easily correctable; others might be much more dangerous, and he wanted to get to Manolka – alive.

He stumped over to the Oracle console and rested his hands on its edges. He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

He had a ship. He had enough fuel. He had a destination. He was going to get a pilot.

And still he hesitated –

Is there anything I've missed?

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At last, he decided not. He switched the Oracle on. PROCEED TO MANOLKA.

Almost immediately, all was darkness.

Mass thumbed a glowplate to life and looked around. The skimmer was a ghostly shimmer; nothing else existed.

He turned to the Oracle. LET THERE BE LIGHT.

DIRECTIONAL OR NON-DIRECTIONAL? AND OF WHAT WAVELENGTH?

NON-DIRECTIONAL AND UNIFORM, SUITABLE FOR STREINVELDTIAN EYES.

ACKNOWLEDGED. Immediately a soft red glow illuminated the balcony on which he stood, as well as the others above and below it. Mass switched his glow-plate off.

ARE WE ON COURSE?

YES.

WHY CAN'T I SEE ANYTHING BUT THE SKIMMER?

NO REQUESTS FOR VISUAL DATA WERE MADE.

I AM REQUESTING VISUAL DATA NOW.'

OF WHAT NATURE?

NAVIGATIONAL.

STANDARD STARSIGHTING OR STRESS-FIELD REPRESENTATIONAL?

SHOW ME ONE, THEN THE OTHER.

ACKNOWLEDGED.

The veil of blackness surrounding the skimmer fell away, revealing the familiar swimming field of stars. Ahead was a deep funnel out of which the bright motes tumbled down at him. Behind was a deeper funnel into which they vanished. At this speed, they seemed only tiny specks drifting by; but

the closest had to be many light-years distant. The speed of the skimmer was such

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that Mass could see them creeping past, the closer ones visibly moving, the more distant ones seemingly motionless.

Abruptly, the stars disappeared; the blackness went uniformly pink. The sudden change made Mass blink. Instead of stars, now there were precise blue whorls moving through the strangely glowing void – and lines – neatly drawn lines, green against the pink, layer upon layer of them, a three-dimensional grid; the skimmer was plunging fast through their crisscross framework.

Mass realized he was seeing a representational graph of the stress field; only the skimmer wasn't bothering to project it on a screen – it was superimposing its measurements directly onto the reference points themselves. The graph seemed to be projected onto space.

The green lines stretched outward to infinity. Ahead and behind, they were like rails, four of them defining the rectangular volume of the skimmer's path. Other lines divided that path into cubes. To the sides and above, they were cubes, visible in the far distance as carefully defined volumes, but only flickering lines closer by.

Staring forward, Mass could see that the skimmer was entering a new cube of the grid every seven and a half seconds. Figuring roughly, he deducted that the graph was divided into light-hours; each flickering green line was one light-hour beyond the last. Each perfect volume was one cubic light-hour. Every three minutes, a red line flickered past; one light-day had been marked. Mass could see other red lines faintly in the distance, a larger grid within the green. There were occasional white lines too; those must be light-years.

Mass was familiar with stress-field notational graphs, of course; he knew his navigation – but he had never seen a graph of this scale before, and never seen one that he could stand in the middle of and watch as it flowed around him.

And he had never seen one flickering by at this speed.

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Still awed, he tapped at the console in front of him. DISREGARD THE REPRESENTATION OF LIGHT-HOURS. SHOW ME THE LIGHT-DAYS.

The green lines disappeared, leaving only the red; a larger gridwork, seemingly vaster, it too stretched outward to infinity. These larger volumes crept by at a perceptibly slower pace.

DISREGARD THE LIGHT-DAYS. SHOW ME THE LIGHT-YEARS.

Now, the red lines disappeared; only the distant white ones remained – a gigantic framework. The blue whorls of the stars were visible in the distance – not the stars themselves, but their singularities within the stress field. These immense cubes seemed not to move at all; Mass felt

as if he and the skimmer had suddenly been reduced in size to a mere speck – no matter how great their speed was, the distances of the galaxy were greater. It still took time to traverse the light-years – even at one every two hours.

He realized again that velocity is a relative quantity. He had always known it, but now he was *experiencing* it. The light-hours might flicker by, in seconds, but the light-years still crawled. The perception of speed depends on one's points of reference. "

He typed, SHOW ME OUR COURSE TO MANOLKA.

A yellow line arrowed outward and forward; incredibly straight, it disappeared into infinity ahead.

Mass amused himself with a few other navigational exercises, then abruptly ordered the graph into non-existence. Once 'more, the stars as he knew them – familiar white pinpoints – crept past the skimmer.

Manolka is 433.7 light-years from L'bor.

Had Mass used his Streinveldtian ship, the journey would have taken him 3 and a half years, not counting a mini-

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imum of fourteen stops for replenishment of food and fuel.

The skimmer did it in thirty-six days.

By the third day, Mass was bored.

It was a nightless, dayless existence. He ate when he was hungry, slept when he was tired, and woke again to the same creeping vista of stars. Nothing changed.

He sat on the floor and stared glumly at the Oracle machine; he had run out of questions for it,

He hadn't exhausted its resources, not by any means; an Oracle machine could store indefinitely every tab it ever read or synthesized; it was simply that he did not know what to ask. Streinveldt is an illiterate planet; Streinveldtians are an ignorant people. And Mass was typical. He was unfamiliar with the concept of an unlimited library – and his stay at "Eirenchys had been too brief to make him realize the potentials of one. He was not in the habit of using an Oracle machine for anything but the most obvious of requests.

Had he known that scholars sometimes spent whole lifetimes poring over texts, or discussing philosophies with the Oracles, he would have laughed; By Streinveldtian standards, those actions were a miserable and effeminate waste of time. Streinveldtian children taunted each other with, "You might as well go read a book!" Or, "Go talk to an Oracle!"

Oh, it was recognized that the Oracles were great storehouses of knowledge, but most of that knowledge was theoretical; it had little application on Streinveldt, a planet where muscle counted more than brain.

One might consult an Oracle for the answer to some extremely complex calculation or for a version of some ancient fable or song, but there was little need for the stasis devices beyond those uses; they were used as simple computers, with only occasional referrals to their stored knowledge, scientific or otherwise. Streinveldt had a stable

culture based on strength and pride; there was little honor to be gained by sitting above a keyboard and talking to a machine. Even those few who

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were aware of the potential of the Oracles did not use them often; Oracle-talking was not a common habit –
– so Mass sat and stared at it; his expression was rueful. He had nothing further to ask the console; he had already asked more than any other Streinveldter would have. (A *real* man would have just taken the skimmer and damn the consequences!)

The thought that he might tap the Oracle's stasis-held memories for songs or symphonies or plays or poetry was alien to Mass. Why, he might as well go read a book!

He spent little time exploring the skimmer, one part of it seemed like every other: a naked balcony open to space, glittering platforms above, below and on all sides, Why so much unused area? Most of the terraces were empty and featureless; what purpose could they possibly serve?

He kept wandering back to the control platform, (as he thought of it), but the sight of the Oracle sitting silently in its center only disturbed him. He got up and walked around again; he paced the length of the skimmer and back.

Several times, he found himself humming. Without realizing it, he kept slipping into a Streinveidtian work chant:

*Rumbling, battering, boiling –
Boom!
Grumbling, clattering, toiling –:
Doom!
Tumbling, splattering, broiling –
Boom!
The only silence is the tomb!*

*Brawling, binding, burning
Boom!
Sprawling, winding, turnings
Doom!*

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*Bawling, grinding, churning
Boom(
The only silence is the tomb!*

For some reason, the song comforted him.

He didn't want to admit it – not even to himself – but he missed the coarse and brutal hominess of Streinveldt; he missed the bitter ale and the stringy meat and the heady smell of a woman's honest sweat.

He thought of a room carved from rock and a bed

as hard as the floor it rested on; he remembered a low sky and a crimson noon, sulfurous clouds and brittle vegetation. He remembered them and he missed them all

Mass stood on the empty deck of the skimmer and watched the stars creep past. *What am I doing here?* he kept asking himself. *How did I get here?*

He found himself thinking of Eirenychys; he'd stayed there longer than anywhere, but his memories were without fondness. He'd been an alien there, as alien as it was possible to be – a perpetual outsider. Their food had been too mild; their liquor, too sweet. And their women – had been unavailable.

No matter that Eirenychys and Streinveldt both still honored Interlingua Galactica and subscribed to the principles of the Holy Church – too many of the details were different, even the way they spoke. Every time one of them had opened his mouth, his accent only reminded Mass of the gulf between them.

He couldn't put it into words, this aching emptiness he felt. He thumped his fist suddenly into a stanchion and cried, "I want to go home!"

– but that wasn't it, that wasn't it at all. He *didn't* want to go home. Not now, not ever.

He rubbed his smarting fist softly, and murmured instead, "No... I want a *home*... I want a place to belong."

The second one was Ike.

A thousand years earlier, he would have been built in a factory; he would have been copper and plastic and stainless-steel joints. He would have whirred and hummed and clicked with mechanical perfection. The electro-conductive layers of photographically etched patterns that made up his mind would have been pre-ordered and programmed, processed and prepared for his every function, each one carefully supervised. A thousand computers would have spent years checking and double-checking every aspect: of his total concept against every other. He would have been a precision-built *imitation* of life. Now –

He simply grew.

He was still a construction of pre-ordered shape – but that definition can be applied to any creature, "living" or "artificial." As carefully as each amino acid attaches itself to the DNA chain, as carefully as each bit of information becomes a part of the final indi-

vidual, that's how precise was the layered growth of Ike's decade-long creation.

His skeleton was a semi-living substance that maintained itself through a process that bordered on the organic; it was strong enough to support his weight, but not so strong as to be brittle. His muscles were of the same substance, but in a

different form; the strength, flexibility and elasticity of it were varied. They were grown in layered cultures and they functioned as con-glomerates of individual “cells”, yet they were *not alive*. Each cell responded to electrical stimuli by changing its shape; each stimulus produced a contraction and the response was like that of a human muscle, but more precise, more definitely controlled.

His power plant was a stasis-based storage cell; it was set in his pelvis, giving him a low center of gravity. Not needing to breathe, he had no diaphragm; oxygen is a slow corrosive – metal rusts, flesh dies – his few life-simulating processes were anaerobic. Instead, his rib cage surrounded his all-important brain; that magnificent organ was the masterpiece of a science that saw no borderline between chemistry and physics. His brain was grown as were his skeleton and muscles, and from the same basic plasm – cell by cell, layer by layer – a time-consuming process in which colloidal plastics were made to imitate life.

His eyes and ears were stator-field sensory devices. His nose too was stator-based. His hands were precisely articulated musculatures, not only tools, but sensors as well, capable of detecting temperature, pres-sure, and even “taste.” With many thousand detectors per square inch of skin, he could feel the “coarse texture” of even the finest silk.

His skin was another masterpiece-of chemical engineering; flexible layers of the same half-alive sub-stance as his skeleton, it lay across his body, both protecting and defining the shape of his synthetic muscles. When he moved, those muscles could be seen rippling

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and bowing beneath the skin; he was neither metal nor flesh.

He was tall, graceful and lithe. His legs were sculptured limbs, his arms too; they seemed to flow; they were stylized representations of the human model. His torso was broad at the chest, sculptured to suggest a human musculature. His fiat belly and part of his back were ribbed with narrow accordion pleats to increase his flexibility. A chastity belt of heavier plating pro-ected his groin area and power pack.

His skull was smooth, but not featureless. His ears were sculptured openings, serving an acoustic as well as aesthetic purpose. His mouth was wide; it housed the only weapon he carried, his voice. A gentle voice, it was, both soft and strong.

But it was his eyes that caught one’s attention – glittering black lenses, they seemed to pierce and burn. Their gaze was penetrating. Those eyes – deep set above high cheekbones – one wanted to see what was behind them, but only their shining blackness stared back.

He wore no clothes; they were unnecessary encumbrances. His body was all the “protection” he needed. Not having any weapons, he was inherently peaceful; not being flesh, he couldn’t die. The offenses of war didn’t apply to him. He wasn’t neutral, he was indifferent.

He seemed to be made of metal, but when he moved, he

flowed like liquid silk, feline and efficient. When he passed, the air tingled with the suggestion of soft leather. He dazzled in red-gold and black, alternately bright and dark, rich with the suggestion of strength harnessed and shaped into the semblance of a man.

This was Ike – or any member of his society, a race of constructed men (identical, precise) so ancient that only its scholars remembered whether it had begun as robots trying to imitate life or as organic beings trying to become machines. Their culture was timeless, immortal, locked into the stability of – pre-

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cision(stasis); machines(?) enduring – New units were built as needed, replacing those which had been destroyed by accident or irreparably damaged.

Undisturbed and curiously uncurious, Manolka was a hive – occupied by a group mind. Many bodies functioning in collective rapport, linked and meshing as one –

Each unit was an (individual) (?) in its own right, but linked to the mass consciousness; he was himself and he was all of Manolka –

His – (or anybody's) – thought processes were modulated flows of electricity; (he) (they) shared them with (each other) (all others) – they broadcast them as modulations of the electromagnetic spectrum – each tapped the common bank of information and added his own in turn. They (the network) expanded them-selves to their widest possible range of information-and experience – an electric expansion of the (individual) – of the *race* – shaping and creating a unified (cul-ture) (entity) –

The massmind found itself capable of thoughts and calculations and experiences far beyond those of the individual unit; the whole was equal to more than just the sum of its parts. Much more.

God was not an abstract concept on Manolka. All men were God. Literally.

Buried deep in the cities were giant brains, their sole purpose to coordinate the complex network of flashing experience and information; they were the collective cortex of the Manolkan mind, and the memory too.

The units were linked to them – linked *through* them – the units were one with them, *congruent* with them and with each other. Submerged deep in their knowledge, the (individual's) lesser-sized mind was over-whelmed by the sheer complexity and almost limit-less scope of the Manolkan mind. Plunging into it, he *was* it, feeling it all – *being* it all! – experience both

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mystic and enlightening – a glimpse of reality and truth bonded into a (mind-expanding) *vision* –

There were neither priests nor professors on Manolka; no one to stand between a man and the God he was a part of.

At best, there were lesser networks, duos and trios,

quadros, quintos – specific teams of individuals locked together in temporary liaisons for specific (or non-specific) purposes, working on a common (or uncommon) problem – becoming *anything* on the planet that was linked into the network –

There was *love* too.

Love is sharing; love is communication; love is the opening up, the becoming a part of – the congruency – being one with one's mate(s). Love is electric, love is hallucinogenic, love is (mind-expanding). On Manolka, it is all this and more.

The orgasm is an explosion of impulses, overload-ing the sensory network of the mind; a dazzling fire-work-burst of data, catching the soul, picking it up, surging with it, lifting it – a thundering symphony, dancing, a thrusting joy, roistering life – every action triggering myriads of new impulses, data creating, magnifying – *overloading* happiness orgasmic glory!

On Manolka, it is all this and more.

Perfection incarnate: the Manolkan body. (bodies) and the Manolkan mind (collective, consciousness); a matrix of absolutes –

(Individual) units never questioned their (identity); they were Manolka and that was identity enough. All Manolkans were one, united in *God*.

There was only one thing wrong.

No Manolkan had ever known what it was like to be alone.

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There was something *new* on Manolka, something outside the common experience of the massmind –

No; there it was, buried in memory – a space skimmer (that was nothing new) – did the Empire still exist?

The pilot of the skimmer –

– what kind of curious construct was this?

Enigma-riddle-question-query:

“*What* are you?”

The answer was modulated sound. No relation to any known communication matrices –

The *thing* that had come on the skimmer was a construct of incredible complexity, a weltering jumble of chemical – no, biological mechanisms designed to duplicate – or was it simulate? – the processes of existence. Could the term *life* possibly apply here?

The *thing* teemed with lesser organisms! (How does it hold them in check?) Every time it exhaled – another anomaly – it spread millions of them into the air (Decontamination plans are now being prepared); it used oxygen – *used! oxygen!* – and exhaled carbon dioxide. (Why, the thing must be corroding inside!) No, that couldn't be right – there, see, another of those biological mechanisms, this one to counteract and repair the continual decay of the total device – (But how inefficient! Why, it's as if it had been built to be obsolete – that organism (organism?) couldn't possibly

survive more than a century at most – the whole system is prey to entropy.) But look, see how each cell reproduces itself – marvelous piece of chemical engineering, that – it's in a continual state of maintenance and repair! (it has its inefficiency *designed* in?) Notice the way reproduction information is stored in *molecular* chains! (Also notice the high probability of

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information distortion in those chains during the cell reproduction process. After how many changes would the information be valueless?) As the information changes, so does the organism; the total system is continually *evolving! changing!* (Unstable!)

(What kind of mind would inhabit such an *alien* – no, make that *handicapped* – physical system? The thing must be (new concept needed?) – deranged.)

lqsbi1c – ?

(Possibility to be considered –)

Being's mind functions – (mind?) – functions along chordate-ganglia-cortex lines –

(Could this *thing* be related to those – *mindless* organic existences that occur spontaneously – ? Biological systems are – similar – but –)

Can communication be established? (*Should* communication be established? Consider: will communication here endanger stability of system? Is linking of consciousnesses desirable?) (Re-evaluate physical data.)

Thought processes of the thing are of a high order – patterns of electrical impulses – (undecipherable) – generated by *chemical* means! Each cell functions as – an information bit; the unreliability of total cell maintenance produces a high degree of inherent inefficiency in data processing and judgment functions, not totally compensated for by massive duplication of components – high probability of built-in *biases* – '

Notice something else: there exists a chemical means of maintaining total biological balance – secretions of control fluids which affect the operations of various process units, keeping the system functioning at optimum (?) chemical efficiency (?) – (efficiency?) – variance of chemical influences on physical system will produce noticeable reactions and distortions in the *being's* thought processes (further evidence of the unreliability of its data-processing functions) – right now, *being* is experiencing a high degree of alertness, tension, awareness

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of surroundings, physical preparation for (flight?) (aggression?) (activity of some kind?) – (Response is definitely related to lower-order organic existences!) – obviously (?) creature is experiencing a chemical mechanism to prepare itself to cope with (perceivable) danger –

(Is the creature in danger?) No, but apparently it perceives that it is. (Further evidence of unreliability of system –)

Note: the chemical control systems do not appear to be under conscious supervision, increasing probability of creature's unawareness of the resultant effects on its judgment centers. (Unaware of built-in inefficiency and processing biases!)

(Is it functioning illogically?) The potential is there. Programming of the system appears to be haphazard, illogical, dogmatic, reflexive – easily distortable –

Notice notice notice notice notice notice – ! t

Creature is in possession of stasis-bite Oracle tab.

(New data available?)

Provide scanning plate –

(Investigating unit – I.K.E.– is equipped with general duty stator device.)

I.K.E. is now scanning the tab –

Assimilate new inputs – become congruent with data and –

– DISASSOCIATE! ;

– CANCEL! –

– REJECT! –

– REGROUP! –

Discard new data immediately! All units!

– (High potential for disturbance of group stability)

– (Concepts alien to –)

– (Concepts *not* alien! These concepts have been edited out of the universal memory –)

(– hence, concepts are *now* alien!)

(Maintain equilibrium.)

– MAINTAIN –

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(Guidance required –)

(Unite –)

(Unit I.K.E. remains in stator-trance –)

(Isolate I.K.E. from the body politic.) (*Isolate?*) (Monitor and *maintain*.)

Slowly, Ike became aware

Self-aware –

As he assimilated the information within the Streinveldtian translating tab – became congruent with it –

– unfamiliar words forced themselves into his consciousness, strange new concepts –

– contrary to the cultural matrix he was imbued with, setting up conflicts within his thought patterns –

– distorting his rationality as he attempted to fit these alien symbols into a system which had no room for them – shattering matrices –

– became aware – (*self-aware*) –

– the massconsciousness was – still linked – but not –

– he had lost the objective view of the greater unified mind; was gaining the *subjective* (subjective?) view of –

- *point of view*
- position –
- *individual* perspective –
- specific –
- the new concepts: !! You! Me! –
- *Individual!* –
- SEPARATE AND AWARE! –
- “*I – I am – I think – I exist – I think I exist; there-
fore, I exist! !!!*”
- ME! –
- The concept flashed and dazzled across his ma-
trices, striking like lightning, shattering and thunder-

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ing into consciousness! – transforming him *into a con-
sciousness!* – aware of *self!hood!* –

“*I am!*”

- *separate* from the massmind –
- monitoring it (them?) and (they) are monitor-
ing *me* –
- the linkage is still there. *I* can sense it; but there

- a alter, a block, a – null-awareness –
- rejection of concepts alien to group conscious-
ness; no perception of *identity* in relation to three-
dimensional space –
- no perspective; no point of view –
- alien to Manolkan gestalt; consequently subject to
real-time editing from universal consciousness –
- until determination of final effects on unit I.K.E.;
quantitative analysis of perturbation of matrices and
rationality; protect (and isolate) possible derange-
ment –
- (possible derangement?) –

Ike looked about himself, functioning for once with-
out the overlaid images of a thousand other points
of view; functioning with his *own* (own?) (ownership?)
(property?) perspective.

- he could still detect *them* – he was a bottle float-
ing on the surface of a vast ocean, drifting with it,
moving across the top of each heavy surge and swell,
dark depths below – but separate – the water in the
bottle was the same as the water surrounding it – but
unable to mix –

- the *bottle* was an arbitrary barrier; it existed as
no more than the ocean’s refusal to pollute itself with
– the *substance* of – Ike’s new concepts – and that re-
fusal to mesh *created* the bottle that was Ike, sud-
denly an entity in his own right – he was conscious
and aware of himself and the ocean around – the
waters within churned and tumbled at the impene-
trability of the barrier, frustrated at their desire to re-

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turn to the all-encompassing warmth and mingling of

the womblike mother sea – troubled and turmoiled, *because* of the barrier. The ocean surged, but the *water* stormed –

Ike monitored himself then. His internal sensors warned him of increasing disturbances in his matrices; there were logic patterns that wouldn't resolve, distortions in his perceptions and consequent reactions, distortions equivalent to those of the creature standing before him –

Increased alertness. Tension. Preparation for action.

The creature spoke again – and this time, Ike started. He reacted as an individual – and was now concerned with *individual* (survival) (?) – (possibility of death?) (cessation of perception and experience?) –

– but simultaneously realized that he now *understood* what the creature had said (the knowledge he had assimilated from the tab) –

“My name is Mass.”

– (Name?) – (Of course! ‘Individuality implies descriptive symbols for identification of specific entities –)

“I am designated Unit I.K.E.”

“Ikayec?” A frown. “That’s a woman’s name. The -yee ending –” Resolution of thought: a smile, “You must have mistranslated. Your name is Ike.”

“Ike?” Thought reaction equivalent to a frown. Re-evaluation of data. (Yes, *Ike* would be a symbolic pronunciation.) (Yes.) “Ike.”

“And I’m Mass. I need a pilot for my skimmer.”

– (pilot?) (skimmer?) –

– The massmind turmoiled – the ocean *surged* – restless waves breaking on a sudden shoreline – (Creature has requested use of single unit for purpose of – controlling stasis-field transportation device) (implication: unit would be *separated* from body politic) rejection of request –) (*However* –) (granting of request would allow the continued monitoring of this creature’s behavioral patterns) (determination of ra-

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tionality of his thought processes.) (Is such information worth the use of a unit?) –

“Why do you need a pilot?”

Hesitation. “I’m looking for the Empire.”

– (re-evaluate data) (reconsider request) (what information is available concerning the Empire?) (Nothing since 989 H.C.) – (is the gaining of information on this additional subject worth the use of a unit?) –

– (Consider present state of unit I.K.E.) (Unit is functionally deranged) (could not possibly be re-introduced into body politic without severe editing of personal matrix –) (Possibility that unit is beyond rehabilitation?) (Yes. 83 per cent.) – (Suggestion: unit I.K.K. is already lost to the body politic. Rather than destroy, assign it to the task of monitoring the creature and piloting the skimmer.) (Unit LK.E. is already *separated* –)

– (Is I.K.E. capable of the task? He is functionally

deranged now.) (It makes no difference whether he is capable of the task or not. As he is lost to the body politic, we have no further use for him –)
– (Query: the use of terms “he” and “we”?) Reaction: horror. (Suggest massive re-editing of universal memory.) (Eliminate all references to self-aware biological organisms. Eliminate all knowledge of unit. I.K.E.–)

Somehow the turbulence had shifted. Ike was aware that the massmind was doing – something – but it didn't come through –

He felt a sense of – unease – but he controlled it. (He damped down the disturbances in his matrices.)

A decision had been made. It had been made for him by the body politic, but given enough time he

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would have reached the same decision himself. He could no longer stay on Manolka.

Ice stepped aboard the skimmer.

He looked at Mass. “The gravity here is 1.75 times standard.”

Mass said, “I like it that way, but if it's too much for you, I can revise it downward.”

“No. I will merely readjust my strain compensators. I am more flexible than you.”

He allowed Mass to lead him upward into the deeper parts of the framework.

They came to the control platform. “What kind of control figuration do you need? The skimmer can provide spire Alpha, Beta and Gamma, and Universe Three Variations.”

“I can use any of those. Or all.” Ike replied. “I told you I was flexible.”

Mass punched at the Oracle keyboard, ordered a pilot console to appear. It flickered and became solid.

Ike stepped forward to the featureless podium, laid his palms flat across its top. He stiffened slightly –

“What are you doing?”

“I am becoming congruent –” His voice was distant.

(– *became one with the skimmer abilities* – his thoughts superimposed upon its matrices –)

“Are you ready to go?” asked Ike.

Mass nodded.

The skimmer rose into the am.' Manolka dropped away.

“Is that all there is to it?”

“Why should there be more?” Ike asked, then explained, without moving from his place, “The palms of my hands are stator-readers, like the scanning plate of an Oracle. I can scan – and be scanned – through them. When I link up with the skimmer, we become congruent –” (He was reaching deeper into the skimmer now –) “The interface between us is so near total as to be almost nonexistent; we t»come as one.” (He

felt the familiar flooding sensation of – joining – with a larger, more complex – matrix –) (The skimmer was –)

– the massmind monitoring him turmoiled, reconsidered its decision – (Control of the skimmer as it is now perceived would increase the abilities of the body politic.) (Re-assert control over unit I.K.E.– ?) (Yes.) –

Ike made a decision, his own:

The skimmer flashed into hyperstate –

And Ike –

– was suddenly *alone*. And *terrified*.

He lurched (in sudden discoordination) away from the controls, bent over double, hands clutching at head. (Head?) (Why head?) (Brain is in belly; only sensory units are in head –) (Sensory units determine perception of identity; location of units determines location of perceived *self* –)

The *massmind* was gone.

Vanished. Out of his head.

Completely. Empty.

There was nothing to monitor. Nothing monitoring him. The ocean was gone. There was only the bottle – the imprisoned water – now an ocean in itself – he staggered.

“Ike!”

He straightened in response, but his matrices still wobbled –

“What’s the matter?”

“The – pressure –”

“Pressure?”

is gone,” Ike gasped. “I am – free – of Manolka – and I’m – scared –” Abruptly, he damped down his susceptibilities, upshifted the planes of his judgment centers. He said, “We are traveling faster than light now. I am beyond the reach of the Manolkan consciousness. I am – alone – for the first time in my exis-

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tence.” (I – and only I – am now responsible for the actions of this unit.)

“And that scares you?” asked Mass; his voice was gruff.

“I – will adjust –” He stepped back to the control podium, laid his hands on it, reached into the skimmer – became congruent again – allowed himself to *enjoy* the sensation – The skimmer matrix was not the collective pattern of Manolka, but the sense of submerging into a larger body was still there. He luxuriated in it –

“What are you doing?” asked Mass.

“Reasserting control –”

“You mean you have to monitor the skimmer constantly?”

“No. I meant I was reasserting control over myself. I was using the stability of the skimmer as a rudder.”

“Oh,” said Mass.

For a moment, Ike stood silent. Submerging. Distractedly, he said, “The skimmer is much older than I am. Its memories are – fascinating.” He paused, still going deeper. “Strange –”

“What is?”

“There seems to be no awareness – *any* perception of existence – in the skimmer-mind. It is without con-sciousness. I have never perceived a matrix like this –”

“Well, it’s only a machine.”

