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The Book of Rack the Healer

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I

For the pleasure of Deepsoft the Keeper, the arching dome of her chamber was drawn to a thinness that admitted the dayglow. Through the membranous shell filtered yellowish purple light reflected from the clouds of noxious gases that, at the end of the sun circle, lifted from dank, dark valleys and thickened the atmosphere. The shifting light attracted Deepsoft's wide, pink eyes. Her heavy head lifted, nodded, jerked. Her long-fingered hands plucked at her coverlet. Her legs moved awkwardly with a lack of coordination.

She made a sound of pleasure as winds high above swirled the thick atmosphere, and the dome glowed russet for a long time. The coverlet, made of the same material as the dome, the sleep-rack on which Deepsoft lay, and the one chair that completed the furnishings of her chamber, bunched up and exposed the lower segment of her nude body. Her feet kicked aimlessly, brushing the warm, soft wall. Her brain registered the sensations—shifting light, smoothness on the soles of her feet, warmth, comfort, the flex of the coverlet under her fingers. She lifted her head and made the pleasure sounds. Time was meaningless.

As her movements jostled her full stomach she burped wetly. A trickle ran from her full lips down her white chin. Overhead the cooling masses of polar air caused condensed moisture to fall in huge, fat drops on the dome. She clucked in delight. One long arm lifted, reached up as if to touch the splat, splat sounds. The light turned purple again, changing the shadows on her face. Her mood changed with the light, her face twisting. Her lips made an explosive, complaining sound; her brain was now

registering discomfort. She needed. Her entire consciousness sent out the need and it was urgent. Red Earth the Far Seer left his contemplation in the adjoining chamber to tend her.

She was momentarily distracted in an amusing effort to stand, supported by Red Earth. Her legs were rubbery in spite of their firm tone. He held her and communicated soothing things as he positioned her and listened as she completed the basic function. Although his smooth knob of a head had no ears or eyes, he sensed all in great detail. Deepsoft tried to thrust one of her long-fingered, graceful hands between her spread legs to feel the results.

"Negative, negative," he sent, slapping her hand lightly. He gave no pain for it would have taught no lesson, would have registered as a meaningless hurt having no connection with her innocent desire to thrust her hand into warmth.

He cleaned her, feeling pleasure in her rounded, full form. Deepsoft. She was aptly named.

Night was near. He put her into the sleepcrack and raised the protective siding, the siding which was made of the Material. Her hands felt along the smooth surface of it. His own hands also partook of pleasure as they caressed her face. Deepsoft made little pleasure sounds and reached for his hand. Her body moved. In contrast to the awkwardness of her limbs her body was a sultry entity. Her mid-section lifted in an inviting rhythm. Red Earth, who had been roused from deep contemplation by her need, had been about to depart. But now he stood undecided, and then examined her. His bulky, tough-skinned, bare knob did not move, since there were no eyes to follow her length, no ears to hear her sounds. But his hands knew her long, white legs. His hands caressed the firm roundness of her chest bulges. His senses traced her and measured her and she relaxed and lay still as his hand teased, pressed. Her pink eyes followed the shifting light patterns above, but her body was attuned to the sensations of his fingers pleasing her. Then the momentary diversion was over and he was gone. Her eyes widened to gather the fading light.

Movements of great cloud masses in the storms that accompanied the end of the sun circle isolated Red Earth's establishment. The stagnant gases made the dim distances seem vaster as visibility was reduced. Light-sensing organs could not penetrate even as far to the north as the beginnings of the plains of glass. Only the senses of one such as Red Earth

could see the great river and the high escarpment to the west. Only Red Earth, in his establishment, could read the density of concentrated gases in the rift valley to the south and could penetrate the toxic gases to see the motionless, misshapen vegetation on the valley floor. He saw all. He saw the shift of frequency in the atmosphere where Deepsoft's inferior light-sensing organs saw only the shift of color.

In his sanctuary, Red Earth idly noted the condition of the surrounding environment. The survival factor was low, as usual at the end of the sun circle. He mourned, the build-up of stagnant poisons and the decline of breathable air. He could feel the rise in temperature when a particularly dense cloud passed and the far sun sent its dying rays through the eternal haze. He shivered internally as he sensed the polar masses moving south and east.

But even as he registered these impressions, he searched his area of responsibility. Everything seemed normal. In far-scattered establishments his people were shut away from the toxic storms, comfortable with their carefully nurtured hoards of air-making Breathers. During his rounds, he passed a casual greeting with his co-responder Growing Tree, who used only a small amount of energy to answer as he tended a colony of Juicers at the Eastern Group Establishment. It was a moment of peace, if one could ignore the storm and the consequent lessening purity of the atmosphere. But it was always thus and those who cried disaster when the storms blew had cried disaster before.

A Power Giver soared high above the roiling clouds. Red Earth did not bother to establish contact or to ascertain identity. Power Givers were notoriously capricious. The flight, of course, was a shameful waste, but it was her own energies and substance the Power Giver was consuming. If one fulfilled one's responsibilities, one's actions were one's own—a principle that held even for Power Givers.

Yet, the waste vaguely disturbed Red Earth and he sought to distract himself by watching two young Healers, at the mid-point of their learning. They were moving outside, using stored life for long periods. As they were unable to utilize the outside air with its high toxic content, their lungs held pure air and their gills pumped out poisons. A Webber had escaped an establishment adjacent to the Eastern Group Establishment. Red Earth watched anxiously until the two youngsters, moving slowly, not wasting life or force, herded the weakening Webber back to her kind in the

enclosure. She would survive.

Near the sea, the process of food-making continued with pleasing steadiness. And, more exciting, a rare joining was in process. Without prying openly, Red Earth took satisfaction in the beautiful act. He lifted his feelings to the toxic sky and, although there was no movement of his bare knob of a head, the effect was a nod of blessing and pleasure. A new life was being created.

That he himself would never know the true beauty of the act was unimportant. He felt no jealousy for the Healer engaged in joining with a Power Giver, creating life. It was the nature of things. In return, Healers and Power Givers held no envy for his ability to achieve the pleasure of the act repeatedly, even though that mysterious force which governed life allowed the Healers and the Power Givers only one or two unions. Nature gave the Far Seers pleasure to compensate for their inability to create life, and, always logical, limited the fertile ones. A dying planet was capable of supporting just so many.

Red Earth carried many burdens, but the burdens were not without their rewards. And Far Seers were accustomed to the burdens, having long since become resigned to responsibility. Deepsoft. Power Givers could squander their precious substance in meaningless soarings above the toxic clouds for the simple joys of vision unobscured by clouds of dense gases and of breathing the thin wisps of pure air. Healers could ramble aimlessly. Each had his duty and if it were performed the Far Seers would see to their survival.

The storms would pass. The noxious, heavy gases would settle back into the valleys. Then even one so fragile as Deepsoft could bask outside in the glow of the filtered sun. Life would go on under the high clouds of summer. The new joining on the eastern sea would produce—what? Hopefully, a Far Seer. Or, perhaps, just perhaps, the long awaited New One.

That wish, Red Earth knew, was pure indulgence. Nature and nature alone could anticipate the need for a New One. He, in his limited wisdom, could not dare to imagine the needs dictated by the planet. Still he allowed himself to wonder about the New One. Would he be able to eat the poisonous leafy things? Breathe the toxic vapors? Be warmed rather than damaged by the projectiles shot down through the perpetual haze by the sun? Only nature would know. But when the New One came, as he

inevitably would, then the Far Seers, the Keepers, the Power Givers, and the Healers and all the rest would be the Old Ones and life would continue despite the giant flares of the sun that tried their worst to return the planet to primordial emptiness.

It was a comfort to believe. Red Earth turned back to his tasks. He recorded the rise of the planet's satellite to the east, his sense bouncing there and back with a noticeable lag. He felt the solidity there and tested the depth of the craters. He searched, unsuccessfully of course, for breathable air, life-giving water, and symbiotic Breathers on the satellite. Then he turned to the sister worlds circling the sun, other planets unseen by any save the Far Seers, sensing, measuring, recording.

For his records, Red Earth sent the information he had gleaned into the vast storehouse of Deepsoft's brain—the rise of the satellite, the noted moment of the joining, the positions of the sister worlds, the flare activity of the sun. It was recorded and read back. Deepsoft lay very, very still. He was pleased. His measurements and the movement of air masses from the south confirmed the end of a sun circle. Now was a time of beginning, a time of renewed hope.

He had seen beginnings. He never failed to anticipate each new one. Moreover, he never lost hope even when his measurements, and the readings of other Far Seers, were discouraging. He had traveled on the force of a Power Giver to the vast waters of the south. Hovering high above he had seen the sea of slime, the natural breeding ground of the Breathers. Once, he had actually measured an increase in the number of Breathers—the record of it was stored in his Keeper's brain. But the green slime of the next sun circle was dense, causing their numbers to decline abruptly. In all the vast, murky seas there was only a tiny area in the south where currents, winds, or some other unknown factor allowed a frighteningly small colony of Breathers to survive. But nature would not allow defeat. A world was solidity, reality, and to comprehend the solidity and the reality life, a thinking brain, was required. To envision a world without life was to negate the basic purpose of all creation. No, the Breathers would adapt; they would learn to live atop the thick, heavy water. Life would go on. And someday the New One would be born and the last remaining resources of this depleted planet would produce dynamic life springing exuberantly upward.

The thoughts of Red Earth the Far Seer ran on as he lay slumped into

his rack, huge chest moving only occasionally, red gills lying idle, since the air of the establishment was pure. All around him, in enclosures lining the walls, were the Breathers, eating, growing, breeding, using their small, half plant, half insect bodies to return to the air the life-giving particles that, in turn, found their way into Red Earth's system.

In the night no star shone. The satellite, unseen by light-sensing organs, moved only in Red Earth's senses. He did not stir until it was at the zenith. Then he rose and advanced to Deepsoft's chamber on thin, short legs that extended from small hips below a flat belly and the huge, bulbous mass of his chest. His hide was thick, and deep gray in color. His shoulders tapered upward into the cone-shaped knob of his head in which there were two orifices: the small, round feeding mouth and the hairy maw of his breather. On the side of his head just above his shoulders, were his gill slits, which now exhaled his body poisons, cleansing his lungs for an extended period of nonbreathing.

Deepsoft fed on the broth of life, the universal energy concentrate distilled at the Eastern Group Establishment from the green slime source of the sea. After she was fed, she seized one of Red Earth's fingers. She smiled, holding it tightly. He lowered the protective railing and joined her. She made sounds of pleasure and Red Earth blanked his thoughts, yielding to pleasure as she cooed in response to his givings of sensation.

II

As chance would have it, Rack the Healer was given his free time as the storms moved down from the cool north at the end of sun circle. Growing Tree the Far Seer assigned a Power Giver who was also finished with her duty to transport Rack to his home area. In preparation Rack breathed deeply, voided his gill sacks of rejected vapors, and closed off. He used stored air until the perpetual clouds were a blanket of color below them and the Power Giver thoughtfully sent a picture letting Rack know that the air here was nontoxic.

Rack's huge chest heaved as his lungs breathed the thin but delicious mixture. His pleasure communicated to the Power Giver and she laughed.

Above them the sun was a deadly furnace, taking its toll. Rack's large

scales made an audible clattering noise as they rose to form small deflection areas. He knew that the hide of the Power Giver was being penetrated and he was momentarily saddened. Yet it was the nature of things. He would be the last to suggest to the freedom-loving Power Giver that she confine her flight to lower levels, where the thick atmosphere would shield her relatively fragile body from the deadly projectiles. Had he been born a Power Giver, he knew he too would seek the exultation of being able to soar above the heavy gases to see and, to smell the thin, pure air. It was, he suspected, ample compensation. All life eventually ended, and the price of pleasure was death. Still in his rare transports inside the power field of one of these fragile, beautiful beings, it always sobered him to feel her depleting her very substance to obtain the energy needed to lock into the planet's magnetic field and thereby negate the pull of the earth in soaring flight far above the curve of the planet.

When she landed him near his establishment in the area of Red Earth the Far Seer he bowed gratefully. She was away with a joyous leap, fading quickly into the purpling air. She would need to find rest and protection soon, for the yellow haze was thickening.

His establishment was precisely as he had left it at the beginning of the summer when he had gone to fulfill his duty as a gatherer of the slime source, the pulpy plants growing on the floor of the shallow, inshore seas. He vented the accumulated poisons from his gills and breathed the clean, rich air. In his absence the Breathers had literally overloaded the dome with good air and it was sheer luxury to fall heavily into his rack and feel life being pumped into all his storage cells as he worked his huge chest like a bellows, breathing with sheer extravagance. He slept long and peacefully and awoke to take his fill of the broth. He stretched his long, agile legs, took in huge lungfuls of his rich air, and made an audible sound of pleasure.

His Breathers were healthy and producing happily. In his absence, of course, they had been regularly monitored by Red Earth, but Rack double-checked their enclosures. He found that the feeding channels to the outside were slightly corroded and he cleaned them carefully. After cleaning the entry port and lock he discovered his housekeeping tasks were finished. Already bored he wandered about his establishment aimlessly.

Healers were, in general, a restless lot and Rack was no exception. As a

youth, he had caused considerable concern among his teachers by exhibiting a startling lack of direction or ambition. His name derived from a picture assigned to him by his mother because he had seemed content to spend all his time in the sleprack, his mind in contact with any available Keeper, probing into the accumulated lore of the race with an idle curiosity. If he had been interested in knowledge for the sake of learning rather than for its entertainment value, his teachers had argued, his constant Keeper contact would have been justified. But Rack had not been interested in dry facts such as the positions of the sister worlds, survival factors, and the state of the native Breather population in the southern seas. Instead he had delved deeply into the mind banks of the oldest Keepers, wanting to hear the ancient lore regarding the origin of the race, asking stupid questions about the Old Ones.

Once he had incurred the wrath of a Far Seer when he tied up the minds of three Keepers at once with questions regarding reported findings of hard-material nuggets. Red Earth discovered that he was unable to record observations because Rack was monopolizing his personal Keeper. Monitoring the contact, he was chagrined to discover that the young Healer was seriously interested in trying to gather enough information to make it possible for him to amass a personal hoard of hard-material nuggets. To Red Earth, hard-material nuggets were interesting and had often led to speculative discussions regarding the talents and abilities of the Old Ones, but they were totally useless. It was true that in the lands across the eastern sea hard-material nuggets were used as a reward for services rendered by duty-driven citizens, but there were many strange things about those who inhabited the land beyond the sea. Red Earth did not want to see his area become involved in the useless accumulation of valueless objects. He had reprimanded Rack the Healer severely, had recommended an educational tour of gathering fresh slime-source plants from the chill waters of the far north, and had been pleased to find that Rack had matured when he returned.

On only one other occasion had Rack displeased the Far Seers. In his first tour out of the Eastern Group Establishment, his work output had been seriously low on certain days. Red Earth discovered that once again Rack was probing the storage mind of Growing Tree's Keeper about the Old Ones and in particular about the sunken city of Nar. Where Rack had found that particular bit of folk legend was a puzzle for Red Earth, for all such pseudoinformation had long before been erased from the mind banks. Perhaps Rack had discovered it hidden in some Keeper's mind

where it had been filed out of context and he had searched for the nonexistent sunken city to the detriment of his slime-source quota.

During a long session with Rack, Red Earth had tried to impress on him the importance of responsibility, duty to the race, and the need to bend every effort toward survival. Too long had the Far Seers been alone in the knowledge that life on the planet was precarious at best. And at first Red Earth had thought that Rack's inquiring mind was receptive. He listened carefully to Red Earth's summary of conditions, agreed that one should not waste one's energies in chasing the ghosts of the Old Ones but should, instead, search for ways, however small, of improving conditions. "We are the results of evolution," Red Earth told him. Rack received a picture of a period of sun circles so vast and so protracted, the images of sun circles extending back and back, that his mind was not capable of seeing the whole. "All of us—Far Seers, Healers, Keepers, Power Givers—are the logical results of life, the end results to this time. Nature, in her wisdom, has created in us the ability to cope with the problems of a dying planet, but she has not made the task an easy one. It is up to us to help as we await her next move."

Such talk did indeed interest Rack. He was, after all, involved in life. But still there was something in him that drove him to question the ways of his world. Was the ultimate pleasure service to one's race? If so, why did every Far Seer have at least one Keeper? Not solely for the purpose of storing information in the blank portion of the Keeper's mind. No. Rack, like all Healers, spied like a curious child, and often saw the Far Seers lost in their own pleasure, using the bodies of the Keepers. It was a pleasure alien to the nature of a Healer, of course, and it was indulged in with an amusing regularity.

To a Healer, curiosity was the source of pleasure, and as he matured, Rack discovered that he was never reprimanded when he did his duty and saved the titillation of his curiosity for his free time. He reasoned that he was as much entitled to his pleasure as Red Earth was to his. During his free periods he filled his mind with the dim legends of the Old Ones and engaged in what the Far Seers looked on as Healer weakness, rambling on his long, mobile legs over the wide, empty space of the area. His ability to heal the damage he suffered from the hard projectiles and the toxic gases gave him mobility. His curiosity and his wanderlust sent him to the thin frost of the far north, to the steamy heat of the middle regions, to the waters of the west. He scaled mountains on the way, crossed a great river

and climbed the broken face of the rift to the west of the river. In a box made of the Material, were the treasured results of his travels: two hard-material nuggets, one the size of his thumb ball, the other tiny, almost invisible. The large one was heavy in his palm, and irregularly shaped. It could be scratched with a sharp, extra hard piece of the Material and it held an endless fascination for Rack. The smaller nugget was fast being eaten away, for even in the protective atmosphere of the establishment it accumulated brown waste on itself from time to time and, when cleaned, became smaller and smaller.

But Red Earth was mistaken in thinking that Rack was merely interested in accumulating the hard-material nuggets because they possessed a certain rarity. To Rack the nuggets did not represent riches, as they did to citizens of the eastern lands. The nuggets held a dark mystery for him.

Rack was constantly frustrated in his pursuit of knowledge regarding the Old Ones. He avidly sought out the dim, old legends, retained for their aesthetic values. To the Far Seers these legends were a part of the culture, saved for the picturesque beauty of the thoughts of the first Healers. Some of the most beautiful were the thoughts of Rose the Healer, preserved from deep antiquity. Ah, Rack sighed, how they rang, coming from the peaceful, childlike mind of an aging Keeper in the steamy land beside the southern sea:

*And when the sun flared up, searing the Old Ones, vast clouds of smoke
and particles covered the sky.
And the Old Ones died, fornicating even in death, to give birth to the
New Ones who had scales.*

"Negative, negative," sent his teachers.

"It is the thought of Rose the Healer," Rack protested.

"He speaks in symbols," said the teachers, "for the process of evolution crawled forward on feeble legs through"—Rack again received an image of a vast series of sun cycles—"to meet the slowly deteriorating conditions."

"And yet," Rack argued, "Rose the Healer said that the sun flared up and killed the Old Ones suddenly."

"It is against logic," said the teachers. "For have we not observed the

sun for countless sun circles and has it not been stable?"

"How do you explain this, then?"

And there were others that had tails and died birthing and those with malformed features and stomachs without vital organs.

"We know little," they admitted, "for the Old Ones had no Keepers and all their store of knowledge, however insignificant, has been lost. We can only presume that such a race, with none of the advantages of civilization, with no kept records, existed on the plenty of a youthful planet, feeding and breathing the bounty of nature. There are also legends of other living things. And yet we find no proof. Surely, had the Old Ones built we would find remnants of their achievements, for is not the Material everlasting, resisting the acids of the air and the smoke of the burning earth of the southern lands?"

"Could they have built of the hard materials?"

"Negative, negative," they sent. "You have traveled far. You have talked with many Healers who have nuggets, and yet, have you found the source of the hard material? Is it conceivable that there was once a life form on the planet capable of producing such a lifeless material? Could you possibly think that enough of the hard material could be amassed to construct even one establishment?"

"But there is more than one type," Rack said. "I have seen yellow and white, dark and light. Some nuggets feed on themselves with dark waste, while others, such as my large one, grow only a white, powdery waste when exposed to the yellow of the air."

"Another proof," said the teachers. "It feeds on itself. In a short span of sun circles an establishment made of your hard material would be reduced."

The hard material was indeed fragile. But Rack had a new idea. "Perhaps," he said, his heart beating with excitement, for he was being daring, "the hard material came from the bowels of the earth."

He received warning vibrations, for he was treading on dangerous ground. But he plunged on. "Perhaps the Old Ones penetrated the

surface?"

There was sadness in the answer, not anger.

"It is conceivable. For the Old Ones died, did they not?"

In truth, the Old Ones had died and left behind old legends and nothing more.

In the final days the bodies of the Old Ones covered the Earth.

So were the thoughts of Rose the Healer marred by impossible statements, making the total credence of his thoughts less than reliable, for no planet, however young and fruitful, could support so much life. On all the continent the Eastern Group Establishment was the largest concentration of the Material known and at peak production periods in the summer it was the most populous. The picture showed Power Givers in a grouping equal to the number of digits on Rack's left hand, a paired group of Far Seers, and rock-weighted Healers diving in the thick water. The whole group numbered no more than the digits on Rock's hands and horny feet.

If only, Rack lamented, the Far Seers had not erased the old thoughts. If only they had saved more than just the beautiful thoughts of Rose the Healer—what a delightful concept his name evoked, a confused mental image of something delicate and bright and beautiful. But only Rose was whole in the minds of the Keepers.

Rack's only other source of information on the Old Ones was an occasional misfiled tidbit. The discovery of these excited Rack wildly. He had found mention of a sunken city in the mind of a northern Keeper, a city in the eastern sea that towered to the sky. An unknown Healer far back in antiquity had been the source of the reference which had been filed with readings of air purity at the tops of various mountains. And on the western sea, a group of Healers told of another city of the Old Ones they had heard of, a city that spread over what was now the plains of glass in Red Earth's area beside the great river. There was even a name for this lost city, but the name was difficult to conceive, for it suggested no known image.

"Could it be," Rack had asked, "that the Old Ones truly knew

civilization and constructed establishments?"

"I think," said a young, visionary Healer, "that question is answered by the picture of city."

He had not truly considered what the image implied. City. A group of establishments. Yet though there was nothing in all the continent to keep the picture in the language, it persisted. The word, the picture, *city* was Old One language. It had meaning. The name of the lost city on the huge river had no meaning, gave no image. It was an abstract thing, difficult to grasp. Was the name another Old One word—a word whose meaning had been lost?

In his learning, the teachers had brushed past the Old Ones. Ancient man was primitive, living on the fat of the young planet. He was ignorant of the process of combining the products of the Juicers and the Webbers to form the Material, thus uncivilized. Ancient man had no recorded history, for there were no Keepers. Ancient man lacked the mobility of the Power Givers and was thus confined to distances he could cover on his feet. In short, ancient man was a weak link in the evolutionary chain and his achievements could not have been great. Ancient man, said the teachers, was probably less intelligent than a Webber, but perhaps more intelligent than the front mind of a Keeper, who was unable to experience anything save basic sensations. To think that ancient man had built was folly. To attribute the origin of the hard materials to ancient man was incredible, for without tools of the Material, how could ancient man work the hard materials into any form? No. The hard materials, used by some mystics in the Healer ranks to form a mystery about ancient man, were of natural origin. Perhaps, since they were of such scarcity, they had fallen from the sky, for Far Seer probes indicated the presence of small bodies of solid material in the space system other than the satellite, the sun and the sister planets, and the far suns that even to the most sensitive Far Seer appeared as tiny motes in a vast area.

"Be content," said the teachers, "with the wisdom of the race, for we are old. Be proud of our achievements, for we have conquered a hostile world with only the weapons given us by nature, our minds. Contemplate the wonder of the invention of the Material by Dawn Eye the Far Seer. For is it not astounding that he could envision the domestication of the vicious Webber? Is it not wonderful that he could milk the fiery Juicer and, working at the risk of death, pain, and disfigurement, combine the liquid

fire of the Juicer with the film of the Webber to create a substance that protects us from the hostile elements? Wonder at the course of evolution, that produced four distinct human forms who live in peace together and work mind in mind to ensure the survival of life. None could live alone. Be proud of your ability to heal, to spend extended periods in the vapors and the corrosive sea. Without them, without your ability to gather the slime source, what would be our nourishment? Be thankful for the Keepers, who store our knowledge and make us civilized. Praise the Power Givers who turn the vats that brew the broth, separating the deadly substances from the life-giving ones."

