

The White Otters of Childhood

Michael Bishop

I

A wind came across the ocean, sweeping with it a pall of fine white ash. The ash fell into the sea and into the breakers. The breakers washed dead shrimp ashore with the driftwood. Then they washed up the whiting. The shark swam out to his deepest waters and brooded in the cold clean currents. He was very hungry that season.

—WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

It is the Year of Our Lost Lord 5309. Or so we believe. From the sea we came, and to the sea we return.

I am chronicling both the upheavals of our ruling order here at Windfall Last and the upheavals of my own spirit. I have recourse to books. Although mankind has been diminished to the two million who dwell on this island, all the knowledge of the past lies in the great Sunken Library at the bottom of Pretty Coal Sack, the bay on which our city fronts. After all, I have been the premier literary advisor to the Sunken Library and also one of the foremost counselors of the Navarch of Windfall Last. The Sunken Library contains manuscripts that not even the first ancients—those who initiated Holocaust A well over three thousand years ago—had at their disposal; many of these records, of course, we owe to the archaeology and the persistence of the Perfects. As a consequence, books open to me almost of their own accord. I know several of the dialects that were spoken before the first holocaust and several of those that were spoken before the second rain of fire, nearly fifteen hundred years later. I believe myself well versed in the ways of men.

Another fifteen hundred years have passed since Holocaust B, since the dispersal of the all-humbling ash, since the season of the shark's hunger.

Sharks still thrive in the world—though, for the most part, we have forgotten their sleek flanks, their slashing undercut mouths, their piggish and brutal eyes. We have forgotten because the sharks themselves avoid the waters that surround our native (so to speak) island of Guardian's Loop, here in the Antilles. They probably scent that this final remnant of mankind dwells here in thrall to a bestiality more terrible than their own sharkishness.

But sharks still exist. In an open boat upon the sea I have had the privilege of seeing their dorsal fins slice through the sapphire waters. Like blades through flesh.

My name is Markcrier Rains. I am the guilty conscience of a species that has twice tried to exterminate itself.

I am Markcrier Rains: poet, horseman, sailor, antiquarian, philologist, mystic, diplomat, natural historian, counselor, exile, lover, husband, dupe, widower, wretch, and finally revenger.

For forty-eight years I lived as if integrity were the sole means toward the scarcely attainable end of conquering the bright black canker of our collective souls. In this last year, my forty-ninth (a minor climacteric, if you believe in numerology), I shoved integrity arsewards and let that deep-seated soul-bruise ulcerate into something indisputably animal. My revenge was sweet; my remorse is as bittersweet as love.

And in this Year of Our Lost Lord 5309, I, Markcrier Rains, make my general confession to whatever deity the Parfects (who have inherited the earth) bequeath their innocent and untarnished spirits to. Not having fallen, the Parfects multiply on the continents, reign over every archipelago, rejoice in the bounty of the oceans.

Since we have only Guardian's Loop, I confess to that veiled deity who has freed them from the Beast. Therefore, read my confession:

I am going back now to the final December before the turn of the new century, back nine years to the last Christmas of that departed age. It was the Year of Our Lost Lord 5299.

I had just returned from a ten-month sojourn among the Parfects in Azteca Nueva, nearly two thousand miles across the Carib Sea, where

these transcendental human beings permitted me to wander among them—just as we tolerate a pet dog to run underfoot at one of our sacramental bayside weddings. The Parfects, who enforce mankind's exile here on Guardian's Loop, the winged island, refuse to come among us; but occasionally they require detailed knowledge of our moods, our numbers, our intramural repressions. At these times they compel the Navarch to provide them with an envoy. On the past two such occasions, our Navarch, Fearing Serenos, selected me to represent the two million dying and doomed human beings of Windfall Last.

And gladly I performed the Navarch and the Parfects' will.

But on the Christmas of my second (and, I hoped, my last) return, I was a man consummately weary and dispirited. No human being can live among the Parfects for ten months without coming to feel himself a wholly contemptible creature, wanting in reason, purpose, and ultimate grace. The experience enervates and destroys. Even the wisest comes back to Guardian's Loop with the stench of his own humanity suffocating him and tainting his reunion with the old friends who seek to celebrate his return. Time becomes a necessity as great as food or shelter. One must recover. One must shake off the malaise produced by nearly three hundred days among the tall naked mutants who rule, without punishments or statutes, their own golden earth. For I was as an envoy to another planet, conscious every moment of the racial superiority of my hosts. At forty-one, I needed time to grow back into myself and my people. Those close to me understood and attempted to aid me in my recuperation.

I left Windfall Last. Fresh winds blew across the waters of Pretty Coal Sack, and ruffles of white lace spilled over the coral barrier in the bay. The sky shimmered with the bluish white of noon.

I rode horseback along the beach, spurring my horse with incredible ferocity toward our destination. Soon—even had I reined in the horse and turned him about—I could not have seen the cancer shape of globes and turrets and aluminum minarets that is the skyline of Windfall Last. Palm fronds and the curve of the beach blotted out that skyline with as much finality as if a fission bomb had fallen on the administrative sanctuary of Fearing Serenos himself. Galloping on horseback, the wind in my mouth, I rode free of mankind and its madnesses.

The horse belonged to Dr. Yves Prendick. I spurred it along the water's edge, now and again forcing the good doctor's docile beast away from the

stretches of sand and broken shells and up into the moist varnished-green foliage that lay inland. I rode to keep a rendezvous with Prendick's twenty-six-year-old daughter. It was my fourth day back, Christmas Eve Day, and Prendick had given me the horse and suggested that I go find Marina at the gutted sailing vessel that a hurricane had long ago swept up and deposited several hundred meters from the edge of the sea. The vessel was a unique landmark.