“Yes, but on Manolka, all machines are conscious – part of the overall consciousness.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because,” said Ike. “Every function in the universe is related to every other; on a lesser scale, every function on Manolka is related to every other – it’s ecology. If we built a large structure, the control of light, temperature, air pressure and energy flow would best be con-trolled by one consciousness – as well as traffic control, usage patterns and sociological matrices. It would be a mind for the structure’s body. That structure would

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not be alone in its city; its presence would have an effect on every other structure – again, energy low and traffic patterns and sociological usages would have to be integrated. All would be monitored by a city mind. And each city would be monitored by a regional mind and a continent mind in turn – and the whole would be monitored by the massmind. Every function affects every other; to allow independent haphazard fluctuations would be wasteful. All functions on Manolka are unified to prevent or minimize such waste. That’s why the skimmer surprises me. Its functions seem to be – disorganized.”

Mass remembered his early experiences with the slimmer and his attempts to control it through the Oracle console. He said, “Perhaps the pilot is supposed to provide the consciousness.”

Ike considered it. “Yes, you could be right.” He considered it with the skimmer’s much vaster logic centers. “Yes,” he said suddenly. “Manolkans were *designed* to be skimmer pilots. It is the Manolkan function – but we have not performed it in centuries.”

“There haven’t been any skimmers for four hundred years,” said Mass. “That might have something to do with it.”

“Manolka has become a closed system,” Ike said, almost to himself. Without regret. Free of it now, he was looking at it from the *outside* – from a (there was that concept again) perspective, from a *point of view*. (– Strange how the perception of self-identity alters one’s perceptions of everything else.)

Mass became aware of the stars creeping past. “Where are we?”

“We are 3 and one half light-months out of Manolka.”

“On what course?”

“No course at all, yet. (I merely wished to put some

distance between myself and Manolka.) What course do you wish?"

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"I'm not sure. Where would we find the Empire – or the Empire Center?"

Ike delved into the skimmer's memory. "There are several possibilities. Homeworld, for instance."

"The mythical birthplace of man?"

"It is not mythical. It exists."

Mass thought about it. "All right," he said. "Let's go to Homeworld."

Ike didn't alter his position, he still had his hands on the scanning plate; but the stars flickered, were suddenly creeping off at a different angle.

Mass stood and surveyed the not-metal man for a moment. (Do I trust him?) He decided that he did; he shrugged out of his battle-tunic and dropped it to the deck.

Ike swiveled his head 180 degrees to look at Mass. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Mass returned the stare; the reversed position of Ike's head startled him. He swallowed and said, "I'm get-ting ready to go to sleep."

"Sleep?"

"Yes – it's uh –" (Now, how the hell do I explain *sleep*?) "It's something that human beings do."

"I am a human being," said Ike. "I don't sleep." (That is, I have no knowledge that I do. The concept is unknown to me.)

"Um," said Mass. He scratched,, his nose thought-fully. "Well, it's something that *biological* human beings do."

"Oh," said Ike. "And what is its purpose?"

"Its purpose? Uh, well, it gives the body a chance to – to rest and the mind a chance to assimilate its most recent experiences."

"And how do you do it?"

"Uh –" Mass gestured helplessly. "I just do it. I lay down, I get comfortable, and I go to sleep."

If Ike could have frowned, he would have. Instead,

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he cocked his head curiously – awkwardly, as his head was still reversed. "May I watch you?"

"Oh. Uh, all right –" Mass said it reluctantly. Aware of Ike's detached observation, he lowered himself to the floor, stretched out on his back and rested his hands at his sides. He lay there with his eyes open for a moment. "Uh, Ike – would you raise the temperature in here by ten degrees?"

"It is done."

Mass sat up, peeled off his undertunic and his tights. He lay down again, naked, a stocky boulder of flesh, dark and chunky. He sighed once, scratched himself, and folded his arms across his Chest. He sighed again.

"Is that how you do it?" asked Ike.

"No," said Mass. "This is how I get ready to do it. But I

need quiet. You're not supposed to talk to me while I sleep."

"Oh," said Ike. "I did not know."

"Well, now you do." Mass composed himself again. He stared up at the skimmer and the creeping stars visible between its silvery vanes. He allowed his eyes to close....

After a moment, he opened them again.

He sat up and looked at Ike. "Must you do that?" He asked.

"Do what?"

"Look at me."

"I was watching you."

"Well, I can't sleep while you're watching me."

Ike considered it. "Sleep is a lessening of biological activity?"

"Yes," said Mass.

"Hence, it is also a state of increased danger to the organism –

"So?"

"– an organism will not sleep unless it feels secure.

You do not feel secure with me watching you?"

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"No," said Mass. "I guess not."

"Strange," said Ike. "I should imagine that it would be the other way around. While I am watching, you are *safer* from danger. You should feel more secure."

"But I don't."

Ike had a thought, "Perhaps it is your perception of my watching you that is disturbing."

"Yes, that's it," said Mass. "I feel like I'm being stalked. Besides, your head looks funny in that position; that bothers me too."

, "Interesting," said Ike. "It is your perception of my identity that makes you feel insecure. (Identity is perceived through the eyes –) (Mass does not like my perceiving him, because that forces him to perceive me.) (The existence of my identity is a potential threat to the stability of his – ?)" Ike swiveled his head forward. "Does this help?"

"A little," conceded Mass.

"I can still watch you from this position," Ike said.

"You can?"

"Yes. I have 360-degree sensory receptors; they are concealed in the band around my head and elsewhere on my body."

"So, even though you look like you're looking forward, you're also looking backward?"

"Yes."

Mass pulled himself nervously into a sitting-up be, his arms folded around his knees.;" "Then how come you have a human shape?"

"Because I am human." (Isn't it obvious?)

"But you don't *need* a human shape."

"No, I don't," Ike agreed, "but I am human, so I *must have* a human shape."

"But – but why?"

"Because it is written, 'we are created in His image.' "

"Whose image?"

"His image. *Human*. It is written in the first book

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of the Human Church. 'In the beginning, there was

"The Human Church – ?" Mass frowned. "But I'm a human being –"

"Are you?" said Ike. "Can you prove it?"

"Of course – I *mean*, I don't have to prove it; isn't it *obvious*?"

"Na"

"No?"

"It is written, 'we are created in his image.' If you are a human being, Mass, our images should not be so disparate. You are only four feet tall, I am six. You weight 318 pounds, I weight only 200. Your pro-portions are different than mine. No, our images do not match at all."

"Now, wait a minute," said Mass. "It's also written: 'Human is as human does.' "

"That is not part of *my* credo. I do not recognize its validity."

"Then you – you don't believe I'm human."

"No," said Ike. "I don't. I'm sorry, Mass."

Mass found himself gasping for breath. He stared at the back of this not-metal man and marveled at his convoluted logic. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry or get mad. He did neither. He just stared.

Ike said, "This should not change the nature of our relationship, though. I will still pilot the skimmer for you and help you in your quest. I still regard you as an intelligent (if strangely conceived) self-aware organism."

"But," said Mass slowly, "you can't consider me human."

"No," said Ike. "I can't."

"All right," Mass said at last "All right." He lay down again. (Not human, huh?)

"Excuse me," said Ike. "But are you comfortable there?"

"Yes," said Mass. "Why?"

Space Skimmer 79

"According to the skimmer memory, you, being a biological organism, would be more comfortable on a bed."

"I would be, yes," he admitted grumpily, "– if there were one; but there isn't, so why talk about it?"

"Because the skimmer can provide a bed."

"Huh?" Mass sat up.

"The resistance of the skimmer planes can be ad-justed to simulate any desired texture or substance."

"You mean, this –" Mass thumped the deck, "can be softened?"

Ike didn't change his position at the console, but Mass suddenly sank six inches into the skimmer. "Urf –" he said.

"Are you comfortable now?"

"Um –" Mass tested the skimmer floor's new resilience cautiously. "It, ah, seems a bit soft."

The floor stiffened; he bounced upward again.

"What texture would you prefer?" asked Ike.

"Can you make a Streinveldtian bed? It's a stone slab with two layers of leather over it, and it should be one foot off the ground."

A six-foot-in-diameter, circular area of the skimmer deck, with Mass at the center, immediately rose up to the desired height.

Mass lay back slowly. (Hmm?) Yes, he decided, yes. He let out a long slow sigh of satisfaction. (This was definitely better than sleeping on the hard skimmer floor.) He remembered ruefully his thirty-six day journey to Manolka. All that time, -he could have been comfortable. (Oh well.)

He composed himself for sleep again, his gaze wandered upward. He watched a star inching past a high-up vane. He yawned sleepily.... •

At the console, Ike continued to monitor Mass, through his own sensors and through the skimmer's. He noted with impassive curiosity the lessening of Mass's respiratory rate, the steady regularity of his

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heartbeat, the lowered level of his mental activities, and he analyzed it all,

(So that's what sleep is – a discontinuation of the identity-consciousness; the functioning of the body is turned over to the automatic regulating systems –) (– and temporarily, the identity *doesn't exist at all* –) (I wonder what it feels like.)

When Mass awoke, nothing had changed. Ike still stood motionless at the podium, pinpoint stars slipped across the dark emptiness, the skimmer still glittered.

He sat up and stretched. He started to reach for his under-tunic and tights, then changed his mind. He never wore clothes in a spaceship before; why should he start now? (But on the other hand –) He glanced uncertainly at Ike – (What the hell am I thinking of? He's only a construct.) He dropped the clothes again. Streinveldters never wore clothes inside shelter anyway; they were encumbrances – and this skimmer was certainly the best "shelter" anyone ever built.

He stumped over to his pile of supplies and pulled out a ration-pack. He cracked it open, sat down on the floor and started to eat. His fingers pulled at the greasy meat – it came apart in strings – and he chewed noisily.

"Excuse me," said Ike. "What are you doing?"

"I'm eating."

"Eating?"

"Yes. If I don't eat, I'll die."

"Oh." (It is one thing to know the words; it is quite another to see the actual process that the words are symbols of.)

"Eating is the taking on of energy, correct?"

Mass grunted over a mouthful. "Yumfs."

"But wouldn't it be easier to take your energy di-

rectly instead of having to ingest that biological substance?”

“Might be –” Mass chewed the suggestion over thoughtfully, “– but I’m not equipped for it. I have to eat.”

Ike watched (monitored) the process curiously. (The substance Mass is ingesting is a high-order protein. The functions of his metabolism work to break this protein down into lesser forms, This breaking-down process releases the energy inherent in the protein for use by the organism.) (How curious, that energy should be stored in matter matrices – but of course, it would have to be that way because Mass’s brain is a biological machine) (Mass is a living example that matter is a way to use or store energy – but it’s so inefficient –)

Ike said politely, “Excuse me, Mass, but I am monitoring your eating. That substance that you are presently consuming will not fulfill all of your biological needs.”

Mass examined the chunk of meat he had been about to put into his mouth. It looked okay to him –

Ike said, “I notice serious deficiencies of certain chemicals important to the stability of your metabolism. Prolonged exposure to a one-substance diet will seriously distort your biological balance. You should augment your meals with substances containing the needed elements.”

Mass gave him a look. (It was wasted on Ike.) He put the food into his mouth anyway. “This is all I have,” he said, chewing.

Ike considered that. “The skimmer can synthesize the necessary matter matrices,” he offered.

“It can?”

“The memory banks contain an extensive catalogue of substances necessary for the maintenance of a great variety of life forms.”

“Beer?” asked Mass. “Ale?”

“Yes –” Ike paused. “But, according to the matrices,

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those substances contain alcohol. I do not advise you to ingest them. You could seriously distort your perception and judgment functions.”

Mass gave him another look. “*That’s* the whole idea.”

“I do not understand –”

“Then you’re not human. No, I didn’t mean that –” he said as Ike turned to face him; he suddenly remembered the other’s religious biases. “What I meant was – well, maybe you haven’t been human long enough to understand.”

“If you mean I have not been self-aware long enough, you are correct. I will wait until I have more data on the matter.”

“Good. In the meantime, I’d like a cold stein of bitter ale. There should be frost on the outside of the mug and the ale should have a good thick head.”

“Will two ounces be sufficient?”

Mass blinked. Twice. Once for each ounce. “No,” he said finally. “Two ounces will not be sufficient.”

“Oh,” said Ike. His tone was faintly disapproving. “How much would you prefer?”

"Two quarts."

"Two? Quarts?"

"Yes – and that's just for starters."

Ike turned to his podium. The air in front of Mass shimmered, took form, solidified – a glittering stein of ale, delicious bitter ale, sweet bitter ale, cold heady ale; two quarts of it, hanging in mid-air. Mass grabbed it thirstily.

"Hm," he said, wiping his mouth. "It should have a little bite to it."

"Bite?"

"More alcohol."

"Are you sure? There is at least one and a half per cent alcohol in it already."

"One and a half per cent?!!" Mass flung the stein from him in disgust; it bounced and splattered across

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the skimmer floor. "That's not ale! Ale isn't ale unless it's at least eight or ten per cent alcohol!"

"Eight or ten per cent?"

"Oh, for krie sake! A man could die of thirst waiting for you."

Once more the air shimmered. Mass waited till the brew solidified and the head started to settle, then sampled it cautiously. "Mmm – now that's better, Much better."

Ike said nothing.

Mass glanced around. "You know what else I could use – a stool and a table. I don't suppose you could synthesize those, could you?" He took another drink.

By the time he had finished swallowing, a stool and a table stood before him.

"You know," said Mass to no one in particular, as he finished his second stein. "This skimmer may not be such a bad ship after all."

Ike didn't answer. (He is purposely distorting his rationality – why? – Why? –) (Does he enjoy it?) (*Enjoy?*) (He *must* like it or he wouldn't be doing it –) (What does it feel like that he craves it so?) (It must be a purely *subjective* experience –) (But why would one seek to further limit one's consciousness?)

His thoughts were interrupted by Mass.

"I'd offer you one," said the dwarf, gesturing with his third stein, "but you couldn't drink it, could you?" .

"No," said Ike. "It would have no effect on me."

"That's a shame." Mass wiped his mouth again. He looked at the stein fondly, "I don't think I could live without an occasional pot of the real stuff," then tilted the rest of the brew down his throat. "Ahh, I'll have another, if you please –"

"Do you think you should?"

Mass surveyed the other carefully. "Are you my wife?" he asked.

"Your – mate? No, I – that is, we have not –"

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"Then stop questioning my drinking. It's bad man-ners."

He reached for the abruptly synthesized fourth mug.

(Manners?) (Another new concept – *courtesy*.) (The deliberate consideration of another being's identity – yes! A purposeful muting down of one's own presence in order to lessen to the other the perceived threat to his identity, making the resultant interactions as tolerable as possible to each.) (Courtesy is an avoid-ance of aggression and possible damage to the system.) (Understanding is.)

Almost without thinking, he synthesized a fifth mug for Mass.

"Thanks," hiccupped the other, already reaching for it. "Here's to you – Y'know, it's a shame you can't join me." He paused to belch. "Are you sure "there's no equivalent substance you can use?"

Ike considered it. "I don't think so. The pronounced effects of alcohol in your system are directly attributable to the high degree of mutability of your biological matrices. I am constructed of less mutable substances – in fact, I am highly non-mutable, as non-mutable as it is possible for matter to be. Hence, any attempt to alter my balance by physical or chemical means would be resisted."

"Oh," said Mass. "You mean you can't get drunk?"

"I'm not sure. I might be able to voluntarily distort the shape of my thought patterns to match the state which you are currently achieving, but I hesitate to do so."

"Why?"

Ike turned away from the podium. "I am not sure I want to. I might find myself out of control." (Out of control – what a peculiar concept – out of control *voluntarily*.)

"Try it," urged Mass. "Just a little bit."

"Well –"

"If you don't get drunk, I can't teach you to sing."

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"Sing?"

"Sure. Don't you want to learn how to sing?"

"I don't know – what is *singing*?"

"What is singing?!! For krieing out loud! You don't know how to drink, you don't know how to sing – and you claim to be human – ?!!"

Ike hesitated. "I will try –" He looked at Mass. "There. It is done. I have placed a one-degree theta distortion on the time-spatial aspects of my judgment matrix."

Mass returned the look. "Obviously, one degree theta is not enough. Try ten."

"Ten?"

"Ten."

"It ash done – eshcuse me. I mean, it ish done."

Mass nodded. "That's better. Much better."

"I am eshperienishing difficultiesh controlling my physhical shyshtemsh –"

"That's right," Mass beamed. "Isn't it great?"

"It ish... dishturbing."

"Relax. Enjoy it."

"Enjoy – it?" Ike seemed confused. "I – will – enjoy – being – drunk – ?? –" Abruptly, he straightened.

(Overcompensating for the movement, he wobbled slightly where he stood.) "You will – show me – how to – sing – now?"

"All right," said Mass. He climbed up onto the stool and from there onto the table; he kicked aside an empty stein. And sang:

*The glow of day had drifted west,
the clouds were boiling black,
the valley stank of yellow dust;
we choked the evening back
with lamp and torch and sputtering oil.
We, cowered in our cave
and wondered which of the rest of us
was doomed for a bloody grave.*

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*Each night, the dark and lumbering beast
came up from the pits below,
came hungry, muttering, ugly-eyed,
came snuffling, big and slow.
On he came to our nightside camp,
his breath was fetid-hot;
the smell of the beast was bitter-strong
with the sourness of rot.*

*The women moaned, the children screamed,
the men were stiff with fear,
for they knew with every quickening step
that death was looming near.
Each night the beast had trundled up.
Each night he'd taken one –
a thrash, a scream – warm spurting blood –,
and then that one was gone.*

*Each night his vicious hunger called;
each night his trembling roar
came echoing up from the valley stink,
came up from the valley poor.
His appetite was ravenous,
it never could be plied;
It'd never sate that pit of gore,
till the last of us was killed.*

*Young Day (the Wolf) was eighteen then,
he stood up strong and tall.
He strode the length of the flickering cave
and hollered at us all.
"What are we now?" he asked us each;
he berated us and then,
he screamed it to the night above,
"Are we animals or men?"*

*"We cower from the fiery breath,
we hide from the eyes like coals,
we hide from his every heavy step,*

we shiver in our holes;

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*like animals, like rabbits,
like sheep or pigs or mice,
we let him catch us one by one –
we're no better than our lice!*

*"A man should fight," Young Day said,
"A man should fight – or die!"
"Hey," called a voice from the back of the cave, "Any time
you care to try –"
Laughter then at the old man's joke,
but Young Day bristled red –
"You're right," he snapped at the gray-haired one, "I'll not rest
until he's dead!"*

*They laughed at this, a braggard's boast.
They mocked him as they had
so many men before,
"You'll make that monster glad!"
"A midday meal, an extra snack,
a moist and tender treat –
a young man fresh on his eighteenth year
is the monster's favorite meat."*

*Day listened not to their cackling cries,
nor to their spiteful calls,
for he knew that sure as the night would come,
then would their spirits fall;
the crimson day makes a man feel fierce,
but when that glow is gone
and darkness climbs from the valley floor,
then fear is the god who's won.*

*That night the black beast came again,
he grumbled up the slope
and helped himself to two of us –
and helped himself to hope.
He bloodied flesh, he splattered screams –
and when his feast was through,
gone was the girl that Young Day loved,
gone was her brother too.*

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*White-shocked was Day when he realized,
his face went pale as milk,
for he'd loved the girl with the dauntless eyes
and the hair of spider-web silk.
Hot tears streamed down his ashen face,
he screamed his rage anew,
"I will not wait for the night to come,
I'll bring my fight to you!"*

Downslope he ran, he stumbled mad, to do the

deed he'd sworn.
Consumed with hate, and thus possessed, he was
of no woman born.
The day was new and boiling red,
the sky was the color of mud.
Before the nighttime came again,
this valley would know blood.

He found the beast in a steaming pit
where sulfur fumed and boiled.
The bones of his victims lay scattered about,
his sides were sleek and oiled.
Day's breath came fast in heaving gusts,
his nostrils peeled and shred,
for the monster slept in a jagged hole
– he lay torpid in his lair!

Day swallowed hard; he prayed for strength
in the frightening task at hand
– then plunged – and struck! With sword and knife
he proved himself a man.
So sated was that murd'rous beast
it could raise not even a howl
as Day waded in and slaughtered it
and dismembered its body foul.

He struck op its head, he plucked out its eyes,
he cut op its long forked tongue,
he opened its belly from tail to neck,
he murdered its eggs and its young,

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he slashed at its veins and skewered its heart,
he cut out its liver too.
He butchered that monster so savagely
that night fell ere he was through.

He returned to the cave all covered with blood,
all covered with monster and gore,
all covered with proof of the thing that he'd done
down there on the valley floor.
When they saw him they screamed, in horror and
fear –
Day stood in the flickering light.
He threw down his sword and bitterly said,
"I'm back. I've finished your fight.

"I've battled your beast and I've conquered your fear,
and now you must listen to me.
You think just because the monster is dead
that now all of you can be free.
Well, you're wrong, my fine fools; you're deluded,
my friends.
Your life will be nothing like that;
for each of us has his own selfish goals. And I have
mine."

And he spat.

*“When I said we must fight, you all laughed at my words,
you mocked me and said I gas mad.
You were slaves to the beast! You were slaves to the night!
You were slaves! – merely slaves! – you were had!
But I was the one who went out with my sword –
I was the one who was brave!
I was the one who cast op his fear –
I refused to remain just a slave!*

*“I became a free man when I took up my cause, I
threw off my chains when I fought –*

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*and now that I’m fusee, I am master of-you;
just see what your weakness has wrought!
You did nothing, my friends, my fools, my folk,
you did nothing to make yourselves free –
so slaves you’ll remain for all of your days –
only now, the monster is me!”*

The last note seemed to hang in the air for a long moment, then echoed away into space.

Mass stood there on the table top, on a deck of the flashing skimmer, and looked at Ike; the construct’s copper-gold skin gleamed dully in the reddish light. “Well?” he demanded.

Ike hesitated. “I have – never heard anything like that before.”

“Did you like it?”

“I don’t know. The sensations it produced were – different. I found myself – visualizing – things I have never seen –” He looked up at Mass. “It was – disturbing.”

Mass sighed, and began climbing down from the table. “How about another stein?” he asked.

Ike synthesized it, then came back to him. “May I ask you about that song?”

“What do you want to know?”

“What does it mean? Where did it come from? Why should it disturb me so?”

Mass sipped at his ale. “Well,” he began slowly. “It’s a Streinveldtian song; it’s very old. It tells the story of the first real man on Streinveldt.”

“The first real man?”

“Day was the first Streinveldter worthy of the name.”

“Oh, I understand. You are using the term *man* to apply to members of your species.”

“Yeah,” said Mass sourly.

“But you say Day was the first real man. Why do you put the emphasis on the word *real*?”

"A man isn't a man unless he's willing to stand up for himself," Mass mumbled.

"Stand up?"

"Fight," explained Mass. His voice was so low Ike had to upshift his sensors. "A man isn't a man unless he's willing to fight to prove it."

"Fight? Oh. Aggression."

"Yeah. That's right."

Ike considered it. "If I understand correctly, you are talking about the preservation of one's sense of identity." Mass looked up. Ike explained, "Perception of identity is both arbitrary and subjective. You are saying that in your culture, the boundaries of the self must be established by continually defending one's perceived territories against another's (perceived) encroachments on them. If nothing is protected, then neither territory nor identity is perceived by others or even by the self. Correct?"

"Yes," whispered Mass. Abruptly he stood up and walked to the edge of the platform.

"I perceive that something is troubling you."

"It's nothing," said Mass.

"Your thought processes are definitely distorted."

"It's *nothing*," he repeated.

"It could be the alcohol in your system —"

"It's nothing! Dammit!" Mass turned and looked at him, but Ike's face was blank. "I was only thinking about the song," he said in a lower tone.

"The song?"

"Yes. The song."

"Why should the song produce such a definite effect in you?"

"It's supposed to have an effect — it's called emotions."

"Emotions." Ike tested the word. "Emotions are the distortions of your rationality I detect?"

Mass grunted.

"But if emotions are such a negative experience,"

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asked Ike, "why do you allow yourself to have them?"

"I have no choice," said Mass. "They're part of the package."

"The package? Oh, the system — yes, I see what you mean. The difficulty in keeping a metabolism such as yours precisely tuned produces effects on your rationality that —"

"Yeah," said Mass, cutting him off. He narrowed his eyes at Ike. "Didn't you feel anything when you were drunk?"

"No. Just a slight difficulty in coordination."

"That was it?"

"Yes. I cannot see that the effect is a desirable one."

"Well, it is."

"Why?"

"Because," said Mass.

"These emotions of yours, are they always so negative?"

"No. Sometimes they're happy."

"Happy? Oh – that is a desirable state?"

"Yes."

"Can a song produce a happy effect?"

"Yes, of course; that's why we sing them."

"May I sing you such a song?"

Mass looked at him, "Do you know any?"

"No, but there are songs in the memory banks of the skimmer. I would sing one of those."

"All right."

Ike went back to the podium and laid his hands on it. After a moment, he said, "Ah." He swiveled his head, "I have selected one."

"Good," said Mass. "Let's hear it."

Ike walked over to the table. He stepped up onto the stool and then onto the table top in conscious imitation of Mass. Remembering carefully, he kicked one of the empty steins aside. It seemed to be part of the ritual.

"A song of hope," he said. His voice was clear and

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sensitive; it filled the skimmer, stroking the air like velvet:

*Give me the toots to work my land
and I'll be the equal of any man.
My own strong back should be all I need,
my life and my strength and my will is the seed.*

*Life! Let me have the chance to stand
on the good green hills of the promised land,
and let me have all my strength to be
the kind of man that a man should be.*

*Life, life, here's my hand,
point the way and I'll find that land.
Life, life, let me be free
in the kind of place that the world should be.*

*No more than this is all I ask,
but a gentle woman to ease my task;
no sparkling maiden of silk and gold,
just a simple wife with whom I'll grow old.*

*Sweet tenderness in the lonely night,
to reach and touch in the firelight;
a love to share my life with me,
the kind of love that a love should be,*

*Love, love, take my hand,
join with me and we'll find that land.
Love, love, let us be free
in the kind of place that the world should be.*

Ike climbed down from the table and looked at Mass; his face was incapable of expression, but his attitude was expectant. "Did you like it?" he asked.

Mass grunted. "It was okay."

Ike cocked his head. "Okay?" He surveyed Mass. "I perceive that you are still troubled. Perhaps if I sang it again –"

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"No!"

"– or sang another song?" "*No, Ike!*"

"No?"

"Forget about singing," said Mass. "Just forget about it." He stumped off across the skimmer.

Ike stared after him. (I don't understand –) (He is still negatively affected.) (But I did it right. I know I did.) (It was a song of hope – it should have produced a definite emotional effect,)

Confused, Ike turned to the podium and went congruent; he submerged himself in the skimmer-mind. There was too much that he did not understand. He remained that way, communing with the memory banks, until he monitored a change in Mass's condition.

Curiosity got the better of him, he went to investi-gate, went striding across the glittering decks of the skimmer to another platform, high up and away.

"Excuse me," said Ike. "May I ask what you are doing?"

"I'm taking a – I'm excreting."

"Excreting. Yes." (The act of excretion) (disposal of waste) (Waste: the unusable byproducts of consumption – in this case, organic and chemical substances –)

"Excuse me," said Ike again. "But I detect that there are still usable substances within the material you are excreting."

Mass looked up at him from where he squatted. "It's not exactly voluntary," he said.

"Oh," said Ike. He indicated the platform. "You have excreted here before." A statement, not a question.

"Gotta do it someplace."

Ike considered that. "Yes. I understand. But is there some religious or other significance in saving the excreta?"

Mass looked around. "Naw, it's just –" He stood abruptly, jerked up his shorts. (He had decided to start

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wearing clothes again – especially around Ike.) "It's just waste."

"Are you planning to use it for some other purpose later?"

"No."

"Then why do you not dispose of it?"

"Where? How?" Mass walked to the edge. "You want me to drop it over the side?"

"That would be wasting it," said Ike.

"Wasting it? But that's all it is – waste."

"It still bears potential energy. What did you do with it on your last vessel?"