Modestly the teachers did not praise themselves, the Far Seers, the accumulators of knowledge, the overseers of society, the backbone of reason. The Far Seers, who were sterile, watched over the lower life forms, measured the Breathers, milked the deadly Juicers, and tamed the fierce Webbers.

Truly, it was an arrangement to give wonder. The wisdom of nature was proved by the infallibility of her scheme to sustain life in an atmosphere that could eat a nugget of hard material in less than a sun circle. And Rack was not really discontent. After he gained maturity he took pride in his ability to gather more slime source than any other young Healer. He gloried in his strength, his huge, billowing lungs that could store enough air to outlast the most severe storm, his wonderful healing cells that replaced themselves when damaged by hard projectiles or acid gases.

But there was much in his world to arouse his curiosity and he made his contributions to the knowledge of the race by feeding his observations into the blank mind of a Keeper after the exploration trips he took in his free time. He was recognized as an authority on the vast, uninhabited area of responsibility of Red Earth and was often consulted. He had come a long way from being the feckless young rack-lover who had engendered frowns of concern from his parents and teachers. In the prime of his physical strength he was tall and had a chest thickness equal to half his height. His scales were healthy, showing no damage from all his wanderings. When he retracted his protective eyefilms in the safety of his establishment his pupils glowed with a bright blue light and glittered with a love of life that was contagious. He was considerate, never venting his gills in the vicinity of an establishment, much less when in view of another being. He was generous with his time, always willing to use his strength to venture out for an extended period in the service of anyone who needed

help. He asked for nothing except, at times, a period of conversation. Lying on his rack, breathing his sweet, Breather-produced air, he would compare knowledge with a Far Seer, gossip with a fellow Healer, or carry on a respectful exchange with a friendly Power Giver. At such times he projected a completely relaxed and totally likable personality. There were those among the young Power Givers who contacted him regularly, trying to detect a hint that Rack was being readied by nature for a joining. But they were continually disappointed; Power Giver after Power Giver, feeling the approach of her own time, had to search elsewhere, for the gray scale covering on Rack's lower abdomen remained rigid, showing no tint of the tell-tale red of readiness.

III

"You are, I see, preparing," said Red Earth from his sanctuary, his mind engaged with Rack's.

"Affirmative."

"A group of Breathers overworking," Red Earth sent.

"I have seen and am content with what I have stored," Rack said. He had spent some time storing life. His body weight was up. His chest was expanded to bursting. All his cells were alive, fattened with precious air. "They will have ample time to recover in my absence."

"Is it polite to inquire?"

"When were you concerned about being polite?" Rack queried laughingly. Red Earth was an old friend and teacher. "West," he sent. "To the river and the rift."

"In search of hard-material nuggets?"

Rack gave a mental shrug. "In search." He sensed a regret on Red Earth's part and knew that the Far Seer begrudged him the waste of his energies in his own pursuits. He sent a hint of reproach, accompanied by a vivid picture of Red Earth with his Keeper, and got a chuckle in return.

"Beautiful Wings the Power Giver will be alert to your needs."

"I thank you." He liked the picture Red Earth sent, but was not familiar with the individual.

"She is newly mature, assigned to the west of the area."

"Daughter of old Northern Ice the Healer? I knew her when she was a child."

"The same. She is no longer a child." Red Earth paused. "And speaking of maturity, I note that your tint will soon be the same." Rack did not like speaking of such matters. He closed his mind. "Could a joining be arranged it would be a propitious event," Red Earth added.

Joining was a matter of nature's design and of personal choice. Rack told Red Earth so and was acknowledged, but the hurt in the Far Seer's mind softened Rack and he sent soothing pictures, along with the rational conclusion that if Beautiful Wings were indeed newly mature his readiness would not match hers. Red Earth agreed with a sigh and ended the contact.

Rack entered into the end-of-circle storms, freshly charged, walking with a distance-eating gait over the bare bones of the planet. His horny feet were impervious to the hard rock underfoot. His scales tingled as projectiles from the low spots bounced off them. Heavy clouds passed, and his gills vented poison, lungs taking only the scattered particles of life from the noxious mixture. For long periods he went without breathing until, on high spots, there was a hint of life in the air and he inhaled to help save his vital store in the cells of his body.

There was a wild beauty in the outside—the constant swirl of heavy gases, the changes of light. And there was the feeling of being alone. Far off Rack could sense an establishment, closed tightly, inhabited by an old Healer whose venturesome soul was now confined to a body unable to withstand the rigors of the outside. Ahead of him stretched a vast, empty wilderness. He alone was living, moving through sterile spaces, the clouds eddying about him, the sun filtering down. The sun was never visible as a round source of heat as he knew it to be; it was now a glow, now only a hint of color, a diffuse feeling under the hothouse clouds. But it heated the rocks under his feet, which were not yet cooled by the movements of winter air.

He skirted a sinkhole, feeling the corrosive strength of its deadly air on his scales. A small shower wet him and his scales crackled as acids sizzled and boiled. The thick clouds in the sinkhole parted, giving him a dim view of the rank growth on its floor, a tangled, pulpy mass. He picked his way carefully, along the edge of the hole. A slip would have been fatal, for not even his healing abilities, not even his tough protective scales, would have saved him had he fallen in.

The land sloped gradually upward and the going became easier. He walked with long, strong strides, the weight of his pack light on his back.

On the plains of glass the wind was a steady force in his face. Billowing clouds moved overhead, but the heat of the smooth plain seemed to form a pocket of fairly decent air immediately above it, so he breathed more easily, not using his stored life.

He camped in the center of the plain, lying on the warm, glassy earth with only a coverlet of the Material over him. He awoke with the first glow of day, fed, strapped on his pack, and set off at a swift pace, eager to put the plains behind him. His jogging pace ate up his reserves, but hopefully there would be good air near the great river.

He could smell the river from afar and it urged him on. To his disappointment a heavy accumulation of gases hung over it, hiding it from his view until, pushing through the low growth of vegetation which lined its banks, he stood with his feet in the water. He strained his eyes, trying in vain to see the tall, broken rocks of the escarpment on the other side.

The water was clean, a pleasant contrast to the heaviness of the sea, in which he spent his working hours. He waded in and felt the coolness covering his scales, washing away the accumulated ash of corrosion. He found a few inches of good air at the surface and gulped it, gills pumping out wastes, then closed his outer lids and ducked under. He swam, his natural buoyancy keeping him just below the surface. He opened his outer lids to find that visibility was good, although there was nothing to see. The river was, of course, lifeless. He walked the last short distance to the shore on slippery rocks, then breathed air at the surface of the water before starting his climb up the escarpment. The rift had been formed by an age-old cataclysm which, for a period of a sun cycle, thrust the western land up into a high plateau. He made the ascent slowly, examining the exposed bones of the planet as he went.

Halfway up, he was bemused by brown streaks which made erratic patterns in the rock on the exposed wall. The discoloration reminded him of the waste formed on the smaller of his hard-material nuggets. He had seen such markings before in his travels and had once asked his teachers an oblique question regarding them. He could not keep his mind from speculating. Could the hard materials have been natural deposits within the forbidden depths of the earth? In places like this where the forces of nature had bared the subsurface rock the ground took on a new look.

He spent much of the remaining light climbing the escarpment, searching in vain. Arriving at last at the top, he felt the effects of the strenuous climb, and, picking his way through boulders that dwarfed him, he quickly found a sheltered place. He cocooned himself within his protective sheet of the Material, fed, and was sleeping before the darkness of the night closed down over him.

He awoke to a feeling of delicious aloneness. A storm was raging. Wet rocks poured moisture as the yellowish rain fell, formed rivulets, dripped, ran, and splashed down the near wall of the escarpment. He lay inside his shelter, hearing the hiss of the acid rain on the impregnable Material. The storm, he knew, would wash the air, leaving behind, hopefully, more amenable conditions. And he had also noted, at other places and at other times, that a heavy rain often washed away pockets of loose material atop the hard rocks, leaving behind newly exposed areas. He had hoped for just such a storm, and it was fortunate that it had occurred on his first night on the plateau. The hunting would be interesting.

When the storm let up, he walked the steaming rocks, his pack in place, for he would not return the same way. The high plateau extended to the north and south all along the western bank of the river. In spots irregular rock formations dammed up lakes of dull water. However, it was not the river's edge that interested him, but the central portions of the plateau where for endless sun circles of time the rain had washed the rocks, leaving behind an accumulation of stones of various sizes. With his eyes on the ground he picked his way carefully through the stones. Now and then a loose stone rolled under his foot, causing him to struggle for balance.

To add to his splendid isolation, he had closed off his mind. He asked for no contact. In the event of dire emergency, he could summon help, for Red Earth's mind was far reaching and a Power Giver was in the western area. But he was calmly confident in his ability and envisioned no such

emergency.

For the first two days, he covered ground that was partly familiar. Then he moved southward. The bleak landscape was unchanged. It was a world of exposed rocks, long since eroded clean by the storms. He was the only life, save for a few thin air-feeders growing on the protected side of the largest boulders. Nothing moved but poison-laden air, which rose from the rank low areas, and was shifted by the vast movements of the atmosphere.

His broth supply was holding out well and he was finding enough air to be able to conserve the vital stores within his body. Because of the five-day lull in the storms he covered a large area; the picture in his mind was based on a comparison of his progress with the well-known image of the distance around the planet. He rested.

During his sixth night on the plateau the winds increased and new clouds of forbidding density moved in. He spent the following day in his protective cover, unable to breathe. He used his life stores sparingly, allowing his body to lapse into a state of sluggishness during which his heart beat only rarely. Although his mind was slowed, his capacity for cenesthesia allowed him to take stock of his condition. He was satisfied.

The new storm blew through the day, calmed at night, but then began anew at dawn. The inactivity galled Rack, and, in order to escape the boredom of nonmovement, he reviewed all of the knowledge he had gained in the last few days. He wished for a contact with a Keeper, but did nothing since the distances and energies involved would have been a drain.

He would not admit, even in the privacy of his mind, that he was indeed looking for a fabled lost city. Yet there was some connection, he conceded, between his being on the escarpment plateau and his having once heard an unconfirmed legend regarding a lost city beside the river. While the storm blew and there was no breathable air, he indulged in speculation about the Old Ones. If it were true that the land had once been rich with growing things, the waters sweet, then the Old Ones would have sought locations such as this, near water. The city, if there had been one, could have been on either side of the river, but the legend repeated by the Healers had specified the western bank, which meant that it had been located on what now was the plateau. Since, according to the observations of Rack and other Healers with similar interests, the plateau was a fairly

recent development, any city that might have stood there would have been lifted with the upheaval of the earth and been tumbled and broken.

The most tenuous of Rack's speculations he would never have made public, lest he be ridiculed. If a city had stood on the western bank and had been broken and scattered by the titanic upheaval of the earth, the rains would have long since washed away any trace—except, perhaps, for the hard materials, which were heavier than the stones. It was his vague hope that he would find particles of the hard material lodged in the broken fields of stone atop the plateau.

It was, indeed, a foolish hope. There was still no connection, except in his imagination, between the Old Ones and the hard materials. But he would not have been content to spend his free time in the confinement of his establishment. His feet tingled from the walking, his scales sizzled when the acid rain struck them, his cells were being used as he lived on his stored air. Yet even if he spent the rest of his life span using his free time to walk the desolate places, it was his life. And even if he never found another nugget of hard material, the mere seeing, the experiencing, the knowledge that he, Rack the Healer, had explored vast stretches of his world with his own feet would be reward enough.

When, at last, the storm abated enough so that he could find some hint of air amid the dense yellows and purples, he moved onward, eyes always on the ground. Near the midpoint of the day he came upon a sinkhole and looked down, expecting to see the usual rank growth, to sense the poisonous accumulation of heavy gases. He was amazed to find that not only could he see to the bottom of the rather large depression, but also he could smell the goodness of clean air. The vegetation on the floor of the depression, was not the misshapen plants that grew in other sinkholes. The sparse growth was more like the harmless stuff that grew along the river bank. He squatted to examine his find, peering through the obscuring curtains of gases. He could hear running water. He moved tentatively down the sloping face of the depression, taking stock as he went. He found no deadly elements, only an improvement in the general atmosphere. Encouraged, he continued down until he stood on the floor of the small valley. He confirmed that the vegetation was not the deadly sort. The air was clean. There seemed to be a sort of rising current which lifted the heavy, noxious gases and dispersed them into the overhanging clouds.

He advanced across the valley floor, feeling the unfamiliar softness of

soil under his feet. He walked gingerly, for only a fool walked unconcernedly on the deadliness of soft earth. This earth, however, was surprisingly free of the hard particles that destroyed cells more rapidly than the most healthy Healer could replace them.

He made his way toward the sound of running water and came upon a wonderfully clean outpouring. The water gushed from the rocks underlying the soft earth, bubbling up with a cheery sound, so clear that he could see small particles of soil circulating in it. He tested it gingerly and found it to be scalding hot. He knew then why the small valley was not like the usual low spot. The polar air that lay over the plateau was cooler than the air in the sinkhole which was heated by the water. Even when the heat of the summer lay over the plateau, the air in the sinkhole would still be much hotter than the surrounding air, thus creating upcurrents and discouraging the growth of noxious weeds.

He was squatting on the edge of the basin into which the astoundingly clean water flowed from its source in the valley wall. The soft earth under his feet sent out particles, but the quantity, although more than the emission of solid rock, was less than the quantity encountered in a dense cloud, and was well below the danger level for a Healer. A load of worry lifted from his mind and his interest was drawn to the movement of the water as it swirled into the basin. The water seemed about waist deep. The flow was strong. Seeking an outlet from the basin, it had cut through the soft earth to bedrock and loose stone.

He followed the stream's wanderings as it looped from the side of the valley toward the center, its entire length lined with the harmless vegetation. The water, incredibly, remained clean. The bed of the stream was covered with loose, rounded pebbles. He had never seen anything quite like it. Near the fall wall, the wall closest to the edge of the escarpment and the river, it formed a small lake and from that lake there was no outlet. Rack concluded that the water must be seeping down through the earth and rocks to the level of the river below.

The most pleasing thing about the valley, however, was not the miraculously clean water of the meandering stream, but the relative purity of the air. When a low-hanging cloud passed, noxious vapors filled the valley for only short periods of time before they were lifted by the rising currents. It was almost as if the valley generated its own clean air. He did not understand, but neither did he question. He walked on the

strange-feeling softness, examined the harmless green growths alongside the creek, then left the water reluctantly to explore the remainder of the valley. He located nothing as exciting as the water and soon was tired. It was growing dark. He slept with the sound of running water in his ear. In the light of morning, invigorated by sleep and good air, he examined the stream more closely. He knew the erosive effect of moving water and accepted the fact that it was the stream that had cut through the thick layer of soft earth, a layer fully as deep as the distance between his outstretched thumb and finger, to the rocky underlayer. He reached into the water and handled the smooth, rounded pebbles. He could feel the heat through his protective hide—the water was hotter than the hottest day in the southern regions. He was bemused by the smoothness of the pebbles, and fingered them with pleasure, sorting them according to size, arranging them on the green-covered bank. He started with the larger pebbles and stacked smaller ones on top to form a small mound. He was for the moment a child, playing children's games. His mind was idle. At first he did not note the difference in weight as he fingered a small, rounded pebble and lifted it. Then the shift of a cloud let a glow of sunlight through and the pebble in his fingers glowed with a life of its own, yellow and rich. He made an explosive sound through his small lips. Hard material. Of much the same heft as his treasured nugget of gray hard material, but yellow, unbelievably beautiful.

Feverishly, he pawed through the pebbles of the stream. His efforts roiled the water with silt until he was unable to see. He berated himself for greed. Many a Healer went through life without finding a single nugget of hard material. He now owned three, and this latest find was, by far, the most wonderful. He spent a long period contemplating it. It showed no signs of having been crafted. It was irregular in shape, but smoothed by the action of the stream. It showed no hint of corrosion, remaining yellow even in the tainted air.

Sated with the sensations he received from the nugget, he began to speculate on its origin. Being heavier than the pebbles it had been lodged at the bottom of the stream when he found it. Perhaps hard materials *were* formed naturally, under the surface. He shuddered. Seated on the softness of the strange soil, he could more fully comprehend the meaning of below the surface. When walking on solid stone, or on the smoothness of the plains of glass, one often forgot that there was a subsurface. Here and on the escarpment's face, subsurface had meaning, for one could see the exposed layers of rock, the different shapes and textures.

He carefully placed his hand on the bank of the stream, down low, near the surface of the water. The hard projectiles tingled his small finger scales, but the increase was insignificant. Had the action of the running water cleansed the earth itself? An entirely new concept thundered into his brain. He loved life, revered it, as did every member of the race. He would not have considered breaking the most ancient of laws, lest he lose prematurely that precious gift with which he was entrusted. And yet, he had held his hand below the surface, next to the exposed soft soil of the creek bank and he had lived, had not even been endangered. This valley, he thought, was different, unlike any other spot on the planet, at least any spot he had seen. The air was clean. Pure water cut through the surface earth and exposed pebbles and beautiful nuggets of hard material.

Not daring to openly entertain his new idea about the subsurface he walked back to the basin and watched the rushing water emerge from the rocks. He moved a few stones experimentally, placing them where the water gurgled from the confining basin. Guiltily he searched the area and found only solitude. He told himself he was not breaking the law. He was merely shifting rocks— this was permissible as long as the rocks were lying free on the surface.

The pile of rocks grew, but the water ran between them undeterred. He filled the chinks with small pebbles, then with gritty small particles, scooped from the floor of the creek. The flow of water was slowed and the level rose in the basin.

His tough feet dislodged some vegetation from the banks of the creek and he picked up a piece, seeing that a certain amount of the soft earth clung to it. He was shocked. He dropped the offending bit of green, then picked it up again. It was lying free, wasn't it? He knew he was stretching logic, for his feet had dislodged it. But the vegetation had a wet, spongy feeling and he placed it in the chinks between the rocks of his dam. It held back the water so well that he recklessly trod up and down the banks of the creek to loosen more of the green material. His dam grew, until finally a trickle of water began to run around the far edge. At first the water was soaked up by the soft earth. Then it puddled, ran. He watched, fascinated, waiting for it to begin to cut into the soft material and expose the rocks underneath.

By nightfall, his diverted stream was running all the way down the valley to join the old stream bed a short distance above the lake. The water

running over the new earth was muddied by its passage, yet the cutting away of the soft material had not begun. Rack spent an uneasy, guilt-ridden night. In the morning his curiosity overcame his guilt, for the running water had begun to loosen more of the earth. The new stream bed was noticeably depressed and here and there rocks showed through. Moreover, the hard projectiles were no more frequent than before. But it was going to be a very slow process, he determined some days later when the bed of his diverted stream was still composed of softened mud. He left the valley reluctantly.

Soon he was caught in a fresh storm and weathered it inside his protective covering of the Material. He wandered and explored, but nowhere did he find anything as interesting as his valley. Everywhere he was confronted by bleak, barren rocks, yielding nothing. During a lull in the storms he jogged back to the east, coming on his valley just as he began to eat seriously into his reserves. He breathed the pure air, watched his stream work, and noted that more and more rocks and pebbles were showing in the new stream bed.

He slept beside the heated water of the basin for many nights, spending his days searching the old stream bed for more hard-material nuggets. He found none. Impatient, as his time grew short, he removed his dam, returning the water to its original channel, and began to search the new stream bed. He found only mud and bare, unpolished pebbles. He decided to build another dam and worked feverishly, the technique familiar now, to build up the low area on the side of the basin where his first artificial creek had overflowed. The newly diverted stream was maddeningly slow in carving a channel, and as his time grew less and less he cut his daily ration of broth and worriedly watched the storms worsen as the sun circled drew toward its end.

He found the object on his last day in the valley. The timing seemed to be significant, as if nature had been withholding the bombshell to the last possible instant. He came upon it as he was sorting through the rocks and pebbles in his second stream bed. He knew when he picked it up that something exciting was happening. It was different. The pebbles and stones were sharp-edged, broken. This object was smooth, oblong, and rounded on the ends, although it was darkened and pitted. And it was strangely light in his hands, having neither the weight of natural stone nor the heavier feel of the hard materials.

He cleaned it in the running water, rubbing the accumulated mud from it, heedless of the fact that in fingering the mud he was technically digging. The mud was from below the surface. But his excitement allowed no moralizing. The object had the look, the feel, of being crafted. At first, when he saw that it was transparent, he was deflated. It was, he felt with a sinking heart, merely an abandoned piece of the Material. But further examination and comparison proved that idea to be wrong. It was not as light as the Material, nor did it have the feel of life possessed by the smooth, flexible substance created by the Far Seers. It was definitely artificial and totally alien—obviously not a product of his civilization. There were two possibilities: either it had fallen from the sky, as some Far Seers suggested the hard materials had, or it had been made by some earlier inhabitant of the planet.

As he packed and left the valley, he prepared his arguments. He, at least, was convinced that he had a bombshell to toss into the minds of Red Earth and all the other doubters. For if the object that rested in his pack had not been made by his civilization, and if it had not fallen from the sky, there was only one other explanation. It was a relic of the Old Ones. And to have evidence that the Old Ones could have fabricated something so like the Material would force a revision in the thinking of the entire race.

IV

His pack, almost empty of broth, was light on his back, allowing Rack to stride along easily. Yet it became evident even before he had gained the eastern bank of the river that he had underestimated the severity of the weather conditions. Pictures of changes in the face of the satellite, which he himself could not see, but for which he had an inner feel, flooded his mind. Soon the new circle would begin and time would bring the abatement of the winter storms. Meanwhile, the outside atmosphere was chilled to a point only slightly above his own body temperature, and the southeasterly movements of the masses of polar air were violent enough to cause Rack's self-confidence to be severely shaken. Already he had been afield longer than ever before, thanks to the store of relatively good air in his valley. However, he had still been gradually using his reserves and now, with the plains of glass stretching endlessly ahead of him, his inventory of his system showed that he did, indeed, have cause for concern. The

outside air was totally unbreathable. Not a particle of it was allowed below the lock above his lungs. As he tested it, his gills pumped violently, sending condensed clouds of pure poison swirling out from his neck.

In a vain effort to replenish his stores, he scouted up and down the river, but not even at water level could he find clean air. There was nothing for him to do but strike out across the plains and hope for a break in the overcast. He moved at a steady, slow pace designed to make maximum distance at a minimum cost. Fresh, he had crossed the plains in a double picture of a day. Now he would be lucky to be able to set foot on the rocky soil of the eastern side in a discouraging picture of days.

He did not fear for his life. Should his very being become endangered, he would call for aid, but only as a last resort. His pride would push him on, and his regard for others would cause him to expend his own life force, rather than call a relatively fragile Power Giver out of her safe retreat into the deadly storms.

At the end of the day he had made very little progress, so he pushed on in the darkness of night, guided by his instinctive sense of direction. He paused long enough to finish his broth supply, overeating in an effort to accumulate quick energy for a dash. He jogged on, burning himself, until the first light of dawn glowed weakly through the solid curtain of gases that lay over the plains. Wherever the plains dipped he would bend to test the air near the surface, but the conditions were totally toxic.

Later in the day he rested, crouched under his sheet of the Material. He had as far to go as he had come, and beyond the plains he would have to cross the rugged, broken land that stretched for even a greater distance before he approached the nearest establishment. It would be a breach of politeness to break in unannounced on another individual, but life was the important thing and no one would turn him away. Thus he set as his goal the establishment nearest the badlands on the east and prepared himself for the unpleasant task of imposing his needs on another. Under ordinary conditions it would be inexcusable, but, remembering the importance of the object he carried in his pack, he felt justified.

He could feel the strain as he moved out, walking with long strides, but more slowly than he would have wished. His scales registered a high amount of projectile emission from the heavy atmosphere. His feet were beginning to know a certain soreness. He did not waste energy in trying to heal them, but saved all his force for fueling his giant heart, that vital

organ within him that sent blood swirling through his body to pick up the particles of good air from storage cells. The discomfort he felt was his just punishment for the greed that had caused him to overstay his capacity.

Another night found him exhausted and still on the plains. His senses were dulled. He no longer had an exact picture of the remaining distance. Endless plains flowed under his feet. The densest clouds he had ever experienced isolated him within a circle of vision extending scarcely beyond his outstretched arm. It would be interesting to compare notes with Red Earth's Keeper, to see just how many sun circles one would have to look back to find a storm of equal toxicity. He would have a great tale for his offspring.