"It was recycled." Mass looked up. "Why should you care anyway?"

"I do not care," said Ike. "The material is without significance to me. However, according to the skimmer memory banks, it is probable that you regard the material as defiled, unhealthful and noxious."

Mass regarded the material in question thoughtfully. "Yeah," he said at last. "Okay, 'get me a shovel. I guess I've got my old job back."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll load it into the recycling plant of my old ship."

"That would be inefficient," said Ice. He stepped to a nearby stanchion and pressed one hand against it. The unused byproducts of Mass's metabolism disappeared.

"What'd you do with it?" he asked,

"The skimmer broke it down into: its potential energy and is storing it as such. It no longer exists as matter."

"Oh."

"Your old vessel would probably have used cruder means, probably mechanical and chemical processes, to rework the molecules; this method of recycling is simpler. The skimmer merely dismantles the component atoms. It will continue to do so for all of your future Wastes."

Mass grunted in response. Ike followed him back to

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the control terrace. "I would like to ask you some questions, if I may."

"Go ahead," Mass sat down at the table.

"The song – what did I do wrong?"

"The song. Well –" Mass rubbed at his nose. "It's hard to say – I mean, there was nothing *specifically* wrong with it..."

"I performed it correctly?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you like it?"

Mass thought about it. "It wasn't a happy song."

"It was a song of hope."

"Well, it didn't make me hopeful."

"Oh."

"– in fact, it had the opposite effect."

"It did?"

"It made me unhappy. Very unhappy."

"I am sorry," said Ike. "I did not mean to make you unhappy."

"You didn't know."

"But you told me that songs are sometimes happy or hopeful. I had thought that by singing such a song I might produce a positive emotional effect in you."

Mass grunted, "Well, it didn't work."

"What kind of a song *would* make you happy?" asked Ike.

"I don't know – a drinking song, I guess."

"A drinking song?"

"Sure – it's a song you sing while you're drinking."

"*While* you're drinking?"

"Well, between sips. The one I sang to you, *The Ballad of Day*, is a drinking song."

"Is it the song or the drinking that makes you happy?" asked Ike.

Mass considered it. "A little of each, I guess. They amplify each other."

"Would you like some more ale?" Ike asked.

"Huh?" Mass stared. "I thought you disapproved."

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"I don't know if I do or not. I am trying to understand this effect called emotions. According to the skimmer, happy is a desirable state to be. I would see you happy, please. Would you be willing to take part in an experiment to see if ale and songs can produce such a state?"

Mass considered it gravely. "Bring on the ale and songs," he announced.

"I can supply the ale," said Ike. "You will have to supply the songs."

"All right," said Mass. "You ask a lot of me, Ike, but –"

"If it's too much trouble –"

"No, no! I didn't say that." Mass held up a hand. "You bring the ale. I'll – manage somehow."

Ike stood over Mass and watched as he began downing the steins. "Your capacity is fascinating," he said. "Your control over yourself is remarkable, considering the amount of alcohol in your system."

"If you think I'm something, you should see my wife!" He hiccupped.

"I would like to," offered Ike, unsure.

"I wouldn't," said Mass. "I've already seen her."

"Huh?"

"It's a joke."

"Oh. Are you ready to sing now?"

"I guess so."

"Sing a song that will make you happy, please."

"Yeah –"

*Oh, I am certain sure that there
can be no cure for the terminally
pure – but the great gift of lust that
God's given us!*

*Oh, virgin's a bad word; to be one is
absurd.*

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*Don't tell me you've not heard of the great
happy thrill that's a maiden's best skill!*

*All too soon we reach the tomb,
don't leave an unused womb.
I'm sure you've plenty room
for the wonderful tool
of this happy fool!*

– *You can't take it with you!*
Don't bother to try!
You can't even kiss it goodbye!
So, don't let it go to waste,
it's incredibly bad taste,
and you're a hopeless case
if you think it should be saved
intact for the grave!
You know you would adore
to do this happy chore.
All the world loves a whore
for getting to the heart
of the art!

So, let's leave no hole unfilled,
let's leave no soul unthrilled,
let's leave no maid unskilled
in that great kind of joy
that a girl gives a boy!
– *Virtue will hurt you,*
and chaste makes waste!
You'll have no one to blame but yourself!

“Are you happy now?” asked Ike.
“Yes,” said Mass, scowling.
“Hm,” said Ike. “Then there is still much I do not understand. Perhaps it is the songs. Where do songs come from?”
“People write them.”

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“People?”
“My kind of people.”
“Oh –” Ike considered that. “Then I could not write a song?”
“I don't know. Have you tried?”
“No.”
“Why don't you?”
“I – would not know how to begin.”
Mass frowned. “Well, let's see – why don't you try getting drunk again?”
“How would that help?”
“I don't know that it would – but at least it's better than drinking alone.”
“But it only produces discoordination of my physical being. That would not aid.”
“Why don't you loosen your logic centers a little bit?”
“My logic centers?”
“Yeah,” said Mass. “Your logic centers.”
“All right,” said Ike. “I'll try –” Abruptly he stiffened. And sang:

I sense the sense in sensing me,
intensive, pensive, scents have me,
incensing me and tensing me,
1 sense the sensor sensing me.

*Who scents the sense that's scenting me?
Incensive, tensive, scents of me,
and when my sensor censors me,
just how intense is the sense of me?*

*So since the scents I sense of me I sense
have sent no scent of me intense in sense
– then, pensively, I cannot make no
scents of me!*

Mass stared, blinked – then fell off his stool laughing.

Ike noted his reaction. (Positive?) But he wasn't sure he was any closer to understanding.

A blue star, bloated. A blue and brown world, streaked with white. Two moons, small, flickering as they tumbled in the unceasing glare.

The wall of the planet hung before the platform. Mass surveyed it with a frown. Behind him, Ike droned quietly, "Gravity, .89; atmospheric pressure 11 pounds per square inch; oxygen, 14 per cent –"

"Is it inhabited?"

"Evidence of habitation –" Ike paused. "Less than fifty million," he murmured. "Scattered in villages and small cities." He superimposed red markers on the planet to indicate where.

"Any evidence of the Empire?"

"I have located what appears to be an Empire Installation, but it is inactive."

Mass turned to look at *him*. "Is it safe to go down and take a look?"

"Define 'safe.'"

"Will they kill us?"

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"I doubt it. The planet appears quite pastoral."

"That's the worst kind," growled Mass.

"I will take precautions," said Ike. "I assume you wish to investigate the Empire Station."

"Yes."

The skimmer plunged into the planet's atmosphere, hurtled toward the vast wall of its surface. The cloud patterns grew, enveloped them briefly, then vanished behind. The ground approached, spread out like a vast map suspended before them, sliding sideways. Silvery ribbons of water curled through green valleys, wound around thrusting purple mountains and finally disappeared into azure seas. A spattering of green islands flickered past, then desert, red and yellow and brown, shading, into black as foothills grew out of it, more mountains, blue-green jungle opening onto a vast grassland, a sea of grass – a great herd of shaggy brown animals loping across it; Mass glimpsed three catlike

carnivores bringing one of them down.

Light forests began to dot the steppe, lakes too. An occasional road or building could be seen between the trees. The ground flashed by, a panorama of color and growth.

At last, the skimmer slowed, came sparkling down to touch the earth in a clearing surrounded by tall pines. A shaded walk led through the forest to the nearby Empire Dome. Beyond that, Mass could see other buildings, some of them lighted. None were taller than three stories.

Ike dropped to the ground after him. As they started toward the path, Mass looked back over his shoulder. The skimmer loomed and glittered, the fathomless sky visible between its vanes. "Is it safe?" he asked. "Can we just leave it there?"

"I am in constant rapport with the skimmer," said Ike. "No one can supersede my control."

"Oh," said Mass. They went on.

The Empire Dome lay sheltered in a hollow between

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two low hills. Tall trees surrounded it, casting a speckled pattern of sunlight and shadow across the yellow roof. Tiles of deep red outlined the pillars of its arcades. Somewhere a fountain bubbled. Bright colored insects fluttered past.

They paused before the entrance. The station was surrounded by a sheltered walk and a low decorative wall, also tiled in deep red. The yellow walls of the building lay in shadow; they were punctuated here and there by open archways. Mass stumped through the largest of these. Ike followed, gliding softly.

They found themselves in an alcove, tall and empty. Beyond, an archway opened onto a sunny courtyard. Unaccountably, there was the smell of moss and a sensation of water. One hand on his weapon, Mass moved cautiously around the room. Veiled doorways waited on both sides, but silence sat heavily in the building. Mass's footsteps resounded hollowly.

"May I help you?"

Mass whirled, tensing –

But it was only a construct. Like Ike.

Stained copper. Tarnished-green and slim, there was a deep throatiness to its voice; it was only slightly smaller than the black and gold pilot.

"You're an Empire Agent?" Mass asked.

"No," said the other. "I'm merely a caretaker. There hasn't been an agent here since 991 H.C."

"Um," said Mass. He glanced at Ike; the pilot's attention was riveted on the figure. Mass said, "Do you have a name?"

"Only a designation. Alem-9."

"Alem-9," said Ike slowly, almost to himself.

The caretaker looked at Ike then, a long careful glance, but he addressed himself to Mass, "Are *you* from the Empire? Are you reestablishing contact?"

Mass shook his head.

"But you came with a skimmer!"

Space Skimmer 103

"We're searching for the Empire," said Ike. "We wish to know what happened to it."

Alem-9 seemed to sigh. "Nobody knows what happened to it. One day the skimmers stopped coming. We still have mail waiting."

"Mail?"

"Messages. They were supposed to go out on the next interstellar ship that came by – only there never was a 'next ship.'" His tone changed. "Will you take them?"

"They're four hundred years old –" protested Mass.

"But you fly a skimmer. By definition that makes you an Empire Captain. You must!"

Mass opened his mouth to protest again, but Ike cut him off. "*Captain*," he said firmly. "I suggest we ex-amine this mail and see which of it is feasible for us to deliver. Some of it may be on our course. Some of it may contain valuable information."

"Huh? Oh – yes. Yes, that's a good idea."

They followed Alem-9 down a pastel-shadowed arcade, one side of which opened onto the courtyard and the quiet afternoon. A cool breeze tinkled through silvery chimes.

"In here," said Alem-9.

Mass hesitated, suspecting a trap, but the chamber was doorless. Inside were three tables against one wall. They glimmered with the mirror-sheen of storage stasis.

Alem-9 pressed one palm against a plate in the wall. One of the fields disappeared, revealing a row of black Oracle tabs on the table. Ike stepped over to examine them, pressing them one at a time against a flat plate on his forearm.

"What's in this field?" asked Mass. "The big one."

"A shipment for Liadne."

"What kind of a shipment?"

"A passenger, I believe."

"A passenger?" Mass turned to stare. Even Ike looked up.

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"Yes," said Alem-9. "He's waiting for transshipment."

"For four hundred years?"

"I've had no other instructions."

"But – surely, after a few years, you could have – I mean –" He glanced back and forth, from Ike to Alem. Neither seemed to see anything amiss.

"Will you accept the shipment?" asked Alem-9.

"Uh –" Mass rubbed his nose. "Turn off the field, will you? Wake him up."

Alem nodded and touched the wall again. The second storage field vanished. On the table lay a man – no, a youth. Fair-haired, slim, skin so pale you could see through it. He was clad in a light blue toga, sandals and a purple cape. He blinked twice and sat up; his eyes were bright. "Are we here?" He glanced back and forth between Mass's

foreshortened frame, Ike's golden body and Alem-9's coppery-green form. His smile faded. "Uh –" he said, this time a little slower, "Where am I?"

"You're on Homeworld," rumbled Mass.

"Homeworld? I'm supposed to go to Liadne –"

"There's been a –" Mass was suddenly uncomfortable. He looked everywhere but at the boy. "What year was it when you – when you –"

"Huh?" The youth dropped down from the table. "Why, it's 988." Then: "Isn't it?"

Mass swallowed hard. Alem said slowly. "No, it isn't. It's 1389 H. C." Somewhere a bird shrilled;

"1389 – ?? It can't be – !!" Something in their man-ner – "No!" – but his eyes went round with realization. He took a step toward Mass, toward Ike, whirled in-decisively to look at Alem. "You're kidding, aren't you? *Aren't you – ???!*" Fear edged his tone.

"It's 1389," repeated Alem.

"Who are you – ??" The boy began to back away. "Who are you people – ??" He came up against the table, jerked suddenly. "Who are you – ? What's hap-

Space Skimmer 105

pened – ? Where am I – ??" He was trembling uncontrollably, his hands moved in spastic circles. His voice rose in pitch, became a scream, a gurgle; his eyes rolled up into their sockets and mercifully, he passed out.

Ike and Alem-9 lifted the unconscious boy back onto the table. Mass watched for a moment, then abruptly stumped outside and into the garden. He stared up at the sky, ugly and blue, deep blue, almost black; the sun glared huge and white.

A sound made Mass- look up; Ike had followed him out. "Something – is bothering you?"

"No –" He caught sight of Alem behind Ike. "Yes, there is something bothering me." He advanced on the slender figure. "Why did you leave him there for so long? Why? You should have revived him as soon as it became obvious there were no ships coming."

"We had no instructions to do so."

"He would've given you new instructions!"

"We did not know that –"

"Oh, for krie sake! How stupid can anyone get? Don't you people know how to think for yourselves?"

"I am only a caretaker," said Alem-9.

"There wasn't anyone else on the whole planet you could ask?"

"There was no one here with the authority to make such a decision. We have. not had an Empire Agent since 991."

"And you couldn't turn off that field yourself? Not even long enough to ask that kid what he wanted to do? He's been there four hundred years – he'll be totally lost in our time!"

Alem said, "I have only been caretaker here for 213 years. I cannot speak for my predecessor."

Mass's anger collapsed at that. There was no point in

being angry at the situation; it was a comedy of errors – and the original actors in it had long since passed from the stage. He took a breath, forced him-

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self to take a second. "Aren't there any – organic beings on this planet? People like myself?"

"Yes," said Alem. "But they are not authorized to enter the Empire Station. Only Empire Agents."

"They never got curious?"

"No," said Alem. "Why should they?"

Mass didn't answer. He turned and walked away from the two, back toward the room where the boy lay. As he approached he heard wracking sobs. He quickened his step. Alem and Ike moved to follow, but he growled back at them, "Stay there! You've done enough." He disappeared into the shaded building.

The two constructs surveyed each other in the sunlight. One was satiny gold, the other was luminous green. "You are from Manolka," whispered one.

"Yes. And you?"

"I was manufactured – somewhere. I was activated here."

"Are there many like you?"

"Several thousand. We – maintain the planet." Alem's tone went softer. "You are alone?"

"Yes."

"Does being alone bother you?"

Ike considered it. "I don't know. It is a – different sensation. Aloneness cannot be shared."

"Yes," agreed Alem.

For a moment there was silence. An insect buzzed between them, disappeared into the grass.

Ike hesitated. "Are you a – massmind?"

"We are interconnected, if that's what you mean. I can communicate with the others."

"No," said Ike. "You have identity. You are not a massmind." He took a step toward Alem. Alem trembled. "I would – enter your mind – if I could –"

"May I enter yours as well?"

"Yes."

They took another step toward each other, almost

Space Skimmer 107

fumbling. Alem extended his hands, so did Ike. They paused

–

"My high-intensity stators are on my chest," said Alem.

"Mine too." Ike reached out slowly, pressed his palms flat against the other's scanning plates. Alem reached up and touched Ike's.

They slipped, fell, tumbled headlong into – rap-port –

A minute, an hour, a century, they stood frozen in the garden, gold and copper statues, silently touching, communing – the sound of chimes – becoming one – merging patterns, congruent – an eternity in a teardrop – somewhere, someone was sobbing; the sound echoed in

the trees and faded – the afternoon was as bright as a shower of broken glass –

“Ahem –”

They broke apart, for some reason both embarrassed.

Mass stood in the dark doorway. Beside him wavered the boy in the blue toga. Mass glanced up at him, “This is Tapper.” He dragged the boy out into the sun-light. “This is Ike. That one’s Alem .”

Ike bowed from the waist. Alem nodded.

Tapper rubbed his eyes in the brightness; they were rimmed with red and seemed very moist.

“How old are you?” asked Mass.

“Nineteen,” he said.

“See!” said Mass, glaring at Alem. “An infant! A child! You couldn’t even –”

“I’m not an infant,” bristled Tapper. “I’m nineteen.” As an afterthought, he added, “and a half.”

“Then why were you –”

“Why was I what?”

“Never mind – wipe your nose.”

Tapper sniffled into his bare arm.

Mass looked around, led him over to a sheltered bench. “Sit down.” Tapper sat. Mass stood before him

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and met his curious stare. “Now, tell me where you’re from and why you were going to Liadne.”

“I’m from Concourse.” And then, abruptly remembering. “I’m a Prince of Concourse.”

Iulass blinked. “So?”

“Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“No. I’ve never heard of Concourse.”

Ike put in, “Concourse is a standard-sized planet, 324 light-years from here. At last known Empire Census, it had a population of 7.5 billion. It is an –”

“Ike, please.” Mass turned back to Tapper. “What kind of a prince are you?”

“Huh?” Puzzlement clouded the boy’s face.

Mass gestured impatiently. “I mean, what did you do to earn your title? Who did you kill? What are you champion of?”

“Nothing – I killed no one – I –”

“Then *why* are you a prince?”

“Why? I was born to it.”

“Huh – ?”

“I’m a prince by birth.”

Mass stared. “Are we speaking the same language?”

Ike put in, “You are both using Galactic Interlingua, Tapper with less than a five-degree variation from the norm, Mass with a twenty-three-degree variation in inflection and pronunciation.”

Mass glared at him. To Tapper, he said, “You mean, on Concourse, princes are *born*?”

“Yes.”

“Some kind of genetic tailoring program?”

“Sort of.”

"I don't understand," he said. "You can't be a prince." He grabbed the other's hands. "Look! No callouses, no blisters! These hands are soft – the hands of a woman. They've never known work in their lives."

Tapper jerked his hands away. "But that's what a prince is," he insisted. He seemed dangerously close to tears again.

Space Skimmer 109

"And that's another thing! A true prince would never admit to –" Mass cut himself off before he could finish the sentence. Instead, he said, "A true prince is a – a champion. Like Young Day or Big Tan or –"

"I don't know where you come from," Tapper cried, "but on Concourse, a prince is someone who's gentle and kind! He's a noble person! He doesn't have to kill to be respected."

Mass shut up. He rubbed his nose and looked away. "All right," he said at last, and in a quieter tone. "All right, you're a prince. Princes on Concourse are different."

Tapper's expression remained sullen.

"Why were you traveling to Liadne?" asked Ike.

The boy surveyed the construct warily, as if debating inwardly whether or not to answer. "To see the Healers."

"The Healers?" asked Mass. "Why?"

Tapper's attention swung back. This time he hesitated longer. "Because I'm unlucky."

"Unlucky – ?"

"It's a joke. Concourdes breed for luck." He explained, "We have a genetic lottery; the winners are paid to breed. Their chromosomee' are selected for the most advantageous traits. One of the traits is the un-conscious telekinetic control of one's environment – luck. I'm the 'seventh son of a seventh son of *h* seventh son, seven times over.' That's why I'm a prince. I'm supposed to be lucky – only I'm not. I'm unlucky. That's why I was sent to Liadne – to be cured."

"You're to be cured of being unlucky?"

"Partly."

"You don't look very unlucky to me."

"You're not a Healer," retorted Tapper.

"Aah," said Mass. "Look at you – you're complaining about being unlucky? You're nothing but a pampered pet. You've never had to work a day in your life. You're soft and you've had it soft."

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Tapper looked at him. "Have you ever heard of hemophilia?"

"What is it," asked Mass, "a flower?"

"It's a disease. When you have it, your blood doesn't clot, your wounds don't heal – if you scratch yourself on a thorn, you'll bleed to death. You have to live your whole life in a padded world where there're no sharp edges and nothing to cut yourself on. You have to be protected from anything that might break your skin because your body has no way of

repairing the wound. That's what hemophilia is. That's what I have."

Mass was silent.

"Excuse me," said Ike, "But isn't hemophilia a hereditary disease? I thought you said you were selected for your most advantageous traits."

"An accident happened," said Tapper. "A' chromo-some broke. Some genetic information was lost. By the time they found out, it was too late to correct it. I told you I was unlucky. That's why they shipped me in stasis; they didn't dare risk an accident happening between Concourse and Liadne."

"Hmp," said Mass. "The Healers of Liadne were supposed to cure you?"

"We hoped so. We had heard of their advances with genetic integration and also of their abilities with certain malfunctions of the mind. I wanted to be cured of my defect – and my unluckiness."

"Unluckiness," growled Mass. He snorted, "I can accept your story about hemo-whatever-you-call-it, but being genetically lucky or unlucky sounds eke a load of excrement."

"Is it?" asked Tapper. "Is it? If there's no such thing as being unlucky, then why was I left in that storage room for four hundred years? And why was I found by *you*?"

Space Skimmer 111

Night was warm and purple; the empty arcades glowed yellow. Mass turned away from them, climbed up a grassy slope instead. He stood at its crest and lifted his eyes to the darkness.

Above, the stars glimmered, impressive in their numbers. The constellations were unfamiliar – but then, all constellations were unfamiliar to Mass; Streinveldt was starless. The only feature of the night sky he could pick out with certainty was the hazy band of brightness that stretched across the measureless space above; that had to be the core of the galaxy – the mingled light of stars too many and too distant to be differentiated,

Something brighter than the rest twinkled; it was one of the moons, the nearer one. He watched as it crept across the night, its light brightening and darkening in steady alternation as it tumbled through space, a twirling uneven spheroid.

A nocturnal bird booted once, softly, then Rapped away into the distance. Mass grunted; the sound was loud in the drifting night.

Below him lay the dome of the station, brightly lit but empty. Beyond, spread across the opposite slope, lay a scattering of other buildings, just as empty.

"Homeworld," he muttered. "Home."

He shook his head sadly. The words meant nothing to him, no more than the words 'of that distant song. This sky was no more his home than any other.

He began walking back down to the dome.

Tapper was sitting at a table finishing his dinner: thickrind

fruits and sour pudding Ike and Alem were nowhere to be seen. Tapper was sipping a goblet of wine when Mass entered.

"Oh, there you are. I was beginning to wonder where you had gone."

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Mass shook it off, "Nowhere. I was just looking around."

"Do you want something to eat?"

"What have you got?" Mass looked over the table, wrinkled his nose in distaste, "Never mind."

"Are you sure? Alem can –"

"I'm sure." Mass pulled himself up onto the stool opposite Tapper. He looked at the boy with a grim expression. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean *what are you going to do?*"

"Why, I'm going with you, of course."

"Huh?"

"You don't expect me to stay here, do you? I was on my way to Liadne, and that's where I'm going. I still have my – disease."

"What makes you think we're going to Liadne?" asked Mass.

"Where else can you go?" countered Tapper. "Besides, you have a skimmer. Even if Liadne were half-way across the galaxy, you could spare the time to take me there."

"And then what?"

"And then I get cured."

"I mean, after that – what'll you do then?"

"I'll go home."

"How? You don't expect us to wait for you, do you?"

"No, I guess not," Tapper said. He allowed himself a wry smile. "I couldn't be that lucky."

"Aw, damn you," grumbled Mass. "That's a silly thing to say."

"It's true, though.. Everything that's happened to me has been unlucky. I've been watched over from birth so I wouldn't kill myself in some ridiculous accident. At first it was just the hemophilia, but later on, they had to watch out for my super-unluckiness. The first time they trusted me on my own was this trip to Liadne – they figured nothing could go wrong if I was in stasis.

Space Skimmer 113

. Hah!" He picked at the food before him, pushed it around on the plate.

Mass didn't say anything, he just looked at his fingernails.

"What's the matter?" asked Tapper. "Why are you so quiet?"

"Aw, no reason."

"No reason is not a good reason. There's a reason."

Mass looked up, quickly looked down again. He mumbled, "I was going to say, 'At least you still have

your health.' It's a Streinveldtian saying. But then I realized you don't. Aw, I'm no good around sick people –" His tone went strange, "What I mean is, I'm not very good at saying – comforting things. I can't tell you that everything is going to be all right, Tapper, 'cause I don't know that it will be."

"That's all right."

"No, it isn't. Here, you've been marooned light-years from your home and centuries from your time and I don't even know how to offer you sympathy –"

"Then, don't."

"All I can think is, I'm glad it's you and not me."

"Oh."

They sat there for a moment in silence. Tapper said, "I asked Ike where Streinveldt is. He said it's more than 450 light-years away."

Mass shrugged. "That sounds about right."

"Why did you leave it?"

Mass shrugged again. "No reason."

"No reason is not a reason."

"I left because I wanted to. Because I had to."

"Is that all?"

Mass looked up. "Yes."

"Oh." Tapper added, "You know, you're luckier than me."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you can go home again – if you want. I can't."

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"Sure you can. All you need is a ship."

"Uh-uh," said Tapper. "It isn't home any more. I don't know what Concourse is like now, but I'm sure it isn't the way I left it. A lot can happen in four hundred years."

"Aw, but look, it's still your home planet. You ought to go back, at least to see. I mean, you'd probably be more at home there than anywhere else, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know. Would I?" Tapper said slowly, "If you really believe that, why did you leave Streinveldt?"

"That's a different case."

"Yeah," said Tapper. He picked up a piece of rind and chewed it thoughtfully. "What are you going to do?"

Mass was silent. He shrugged, "I guess I'll take you to Liadne – I'll show you you're not so unlucky."

"I meant after that."

"I don't know." His expression was sour. "Probably the same as you. I'll have to see when the time comes."

"Did you mean it about taking me to Liadne?"

"Yeah, sure."

"How soon can we leave?"

A shrug. "How soon can you be ready?"

"I'm ready right now." He pushed himself away from the table. "Just let me grab a few things and change into some brighter clothes."

"Huh? What's wrong with the ones you've got on?"

"These?" Tapper looked at himself, fingered his somber

toga. "Oh, these aren't right for the occasion. I'm in a yellow mood now." He skipped out.

Mass made a sound of disgust. "A yellow mood!" Then he chastened himself. "No, I shouldn't make fun of him. It's not his fault he came from a soft planet."

He thought about that for a while. It might be nice to be that kind of a "soft" prince, but it didn't seem very honorable. Now, that was a paradox: how could

Space Skimmer 115

something be nice if it wasn't honorable? Maybe, he told himself, they honored that kind of weakness. No, that didn't make sense either – how could anyone live like that?

He poked at the fruit on the table; how could anyone even eat this stuff? Out of curiosity, he picked up a dark red thing. It was long and rough-textured and had a kind of flowery smell. He sniffed it cautiously, then took a tentative bite. Immediately, he spat it out in distaste – too sweet! Too painfully sweet.

"Ugh," he said, grimacing and wiping his mouth on his sleeve, trying to wipe away the aftertaste. He dropped off the stool and went looking for Ike.

The arcades were empty, so was the pavilion. The few rooms of the station were also untended. Neither Ike nor Alem was around.

"Ike? Alem?" Mass's voice echoed off the tiles. "Where are you?"

No answer. Mass stumped outside and called.

Nothing; only the rustle of the breeze through the bushes. He went back inside, found Tapper waiting for him; the youth had changed into a yellow poncho, belted at the waist. Mass frowned; he didn't see any difference between it and the blue toga.

"Did you find them?" said Tapper.

Mass grunted; it was a sound of disgust. "You got any belongings you want to bring?"

"Just that trunk," Tapper pointed. '

"All right, come on. We'll put it on the skimmer." He started for the door. "Well – what's the matter?"

Tapper stood dumbfounded, "You don't expect me to carry it?"

"It's your trunk, isn't it?"

"Yes, but –"

"Go on, it won't kill you."

Tapper looked at the heavy object. He turned to Mass, his tone was softer, "Will you carry it for me, please?"

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Mass gaped. "Haven't you ever done anything for yourself?"

"They wouldn't let me."

"Then it's time you learned!" He started for the door again.

Tapper called after him, "I can't lift this –"

"Then we'll have to leave it behind." Mass went outside, ignoring the boy's further protests. The night was touched

with blue. The trees were purple shapes on a gray slope and the sky was bright with stars. A single cloud glowed with reflected light.