He realized with a start what a strange thought this was for a Healer who had shown no signs of readiness. Perhaps the knowledge of his own mortality had prompted the wayward speculation. He was indeed threatened. For the first time in his life he was in a situation from which his vast endurance, his strength, his own resources, could not extricate him. He admitted it now. He was beyond his own abilities and it was only a question of time before he would have to open his mind and admit his failure to another.

Yet, his pride pushed him on. Each step used up his reserves. He slowed to a crawl, but he was determined to make it to the rocks. There, with any luck at all, he would be able to find pockets of usable air. Calling a Power Giver into the thick of the stagnant storm would rob her of a portion of her life and, Power Givers being the most short-lived, fragile beings of the race, he refused to ask such a sacrifice.

Pain was signaling the far-reaching waste of his body when his feet encountered something other than the hopeless smoothness of the plains, and for a moment his spirits lifted. He made respectable time into the towering boulders, his sensitive nose seeking air but finding only unusable gases.

Even at his pace he was still more than a day's march from the nearest establishment.

Above his head the stagnant masses of air began to shift. He could feel the movement on his scales and allowed himself one last hope. If the storm began to blow over, perhaps cool air of a usable purity would come in behind it. He wrapped himself, slowed his metabolism, and went into a

state of nearly suspended animation in which his heart beat only occasionally and his mind darkened and slowed. A few good lungfuls of air would give him enough strength to make the establishment.

But the movement of the air masses soon ceased—it had been only a local phenomenon. Checking his resources he estimated he could safely wait the coming of a new day. He dropped his heartbeat to the minimum level and, in a state of quasi-death, waited through the long night. His mind held only a token of awareness— a spark of life lying there, banked, waiting to rouse him, waiting to open the gates and send out that last desperate admission of foolishness.

As the rising sun dimly lightened the rocks, awareness seeped down through the protective layers of his mind. He stirred. The toxic conditions were still total. A feeling of overwhelming sadness swept him as he opened his mind and sent. Sadness was replaced with horror as he realized the weakness of his signal. He burned the last of his reserve cells, converting the energy into a truly desperate call, knowing even as he lapsed into darkness that he had waited too long.

His last awareness was not fear of death, but shock at his miscalculation. His mistake would take one unit of life—it just happened to be his own personal unit—from the pitifully small store of life on the planet. He did not mourn his own loss, but the loss his carelessness had inflicted on the whole.

Deep-lying cells were robbed. His extremities were beginning to lose the flexibility of life. His brain was numb, dark, and he was unaware. Nature, sometimes kind, sometimes cruel, spared him the knowledge of his dying.

V

Since there was no hereafter in Rack's world, he knew, when he felt the caress of good air in his lungs, that he was alive. He lay on an unfamiliar rack, his huge chest pumping at a fast rate, his depleted cells drinking thirstily, his lungs sucking up air at a tremendous rate. He stopped breathing immediately, rolled back his outer lids, found himself in an establishment, and opened his inner eyes to see in the semidarkness.

"Thank you," the thoughts of a Power Giver said. "I was afraid you were going to bankrupt me of air before you awoke."

He was lying under a coverlet which, in the comfort of the establishment, was unnecessary, and, in fact, rather too warm. He threw it off and sat up. The Power Giver was sitting in a chair opposite him. As he swung his legs off the rack, she averted her eyes. He sent abject shame. She negated.

"You heard me, then?" he asked.

"No. Red Earth sent me. You were out so long he began searching."

"To Red Earth, too, I owe expressions of shame," he said.

She would not look at him. He couldn't blame her. His seemingly foolish behavior had sent her out into the storm. Moreover, he had been unconscious when he entered her establishment, and, as he inhaled the good, Breather-manufactured air, he had involuntarily voided his gills. A small cloud of heavy, poisonous stuff had accumulated along the floor. He bent down and breathed it in, storing it inside his gill sack. He would void it later outside. In cases of dire emergency the niceties were sometimes forgotten, but Rack could not forgive himself for having soiled her private air and for having used an unforgivable amount of it. She would be on short rations until the overworked Breathers made up the deficit. He was deeply in her debt.

"There was a reason," he said.

"Yes, I'm sure of that." Her eyes were still cast down, her inner lids closed.

"You're Beautiful Wings the Power Giver?"

"Yes."

"Would a small gift repay you even in part for your sacrifice?" He had seen his pack on the floor. He opened it and brought out the precious nugget of hard material. He moved to stand in front of her, hand extended. Astoundingly, her face began to glow through the delicate covering of tiny, bejeweled scales. He found himself looking at her as he had never looked at a Power Giver before, noting her delicate proportions.

She was small as Power Givers went, with long, delightfully curved limbs, a slender waist, and a graceful chest on which her bulges, protected by silvery scales, were quite pronounced. He had always been an admirer of the graceful beauty of the Power Givers, but never before had he been so smitten with any one individual. He was suddenly speechless.

"It is not necessary," she sent.

"I want you to have it. It is a material of certain scarcity and it would adorn you." He pictured the beautiful yellow hard material mounted in the Material and lying on her rounded chest. The glow of her face became even more pronounced. It was certainly strange behavior for a sensible Power Giver. But he was also feeling very strange. Was it simply the near brush with death? Even now he could feel the depletion of his resources. His body weight was extremely low.

"May I ask how much my rescue hurt you?" He waited politely for her answer.

She sent a picture of her condition. He was pleased. She was vibrantly healthy. Apparently her excursion into the storms had cost little. "Fortunately," she sent, "you moved within a short distance of my establishment."

"Then I insist on your having this." He pressed the nugget into her hand and the touch electrified him, sending a surge of pure goodness through his body. Alarmed, he stepped back, his eyes falling, his suspicions growing. Now it was his face that glowed through his scales, for in the bulge over his pelvic area the large, protective scales were tinted a dull russet. He knew then why she had covered him, knew why he was looking at her with an interest he had never felt before. He seized the coverlet in agitated haste and draped it over his middle. He sent waves of embarrassment and atonement.

"It is merely nature," she sent. "It's just—it's just—" She went blank.

He had exposed himself shamelessly. His state of confusion resulting from his experience was no excuse. When entering the state of readiness, one secluded oneself from polite society and bore the change in solitude until, fully readied, one went in search of a mate. To expose one's first tint to the opposite sex was unforgivable. He could only send regret and ask for forgiveness.

"You were unaware," she said. "I understand."

He closed off, unable to bear his shame. She fingered the nugget of hard material, opening her inner lids to see better. "It is truly beautiful. Is this the justification for your trip?"

"Beautiful as it is, no." He opened his pack and showed her the strange object. She examined it with wonder and looked at him fully for the first time.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "But my not knowing helps to explain its importance. As you can see, it is not the Material, nor is it anything with which we are familiar in our high state of civilization."

"Is it a thing fallen from the space outside?" she asked.

"That again I do not know." He looked at her and felt a strange, sweet feeling of peace. And in her absorption in examining the object she forgot to hide her own feelings. On the delicate bulges of her chest her scales flowered, opening slightly, as the flower of the slime source opened under the thick, salty waters of the sea. His heart pounded. She was incredibly young. The change should have been sun circles in her future, and yet here was the unmistakable sign. The flowering of her chest bulges was revealed only momentarily before she became aware of the erotic sensation and closed them, glowing furiously.

"Beautiful, Beautiful Wings," he sent, searing her with his emotion. Then, as she recoiled, he eased. "I knew your father, Northern Ice the Healer. In my travels I talked with him often, and I knew you as a child."

"He is dead these several sun circles." A surge of emotion swept through his body, making his interior go soft and flowing. "I am not mistaken?" he asked, sending a replay of the unconscious flowering of her chest bulges. She answered with a shy negative, and delightfully feminine in her movements, reached for an opaque sheet of the Material with which to cover herself before looking at him. Wild thoughts flooded out of him, thoughts about nature, fate, luck, bringing them together, amazement that she should begin her change so young, pleasure in his picture of her.

"Am I truly?" she sent. "Am I truly beautiful?"

"Affirmative, affirmative, affirmative," he sent, repeating his picture of her.

"There are many others," she said.

"They do not matter."

"I have heard that a Healer is prone to love the first Power Giver changing he encounters, but that this love is not necessarily the indication of a wise choice," she said.

"It is true. Our custom will require that I seek."

She closed. He sent one last beautiful picture into her mind and got a grandly complimentary, girlish picture in return. Then the moment was gone.

"You are to seek Red Earth's establishment as soon as you are able."

"True," he said. "I have much to report."

"He was fretful."

"I little doubt that."

"Will you be reprimanded?"

"I don't think so. Not when I show him this." He took the strange object from her hand. "Red Earth, although he won't admit it, is as curious as any Healer."

He read the state of the air in the establishment, monitored the activity of her Breathers, who were working overly hard because of the drain of two sets of lungs. "But I have taken enough of your air. I have ample stores to reach Red Earth's establishment."

"I will take you."

"No!" He was emphatic. He would not allow her to go out into the deadly storm again on his behalf.

"I have been so instructed."

"Then we shall disobey," he said. He allowed himself one more breath of her air, bowed, and left her. As he went out into the lock he sent a picture of his returning. He felt a warm glow in answer.

Since his own establishment was nearer than Red Earth's, he jogged, in a homeward direction through the barren landscape, joyous in the feeling of renewed strength. He vented his gills in the lock and entered his establishment, where the air was so rich it made him giddy. He breathed furiously, causing much agitation among his Breathers, and felt his weight build, his chest expand, and his tired, empty cells fatten. Refreshed, he started out again through the dark, thick storm, dressed now in the loincloth of readiness. Beautiful Wings' coverlet, used during the trip from her establishment, was cleaned and ready to be returned to her, a task he hoped to perform in the very near future.

He made the march to Red Earth's establishment in short time, feeling only a slight drain on his reserves, so fat was he with air. He announced his arrival, was admitted to the lock, vented his gills, shook the ash of the outside from his scales, and sneaked a look at the russet bulge in his loins. Inside, Red Earth was lounging on his rack. Rack greeted him cordially, holding back the sensational information.

"You are fat and refreshed, I see," Red Earth sent grumpily.

"I will use none of your air," said Rack.

"A pleasant change," Red Earth said, a reference to Rack's hungry breathing of Beautiful Wings' air. "A nugget of hard material is scant exchange for life."

"If you were observing so closely," Rack said, "did you also see the valley of the hot water?"

"I have more to do than follow the ramblings of an irresponsible Healer," Red Earth sent.

"Then I have much to tell."

"I am interested only in the breakdown of your cenesthesia and the reasons for your being stranded in the wilderness, and in those subjects solely for the reason of preventing such happenings in the future. Perhaps your punishment will inspire other Healers to use more caution."

"I do indeed deserve punishment," Rack admitted. "However, I think there may be some mitigating circumstances."

"Your state of coming readiness is noted and will be considered." Red Earth gave a mental shrug. "We cannot, even in an event such as this, neglect the possibility of creating a new unit of life." He let slip his foolish hopes and Rack grinned inwardly as he saw pictures of speculation. It would indeed be ironic if a disgraced Healer should be the sire of the New One.

"I am not speaking merely of my condition," Rack said. He slowly produced the object, holding it on the palm of his hand. He stood directly in front of Red Earth. The bare dome of Red Earth's head did not move, but Rack could feel the push and probe of the Far Seer's senses. He was gratified when Red Earth expressed interest and surprise. He extended the object, and Red Earth took it in his hand. For long moments the Far Seer examined the object, then with an explosion of emotion, threw it from him. It hit the soft, yielding wall and fell to the floor.

"From the subsurface!" Red Earth flared.

"True," Rack admitted. A blast of anger and shock poured into his mind, but he stood his ground.

"You dug," Red Earth accused.

"Not true," Rack answered.

"I sensed the taint of soft earth, the deadliness of the earth." Waves of anger, fear, and sorrow emanated from the Far Seer. .

Rack began to be seriously concerned. He was well aware of the law against digging. It was a law so absolute that even in the mind of the oldest Keeper there was no record of its having been broken.

"If you will listen—" he said.

"Not I." Red Earth sent sadly. "No, I will not listen. There will be a council. Then we will listen."

"That will take time," Rack said desperately, remembering the flowering of the delicate scales on Beautiful Wings' chest bulges. He sent a

powerful picture of his need, his love for Beautiful Wings, the pull of nature, the necessity of proper timing. His russet tint would deepen to flame red. The flowering of Beautiful Wings' chest bulges would become involuntary and expose the soft flesh underneath her scales. And there would be other changes, changes the mere thought of which left him weak.

His plea was rejected coldly. Red Earth's mind was tightly closed. In the whole of civilization there were only a small picture of unbreakable laws and Rack had broken the most severely enforced one. It was unthinkable. Yet it had happened. In the face of that fact, nothing mattered, not even the chance for new life, the most desired event in the life of man.

"Please, you must listen. I myself did not dig."

"I will keep the evidence of your folly," Red Earth said sternly. "You will not be given the opportunity to cleanse it further, although you have, obviously, already tried to erase the traces of the subsurface from it. You will return to your establishment. There you will stay until a council can be arranged." A picture of time, extending past the time of storms into the new beginning. By then Rack's tint would have long since faded. The moment would have passed.

"You will not listen?" he asked.

"I am but one. The serious nature of this crime demands a council."

"And my readiness?" Rack asked.

"Wasted." And over Red Earth's anger and shock and fear hung a shroud of sadness. "Go."

Rack picked his way back to his establishment, paying no heed to the waste of his energies and forces. Once inside, he fell into his rack. He felt unjustly used. He had not dug. The water had dug, not he. His innocence was proved by the fact that he had suffered no ill effects from his experiment, but had instead discovered an amazing object. To his astonishment, the object had not even aroused Red Earth's deepest curiosity.

Even a Power Giver—*Beautiful Wings, oh, Beautiful Wings*—had been impressed. Any Healer would have been beside himself with excitement. But to a cold-blooded Far Seer the suspected breaking of an ancient law

was the issue, not the mind-boggling presence of the obviously crafted object. The situation was completely without logic.

Rack's world was an orderly one. It ran on age-old principles that had been proven with time. In his world such a misunderstanding was not possible. It was unbelievable to him that he was to be robbed of his chance to contribute to the scant life force of the planet. Who indeed was breaking the law? Not he. The law-breaker was clearly Red Earth, who was trying to negate one of nature's most elemental forces. *Beautiful Wings*. Ah...

He opened his mind and sent. The distance was far too great. But in his state of openness he intercepted Red Earth's message, directed over Rack's establishment to a northern Far Seer—the call for council. The urgency in Red Earth's thoughts made a cold chill run down Rack's spine. Hearing Red Earth's charges, he began to realize the seriousness of his predicament. In a world that revered life he did not fear death as a punishment, but in outlining the crime Red Earth touched on possible punishments that chilled Rack's mind. Banishment. To the far southland with its burning earth that dealt a slow, lonely death amid choking gases belched up from the earth's bowels. Or to a lonely station where the frost sheet never melted.

He closed and considered. In all fairness he was due to be questioned, for his actions in the small, pure valley had been out of the ordinary. His use of running water to cut through the shallow layer of soft earth was, at best, a daring innovation, and Far Seers were affected strongly by any hint of innovation. Life's balance was so precarious that experimentation was to be carefully considered before being undertaken.

But he had done no harm in the valley. His only crime was greed; he had stayed too long, and had had to use some of the life force of Beautiful Wings to extricate himself from his self-created crisis. For that error he would gladly accept a punishment tour in the far north, provided the tour began after his joining. Such a sentence was not the wishful thinking of a guilty individual—such punishments had been meted out in the past.

He would not, could not, accept the punishment being suggested in advance by Red Earth, for banishment was worse than death. Not only would he himself die a slow, lingering death, but his offspring would remain unconceived. Thus, the planet would be deprived of two life units. Could not the Far Seers understand that?

If he had indeed dug in the earth, then he would have expected the most severe punishment. Or would he? Guilt was a matter of degree. If he had willingly dug in the soft earth with his hands—a dark thought—he would have deserved punishment. Or...

An entirely new line of thought occurred to him. Even if he had dug in the valley by hand he would have, according to his measurements, suffered no bodily damage. So where was the crime?

Red Earth would have been shocked to find a Healer seriously questioning the laws. It didn't happen. All forms of life were involved in the struggle for existence and it was imperative that all forms obey the proven laws. But here was a Healer with serious questions. Here was a Healer who had seen the layer of soft earth being cut, washed away by running water. Here was a Healer who had thrust his hands into the disturbed mud, not digging, but feeling the subsurface material. Here was a Healer who had broken the spirit of the law, if not the letter of the law, and here was a Healer who had survived and had proven to his own satisfaction that at least one of the laws had no basis.

Rack had no doubt that to dig in most sinkholes would mean death. He could feel the deadly hard projectiles on his scales when he merely walked close by a sinkhole. But if the law was not in total error, it was at least subject to exceptions, for in that wonderful, pure-aired valley, he had seen and felt the subsurface and had found there a piece of material that brought to mind other serious questions about the wisdom of his civilization.

Rack prowled his establishment, breathing carelessly. He slept little, and awoke to find his russet loins turning a pinker, brighter shade. He pictured Beautiful Wings the Power Giver and the image was unbearably sweet. He remembered her response when he suggested that he would return, and he contemplated the loss of his only readiness, for to have more than one change in life was rare. He was young. He felt that he was in the right.

"If I am a law-breaker," he told himself, "then I am lost. But the sins of the father should not be extended to cover his seed." With his loins pink and bright, such thoughts seemed natural. Nature moved in him, making chemical changes in his body, sending delicate urges into his brain.

By the midpoint of the day, he had made his decision. Red Earth, in his

intercepted thoughts, had indicated that he would contact every Far Seer east of the river. Such an endeavor would take time and energy and would, Rack estimated, cover the period of this day, another day and possibly still another. The establishment of Beautiful Wings the Power Giver was a quick jog away. If he were a criminal, then he was not responsible for his actions. Moreover, he could be punished only once. And once implanted in Beautiful Wings' body, his seed would be life, and thus sacred.

He stored a maximum quantity of air, packed his winter's supply of broth and a sealed container of closely crowded Breathers to add to Beautiful Wings' colonies. He marched swiftly, heavily burdened, not able to breathe in the fierce storms that had now reached their peak of deadliness. She was waiting, sensing his coming from afar, meeting his mind and discussing the situation as he jogged through the atmosphere-darkened emptiness. At first she was shocked and reluctant to grant him entrance, but his emotion-filled thoughts found an echo in her own feelings. The emotions of a Power Giver at joining time were nature's strongest force, and she had witnessed Rack's beginning tint, had felt the strength and power of his personality, and had seen the beauty of his body.

She stood inside the establishment, unable to control the flowering of her chest scales as he entered. They opened out delicately, flaring in a curling sheet, forming a ring around delicate pinkness of the flesh of motherhood, the flesh from which the offspring would feed. The first sight of her sent a blast of fierce heat through Rack's loins and he felt his own scales stir. He sent beauty, beauty, love. And she answered with a sweetness that made his knees weak.

Quickly he joined his container of Breathers with her colonies, making the colony sufficient for two. Then, his gills having been vented in the lock, he loosed stored air from his huge body and felt his storage cells give gladly to share with his love. In a sweet, rich plenty of air they stood gazing at each other, inner lids wide. Rack's vibrant blue eyes sparkled with his energies. He could see far into Beautiful Wings' soul, and it was open to him, sending potent, beautiful thoughts of submission and love.

"You, too, may be punished," he told her.

"No punishment could take away the memory of this," she answered.

"We have"—he sent a picture of the time remaining before Red Earth

could complete his contact with the eastern Far Seers. "Then he will notice that I am not in my establishment."

"When I first saw you, when I was a child, I dreamed of this day," she said.

"Our time could be shortened if he discovers me here. You would, thus, be robbed of your heritage."

"But we will have created life," she said. Life cannot be destroyed. The picture of incredible passion she sent made him gasp. The beauty of her tender, exposed chest buds sent a rich, red glow moving up from his loins. He felt his scales spread wide.

"Before I throw aside my covering," he said, "be sure, Beautiful Wings."

"I will be content with one night, if that is all fate will allow. My only fear, my only regret, is for you. For as you know, the mind of a Far Seer is powerful."

"In all of history there has been no record of a Far Seer destroying life."

"But he is agitated. In all of recorded history no one has dug." She sent the last picture regretfully.

"I think not of myself," he sent. "But of you."

"For me the mere throwing aside of your covering will open a world of delight," she said.

Slowly he drew aside the opaque covering. His maleness was fiery red, his scales folded back on themselves to reveal the never-before exposed beauty. She made an audible purr of pleasure and drew aside the belt of fashioned Material to show that she, too, was at the height of her readiness. He knew then the full picture of her name, derived from an age-old picture of wing-like organs, fragile, brightly colored, delicate. He had never seen such loveliness and his entire being vibrated as she moved languidly toward him.

"They tremble and hunger for your touch," she sent in softness. His eyes caressed the pink, exposed breast buds, his fingers trembled as they touched them and slid down her soft body. The red tint of his sex grew

and sent scales folding back as his maleness fully emerged. She, in trembling wonder, touched it with her hand.

"Now we will join," he whispered, leading her to the rack. She sat down, legs crossed and he duplicated the position, looking deep into her brown eyes, letting himself swim there, fall, merge. He knew the fullness of her mind, let his mind lose its individuality as she came into his and locked. He knew her most basic thoughts as she knew his and a rapture lifted them out of time and space. Their limbs, bent under their bodies, felt the strain but did not register discomfort as the night fell and the planet spun on its axis and swam toward the new beginning.

They required neither food nor air. They fed on themselves and on each other. Throughout the long, dreamy night, as the storm raged and the survival factor reached its lowest point in the sun circle, they caressed minds, and when at last the sun glowed through the poisons of the outside they reached a state of pure ecstasy and not even the force of Red Earth's anger could have broken their locked emotions.

She came to him with the sinking sun. Her swollen chest buds were a delight under his fingers. Her exposed, ruby red femininity drew him, and the union began, sweet and true and of such a totality that the Breathers, half-life that they were, stirred uneasily in their colonies. He breathed pure air into her open mouth and merged with her. Softness met softness—his penetration joined them and their two locked minds heard her purring audibly as the day passed without notice. Another night found them poised on the brink of the ultimate experience, and as it happened she cried out, her expelled breath sweet.

VI

In rare cases, when love was strong, the joining urge was not satisfied with one experience. Thus it was with Rack and Beautiful Wings. So perfect had been the preliminary union of their minds, so sweet was the seed planting, so devastating the pleasure, that his tint become only more fiery and her ruby femininity did not fade. True, her chest buds were covered, and her scales folded, as were his, but their powerful emotions continued to rage.

Had they not been in the grip of nature's most powerful force neither of them would have considered the desperate measure suggested, at the height of their joining, by their combined minds. It was a suggestion so desperate that both, the total unit of them, knew that it was unthinkable. And yet that unit, that combined thing, had also predicted that their urges would not be cooled with one experience. That rare miracle had happened and they were to be given another experience. But time, they knew, minds separated now, was running out. Both were still aware of the suggestion. Both rejected it. Yet both knew that time would be required for the scales to open again, for her to flower. Time they did not have, for Red Earth's powerful mind would soon find Rack. They had no idea what would happen then. They knew only that they would be separated and the thought was intolerable.

Outside, the survival factor was fearfully low. To take the desperate measure—to escape, if only briefly, the surveillance of the Far Seers—would mean going out into that hell of poison. A brief exposure would not seriously harm Rack, but even a short time outside, with the atmosphere giving off potent projectiles, was folly for a Power Giver. The time spent outside would be subtracted from her life, in expanded pictures of the unit spent outside. But she was feminine, in love, in change, and filled with the glory of having, perhaps, a new life in her.

"I will not be robbed," she sent.

He protested, but he too, was in love. He, too, felt the potent biological, chemical, and emotional stresses. Outside he could breathe for her, giving her air from his lungs, but he could not, short of wrapping his more thickly scaled body as tightly around hers as possible, shield her from the deadly projectiles.

"It is my life, love, and I will gladly spend part of it," she sent.

"I cannot allow it."

"I will not live long if you are sent to the south."

He could feel the power behind the statement and he believed her, for in rare cases the union produced a lifetime of love, an ability to blend minds even when nature forbade the joining of bodies. "I would hate myself, I would die myself, if your life were shortened," he argued.

"Then we die together."

Together they packed the broth, a supply sufficient to last both through the winter. Together they loaded the Breathers into travel containers of the Material. He winced as he measured the load she would have to carry. But they were now committed, for a tentative probe from Red Earth's mind had located him, then drew back. Red Earth was mustering the powerful force of his mind to act. Rack knew not what the shocked Far Seer would do. Immobilization was the least he could expect. He quickly depleted the establishment, storing its last remaining air in his huge lungs, and numerous cells.

As Beautiful Wings lifted he wept, for he could feel the drain, the using up of her force. And she, not blessed with his healing powers, could not repair the damage. He held her tightly in his arms, giving her air from his mouth, protecting all of her that he could with his superior armor. The ascent took its toll and when they were finally above the high clouds she breathed furiously of his stored air, trying to regain some of the loss. The soaring was not as strenuous, but the descent through the roiling clouds, as she fought the pull of the earth, caused waves of pain to sweep through her. He shared them in his mind, if not in his body, and his entire being cried out at the injustice of it. It should have been he who was sacrificing for their love.

On the thin film of icy frost of the far north he held her and gave her a lungful of his good air. Then he entered the closed establishment of Northern Ice the Healer, her late father, set the Breathers working, and emptied his store to replenish the barren establishment.

She lay weakly on the rack, breathing with difficulty. He wept openly. Once again he had been criminally foolish, and this time his actions harmed not himself, but the one he loved. Both had underestimated the weight of her load, the distance, and the height of the clouds and now she was paying for it. Her very substance had been used. She looked thin, drawn-out. But she smiled at him and directed his attention to her breasts, which were being exposed slowly as she flowered. The ruby tint spread and her lower scales opened and those delicate, soft buds swelled with nature's bounty.

"Poor Rack," she sent. "Don't suffer more than I, for I gave myself gladly and would do it again."

Twice blessed by nature, they were alone in the far north, beyond the full strength of Red Earth's punitive measures. No Far Seer was near enough to intrude upon their privacy. The hardworking Breathers expelled good air and made the long vacant establishment comfortable. The unaccustomed chill served merely to invite body closeness. The fiery tint of love added richness to the body tones of each of them, and the delicate flowering of the chest bulges of Beautiful Wings belied her weakened condition. Even as her ravaged body felt pain, the powerful joining forces overcame all but a slight discomfort that, when her mind sought Rack's, brought a wail of sorrow from him.

He held her, standing, her chest hard against his, his arms supporting her, saving her remaining strength. More than anything in his world he wanted to lift the suffering from her, to take it into his body, where it rightfully belonged, for the entire situation was of his making. The soft tendrils of her mind pressed at his shame points, caressed his pain and sorrow.

"I will live to give birth," she told him, inside him. Her body anticipated and Rack felt the wonder of growth, the swelling of life. He knew the movements of labor and the emergence of a new life. He could not help but exult. They moved into oneness and a fierce pride of achievement sent strong radiations reverberating around the domed establishment. Their new ecstasy mounted until, facing each other, seated cross-legged on the rack, the beauty of their union was all. There was total communication and the joy of deep emotion, emotion that would be as strong in memory as the actual physical sensations. Rack experienced a bewilderingly powerful sadness mixed with the most complete happiness he had ever known, for he was loved to the point of the exclusion of the most basic value of all, the regard for life. To be so loved changes an individual, and it changed Rack, brought out in him a humbleness, a desire to please. Beautiful Wings, though seriously weakened, received the compensation of knowing the total love of a Healer. It washed through her, easing the pain and making the warning signals being sent to her brain from every part of her body things of little consequence. She would live to give birth.

The joining began. Linked, flesh within flesh, Rack became even more a part of her and she a part of him and the long, lovely process extended into time without end, time without thought of the future, except for the deep awareness of creation. And, yet in Rack's mind, in that joined mind, there was also the despair, the pain, the sadness.

Joinings were routinely monitored by Far Seers and though the nearest Far Seer was not near enough to be able to break into the concentration of the two lovers, he was awed by the force, the closeness, and the duration of this joining.

A Healer knows the flesh of a Power Giver once, perhaps, in lucky cases, twice in a lifetime. Rack, the fortunate one, knew more. He knew flesh and total love and this made his despair deeper, for even in total union he was aware of her condition, and knew that he and he alone was responsible for it. Neither of them would think that the very uniqueness and desperation of their union were adding to the depth of their emotions, but that obvious conclusion was made by the observing Far Seer before he withdrew, tinglingly envious, to seek his sterile consolation with his Keeper. Rack knew only that he would forsake all if his actions resulted in the death of Beautiful Wings.

She was very weak. When the seed planting began and joy convulsed them, she was overwhelmed by the strength of her joy. Rack's mind filled with panic, even as his entire being lived the glory of nature's finest moment. As her mind withdrew, going blank, he roared a hoarse animal sound, an expression of his outrage that she should pass into unawareness at such a moment. He sent his body out to her, tried to possess her, to will her to be strong as he was strong. His mind weeping, his healing cells screamed out to her to fight, not to give in to the specter that had thrust itself into their moment of joy. Love was the force. His message was not a mere hope or a plea, it was a command: *Be well*. And it was repeated by every fiber of his being; his body thundered the order, and he wished desperately to be able to send into her body the gift of his healing. Yet still she sank. He felt the darkness of her mind, a foreboding of the darkness of death which he, who loved her, had inflicted upon her. The burden was too great for him to bear. His mind threatened to join hers in blankness, but in that last, wildly emotional moment, he felt another change, a great and astonishing change, roar through him. At the point of their union an unheard-of thing began to happen—it was as if their very flesh melted and joined. At first he was not directing it; it was an event of nature, his flesh becoming her flesh. Cell bonded to cell and where there had been lubricous nonfriction there was a bond and movement ceased. He felt a strange swelling and a sensation that he could not identify until he felt, in his body, the beat of her feeble heart. The flow of her blood joined his, passing through the bonded flesh as they literally became one, connected in all the soft areas of their union. He sensed the damaged cells of her

blood and then he was aware of her entity as well as his own. He sent his powerful Healer's forces out to battle the darkness, cell by cell. His substance was her substance and he was strong, freshly filled with broth and air, equal to the task of mending her frail body. With an awed joy, he felt life spring up in her, and saw her eyes open in wonder and look into his. He was too busy to pause to analyze what was happening. His Healer's blood flowed in her veins, his cells were her cells and his healing ability worked for both of them. He used up his stored substance with abandon, voiding poisons through his gills not at all concerned by this breach of politeness.

"Rack, Rack," she sent.

The extent of her weakness frightened him, but he was equal to the task. It cost him, but he was giving joyously, praising nature for this chance to redeem himself, to give of himself as she had given of herself for him. As he healed he flowed in her, was part of her, knew the intimate processes of her body, and found the inherent weakness of the Power Givers in organs that could not reject the deadly things in the environment. He knew his Power Giver as no Healer had ever known his love, and he made her young and whole again.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the process ceased. The flesh parted and they were lying together, both aware of his seed in her. Rack told her what he knew, for he had been able to see that she was in the process of conceiving. He could no longer watch, but they talked of the mechanics of the process, timed it, and tried to pinpoint the exact moment. They laughed joyously and clung to each other and, in a total love that made them both giddy, found the union of mind that transported them once again.

Later she fed him. Her being radiated health. He felt his strength returning as he consumed broth and filled his storage cells with air. The last tints of russet left Rack's pelvic region. On Beautiful Wings' chest bulges the scales folded into place and covered the soft flesh.

The sun, only a puny force in the far north, stayed below the horizon and in the cool dark they found it beautiful to sink into the mind-blend union. They did not miss the physical union, for that was nature's way and the physical aspects were purely concerned with the creation of life. Pictures of days became pictures of satellite changes and they were not aware of the swift passage of time, lost in the beauty of mind-blend, eating

only when necessary, using air sparingly. They had achieved that rare union which lasts past the creation of life, and were drawn closer by the miracle that had occurred. Once, for a time, Rack's blood had flowed in her veins; he had known her down to the minutest cell level; and he had felt and seen what she could never feel or see, the beginnings of new life within her body.

After many satellite changes of pure happiness, responsibility intruded in the form of the mind of a Far Seer.

"Rack the Healer, will you voluntarily attend the meeting of the council of Far Seers, Healers, and Power Givers?"

"I will inform you," Rack sent, sinking to depths of sadness.

"Now you have other crimes to answer to," Beautiful Wings told him. "They will cite your disobedience."

"And the crime of endangering the life of a Power Giver in unlawful flight," Rack agreed.

"I will lose you."

"Negative, negative," he sent angrily. If she lost him he would lose her and he could envision no worse fate.

"I will go with you to the death lands of the far south," she promised.

"Negative, negative," he sent, thinking furiously

"Perhaps, by some miracle of nature, you can heal me even in the death lands."

"There I cannot even heal myself," he said.

"Then we die together."

"Much as I revere my own life—and life in the abstract—I revere yours more." He caressed her. "To think of you dead is the most terrible pain."

"Then let us flee again. We will go to the lands across the eastern sea."

"Negative," he sent, adding pictures of the distance, the load she would

carry, the drain on her system. She was in perfect health, but even the most healthy Power Giver was seriously drained by such a trip. The passage across the eastern sea had been made only a few times in recorded history and only in times of dire emergency.

"But you forget," she chided. "You can heal me. You can join your power to mine."

Hope sprang up in him. Then he negated. "In the heat of the union I felt your flesh and healed you. I have no feel for it now. I don't think I could do it again, not without the emotional stimulus of the joining."

"We could try."

The problem was that without the flowering of scales that accompanied the physical union there were no flesh areas to bring into contact. Armored hand on armored hand gave a heady and pleasant sensation, but produced not even one spark of that strange power Rack had felt during the union. Rack considered. Every portion of Beautiful Wings' body was protected by her small, decorative scales, save for the inside of her small mouth and the inner lids of her eyes. He examined her small, protected lips. With a finger he opened them and looked into the pink, toothless maw. Her vestigial tongue was very small. His own tongue would barely extend past his armored lips. Yet, this was the only area of exposed flesh that could possibly be joined. "We can only try," he agreed. He placed his lips on hers, thrusting his tongue into the fleshy interior of her mouth.

"A sensation not to be despised," she giggled.

"Quiet, I am thinking."

Flesh on flesh, remembering. The glory of union, the softness of entering her body, the feel of her cells, were implanted in his mind. It was, he found, surprisingly simple. He had only to will it and his tongue welded flesh to flesh, melted into her, knew her. Through that small contact of united flesh he sensed the processes of her body and made minor healings. He closed off the contact, knowing a wild elation. He would never have to be without her; his healing abilities would make her as long-lived as he. Only the ruin of his system would bring death to both of them and that would be many, many sun circles away. He knew the feeling of complete victory, and then it was tinged with regret.

"I know," she said, "responsibility is a heavy thing." She touched him, sending a warm glow through the scales of his arm. "But we have something to contribute"—a picture of their unborn offspring. "The people to the east, it is said, are much like us," she consoled.

"But they are not our people," he sent, regretting already the loss of their own land and friends.

There was, however, no choice. Had he not loved her, he would have gone to the council and would have used the forum to try to convince the Far Seers of the importance of that strange object he found in the valley of the hot waters. But having known perfect love and knowing that his own banishment would condemn Beautiful Wings and his child to an early death, he chose to flee to the eastern lands.

Amid much hilarity they practiced soaring. The mouth-to-mouth position made for some difficulty. Beautiful Wings drew not only on Rack's substance, but utilized as well his power of mind to reinforce her own push against the magnetic field of the planet. At first she could not see, but an adjustment of their heads conquered that difficulty and practice sent them flying effortlessly, without cost to her substance, into the clean air of the world above the clouds.

Having become proficient in joint flight, Rack guided them to a position over Red Earth's establishment. "I am Rack the Healer, bringer of new and startling things," he sent.

"You are Rack the Healer, madman," Red Earth sent angrily, adding astonishment and shock that Rack was once again recklessly using the life substance of a Power Giver for illegal soaring.

"I ask only a hearing," Rack sent, "a fair and impartial forum composed of equal numbers of Far Seers, Power Givers, and Healers."

"The law," Red Earth sent, "is the law. Your new and startling thing has been adjudged, after careful study, to be the result of unexplained forces in the depths of space."

"The Far Seers err and dream dreams of the unimaginative mind," Rack sent, himself becoming a bit angry, "for the object is clearly crafted and must, therefore, be the work of the Old Ones. As such, it not only should receive the attentions of the scholars among the Far Seers, but

should be subjected to the speculations of the scientific Healers, as well."

"It is the will of nature that the Far Seers hand down the law," Red Earth said. "Tell me, Healer, your justification for continued defiance."

"In the interest of the race," Rack said. "In that interest I have traveled far. In that interest I risked death and disgrace, and in return I am scorned and judged without a hearing."

"Your absence from the hearing was your own doing," Red Earth said pointedly, referring to Rack's flight from justice.

"If the Old Ones were capable of crafting so unique a material," Rack went on stubbornly, "what else might they have been capable of? I demand a renewed effort to rethink our position."

"You seek to dig in the earth and release death," Red Earth said sadly, seeing behind Rack's words a picture of the valley of hot waters. "This we will not allow. I have been empowered, to my sorrow, to—"

But Rack was prepared. As the Far Seer gathered his energies, Beautiful Wings sent them soaring high into the purpling sky, into the regions of nonair, into the coldness of the upper reaches. The bolt from Red Earth's mind dulled Rack's senses momentarily. Shocked, he realized that it had been meant to be a killing blow. Had he not anticipated it and removed himself from Red Earth's range, he would have been a lifeless form clinging inside Beautiful Wings' field of power, draining her, leaving her without his healing protection.

"So be it," he said. Flesh to flesh, they accelerated, leaving the zone of the sun for the darkness to the east. They sensed the rolling sea beneath them as they sought the land of the east, fleeing those who would kill.

VII

I, Rack the Healer, sing of my joy with the brilliant satellite in opposition to the sun, rising there in the cold, airless heights, dark valleys forming shadows on its face. I can reach out and touch its face, not with my mind, as the Far Seers do, but with my imagination, as

dreamers do. I dream and my dreams are turning true; welded to my flesh is Beautiful Wings, whose body, even in flight, nourishes that which we have made together.

I share with her the elation of freedom from the pull of the planet. Through her mind I see the delicate design of the magnetic field, and with my own force coupled with hers, for we are one, I push against it. We use its power with our own, directing the force to send the union of our bodies flying. The bright gleaming satellite comes swimming through space to meet us; the clouds roil darkly beneath us; the planet turns in its circle around the sun. I feel myself giving, my surplus of substance being used for the first time in Power Giver soaring. I wonder at it.

I speak with her, telling her of the satisfaction I have known in my wanderings and she shares with me that curiosity which, to my knowledge, has in the past been limited to those of my kind. We are not dismayed by the length of the passage; we are occupied in spying out the far, bright spots the Far Seers tell us are other suns like ours. Although their senses are too dim to affirm it, the basic laws of nature must work even there. Planets swim in their orbit and nature peoples the planets with life, for life is the be all end all.

I hail you, all you far-flung Power Givers and Healers and all your loves. May your unions produce a balance. May all of you who live where the far suns glitter dimly find your tints to be brilliant and your blendings all-powerful. For I know the goodness of life and share your joy as I invite you to share mine.

My mind makes flamboyant pictures of hope. I see the survival factor rising and the Breathers reproducing themselves in numbers as difficult for my small mind to hold as is the picture of the distance between us and that bright circle of light that rises overhead. The sun is shrinking but still gives our world above the clouds a softness of light that illuminates the lightly-filmed eyes of my beloved. Her lips work in a smile under mine and our flesh tugs at itself where it is blended together.

I see understanding. I see love. I see the race rising to overcome the hardships of our ancient home, replenishing the air, stilling the storms, banishing the toxicity to the sink holes, leaving the earth to us. I see the need for our self-protective isolation in establishments overcome, and even the fragile Keepers basking in the kind sun. I see the Far Seers free

to make more than an occasional brief foray into our unchallenged outside and using their analytical minds to conquer our problems.

For too long have we allowed the planet and its deadly poisons to dominate us. Are we at the mercy of the planet? No. If we merely took what was offered, we would die gasping in the clouds of death.

The learned thinkers tell us that we are beloved of nature, and yet she does her best, in every way, at every moment of the sun circle, to kill us. Nature is the sacred force and is, therefore, not to be questioned. Tampering not allowed. Witness my own problems involving an ancient law that says thou shalt not dig in the softness or the hardness of the earth lest the poisons of death overtake you. But I, Rack the Healer, have wetted my hands in the products of the soft earth, pushing my fingers into the muck of a new stream bed with impunity. You, out there, circling the far suns, are you bound by tradition? Are your Far Seers blind to new knowledge?

We could, with our strength, soar to meet that bright, dark-shadowed planet, our satellite, and speak to the men there. I see it and think, ah, how clear, how bright. How clean the air. Is it not as old, not as wasted, not as soiled as our world? I think not, for otherwise it would glow with the poisonous yellows and purples rather than with the clarity of the hot water that gushes from the rocks in the valley I found beyond the river.

Yes, we are strong, full of substance. Yet as we soar I feel the cold seep through my scales and slow my blood. My love shivers against me and we drop to the clouds to warm ourselves with the heat of the sun captured under that thick blanket. Here is the reality that binds us within our scales and within our minds. There I doubt, for we live on my stored air, our gills expelling the gases without allowing a breath to pass. Here our outer lids close and we are in darkness, for the tender membranes of our inner lids are scalded by the harshness of the atmosphere. Here, the bright sky hidden, we soar on instinct alone, guided by the Healer's sense of direction and by the Power Giver's ability to measure distances. Farther down, on the surface, skimming slowly, we find pockets of breathable air and I replenish my stores, but the storms that are abating in our homeland behind us rage still on the sea and the heavy waters heave up, wetting our feet. Here nature is cruel—a blasphemous thought, but true. Outside the protective community of my birth, I, Rack the Healer, outlaw, think such thoughts

and have to hide them, for my love is not as cynical as I.

The water of the sea is warm and I remember the feel of it on my scales when I would dive for the slime source. Rocks at my waist, for without weight I would float, I sink to the bottom and feel the slick, pulpy plants in my fingers as I gather the food source.

It is said that the people of the eastern lands eat the flesh of the small, armored animals that crawl in the beds of the slime source. The Far Seers have said they are poisonous. Does this not speak of the fallibility of the law-givers? I have not seen it, but it is recorded. The same sea washes both the shores of my homeland and the eastern lands; would the small, armored animals who live in it be poison for some and food for others?

I know only that there is much to learn and I, Rack the Healer, intend to stretch my mind until I feel it strain within its scales. For I have known the joy of union. Unique among Healers, I have known the joy of joining my body totally with a Power Giver, her blood my blood, her organs open to my healing powers.

True, I may be suffering from excess pride, but can such a one as I think seriously about resigning himself to tradition, when such small innovations open such broad vistas of possibility?

We hunger. We suck the good broth from my pack and it refreshes us. My cells engorge themselves and I feel my strength flowing through my welded tongue into her body. To please me, she allows us to drop from fearful heights, like stones dropped from the escarpment, falling, falling, until, with a long, sweeping rise, we soar again. We laugh and sweep through the dawning sky as the rising sun brightens the low clouds and sends its glow to greet us.

There is a world around us. We are not totally free, for we are dependent on the broth. For the broth, we are dependent on the Far Seers who have tamed the many-legged Webber, who have bred the deadly Juicers and who combine the sticky material exuded by the Webbers with the fiery fluid of the Juicers to form vats of the Material to hold the broth. We are not independent, for nature has decreed that it takes the three mobile forms to provide food and shelter for the race—Far Seers, Healers, and Power Givers, working together. The particular mental talents of the Far Seers mold the Material and start the process of

breakdown in the pulpy slime-source plants gathered by the Healers. That results, with the addition of power from the Power Givers, in our food. Thus, we are all dependent on each other. My love and I must become a part of a community in the eastern lands which, the senses of Beautiful Wings tell us, are lying ahead where the clouds billow high.

But we will have free times. Then we will fly, our packs with us, to see the unseen lands, to explore the vast, empty spaces, to walk the barren rocks of the earth. For we have the freedom of unlimited flight. We have now traveled far and I am scarcely hurt; my resources are almost totally intact. With my metabolism and her ability to climb the lines of force radiated from the planet we could truly soar off this dying planet and seek our brothers on the far worlds.

Ah, you see, I am Rack the Healer, dreamer.

VIII

Weathered Mountain the Far Seer, making a routine check of his area, noted the soaring Power Giver carrying a healthy young Healer with an almost empty pack with resignation. He was old. Named for his area, that ancient, eroded range against which the sea rolled on the west, he had lived too many sun circles to be amazed by this willful waste of the Power Giver's substance. The line of flight traced back to the sea indicating that this was a joy flight, for no one on a purposeful mission would be traveling that route in his place.

Weathered Mountain was more concerned with the fact that the new beginning was not bringing the expected rise in the survival factor. He was engaged in measuring the output of the food and Material establishment in his area and was becoming convinced that short rations were in the offing, since the outside conditions did not allow the Healers a full day's work in the sea. This conclusion made him grumpy, for he, of course, would be on as short rations as anyone, and at his age such minor discomforts displeased him.

He paid no more attention to the soaring Power Giver and her burden until his senses, swinging out automatically, noted that they were lowering into his area. He checked identity idly. The answer he received caused him

to arise quickly, moving with a spring in his legs that he had thought was long since gone. What he had seen pushed survival factors and food production problems into the back of his old mind and filled him with a youthful excitement.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome," he sent. "Welcome to my area and welcome to my air and my broth and my meat."

Rack sent thanks and said privately, "This place is as good as any." Beautiful Wings agreed, although she was a bit awed by the high-piled rocky bones of the ancient mountain range.

The life forms, they found, were the same their world over. Weathered Mountain the Far Seer was no different from his counterparts in their homeland. And the establishment, with one noticeable difference, was much the same. The difference—a display of gleaming nuggets of hard material in a case of the Material—caught Rack's eye and interest.

"We do, indeed, come from across the sea," he answered to Weathered Mountain's query.

"Then your Power Giver must have rest," the Far Seer said solicitously, knowing the terrible drain of substance involved in the long journey. "There is a vacant chamber, my prime Keeper having unfortunately died during the winter."

"Beautiful Wings is young and strong," Rack said, "and relatively unharmed. She prefers to stay with me."

"As you wish," Weathered Mountain said, seating himself. The excitement he felt had begun to make his old limbs tremble. "Have you then developed new techniques for soaring?"

Rack pondered the question. In this strange land, where people were said to eat the flesh of sea animals, he was at a disadvantage. He was not yet ready to reveal the amazing thing that had happened between him and Beautiful Wings.

"Only a long period of rest and heavy feeding and breathing in advance," he said. "And, as I said, she is unusually strong for a Power Giver."

Weathered Mountain was not content with the answer, but there were larger questions. In his lifetime no one had crossed the sea. The last crossing, made in the time of his grandfather, had been undertaken in order to compare survival factors and air readings on either side of the sea. This comparison had indicated that conditions were much the same on both sides of the wide waters and that the same deadly air moved over all lands.

"The purpose of your trip, then," he sent politely, "if you are prepared to discuss it with such a one?"

"We are honored, indeed, to be greeted by one of such accumulated wisdom," Rack said, "for I detect the presence of a double picture of the mind of a Keeper."

"It is true that I pride myself on my interest in learning," said Weathered Mountain, "but you flatter me." He smiled. "The new Keeper is young and has been newly filled with the knowledge formerly kept in the mind of the old one who died. I did note, however during the process of transferral, that we have the complete records of the last visit from across the sea, if you are interested."

"In time, perhaps," Rack said, raising the Far Seer's curiosity to a feverish level. "But we did not come to gather observations of survival factors and air readings. We came to confront you with a new piece of information—at least, information that is new to our land. It is our wish to see if any information of a comparable nature is available in the lands of the east."

Beautiful Wings cast a look at him, for he had not discussed his plans with her. She, with the noninventive mind of a Power Giver, had envisioned Rack applying for a position in the area of the Far Seer for both of them.

"Ah," sent Weathered Mountain in expectancy.

"Perhaps it would be best for you to enter—" Rack said, as he opened a specific area of his mind.

"If you permit."

"Gladly."

Rack felt the mind tendrils of the Far Seer. The memory of the feel, the weight, the texture, and the taint of wet, soft earth, was there as the Far Seer examined Rack's stored impressions of the odd material from the valley of the hot waters. Rack waited, slightly nervous. A bit of his fear must have leaked, for the old Far Seer sent amusement.