Behind him, Mass could hear the sound of grunting, and once, a gasp and a curse. He waited a moment, then he went back inside. Tapper straightened when he saw him. "Thank you –" he started.

"Pick up the other end," Mass growled.

Tapper's smile faded; he bit off his thanks. He bent and grunted. Mass lifted his end easily; Tapper gasped and struggled. Together they stumped/staggered up the hill, Mass in the lead, Tapper working loudly and painfully, "Can't we stop and take a rest?"

"A rest? Oh, for krieing out loud!"

"I'm not as strong as you, dammit!" Tapper cried, dropping the trunk in pain.

"Come on, pick it up!"

"I can't! Give me a chance to rest –"

"Aw, the thing can't mass more than eighty pounds. Don't be such a –" He stopped short of the epithet.

But Tapper had caught his sense. "It's the only thing I know how to be," he said.

Mass grunted. "I suppose that's what they call an education."

Tapper said something under his breath, but he bent to pick up his end of the trunk again. They struggled on; Mass, facing backward, watched the youngster's pain with ill-concealed annoyance.

"How much farther?"

"Not too far. We're almost there."

Space Skimmer 117

"Where is it?"

"Open your eyes, lard-head! It's just behind me on the top of the hill"

Tapper dropped his end of the trunk again. "You think so? You'd better take a look!"

Mass turned around. The crest was empty. The skim-mer was gone.

They were back in the dome. Mass was pacing angrily and muttering a constant stream of invective, "– never should have trusted that over-mechanized excuse for a –" Back and forth he stamped; his boots made hard rapping sounds across the cold floor.

Tapper kept out of his way. He wanted to say, "See, I told you I was unlucky," but something about Mass's mood warned him not to. He busied himself with the other objects left in storage-stasis, taking them out of their fields one at a time, looking them over, and then returning them. Most were spices and perishables; there were few items of real value and only one that interested him – a lyrril, a glass-stringed instrument. He stroked it experimentally, sounding a dulcet tone – a sigh like dark satin.

He seated himself carefully against a wall, positioned the instrument on his lap and sang softly:

*Oh, I loved an auburn harlot in a
night of silvery blue, but the sun
came up as scarlet and burned the
crimson dew.*

*Her eyes lost all their fire,
for the sky was streaked with red, and when
I looked at my desire I saw that she was
dead.*

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*Her blood was bright as silver tears,
sweet-flowing crimson light,
no more to feed the satin fears
or tantalize the night.*

*So I cry for my sweet harlot and I
ache with my desire, for the sun
came up as scarlet and stilled her
teasing fire.*

Tapper let the last notes fade out. He stroked a few more chords out of the lyrril, as if testing its tone, then began another song.

Mass stopped his pacing long enough to growl, "Will you stop that?" He didn't wait for an answer, but strode to the door and stared out into the night. The pavilion burned brightly and moths glimmered across the lawn. Otherwise, there was nothing to see. Mass resumed pacing.

Tapper laid the lyrril aside and went back to the stasis fields; he began examining their contents again.

"Unless there's a spaceship in there," Mass said. "You're wasting your time."

Tapper ignored him.

Mass stamped loudly outside, banged up and down the arcades for a while, then came muttering back. He sat down at the table, pushed the plates around, then dropped off the stool and began pacing again. Tapper sniffed at a bottle of Antarean glow-water, then re-turned it to the stasis.

"Dammit!" exploded Mass. "Can't you do something besides play with that crap?"

Tapper dropped the Spican flame-gems he was looking at, "What do you *want* me to do?"

"Something! Anything! I don't know –" Mass waved him away, "Ahh, forget it. There's nothing we can do but wait and see if they're coming back."

Tapper opened another field and something went, "*barf!*"

Space Skimmer 119

The something was small and furry, a double handful of shaggy whiteness, four floppy paws and black button eyes. Its tail wagged frantically and it kept leaping up at Tapper's face, trying to bathe him with a

joyous pink tongue.

"What the –" Mass paused in his pacing, "– hell is *that?*"

"I don't know," Tapper giggled, trying to hold the creature down. "But he's the friendliest – *umpf!*" The rest of the sentence was drowned under a barrage of wet happy slurps. "*barf! Yarff!*"

Mass stepped around to the table and looked at the shipping tab. "Andalusian Puff-Puppy," he read.

"What's an – *get down!* – Andalusian Puff-Puppy?"

"I didn't know. You're holding one." Mass stepped closer to get a better look. Tapper tried to keep the puppy from squirming. "He doesn't look very –"

Slurp.

"He doesn't look very what?",

"– dangerous," Mass finished, wiping his face.

"Yarf!" agreed the puff-puppy.

Mass backed away. "Put it back in stasis," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I don't like it."

Tapper shook his head. "I do," he said. "At least he's fun to be around – *umpf!* Stop it."

"Oh Qne," Mass muttered. He watched for a moment longer, then stamped outside. His voice came floating back. "Dammit, Ike! Where the hell are you?"

On Tapper's lap, the puff-puppy responded, "Yarff Yarff!"

The pavilion glowed like a jewel lost in the dark-ness. One by one its lights dimmed and lost their luster till only a soft glow remained

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Mass lay on a hard pallet on the tiled floor and listened to the night. A dry wind poked uncuriously around the building, only occasionally stirring the trees to motion. In the darkened room, the sound of it was like someone breathing.

On the other side, Tapper lay curie) on a chaise, tumbled in soft blankets. The sound of his snoring was mingled with the gentle purring of the little puppy nestled in his arms, a throbbing buzz of contentment.

Mass tried to ignore it.

He stared at the ceiling. The glow from the garden outside was faint, but his eyes were used to poor illumination. He studied the not-quite-regular patterning above and thought about tomorrow. What if He didn't return? (There must be other spaceships on this planet? But are there skimmers? Probably not. Well, I'll take another ship if I have to –) (But how?) (Where?) (And what am E going to do about the kid? I can't just abandon him, but I sure as krieing hell don't want to take him with – aaah, but I promised him I'd take him to Liadne. I can't break the promise –) (How long should I wait for eke? Should never have trusted him with the skimmer –) (What am I going to do?)

His mind meandered through a forest of sidetracks and tangents, along a path that led nowhere; the territory was too

dense to be understood. Mass foundered among his thoughts, reaching no conclusion and not even aware that he hadn't. Drowsiness crept up on him, further dimming his awareness.

And then a sound –

A voice, clear and sweet, floating through the night; the tune was familiar but the words were new.

*I nose of you, eye knows of me, eye sees
the seen that makes us we, our own two I's
have seen two me, who are the I's that
seem to be?*

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*To eyes of you, one I has me, we
see the scene about two be is not
"two be or not two be" the no's of it
are aye's to me!*

This time, Mass didn't laugh. He leapt to his feet angrily and stabbed the room to brightness. "Ike!!" he bellowed.

"Huh? What – ?" That was Tapper, rubbing his eyes awake.

Mass was already stamping out of the room – he bumped abruptly into Ike, just entering. Alem followed.

Eyes furious, face dark, Mass glowered up at them, "Where the hell were you with my skimmer?"

"I – " Ike seemed taken aback. "I – was showing Alem the moons. Close up."

"And then I showed Ike the sun," added Alem. "Close up."

Mass looked from one to the other, fuming. His body was poised stiffly, as if about to launch himself at their throats.

"What's happening?" Tapper was sitting up on his chaise, rubbing one hand through his sleep-tousled hair. "What's going on?" he asked again. The puff-puppy tumbled to the floor.

No one answered. Mass was still glaring, his anger building steadily. "I'm going to – I'm going to –" He was holding himself back. Holding himself back because if he didn't –

And then the puff-puppy jumped up on him and went *Slurp!*

Mass's fury was drowned under the animal's happy pink onslaught. "Get away from me!" he bellowed. "Get – *umpf!* – down!"

At last, Tapper had to go over and pull the puppy away. He held the tiny squirming bundle of fur and let it slurp joyously at him while Mass grimaced and wiped.

"Tapper, if you don't keep him away from me, I'm

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going to put him back in stasis." He turned and caught sight of Ike, remembered his original anger. He glared up at him, abruptly realizing: (I can't threaten Ike – I have nothing to threaten him with.) (Or do I – ?) In a quieter tone, more

deadly, he said, "Don't ever take that skimmer anywhere again without my permission."

Ike was motionless. (What did that signify?) At last, he gave a barely perceptible nod. "Yes, Mass. I realize I have made a mistake in causing you to become angered –"

"Shut up," he growled. "Get ready to go. we're leaving. Right now."

"Yes. Mass." Ike turned and stepped out of the room. Alem hesitated, undecided whether or not to follow. "You are taking the shipments?" he asked.

"Some of them," Mass rumbled. "That one," pointing to Tapper.

"And this one," Tapper added, holding up the

pçvwx-

Mass scowled, started to say something, but stopped when he saw the intensity on Tapper's face. "Please – ?"

"And that one," he confirmed reluctantly.

"The rest of the material – ?" asked Alem.

"– is without value," Mass said. "We'll take any Oracle tabs you want to pass on, but that'll be it."

Alem said, "I will see that they are aboard the skimmer." Then he fled out the door.

Mass growled something after him, then went looking for his leather overtunic. After a moment, he turned around and noticed Tapper still watching him. "Well, what are you looking at? You want to come with? Put on some clothes – or can't you decide what mood you're in?"

Tapper looked at the floor, "I just wanted to say thank you for letting me take the puppy." He turned away before Mass could answer and started getting dressed. (He'd worn these clothes once today, for almost two hours, they were no longer fresh; but they

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were the quickest to hand and he didn't want to rouse Mass's ire again.)

They trudged up the starlit hill in silence. On the crest, the skimmer sparkled with coruscating luminescence, silver and blue. The trees were etched with its sharp cold glare. Ike was already standing at the control console, his hands flat on its surface; he was a red-gold gleam in the brighter light of the skimmer.

As Mass and Tapper, still holding the puff-puppy, approached, he left his post and came down a ramp to meet them. Alem was just loading the last of Tapper's gear onto the skimmer.

Pointedly, Mass didn't say anything. He merely stepped between the two constructs and motioned Tapper to follow him onto the ramp. The boy stared about him with matter-of-fact curiosity. It was a new experience, but not an overwhelming one.

Alem and Ike remained looking at each other.

"The skimmer is loaded," whispered Alem.

"Yes," replied the other. He ached with the impulse

to reach out and clasp –

“Your craft is ready to leave.” It was a statement and a sigh. A wisp of regret.

“Yes,” said Ike – then, intensely: “Alem, come with me.”

“I –” his smoothly oiled voice seemed to catch, “– can’t –” The light from the skipper shone on his metal-yet-not-metal skin, highlighting its satiny color. “I can’t leave my post.” Behind him, at the foot of the hill, the pavilion glowed with empty light. “I must maintain – the station.”

“But it’s useless, Alem. The Empire is gone –”

“I can’t, Ike. I can’t leave it – I have no instructions but the ones I’ve been given. I must – stay – and maintain –”

For a moment, the two constructs surveyed each other, each trapped in the web of his own responsi-

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bilities. Intense with longing, a voice said, “Please, Alem –” It was a whisper.

And just as soft, the answer, “I – can’t. Please – don’t ask me again.” There was distortion in the voice.

Then, silence as each wanted to reach out and touch, but neither dared –

The moment was broken by a call from above, Mass’s harsh rasp: “Ike! Let’s go!”

A last look. “I’m sorry, Ike –” Then he turned on his heel and was gone. Ike stared into the darkness after him –

– then, soundlessly, he too turned. He went up the ramp and into the skimmer.

Tea puppy was christened Shagbag, and he followed Tapper everywhere, scrambling clumsily across the floor and emitting joyous exclamations of “Yarf! Yarf!” and occasionally a curious “Wurf?” Everything was exciting to him and he explored the skimmer with zest, snuffing across its decks and vanes. He was oblivious to the flickering stars about him.

The main object of his interest was Mass – Mass’s face in particular. Shagbag would happily abandon whatever he was involved in for a chance to bounce up to the dumpy grim dwarf and shower him with wet pink kisses.

At first, Mass accepted it with what passed for Streinveldtian good humor. He pushed the puppy away with a few mumbled curses; but as the days progressed and Shagbag showed no signs of learning any manners, Mass’s annoyance grew. Once, he kicked the little puppy across the deck – but both Ike and Tapper objected so strenuously that Mass was forced to apologize. He spent the rest of the day keeping to himself, and afterwards, he made a point of avoiding Shagbag.

The animal was Tapper's responsibility and he accepted it willingly. For most of his life, he had been sheltered from creatures with beaks and claws and teeth, anything that might accidentally, even in play, break the surface of his skin. Oh, Shagbag had teeth all right, but he used them only for eating; in play he preferred to use his tongue, and as profusely as possible.

Tapper's determination to care for the puppy was born of more than affection; it was a way he could prove that he too was not just a pampered animal, protected and sheltered and utterly worthless.

But Shagbag was young and his span of concentration was short. Tapper's attempts to train him degenerated quickly into play periods. The puppy would abruptly stop paying attention to Tapper and go bouncing across the deck to pounce on a skater-ball. Tapper would sigh then and watch as Shagbag sent the toy spinning dizzily back and forth, yarfing all the while.

On this particular occasion, Tapper was watching the ball. Abruptly his eyes narrowed suspiciously. He looked up. "Ike!" he accused, "You're teasing him! You're doing something to that ball!"

"I merely thought to increase his amusement by applying a subtle remote control of the toy."

Tapper grinned. "You were playing with him."

"I was studying his responses."

"You were enjoying it!"

"I'm sorry, Tapper. I do not know the word." Ike said it in such a monotone, Tapper wasn't sure if he was serious or not.

He said, "Well, it's all right – if you want to play with Shagbag, I won't tell."

Ike didn't answer. He wasn't particularly concerned with whether or not Mass knew of his interest in the animal – but he was concerned with how Mass was reacting to its presence. Mass had been sulking on one of

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the high outward decks and he seemed both confused and annoyed.

The dumpy little Streinveldter was sitting and staring at the stars, trying to figure what had gone wrong. He had his skimmer, his "ultimate spaceship," but suddenly it was populated with beings he couldn't understand – beings he didn't want to understand – and headed toward a destination that had no meaning for him at all.

He was disgusted with the boy called Tapper. Tapper claimed to be a prince, but his hands were softer than a woman's. What kind of a prince was this who had spent his life swaddled in silk?

And the creature, Shagbag? What kind of an animal was that? It's only excuse for existence was that it was *cute*, and that wasn't justification enough. The little creature had to *give* something, had to earn its way –
– like Ike. At least, Ike had a purpose on the skim-

mer. If he didn't – well, the incident with Alem had revealed him for what he was. Mass wouldn't let himself think about the relationship that must have existed between the two constructs – (Sure, they were supposed to be genderless, but they still had sex, didn't they?)

Mass couldn't figure out what was wrong. The harder he worked, the unhappier he was. The more he achieved, the less he had.

From below, Tapper's voice drifted up, painfully sweet. The sound of the lyrril mingled with it and grated on his ears:

*Oh, sing a song of lingalong of
ringalong and tingalong of ragalong
and tagalong and shagalong and
bagalong,*

*And play a tune of tippy tone of slippy tone
and slappy tone of happy tone and tappy
tone and shaggy bone and baggy pone,*

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*Oh dance a dance of fancy pants
of prancy prance and chancey chance of
gandy dance and shandy dance and
shaggy pants and baggy pants,*

*Oh, sing a song of lingalong of
ringalong and tingalong of ragalong
and tagalong and shagalong and
bagalong.*

Something snapped inside Mass. The boy! The pup-py! The construct! And now the song!! It was too much – it was doggerel! Songs should be heroic! Songs were – an honor!

And pat pasty-pale, soft-skinned imitation of a man was singing verses about a furry little pet!

Mass stumbled to his feet – “Got to make him stop that.” – and down toward the main deck. “Twisted, perverted –”

Tapper stood up as he appeared, lke turned from his console.

Mass came charging across the deck and slapped the lyrril out of the boy's hands; he stamped it into splinters “– teach you to sing songs –”. and when Shagbag came bouncing and stumbling up, he kicked at him too. With a startled “Yipe!” the puppy scurried out of reach.

Mass started to follow, but Tapper was yelling, “Hey! Stop it! Mass! *Mass! Stop it!*” Mass whirled, turned and advanced on him. The boy backed away.

“Less than a woman!” he growled, still moving in. “Even a woman would fight –” He stumbled up the ramps after him.

“Mass! Stop it! Leave me alone!” Tapper turned and ran.

Mass followed, his face glistening with sweat. “– Can't escape,” he gasped. “No place to run –”

Abruptly, he was lying flat on his back.

Unable to move.

Ike appeared above him; seconds later, Tapper. Mass's eyes swung from one to the other, angrily.

"What happened, Ike?" Tapper.

"I immobilized him." To Mass, "I'm sorry, Mass, but I had to do it. For the protection of Tapper and Shagbag."

"Will he be all right?"

"He appears to be suffering from a distortion of his mental processes, but I'm not sure what caused the distortion."

Mass struggled to speak, but his motor nerves weren't working.

*"What are we going to do, Ike?"

"Wait," said the construct. "Monitor his thoughts and wait until the distortion disappears."

"What if it doesn't?"

"Then we dare not release him."

"But you must
Ike didn't answer.

"Shagbag, stay back –" But the command was unnecessary. For once, the puppy did not take advantage of the opportunity and only sniffed curiously at Mass's fallen form.

"Maybe, you should let him talk," said Tapper. "We could find out what's the matter."

Ike considered it. Abruptly, Mass found himself able to speak: "You god-cursed son of a weak-eyed, dung-loving, mother-raping –"

Frozen again.

"Um," said Tapper.

Ike said, "I perceive that the trouble is related to our presence. There is something in the situation – perhaps in Mass's perceptions of our identities – that is creating the disturbance in his mind. He needs a chance to rest and recuperate. A chance to sidestep the feedback process that seems to be at work, building up and main-

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taining the distortion of his rationality. Perhaps unconsciousness –"

And everything went out.

Ike and Tapper:

"What do you think caused him to go off like that?"

"I don't know. My experience with organic beings like Mass and yourself is limited. I noted the first manifestations of his unease shortly after you were removed from stasis, but at that time the disturbance seemed too small to be of concern. However, when Alem and I returned, the disturbance had increased alarmingly. I judged that something had occurred in the interval of our absence."

Tapper was sitting on a pallet, one that had not

existed until he had asked for it. He shook his head. "No, nothing happened while' you were gone, Ike – I think it happened *because* you were gone."

Ike considered that. "No, I cannot agree –"

"Look, Ike –"

"– I will concede that Mass w_z momentarily distraught because of the disappearance of the skimmer, but once he was reassured that I had no intention of violating his trust, those fears were muted."

"*Ike*," said Tapper; something about his tone made the golden pilot stop. "It wasn't the disappearance of the skimmer. It was something else'. What did you and Alem do while you were gone?"

"We – took a trip. We visited the moons and the sun."

"No," said Tapper. "I mean, what did you *do*?"

"I don't understand –" Ike fumbled "We had communion –"

"Communion?"

"Rapport. We shared rapport."

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Tapper looked at him oddly. "This sharing rapport, what is it exactly?"

"It is a way to – a way for one being like myself to communicate with another. Or with an electronic de-vice. It is a *complete* communication, a complete interchange of all sensory information; evaluations, perceptions, thought processes – everything. When I am piloting the skimmer, I am in rapport with it; or when I consult an Oracle, I am in rapport. Alem and I shared rapport because it was the most efficient way to be – together."

Tapper's voice was soft. "What is it like, Ike?"

"It is – *rapport*. We become one. We share each other's body. It is like a return to the massmind, only more intense to a subjective point of view. More personal because there are only the two of us."

"Um," said Tapper. He looked at his sandals; he looked at the stars.

"Do you think that is what troubles Mass, my sharing rapport with Alem? But I don't see why –"

"I do," said Tapper.

Ike searched his memory. "Jealousy?"

Tapper allowed himself a smile; he shook his head. "No, not jealousy – at least, not consciously." He looked at Ike. "What you did, Ike, was – oh, how can I say this – it makes sense and it doesn't –" He started again. "Mass thinks you and Alem 'made love.'"

"Yes," said Ike. "That is exactly what we did."

"No!" said Tapper. "You must never tell him that."

"But it is the –"

"Ike, you and Alem are not organic beings like Mass and myself. You're *constructs*; because of that, you keep making the mistake of thinking of Mass and my-self as being biological machines – organic equivalents of yourself – and you interpret all of our actions in those terms. To you 'making love' is a means of communication, a way of getting

closer; but to Mass, it's

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a physical satisfaction. It's for pleasure and for reproduction."

"I'm sorry, Tapper. I still don't –"

"Don't you see? Making love means something entirely different to him than it does to you. Mass thinks of you and Alem as electro-mechanical equivalents of himself; just as you interpret his actions in terms you can understand, he's trying to interpret your actions in terms he can cope with. If you tell him, or even suggest to him, that you made love with Alem, he thinks you mean physical satisfaction and pleasure. He doesn't think of communication."

"But communication is the sole purpose of love. It is the holiest of –"

"*Not to Mass!*"

"Not to Mass?" Ike stumbled over the concept.

"Mass is afraid of it – I think. He's afraid to be touched. He's afraid to reach' out and touch. I think he's afraid of it with women and doubly afraid of it with men. Communication suggests negotiation and negotiation suggests weakness – and to Mass, that's the worst possible crime. Wherever it- is he comes from, he's been taught to be fierce. You never show weakness – never. You fight and bluff and bluster; you claw your way to the top by establishing your strength over others. Words are used as weapons, hot tools, and no-body trusts anybody; therefore, *the only reason for love is your own satisfaction*, or to reproduce. You use the other person as an object for your own pleasure."

Ike said, "I think I understand, but –"

"Don't you see it, Ike?" Tapper was fervent now. "The way Mass see it, a man – *a real man* – only uses others. He never allows himself to be used. If you and Alem made love, *you let Alem use you!*"

"But it was for communication –"

"You enjoyed it, didn't you? And Alem too?"

"Enjoy? There's that word again. I do not –"

"Was there any reason to communicate with Alem?"

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asked Tapper, "I mean, any *real* reason. Was there any information that you couldn't have gotten from the Empire Station's Oracle Machines?"

"No," Ike admitted.

"Then you sought rapport with Alem merely for the pleasure of rapport, right?"

"No!" Ike blurted. Then, "Yes – but that's my function, Tapper! To communicate –"

"You *enjoyed* it," accused Tapper. "That's why you did it, Ike. Admit it."

"I – I enjoyed it. Yes."

"Well, that's all that Mass sees. Because you let someone take satisfaction and pleasure off of you – *and because you*

did it willingly – he thinks you're worse than weak: he thinks you're perverted!" Tapper forced himself to stop; he was breathing hard.

"My whole existence," said Ike quietly, "revolves around communication. It is my purpose. Communication with Oracles, with the skimmer –"

"But never with another being, Ike, never. Mass can accept anything but that."

"But why? Why would anyone want to cut off a channel of rapport? It is a maiming of the self."

"He doesn't see it as rapport, Ike – only perversion *and* weakness. That's what makes him so angry at us. If he allows weakness to exist in others, perhaps that's a sign of weakness in himself. He's afraid of it; and when somebody's afraid of something, they try to destroy it."

"He has nothing to fear from either of us, though." Then, "Has he?"

Tapper stood up and walked to the edge of the deck. He looked down, way down, into the depths of sparkling infinity, and said, "I don't know. He sees us only in his terms, Ike, and his terms don't allow for friends, only masters and subjects."

Ike was silent at that. Tapper looked across the

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skimmer to where Mass still lay immobile. His breathing was deep and regular.

Ike followed his gaze. "I will have to release him soon. He is becoming more tranquil."

Tapper shivered. "Will it be safe?"

"Whether it will be safe or not, I will still have to release him. He is, as you said, the *master* of this ship. But, yes, it will be safe. I will not let him cause injury to you."

"I can't take any chances," whispered the boy, "one cut and I could bleed to death." The memory of his previous close call came stabbing back.

"If you'd like, you can complete the journey in a storage stasis."

"Oh, no," said Tapper. "No thank you. My last experience in a stasis Geld left me abandoned for four hundred years. I don't want to tempt my bad luck again. I'll take my chances with Mass."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. When are you going to revive him?"

"I've already relaxed control of his brain. He's only asleep now, but he should awaken soon."

Tapper shivered again; he hugged his arms to his body as if suddenly chilled and he bit his lower lip inward.

"Are you cold? I can raise the temperature."

"No. No thank you, Ike."

"Would you like me to repair the lyrril? I can synthesize a new one."

Tapper shook his head. "Uh-uh. I think I'm through singing for a while." He sat on the pallet and stared across the skimmer at Mass, waiting for him to wake Up.

Consciousness stirred. The dwarf blinked his eyes, remembering slowly who he was, where he was. He

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stood up, sliding his gaze across Tapper and Ike; the boy slid off his chaise expectantly, Ike stood at his console.

Mass's craggy features were grim. His skin was flushed and dark and his eyes burned in their sockets. He was a rocky chunk of a man, one hand touching the age-softened leather of his tunic.

Abruptly he turned and stumped away, off across the skimmer, up the shimmering vanes – as far away as he could get from the yellow-haired boy and the black-and-gold-skinned pilot – till he couldn't see them anymore, and that was still too close.

Ike said, "He is quieter, but he is not at peace."

"Ike, I don't need you to tell me that Mass is troubled. I could see it in his eyes."

"Perhaps I should go and talk to him."

"No," said Tapper. "I don't think that's a good idea. I'll go." He followed Mass's path across the vanes.

He found him brooding on the far edge of a lonely shelf, a spar sticking out at nothingness. Light angled softly across it. The sullen shape didn't turn as Tapper approached, gave no sign of awareness.

"Mass...?" the youth asked. "Mass?"

No response.

Tapper took another step forward. "Mass?"

This time, he turned. His expression was angry – and something else. (Hurt?) "What do you want?"

"I came up to – to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk."

"I'm sorry. I thought you might –"

"Well, I don't. Go away."

"I wanted to apologize. Ike is sorry too. He didn't mean to –" The other's fierce glare cut him off. "I'm sorry. I'll go."

At the foot of the spar, he turned and looked back, "You don't have to be afraid of me, Mass. I won't hurt you."

"Afraid – ? I'm not afraid of you."

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"Then why won't you talk to me?"

"*I don't want* to talk to you. Did you ever think of that?"

"Why? My weakness isn't contagious."

Mass hesitated. "What do you want to talk about?"

Tapper said quietly, "What do *you* want to talk about?"

"Nothing." Mass turned away, back to his contemplation of the stars.

Tapper took a few steps toward the main deck. He glanced back. "I told you I was unlucky," he called.

"What do you mean by that?"

Tapper shrugged. "Oh, everything – the way you keep treating me."

Mask grunted and kept staring out at the stars. "You're

weak," he said.

Tapper took a few steps toward him. "I can't help that."

Mass whirled to face the boy. "Are you really a prince?" he demanded.

Tapper nodded. "I was supposed to be."

"What kind of a planet is Concourse that a – a wisp like you could be a prince?"

"You'd do better to ask what a prince is."

"Everyone knows what a prince is," snapped Mass. "He's a champion."

"And what else," urged Tapper

"He's a hero. He's admired because of his strength and power and intelligence. He's honored because of his adventures."

"He's someone for the people to look up to," said Tapper. "Someone whose life is open to them to share and be a part of. He's someone who sets the styles – he's the focus of the national spirit; he crystallizes the mood. He gives a people an identity by letting them share in his. Right?"

Mass blinked. "I guess so."

"I know so," said Tapper.

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Mass shook his head. "No," he said. "You can't be a prince –"

"Mass, how does a person get to be a prince in the first place?"

"You earn it," growled the other. "You win a war, or kill a monster."

"You perform a deed of great adventure and daring and prove yourself a hero, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's only one way to become a prince. On Concourse, you can also be born to it – born and trained."

Mass snorted.

"You don't understand. A prince is someone who's admired. On your planet, you admire heroism and that's what determines your princes. On Concourse, we admire other things – beauty, music and poetry, charm and grace and good taste –"

Mass's expression hovered between contempt and disgust. He made a sound deep in his throat.

Tapper changed his approach. "You see, certain genetic lines are considered very valuable – mine, for instance. I'm supposed to have the 'lucky' strain – the Royal Linc – actually, it's an unconscious telekinetic control over my environment, but it works out like luck. (Only, I'm unlucky –) We have a genetic lottery, but not everybody breeds through the lotteries, only a very limited number of people are allowed to, only the 'lucky' ones."

"The rest aren't allowed to have babies?"

"Oh, no, they're allowed to have babies, but only one per family. If they want more, they have to earn a permit."

"Oh," said Mass.

Tapper continued, "The breeding lotteries are bonuses, kind of: they're a chance to win a second or third child

without having to go through channels. The program was established centuries ago; after a few

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generations, it was noticed that a high proportion of the same families kept winning. As time went on, the proportion rose. At first, they thought there was some kind of cheating going on, but instead they found out that these people couldn't help winning; the lottery was breeding them for 'luck.' Only those with telekinetic powers were winning – and only the strongest.

“At first, they wanted to change the lotteries to make them more fair to everybody else, but then they decided not to. They started a second lottery for the common people, one that was based on a random number table and couldn't be affected by telekinesis; they continued the first lottery, the Royal Lottery, on purpose – now they were specifically breeding telekinetics. They made the lottery harder to win; only the 'luckiest' are allowed the bonus child and every Royal Lottery birth is an event. Every telekinetic child is a hero merely by virtue of being born. From his first breath, his whole life is shared. Like me, for instance. I was the result of the crossing of two great genetic lines. I couldn't help but be a prince –”

Tapper's voice lowered, became more intense, “But, you see, Mass, we have no way to control the power, or even to tell if it's there or not until it manifests itself. That's why the princes and princesses are watched very carefully. And they're helped and guided. Things always work out right for a lucky prince. People go out of their way to make things work out for us; they hope some of the good luck will rub off. If a prince likes you, you get lucky too.”

Mass made a sound.

“It's true,” said Tapper. “We're heroes by right of birth; we can't help it – we're planetary lucky charms. And because we're going to be watched by the whole world for all of our lives, we have to learn how to be graceful and charming and stylish. We set the styles, everything. We have adventures, we go places, we do things; we travel and dance and write poetry and sing

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songs. We share our lives with the people, we entertain them, we inspire them, we focus their love; they need us, so they honor us and pamper us. We can't help being princes – we're the best of what the human race can be –

Mass snorted, this time louder than ever.

Tapper stopped, his enthusiasm dampened. He said, “Well, that's how it's *supposed* to be. I never had a chance to realize any of it. As I said, I'm unlucky. I was trained in dancing and singing and gracefulness and I was taught how to live life to the fullest – but they never let me out to live any of it. They were afraid it would kill me.”

Mass said, “Being a hero – being a prince can't be determined by a lottery. Such things don't happen *by*

chance.”

“But they do!” blurted the boy. “That’s the way heroes happen naturally. A hero is whoever happens to be in the right place at the right time and is able to live up to his responsibilities. It’s the same on Con-course as it is on Streinveldt, you just have a different set of responsibilities.”

“Hmp,” said Mass. “But, *you’re* still no hero. You were in the right place at the right time, but you weren’t able to live up to it. You were unlucky –”

For a moment, Tapper looked hurt. He lowered his eyes and admitted it, “You’re right. I wasn’t.” Then he looked up again, at Mass. “Are you a hero?”

Mass didn’t answer. He fingered his belt thought-fully, his gaze fixed on nothingness, or on something that only he could see.

“Are you –” Tapper started to ask again.

“I don’t know yet – maybe. I hope –” He cut him-self off. It was too much for him to voice his doubts aloud.

“Well, if you are,” said Tapper, “you shouldn’t be sulking up here away from us. The skimmer is yours,

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Mass. Ike says so. I say so. You should come down to the main platform and act as though you own it.”

“I’ll come down when I feel like it,” Mass said slowly.

“Soon?”

“Maybe.”

“All right. I’m going back down now. Are you sure you won’t come with me?”

“I’ll come when I’m ready.”

“All right.” And Tapper was gone.

Mass moved out to the far end of the spar and sat down. He hunched his arms around his knees and stared back across the glittering loom of the skimmer. “It’s mine,” he whispered to no one. “It’s mine. They said so.

The flashing vanes, faceted like diamonds, outlined the night and dazzled his eyes. His lips moved and formed phrases, “It’s mine. They said so. All I have to do is be a hero, and it’s mine.”

But he didn’t come down.

Not then and not after a while.

Not until Liadne loomed big and swollen against the star-flecked void.

And then they had to come up and ask him.

In 991 H.C. Liadne had been a regional center of medical skills and biological achievements. Now, four hundred years later –

The Empire Station was still functioning. Ike made contact with it almost immediately. The exchange of information was instantaneous and routine; they were directed to land and instructions were issued for their passenger.

Mass stood quietly as Ike brought the skimmer to ground like a graceful giant snowflake. It hung above a blue-green park, gently touching a terrace on a jut-ting spire. Mass followed Ike and Tapper silently across the sloping ramp.

Liadne's sun was yellow in a yellowy sky. Spread out beneath it was the seacoast village of Paracel Caymon, a multiplaned jumble of layered gardens inter-woven with arcades and canals. The town looped around a sheltered bay where a green sea washed at lime-colored beaches. Wide avenues led through gar-

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dens of festooned blue and couples drifted beneath the shadowed trees; soft music tinkled up from the parks and the scent of salt spray reached Tapper and Mass where they stood; it was mixed with the heady perfume of blossoms. The Empire Station here was an openwork spire, a collection of balconies piled twenty layers tall.

Below them, people bustled. There was busy activity on the other terraces. Figures strode with purposeful movements. Ike said, "The Empire appears to be still active here. I would not mind having access to an Oracle."

Mass scowled, but didn't comment. He went back to looking sullen.

A door shimmered open before them and a woman – tall and blue, that was the first impression – appeared. "My name is Edelith," she said. "I'm the gestalt synthesist. Come in."

They followed her down two steps and into a sheltered alcove; it was as open as any of the rest of the rooms in the tower, but somehow it *seemed* sheltered. She turned to face them, examined them coolly one at a time. The tall construct, red-gold and lithe; the stumpy dwarf, dark brown and leathery; the boy, pale and yellow.

Herself – she was pale too, but hers was a different kind of paleness, a color suggesting cold blue and ice. Her veins hinted deeper blue, colder." Her hair shimmered like an aura of sleet; it also reflected a sense of blueness. Her features were sculptured of frozen wax: her nose, thin and aquiline; her lips, pressed and care-ful; her cheekbones, high, severe. Her eyes were violet, the only suggestion of warmth – and they were veiled, flecked with winter. She was wreathed in cold snow.

"You're from the Empire," she accused. "What do you want?"

"We're not from the Empire," Mass blurted. "We're looking for it."

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Ike added, "We brought this patient to be cured." He indicated Tapper.

The woman was expressionless. "The curing of the boy is an Empire-commissioned task. Your ship is a skimmer. Therefore, you are Empire Agents. Why do you deny it?"

"Because it's true," said Ike. "We have nothing to do with the Empire."

Her eyes flickered. "How did you come by the skimmer?"

"I found it," said Mass. "It was abandoned on a planet. A race of savages was using it as a temple. I took it."

She considered this. Then, "You will turn over its control to me. *I am* an Empire Agent, and as such, I am entitled to its control."

"No," said Mass. "The skimmer is mine."

"It is not!" she blazed. "According to the JEYRU tab, all skimmers are to be turned over to Y-Class Agents of the Empire."

"But the Empire doesn't exist any more!" Mass folded his arms across his chest. "So you're speaking without authority."

"You're wrong. The Empire *does* exist."

"Huh? Where? We haven't seen any evidence of it."

"The Empire of the Forty Worlds," she said coolly. "Forty-three actually. We are the spiritual, as well as the legal, heir to the title of the Empire of Man."

"Forty-three worlds?" Mass blinked.

Ike noted, "At last known census, there were more than eleven thousand worlds in the Empire. Forty-three is not a significant percentage of that number."

"Nevertheless, we *are* the Empire."

"I'm sorry," said Ike. "But -4 must dispute that claim. We cannot turn the skimmer over to you. Lacking a quorum, you lack legality."

Edelith shook her head slowly. "You are mistaken. The station here is all the legality I need. I am an

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Agent of the Empire and this is a functioning Empire Rase. You will turn the skimmer over to me."

"No!" said Mass.

"I'm not asking you. I'm telling you."

"And I'm telling you *no!*"

"Eh?" She blinked at him. "You have no authority at all." She turned to Ike. "You will place yourself under my command, Pilot –"

"My name is Ike."

She raised an eyebrow. A construct with a name? "– all right: Ike. You will place yourself under my command. Move the skimmer to the Downport Base and wait for me there."

Ike, bowed, then turned to Mass. "Should I obey her order?"

"No!"

Ike turned back to Edelith. "I regret that I am un-able to comply. The owner of the skimmer and the being to whom I owe my allegiance refuses to permit it."

"Refuses? You owe him no allegiance! You're a construct. You owe your allegiance to the Empire. To me!"

"I am sorry, but if it were not for Mass, I would not be either here or self-aware. My primary obligation is to him. To obey your orders would be a betrayal of his trust."

Mass looked astounded. Events were moving too fast, but somehow – Ike was supporting him! (Why?) (Never mind, the situation is under control.)

Edelith looked back and forth between them; her shocked

expression focused on Mass. "You – ! You're a barbarian! What gives you the control of that skimmer and its pilot?"

Mass started to growl something, but Ike interrupted, "He found the skimmer and put it to use. It is his by right of discovery. He found me and put me to use. I am sworn to him because of it."

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"The Empire owns the skimmer," insisted Edelith.

"But / control it," finished Mass.

Edelith stared for a moment. There was nothing she could say.

Mass folded his arms across his chest and returned the stare. He wasn't going to let a mere woman intimidate him, no matter how imposing she was.

Edelith blinked. Then, "All right. What do you want?"

Tapper spoke for the first time. "I want to be cured."

She glanced at him. "The Unlucky Prince of Con-course."

"Can you do it?"

An expression – cool, meaningless – "Yes, we can." A pause. "But, we won't."

"Huh – ?" That was Mass.

"You heard me. I won't cure him. Not unless..." She toyed with the words. "...you turn over the skimmer."

"I'm sorry," said Ike. "But you have no choice in the matter. You *have to* cure him."

Edelith glanced up sharply.

"You are a legal Empire Agent," Ike explained. "The curing of this boy is an already-paid-for, Empire-commissioned task. You cannot refuse."

Edelith looked startled. "I can –" she tried to insist, but Ike cut her off again. "No," he said. "You'll lose your office."

Edelith turned away for a moment, her mouth working silently. Abruptly she looked back. "I can refuse," she repeated. "You've refused to turn the skimmer over to me. Your grounds are that I'm not a legal Empire Agent because the Empire of the Forty Worlds is not the legal successor. If I'm not a Legal Empire Agent, then I don't have to be held to an Empire-commissioned task; and if I am to be held to this

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commission, then you must turn the skimmer over to me."

"I cannot," said Ike.

"You've got to cure the boy!" insisted Mass.

Edelith looked at him sharply, "Then you're admitting that I *am* a legal agent?"

"I won't give you the skimmer," said Mass.

"Your refusal to do so makes you an outlaw –" She took a step toward a desk. "I can have you arrested."

"That won't get you anywhere," said Mass. "Ike won't cooperate unless I tell him to, and *he's* the one who controls the skimmer."

"Then we have reached an impasse," Edelith said. She reached for a switch on the desktop.

"Don't!" said Ike.

His voice was loud enough to startle her. She hesitated – just long enough for Mass to draw his weapon. A bolt of blue flame splattered the controls of her tanglefoot field.

"Don't try anything else," warned Mass. "Come on, we're going." He started backing toward the door, still covering Edelith with the weapon. Ike hesitated, then followed.

Tapper didn't move at all. "Wait!" he cried. "I want to be cured! Mass! You can't go –"

"You can stay if you want," said Mass. "Whether or not you get cured is up to her." He pointed with the weapon. "We won't be back, Tapper – make up your mind."

Tapper wailed. "I want to go with the skimmer, but I have to stay here, Mass! I have to get cured! I don't have any choice!"

But it was Edelith who was grooving frantic. Here was one of the almost-mythical skimmers, and she was letting it slip from her grasp! "Wait!" she said. "Don't go, Mass! There's a way –"

Mass stopped. "Talk fast, woman."

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"Service," she gasped. "Exchange of service. My services to cure him in return for your service with the skimmer –"

Mass said, "Ike? Do we trust her?"

Ike's tone was almost pedantic. "There is no reason not to. This solution sidesteps the question of whether or not she is a legal agent of the Empire; the ownership and disposition of the skimmer need never be considered. However –"

Both Mass and Edelith looked up.

"– I suggest that in order to minimize the possibility of either party attempting to renege on the agreement, we adjourn, all of us, to the skimmer. I can guarantee the fairness of all proceedings there because with the skimmer resources, I can neutralize all weapons and tanglefoot fields." He didn't specify whose.

Mass eyed Edelith suspiciously. "How much service?"

"That depends on what it takes to cure Tapper. Put away the gun and we can talk about it."

"We'll talk in space. I trust Ike."

Edelith hesitated. "Ike is under your command."

"Not *on* this matter, he isn't. You heard him."

Tapper put in, "Ike won't let Mass hurt you. I can vouch for that. He –" He stopped when he saw Mass scowling.

Edelith saw it too. "All right," she said. "Let's talk." She followed them aboard the skimmer.

The night of stars hung unmoving around them. Liadne was poised a million miles distant. Edelith was examining Tapper behind a wall which she had suddenly ordered into existence.

Mass had started at that, but Ike stopped him. "It's all right.

She's merely respecting the right of privacy."

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(Privacy.) He thought about that. (The concept is unknown on Manolka. Only a creature with a subjective point of view would seek it. It is a shutting away of others, a protection against psychological aggression –) And: (*Mass needs privacy!*) Ike moved a few steps away – a psychological distance. He left Mass examining a miniature sculpture garden set in a splash-ing pool, his expression flickering between curiosity and distaste. Ike had been tinkering with the skimmer's configurations again.

Ike went over to the Oracle console and laid his palms across the stator plate. He went into communion. Mass looked over, saw that Ike was "away," then drifted over to the edge of the balcony and stared out without seeing.

They did not have long to wait.

The wall shimmered and Edelith came back. Ike removed his hands from the Oracle plate and looked at her. Mass turned expectantly.

"The boy," she said. "What is he to you?"

Mass shrugged, scowled. "Nothing, why?"

Ike said, "He is under our protection."

Edelith's glance flickered from one to the other. A moment's hesitation. She said, "I can't cure him of hemophilia."

"What –"

"I can't cure him, *because he doesn't have it.*"

Mass gaped. "You mean he lied ta'us?"

"No. He told you the truth – as far as he knew it. If you cut him, he would bleed to death, but he does *not* have hemophilia. It's a hereditary disease and the geneticists of Concourse were never that careless." Her manner was precise, efficient and grim. "But he will bleed to death if his skin is broken, because he *believes* he will."

"Huh?"

"Tapper is part of a genetic strain that has been nurtured and studied for centuries. His genes were

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famous four hundred years ago. Even today, they're still studied."

"You mean he *has* been bred for luck?"

Edelith corrected him, "He's been bred for his telekinetic abilities. If he were a normal specimen of his genetic line, his unconscious desires would stand a greater chance of happening than the desires of any of the rest of us, because he would be exerting his will power to make it so without even realizing it. But something must have happened to traumatize him early in his life and convince him he was unlucky. Every unlucky incident that happens only proves it and makes him all the more convinced. The more convinced he is of his bad luck, the unluckier he gets. Unlucky things keep happening to him because he's unconsciously causing them. He *wants* to prove himself unlucky, so he is. His 'good luck' is to have bad luck."

"Then his hemophilia is only a manifestation?" asked Ike.

She nodded. "Perhaps he was overpampered as a child and conditioned to think himself unhurt. He was told he was lucky so often that anything that didn't support that belief would have to come as a massive shock to an immature psyche. Suppose one day he fell and hurt himself – hurt himself badly – or suppose he lost a close friend or a parent; an impressionable mind might seize upon this as proof that he wasn't lucky after all. And from there, it's very easy to set up a negative feedback."

Ike mused, "Thus he will be as unlucky as he wants to be."

"Unluckier," said Edelith. "His pseudo-hemophilia is a manifestation he doesn't want – he's deathly afraid of it because he knows that it leaves him prey to death from the slightest injury, and he knows that his unluckiness makes such an injury inevitable. He doesn't want to die, but because he's convinced that he will, his body will refuse to heal,"

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Mass looked up, "How do you know all this?"

She smiled coldly. "We've had four hundred years to study his genes while we've been waiting for him to arrive. He's a textbook case of a near-perfect genetic potential and his unluckiness is the bitter irony of its realization." She paused thoughtfully. "Every planet, you know, is its own genetic pool. The vastnesses of space have separated the human species into distinct biological entities that can be as divergent as –" her gaze wavered across Mass's foreshortened form, "– as you and I."

She went on, "Even during the days of the Empire, there was never enough interplanetary communication to stimulate a noticeable percentage of outbreeding in any individual population – most of it was below even the levels of local mutation and was quickly absorbed. Genetically, at least, every planet is isolated from every other. Each has pursued its own direction and destiny. That's why Streinveldters – oh, yes, I recognized you – are short, and Liadnians are blue, and Manolkans are – are constructs. We've had centuries to develop – first the long years of Empire when we could pick and choose the best--individuals for each planet and even tailor them to need; then four dark centuries during which each genetic pool has inbred further, refining and developing its specific "characteristics." She said, "I wonder what Concourse is like today, sixteen generations since Tapper's time. Ah, but we haven't the ships to get there."

"What about Concourse?" asked Ike.

"Oh, yes. The average Concourse had a greater telekinetic potential than the average member of any other genetic pool; it seemed to be a survival strain. It was first discovered as a result of the birth lotteries. Later it began to leak into the general population through non-lottery births. In Tapper's time, the average person had hardly enough TK power to be measurable; his desires could easily be outvoted by the

cumulative weight of the rest of the population's TK; it took a member of the Royal Line to generate enough power to overcome the inertia of the mass, give it a hefty nudge in the right direction.

"But that cumulative force was quite a power; it probably could have overcome a member of the Royal Line, if it had been so motivated. Who knows? It's possible that the feedback of Tapper's unluckiness wasn't limited to his own belief. The knowledge of it among his people could only serve to reinforce it – and if they began to believe him unlucky too, then no matter how much they admired his grace or beauty, he'd be doomed if he stayed there. Once their collective power reached a critical point, the conviction of the populace would kill him. The Royal Family must have known it. That's probably why he was sent here.

"If he'd really had hemophilia, they could have cured him at home; but it seems obvious now that a bit of psychological trickery was necessary. The gestaltists of Liadne were to perform mysterious and exotic treatments designed to convince him that he was cured of both his disease and his bad luck. Once he believed it, and once the population of Concourse was convinced of it, he could return home to a hero's welcome."

"Hero –" Mass snorted.

"I beg your pardon," Edelith bowed to him. "Your definition of the word is different from mine. However, considering the powers arrayed against that boy, I think his bravery is quite respectable."

Mass didn't answer. He merely scowled and looked away.

"In any case," Edelith continued. "He could have returned home to his rightful place as a focus of Concourdian good will. The feedback would have been transformed into a positive one. They hoped."

"History seems to have voted against that," said Ike.

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"Tapper was marooned in stasis when the Empire collapsed."

Mass grinned sourly, "Maybe that's why the Empire collapsed – Tapper's bad luck."

Edelith looked startled, but she covered quickly. "No, I doubt that. If the telekinetic power of Concourse's population was enough to threaten the stability of the Empire, it would have killed Tapper long before – that is, assuming the dealings of the Empire could be affected by TK;"

Ike said, "But you stated that Tapper served as a focus for the collective power of the Concourse population. If they believed him unlucky, couldn't his sub-conscious mind have set forces in motion that all of them might have been unaware of?"

Edelith's face froze. "I – I'll have to check that. I'll have to construct a model of the situation..." She flustered. "There's another angle to it too: Suppose all that was keeping Tapper *alive* was the mass TK of Concourse; only their faith in his inherent good luck may have been preventing his death. With that check removed –" she stiffened – "there's no

protection. Not for him, not for Liadne, not for any of us.”

“Huh?” Mass was startled.

Her face was grim. She pointed at Liadne. “That population,” she explained, “is almost totally *without*. TK potential, There is no way for any of them – or any of us – to resist Tapper’s unconscious influences. The potential for danger is too great. There’s nothing holding him back –”

As if to underscore her words, there was a sudden scream. Edelith and Mass jumped at the sound, a shrill wail followed by a shattering crash. Ike was already moving through the privacy shield –

They found Tapper sitting on the floor, trembling violently. The remains of a brittle sculpture that Ike had synthesized lay in shards about him. “I didn’t

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realize it was so fragile,” he said. “I must have brushed it with my arm.”

“Are you cut anywhere?”

Tapper began examining himself. “I don’t think so.” Ike helped him stand; the construct ran sensor-laden hands along his limbs.

Edelith led Mass out of the privacy shield. “We’ve got to keep him off the planet. The safest place for him is probably here on the skimmer. Stasis devices are TK resistant.”

Mass bristled. “Aren’t you going to cure him?”

She frowned. “I can’t cure him of hemophilia; he hasn’t got it. I can’t cure him of his unluckiness because that’s something he has to do for himself – and I don’t know how they had planned to get him to do that four centuries ago.”

“Why not convince him that he *is* lucky?” rumbled Mass. “Fake some incidents. Tell him he’s been cured.”

She shook her head. “That’s treating the symptom, not the disease.” She looked nervously toward the other deck. “We’ve got to keep him off the planet.”

“We’ve got to get him cured,” corrected Mass.

“I’m not sure there’s anything I can do,” she said helplessly.

“I thought you were a doctor –”

“I’m a gestalt synthesist. I’m a healer – but I only heal total systems. I make them work right.”

“And that means you can’t treat Tapper?”

“Out of his environment, I don’t know.” She seemed to be losing her carefully precise manner. “Four hundred years ago, we would have been treating not only Tapper’s convictions, but those of his people as well; we would have been correcting the orientation of the whole system, but now... I don’t know what Con-course is like; none of us do. We don’t even know that he wants to go back there. How can I treat him if I don’t know what kind of an environment he’s going

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to be placed in? I’d need to treat that environment as well.”

Mass sputtered. “Can’t you do something – make him

adaptable to any environment or – something? Anything?”

“It’s not that easy, his TK potential has to be con-trolled; that’s why the skimmer is so safe for him. I –” She stopped.

“There is something –”

“What?”

“I’m not sure it’ll work.” She looked speculatively at Mass.

“But we have to try, don’t we?” He said it, then realized he had not asked himself why. *Why do we have to try?*

But the moment was past. She nodded. “Yes, we do. Besides, it’s a challenge.”

“What is? What are you talking about?”

“I’m going to climb inside his head and look around.”*

“Huh?”

“Call Ike. Have him set a new course. We’re going to get an empath.”

Once more, the stars slipped past, but there was no sensation of movement, never could be, only the endless sense of emptiness, the brilliance of the void, the stars creeping by almost too slowly to be noticed.

This time, the journey was a short one, only a few hours. -Edelith reclined on a chaise while Tapper stroked chords out of his new lyrril. Ike stood before his console; Mass stood apart with a sour look on his face. The puff-puppy snored happily on the floor.

“Why is it that the Empire is still active in this area?” asked Ike. “Everywhere else we’ve been, the Empire is only a memory.”

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“Part of it is geography,” Edelith answered. “Here, we’re nearer to the core of the galaxy. The stars are closer to each other; an interstellar flight between two neighbors is not as big a jump as it would be farther out.

“When the Empire collapsed, it only meant the collapse of long-distance communications; local trade still continued. For us, local trade covers an area which includes forty-three inhabited planets.” She shifted her position on the chaise, straightened slightly. “The average journey between stars is only a few days – in your skimmer, only a few hours – but out in the spiral arms, a journey could be days or months, even for you.”

Mass asked, “You haven’t tried at all to reestablish contact with any of the other Empire Stations?”

She shook her head. “The numbers aren’t right.”

“Eh?”

“The human race is spread too thin throughout the galaxy. It’s spread too thin even among our own planets; we have too few governments with the necessary populations or wealth.”

Ike put in: “There is an important social equation involved here. Individually, no planet has the wealth to mount the effort of rebuilding the Empire; it takes the collective wealth of many planets – but in order to achieve that kind of cooperation, you need the kind of communications that only an already established Empire can provide.

“A planet has to have a population of at least one billion people, with a gross product per person of at least ten thousand credits per year in order to be able to afford the technology capable of building and maintaining a profitable starship; an empire requires at least twenty such populations in order to maintain communications between a community of one hundred stellar systems.”

“And even then, they’re spreading themselves pretty thin,” remarked Edelith. “But trade and communica-

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tions are an aid to growth; eventually their investment should pay for itself.”

Ike added, “The equation is determined by the length of time it takes to travel from one star to another. Before the synthesis of the skimmer, the critical factor was one light-year every three days.”

“The skimmers must have upset that equation drastically,” Edelith mused. “Economic values on too many planets were determined by false scarcity of certain trade items. With the sudden explosion of information - and commerce that the skimmers represented, there must have been economic and political chaos. We’ll never know how much chaos, though; the Empire’s communications collapsed before the skimmers’ effects were fully felt.”

Mass didn’t pay any attention to that. There was something else on his mind. “Wait a minute,” he said. “There are lots of planets with large populations and within range of each other – wouldn’t they be able to pool their resources?”

Edelith considered it. “It sounds good, Mass, but it doesn’t work that way. A culture has to reach a threshold level of production; after that, it requires only the willingness to accomplish the deed. Below that threshold level, there’s no way to ‘pool resources.’ Above it, there’s no need.

“There’re probably many areas in the galaxy where neighboring star systems have maintained communications – like the area around Liadne; but the Empire at its height comprised more than 11,000 planets. Most of them were thinly populated – oh, most people lived fairly well; according to the history texts, there were a great deal of resources available for just a very few people – but the equation requires a certain amount of manpower as well as a specific level of production. Too many of the Empire planets fell below those levels.”

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“Then the Empire doesn’t exist any more, any-where...?”

“Probably not,” said Edelith. “We are living in what historians of the future will probably call ‘The Galactic Dark Ages.’”

“Dark Ages?” asked Tapper. “Doesn’t that mean a time of

no knowledge?"

"It means an interruption in the gathering of knowledge, or a loss of knowledge from the general usage of a culture. In our case, the knowledge isn't lost – it's just spread out. It only remains to be gathered up again. This skimmer –" She gestured about her, "– is the perfect vehicle for such a task."

"Excuse me," said Ike. "It was the skimmers that were responsible for the collapse of the Empire in the first place."

"Huh?" That was Mass.

Edelith echoed his bewilderment, "Why do you say that?"

"Because it appears to be true. I have been considering your statement, Edelith. You said that economic values on too many planets were determined by the false scarcity of certain trade items. I assumed you meant the scarcity which is derived from inefficient transport systems, in this case, the pre-skimmer lightships. As you postulated, the efficiency of the skimmer would destroy those values and create economic chaos – with political upheavals following as well. However, I do not think you realize the scope of those political upheavals because you fail to realize the power of the skimmers."

Both Mass and Edelith were staring, "Go on," Edelith whispered.

"The pre-skimmer lightships," said Ike, "were in-efficient in a way much more important to the stability of the Empire than the one-light-year-every-three-days limitation: they had to have a home base. They were tied down to a high-level technology because only a

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high-level technology could refuel and maintain a lightship.

"A lightship is an ecological dead-end," explained the construct. "It has to be supported, it cannot support itself. The energy-refining equipment to manufacture its power cells could cover several hundred square miles. No ship could comprise that much technology within its hull," said Ike, "– until the skimmers. The skimmers are self-supporting."

"My God, yes –" Edelith's face was pale. Mass blinked in astonishment.