"Your law-givers still abide by that hoary old taboo?"

Rack felt relief. "I am pleased to find that the wise Far Seers of the east value knowledge above tradition."

"You see them," Weathered Mountain said, indicating his collection of hard-material nuggets.

"I think there is a connection between the hard materials and the Old Ones," Rack said. "Do you find that foolish?"

The Far Seer shrugged. "One does not fully understand. I would that you had brought the new thing," he added.

"Its value, of course, prevented that."

"Yes." Then the Far Seer closed his mind for contemplation.

When he sent again he asked questions. Rack, freed of the fear of punishment, answered, telling of the methods used to unearth the object.

"It is said by some that the Old Ones built with stone," Weathered Mountain said.

A wave of excitement sent Rack's mind speculating. "There is evidence?"

"Suspicion. Guessing. Curious formations."

"But in your lands no object, of the curious material has been discovered?"

"None. Although we do, of course, find hard-material nuggets, which we value for their beauty, if not for their usefulness. There is a certain competition for their possession."

"And do they come from the subsurface?" Rack asked.

"No Healer can withstand the lure of the low areas," Weathered Mountain said.

"But are there areas such as the valley of the hot waters where digging is possible?"

"So it is said." Amusement. "When I am offered a hard-material nugget in exchange for a certain favor, such as a change of duty time or an extra ration of the Material, I do not question the Healer too closely."

"And your knowledge of the Old Ones?"

"It is not one of my interest areas, but there are some who are as fascinated with the Old Ones as you. I can put you in contact with them. Is this, then, this pursuit of the old myths, your sole reason for journeying across the sea?"

"Is not knowledge worthy of pursuit?" Rack asked.

Weathered Mountain, vaguely disappointed, but still stimulated by the contact, said, "My area of interest is that common to all Far Seers—life and the maintenance thereof. If you knew that the object you found was the work of the Old Ones would it help those who have left their establishments in the lowlands of the interior for lack of air?"

"It might have some significance," Rack said. "I am interested in knowing if life has always been at the mercy of the whims of nature or—and this is not meant to be blasphemy—"

"Blasphemy is an outdated concept," Weathered Mountain sent, "at least to one as old as I."

"Could the Old Ones have known more than we credit them with? Did they in any way control the forces of nature?"

Weathered Mountain was silent. After a long pause he spoke. "I find that I am not, after all, past the ability to be shocked. It is, indeed, a startling concept. Nature, my young Healer, is nature. How would you control her? By stilling the movements of the air? As long as the planet spins, there will be movements of the air. Moreover, the calculations of Wide River the Far Seer prove that if the air were stilled and allowed to settle, only the peaks of the highest mountains would extend above the

heavy gases."

"I think in smaller pictures," Rack said. "If the Old Ones did use the hard materials, what did they use them for? Would the answer to this question be of more than passing interest to us? Was the object I found in the valley of the hot waters made by the Old Ones? Or did it, as the Far Seers in our land think, fall from the vastness of the space outside? And even so, is it still not amazing? For if it came from one of the worlds out there, could it not have been crafted by men like us? I see no conflict in either theory, for both contain much that should interest our minds. Life exists, according to our best minds, on all worlds. Why would nature provide a world if not to support life?"

"Had I not seen the death of a Keeper just days ago I could be more in sympathy with your theory," Weathered Mountain said. "And since you seem to be of an inquiring mind, I will tell you something that has not been revealed to any mind other than that of a Far Seer. It is the prediction of our combined minds, after a vast picture of measurements and agonizing analysis, that life on this planet will cease to exist, save for the inert plants of the poisonous sink holes, in a frighteningly short period of sun circles, a picture well within the range of the mind of a Healer. Does this shock you?"

Rack felt weak. He seized Beautiful Wings' hand and felt her tremble. Such a thought, the extinction of all life, was unbearable.

"As do the Far Seers in your land," Weathered Mountain said, "we measure the growth of the Breathers in the southern seas. We read the air and the poisons therein. What we read discourages us. There is a steady decline in the quantity of good air. Survival factors are lower and lower. We measure the emanations of the sun and the movements of the air. We find little to indicate hope."

"Should this be true," Rack said, "then there is ever more reason for inquiry." He was tempted to tell the Far Seer that something new had come to him, the ability to blend with Beautiful Wings' flesh and to heal, but he restrained himself. "For who knows where inquiry might lead?"

Weathered Mountain was tired. He longed for the comfort of his rack with the new Keeper beside him. At first he had hoped that the unusual journey across the sea had brought new information, perhaps a good survival factor reading to indicate that somehow, against all logic, the

planet was starting a new cycle of replenishing itself. Instead, he had been subjected to the wild speculations of the mind of a Healer and had been given only one piece of new information of doubtful use. The knowledge of a strange, unexplained object was not in any way going to put clean air over the abandoned lowlands of the interior. The existence of the object would not, he determined, save one life.

"I rest," he sent. "You are welcome to use my air and drink of my broth. You are free to use the stored knowledge in the minds of my Keepers."

At the doorway to his chamber he paused. "In spite of the superb condition of your Power Giver the journey back to your homeland will, of course, be impossible. You must therefore choose your community. You will be welcome in mine. We can always use a strong Healer and a young Power Giver. I note your attachment and will assign your periods of free time so that you may be together. Take your pick of the unused establishments in my place and be part of us if you choose."

Rack sent gratitude, but he, too, knew disappointment. He was not sure what he was seeking, but the Far Seer of the mountains had added little to his store of knowledge beyond one doubtful picture of the Old Ones building with stone. That would bear investigation during his first free period. Meanwhile, there was other food for thought—the pessimistic prediction of death for all. It was of little consolation he would be allowed his full lifespan, as would Beautiful Wings and their offspring. What lay ahead for his grandchild, should Beautiful Wings give birth to a Healer or a Power Giver? Death? The end of life on the entire planet? That he would not accept.

Soaring low, they examined the unused establishments in Weathered Mountain's area and selected a spot on the side of a craggy, bone-bare mountain where updrafts brought occasional breaths of good air. There they rested, blended minds, and installed the new colony of Breathers from the scant reserves of Weathered Mountain's place.

To repay the generosity shown them, they worked, Beautiful Wings powering a vat of brewing broth, and Rack diving into the murky, heavy sea to pluck slime source. Conditions improved slightly, seemingly giving the lie to Weathered Mountain's dire prophecy of doom. Life was good. Rack came to know his fellow workers with whom he compared knowledge. He was told, to his mounting excitement, of the methods used by eastern Healers to collect the hard material. In safe spots, which were,

of course, scattered and always rare, they actually used tools fashioned of the Material to turn the soil and find the telltale streaks of waste that indicated the possible presence of a nugget. He was astounded to find that the hard materials, once the surface of the earth was scratched, seemed to be relatively plentiful. Although his former pride in the ownership of three nuggets, of which was one mounted on Beautiful Wings' breast, was damaged, dashed, his ambition was stimulated, for, while visiting the establishment of another Healer, he saw a nugget of amazing size and shape. One flat, gleaming side reflected his image. It was a treasure, but its value as an object was secondary to its interest to his own particular inquiry, for, like the object from the valley of hot water, this nugget seemed to him, at least, to have obviously been crafted. More convinced than ever that the Old Ones had been more than a shiftless race of savages living on the fat of a young planet, he approached his first free period with excited anticipation.

IX

Beautiful Wings' belly began to stretch with the life inside it. New scales sprang up to cover the expanded area of flesh. They would molt and fall after the birth returned her belly to normal size. After working through the new beginning and into the summer, they were allowed a free period in a time of stable, warm air. Using their combined technique for soaring they went exploring finding, as in their homeland, vast, uninhabited emptiness. Everywhere the land was stripped bare. Low spots stank with the same rank growth. Broad, thick-watered rivers crisscrossed the land. Digging without fear beside them, Rack found discoloration that indicated the past existence of much hard material. When their supplies were gone, they soared back to the establishment, enriched with three tiny nuggets of the hard material. There, they refreshed, breathed, ate. Under Rack's hand, the life in Beautiful Wings' belly moved—an occurrence that never ceased to fill Rack with a proud joy.

Rack went to Weathered Mountain's establishment to consult the minds of his Keepers.

At the end of summer storms Beautiful Wings was confined to the establishment, as the time of birth was nearing. Of the most interest was the store of knowledge in the older Keeper, for the new Keeper's mind was

stocked with technical data, while the other held more miscellaneous material. And while the mind of the younger one was orderly and arranged, the mind of the older, kept as a luxury by an old Far Seer, was chaotically misfiled. Ancestral records were mixed with fragments of ancient picture poetry, planet movements with speculation on the thoughts of the early Far Seers, broth inventories with the familiar Book of Rose the Healer.

The older Keeper was pleasant-minded, childishly delighted with Rack's company, expressing herself in uncoordinated movements and audible sounds of pleasure. Her fleshy white body was no longer firm, and consequently she was neglected by the aging Far Seer, who sought his pleasure in the arms of his new Keeper. Rack, his mind engaged, did a kindness with his hand, was rewarded with a flow of pleasure. But he was, as always, contemptuous of such things; his time of readiness was long past, and his Healer's nature was not able to comprehend unpurposeful sex. Keepers, he felt, were to be pitied. The portion of their minds that was their own never matured, and, remaining at the level of a baby, could comprehend only sensation. But in the huge storage areas a wealth of information lay waiting to be mined.

Rack sorted through the records, musing over the scant, beautiful pictures of poetic Healers, skipping the dry, technical records of the Far Seers, seeking any clue that might feed his curiosity.

It was not true, he discovered, that the people of the east were unresponsive to duty. Once, long ago, Red Earth—or was it one of his teachers?—had indicated that the eastern civilization was based on the bartering of hard-material nuggets in exchange for services. Rack now found that this was not true. The easterners valued the hard-material nuggets mostly as objects of wonder and beauty, although, as Weathered Mountain had indicated, it was not unknown to exchange a nugget for favors.

In the mind of the Keeper there was an exact record of each exchange made by Weathered Mountain. In addition there was an analysis of different types of hard material. This interested Rack, for he had seen only a limited picture of types. Apart from this information, he gained nothing new, and as the birth time neared, he abandoned his visits to the Keeper to tend Beautiful Wings.

As the awareness of the inner movements came to Beautiful Wings, she

felt no pain. Rack watched in awe as nature did her work. Soon, very soon, he would know. Was their child to be a Healer? Far Seer? Keeper? Power Giver? He hoped for the latter, a daughter with the beauty of his love, to be named Many Pleasures in honor of the union in the far north. Beautiful Wings asked nature, in a shy picture, for a Healer. She writhed now, feeling as the movements became more powerful. Rack, his hands on her belly, saw the miracle of birth flowering, the red, beautiful tint reminding him of the joining. Scales flowered and molted.

"Come, Many Pleasures," Rack sent to the unresponsive, tiny mind inside the Power Giver's body. "It is a pleasant world and it will be yours."

Beautiful Wings' body did the work for which it was designed, creating new life. Her lower portions, mottled ruby red, spread to reveal a large, soft fleshy area. With a new day dawning, the birth began. Interior muscles contracted and pushed until, miraculously, painlessly, a tiny head emerged, encased in a fleshy sack, followed by a soft, scaleless body which wiggled with life and reeked with the products of birth. Rack, trying to hide his disappointment, cleaned his Keeper daughter and presented her to her mother to suckle at the flowering chest bulges.

Nature's balance was maintained. Ungovernable forces decreed the type of the child that was born, and obviously, another Keeper was needed. And their life would not be filled with a growing Power Giver or a curious, wild, young Healer, Rack thought sadly.

"We will have ourselves," Beautiful Wings sent.

Rack berated himself for letting Beautiful Wings see his sorrow. He tried to take pleasure in watching the infant suckle the rich juices of her mother's body, but he could not help but think of the fate of their child, to be kept by a Far Seer, used for his pleasure.

Ah, but she, in turn, would have pleasure. Protected inside an impregnable establishment, she would live a long, happy life. And she would make her contribution, for what is civilization but an accumulation of knowledge and experience? Without Keepers, civilization, dependent on the frail memory of other types, would decline.

"We will have each other," Rack agreed. He sent pictures of soaring, traveling. The ice of the far north, the fire of the south lands, the fields of the Breathers in the southern sea—they would see all.

"And—" She sent a devastatingly strong picture, full of sadness and nostalgia, of the establishment where they had known their initial bliss, and then of the one in the far north and the repetition.

"Do you miss it so?" he asked.

"I shouldn't. It isn't logical." She smiled as the infant had its fill and slept.

"I will take you home," he said.

She sent alarm.

"Surely they will listen to reason," he said. "Here in the east we dig, and the death that was promised does not come. Moreover, they should be apprised of the predictions of the eastern Far Seers, the dire warnings of all-encompassing death."

"I fear for you," she said.

"We have unlimited soaring ability. We could fly to the satellite itself, given enough broth and air to carry us through cold space."

"Silly," she giggled.

"We could, at any rate, fly away again if they are not responsive."

He, too, longed for his homeland. He would take her to the valley of the hot waters. There they would dig and hopefully unearth other odd things, perhaps something that would pull together his confused thoughts.

When their infant Keeper was able to take broth, she was delivered to the establishment of a youthful Far Seer who had not as yet been provided with a Keeper. The Far Seer assured them that she would be given the best of treatment, and his tender handling of the baby comforted them. Rack tried not to think of her future, but thought instead of the Book of Rack the Healer, the work he had planted in the scarcely formed storage space of her brain. Some day, a curious Healer would find it, read the pictures, and know him. In his daughter's mind he had left all his thoughts, all his questions, all his discoveries.

They felt no regret when they soared, pack in place on Rack's back, into

the clean, thin air above the early winter clouds. Nature provided and nature made a balance. Behind them was the product of their miraculously beautiful union—a baby without a name, a baby that had ceased to be theirs when she took her first meal of broth. Ahead was home.

X

People were dying in Rack's world. It was the first thing he sensed after an uneventful soar across the sea. In a land where the barren rocks were broken only occasionally by the gleaming, transparent domes of establishments there were new blank spaces. The location of scattered life in Red Earth's area of responsibility, home to Rack and Beautiful Wings, was engraved on their minds—a map with each life in its place. And as they soared past the coastal sands they noted a blank. Growing Tree the Far Seer, cosponsor of Red Earth, was gone. It was as if, on a large board strewn with lights, a light had gone out. And, as they continued toward the interior, other establishments void of life cast a pall of gloom over the feeling of peace that had flooded them at the first sight of the western lands.

The end-of-circle storms had started moving earlier than ever before and were more severe. It was fortunate, Rack thought, that soaring on his power was less debilitating than moving on the surface. When at last they were hovering over Red Earth's establishment, he sent his mind down, encountering the heat of pleasure below. Red Earth was with his Keeper. Mouth to mouth with Beautiful Wings, Rack waited. After a time he sent, "I am Rack the Healer."

He was pleased to receive a quick flush of pleasure from Red Earth, but the pleasure was soon damped by surprise, questioning, and a heavy sense of duty.

Rack answered, "No, I am not dead. Nor is Beautiful Wings."

"You have come back, then, to submit to the judgment of the law-givers?"

Rack sent the strongest anger and contempt he could muster. "Growing

Tree the Far Seer is dead before his time. Gone are Strong Swimmer the Healer, Quick Soar the Power Giver, and others in the eastern marches of the area. The storms are early and the Breathers labor in the establishments. At such a time will you be bound by your petty traditions?"

"It is all heavy on my mind," Red Earth admitted. "What is your reason for returning, then?"

"I bring a message of gloom from the Far Seers of the east," Rack said. "Would you hear in peace?"

"Welcome in peace."

Red Earth had not changed, but an aura of sadness hung over Red Earth's establishment. The air was pure and good and Rack used it sparingly. Beautiful Wings was allowed more freedom of breath, since Red Earth was observing the rules of privacy and had not scanned their minds to discover the secret of her good condition after a long soar.

"I have many questions," Red Earth said. "But first, what is the message?"

He received the news of impending doom with no show of emotion. After a long time he sighed, expelling his air. "We have read the same. But I would like to confirm the conditions in the breeding grounds of the Breathers." He sighed again. "I hesitate, however, to consume the substance of a Power Giver and I must admit, I cringe at the thought of going into the outside under such adverse conditions as now exist."

"There is a way," Rack said. He was not sure that it would work, but the situation was serious enough to warrant any experiment.

Red Earth was nonplussed. The mind of a Far Seer would be required to measure the huge, but decreasing picture of Breathers in their broad field of surface slime in the southern sea.

Rack said, "I ask your indulgence to break one of the rules of privacy."

"In what cause?" Red Earth asked.

"Life," he said simply.

"A potent argument. You may act."

Rack walked across the room and stood behind the Far Seer. Overcoming his own distaste at what he was about to do, he bent quickly and pressed his small tongue to the bare flesh of the Far Seer's domed head. The act proceeded with surprising simplicity. There was not the pleasure involved in merging with Beautiful Wings, but it was not, he found, distasteful. His flesh melted into the flesh of the Far Seer. Red Earth's mind registered high surprise, but also a quickness of understanding that awed Rack.

"Now I understand," Red Earth sent excitedly. But there was something in the Far Seer's mind that made Rack feel uncomfortable, even as he continued to merge and began to make repairs on the body of Red Earth. There was a thought below the readable level; it grew stronger and stronger until it burst out as it became obvious that the Healer's powers were being extended into the Far Seer's body.

"Hail, New One. Hail, New One."

"No," Rack said, feeling a flush of embarrassment. "I am Rack the Healer."

The process continued, cell by cell, fiber by fiber, organ by organ. A sense of excitement spread from the agitated Far Seer into Rack's mind and into the mind of Beautiful Wings. Red Earth, in his dreams, had been expecting a completely new form, as different from present life forms as the first Healer was different from the Old Ones. Nature, always guileful, had duped them, sending the New One in a common form, but Red Earth was capable of understanding the import.

Beautiful Wings thought only that Rack's new ability would undoubtedly save him from being punished for past crimes. She took a small, selfish pleasure in basking in the glow of Red Earth's near-adoration of Rack, who, when he had finished, had left the Far Seer in better health than he had enjoyed since his youth. She could not feel seriously threatened by the predictions of the Far Seers. Her world was good. She had Rack and a rare, lasting love. Their position was secure. They were home.

Red Earth's mind, stimulated by the realization of a dream, blessed the infallibility of all-knowing nature and speculated wildly about the future.

He was brought up short when it was revealed that Rack's union with Beautiful Wings had produced a child.

"A Keeper," Rack told him. "She was left in the care of a young Far Seer of the east."

"No, no, that cannot be," Red Earth said, forgetting himself and searching the mind of Beautiful Wings for confirmation. Nature would not deliver a New One and then let him be wasted in death without having passed on his abilities. "Perhaps," he mused, "the Keeper is also different."

"She seemed as all Keepers," Rack said, remembering his disappointment.

"You will breed again, then," Red Earth said.

"Perhaps," Rack agreed. "The experience was a repeated one."

"Yes, you will breed again," Red Earth continued, excited once more. "When you tint we will select the most suitable mate." He felt the flare of jealousy from Beautiful Wings, sent soothing things, and said, "Perhaps it will be you, since your attachment is strong."

It was truly a time for great things. To demonstrate his ability, Rack, after eating hungrily and breathing deeply to rebuild himself, merged with Red Earth's Keeper, planting the technique in her storage banks as he felt her blood, her body, her organs. Then Rack and Beautiful Wings, with Red Earth feeding the data to his Keeper, told of their flight to the east, sending detailed pictures of all their activities there. Thus was history served, for it was the duty of all to record knowledge. In return Rack was briefed on conditions at home and they were discouraging. The discussion returned to Rack's statement that something could be done to allow Red Earth to measure the Breathers in their home waters. At first Red Earth was skeptical, but after a demonstration during which Beautiful Wings merged with Rack, encompassed both Rack and Red Earth in her field of power, and lifted them from the floor, he was convinced.

It was a strange grouping that emerged a short time later from the roiling clouds into the thin, upper air. Face to face, merged, were Rack and Beautiful Wings. Back to back with Rack, Red Earth was making a rare soar, his mind seeing all, feeling the far suns, contacting the face of the satellite, measuring the scant spray of air particles in the vast heights.

He let his pleasure flow and it was joined to the never-old pleasure of Beautiful Wings and Rack, who had soared higher and longer than any Healer and Power Giver in history. Rack laughed, seeing the bright satellite in the sky, and playfully repeated his boast that with his vitality and the power of Beautiful Wings, he could send them all soaring there. But he was sobered when Red Earth, using the distance around the planet as a base, sent a picture of the distance and a calculation of the energies involved.

Then the southern sea was below. They lowered through the dense clouds and found only minimum conditions at the surface. Red Earth directed the flight of the Power Giver, crossing the area again and again, his mind storing pictures so vast that they would not stick in Rack's mind.

Since the air was scarce and the hard projectiles plentiful, it was necessary for Rack to break his merge with Beautiful Wings, and to merge with Red Earth and heal him. When he was finished, he turned back to Beautiful Wings and was shocked to see how quickly the heavy burden had sapped her. He felt himself flow out, giving gladly and feeling a tenderness that made Red Earth squirm with embarrassment.

"You are never to soar without me," Rack said sternly. He was unable to bear the thought of her using her own substance, being weakened.

"Yes," she said gladly. "Yes."

After a time of mutual healing back in Red Earth's establishment, the Far Seer went into rapport with his Keeper. For a long period, he compared his pictures, drawing occasionally on the minds of his fellow Far Seers and the storage banks of their Keepers.

Rack and Beautiful Wings drew fresh Breathers from the Eastern Establishment and replenished his old establishment, emptied during his absence. Their home was a dome of transparency, for Rack liked to see the outside. The inside was filled with good air and happiness. Beautiful Wings slept peacefully as Rack watched. He saw that Red Earth had valued his hard-material nuggets so little that they had been left in his establishment. Outside, the survival factor was negative in his immediate area and the severity of the toxicity dampened his emotions.

The readings of Red Earth confirmed the predictions of the Far Seers of the east. He announced his findings, making individual contacts with

far-flung Far Seers, but added that all hope was not lost. He called for a council in the Eastern Establishment. He did not reveal the source of his hope as it was now only a wild dream. But already one of his dreams had come true with Rack's discovery of his new power.

Selected Power Givers transported Healers and Far Seers to the council. There was a drain on all, for the storms were peaking. Rack, feeling the damage, wanted to heal them all, but he knew, by some instinctive measuring, that it would be impossible, that it would result only in his own depletion. The gathering, although it was representative of the entire area of Red Earth, was small. The council began with a dry, long-winded recital of the observations of the Far Seers, confirming once again the great threat to life on the planet. The corroborating observations of the eastern Far Seers were presented. New deaths were reported in sad pictures. Predictions of more deaths left the gathering silent. No one could actually believe the verdict of the data, the end of all life on the planet, but the evidence was undeniable.

"Where," asked a young Far Seer attached to the Eastern Establishment, "is the hope you promised us, Red Earth? The Breathers die, breeding toward their own extinction. The clouds stir the accumulated poisons. People are dying."

"He is among us," Red Earth said.

Once again Rack had to demonstrate his powers. He merged, to Beautiful Wings' squirming displeasure, with a weakened Power Giver, bringing her back to strength. He ate, breathed, stored, and merged again with an ancient Far Seer, who was eased, but who was so near natural death that Rack was unable to do more than give momentary comfort.

"It is my hope," Red Earth said, "that this power has been latent in all Healers. We will listen as Rack the Healer explains. Then the Healers will try to emulate him."

Embarrassed Healers placed their small mouths on the heads of the Far Seers, and the mouths of the Power Givers, watching the pictures sent by Rack. But the Far Seers concluded that the power in Rack came from a totally unknown section of the mind, a strangely shaped area that seemed to be missing completely in the other Healers. The experiment was abandoned.

Red Earth, an impressive figure, rose to face the council. "Nature has sent the New One. Is it accepted?"

"It is accepted."

"Would she send the New One without purpose?"

A chorus of negative, negative.

"There is, then, only the question of finding the purpose," Red Earth said. "And, for some time, she has been trying to tell us, in her own way, the nature of that purpose." He sent a picture of elapsed time measuring back to Rack's trek to the valley of the hot waters. He projected an exact picture of the object found there. "This object, which has been studied by our foremost minds, was a message."

Rack, who had been letting his mind wander, was brought to full attention. He had been unaware that such a study had been made. The last time he had seen the object, it was lying on the floor of Red Earth's establishment where it had been flung in revulsion by Red Earth.