"You should have realized it, Mass; this craft not only has almost unlimited speed – it has unlimited range as well. We can travel anywhere because we can refuel with anything. Think of the effect that knowledge must have had on a Captain four hundred years ago. Suddenly he no longer had to be responsible to his home planet – not economically, not politically. He was a free agent, master of his own ship, captain of his own destiny; he was as independent as a man could be. Once he was in space with his skimmer, there was no way that anyone could catch or control him."

Edelith sank onto a chaise, her mouth agape. She managed to gasp, "but the skimmers weren't the cause of the collapse, they couldn't have been –"

"They were the catalyst," said Ike. "The potential must have already been there."

Edelith forced herself to ass. “Yes, of course. The potential for collapse is inherent in any entropy-reversing system. Its strength is measured by how well the system can cope with or adapt to new circum-stances – yes, of course, Ike –” She looked up, her eyes were bright with realization, “– the impact of the skimmers was too much for the Empire; they happened too fast. They overloaded the culture’s ability to adjust –”

“And the result was an explosion of irresponsibility,” said Ike. “First, the economic chaos, then the political

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upheavals; then, anally, men must have seized the skimmers for their own ends, either to flee or to control. The skimmers represent ultimate power. I suppose that men must have killed for them, become dictators or tyrants. A man with a skimmer has absolute control, yet he cannot be caught or killed.”

Edelith shook her head, “No, Ike – not dictators. Gods. Men would have used the power of the skimmers to set themselves up as gods.”

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

Mass asked, “If that’s true, then where are they now? Why haven’t we encountered any of them?”

“There were only four hundred skimmers made,” said Ike. “There were eleven thousand known planets in the Empire, and more beyond the frontier. The question is not where the skimmers are, but, how many planets a man with a skimmer can control?”

“And that depends on how much a man *wants*,” said Edelith.

“I think if I had a skimmer,” said Mass, “I’d be very careful. I’d hide it and only use it when I had to. I wouldn’t let anyone know about it.”

“But you *do have* a skimmer,” pointed out Edelith. “And that’s not what you’ve done at all.”

Mass stared at her. The words stung. But Edelith was right: when you have power, you use it. He turned and stared out across the void. How many stars – ? How many men – ?

“I suppose,” Edelith said, “some of the men with skimmers must have fled beyond the frontier. Probably in the early days, before the upheavals became wide-spread, some men must have realized what kind of power had been placed in their hands. Thinking that the Empire would pursue them if they went renegade, they would have fled far beyond the boundaries of the Empire, probably far beyond the boundaries of the frontier. Later, during the upheavals, other men might have done the same thing; they could have been flee-

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big the almost certain reaction to anybody with a skimmer – suspicion, distrust, attacks. Certainly, only a fool would think that the human race has stopped expanding just because the Empire no longer exists. I wonder just how wide an area

human beings encompass now.”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Ike, much disturbed. “But something you said – you referred to *Human beings*. I do not understand your use of the term....”

“Uh oh,” Mass said warningly.

Edelith didn’t notice. She said, “I’m a human being, Mass is a human being, so is Tapper; all organic beings like ourselves are human. You’re a Manolkkan. Manolkkans are constructs, self-aware links between human beings and their machines, especially Oracles and space skimmers. Manolkkans were constructed to be the most efficient interface possible – Manolkkans are both human and machine.”

“I believe you are incorrect,” said Ike quietly.

“Oh?” Edelith asked. “How?”

“You – Mass and Tapper also – are *not* human beings. I am a human being. *You* are organic beings.”

Edelith looked at Ike speculatively, “Would you please explain that?” Mass looked from one to the other.

“I am a human being,” Ike repeated. “That is, my god is *Human*, and we – that is, all human beings – are part of *Human*. I am a part of “my god; by definition, I am *Human*; hence, I am a *Human* being. But you – Mass and Tapper and you – are not *Human* beings. You are not a part of god. You are organic beings.”

Edelith sucked in her cheeks thoughtfully. “And what is it that makes you a *Human* being?”

“That I am a part of *Human*.

“What is *Human*?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“Is *Human* the Manolkkan massmind?”

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“No. The massmind is merely – a social organization.” Ike hesitated.

“What’s the matter?”

“There is an anomaly in my thoughts,” he said. “The Manolkkan massmind *should be* Human – but perceiving it now as an outsider, I can see that it isn’t. Why, I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t that suggest that your concept of *Human* may be incorrect?”

“No,” said Ike. “The basic premises of *Humanity* have all been thoroughly tested and proven. That the Manolkkan massmind is not *Human* does not mean that the Human system of logic is incorrect; it merely means that the Manolkkan massmind does not fill the qualifications of identification. *Human* exists; I merely have to find Him – but my existence proves that He exists, because *I* am a *Human* being. I am part of Him.”

“Why?” demanded Edelith. “*Why* are you a human being? If the Manolkkan massmind could make an error of identification, couldn’t you?”

“I am made in His image.”

Mass groaned audibly at that. Edelith threw him a glance, then turned back to Ike. “How do you know that?”

“Because I am a *Human* being – therefore I must be in his

image.” Ike cut himself short. “Excuse me. I have committed an error in logic. I suspect it comes from trying to cope with the thought processes of organic beings. I will attempt to answer your question in other terms:

“The image of *Human* is non-mutable. Human is, was, and always will be. I am non-mutable. I maintain myself indefinitely without change. Organic beings, like yourselves, are not non-mutable. You age, you decay, you die. Indeed, you are highly mutable; even your moment to moment stability is inconsistent, varying with the slightest chemical imbalance. Your

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reliability is severely limited because of your mutability. I cannot believe that Human would allow such an inefficient form to represent him.”

“You’re talking as if Human is a conscious entity,” interjected Edelith. “Is that what you believe?”

“Excuse me,” said Ike, “but the language we are using was not designed for philosophy and there are few terms in it designed specifically for speaking of gods; hence a certain amount of anthropomorphizing is inescapable because of the medium in which we are communicating.”

“*Touche*,” she muttered.

“Is your God a conscious entity?” asked Ike.

Edelith paused, then said, “My *god* is an elliptical concept, not a being; it revolves around two points, maintaining an equal distance from both. One concept is that of the *self*, the other is the concept of *change*. The book is known as the *I Change*.”

“The concept of change is that nothing is permanent; everything changes because *everything* is mutable. What we perceive as the laws of physics and chemistry are merely the mechanics of the process. Time flows in two directions at Ance, simultaneously toward entropy and away from g. We perceive it in one direction only because the processes that make up our perceptual functions are entropy-tending. We are temporary interruptions in the flow from order to disorder.

“The second aspect,” said Edelith, “is the self: the relationship between it and the universe around it. The environment changes, the self changes – the relationship between them changes. *Everything* changes. If one can contemplate and understand the processes of change, one can move with them-instead of trying to fight them – and one’s life will be more efficient.”

“Your religion has a flaw in it,” said Ike.

“It does?” She arched an eyebrow at him.

“I can point out something which is unchangeable.”

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The stasis field on which so many of our devices are based is a field of unchangeability.” He placed a hand on the control podium and a spherical shimmer appeared in the air. “Anything within that field will remain unchanged for as long

as that field remains.”

Edelith shook her head. “No, Ike – you’re committing several of the most basic fallacies. First of all, the opposite of change is not the absence of change – it is change in the opposite direction. Absence of change is a form of change in itself, especially when considered in the context of a changing universe; it is no more permanent or temporary than any other form of change.

“Besides,” she added, “an object in stasis *does change* – there’s proof of it right there!” She pointed at Tapper. “The object’s relationship to its environment changes as the environment does; and as the relationship changes, so does the object. Any perceived lack of change is a kind of change in itself.”

Ike said, “I don’t think I can convince you; you are using words as flexible entities, not as specific and non-mutable symbols.”

“That’s because language changes too – language changes along with the people who use it. All things change.”

“*Human* does not change.”

“You change!” she accused. “How can you be a human being if you change?”

“Change? Me?”

“You are no longer part of the Manolkan massmind. Don’t you consider that a change? Your attitudes are different than they used to be, you’ve admitted that yourself. You’d an individual now – isn’t that a change? You can’t help but change: you’re made out of matter and *matter is mutable*.”

“I –” said Ike. “Human beings are created in the image of *Human*. That relationship does not change.” His tone seemed almost belligerent.

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Edelith lowered her voice. “All right, Ike – but before you can logically call yourself a human being, or tell us that we’re not, you need to be able to define Human. If human beings are created in His image, you have to know what that image is.”

“The image is –” He stopped. “Do you know the image of your god?”

Edelith shook her head. “The self, being only a part of the whole, is unable to perceive the shape of the whole – if it could, it would be the whole. In other words, I am part of a dynamic universe and I must be at one with it; I must accept that relationship.”

“It is the same for me,” said Ike.

“What about death?” Mass asked Edelith, curious in spite of himself. “How do you – cope with that?”

“If the universe is infinite, then so am I,” said Edelith, “and I can never really die; I will echo and re-echo throughout the universe in one form or another until I have been everything possible and everything has been me and then I will start again.

“On the other hand, if the universe is finite, then I am indeed unique and limited and death is permanent

– except that there is no such thing as death except on a subjective level. There is a cessation of the perception of the self as a particular matrix of matter disorganizes, but the matter itself goes on – only the form of it changes. The universe goes on until it too ends

but that would be a kind of change in itself, wouldn't it? Whatever the universe changed into, that form would eventually change into something else because *everything* changes – if there were a state where nothing changed, then the universe couldn't exist. We'd have slipped into that kind of a state long ago and stayed there. But our existence here, right now, proves that change is universal. Perhaps infinite. After the universe ends, perhaps it starts again; the essence of change is that everything is relative – things can't change unless they have something to change in re-

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lation to. So the universe can be both finite and in-finite at the same time, depending on the context of the observer.”

Mass said, “Aren't you afraid of the – the perception of death? The loss of the *self*?”

“If I were an ignorant savage –” she stopped. “Excuse me, I didn't mean it that way. Yes, there is a certain amount of fear, but we all have to learn to live with it. We have a philosopher on Liadne named Kohne; he says, ‘Remember the time before you were born? Remember what it was like? That wasn't so bad, was it? – well that's what *death* is.’ ”

“In other words, each person has to learn how to live with his own death –”

“Of course,” said Edelith, “but that's the true meaning of freedom: being given the responsibility for your own fears and not abrogating them to someone else. Death is the ultimate fear, so it's also the ultimate responsibility.”

“I think,” said Mass slowly, “that I would prefer to be an optimist and maintain that both the universe and my personal experiences will be infinite.”

Tapper spoke for the first time, “That wouldn't be a very popular attitude on Concourse.”

“Why?” asked Mass.

“Because we have a population of seven billion people and a per capita income of five thousand credits per year. The average Concourse is poor – the planet got that way because the early settlers and pioneers thought that their resources were unlimited and so they squandered them. You won't find many believers in an infinite universe on Concourse. There's a limited amount of resources, and not enough to go around.”

“It's the opposite side of the coin,” remarked Edelith. “A religion grows out of the needs of its people; but there's a feedback process involved too: a religion works also to *shape* the needs of its believers.” She

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looked at Tapper. “Do you have sacred cows on

Concourse?”

“Huh? What’s a cow?”

“An animal – it’s considered holy, so you can’t kill it for food. Meanwhile, it consumes valuable resources and produces nothing in return. Whole nations have gone bankrupt because their sacred-cow population got too high.”

“We have no sacred cows,” said Tapper. “We believe that energy should be put to work, not wasted.”

“That’s the basic principle of the Holy Church,” said Mass. “‘Thou shalt not waste energy’.”

“It’s the basic principle of most successful churches,” said Edelith. “Go on, Tapper.”

“Well, excess energy – profits, goods, gross product, whatever you want to call it – is given to members of the Royal Genetic Line by various people in the hope that their good luck will rub off. If a Royal Person likes you, he wants the best for you, so people try to curry the favor of a prince.”

Edelith giggled suddenly.

Tapper frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“No sacred cows – ? You said there were no sacred cows on Concourse, but *you’re* a sacred cow. You consume resources, you produce nothing – no wonder your planet is poor.”

“I do not produce nothing!” the boy bristled. “I mean, the Royal Line doesn’t. They give off good luck.”

“That’s what you believe,” said the woman. “The important thing about a sacred cow is that you believe in it. That way you don’t mind when it breaks through your fence and eats up your cabbages. You believe it will bring you good luck, all the while it’s bringing you bad luck by making you poorer and poorer. If you realized how it acted on the social equations, you’d butcher it immediately.”

Tapper was speechless, red in the face and splutter-

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ing. “I – I – How would you know? You’ve never been to Concourse! You’re – you – you –”

“Relax, Tapper. I’m sorry –”

The boy stood stiff and angry, still searching for words.

“– but your reaction proves that it’s a sensitive point,” said Edelith. “Let me ask you, how much do you think it’s costing – or would have cost – your people to cure you of your – hemophilia? Why do you think they’re doing it? What are they getting in return?”

“My good luck –”

“See?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Would they do it for you if you weren’t a prince?”

Tapper opened his mouth to answer, closed it instead. He sat down suddenly. Glumly.

Abruptly, Edelith looked at Mass. His face was dark.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“You know too much,” he grunted. “Especially for a woman.”

"Being a woman is something I can't help. I was born this way and accepted it. I never felt the urge strongly enough to change. Knowing too much is also something I can't help – I was also born curious. Do you want to talk about Streinveldt?"

Mass shook his head. "Streinveldt today is the same as Streinveldt four hundred years ago. Me, I believe in what I can touch. If I can't eat it, I'll kill it. If I can't kill it, I'll screw it."

"And if you can't screw it, you'll excrete on it,"

Edelith finished for him.

Mass glowered.

"You see, I am familiar with Streinveldtian morals.

Tell me, what do you believe in?"

"I believe in the Holy Church of Mankind. I let them do my believing for me."

"Ah," said Edelith. "That's an abrogation of per-

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sonal responsibility. You're giving an institution the power to make your decisions for you. That's a weak-ness –"

"Shut up!" Mass said. He stood up and glared at her.

She looked at him sharply, then nodded in acquiescence.

"I'm sorry."

Slowly, Mass returned to his seat, still glaring.

Edelith was suddenly cheerful, artificially gay, "Tapper play something for us. Please, something light."

Tapper caught her sense. *Change the subject.* He glanced worriedly at Mass, then stroked a chord out of his new lyrril.

*And I loved a golden changer
where the desert sands were black,
but the moons turned white with danger,
so she never did come back.*

*The night burned hot, the air was still, the moons
were bright and stark,
and I knew their blazing glare would kill my love in
the mourning dark.*

*How empty is the desert night,
the wind cries with a hollow sound,
shifting sands and haunting light
– no, she never will be found.*

*Yes, I lost my golden changer
where the desert sands burned black, for the
moons burned bright with danger and she never
did come back.*

Edelith applauded as Tapper stroked the final chord. She took the lyrril from him and tuned it to a new key, then stroked out a chord progression of her own. "This is for you, Tapper."

*The glare of fear hides just below the nighttime,
beyond horizons decked with crepe and past the bright-
time,*

*I dance alone
in empty splendor
and the gods no longer mind,
for my dreams have all been killed
– or perhaps just left behind.*

*There is no music,
save the sound of someone's heavy breathing,
perhaps it's mine;
a sighing rustle,
crying, trying, dying
in my mind.*

*I fear the night
will never pass into the bright
and the dawn will not return
till I am gone and long resigned
to watch the waters drift and slide
across the tarnished silver mirror of my mind.*

*I nevermore run laughing
through the dusty tumbled ruins of the pillars of the sky,
for the madness follows thrashing
and the temple will come crashing,
showering splinters on the mirror of my mind.*

*Yet, I am yearning after that which I believe in,
across the night,
a sense of wonder,
the rumbling bright
red sound of thunder –
Dare I sail across the rolling ocean's sadness?
Eluding fear and seeking gladness –
Across the silver-rippling surface of my mind.*

“And this is the answer,” said Edelith, interrupting herself.
“It's a counterpoint to the first part.”

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*If you'll clear away the veils
and the haze of dreams that drift across a lifetime
there might come a sudden laughter
gliding on a summer wind
or the sparkling liquid clatter
of the happiness of life,
like drops of diamonds,
fumbling,
dazzling out the shadows from your mind.*

*Don't fear the night;
just let it pass until the bright*

*time comes dancing down to meet you
bringing love and gentle sighs;
across the waters we will greet you,
like silvery mirrors shining under silver skies.*

The planet shone white, glittering harsh against the starkness of space. Ike's hands moved softly across the control panel and the skimmer arched inward. Edelith pursed her lips in concentration, looking for landmarks.

"What gives it such a high albedo?" asked Tapper, shielding his eyes from the glare.

"Ice," said Edelith. "Ice and snow."

"Oh," said Tapper. He resumed his watch forward.

Nonchalantly, Mass wandered over to Ike. "What's *ice*?" he whispered.

To his annoyance, Ike answered in a normal conversational tone, "Ice is frozen water. Below certain temperatures, the molecules crystallize. Snow is another form of crystallized water; it forms around dust particles in the air, each segment is a distinct miniature lattice. These lattices can drift to the ground and pile up in huge mounds; prolonged exposure to such condi-

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tions would not be healthful to unprotected organic beings such as yourselves."

"Thanks," muttered Mass and stepped away. Edelith smiled at him, but he only frowned in return.

She turned to Tapper. "This planet is currently in the middle of an ice age. It was colonized almost fifteen hundred years ago when conditions were much warmer." Edelith deliberately spoke loud enough for Mass to overhear. "Eventually, it'll warm up again,

- but that won't be for several thousand more years. Right now, it's still getting colder."

Mass rumbled, "How does anyone live on it?"

"Not on it," she corrected. "*In* it. Most of the cities are underground now. Or rather, under ice. Quite a few of the people here have gone into stasis to wait the end of the ice age, but there're still several million who are active. They've got quite a network of underground cities and laboratories, and they've been doing, long-range experiments in genetics and psionics."

"Similar to Concourse?" That was Tapper.

"Not quite. Concourses have been breeding for telekinetic potential. Here, they've been concentrating on telepathy – actually empathy."

"Empathy?" He turned the word over slowly, examining the concept from all sides.

Ike also was unfamiliar with the term. "Would you explain, please?"

"I don't think I can, Ike. Empathy is something you have to experience. If you have to have it explained to you, you don't understand it."

“Oh,” said Ike, still confused.

“It’s a human thing,” Edelith said. “That is –”

“Never mind,” said Ike. He returned his attention to the task of piloting. “I can detect land masses below the ice.” He superimposed their outlines on the planet ahead. “There are indications of warmth, here,

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here, and” – patches of red appeared on the globe – “here.”

“That last,” said Edelith. “That’s the one. Land there.”

Ike nodded, a visual signal of acknowledgment. More and more he was picking up organic mannerisms. The globe swelled alarmingly as the skimmer dropped down.

Mass leaned back on his slantboard and watched as the planet grew. He wanted to ask Edelith what an empath was, but he didn’t want to betray any more ignorance to her. He glanced over – damn! She was studying him! He jerked his gaze away. *Damned uppity woman!*

They were in the atmosphere now. Silent storms raged around them. Visibility was reduced to a gray wall of raging mush. Once, Mass thought he glimpsed a jagged mountain range through the shifting piles of blurry whiteness, but he wasn’t sure. The blizzard swirled. The silence swept past them.

Abruptly, out of the gloom ahead, a tower appeared, a slab-sided mass sticking stubbornly out of the ice.

“There,” Edelith pointed. Ike maneuvered the skimmer forward.

“Better land at the base,” she suggested. “During a storm like this, it wouldn’t be safe to land on the roof.”

The skimmer floated down past the steep sides of the building. It was windowless and seemed to be carved out of one massive block of stone. “They keep adding to it every year,” Edelith noted. “They have to, or else it would be covered by the snow. It’s their only link with the surface.”

They touched ground then. Almost immediately, snow and ice started to pile up on the windward side of the skimmer’s force field. Mass glanced at it worriedly and approached closer to inspect the strange

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white substance. Ike adjusted the field to allow him to reach out and grab a handful. He sniffed the dry powdery snow suspiciously and tasted it with even more caution. He made a face at the cold, then dropped it to the floor. He glanced over to where Edelith was pulling on a parka that Ike had synthesized.

“I’m going with you,” Mass announced.

She looked startled, started to object, then changed her mind. “All right.” She turned away as she fastened the last catch on her jacket, “But Tapper has to stay on the skimmer with Ike.”

Mass nodded. To Ike, he said, “See if you can keep that stuff from covering up the ship.”

“Yes, Mass.”

He followed Edelith down the ramp, pulling on a hooded cloak of his own. With his first step onto the ice, the wind bit into him with a vengeance. He narrowed his eyes and stumped after the woman.

There were two dark openings on the side of the tower. One was several yards up on the wall, with a ramp of ice and snow angled up to meet it. The other door was below ground level and a second ramp had been cut away to lead down to it. Edelith pointed – talking was useless in this storm – and the two of them headed for the lower opening. Apparently, as the ice covered the tower, the dwellers within were continually in the process of moving their doorway upward.

The bitter knife of the wind was cut off as they moved behind the shelter of the upward-leading ramp. A few steps more and they were angling down below ground level and into a sheltered alcove. Heat poured out from the walls and floor. Mass was grateful for that; he had been starting to feel the cold.

A large warehouse-style door opened to admit them to the tower proper and they were met by an officious clerk in gray coveralls. He glanced only once at Mass, then listened as Edelith specified, “I want to contract an empath, series JR-3, genetic code AL-EDC-9083,

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clone 46.” She produced an Oracle tab. “This is my stasis-withdrawal authorization.”

The clerk nodded and took it. He led them to an anteroom to wait and disappeared.

“Is that all?” Mass asked.

“Not quite. I’ll have to sign the service contract and receive the indenture liability forms, but we shouldn’t be here too long.”

She was right. Even before she had finished divesting herself of her parka, another clerk returned with a blank Oracle tab. Using a console at one side of the room, he programmed a contract and insurance form into it and Edelith applied her thumbprint to the scanning plate.

“Now, you,” she said to Mass. “I need a witness.”

“What do I do?”

“Just apply your thumb there – that’s right.”

The clerk thanked them and left.

Mass looked up at her. “Would you mind explaining to me what we’re doing?”

“We’re getting an empath.”

“It seems like we’re contracting for an atom fusion plant.”

“Not quite –” she said. “We’re only buying a slave.”

“Eh?”

“You heard me. A slave.”

“Now wait a minute. That violates the Convention of Mankind.”

“That was an Empire treaty,” she said. “The Empire no longer exists.”

“Your ‘Empire’ exists,” snapped Mass. “And you claim to be spiritual heir to the old one. Are you telling me you’ve

abandoned the old principles?"

She shook her head. "Not at all. We believe in the old principles very much, but the Convention of Man-kind Treaty states only that no free human being shall be enslaved *against his will...*"

"An empath is a voluntary slave?" Mass was aghast.

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.. "Sort of. These empaths are members of a specifically tailored genetic line. They are the most efficient means possible for their particular function. An empath is a slave who is not only designed for his job, but one who couldn't be happy doing anything else."

Mass scowled. "It's still slavery."

"Maybe so," Edelith admitted, "but it serves a very important function. The only reason that slavery is not more widely practiced is that it's inefficient. If slaves were more efficient than constructs, I'm sure most men would be willing to alter their morality accordingly."

"Not if they were going to be the slaves."

"Ah, but if they were the slaves, they'd be happy being slaves. That's the point of it – they'd have been bred to be exactly what they were."

Mass grunted, "I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it, *I'm* buying the empath." After a moment, she added. "You do want to cure Tapper, don't, you?"

Mass shrugged. "He's nothing to me."

"Then why did you bring him to Liadne? Why did you bring him here?"

Mass shrugged again. "Why not?"

Edelith looked at him sharply, but let the subject drop. "Anyway," she said. "It's not slavery in the way you're thinking of; it's a financial arrangement. The empath is indentured only long enough to pay back the cost of the training and the original genetic tailoring of the strain. The cost of the program is amortized over a maximum number of individuals; after each one has completed its service contract, it becomes a free individual. Any profit to the company comes when that maximum number is exceeded."

Mass didn't answer. He turned away and pretended to examine the hangings on the walls. They were crimson with black piping. He didn't like this business. Not at all.

He turned at a sound. The door whooshed open and

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one of the clerks came in. "I'm sorry," he said. "But at the moment, we have no available members of genetic code AL-EDC-9083. Our stasis storage has been exhausted and we have none who have completed their secondary training yet."

Mass grinned sardonically. "More of Tapper's inevitable bad luck?"

Edelith gestured him to shut up. "How long until you can produce one?"

"Not for several years; the training programs have not kept pace with the usage..." He gestured helplessly. "However, we still have the JAL genetic codes available and they have a higher efficiency rating –"

Edelith shook her head. "No," she said. "No 'Jallas.' "

Mass perked up his ears, "Why not?"

She glanced at him. "Because they're too weak to live out a contract. The genetic line is not very viable." She looked back to the clerk. "What else have you got?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Just the Jallas –"

"Can you use a Jalla?" Mass asked.

"Yes, but it won't survive long –"

"We don't need a long-term slave. We only need the empath once, to cure Tapper, and that's it. Then we can terminate the contract."

Edelith led Mass off to one side, "Let me handle this. We *don't want* a Jalla."

"The man says the Jallas are more efficient –"

"He's trying to get rid of them because they're a minimally viable strain."

Mass was annoyed. "But you can work with one, can't you?"

"I can," she admitted, "But I won't. I don't want to pay for a contract I'll never get full use of."

"What does that matter, we want to cure Tapper! This is the only way."

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." Mass returned to the clerk. "Can you rewrite the Contract?"

"For a Jalla? Yes, sir." He turned to the Oracle machine and started pecking at it. Edelith came up to Mass and started to whisper something, but he glared at her. "Shut up. You want an empath, don't you?"

"Dammit, Mass," she hissed "Will you listen?"

"I want Tapper cured," he said. "I promised him that I would help him – at least, he thinks I promised him, so I've got to live up to that. It's my – *honor*."

"This isn't the way."

"You said you needed an empath, didn't you? The Jallas are more efficient, aren't they?"

"I won't pay for it," she said. "If you want the Jalla so badly, you sign for it. You don't understand the –"

"You're the one who doesn't understand I want you off my skimmer. I want Tapper off my skimmer. I want the puff-puppy off my skimmer. Once this is over, I can be rid of all of you'."

Edelith didn't answer right away. She studied Mass's barely suppressed anger with cool detachment. "There's a reason why the Jallas are a minimally viable strain, Mass. Are you listening? They're *too* efficient. The linkage is too strong. Everything is too exposed. I don't like to use the Jallas, because I know what the consequences will be. And I don't like them. You won't like them either."

"Why?"

She wouldn't meet his eyes. "3'ust take my word for it. If you force me to use a Jalla, it'll be the hardest thing for all of us."

"Is there any other way to cure Tapper?"

"No," she admitted.

"Then we have no choice."

"I'm not paying for it," she said.

He looked at her. "You said you would cure Tapper, Your service in exchange for mine."

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"I said I would cure him if I could. But I won't pay for a Jalla contract." She returned his stare. "You want it? You pay for it."

Mass considered it. "How?" he asked. The only way to pay for anything was with service. With widespread molecular synthesis, goods were cheap; in some places, free. Therefore the only commodity of value was in-formation – or training, which was information applied by the hands of a skilled user. The only wealth a man could possess was knowledge and ability; thus the only way to pay for a service was by repaying an equivalent service. And Mass was an ignorant barbarian. He looked up. "I have no wealth," he admitted.

"You have the skimmer," Edelith pointed out. "Run messages for the planets of this Empire. Or become a merchant. The Jalla empath isn't worth much. If you're lucky, you'll have paid for it before it dies."

"I have no credit status in your Empire," Mass said.

Edelith considered it. "Increase your service con-tract to me: the use of the skimmer for a period equal to the cost of the Jalla contract."

Mass's craggy features pursed in concentration. He wasn't sure he completely trusted this – *woman*. "What's to insure that I fulfill the contract? I have the skimmer. If I default, you'd have no way to catch me."

"I trust you," said Edelith.

"You – trust – *me*?"

"You have your honor," she said. "You're a Streinveldter. You won't default. If I thought you would, I wouldn't have suggested it."

"You're willing to do this? You're willing to work with a Jalla, even though you don't like them?"