"The fact that nature told this Healer that it was time to dig"—a shudder of fear passed through the assembly—"was also a message, a message we, who are supposed to be wide-seeing and wise, chose to ignore. How long had the object been hidden below the soft poison of the earth? And what of the nuggets of hard material? We have considered them useless, but they too may be part of nature's overall plan for us."

Following a dramatic pause, Red Earth continued. "In the beginning nature imbued the Healers with a fascination for the hard-material nuggets. To them they are beauty, wonder, possessions of aesthetic worth. The reason for this apparent folly of nature is now clear. Do you see it?"

He waited, the look of a questioning teacher in his pictures. There were small, shamed negatives. Even Rack was silent, waiting to hear Red Earth's conclusion, as he tried to group his own confused thoughts.

"Balanced against this curiosity, this yen for possession of the nuggets, was the ancient knowledge that to dig meant death. Thus it was for an incomprehensible picture of time. And yet, even as the planet died, nature had long since planted our salvation. It was there in the valley of the hot waters, a strange and wonderful place, for where, in our tortured world,

does one find clean water, good air, and soft, unpoisoned soil? This valley was not an accident, but part of nature's design. It must have been there for countless sun circles, and Healers have always been a restless, wandering lot." A twitter of amusement. "But no Healer came upon this wondrous valley until Rack set out on his summer explorations during that fateful sun circle. Had another Healer, not blessed with the abilities of the New One, come upon this valley, he would have breathed the air, and appreciated the beauty of the place, but would he have dug?" He indicated a young Healer. "Would you have had the courage to go against the ancient teaching?"

"I fear negative," admitted the Healer.

"Only the New One had such daring," Red Earth said.

Rack, a bit embarrassed by all the praise, said, "I felt there was no danger. Then, too, I didn't dig. It was the water that dug."

"Yet, it was an act of daring," Red Earth continued. He motioned with his mind for Rack to be patient. "It was the act of the New One and it was all a part of nature's intricate design. It was her intent for the New One to dig, to find new values, to unearth this object." He had it in his hand, produced from his pack which rested on a nearby piece of furniture. "And this object has been adjudged by our best minds not to have originated on this planet."

Rack felt disappointment.

"So," Red Earth continued, "where has this message from nature, this alien object, come from?" He paused. "A sister world? We who can contact them know the distances involved to be too great. Yet there is another world, a world much closer, only a short lag in senses away. There is only one conclusion. This strange object, which lay under the earth, is a message sent by nature from our satellite."

"Possible," Rack mused. For after having searched two continents in vain for traces of the Old Ones, he was prepared to accept new theories.

"It is," Red Earth went on, "a message full of meaning. There is obviously life on our satellite, for Rack the Healer's original contention that this is the remnant of a crafted object stands. But why were we sent this message at this time? We know our planet is dying. But we know that

nature in her wisdom makes it possible for life to continue.

We, in our ignorance of her grand design, cannot envision the continuation of life under the worsening conditions, and yet, she obviously intends for us to live on. But is she asking us for action?"

Rack nodded, remembering his almost blasphemous thinking in regard to the manipulation of the environment by man. Red Earth was treading on new and daring ground. The squirmings of the assembly confirmed it.

"I say nature is telling us that we must act, now. The message import of all these events—the emergence of the New One, the appearance of strange objects, the deterioration of conditions on our planet—is clear. Nature is telling us that there is some connection between life on our satellite and our own survival."

"If the message is clear to you, Red Earth, perhaps you can tell us what action we should take," said an old Far Seer named Gray Body dryly.

"So I shall," Red Earth retorted. "Nature intends that the New One and his mate, Beautiful Wings the Power Giver, will soar to the world that rises each night in our eastern skies."

Rack started visibly. Had the old Far Seer taken his fantasies seriously? Around him there were mutters of disbelieving thought. Beautiful Wings sent him a sudden cold fear.

"Not impossible," Red Earth was defending, "for you have witnessed the healing power of the merge with the New One, have you not?"

"But the satellite is many pictures of the distance around the planet away and space is cold and airless."

"There are problems, true," Red Earth said, "but are we not intelligent life? I myself have soared with the New One and Beautiful Wings to the southern seas, a soar that ordinarily taxes the strength of a Power Giver. I have seen the New One power that flight at a cost of almost nothing to his reserves."

"But," protested a Far Seer, "are we to send the New One into space, perhaps never to return, and be left without anything save a vague hope of some miracle from another world?"

"The facts are recorded," Red Earth said. "The union of Rack and Beautiful Wings produced a Keeper. Thus, his power, unless nature poses conditions favorable to another union, ends with him. Again, I think the import is clear. We are not to wait for nature to save us. We are to save ourselves. We are to take action."

"If the difficulties, and there are many, are overcome—if the New One reaches the satellite and finds life there—how is this to save us?" grumbled Gray Body.

"If we could fathom nature's ways, we would have all the answers," Red Earth said. "Since we do not, we must proceed with faith, taking the only course open to us, trusting that nature's wisdom has guided us properly. The object found by the New One is already old, as witnessed by its presence beneath the surface, but the inhabitants of the satellite have crafted it with a skill far beyond ours. As you may know, this material is impregnable to the acids of the atmosphere. It is not workable with tools fashioned from the Material. It is truly wonderful. Contact with such people would expand our knowledge, perhaps provide us with the techniques we would need to alter the falling survival factor."

The old, doubtful Far Seer Gray Body sent objection. "If this wonderful race of people are so advanced, why have they not made the far flight to our world, rather than waiting for us to make the contact?"

"For this," Red Earth agreed, "I have no answer. I merely repeat my faith. The events of nature are never without logic. Even the fatal winter storms follow a prescribed pattern imposed by the movements of the planets, the angle of the earth's axis, the position of the satellite, and the strength of the emissions of the sun. Not even death is random in nature, for it takes the old at the prescribed time. I contend that all these seemingly random happenings, if we could but understand, are a part of the whole. I contend that the nature of the Healers, combined with the lure of the hard-material nuggets, the emergence of the New One, and the conclusions of doom for life on our world, are all part of nature's scheme to send us into space. What we will find there I do not know."

He paused, then continued sadly in a new vein. "We must, in this crucial time, consider all possibilities. Perhaps we err in our understanding. The picture I now project is shocking, I know. I defend it from charges of blasphemy on the grounds of scientific speculation. Is it totally inconceivable to think that life, sacred as it is, is confined to this

planet?"

The council was indeed deeply shaken by the picture, but the seriousness of the times allowed it.

"Should this be so—and I pray that it is not— then nature's design could be to pass this life along to a fresh, pure-aired world. In short, the abilities of Rack the New One could be given to him for the sole purpose of transplanting life from this dying planet to a new world. How often, in history, does a union produce such a lasting relationship?" He indicated Rack and Beautiful Wings, hand in hand, the Power Giver pale and fearful. "Its strength can be felt, even now. Perhaps, on a new world, they will be granted a second joining and will create a new race."

"I cannot accept the possibility of extinction of life on the planet," said a bold Healer.

"Nor can I," agreed Red Earth. "But can we risk going against nature's obvious directives?"

"There is merit in your thoughts," sighed the old, wise Far Seer who had been given momentary relief from the aches of old age by Rack. "I volunteer my services in the project."

"Welcome," Red Earth said. "For it will take the powers of many to prepare such a venture. Time will be required as well. I would be fearful that we were making a wrong decision if we were to send the New One soaring to the satellite today. But as we plan we will have time to study this long flight. Should events occur to prove us wrong we will have done nothing more serious than waste the time of those who have little time remaining. Nature may decree a new joining for the New One on this planet, in which case we can but hope for a breeder for his offspring to carry his seed. This possibility has not been neglected in my thinking, but I do not hold forth hope that it will save us. For, as our recent readings indicate, not even the abilities of many New Ones would keep alive a sufficient number of our people to carry our civilization forward. At best, the breeding of a new New One from Rack's loins would merely buy us another generation of life before the conditions wiped out even the New Ones, for the worsening of the survival conditions is irreversible. Still, we have time. Perhaps something will be revealed to us. If not, Rack the New One and his chosen mate, Beautiful Wings, will journey into the cold of airless space in search of the salvation of life."

Red Earth stood silent. When the buzzing thoughts stilled, he sent, "Is it agreed?"

"Affirmative, affirmative," the council sent.

"But you haven't asked us what we think," Beautiful Wings wailed, sending pictures of death, vast, empty space, and unknown worlds in her agitation.

"We know you will do your duty, whatever it is," Red Earth said soothingly.

"It is the nature of the Power Givers to be fearful," Rack sent. "We will do our duty." He touched her with his armored hand, blended his mind with hers, and quieted her fears. Feeling his strength, she was reassured.

"Yes," she said. "We will do our duty."

XI

"Nature," Red Earth the Far Seer said, "is admirably logical, never leaving the straight line of the advancement of life."

He had moved, at least temporarily, to the large dome of the Eastern Group Establishment, for space was needed to house the group that had been put together to plan and execute the grand, hopeful soar of Rack the Healer and Beautiful Wings the Power Giver. In addition to Rack, Beautiful Wings, and Red Earth, the group consisted of Shadow on the Moon, an aptly named young Far Seer who had spent much time in studying the satellite; Yellow Sky the Power Giver, who, to conserve the energy of Beautiful Wings, was to make some test soars with Rack; and, for the balancing value of his skeptical mind, the ancient Far Seer Gray Body. Supplemental to the main group were additional Healers and Keepers; the Healers would perform any needed goings about in the forbidding storms, the Keepers would assure detailed records of the events. Since the Eastern Group Establishment also had to continue its function as the prime source of broth and the Material, the extra bodies inside the large dome strained the available resources and made demands on the rights of personal privacy. However, no one grumbled.

"Rack the New One," Red Earth went on, "was responsible for leading my mind to a new concept of nature. In his eagerness to prove the abilities of the Old Ones, he set me to speculating about the nature of life on this world and on our sister worlds. On our world, at least in the beginning, life had many forms. Have you ever considered the meaning of some of our traditional name pictures? For example, the name picture of our late brother Growing Tree the Far Seer is something from the young days of our world when the soil was less toxic and could support vegetable life of amazing complexity. His picture is of a large, growing thing, green and fragile. In our records one finds many such names, one of the more notable being the picture of Rose the Healer. His name picture suggests something of beauty, a bright, fragile, short-lived thing that also grew out of the soil. Some of our other names suggest that there was, in addition to vegetable life, life of other sorts in the youthful days of the planet, such as flying things. Indeed, our own Juicers show vestigial wings, and the young Juicers are winged before their change. It is reasonable, then, to think that life adjusts to planetary conditions, resulting in a variety of life forms that serve some practical purpose that is unknown to us. As conditions alter in the natural order of a world, changes occur. Nature does not, I believe, destroy life, but alters its form. Life is concentrated into necessary forms, and some believe that there is a constant quantity of life allotted to each world. Should this be true, then the life force we embody could have, in the past, furnished animation to some strange life forms beyond our imagination. At this stage of our world's development life is evident in a small picture of forms—the four forms of us, the two forms of insects, the combination of vegetation and animal that is the Breather, and a few forms of vegetation. Think of the wisdom of this arrangement: only necessary things exist with no life force wasted in useless forms. You may point to the poisonous plants of the sink holes and question this statement, but who is to say that these things do not have a place in the future of life? We do not know the exact form of the Old Ones, but we do know that we are drastically different than they were. The New Ones, the logical advancement of nature, assuming that Rack the Healer's change is incomplete and will be perfected in some future birth, could be so radically different as to be able to utilize the poisonous plants of the sink holes for their own good."

"It would, indeed, seem that nothing is random in nature," agreed Gray Body, the old Far Seer. "But in restating this concept, Red Earth, my brother, are you not seeking to ease doubts in your mind regarding our present course of action?"

"I shall not deny certain misgivings," Red Earth said. "Some of them are not worth considering, for the pain I feel when I think of losing the presence of two of my fellow beings is purely emotional and not at all in keeping with the logical mind of a Far Seer."

"You will not lose, but gain," Rack said. "For the success of our journey will bring changes. We, having replenished our stores on the new, sweet world, will return, bringing to you the wisdom of our brothers there."

"I would like to think so," Red Earth said.

"The thought of such a journey is, of course, pleasing to a Healer, who is notoriously footloose," Gray Body sent. "And I fear that the result of this venture may be measured only in the pleasures received by those involved—a Healer who will see more of the universe than any Healer before him, a Power Giver who will make a soar that will diminish all past flights. Should you find the satellite to be empty, there would be a temptation to return, for it is horrible to think of a world empty of life force. You would be lonely. The temptation to return would be great."

"Yes," Red Earth agreed. "Should nature decree that you discover a world empty of intelligent life, then you must suffer the loneliness. You must not return to our planet. You will breed, perhaps many times, for nature *will* preserve life, and you will people the new world."

"But if we can accept this blasphemous idea that nature limits life to one world at a time, then can we also entertain other blasphemies—such as random factors in nature?" asked a young Healer.

"The consideration of that subject pains me," Red Earth said, "but I have thought on it. We come, once again, to faith. Compare the pictures of the early stages of this world, fruitful, with varied forms of life, rich, sweet air, and a variety of foods with our world today. Compare the pictures in the Book of Rose the Healer of the Old Ones dying in vast numbers with the small picture of our population. Assuming that there is a constant amount of life force is it not logical to think that each of us is allotted a larger picture of life force than was allotted to one of the Old Ones? This would explain the superiority of our life forms. Is it not possible that there is a life force on a new, empty world, waiting to inhabit the body of life? One of the possibilities is that Rack and Beautiful Wings will find an empty planet, true. But it is just as believable to think that nature awaits them with a reserve of life force which, once absorbed, will make them

more than they are."

"Your faith humbles me," said Gray Body.

"What else is there?" Rack asked. "I share Red Earth's faith. Nature has never deserted us. She has given us good life in the past, with pockets of sweet air and quantities of broth. She has made us thinking beings who can see beauty. A mother will not abandon her children."

"It is time," Red Earth said, "to cease speculating and apply ourselves to the task at hand. Shadow on the Moon, the youngest Far Seer who studies the satellite, will outline some of the difficulties."

Shadow on the Moon, agitated by the attention, began his presentation. "Our senses tell us of large mountains and valleys. This fact may indicate a supply of good air, for uneroded mountains indicate a youthful world. On our world the rains and the winds have eaten our mountains. Thus, we anticipate no difficulty once the satellite is reached. The dangers lie in the journey through space. In space the air particles are so scattered that not even the lungs of a powerful Healer such as Rack could find a breath. Enough air must be stored for Rack and his Power Giver to sustain life for—"

The picture of days he sent startled Rack. "It is not within the power of Rack the Healer," he protested.

"So," Shadow on the Moon went on, "it is necessary to provide a store of air and food. I have considered the possibilities. The amount needed would entail a pack of unwieldy proportions. This being undesirable, I have suggested, an alternate course." He sent a picture of a small establishment, constructed of the Material, complete with Breather tanks and broth vessels.

"The bulk will be far too great," Rack said, thinking of the drain on Beautiful Wings.

"Ordinarily, yes," Shadow on the Moon said. "But there are certain differences between a soar such as we contemplate and a simple soar within the range of the pull of the earth." He turned to Beautiful Wings. "Your senses tell you of the nature of the force that surrounds the earth. Can you picture the extent of the force?"

She concentrated. "I have never considered it. I have soared high, but I have never felt any diminishing of the force that, when unopposed, tugs me back to earth."

"The senses of a Far Seer are more perceptive," Red Earth prompted, and Shadow on the Moon continued his discourse.

"We, too, can see the force of the earth," he said, "although we cannot utilize it, and our sight extends into the airlessness of space. There, at certain distances, we note a decrease in the power. Surrounding the satellite we sense a similar force, although its power is less because it is a smaller world. Thus, in a soar beyond the earth, less power would be required, and once past a certain point, a Power Giver could cease her work, allowing the pull of the sister world to furnish the motive power."

"But," said Beautiful Wings, "in my idle play I have sometimes allowed myself to fall. When I cease working, the earth tugs and I fall ever faster. If I allow myself to fall for too long, the power needed to stop is far greater than the power needed for a simple soar."

"True. That is in our thoughts," Shadow on the Moon said. "I suggest that practice soars be made, using the helping Power Giver. We must measure the force of the earth's pull and compare it with the pull of the sister world. Then we shall know the amount of power needed to stop the soar. It will be great—perhaps too great— for in airless space, the soar must be faster than any flight has ever been." He pictured the distance and, once again, Rack was awed.

As the planning continued the number of difficulties seemed to grow until they burdened Rack's mind. The vast picture of distance intimidated him and he feared not for himself, but for Beautiful Wings. Never before had such a great demand been made on a Power Giver. And as the workers constructed the small establishment that would, according to the plan of Shadow on the Moon, protect them from the cold airlessness of space, Rack watched and weighed with his mind and despaired.

However, he prepared for the trip dutifully. He stored by eating far more than his usual amount, breathing the rich, Breather-made air until all his cells were fat with air and he added new cells in the form of surplus. He felt bulky, but he knew that each small picture of air that was added, each bit of reserve, gave him that much more to share with Beautiful Wings.

To cover all eventualities it was decided that an attempt should be made to teach Rack and Beautiful Wings the techniques of food and Material making. Eggs of Webbers and Juicers and small containers of the slime source plants would be stored in the flying establishment so that should they find an empty but clean-aired world they would have means for survival. Tending the Webbers and Juicers was a responsibility of the Far Seers, and the insects, accustomed only to their mind patterns, were at first restless in the presence of others. Rack studied the soothing patterns sent by the Far Seers, duplicated them, and finally became at ease with the hairy Webbers. Carefully avoiding the vicious stingers of the Juicers, he managed to master the technique of milking the creatures. It was up to Beautiful Wings to use her power to combine the two extracts, and after much experimentation she was partly successful. Red Earth assured her that before departure date she would be as adept at Material-making and broth-brewing as a Far Seer.

At last the flying establishment had been completed and was ready for a test. The group gathered. Rack and Beautiful Wings entered, closed the lock, and lay down on the comfortable rack. He merged with her and she lifted, her area of power enclosing the establishment. They rose to the ceiling of the dome of Eastern Establishment and held there effortlessly, with Rack's substance and power funneling through their blended flesh to heal and help. Rack was encouraged, for the flying establishment added only a tiny picture to the drain on their joint resources.

Then the test to measure the drain in actual soaring was arranged. Yellow Sky, a young and beautiful Power Giver, was to be united with Rack.

"I fail to understand why, if I am to be the one to make the soar, I cannot go with you," Beautiful Wings protested.

"We must conserve your resources," Red Earth said impatiently.

Beautiful Wings, sending half-concealed pictures of jealousy, watched as Rack touched his tongue to the tongue of Yellow Sky. The flying establishment lifted rapidly into the dark, swirling clouds. Rack sent back pictures of their condition to the Far Seers. Yellow Sky took them up swiftly, as if to prove to all that she, as well as Beautiful Wings, could power the soar. Soon the establishment burst through the clouds into the blackness of the upper air. Rack in contact with Shadow on the Moon, directed her to slow the ascent until finally they hovered motionless high

above the planet. The flying enclosure was almost invisible against the black space beyond it. Below, the view was blocked by the most terrible winter storms in history. Yet they were not alone, for the Far Seers held them in their minds, measuring their expenditure of substance.

Exultant, not penalized in the slightest by the fast, heavy lift, the Power Giver radiated joy. Rack, however, was slightly uncomfortable. His mouth to hers, he knew the vague unease that he always felt in a merge with anyone other than Beautiful Wings. He was relieved when the Far Seers had enough information to allow the soar to end, and when they returned to earth he immediately sought seclusion within his chamber at the Eastern Establishment.

That he was being selfish did not occur to him. However, when Beautiful Wings entered he looked up, arranging his features in an expression of pleasure.

"Did you not even want to see me?" she asked.

"Of course," he said. "I was merely tired."

"Yet we have soared the wide sea without feeling fatigue," she said.

She was defenseless against his probing mind. Their long closeness had robbed her of the ability to close her mind to him. What he found hurt him. "You are the most foolish of Power Givers," he told her fondly. "Do you think I could forget so quickly?" He sent pictures of the repeated joining and she melted, coming to his side.

"I will not allow you to merge with her again," she said.

He laughed. "Then you shall be the one who explains it to Red Earth." But he sent such a wave of love that she purred aloud with pleasure and clung to him.

Since it had been proved that the flying establishment could be soared relatively easily, only a few tests remained. As Yellow Sky once more lifted the load, Beautiful Wings tried to appear unconcerned, but was not successful in hiding her pique from Rack. At the height of the soar, in the thin air of near space, they hovered. Under the guidance of Shadow on the Moon, the flying establishment moved in an arc corresponding to the curve of the planet. Faster and faster they moved, Rack sending his

energies into the body of the Power Giver. Just as the contact was about to be broken by the curvature of the planet Shadow on the Moon ordered them to slow, make a sweeping turn, and come back. As they complied the establishment began to move up at an increasing rate of speed, the strain felt even in Rack's strong body.

When they returned to the surface of the planet they found the Far Seers greatly excited over the relative readings of power expended in the two methods of acceleration. One more test was required to confirm the thinking of the Far Seers. And to the relief of Beautiful Wings, it was decided to use the team that would make the final long soar.

Rack was happy to be merged once again with Beautiful Wings. He knew her as he knew no other, knew the vibrant life force of her, the gladness with which she merged, the inner workings of her organs, the miraculous beauty of her cellular structure. His mind sang with hers as she lifted the thin bubble of the Material through the toxic clouds to where the bright sun was visible in the cold, thin air. Up and up they went, moving slowly, to conserve energy. Their trajectory was angled, aligned with the curve of the earth in a direction opposite to its rotation. Just before contact was lost, Shadow on the Moon directed them to level and engage the power of Beautiful Wings' mind to push the flying establishment even faster.

There was no sensation of speed. Blocked by the curve of the earth from the mind of the Far Seer, they relied on an instinctive sense of timing to halt the force. As they rested, they felt light and free, their bodies floating gently free of the rack. Disengaged, they examined the situation. The senses of the Power Giver noted the pull of the earth, but they also distinguished another force that counteracted it. The balance of these two powers kept the flying establishment on an even keel, circling the earth at a far height, with no need for Rack and Beautiful Wings to expend any of their own energies. They passed through the dark of a space night and emerged again into the sun. The minds of the Far Seers came into contact, measuring jubilantly.

After another circle of the planet at a speed never before attained, they came down, the mind of the Power Giver using its force to break the unseen force that counterbalanced the pull of the planet. Forcing against the pull they lowered slowly and settled outside the Eastern Establishment.

Rack had difficulty understanding the pictures in the minds of the Far

Seers, but Beautiful Wings, whose knowledge of planet fields and pull was inbred, grasped the pictures easily. Together, minds blended, they would be able to follow the exact instructions of the Far Seers. Moreover, throughout the early stages of the soar, they would be in contact with Shadow on the Moon. In his mind the wheelings of the worlds were precise pictures and his logic could send the pictures ahead in time to anticipate the exact location of the sister worlds at any given time. He had conceived a daring theory to save energy. As the flying establishment approached the sister world it would be speeding through space at a huge picture of velocity. Having measured the strength of the power used by Beautiful Wings and other Power Givers in stopping the fall of their own bodies toward the planet, he pictured the force needed to slow the flying establishment with the weight of Rack and Beautiful Wings inside. To stop the motion would cost dearly if Beautiful Wings forced herself directly against the satellite and came to a direct landing. Shadow on the Moon thought it possible to allow the pull of the satellite itself to slow the soar. Rack tried hard to capture the concept, but it was difficult. He left such technicalities to the Far Seers and Power Givers, confident that they were right when they said that the flying establishment should not aim directly at the satellite, but should swing past, allowing the pull of the world to slow the forward motion and curve it into a circle around the satellite. Power would then be used sparingly to slow the motion and allow the tug of the satellite to pull the establishment down to a site selected by Rack and Beautiful Wings.

The preparations were complete. On a dark night at the low end of the sun circle, with the storms howling outside, lifting all the heavy gases into the already toxic atmosphere, the group gathered and listened to a recital of the deaths of the season. There were more blank spaces in the thin web of life force around the continent. Death stalked the world and dampened the anticipation of the great event. The aching knowledge of loss added a sense of urgency to the last-minute activity as Healers stored good air and broth in the flying establishment, placed fresh, healthy Breathers in the tanks, stored the eggs of the Webbers and Juicers and the slime source plants in their containers.

Unable to sleep, Rack lay with his armored hand on the flank of Beautiful Wings. He felt her shift in sleep and heard the sound of her lungs using the good, sweet air. The Establishment was quiet, work at a half. He could hear the sigh of the winds through the thin walls of the Material. On his scales he could feel the occasional particle that made its way through

the resistance of the walls. He wished for the abilities of the Far Seers, so that he could send his mind up beyond the lowering clouds to feel the swing of the worlds, the heat of the sun. He considered his life, and it was good. He had seen much, done much. This was the greatest adventure a Healer would ever experience. The fate of his world depended on his action. But Rack the Healer was young, strong, and confident. He did not know fear.

XII

This is the Book of Rack the Healer, called the New One, sent back to the minds of the Keepers from a point where the planet is but a yellow-purple brightness. These are the thoughts of Rack, sent from Space. They are sent for my daughter, the Keeper, whose name I do not know, who can store and keep but who can never know me; for those we love, Red Earth and Shadow on the Moon and Gray Body, Far Seers of great knowledge; for those who helped Yellow Sky the Power Giver and our brothers and sisters on the Eastern Continent, whom we greet. Our thoughts travel to them as well as to our homeland, for here, where the planet is small below us, our thoughts spread easily through the clear vastness, the ever-growing picture of distance.

Know you, my brothers, my sisters, that your force is felt even here. Tender but strong emotions follow us, making us feel the life force, labeling our world as one of the favored of nature, one on which the life force glows brightly. We are able even now to feel the reassuring warmth of the combined minds of you, the Far Seers. We know at what cost you are sending us your guidance, for the distance is great and the sky is thick with poisons.

And before we pass beyond the strength of our weak mind powers, I, Rack the Healer, presume to speak, to clutter the vaults of the Keepers' minds with my thoughts, in the hope that future generations might gain from our experience.

You have seen the deadly poison and the dark, swirling air. You have, some of you, been able to make the high soar, passing beyond the obscuring darkness into the light, where you could see the sparkling suns within the black depths of the universe. For you, I send the scene to be

recorded forever. The curvature of the planet is becoming evident as we rise, the cold is beginning to be felt inside the Establishment. I ruffle my scales so that they receive the direct rays of the sun. Its hard particles bounce and send energy into me which I share with the one who is welded to me, flesh on flesh. We leave the dying world behind. The night of space is black and the sun a brightness that, without the protection of my outer lids, I cannot endure.

Even as I record my poor thoughts alongside those of my betters, I receive and obey the learned thinking of the Far Seers, who guide our soar into an arcing swoop. Now the forces equalize and we float, effortlessly. At this picture of distance, the clouds lose their deadliness and are merely a beautifully mottled layer of color, smooth, dense, even, obscuring the planet from our eyes.

Into the cold of the shadow of the planet we fly, and I feel the slowness of my blood and give of my warmth to my Power Giver. We are measuring the time and at the precise moment determined by the mind of Shadow on the Moon, we surge, using all our combined power. I bid you, my world, temporary farewell and send you my love and ask yours in return. We are not of this world now, but from it, dwellers in the hostile vastness of space, an emptiness that makes the airless plains of glass seem like paradise.

The world behind us seems close enough to touch. Steadily it shrinks to become a globe of yellowish-purple, and we watch the march of the giant winter storms. The clouds cover the southern seas, where the Breathers grow. The sun, harsh, unpitying, beats down on it.

Out there we see the satellite, our goal. We are pushing toward it, using our power, feeling the drain. We rest, eat, refresh ourselves, and then we push again. I feel the accumulated fat of my system being used, feel myself shrinking. There is no sensation of speed or movement. We know we are moving only by the resistance to our power and by the steadily shrinking planet behind us. We push for a period of time and then rest.

We are alone and the loneliness is terrible. We know now that life loves life and needs its presence. Experience our loneliness with us and value your fellows. Here there is no friendly life glow in the next establishment. There is only emptiness, a vast, aching void.

And yet as we drift, moving at a speed that is beyond my meager comprehension, as the minds of our friends grow feeble in the distance, I exult, for we will achieve our goal. We will bring continued life to our world. I sing the song of Rack the Healer, called the New One, craving no special recognition for doing my duty, but asking the indulgence of my brothers and sisters, for we are lonely and we are going a vast distance from the glow of life and our homes and even as we trust in the goodness of nature we fear.

I sing of my love, of the Power Giver Beautiful Wings, with whom I have joined to produce the life of a Keeper, thus contributing to the balance of nature's life. I sing of her beauty, her delicate scales of flashing colors and her slim legs of strength and her arms of warmth and her pink-tinged gills that remind me of the glory of her tinting. She is blessed with a delicate sense of joy in sharing my nature-given love. I sing of our union, for it lasted past the tinting and became deep. I sing of our togetherness as we merge and I share with her and heal the damages of raw sunlight. I inscribe her name on the records of our race, to be remembered, for she has risked much. She soared into the poison of the winter storms to find me, and now she joins me in this daring soar.

I sing of Red Earth the Far Seer, who attended the ancient laws, thus following nature's design which led to this flight. May his life be long with many moments of pleasure with young and beautiful Keepers. To him I entrust my memory, my establishment, my nuggets of hard material. May he find beauty in the nuggets, for beauty is nature's gift to all, not simply to Healers.

I sing of Shadow on the Moon the Far Seer, whose wisdom guided us and whose strong mind still comforts us, and of Gray Body the Far Seer, whose doubts made us work harder to seek this opportunity to save the race. I sing of Yellow Sky the Power Giver and remember gratefully her soars with me. I send her my thanks and my love and a wish for an early tinting and a production of life.

The cold of space slows my thoughts. The burning sun makes ashes gather on my scales; I must shield Beautiful Wings from this cruel sun with my stronger body. The satellite grows in brightness, its shadows sharpen. It looms there, waiting with its gifts.

I sing, reluctantly, of my doubts. I am weak and I fear, shudderingly, as sleep claims my companion, of finding emptiness.

But should such disaster overtake us, weep not for Rack the Healer and Beautiful Wings the Power Giver, for we have enjoyed much and have known the awesome wheelings of the worlds from afar. Think, then, that this was a folly of man, not of nature, for the faith is kept as long as the life force is vibrant on our world.

I sing of my hope, of anticipated greetings from fellow beings on our sister world in a place of sweet air and plentiful food and undiminished life. I sing of our return to bring hope and word of renewal. Or, if it be nature's wish, I sing of two alone on a vast world, building life.

I add my thoughts to those of Rose the Healer, who was not the initial one but was young with our race, when the Old Ones were a fresh memory and their knowledge was not lost. I would that I could see the world as it was, young, with growing things and multiple forms of life. What a wondrous place it must have been. Perhaps we, at the end of our journey, will find such a place, replenish ourselves, and return to you with many secrets. And as I dream, I dream of moving the race to this fresh, new world where no one wants for air and the gentle sun warms even the frail, unprotected hides of the youngest and most tender Keepers.

Many questions assault my mind. What can we, even if I am truly the New One, do all alone? Will there be a powerful life force on this new world to make us strong enough to once again soar across the emptiness and carry on my broad back all life to this wondrous new world?

Our Breathers die, but the supply will be ample, for now we pass from the pull of the home world to the tug of the new world, growing steadily ahead of us. The senses of my love feel its power seize us and gradually speed us forward. The thoughts of Shadow on the Moon the Far Seer were accurate.

We burn and freeze. My scales are coated with ash. Sadly, I sing of the weakness of my love. For she is being used, even with my healing. The strain, as we apply our power to slow ourselves, is felt to the core of my deepest cells, for I have used my reserves. My weight lessens. We are far from our home planet and feel the pull of the new world.

I will breathe deeply of the air and eat of the broth held in reserve. I will send my strength into my love, healing her; I weep for her wasted substance, and for the first time, doubt our combined wisdom. Had we

not chosen to venture into this vast cold we would be snugly established with the storms blowing. Selfishly, I dream of the time we would have had, even with a world dying about us, for we would have lived and blended our minds for our allotted span. But that is not to be. In the chill of a northern establishment, with the frost sparkling on the earth, we joined. Her breast buds were tender and sweet and I saw them suckled by our issue, by the Keeper whose name I do not know. And that is in our past.

Weakened, we near our goal. It was fortunate that we brought just so much air, just so much broth, just so many Breathers, for the load has been great and the cold has drained us and ahead is the final surge of power. I rest fitfully. I dream of a new time of readiness. I see her scales flowering and see the emergence of the ruby beauty from deep within her. Even though I am awake, I dream. But no. My love tints. Even in her weakness there is about her lower regions a definite tint and a hint of flowering on the chest. It could only be nature's plan. I will tint. I feel the preliminary tinglings. Below, on a new world, we will find a union. It is nature's will. Are we then to stay, to build a life force on this new world?

The voices of our minds are weak traveling far, hopefully to be gathered in by the combined mind-strength of the Far Seers.

Below is a new world with deep valleys and high mountains. There are no clouds, leading us to think, brothers and sisters, that there is clean air below. As we send this last message of hope, we salute you. We see behind us our home, which although small is larger than the satellite as seen from the clean air above the clouds where we use to soar in joy. Behind us is our yellowish-purple home, a world swimming in deep space.

Farewell, farewell. We will lower now to find our destiny.

XIII

Appended to the Book of Rack the New One by Red Earth the Far Seer, my thoughts. The principle of interplanetary soaring is proven and praise is due to all who were involved, but especially to Shadow on the Moon the Far Seer who sensed the movements of the worlds to such an accurate

degree that the soar was made within the tolerance of our measurements.

I record the time in pictures of sun circles, satellite movements, and tilt of the planet. I record the duration of the soar in terms of the rising and falling sun. I record minute cell counts and am amazed. Rack is, truly, the New One, for the expenditure of his substance was beyond the endurance of any Healer.

The foregoing final segment of the Book of Rack the Healer was received by the combined minds of the Far Seers much as it is recorded, with interpolations by Deep Diver the Healer. These were necessary due to the weakness of the thoughts from far space, which were received sporadically, and were altered by the toxic storms.

Yet it is felt that we have preserved the essence of the thoughts of Rack the New One.

We wait. The survival factor allows little outside activity and the food stores dwindle. But a new beginning approaches and with the new beginning, as always, there is hope.

As I wait I record thoughts that haunt me. I am especially impressed by one of the last clear pictures received. That tinting was in process is beyond doubt, for the excitement strengthened Rack's thoughts and made them clear. Could this mean that nature's plan is to establish life on the new world?

To myself and to the private banks of my Keeper I confess that this is my belief, as indeed it was all along. Yet old beliefs die hard and still I hope that they will return with information, with ways of keeping life on the world. But the indications all tend to convince me that the New One was born to transplant the seed of life from this dying world to another, younger planet.

But there is another fear. We received a picture of a clearly visible world. This is strange, for in all recorded history the air has been dense with clouds. We know that clouds contain many substances, most of which are apparently of little or no use to life. But what if some of those substances which cloud the air serve some small purpose? Would it be possible for life to exist and reproduce in a completely clean-aired world? I would have been happier to see a moderate cloud cover on the new world, our sister planet.

My senses can penetrate the clouds that cover our world, can cover the vast picture of distance, and can measure the density of the earth of the satellite, it is earth, nothing more—solid rock. I cannot penetrate to the depths. I cannot detect the presence or lack of air or water or any other substance. I cannot, of course, detect the minute forms of life there, Rack the New One and Beautiful Wings the Power Giver.

I can only wait.

Perhaps, in time, other New Ones may spring forth. We search all the new-born Healers, trying to detect that strange, new area of the brain that gives Rack the New One his ability to merge physically with another. We have sacrificed the best sun circles of the life of a Power Giver to carry a message to our brothers across the sea, telling them of the New One, warning them to be on the lookout for others. But we find nothing.

We wait. We can pleasure with our Keepers and forget for a short span of time, but there is always the outside, the growing toxicity, the failing survival factor. It is more and more evident that the fate of all life on this planet is dependent on the findings of Rack the New One in the distant reaches of space.

XIV

Ref: F-454-269-1933-B-555 X&A Restriction Code 2 Blink Priority
Urgent-Urgent

Origin: U.P.X. *Pharos*, Sector P-232, Capt. Bradley J. Gore Cmmd.

Des: Exploration and Alien Search Headquarters, Sec. 1, Xanthos II,
Attention urged High Admiral Jackson G. Sparks.

Sub: III Planet, Life Zone Class Xanthos II sun, sector P-232. Inhabited
Humanoid.

N.Y. 30,456, Month 7, Day 14, U.P.X. *Pharos*, Capt. Bradley J. Gore, Cmmd., blink beacons Chicago class star, position R-77.99, V-22.23, H-1.19, L-99.4, Sector P-232, Tri-Chart Ref. P-232-44. (See attached survey charts.) Short blink Expo, scouts *Pharos* IV and V, beginning

Month 7, Day 16 resulted planetary sighting, system A Type, Month 8, Day 10. Star class Xanthos II, planets number 9, III planet life Zone A-1. (Attached survey chart position sun R-80.76, V-34.45, H-5.99, L-87.53.)

Lifetype: Class I-B Humanoid. C-Scale. Questionable. (See attached Tri-Tape Personal-Personal Capt. Bradley J. Gore to High Admiral Jackson G. Sparks.) Possible T rating T-1 or T-2, possible P-9 or P-10.

Questionable rating explained: Non-metal culture, sub-atomic, but with extensive use of biological material formed from extracts from two insect forms, durable, radiation resistant, highly flexible use in building, making seldom-worn clothing and utilitarian objects.

Planetary Conditions: Scale .99 Oxygen atmosphere, various heavy gases in lethal quantities. (See atmo-analysis attached.) Vegetation: limited. Soil Condition: critical. (See agri-analysis attached.) Life Scale: Under study. Technology: Limited production of aforementioned biological building material and liquid all-purpose food extracted from specific algal type sea plant.

Language: None. Repeat. None. Communication via telepathic pictures.

Population: Numbers unknown. Four distinct racial types living in symbiosis.

Explanation of above: Preliminary hypno-contact indicates lack of number system. Thus, questions regarding population answered in incomprehensible picture showing numbers estimated in thousands for population density. Difficulty reconciling pictures from alien minds with number system. (See Tri-Tape, Janti-III Planet Sector P-232.)

Justification Blink Priority Urgent-Urgent: Humanoid life endangered by rapidly deteriorating planetary conditions. Oxygen replenishment factor:— .87. Atmospheric life factor, —10.09. Population factor:—4.68.

Rec. U.P.X. Officer Cmmd.: Immediate contact. Transmigration III Planet, Sector P-232, Xanthos II type sun, position R-54.66, V-56.78, H-87.55, L-11.0.

Signed: Bradley J. Gore, Capt, Cmmd. U.P.X. *Pharos*.

Ref: F-454-269-1933-B-555 X&A Restriction Code 2 Blink Priority
Urgent-Urgent

Endorsements Blinkstat Capt. Bradley J. Gore, Cmmd., U.P.X. *Pharos*,
Sector P-232. N.Y. 30,456, Month 12, Day 14.

Smith, Adm., Cmmd. Sector P-232: *Affirmative*. Tarsus, Adm., Cmmd.
P-Group 4 X&A: *Affirmative*. Larkins, H. Adm., Hdq. 2 Troup Z&A
Pegram IV: *Rec. furthur study*.

Note: Discretion H. Adm. Larkins, Hdq. 2 Troup X&A, Pegram IV, info,
presented representative civilian board. Results: Inconclusive.

Evers, Jonathan, H. Adm. (R), President Xanthos U.: *Rec. further study*

Parthin, Avery (Miss), President's Board Applied Humanity, U.P.
Central: *Rec. affirmative request Capt. Bradley J. Gore*.

Bragg, Amos, Chm. Board Natural Resources, U.P. Central: *Rec.*
hearing before Combined Congress, U.P.

Fulton, Gregory, Asst. Pres. George O. Borne, U.P. Central: *Rec.*
detailed study planetary conditions.

Ref: F-454-269-1933-B-555 X&A Restriction Code P. Personal 1-A Blink
Priority Urgent-Urgent Personal-Personal

Origin: Sector P-232, U.P.X *Pharos*, Capt. Bradley J. Gore, Cmmd.

Des: Personal-Personal High Adm. Jackson G. Sparks, X&A Hdq. Sect.
1, Xanthos II.

(Transcript verbal content Tri-Tape Personal-Personal Ref.
F-454-269-1933-B-555-AX34.

Admiral, I know this is highly irregular, but you know me from way
back. You've always said that I didn't like to follow the system and that is
explanation enough, I suppose, for the rank that I hold. I like to think that
I'm a man who dislikes the planetary piles of red tape which have been

thrown up around Exploration and Alien Search work.

Now I know you're already saying, "Same old Brad." I guess you're right. I've been known to go out on a limb. Remember the time I called a three buck pass in the championship game between the Academy and Xanthos U? We lost, but it was because some little bastard on the Xanthos team missed his assignment and was in the wrong grid and the ball hit him right in the chest. Well, I've always been a high roller, haven't I?

Jack, I'm not used to this type of communication. I don't like looking into those glassy little eyes in front of me. I hope you'll excuse my appearance. I'm just in from planet-side. I really don't know where to start. Maybe I should begin about 75,000 New Years back. I know you're a student of history, but please be patient with me—I'm not trying to refresh your memory. I just need to ramble a little until I get this thing straight in my mind. Besides, you own me. You're the bastard, if you'll pardon the familiarity, Admiral, who talked me into X&A in the first place when I had my mind set on Intersystem Transport, where the loot is. You turned me on with that summer trip to old Terra II. Damn, my back still aches when I think of the digging we did. Remember? We were camped there on that ruined world beside a river that had been killed and that never had the chance to come back to life. We speculated about what kind of junk they dumped into it—it was still dead a few millennia after the last people had given up trying to revive the world and left it for greener places. We couldn't believe it was possible to kill a planet, but there was the proof and we decided that it was a phase we went through as a race. I remember how the soil had all been eroded away, how the rock stuck through like bare bones, and how there was almost no vegetation. But remember, Jack, dead as Terra II was, how there was life on her? There were crawling things and flying things and there was air, even if it did stink.

I've had a lot of time, during these past few weeks while that fruity little telepath you stuck me with has been lifting the skulls of these poor bastards on this Godforsaken little planet, for thinking and I remember what we talked about. We talked about the destiny of the race and we always went back, if you remember, to that big question of who the hell are we?

You're supposed to stop asking that question when you leave the college soph coffee tables, but I think the whole X&A program is just another way of phrasing it. And I'm amazed that we haven't found an answer. Hell,

we've been in space for thirty thousand years and we still don't know whether or not we had parents or whether we were just laid out on a flat rock in the sun somewhere.

I've been thinking about the way you explained our inability to trace our racial origin. You said that the average man can't even tell you his great grandfather's name, and damn it, you were right. I couldn't tell you mine. You said that when a man can't even remember his great-grandfather's name, it isn't odd that a race can't trace its origin back some 75,000 N.Y. When I went back to the Academy and started digging into the records you said that all the trouble could have been saved if one of my ancestors had taken the trouble to write down the names of his ancestors and passed the list down to his kids. But no one thought of that in my family and no one thought of it in the race. We have only a few old legends. We came from space. That much is sure. We've done enough work on the home planet, old Terra II—and the name alone is indicative of the fact that there must have been a Terra I—to know that until our race came there and unloaded a regular zoo of life on her, she was a barren planet. Life began on Terra II 75,000 N.Y. ago. And on all the other planets we've settled in 30,000 N.Y. we've found only enough life to fill a thimble.

But now we've hit the jackpot. I had to laugh when I filled in that official report. I've done it a hundred times and I've never had anything to write in answer to the questions about life other than data about some weird bugs and nutty plants. And this is a good indication of the fact that I'm not all wrong when I say that there's too much red tape in the program. How many hundreds of sheets of blinkstat paper have been wasted on those blank pages regarding life? How much does it cost to blink a stat from four hundred light-years away? The point is, I guess, that we thought there'd be a time when those blanks regarding life on a new planet would be needed. Or we hoped so.

Man, it sent a chill through me when I inked it in: Lftype: Class 1-B Humanoid. And I can feel the vibrations caused by those words all the way out here. I'll bet my report has been fingered by everyone from old George Borne down to the office boy in X&A Headquarters and I'll bet the paranoid types are messing their pants. I've got a pretty good cross-section of society right here in my own crew and I think I've got a good idea of what the reaction was out there on the home worlds.

I'm telling you this, Jack. These poor bastards on this sad little planet are not the ones who shot up those central galaxy worlds we stew about so much. I've seen those worlds. I've walked the streets of the dead cities. You and I both know that the people who built those cities were not even vaguely humanoid. Those ruined worlds have nothing to do with this situation, and I hope you'll keep reminding people of that. Those cats there in the thick stars were blood-thirsty sons-of-bitches, and we've been having nightmares ever since the first X&A ship came back and showed us the pictures and the message they found burned into the skin of one of the planets: *Look on this, ye who aspire, and quake. Build not, for we shall return.* It's enough to give you the creeps, I'll admit. Twenty worlds killed. Up to 200 billion beings done in. And our quaking isolationists think that every time we go out on a mission we're going to run head on into the planet-killers. But you know my views on this; I think they did themselves in. Our explorations of those worlds uncovered nothing to indicate that they had developed anything half as sophisticated as the blink drive. The worlds they inhabited were packed together around five suns in the same neighborhood. We've had ships all over this fucking galaxy and found only those twenty dead planets out there toward the center behind that big beautiful grouping of New York type stars. We haven't covered every star system in the galaxy, not by a long shot, but a civilization that could do what they did would be able to detect our ships if they came within four hundred light-years the way a blinking ship sends signals ahead of itself through the continuum. So I'm going to be damned unhappy if you people back there at headquarters let those fear-ridden isolationists delay a decision on this thing until it's too late.

I suppose I wouldn't be surprised if that happened. God knows, I'm not surprised at anything we do. Besides even if those planet-killers did come sweeping in from a neighborhood galaxy breathing fire and shooting up worlds, we're not completely without a defense, you know. For 15,000 N.Y. we've been so worried about those dead bastards that we've spent a pile of loot working on weapons we've never had a need for. You know the line—if they could kill a planet, we had to be able to kill a planet.

We bewail their cruelty, but we're not entirely without aggressive tendencies ourselves. Our history shows that. So far we've not destroyed entire worlds, but we sure cut the population when Zede IV came up with that fascist nut who was going to establish an empire. We've got some blood on our hands, too. We go armed. Hell, I've got enough weapons aboard an Expo ship to handle a fleet of those planet killers and shoot up a

dozen worlds while doing it. I've never had to use a single popgun and I pray I don't ever have to, but I've got them and I would use them if necessary.

But we've been good boys and girls for a few thousand N.Y. and we haven't killed anyone except in accidents and occasional cases of psychopathic murder or something. We've spread ourselves from asshole to appetite all over this arm of the galaxy and we're breeding as fast as we can to settle more worlds. I think I heard someone say that new world settlement requests come into United Planet Central at the rate of about five a year. We're pretty prolific. There are a hell of a lot of us, and we're still suffering from two afflictions. One, we're lonely. In our billions, we're all alone. We can't understand why there's no life in this galaxy except us. We're always looking for it and we're always scared we're going to find it in the form of the planet-killers. This makes us hope and quake at the same time, being human, but we're curious enough to go on looking. We're so hungry for company we breed our dogs to be almost human and those scientists on Xanthos II breed sea mammals up to the communication level and go swimming around under the water talking with them. Well, I think a lot of people are thinking of X&A in terms of a search for human dogs.

But what if we run into someone out here who is our equal? Not the planet-killers, but just a race that can stand up to us intellectually? Will we start shooting, unable to bear the competition?

When this Dr. Feli Janti, the telepath from that mucked-up Belos II, discovered that these poor bastards here are way to hell and gone ahead of us in certain mental powers he panicked. Some of these people can, without a single number, picture in their heads a number of what they call sun circles equivalent to 100,000 of our old years. Janti came face to face with a guy who could manipulate his cells at the DNA level. He got pictures of others who could fly, or teleport, using some power we can't even measure. Janti went white. He shook. He turned to me and said, "Captain, I recommend that we sterilize the planet immediately." Just like that, from one look into their minds. He was scared shitless. These people don't have a single weapon, offensive or defensive, and their only enemy is the planet itself, but that creep wanted to wipe them out lest they overpower us with their superior mental abilities.