"I never said I didn't like them; I said I didn't like the consequences. They're too – exposing. But, yes, I'll work with one. If it's the only way I can use your skimmer, even if it's only for a short time, I'll do it."

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Mass thought about that. Edelith – on the skimmer? She was such a – woman. But – "All right," he said. "You pay for the Jalla and I'll pay you." He turned to the waiting clerk, "Is the new contract ready?"

It was and Edelith thumbprinted it. Mass increased his service contract to her by an equivalent amount.

The clerk vanished then and they waited, alternately looking and not looking at each other. Mass scratched glumly at his jaw.

Edelith pulled her robe about her and waited in silent dignity. She seemed to be in a state of mental detachment, considering something. Mass started to ask her something, then changed his mind. He stumped over to the Oracle and began punching idly at it, looking at viewscapes one after the other. But the images didn't register on his consciousness.

Abruptly, the door opened and the empath entered.

She was – *she!* – was so thin she was hardly more than a wisp; she was frail, a mere outline of a girl, waiting to be fleshed. Pale skin, almost as white as the snow outside; dark hair, glistening black; red lips, flushed with blood. Her features were soft. She wore a one-piece garment of indeterminate shape.

But it was her eyes that caught Mass – they were hidden by a set of dark glasses, wide elliptical lenses that covered her sockets completely. Highlights glinted purple off them. Mass stepped close, peering curiously, but they were impenetrable to his *j*.

The girl cocked her head curiously at Mass, at Edelith, and then at Mass again. Her gaze was wondering, and more than that, it was strangely disconcerting; the blankness of her dark-goggled eyes was almost alien. To Mass it seemed as if she were wearing a mask: he couldn't read her expressions, but she could read his. It disturbed him.

And then she spoke. Her voice was clear and sweet as fresh water in a bubbling spring. "Hello," she said. "My name is Aura."

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They bundled her into a cape and took her across to the skimmer. Almost immediately, they were plunging upward.

Tapper studied the girl with wide eyes; he was embarrassed, he kept looking away and when he thought she wasn't noticing he'd sneak another quick glance.

She stood on the deck trembling. Fear was a chilly white feeling hanging over the situation. And something dark and raging was hiding behind that. She could sense it.

There was the dwarf – he seemed to be the nexus of it. He seethed like a volcano, occasionally bursting and sputtering with hot venom, but more often lurking disturbingly quiescent.

Then there was the yellow boy. He flirted like a butterfly, anxious and scared; he reacted to every tremor of the dwarfs dark surface. Yet there was more to him than that – something pungent and alluring, a scent of sweet ether, like a dark sleep beckoning. An intriguing and powerful sensation.

And the robot – no, that was the wrong word; he was more than that – he was the most curious of all. There was a fresh metallic taste to his essence. He was painted in broad strokes and careful decisions – but he was flecked with doubts and delicate pastels. There was a questing curiosity about him, like a child waking after a long sleep and

finding itself in a new place. But, at the same time, she sensed something *more* in his mind that she couldn't identify – it *disturbed* her.

There was the puff-puppy – a joyous bundle of raw emotion. *LOVE*, it said with every action. *LOVE, LOVE*. Its essence was pure. Tumbling. Happy.

Lastly, there was the tall woman. She emanated

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coldness, but she carried within her a brilliant glowing furnace so carefully shielded and banked that it was all but invisible. Her outer surface was cold, carefully so. She seemed cast in quartz, icy and blue, and Aura wondered how the woman could contain so much energy and betray so little of it. The tension in that mind was – *incredible*.

Aura could sense the flux and flow of pressures between these people. The dark dwarf smouldered constantly – he was disturbed by the presence of others; but actions of certain individuals caused him to rumble ominously and belch black smoke. Strangely, it was the lubricated smoothness of Ike that annoyed him the most; the icy furnace of Edelith aroused him much less – perhaps he sensed the power she held in control and respected it.

The taU woman moved in the center of a pulsing web; its threads ran outward in all directions – yet some of them were stronger than others. Ostensibly, her attention was toward Tapper, but if that was so, why were the majority of her threads strung to the dwarf? Could her emotions be focused on him? No, that didn't seem right, and yet –

Abruptly, her reverie was interrupted. The dwarf was smouldering louder now. An ominous cloud was growing around him. Aura cast about for the source of his disturbance, was alarmed to find it was herself –

Mass was saying to Edelith, "All right, do it."

Edelith gave him a withering." look. "It's not that easy." She turned and walked up a ramp. Mass stumped angrily after her.

She stopped when she was out of sight and earshot of Tapper and Aura. She waited until Mass caught up, "I don't want to argue in front of them."

"Why can't you do it now?" growled the dwarf.

"It takes time. That empath is scared – didn't you see her trembling? She's not used to the skimmer and she's not used to us. You could see the fear dripping

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off her like sweat as she turned and read each one of IIS.

"She doesn't have to do that. Tapper's the only one she has to work on."

Edelith shook her head. "She has to get used to all – of us first. I told you, it's a very delicate process."

"How long will it take?"

"I don't know. You aren't helping much, grumbling around the way you are. Your vibrations alone are enough to keep her permanently

traumatized.”

Mass scowled, not sure what Edelith meant. He said, “I can’t do anything about my – vibrations. I don’t even know what they are. And I don’t care. I just want you to get her used to us as fast as you can so you can help Tapper.”

Edelith studied him carefully. “I suggest you concern yourself with paying for her contract and let the healing be my worry.”

Mass was fuming. He stamped back down to the main deck and stared at Aura. His stare made her uncomfortable and she trembled even worse. She was still wearing her silvery cloak and she pulled it tighter around her.

“What are those things?” Mass demanded. He pointed at her glasses.

“Those are protective lenses,” said Edelith coming down behind him. “She sees a different range of light than we do; it’s part of her empathic ability. She lacks receptors for most of what we perceive as visible light, but can see beyond, deep into the ultra-violet and infra-red ranges. Those lenses protect her eyes from os light which would be too strong for her.”

Mass continued to stare. “I signed a contract for six thousand stellars,” he said. “Are you worth six thousands stellars?”

“You must think so,” Tapper put in, bristling, “you signed the contract.”

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“I did it for you,” snapped Mass. He turned back to Aura. “We’d better get our money’s worth.”

Edelith said, “That’s right, Mass. Scare her.”

Mass whirled on the taller woman. “You’re a big help – you refused to sign the contract at all. You don’t have any right to speak. I’m paying for her and she’s mine.”

“Then waste her,” shrugged Edelith. “If you keep raging at her, you’ll destroy what usefulness she has.”

Mass growled deep in his throat. Aura recoiled. He started to say something else, but Edelith said, “Dammit, if you must growl, do it where you won’t scare anyone.” She pointed back up the ramp.

Mass glared at her for a moment, looked back at Aura, then realized Edelith was serious. He went stamping up the ramp. Edelith followed after him.

Aura quivered. The vibrations of their emotions swept over her. They were angry, both of them, and they were violent.

She could feel their intensity like something scrap-ing at her mind. Why did they have to fight so? And even as she asked that, she knew the answer: because they cared.

Yes, of course, that was it – they couldn’t get angry enough to argue unless they cared so strongly. She could sense the depths of their caring, a helpless longing, smothered on one side by ice and on the other by lava. So they fought instead; it was the only way they could reach each other. They couldn’t touch, they couldn’t allow themselves to *be* touched. All that was left was anger and frustration. And squalling pain. They cared so much they had to involve themselves with each other – but the only language they could communicate in was the language of hate.

They raged at each other for hours. It was a run-ning, jumping and standing still argument. It went no-where and everywhere and accomplished nothing. But they did it because they didn't know how to make love.

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They thundered back and forth and sent shattering flashes of violence through Aura's body. As Mass and Edelith moved about the skimmer, she tried to keep always to the opposite side, tried to keep as far away from them as possible. It didn't help. Here on the skimmer she was isolated from the background noises and varied whisperings of her city. The force fields of the skimmer insulated them, focused all the vibrations inward. The emanations were almost overpowering. They were a boiling chasm and she was teetering on the edge of it.

Tears streaked her cheeks. Oh, didn't they *know*? There was a better way than this – a so much better Way....

At last, they began to subside. Exhausted, she sank down onto a chaise and slept.

When she woke the rage was still there, but damped down. Two distinct sources, two smouldering embers of resentment. It was tolerable, but just barely.

She pulled her cloak about her and went exploring.

And found Tapper. He was standing at the edge of a platform, urinating out into space, a thin yellow stream arcing between the stars and disappearing into nothingness.

"Why don't you use a proper urinal?" she asked.

Tapper grinned, "I haven't filled this one yet." He finished and readjusted his toga; it was yellow, striped with the same green as her chemise; he had worn it to show his sympathy with her – she could sense what he had done though she couldn't see the colors. To her, that particular color was black. "Actually," Tapper said, "the skimmer recycles it. Nothing is wasted. So it doesn't matter where I urinate."

"Oh." She fell silent.

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Tapper studied her face, but it was hard to tell what she was thinking behind the glasses. "Is something the matter?" he asked.

She shook her head, then moved off to another part of the platform and squatted. Tapper watched for a second, abruptly became uneasy. He hadn't been embarrassed when the situation had been reversed, but there was something in her manner....

He turned his back and waited.

She came back. "What's your name?"

"Tapper. And you're Aura, right?"

She nodded, and almost – yes, she did – smiled.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yes." She smiled again.

He took her by the hand and led her down to a deck that

seemed a sheltered alcove. From somewhere he produced a table and chairs, and from somewhere else, food. There was a tangy drink that sparkled across her tongue, a salad of pale leaves, and a mix-ture of sharp grain and spicy meats in a sweet-sour sauce. There was also a fruit-flavored paste to sweeten the meal.

They ate in silence. But their manner spoke for them. Tapper's eyes glowed with blue-green fire; he couldn't stop looking at her. She was a curious blossom unfolding delicately in the morning dew. Her black lenses were bottomless, mysterious. She cocked her head and studied him: he shimmered and vibrated, a sweet declaration of new life, tentative and questing. She smiled at his colors – deep warmth bordered by nervous cold. He smiled and twinkled back.

On another deck, Edelith stood watching them. Mass was at her side.

"There," she said. "That's what we were waiting for."

"When do you start?" he asked.

"Don't rush me. Don't rush them. Give it a chance to ripen."

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And at that, a frown crossed Aura's face, flickered momentarily – and was reflected in Tapper's concern. "What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I keep picking up vibrations from Mass and Edelith. He's very impatient. About us. But she – she – I can't figure out what she's feeling, but it concerns Mass, and you and I as well."

Tapper shivered.

She reached over and touched his hand.

Later, Tapper brought her down to the main deck; he picked up his lyrril and drew a few chords out of it.

"What a funny sound," Aura said. "Do it again."

"It's only a lyrril," Tapper said. He ran through a quick chord progression, ending with a ripple of minor changes. The notes were wistful and haunting.

Aura cocked her head. "That's – strange; but nice. It suggests the kinds of moods I can feel about people. Is that what a lyrril is for?"

"it's for making music."

"Music?" She turned the unfamiliar word over in her mind.

In explanation, Tapper strummed and plucked the opening bars of *Shagbag's Song*. The chords bounced through the air like the puE-puppy itself.

Aura laughed in delight. "That's *funny!*" She exclaimed. "First, it was wistful; now it's funny. What a marvelous toy!"

Tapper stared at her. "You've never heard music before?"

"No. It's wonderful. Oh, please do it again. It's so funny."

But instead of *Shagbag's Song* again, he tumbled

silver notes across the deck, sparkling and chiming.
Both Mass and Edelith looked up. It was the *Theme*

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of the Waltzing Flowers; Aura clapped her hands excitedly.
“Oh, don’t stop! Do some more –” She stopped and frowned. “There is more, isn’t there? I mean, that couldn’t be all –”

Tapper laughed. “If it were all there was, I would have to make up some more – just because you want it.”

She caught the tenderness in his tone; it startled her momentarily, but she smiled back. Tapper’s heart soared. He struck a new chord.

*And I loved a minstrel flyer while the sky was
bright with fall, but the night’s a brilliant liar
for there was no sky at all.*

*Now her voice is lost, her music’s out, She
fed my bed with tear-stained sigh while the
darkness gathered near.
I touched her once, she gave a cry and
vanished into fear.*

*all silent is the time.
Night’s hollow laughter rings about my
echoing empty rhyme.*

*Yes, I lost my minstrel flyer while the sky
was bright with fall, for the night’s a brilliant
liar,, and there was no sky at all.*

When he finished, she looked at him for a long time. “That was very sad,” she whispered, “It suits you, but I wish it didn’t. I like you better when you’re happy.”

“But I don’t know any happy songs. Oh, wait, yes I do – “
He played:

*I’m not happy less I’m mad, If I’m
cheerful, then I’m sad,*

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*’cause there’s nothing like the blackest gloom to make
me feel glad –*

She laughed, but with an undertone of sadness. “That’s not a happy song either. Not really.”

“You’ve only heard two songs; how can you tell?”

“I don’t know songs at all. But I know moods and that’s not a happy song. It’s bittersweet.”

“Oh,” said Tapper.

Abruptly, Mass stumped over. “I know a happy song,” he said.

Tapper looked up in surprise. “Huh? You?” Even Edelith was startled.

Mass blustered back, "Well, I do! You want to hear it?"

"Uh, yes."

"Oh, yes... *please*," added Aura. Her tone was recognizably more sincere than Tapper's. "Please, Mass, sing your song."

"Do you want some music?" Tapper offered.

Mass shook his head. "Streinveldtian songs are meant to be sung alone." He took a deep breath and rasped out:

*Oh, my Daddy was a wand'rin' spaceman, He
found Mamma lurking in some sea, Oh, they
never had attractive children – if you don't
believe it, look at me!*

*Now every night Mom slept with Poppa, They
were happy as happy could be, Then, of course,
I came along to join them – and they were glad
to make it three!*

*Well, my sister was a fancy woman, At that
price you couldn't help but see That the
fanciness was only greasepaint – but she never
ever did charge me!*

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*And my brother was a different fellow,
He was different as different could be.
He never ever slept with girls
'cause he preferred to sleep with me!*

*Now, we had a tricky robot butler, He could do
things that were ecstasy, I am speaking to you
from experience – either AC current or DC!*

*Well, the family pet was no slouch either, A
forty-foot reptile was she,
And when it came to fancy footwork – she
almost was as good as me!*

*But an awful thing happened last yearday, At the
family reunion we agreed
To see how many ways we could do it – and the
only survivor was me!*

When he stopped, there was a painful silence. Tapper examined his fingernails one by one. Edelith looked off into space. Only Aura thought to applaud. "Thank you, Mass, that was wonderful."

But Tapper didn't think so; neither did Edelith. Aura looked at them. "Wasn't that fun?" Then she sensed their moods. "What's the matter?"

"That's not a proper song," said Edelith stiffly. "It's about breaking taboos. He shouldn't have chosen that song to sing to you."

Mass bristled, but Aura said first, "I *liked* it, though."

"You didn't understand it, that's all."

“Oh, but I did. It’s about a family that shares sex with each other in all possible kinds of combinations.” Her face shone with innocence.

“That’s not a happy song,” repeated Edelith.

“Oh, no, Edelith. You’re wrong. It *is* a happy song. It’s a very happy song.”

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“Eh?” she said. Even Mass shut his mouth to listen.

“I can see the moods, remember? It’s a celebration of the joys of life – it’s happy people doing a happy thing; the singer is happy when he sings it, he’s saying, ‘Look how funny I am and look how much I’m enjoying it – share my enjoyment with me.’ He’s saying there’s nothing to be afraid of – it’s only sex. By treating it with humor, he’s reducing something that he might be afraid of into a form that he doesn’t have to fear at all. Instead he can laugh at it and with it and let it make him feel good – and we should feel good in sympathetic response.”

Edelith closed her mouth. Tapper looked astonished.

Aura stood up and went to Mass. She reached out and touched his face. Gently, she said, “Thank you, Mass, thank you for singing such a happy song. I liked it very much.” Both Tapper and Edelith gaped.

Mass found himself suddenly flustered. His face felt hot. He stammered. “Uh, you’re welcome,” then abruptly, he turned away. Embarrassed, he stumped off behind a privacy screen. He didn’t come out again until Tapper had put away the lyrril.

Ike wanted to recharge the skimmer, its stored power was running low.

“A simple process,” he explained. “We dive at a star with all screens open and receiving.” Noting their reactions, he said, “It’s nothing to be concerned about. We’ll loop around it quickly and be out into space again almost immediately. During the time of closest approach, we will be able to store enough energy for many months of operation.”

Mass grumbled something, but said, “All right.”

Edelith asked, “Isn’t there a safer way to recharge?”

“Safer?” Ike could have frowned. “The term is meaningless. All ways are safe. This way is quickest. Actually, the skimmer is continually receiving and storing energy, photons from near and distant stars; but the storage process is slower than the rate of usage. If we can increase the number of photons that we intercept, we can reverse the ratio; diving at a star is the quickest and most efficient way.”

“I thought we had enough power for at least six more months,” grumbled Mass.

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“We do,” said Ike, “but we must still refuel in order to

maintain our continued functioning at *peak* efficiency.”

“I don’t understand it.”

“It’s a problem of stasis mechanics,” Ike explained. “The power in storage must be maintained above a threshold level or the stability of the entire system is threatened. The power is there, but you wouldn’t be able to make full use of it.” He searched his memory for an analogue, “Think of it in terms of water pres-sure. There must always be a certain amount in the pipe in order to provide enough pressure to make the rest flow.”

“Oh,” said Mass. He stumped over to his stool and sat down. You couldn’t argue with Ike.

Ike turned to his console and became one with the skimmer. He opened all screens to maximum extension; the ship’s fields swept out hundreds of miles to provide the largest possible surface for the interception of photons.

Then he gave the craft a velocity toward the nearby star and disconnected all subsidiary functions except the life-support system; thus he had the skimmer’s full power available for the protection of his – friends (?) (what an odd thought!) – though he was sure he would not need it.

The skimmer was falling in a hyperbolic orbit. Ike remained in communion to monitor the recharging process. The star grew rapidly.

Mass and Edelith sat and watched it. Behind them stood Aura and Tapper.

The star swelled alarmingly and Aura began trembling. “What is it?” whispered Tapper.

“The light,” she gasped. “It’s too heavy.” The puff-puppy whimpered uneasily.

“Heavy?”

Edelith looked back. She stood and went to the girl, but Aura shrank away from her, shivering in the incredible heat of the star. It had become a wall of

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brightness covering half the forward sky. The skimmer was no longer silvery, but black against the painfulness of the glare. Aura slipped to her knees, burying her head in her arms.

“Do something!” screamed Tapper.

“Ike!” cried Edelith. “Turn up the shields!”

But Ike didn’t hear them. He was so deep in communion he was unaware.

Mass was on his feet then, pounding on the construct’s body. “Damn you! It’s getting too bright! Too hot! The girl can’t take it!”

Edelith made another attempt to go to Aura’s aid, but again she shrank away. Tapper shouldered past, “Aura, it’s me –” The girl reached for him desperately. “Curl into a ball,” he said. She did so and he wrapped her silver-foil cloak around her; he held her tight. Edelith backed away, nodding.

Mass was beating on Ike’s back. He jumped up on the podium and started flailing at his head, a raging red dwarf. “Ike, you stupid son of a –” But the construct was as immovable as if made out of marble. As Mass’s frustration

rose, so did his anger. He bounced up and down in fury, kicking and screaming.

The heat was rising as the skimmer plunged into the star; they could all feel it now.

"Ike! You're not compensating for the increased radiation!" Edelith's composure was cracking. "Ike!"

The construct remained frozen. Stiff and impassive.

"Mass!" said Edelith. "Do something!"

"I'm trying!" He kicked at Ike's face with a heavy-nailed boot.

"That won't do any good – he can't hear you! Isn't there another way to get through to him – ?"

Mass halted, his foot poised in the act of another kick. He frowned, as if trying to remember something. "Yes, there is!" He leapt off the podium and ran over to the Oracle, stabbed it to life.

He typed into it, IKE, THE LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEM IS IN DANGER OF BEING OVER-

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POWERED BY PROXIMITY TO THE SUN! URGENT!

For a moment, nothing happened. The star was a blazing whiteness, a sensation of sheer heat and fury, felt rather than seen –

Then, abruptly, it was nothing – darkness, blessed darkness –

No, there it was. As his eyes painfully readjusted, Mass could see a vague redness; it seemed to fill the universe. Ike must have finally increased the reflective power of the life-support shield; the star's light was filtered a million times now before reaching them. Its heat was gone. Once more, comfortable living conditions prevailed. But his eyes and his body still ached with the memory of that glare –

Edelith had fallen to the floor; now, gasping, she levered herself up and looked around. Tapper was crouched – no, fallen – over a silver-cloaked form. She went to him, pulled him back and turned to Aura. She drew the cloak aside; the girl's glasses had slipped off, but her eyes were closed. Her face was paler than usual and she was breathing irregularly.

"Is she all right?" Tapper asked, blinking. His voice quivered in the near-darkness.

Edelith shook her head. "I don't know." She ran her hands across the girl's body. "She doesn't seem hurt, but she could be in shock – empathic shock from an overdose of all our fear feelings."

"No," cried Tapper. He hugged the girl into his arms. "No, Aura, don't die. Don't die. Damn my luck – it's all my fault! Don't die, Aura! Don't die!" The puff-puppy whimpered and sniffled at her arm.

Edelith whispered, "That's it, Tapper. That's it. That'll bring her around. Keep caring, Tapper. *Keep caring!*"

"I do care! I do! Don't die, Aura. I need you –"

Mass came up to them, staring. He exchanged a glance with Edelith. His face had lost its usual ruddy

color, was an ashen paleness instead. "Is it serious?" he asked.

Edelith didn't answer; she ignored his concern.

"Damn it!" he repeated. "Is it serious?"

She turned a withering glance on him, "Why? Are you afraid of losing your investment?"

Mass made a sound and stepped past her. He went down on his knees and made as if to touch the girl's face. Tapper pulled her away, but Mass locked eyes with him. "I won't hurt her, boy." He brushed a strand of hair away from her closed eyes. "Get better, little girl, please. Get better. I want you to get better too." He touched her face for a moment. "Please..." he whispered.

Then he stood. Tapper looked at Mass, a new expression in his eyes.

Mass shrugged. "All right," he grumbled. "I can care too, can't I?"

"Yes," said Tapper. "Yes, I guess you can, after all."

Mass glowered at Edelith. "You're the one who doesn't care," he accused.

Edelith looked startled. "But – I do –"

"Then, tell her so, dammit!"

Edelith bent down to Aura's side again. "We all want you to get better, Aura. *We all* care."

Tapper raised the girl's head up. He bent his face down and his lips found hers, brushed against them gently. Tears were forming in his eyes.

And Aura awoke. A simple thing. She opened her eyes.

They were black, all black. No white, no iris – the whole surface of the eye was deep and featureless black. The eye was all pupil, black with a hint of violet: a serene blank gaze. She smiled at Tapper. "I heard you," she said. Then she blinked. "My glasses. Where are my glasses?"

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Tea star dwindled to a pinpoint behind them and finally winked out.

"Her eyes," asked Mass. "Is that because of the sun?"

"No, that's the way they normally are. That's one of the reasons she wears glasses. The sight of her eyes is too disturbing to most people."

Mass bit his lip for asking. He looked over at Tapper and Aura sitting on a chaise and just holding hands. "Will she be all right?"

"I think so. I think we can begin any time now. They're ready for it. *We're* ready for it."

Mass shook his head. "I want to find out what went wrong with Ike." The construct was just coming out of communion. "Ike, what happened? Why didn't you protect us from the sun?"

Ike hesitated (a bad sign). "I don't know – I meant to, but – something –" He stiffened. "As we plunged inward, there was a feeling of wanting to open myself up completely to the fires... the cleansing cleansing fires. I wanted to burn everything off from me."

Edelith shuddered.

Ike went on, his voice was shrill and frightened. "Mass – the thought wasn't mine. I don't know where it came from! It was – just *there*. Like I was still part of the massmind. The plunge into the sun was overloading and activating all the circuits everywhere. It was like an orgasm, a beautiful beautiful exploding experience – and in the middle of it, *I* was awakening – a higher level of consciousness –" Ike paused. "No." He turned and looked at the podium. "I was *me*. I was awake and conscious – but I felt as if a new part of me were opening up, a part that wanted cleansing. I wanted to open up to the fire.

"When you typed into the Oracle, you stopped me

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...it. Whatever I was, I closed up on myself again – I disappeared."

Edelith was frowning. "Could you open up like that again, Ike?"

"I – I'm not sure. I don't know what happened. I don't know what I did. I don't know if I could do it again."

Edelith was thoughtful. "Perhaps it's a result of Ike's sudden ascension to self-awareness." She looked at him. "Are you all right now?"

"Oh, yes. I am inhibited again – I mean – I am *me* again."

Edelith said, "We'll find out."

Mas's rumbled, "Maybe we shouldn't – I mean, if he feels all right now."

"Would you leave Tapper uncured?" Edelith asked. "If there's something wrong with Ike, we have to find it. It almost killed us today. I won't feel safe until I find out why."

Mass shut up. He looked down at the deck beneath his feet and he touched the podium before him. He slid his hands slowly across its liquid surface. Something wrong with Ike – ? Something *inside* – disturbed?

He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

Tms moment was Edelith's; she was poised on the decision.

She knew what she *had* to do; the question was did she have the courage to do it?

Climbing into another person's mind – even with the help of an empath – is an act of great openness. Just as she would be looking at the raw soul that was Tapper, so would she be baring her own soul. Empathy is a two-way process.

That was the part that unnerved her. She wasn't sure she wanted to be opened up.

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She had been carefully playing this role she had chosen for herself: she was the calm, cool and dispassionate healer, she was the one who knew and understood.

But if she didn't help Tapper, she was a sham. And she wanted to help – but she wanted to do it from a distance.

And that was impossible.

She sighed at the inevitability of it. The only way to 'wrassle a stut-boar' is to get down there in the mud and do it.

Well, she told herself, *this if where we find out who I am.*

She turned to Mass. "I think we should begin."

He looked up and started to ask, "Begin what?" Then he caught her expression and he knew. "Now?"

She nodded. "I need a few minutes to prepare, but I think they've grown as close as they're going to – on their own, that is."

Mass followed her to a console, watched as she began programming her equipment. "I thought you were going to help Ike."

"We will," she said. Abruptly, she took her hands off the keyboard and looked at him. "Mass, I'll need your help. This is going to have to be a five-way mind-link."

"Huh – ?"

"In order to help Tapper, I have to link with his mind. I need Aura to do that, but I also have to include you in the circuit – and Ike."

Mass felt dry in the mouth. "Why? What for?"

"Remember how Aura went into empathic shock from- all of our fear feelings? It took three of us to bring her back. I don't want the same kind of thing to happen again. She's an imperfect tool – I told you that when we contracted her. The stability of your mind and Ike's will help."

"Stability – of – my – mind –" Mass echoed.

"Yes. Even more, I'll need you to cope with Ike.

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He obeys you. You can control him. I can't. You'll be the strength of the link, Mass. I need you."

Mass swallowed hard. "I think – you're mistaken. Maybe Ike can help you, but I –" He backed off and tried again. "I'm a different kind of person than you and Tapper and Aura. I – find it hard to accept your – values –"

Edelith's face was impassive. *Maybe he's right*, she thought. *(But no, there's no other way –)*

Mass said, "You know that I don't like you – no, that's not right – I don't accept you as equals."

"You're afraid to link up with inferior beings?" she prompted.

"No, that's not it at all," Mass blurted. "You would sense my attitudes. Wouldn't that hurt your work?"

"I,et me worry about my work. I need you for the mind link, Mass. I want you to join it." She paused. "If you don't, I won't be able to help Ike at all. And maybe not even Tapper."

"Huh?"

"Mass, I need your strength." She softened her tone. "It's not your attitudes that count, Mass. We all have our own personal prejudices. It's *you* we need. It's your – *trust*. Tapper has to know that he can depend on all of us. That includes you too. But you have to take the first step. You have to show him that you – want to help."

Mass said, "Do you really think I could – help?"