Jack, I know I'm taking up a lot of your time. I know you're damned

busy flying that desk and painting scuff spots on the red tape. So I'll get down to it.

We've seen some hell-holes together, Jack. Some of the places we checked out were pretty bad, but all of them are like paradise compared to this one. She's a hot one. She's greenhoused by a thick atmosphere and under it there's a lot of volcanic activity, just as if she'd been split by something right down to the mantle. At the poles, in the winter, there's just a trace of frost. It melts off completely in the summer. The air is full of sulphur and ammonia and other goodies with just the barest trace of oxygen. The surface is about eight-tenths water, but usable water is as scarce as on any desert planet you can name. The rivers are running chemical sewers and the seas are just about as thick as a good *juaro* soup—only they contain everything that is soluble in water. They'd float a piece of steel, almost, they're so saturated. Fortunately these people don't need water; they subsist on an all-purpose liquid food that comes from a slimy, green sea plant.

There's not enough soil on the planet to grow a patch of beans. Most of the land is bare rock, except in valleys where soil has been trapped. Those low places are something out of a nightmare. They're filled with plants that look something like toadstools, but they're unlike anything we've seen because they're as toxic as a Telos red-snake. The soil holds about all the radioactivity that is left on the planet. It limits the stay in a Type-A suit to about ten minutes. That's damned hot. The radioactivity is artificially produced and is all old stuff. Lots of the carbon series. There are enough original radioactives down deep to tell us what happened. There are indications of mining at very deep levels. Yep. That's the story. I didn't put that in my official report and I leave it to you whether or not to break it right now. I was afraid if I reported it I might give the isolationists more fodder for their fear-mongering.

The planet has been systematically looted of every resource. On the surface there's not enough metal to put together a child's toy and indications point to quite a few millennia since anyone has dug for it. We've turned up samples of most of the common stuff, Lead 208 and 206 and a bit of U-235 at the deep levels. On the surface, especially next to the vegetation in the low spots, there's some Strontium 90 and Cesium 137, and it gets into the atmosphere at times.

But these beings are not the planet-killers of the central galaxy. I'd

stake my career on that, Jack. This planet was killed, all right, but it's older than the center worlds. Not in geological formation, but in settlement. And this very oldness leads one to speculate.

The ruins of the central worlds are about 75,000 N.Y. old. The planet-killers were in their big, final battles just about the time we came from wherever it was we came from and landed on Terra II. We couldn't have come from the central galaxy or beyond, or we'd have encountered the killers. Suppose we'd missed Terra II—and it would have been easy as it's the only life-zone planet in its sector. We'd have gone on and run head-on into that big war and that would have been the end of us. But we hit on the one planet in a thousand that could give us the proper conditions and then we settled down and started pulling ourselves into space again. It makes me think, sometimes, that Jordan is right in his history about a one-ship landing. That would explain a lot. If one ship had carried our little zoo out from the mother planet, wherever the hell it is, and if it had been severely damaged on landing so that somehow the history tapes or whatever records there were were lost, the survivors would have nothing but their intelligence. And they'd have been so damned busy during the first few generations rebuilding toward a technological civilization that they wouldn't have bothered with recording history and where they came from. Word of mouth is a chancy way of preserving fact.

All right, I'm rambling, but it's all connected, It's all about the Goddamnedest bunch of people I've ever imagined. This world is peopled by four distinct racial types. No type is dominant. One type is a moron-intellectual sort of being, female, and the most humanoid in appearance. They're hairless, with skin much like ours, only a bit thicker and tougher. They have breasts and most of the other female accouterments. They grow to adult-size, a bit smaller than the average U.P. female, but their brains remain at the level of about a six-month-old baby. I've seen one or two of them. They lie in bed, naked, kicking and mewling like infants. But behind the part of the brain that controls their bodily functions is an area that, according to the creeps from Belos II, is like a flesh-and-blood computer. These idiot-computer beings can't control that part of the brain, but it's used by another racial type. This is a male who lives and works with the idiot female and he's a real monster right out of the flicks. He's got scales like a lizard and a chest about the size of a barrel and his head rises from his shoulders in a solid, fleshy cone into a rounded peak. He has no eyes, but has a small mouth and a hairy, inverted nose through which he breathes.

All four types have one thing in common. They have red gills on their necks. The gills have something to do with breathing, because the computer morons, whose gills look like they haven't been completely formed, can't go into the outside, except under ideal conditions. The male types living with the computer morons have the gills on the thick, fleshy portion of their tall, domed heads. They see and hear and apparently smell and do a lot of other things with senses much like old-fashioned radar. They can hurt with the power of their minds, but they're gentle. We've observed no attempt to dominate. They can send their senses bouncing off the near planets and—try this one on for size—they can sense the stars. Of course, they're not sending signals all the way there and back, because the nearest star to their sun is four plus light-years distant, but they can feel something, maybe the light from the stars, which is quite a trick since the thickness of the atmosphere makes a summer's day as dark as the inside of a cat's ass. They've got an abstract sense of time that tells them the season, the month, and the day, although they have no names for them. They use pictures to compare the time in relationship to the entire year.

Of the two other racial types one is male and one female. The female is the flyer. She uses electromagnetic force in some way that has our boys stumped to lift herself and a considerable load for fantastic distances. More on that later. The other male type is the worker. He's developed some amazing body functions, including the ability to rebuild damaged cells on the DNA level. This healing ability allows him to go out into that hell of a planet and gather food. He likes to travel and bugs around all over the land areas and under the seas when he's not working. He can exist in an atmosphere in which an ant couldn't get a good breath of air by storing oxygen and nutrition in his cells and using these reserves at will. These two types are the breeders. They copulate just once in a lifetime. Once in a lifetime, Jack. How would you like that?

All four of the types are ugly by our standards. The male breeder has huge, thick scales that repel both the local radiation and that from the sun. This property in itself is worthy of a lifetime of study for a dozen of our scientists. He has a chest capacity of about four cubic liters. He has eyes, as do the three types other than the radar fellow. The male breeder also has the strongest aesthetic sensibilities.

But you've got all this if you've read the rather unusual transcript we sent as exhibit one in this affair. I hope you have read it, thoroughly, because this whole thing means a lot to me, and I sincerely feel that it

means a helluva lot to all of us.

So here's this society working together. They never, never, except in rare cases of severe law-breaking, do any harm to any living thing. They're the dominant form on the planet, and there's not much else. There's a large, spiderlike thing and another insect type about the size of a phralley dog which looks like an ant and makes a fantastic amount of sting fluid. Then there are the half-plant, half-animal creatures, the size of the period dot on a blinkstat typer, which can eat the atmosphere and synthesize oxygen. These little bugs are keeping the race more or less alive.

The people know they're living on a dying planet, but they don't know why it's dying. They have a semi-religion and worship nature as a force for good. Their god is life itself. They think the role of nature is to people worlds with life of an intelligent nature, and to them that means individuals like themselves. But their faith is being tested, because their best minds predict death for the race in about one generation. We think they have plus or minus nine years, New Years, that is, before the air is gone. We may be slightly underestimating their survival capacity, but it is my considered opinion—and the opinion of my staff—that the situation is urgent. They're going to die. The little oxygen-makers they call Breathers are being killed in their natural habitat by a worsening of the sea and air conditions. Colonies of the Breathers are kept inside, but the Breathers are relatively short-lived and cannot be bred satisfactorily in captivity. New Breathers have to constantly be brought in from the sea with much labor and difficulty. And in about nine years there ain't gonna be no supply of new Breathers, as one of my mech-mates says.

For the first time in history we're face to face with an intelligent alien society and it almost makes me believe in their nature worship, because we've come on this at a crucial time and we have the power to help them. Basically, that's the case, Jack. We help or they die. I hope you haven't made a decision yet, because now I'm going to hit you right in the balls with a few facts we've dug up.

One, our archaeologists have made test borings and excavations. We have to do this in out-of-the-way places, in order to avoid making contact, but we've been able to do some interesting things. It's difficult to state anything with much authority, because by our measurements this world has been in bad shape for the last 75,000 N.Y. You can imagine what 75,000 New Years of corrosive rains and uncontrolled erosion can do to a

planet— especially one that has been burned good with atomics.

Yep. That's what I said. She was burned bald. Just like the worlds of the planet-killers. Only these people did it the hard way, with old-fashioned atomics. The signs are unmistakable—all the old, decaying isotopes. They must have been very funny bombs they used, because they produced a lot of carbon isotopes with long half-lives. I know that I'm going to be asked how, with the amount of radiation that must have been present 75,000 N.Y. ago to leave this much hot stuff now, anyone at all survived to found this new race. Well, I haven't got the answer, only proof that they did survive, because they are here.

I've monitored as many interviews as I could. The ones with the pointed heads who have no eyes or ears call themselves Far Seers. That's because they can send their radarlike senses out to vast distances. The Far Seers are the priests of the nature religion, logically explaining that nature abhors a vacuum as far as life is concerned.

The Far Seers believe that all the far suns they can sense have planets and that those planets swarm with life like themselves.

Incidentally, Jack, the Far Seers screw the computer beings, called Keepers, with astounding frequency. They're very virile cats, but completely sterile, like that creature out of our mythology, the mule. That is their only pleasure, but they're not just dirty old men, because the Keepers are also sterile but well developed sexually, and enjoy it too. That's just an aside, but I think it shows as much as anything that these fellows have basic human traits.

I've looked into the records of the Far Seers, kept in the back part of the minds of the Keepers. I know about as much about the history of this race as they know themselves. I do it, of course, with the help of the little bastard from Belos II, who can't concentrate, but has to keep looking into my mind to see if I'm having too many wet dreams or something. It's interesting to note that these people are about as foggy about their beginnings as we are about ours. They have some incomplete legends, just as we do. They think they're mutations of a race they call the Old Ones. They believe that nature adapts life to meet the conditions of a world. They believe that in times of crisis nature comes up with a New One to pull life through. This is like saying that environment shapes life, isn't it? Here on this world it seems to. These people have adapted to conditions that would kill one of us in nothing flat.

Their legends tell of nature forming the First Healer. He could live with what they picture as small, hard projectiles: radiation. He apparently did, for the Healer calls on that strange ability of his to repair radiation-damaged cells and his scales bounce off all kinds of radiation in quantities that would kill a horse. His organs don't collect the bad stuff either. They throw it out and vent it, along with the waste gases and unused toxic content of the air, through the gills. Then this First Healer, breeding with what they call the Old Ones, produced the Keepers and the Far Seers. I'd guess that it was the Old Ones who did in the planet with atomics.

There's a beautiful series of pictures in one of their records that is called, roughly, The Book of Rose the Healer. They don't know what a rose is, but the picture of a rose is still in their minds after the conditions that would have produced a rose have been gone for 75,000 N.Y. Rose the Healer said that the Old Ones fornicated even in death, producing the Healers. That sounds rather human, doesn't it? The Healers, of course, were mutants—instant adaptation, believe it or not. I suspect the legends condense the process somewhat.

But we have to believe what we see and what we find. We have here a world that, at one time, was highly technological, to the point of atomics. We've found a few decomposing chunks of metal to indicate that they were working with some advanced alloys of an atomic culture type. We've found a sizable city under the sea. We can't get to it because it's under a few hundred feet of sludge, but we detect decomposed metals, stone, everything to indicate that it was a real city. It was submerged, I'd guess, either by the melting of the icecaps or by the distortion of the planetary crust which is indicated by wide rifts, the deepest of which splits the crust almost to the molten core in the south of the western hemisphere. Both these events occurred 75,000 N.Y. ago. We've found a few traces of plastics, but a lot of it must have been burned with the surface stuff. I'm sure that, given time, we'll find some underground deposits that will tell us more.

So this world was much like some of ours, with atomics, metals, and plastics. It killed itself. The present race mutated from the original race, which was also humanoid, because the forms of the things we can identify by instrument in the sunken city point definitely to a humanoid origin. The question is, who were the Old Ones?

I think I have an answer to that. I know we don't have enough proof for what I'm coming to, not yet, but I say we have to take the risk and supply the justification later.

We followed the prescribed approach to a life-zone planet. We came in slowly and carefully and did a lot of instrument work at long range. When we detected no probes from the planet we looked for a base close in and decided on a large, airless satellite that kept just one face to the planet, as do the satellites of some of our worlds. We came down on the back side and peeked around the horizon with instruments. Although we found nothing, we went through normal routine. We sent crews around to the side facing the planet to probe her and measure her. I had come down with a cold and was sacked out, groggy with drugs, when one of my junior officers came in with his ass in an uproar. What he told me made the drug-wooziness leave me like a hangover after a dose of Zarts. I got into a suit and took a jumper around to where one of my crews were milling around a veritable junkpile.

Yep. We were not the first ones to land on that satellite. Someone had been there ahead of us. Two of those someones were still there. This, too, is not in the report, Jack. I suppose it should have been sent immediately Code 1, but you and I both know there's nothing that whets the curiosity of an X&A stat clerk like a Code 1 rating. It would have been all over the U.P. But a Personal-Personal communication like this is fairly sacred.

Inside a five-foot-high half-dome of semi-opaque material were two beings with huge chests. They were lying on a little bed with their arms around each other. They looked as if they were asleep, but we knew they had to be dead, because we were on the night side of the satellite and it was colder than hell. There was no air outside and our instruments showed no oxygen inside. We thought they might be breathing the inert gases, but we could detect no movement. It was a male and a female of the breeder species. The female had cute little silvery and gold scales. The male was as horny as any Phebus lizard in any zoo.

The thing that stoned our people was the lack of any propellant device. I mean, you could see through the whole fucking thing and the plastic-like material was soft to the touch. There was nothing in it to account for its having got here.

The two beings were obviously dead. It took a few hours to get ready, and then I opened the lock. It was a funny thing, that lock. It opened

easily, but when it was closed the material overlapped itself and formed an airtight seal. Well, after we'd taken all the pictures and measurements our scientists wanted, I went in. As per regulations, the telepath from Belos II accompanied me, even though I knew in my mind that there was no chance of contact, since they had to be dead. The air in the dome was completely dead—no oxygen at all. Along the walls, in little tanks, were dead Breathers, looking like tiny flower buds. I was casing the joint when Dr. Janti, creepy little fink that he was, came on with his communicator full blast and almost ruptured my eardrums. He was yelling, "It's alive. It's alive." All the dead air had evacuated through the open lock. I ordered the lock closed and then I told Janti to vent his spare oxygen into the air. We emptied our tanks and suits of all but a reserve. There must have been just enough air in that cold dome to give a mouse a full breath, but it was enough for that big fellow with the scales. I'll be damned if he didn't move. I was paralyzed. I won't say I forgot my duty, but I ignored regulations. This was the first intelligent life we'd ever encountered and I wasn't about to bug out of there and let it die. I watched, my hackles rising, as his big, thick, scaled chest heaved. Then I got some more oxygen into the dome. Soon we had it filled with good, sweet air. And that scaled monster sat up.

"Contact, please, Dr. Janti," I ordered.

The alien was sitting on the little bed looking at us with a set of blue eyes unlike anything I'd ever seen—huge, soft, alive. Think of the eyes of one of those Satina sea nymphs and multiply them four times. He looked at us and the little creep from Belos II went probing into his mind. Meantime, this scaled cat was breathing us down to nothing. His lungs and cells could hold almost all the oxygen we pumped in.

I was watching him. He looked at us. His face wasn't built for expression, being pretty well hidden by scales. He made no hostile move; he just looked. When he shifted his eyes to Janti, I felt a force in the air that I couldn't put my finger on. It was just something that came out of him. Then Janti lost control and started screaming that the alien had to be killed.

The alien looked down at his female. She wasn't moving. She was dead. I felt an overwhelming sense of despair, as if the planet-killers had done in all our worlds with all my friends, family, crew, all the girls I'd ever loved, all the sweet grass I'd walked on and sat on, all the good, blue water, all the sweet air, everything. Gone. I don't have the words to describe the

total sadness I felt. I wanted to reach out to him, but Janti was screaming that the alien had to be killed and that we had to blast the planet before it was too late. I had never realized that Janti was a psychopath.

Whose mind can heal the mindhealer's mind? But all the time he'd been one of those damned doom-sayers and he was sure we'd run into a form of life that would do us all in unless we acted quick. In all this turmoil the scaled fellow turned and made an animal sound. It was a sound of pure pain. He put his arms around the female and held her dead body close. He rocked and rocked. It was quiet in the dome, because the good doctor had finally made his escape, taking all the air out with him.

I pumped it up again. Then I went out and threatened to smash Janti's faceplate and let in space to boil his blood. Janti recovered his sanity and came back into the dome but he couldn't get any communication. I ordered him to contact, breaking every rule in the book. The scaled fellow was closed off tightly and Janti couldn't find a chink. He said the alien's mind was like a solid ball of steel.

So I had to watch as this first intelligent being we've met in all our history died. He held the female close and rocked back and forth. I had tears running down inside my helmet. There was plenty of air in the dome, but the alien wouldn't breathe. He seemed to will himself to death. It took a long, long time and there was nothing we could do to reach him. We tried contact on all levels. But he was closed. Janti said his mind was the most powerful he had ever encountered. In the end we tried to pump oxygen into his mouth, but he merely voided it from his gills.

He was from the planet, of course And the way he got to the satellite is one of the most incredible stories I've ever run into, fiction or otherwise. I've told you that the female breeders fly. Well, when we went down to the planet we landed on this fellow's home continent. As I've described, it's a piece of desolate real estate if I've ever seen one. It wasn't much better than the planet's moon.

Janti and his help made hypno-contact. Luckily our encounter with the live one on the moon had warned us of the strength of their minds. If we'd made direct contact those Far Seer types would have sensed us. It turned out that the fellow we met on the moon was a hero, and their last hope. Everyone knew all about him. He'd been sent to the satellite because of their wild belief in nature. They just knew that there was a happy, sweet-aired world up there, so they sent these damned kids, and I say lads

because the life span of a male breeder is about twenty-two N.Y. and that of the female breeder even less. The female breeder literally consumes her life substance in flight.

But how did they manage to get there? Well, they had come up with something new. It wasn't a machine or anything like that. It was a mutation, those two beings were propelled to the moon of that planet on power of mind, Jack. Somehow, this Healer—he was called the New One—was able to "blend his flesh" with others. It was somewhat like a blood transfusion, only infinitely more complete, for he could go into the body of the others and heal them, as he healed himself, on the cell level. His fantastic capacity to store oxygen, combined with what food and air they could carry in that dome, gave him enough energy to send that whole crazy space ship, and that's what it was, all the way to the moon.

Don't ask me why they didn't freeze. There was no artificial heat in the thing. Our boys think he might have been able to diffuse the heat from direct sunlight around the dome with his scales. At any rate, he had to have been exposed to direct sunlight and to the freezing cold. He must have had a fantastic tolerance for extremes in temperature, for when we found him he came out of his coma unharmed, except for a small ashlike deposit on his scales. The female had apparently died of a variety of things, cold, heat, radiation, and lack of oxygen. They went there expecting to find life and they found airless space and heat and cold and death.

Back on the planet everyone knew all about the trip all over the western continent, and even in the eastern areas, too. We were interested in our first alien, naturally, so we traced him through the records in the minds of the Keepers and compiled the stat that we've submitted as exhibit one. Now maybe you're thinking it's a sad story but no justification for us to step in. I know that there are isolationists high up in the council of President Borne and they'll agree with Janti that these people could threaten us with their fantastic mental powers. How would we control people who can teleport, send fatal force from their mind, and live in conditions that would kill us in three minutes?

I know that a lot of powerful people are going to insist on following regulations—no contact until a thorough study has been made. But if the study were carried out according to regulations, it would take twenty N.Y.

Jack, we can't let these people die. We've spent a lot of time, energy,

and resources trying to find exactly what we've found here, a civilization of intelligent beings. They're different, but not that different. They're gentle. When we pieced together the account of Rack the Healer from the minds of the Keepers and the others it was so human that there wasn't a one of us who wasn't touched. I like to think that Rack would be pleased with his book. It was taken from a lot of sources and the end of it is not yet written. We found a part of Rack's book in the mind of his infant child, a Keeper living in the east. We found more of it in the minds of his friends and their Keepers. I wanted you to read it even before you scanned the official reports, because I think it shows that these are nice people, Jack.

They must be saved. Hell, I'm selfish. I want one of those Far Seers in my crew some day. What an exploration tool he'd be! And a Power Giver to do short range scouting. And a Healer to look around on hell-hole planets where even the best suit is only good for limited periods. I won't guarantee that if we took them into the United Planets they wouldn't be running things in a few hundred years, but we could do worse for leaders. They have gentleness, true regard for individual freedom, and a reverence for life of any sort. If they're smarter than we are, then we'll just have to buckle down and learn more. We just can't let them die.

As I see it, we have three choices. We can let them die—and that's what will happen if the regulations are followed. In order to hide our contact we can move some or all of them under hypnosis and risk having them go into some kind of shock when they awaken on a totally different planet. Or, we can contact them, explain the whole situation, and move them to a nice, fresh planet. It wouldn't even have to be a prime planet. Worlds we look on as being waste worlds would be paradise to them. They'd live like kings on Terra II, for example.

I am unalterably opposed to the first course of action, and I don't favor the second, because we'd be unable to move all of them in time. I therefore suggest we undertake the third alternative and in support of this course I have one more item.

I said, earlier, that when I went out to see what my junior officer had reported I found my crew beside a regular junkpile. Up to now I haven't mentioned anything but the dome in which the two aliens made the trip from their world to the satellite. But there was something else.

The spot where we found Rack the Healer and his nicely named female was not, obviously, their first landing on the moon. They had made some

prior stops. We found Rack's footprints in the lunar dust. That fantastic scaled character could walk around in a complete vacuum, using his stored oxygen. He'd done a lot of exploration and all along he must have known that it was hopeless. He didn't have enough reserves to make it back home. His Breathers had been used up and were dying. His girl must have been dying. But he didn't give up and during his explorations he found this junkpile I mentioned. He knew, before he died, that he was not the first to make the trip from his planet to his moon, because his landing, his last one, was made alongside a meteorite-pitted, antique contraption that could have been nothing but the jettisoned state of a primitive combustion rocket.

Yep, there it was. We found others later. And here was the real kick in the ass for us and for Rack. This thing has been there a helluva long long time. And I wondered, as I looked at it, what he thought. As you know from reading his book, he valued and speculated about the small chunks of metal he found on his planet. Even while he and his lover were dying he must have been amazed to discover such a store of metal. But he wouldn't have known what it was.

And I thought of you, old buddy, and the talks we used to have about where we came from and about all our speculations about which direction our ancestors would have taken after they launched us into space. We dreamed about finding them and being welcomed. We would be the long-lost children home from the far stars. We'd be given the benefit of all their advanced wisdom. We'd gain immortality, and other fantastic gifts, because a society that, 75,000 N.Y. past, could launch a starship, would have made unbelievable advances.

I'm sorry I have to kill that dream for you, because, knowing you, I'm sure there's a spot somewhere in your aging carcass where that young dream survives. But it's dead, that dream. We killed it when we landed on a barren satellite without a name, just a generic label, moon. It died when we found Rack and Beautiful Wings beside a junkpile of antique equipment. I knew it was dead when I stood in front of a crazy, boasting, thoroughly human object I'm going to show you in a moment.

But it's not all bad, Jack. It's not all bad. We've been looking for our parents for 30,000 N.Y. and now we've found them. Our old year figures to the minute or so with their sun circle. When I looked at Rack, the scaled fellow, I was looking at my cousin a million times removed. Rack and his

people are mutations of the Old Ones and some of the Old Ones were sent to the moon about 100,000 old years ago. After this experiment they must have discovered better ways to travel, and sent another party—our immediate ancestors— out into space with what might have been an unguided version of the blink drive, since we landed so far away from this insignificant little sun here in the periphery. After that they lost interest in space travel and had their little family squabble that burned the whole world bald.

Here's the picture I've been saving, Jack. As a clue, it's Old English. If you have trouble, consult Parker at the Academy. He's an expert. He's the one who taught me to love the old written language. I didn't have a bit of trouble reading it, except for the dates, of course, which are meaningless. Take a look at it. It was placed here on this planet's moon about 100,000 old years ago, this planet's years, our old years. And I like to think that maybe one of my own, a grandfather a million times removed, was among the three listed as crew on the first moon landing. My reason tells me it's a billion-to-one shot, but maybe he was. So take a look, and think, maybe, that one of them was in your direct line, too, and then send me the order that will do away with the red tape and allow me to save the lives of the few survivors of our mother race.