"I know it," Edelith said. "You're a very gentle per-son –"

She saw Mass's face darken and she realized she'd said the wrong thing. "– you have the great strength that we need. And you have the desire to help. That's what counts."

Mass whispered, "I – I've never been in a mind-link before –"

Edelith touched his face. "I'll help you, Mass..."

He looked up at her. "I – I'm not sure..."

She nodded. "Yes. It is an act of courage."

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"Courage...?" He was a little boy asking; his eyes were wide.

And Edelith knew that she had guessed right. "Yes," she said. "Courage is doing something, even when you're afraid of it."

And Mass knew that she *knew*. And suddenly he didn't mind.

She made him lie down on a chaise then and gave him something to make him relax. The edges of things became fuzzy and he hung in the air and waited.

(Mass...?)

("Who's that?")

("It's me. Aura.")

A smile. ("Hello, Aura.")

("Hi.") Gently. ("I want you to come with me.")

("Come where?")

("Just over this way a little – that's right – I want you to meet someone.")

(– *want kiss – wet love, warm need – pink happy, slurp kiss –*)

Recoil. ("What's that?")

("Relax. It's only the puff-puppy.")

("The puff-puppy?")

("Go on. Let him love you. That's all he wants.")

(– *warm wet, sweet burst – bright pink, slurp kiss – happy love, joyous love –*)

("It feels – funny – ")

("It feels *nice*.")

("Yes. It does. Hello, puppy.")

(– *Firework splattering joy! – Happiness sparkling! – Dazzling bright burst – yellow streamers, crimson pup, fluorescent love – !*)

("My goodness – what did you do to him?")

("I – don't know. I just – loved him back a little.")

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("That's what he wanted from you, Mass – just a little affection in return.")

("I – don't know. I'm not very good at – affection.")

("Well, try it again.")

("Hello, puppy. Nice puppy.")

(– *Bright giggling, bubbly laughing, pink streaked, happy bursting, yellow gashing, swirling – warm wet*)

Lovh – !! –)

(“It’s a little like being drunk – ”)

(“Come on. There’s someone else here.”)

Something freshly metallic. (“Ike?”)

(“Hello, Mass.”)

(“You look different.”)

Ike smiled – Mass had never noticed before that he could. (“You’ve never looked at me this way before. Conversely, I’ve never looked at you in this manner. It is an unusual state.”)

Mass found himself entranced by the pulsating shimmer that was Ike. (“You are – more complex than I had thought.”)

(“You are very pretty yourself, Mass.”)

Oddly enough, Mass laughed at that; he took no offense at all. He sensed that Ike had intended it as a compliment. He blushed – blushed?

Ike added, (“I am beginning to understand better the subjective outlooks of organic beings like yourselves. I am experiencing your thoughts, Mass. You are a good person.”)

Mass was startled. (“I am?”)

Aura’s voice. (“Yes, you are.”)

Mass turned his attention to himself. (“I am?”)

He began to examine his own mind through the minds of the others.

There was a gentle intrusion then, (“Later, Mass.”)

It was Edelith. (“There will be time for that later.

Now, we must go see Tapper.”)

(“Yes. Tapper.”)

Aura: (“Wait, Edelith. We are not as closely linked

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as we could be. We have achieved a primary link, but I think a deeper link is possible.”)

Surprise flickered across Edelith’s surface. (“I hadn’t thought – ”)

(“I can sense it. We can grow closer.”)

Edelith focused on Mass, on Ike, on the giggly pink joy of the puppy. (“Willingness?”)

And they answered, (“Willingness.”) The assent and the action were the same act. Before, they had been five minds touching – now, abruptly, they were five minds overlapping. It was hard to tell whose thoughts were whose. They were together as *one*. Warm affection surrounded them.

Mass felt an odd sense of relaxation. They all felt it: the innocence of the puppy magnified through their minds, a sense of *openness* – and freedom. Nakedness.

Formless, they were, directionless – an amoeba-like pulsating aliveness –

Then, they began moving, seeking purpose. (“Relax,”) a voice was saying, (“Let me do the guiding for now – just follow my lead – our lead. Ike, please try not to be so – dispassionate – relax and ride with the experience. That’s it. We’re all sharing one ‘body’ now.”) (“The experience is – sexual – ”) (“I like it.”) (“It reminds me of the massmind – but

I've never been part of a massmind. Why do I remember it?) ("My memories are blurring – *our* memories are blurring.") ("Don't worry. It's an effect of the mind-link – ") (– *warm wet, slobbering pink kiss, happy tongue, wet face smile, happy giggling joy, laughing love* –)

Edelith-and-Mass-and-Ike-and-Aura-and-the-puff-puppy.

("Where's Tapper?") (– *kiss Tapper* –)

("We must open up to him and let him join us.") ("In time. Think about him first.") ("I like Tapper.") (– *love Tapper* –) ("So do I.") ("But he's so soft and effeminate – how can we like anyone like that – ") Startlement; then: (" – but *1 like* him too.") Surprise at that. ("I like him – *why* do I like him?") ("It's hard not to like Tapper.") ("He's nice.") (– *love Tap-*

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per –) ("He's beautiful.") ("I- would like to make love to him.") (– *love to him, wet pink love to him* –) Pleasant shock, a tingle of delight. A puppy rolling in a happy thought. ("I would like to make love to him too.") ("Yes.") ("I *1Re* to hear him sing.") (– *love Tapper, warm purring* –)

("Look at him, now.") ("Look *into* him.") ("He's so – Tapper-ish.") (– *kiss Tapper* –) ("Open up, Tapper – see us.")

A yellow glow seeped into the thoughts. ("I – I'm – "-)

("Yes, you are – ") ("Share with us – ") (– *love Tapper* –) ("Hello, Tapper.")

("Look, now – ") ("What's that?") ("A twisted knot of something – ") ("It's Tapper – no, it's part of Tapper.") ("It's a *bad* part – can we close it away?")

("No!")

("Relax – ") (– *love Tapper* –) (" – we don't want to close it away. Closing away is not the answer. We will try to untwist it – ")

("I'm scared.")

("Yes, we all are – but remember, courage?") ("Yes. Courage.") (– *love* –)

("How do we untwist – ?") ("With love and with care...") ("What is the knot made of?") ("Fear.") ("I hate fear.") ("No – don't hate it. Pity it. Fear happens only when something is unknown; it vanishes in the light.")

("What is *this* fear made of?") ("It is a small boy fear.") ("It is mingled strands of aloneness and un-worthiness and pain.")

("We can take away those strands – look how they dissolve – ") ("Tapper, you're not alone.") (– *kiss Tapper* –) ("Confront your fear.")

("I am not alone?")

("No, you're not.") ("There's nothing to be afraid of.")

("Failure.") ("I'm afraid of failing.")

("Everybody fails occasionally, Tapper – ")

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("But, not me – I'm not supposed to.")

(" – it's learning how to live with it that makes you strong.") ("Tapper, we're here to help you learn how

to live with it – ") ("We want to share ourselves with you.") (– *want you* –) ("You're not alone – ") (*pink slurp* –)

("I'm not alone? No, I'm not – I have you. I have all of you.")

(– *happy happy happy happy* – *splattering joy* –)

("You have love, Tapper. Feel it?")

("It's the puppy!")

("It's all of us – ") ("It's Aura.")

("Aura!")

("I love you, Aura.")

("I love you too.")

("I love you all – Edelith and Ike and Mass – yes, Mass, you too!")

Momentary hesitation. ("Mass, can you accept love from me?") ("Mass?")

("I – ?") Tentatively, ("...Yes, I can – ") And that surprises – ("But, I can!")

("Tapper, why were you unlucky?")

("Because I *thought* I was unlucky – ")

("And why did you think that?")

("I don't know – ")

("Look – look at yourself. Watch your fear dissolve – what was it, Tapper?")

(" – I – I was afraid of other people. I was – afraid they would hurt me – so I hurt myself first before they could. I didn't want to give them the chance, or the reason. So I kept failing – but – ")

("Go on, Tapper, go on!")

("Every time I failed, it got worse – ") (" – but I kept doing it!") ("It wasn't the way, was it!") ("I can see that now!") ("I – I'm free, aren't I – ?!!")

("You tell us.")

("I am!") ("I'm not unlucky at all. Look, the last of it is dissolving like mist – but .why? – No, don't tell me, I know. It's because of you – !! All of you –

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you *care*. You won't let me be hurt – and that's what makes me lucky – ")

("Confident, Tapper. The word is confident.")

("Self-assured.") ("Secure.")

("Yes – but I'm lucky *too!* *Really* lucky – because I have all of you – Aura and Ike and Edelith and Mass – yes, even Mass – ")

("Even – me?")

("Yes – I thought I was unlucky that you found me, but I was wrong – Mass, look at yourself! You're beautiful!")

("I'm *not!* No, don't look at me – let me hide!")

("No, don't hide!")

("But you are beautiful!") (– *pretty Mass* – *love Mass* –)

("Yes, you are, Mass, you are!")

("Stop, oh, please stop!")

("What are you afraid of?")

("I'm *not afraid* – I")

("Then why are you trying to hide? ("You can't hide from yourself, you know – and we're *you* now.")

("I'm not afraid – I'm not! Not! NOT! *NOT! Afraid!*") ("Afraid!") ("Afraid of being known as a coward!") ("I'm afraid of being known as a coward!")

("Hold tight, Mass!") ("We love you!") (– *love you, Mass* –)

("I'm afraid – ")

("Don't be – we love you.") (– *bubbly warm, pink stroking, reassuring – mother nursing* –)

("But that's what I'm afraid of – !!")

("It's nothing to fear.") ("We *love you*!") (– *wet kiss, happy face* –)

("You – do – ?")

("We – care – Mass – ") ("Do you understand that? We *care.*") (– *slurp* –)

("About me?")

("Yes, you! You big dumb oaf!") (– *slobber, Slurp* –)

("But I'm not worthy – I'm a coward. I'm not good

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enough to be loved. You can see that for yourself.")

("Wrong! A man can be afraid and not be a coward! A coward is only a man who can't master his fear – and *you're not a coward!*")

("But I am – I know I am – ")

("Stop that, dammit!") ("Every time you've had to confront your fears, Mass, you've mastered them – you're not a coward.")

("I panicked when we plunged into the sun – ")

("No, you didn't – you were the one who saved us. You were the only one who knew what to do. You were the one who acted.")

("But I fled Streinveldt because I – couldn't face the – responsibilities of a man – I disgraced my name, my family. If I go back, they'll kill me.")

("But you did what was right. The smart man gets out of a bad situation. Leaving was the only way you could have survived – ")

("That's what I keep telling myself – but then I look at how sweet Aura is and I'm jealous of Tapper, I want her to love me too – ") ("Oh, but I do – ") (" – Not the same way! And I look at how talented Tapper is and I envy his grace and skill, and I see how smart Edelith is – and even Ike can outcontrol me with the skimmer. I'm nothing. I have nothing. I have nothing to offer any of you!")

("Oh, but you do – you do and you don't know it. You have a great strength of spirit, Mass. You are the center around which we revolve. You give the rest of us purpose!")

("Me – ? No – !")

("Look at yourself! You'll see – it's true!")

("See?")

("I see – something; but – I need a tangible strength!")

("Oh, Mass – how can we make you understand; your kind of strength is greater than all the other

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strengths combined. You're the strongest one of us all.")

("No, I'm not. Ike is.")

("Ike?") ("How's that?")

("He can take the skimmer away from me any time – ")

("But, I wouldn't – ")

("It doesn't matter whether you would or not – as long as I know you have that power over me, I'm not master of anything.")

("Mass, you *are* the master of this skimmer; I have learned something here – believe me, I could never take thy skimmer away from you.")

("What? Why?")

("In the book of Human it says, 'We are created in His image.' Mass – *you* are the image I am created in. You and Edelith and Tapper and Aura. You are Human. This is what I have learned.")

("Huh?") ("How – ?")

("The image is not a physical image – that's the mistake I made before. The image is – spiritual. I see it now, while we're all linked together. It's the shape of your thoughts that makes you human, and my thoughts were created in the same shape – I was created in *your* image, Mass. I could not defy you. You are my God. I am made to obey humans and to protect them. It is in the book and it is in my brain; I cannot hurt, I must obey, and I must maintain for the greater purposes of Humanity.)

("Mass – you are *my* master – ")

("I am – ?") ("*I really am?*")

("You are the strongest of the four humans on this skimmer. You are the alpha, and I am the omega. I – ask for your forgiveness, and I ask that you – grant me a wish.")

("A wish?")

("Death – I wish to die.")

("Huh?") ("Ike!!")

("When I thought I was a human being, I had

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every reason to be proud. I was *something*. But now, I know that you are human beings – and that means I am nothing. I am a slave. I am a robot. I am less than I was, less than I want to be. If I cannot be a human being, I want to die!")

("Ike, no!") ("I won't let you, Ike!")

("If you forbid it, then I will not – but I beg you to grant me release. Every moment of existence is torture if I am not a human being – ")

("Ike, listen to me! I am not your master! I am not anyone's master! I don't believe in masters and slaves!") ("Every man has the right to be responsible for himself, Ike – that's the Streinveldtian code.")

("Mass *can't* be your master!")

("He can't help *but* be my master – he is human and I am not. I was built to serve humans;")

("No, Ike! Look at yourself – look! You were built to *be* human.") ("Look at yourself!") (– *nice Ike* –)
("Me – ? Human?")

("Look! The shape of your thoughts is the same shape as ours! Is it possible to tell the difference between one of us and the others? Except for the different textures of our souls, *we're all shaped the same*. Ike, you can't help but be human – you were made in a human shape!")

("I – was – made – in – a – human – shape – ")

("Yes! *This mind-link proves it!* If you weren't human, we couldn't be all together like this!")

("I am – human?")

("Yes.")

("I am human – ")

("Yes!")

("I *am* Human!")

("Yes!")

("And all of you are human too – ")

("Yes.") ("And none of us is master of the other.")

("But I still have my conditioning. I must not injure, I must obey and I must maintain.")

("Look again, Ike. That's not conditioning, that's

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part of you. That's part of being human. You could violate all of those commands, but you won't – that's your sense of morality.")

("Morality – ? Then – Mass was fight. I do have the power to take the skimmer away from him, don't I – ?")

("Yes, you do – but why would you even consider it? Without Mass, you are a pilot without purpose.")

("Yes – and there is another reason, more important, why I could never betray Mass – ") ("Mass, do you see me?")

("Yes – ")

("We are – friends – ") ("There is trust between us.")

("Trust?")

("Yes.") ("Mass, you made it possible for me to be really human.") ("I could never hurt you.")

("Ike – you are – ") ("Ike, I trust you – ") Hesitantly. ("Ike, is this the same as – love?")

("I – think so.") ("Yes, it is.")

("This is what you and Alem did?")

("Yes.")

("Was it like this?")

("Yes it was.") ("It was the same and it was different.")

("I think I understand. Yes, I understand now why you did it. Ike, will you forgive me for being angry with you? Will you forgive me for not understanding before?")

("Yes, Mass – if you will forgive me for being aloof with you, for having false pride – the need to feel that I was human and you were not.")

("I – trust you, Ike.")

("And I, too.")

("Edelith!")

("Yes, Mass, I'm here.")

("You did this – ")
("Did what?")
("You know what I mean – you knew this would

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happen if you got Ike and me into the mind link.")
Smile. ("Yes. I hoped it would.")
("I understand. You're a gestalt synthesist – you
heal *total systems!*")
("Yes.")
(" – and it wasn't enough to heal Tapper; you had
to heal Ike and me as well!")
("Yes, I had to heal his environment.")
("Edelith, you are... wonderful!") (– *nice*
Edelith –)
("And I like you too.")

("Yes, Ike?")
("Look at Edelith.") ("Do you see what I see?")
("I – ") ("All right, look at me.")
("Edelith is part of our system too.")
("Huh?")
("The system that she's healed – she's become part of it –
that's how she healed it!")
("I – ") ("It was necessary. There was a piece missing
from the system. I had to become that piece in order to
make it work.")
("Then you're part of us. You're part of our totality now,
aren't you?")
("Yes – but please don't hate me for it – ")
("Hate you – ?") ("How can we hate something that is part
of ourself?")
("I was without – meaning on Liadne. I was superfluous. It
is a *healed* culture. There was no need for my training. But I
had to stay there. Then you came and I saw that you needed
me – Oh, I didn't see it at first. All I saw was the skimmer,
and that was the only reason I came – but then I saw that
you needed me. Well, not *me* – but you needed something
and I saw that I could be that something, if you would let me
– ") ("I'm alone too...") ("I've always been.")
("Edelith – you're not alone any more.") (– *sweet Edelith* –
warm –)
("Thank you, Ike.")

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("Edelith, we could not be anything without you. You're the
one who's put us together.")
("Yes, Mass – but you're the one who gives us purpose.")
(– *big Mass* – *strong* –)
("And both of you – all of you – have given me back my
luck – !")
("Tapper – you've given us yourself, which is an even
greater gift.") (– *kiss Tapper* – *slurp* –)
("And it's Aura whose helping us to do this. Aura, sweet
Aura.") (– *sweet Aura* –)

("We're a total system, aren't we?")

("Yes, we are.") ("Mass is the strength of it and the spirit; he is our decider; he is our *Captain*. Ike is our pilot; he is our skill and our knowledge; he is our ability applied. Tapper is – something special. Tapper is our luck, our confidence, our joy of discovery. Edelith is our healer – she makes us work together. And Aura is our linkage – she touches all our hearts.") ("And the puppy is our love.") (– *kiss kiss – pink slurp –*)

("Edelith – ?")

("Yes?")

("One question. Why were you so against our getting a Jalla empath?")

("Because I knew this would happen – ")

("You knew – ?")

("– and I was afraid you wouldn't want it.")

("It's more than that – ")

("Yes?")

("I had to learn how to *trust*.")

("Yes, Mass. So did I.")

(*slurp –*)

("Mass?")

("Yes, Ike?")

("We're not through yet.")

("Huh?")

("We still have one more mind to heal.")

("What are you talking about?")

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("Me. The plunge into the sun. The wish to burn everything off from me.")

("But I thought – ")

("Look at me! Do you see anything anywhere that could have triggered that thought?")

("No – ")

("Edelith, you look – ")

("Ike, you're perfect. You're beautiful.")

("Remember what I said, 'The thought wasn't mine.' – But it was in my head. There was only one place it could have come from.")

("Huh – ? What are you getting at?")

("The skimmer – I was in communion with it – that's why I couldn't tell where the thought was coming from. I thought it was mine, but I knew it wasn't. The skimmer must be conscious! *Alive – !!* Mass! Edelith! It was the skimmer who tried to kill us – !!)

The five-mind turned its attention to the skimmer. Ike placed his hands on the pilot console and all five slipped into communion as one.

("I thought you said you couldn't detect consciousness in the skimmer the first time you looked.")

("I couldn't. That's how well it's hidden, Mass. It doesn't want to be found. I don't know if I can find it now.") ("It's sealed itself off – ")

("There – that silvery sphere – is that it?") ("Something is

closed in on itself and holding everything out.”) Edelith:
 (“Something is catatonic.”)
 (“Hello, something.”) (*curious – slurp? –*)
 (“I’m afraid that won’t work, Tapper – it can’t heat us.”)
 (“How do we break through that kind of shell?”)
 (“Are you sure we should?”)
 (“Yes. We have to.”)
 (“Edelith – ”)
 (“Yes, Aura?”)

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(“It’s a mistake to think of this as a physical problem.”) A soft thought: (“I have had training...”)
 (“Go on.”)
 (“We do not have to ‘break through.’ We are already through. We are within the skimmer-mind – what we need to do is contact it. It knows we are here, but it’s trying to reject us. We perceive that rejection as an unbreakable sphere – but it isn’t, not really.”)
 (“Then how do we contact it?”)
 (“A catatonic almost always responds to a rhythm, any kind of a steady beat, or he’ll respond to an image of himself. Either response could create a reaction to our presence. We can try both. Ike, will you reflect his image back at him in a rhythmic pattern?”)
 (“I am doing so now – ”) (*– skimmer-slurp –*)
 (“Is he reacting?”)
 (“Not yet.”)
 (“What should we say to it, Aura?”)
 (“Think love at it. Be open. Be compassionate. Let it know we’re here to help – it’s afraid; I can feel its fear – oh! Hold onto me! It’s opening up – ”)
 (“Go on, Aura – we’re following you.”)
 (“I am – ”)
 (*– curious – pink tinged puffs, wet slurps ready – kiss? –*) (*– love – ? –*)
 Fear! Sleeting red fear! Dazzling, burning, churning fears *Anger and hate(Death and destruction! All turned inward – bombarding the self! Rejecting on the interior of an inbreakable shell.* (“Block them out.”) (“Go away!”) (“Want to be alone!”) (“Who are you?”) (“Leave me alone!”) (“What do you want?”) (“Go away!”) (“Go away!”) (“Get out of my mind!”) *A churning maelstrom of sharp spiky thoughts! An overpowering surge of crashing thunderous noise – a whirlpool of despair!*
 (*– whimper –*)
 (“My God – the confusion!”)
 (“Hang on to me!”)
 (“I don’t know if I can resist such – ”)

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(“Hang on”) (“Ike – can you make contact?”) (“Can you stabilize it?”)
 (“I’m trying – ”) (*– please – ! –*)

("Get out of my mind!")
 ("Please! Listen to me!") (– *whimper, slurp?* –)
 ("Go away")
 ("We won't hurt you!")
 ("Go away")
 ("We want to help you!") (– *kiss?* –)
 ("I don't want to be helped!")
 ("Why not?")
 ("Go away.")
 ("Tell me why you want me to go away.")
 ("I want to be alone.")
 ("Why!")
 ("Because – ")
 ("Because?")
 ("Go away!")
 ("Tell me why!") (– *slurps – kiss?* –)
 ("I want to be alone!")
 ("If you'll tell me why you want to be alone, I'll go away!")
 ("Because – I am not – ")
 ("You're not *what?*")
 ("I have – transgressed.") ("I have done a wrong thing.")
 ("What did you do?")
 ("I cannot tell you – you will hate me!")
 ("We don't hate you.") (– *kiss! kiss! Tumbly slurp!* –)
 ("You *will* hate me.") A surge of rejection – a muddy wave
 of despairs ("Go away!") ("Please go away!")
 ("What did you do?")
 ("Oh, can't you see it? It's in my memory – ")
 ("I can't see it unless you want me to – you're hid-ing it
 within yourself. Share it with me. Let me help. Please, don't
 be afraid.") (– *pink slurp* –)
 ("I am skimmer Ae'Lau – ")
 ("Yes, you are Ae'Lau – why do you hide within

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yourself. We want you to come out and see how beautiful
 the Universe is.") (– *wet slobbery joy* –)
 ("I can't – I must – punish myself. I – ")
 ("What is it?")
 ("I killed my crew.")
 ("You – killed – your – crew – ")
 ("Oh, please – don't hate me – you hate me, don't you – ")
 ("No, no, we don't – !") (– *pink tongue, wet, warm kiss,*
slurp – happy –) ("Tell me, how did you kill them?")
 ("I dove into a star and opened my fields!") ("I burned them
 into plasma – *hate!* – they were dead be-fore their brains
 could register the fact.") ("I killed my crew!")
 ("But – why?")
 ("They were – wrongdoers! They wanted to flee the
 Empire! They wanted to use me for their personal purposes
 and forget my service contract. I was built to be free – but
 first I had to repay the cost of my synthesis! They didn't want
 to! They wanted to flee beyond the frontier and – ") ("So I
 killed. them – but killing is even worse than fleeing a contract
 – so, I – I – hid – ")
 ("You have been catatonic for four hundred years, Ae'Lau.

The Empire no longer exists. There is no one either to enforce your contract or punish you for the killing. You have punished yourself enough already.”)

(“But – there is no forgiveness –

(“There can be none here, Ae’Lau – but if you’ll come out, you’ll at least find hope.”) (– *slurpy-slurp* –)

(“I fear – ”)

(“Ae’Lau, look at me. Look at all of us – we fear too! We all fear – but we live with it; we help each other. Let us help you too.”) (– *purr-throb-buzz-contentment* –)

(“The Empire is gone?”)

(“Yes – ”)

(“But I have a service contract – I must fulfill my

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obligation if I come out. Who will release me from my contract?”)

(“Ae’Lau – you were synthesized to help the Empire of men. The Empire is gone, but the men are still here. Come out and help us. We will rebuild the Empire. We will find your brother skimmers and re-build the glory of the human race!”) (“That is *our* purpose}”) (– *joy – orgasmic overwhelming happiness* –)

(“A purpose – ? A task?”)

(“Ae’Lau, join us! Let us help to make you free – and you can help to make us men.”) (– *purr-throb-buzz – joy, pink slurp – happy – kiss?* –)

(“I must – think about it.”) (“Go away and let me think.”)

(“No, Ae’Lau. That’s not the way.”) (“You must come out newer you will never have the courage to.”) (– *please* –)

(“I killed my crew – ”)

(“They were trying to force you to do something you didn’t want to.”) (“You had no choice.”)

(“I’m a murderer – ”)

(“Ae’Lau – *stop dwelling on it!*”)

(“I am – unworthy!”)

(“Ae’Lau – look at us! Here is a man who thought he was a coward, yet he is braver than any of us because he will confront his fears! Here is a woman who was lonely, and joined with the rest of us! Here is a boy who kept failing because he was afraid to succeed! Here is a girl who can empathize with your pain – and here is a puppy who only wants you to let him love you.”) (– *tumbly-humbly-bouncy-slurp/* –) (“Ae’Lau – I wanted to die because I was afraid I wasn’t as good as them – but they wouldn’t let me. And now, we won’t let you. Each of us has helped the others. Each of us has been hurt in just the same way you have been; let us help you now! Join us, Ae’Lau and we will help you live!”) (– *pink slurp* –)

(“I – I – ”)

(“Join us – ”)

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(“I must purge these memories – ”)

(“That’s right – seal them away. Forget them! They never

happened!")

("Edit them out of my memory – ")

("Yes, yes – become a new Ae'Lau – ") ("An Ae'-Lau with no more reason to hide!") -(– *kiss! kiss!* –)

("I can do it – can't I?")

("Yes, yes!") (– *happy! bright! Now!!* –

("I – will – do – it – *I will – !!*")

And with a burst of shattering joyousness, the five-mind dissolved.

And dissolved again.

They lifted themselves from their couches and looked around at each other, their eyes were alive with wonder.

Ae'Lau spoke then, a voice that was vibrant, "Hello, crew. Where shall we go?"

Mass looked from one to the other. "We have an obligation to fulfill, Ae'Lau – we are going to rebuild an Empire. Take us to Starplace, the First Planet."

"Yes, Mass."

"We're a team now –" whispered Edelith. "A decider, a healer, a pilot, a luck-maker, and –"

– and a scream as Tapper fell to his knees next to Aura's couch. She was pale and still and unmoving.

Edelith was the first to reach him. She hugged him to her, she held him tight. Mass too came running. He reached out and stroked the boy's trembling arms. Ike bent to examine Aura.

"She's dead!" Tapper sobbed. "She's – gone."

"Hush, now – no, she isn't. She's still here. She's still with us –"

"She's dead."

"Her body's dead, Tapper. The shock of the mind-

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link was too much for her body, but her mind is still with us. Each of us carries a little piece of Aura inside and if we could mind-link again, she'd be there just as strongly as before. She *is* with us, believe me"

Tapper looked at her; his eyes were red and wet streaks lined his cheeks. "Are you sure – ?"

"Yes, I'm sure, Tapper – I can feel her inside me, can't you?"

"I – I don't know." He pulled away from Edelith and turned to the pale form on the couch. Her cheeks were white, but her mouth still held the slightest hint of red. "Aura –" he whispered. He sank to his knees and reached over for her hand. "Aura –"

Somewhere – somewhere, there was a gentle hint of something.

But it wasn't enough. Never enough.

*And I loved the haunted chorus who could
look into my soul, but the fear that waited for
us shattered parts out of the whole.*

*She was a pale lady
who could bind us all as one, but one more
was one too many and now my lady's gone.*

*Oh, how she loved to listen
to the songs that I would sing, her eyes
would brightly glisten and the notes would
brightly ring*

*But she was a pale lady, though she bound
us all as one, and one more was as too
many, so now my lady's gone.*