"Marina's camping there," he had told me, "studying the vegetation, the migratory waterfowl."

"My God, Prendick, is she out there all alone?" Our centuries-old Navarchy had decreed no one could leave Windfall Last but the duly licensed and authorized (among whom Prendick and I and other counselors to Fearing Serenos counted ourselves), but enforcing such a decree among two million imperfect subjects presents special problems. I feared for Marina.

"She's all right, Mark. She has a pistol, and she knows how to use it. Take Paris, go down the beach and find her. Stay out there awhile if you like. You need quiet company, a woman's voice."

And so I urged Paris, Prendick's dappled gelding, to aid me in seeking out Marina. In the glory of the white afternoon Paris's mane undulated like silken grass.

I found Marina when the sun had begun to fall a little toward the west. (Perhaps our first meeting after my return was a metaphor, who can say?) The old ship, the *Galleon of the Hesperides* as Marina and I had called it, lay wracked and rotting on the side of a small rise; and the sea had managed to cut a channel—a narrow channel—through the sand and then through the clamoring vegetation so that water sloshed and echoed in the caved-in opening beneath the galleon's forecastle. This same channel was fed in part from a freshwater runoff from the interior.

The ship dated from the 5100s; it had been built by the Parfects as an experiment in restoration, most likely, and then abandoned with their characteristic whimsicality to the elements. Somehow, its wood had not wholly decayed, in spite of the vegetation and the wet. The upper decks suffered under the liquorish weight of this vegetation; as a consequence, the *Galleon of the Hesperides* resembled a great basket of flowers: amazing varieties of cineraria grew there, as did acanthus, melilot,

mallow, and fenugreek, plants one would not have anticipated growing in the West Indian tropics.

And it was on the upper deck that I saw Marina, dark, lithe, and inattentive to my approach, stooping over a bouquet of plush blue flowers. She was drawing in a sketchbook. She wore khaki shorts, a sort of sleeveless mesh-cloth hauberk, and, of course, a pistol. I halted Paris on the slope above the galleon and watched her with the eyes and heart of a man who knows himself too well. My eyes and heart ached. The wind was blowing from her to me, and it carried upon it the intimations of old perfumes.

Then Paris whinnied, drawing her attention. Paris danced sideways on the slope a little, and I had to pull him up with the reins.

Marina, below on the ship's deck, dropped her sketchbook, stood to her full height amid the blue flowers, and drew her pistol, all seemingly in a single motion. Her left arm came up to shield her eyes, and what I had forgotten during my ten months with the Parfects came back to me with heartbreaking cruelty.

Marina had been born with a left arm that terminated, just below the elbow, in a splayed paddle of flesh. It was a cruel and heartbreaking reminder of our ancestors' brinksmanship: the ash was always with us.

Whenever I remembered Marina, I remembered her without deformity. It was as if my mind unconsciously extrapolated from the tenderness of her nature and gave her the faultless physical beauty that she deserved. I *saw* the flat and slightly curved blade at the end of her arm, yes, but it had no genuine reality for me—only enough reality to make my eyes and heart ache in a way different from that provoked by simply beholding her face. Therefore, I suppose, that reality was enough.

Her father, a surgeon, might have softened the hard cruelty of her "hand" when she had come of age. But when she came of age, she would have none of his reshaping and plastisculpting. "I am as I am," she told her father. "I accept myself as I am. Besides, my seawing"—Fearing Serenos, our Navarch, had been the first to call her deformed hand and forearm a *seawing*—"serves to remind me of where we came from and what we've done to one another." Moreover, Serenos himself, whose face and hands bristled with a covering of atavistic fur, frowned on surgical remedies.

The result was that Prendick obeyed his daughter; he refrained from angering his hirsute and bestially ruthless lord.

And the further result was that Marina now shielded her eyes with the stump of her seawing and in her good hand held a pistol that was aimed at my heart. At her back, the sea sparkled under the white sun of noonday, laving the distant beach with foam. The pistol glinted blue.

"Don't shoot," I called. "If you miss me, you might kill your father's horse. You know how your father is about his horses."

"Markcrier!" She smiled and bolstered the gun. "Markcrier, come down here. Leave Paris on the hill."

"To run away? A fine Christmas gift for your father."

"Paris won't run away. If you get off his back and unbridle him, he'll graze and be happy for the chance."

I did as Marina bade me and then descended to the galleon. Boarding the run-against vessel, I felt like a pirate who has fought for doubloons but who discovers that his captives' sea chests all contain roses. But I am a bad pirate; I was not disappointed. Marina had more the odor of roses about her than the metallic tang of old coins, and I kissed her. She pressed her lips against mine with no little ardor. The sea laved the beach with foam.

I was a little surprised at the degree of Marina's ardor.

We had known each other for almost her entire life, for I had met Yves Prendick in 5278 when he was elevated to the council and made the Navarch's personal surgeon. Marina had been five years old and I a precocious twenty. Even then, Serenos had trusted me more deeply than he did the fawning old magi twice and three times my age. I paid no attention to the children of fellow council members, however, and it was not until I returned from my first diplomatic excursion to the Parfects, eleven years later, that I became aware of Marina.

She was a self-possessed young lady, and our relationship developed into something subtle and significant—although I refused to acknowledge that it might be the prelude to marriage. The erotic aspect was not there, not even the first hints of a shy amorousness. Marina had other interests;

so did I. When she turned twenty and I began to think about her as a possible wife, a political incident removed me from the council and the circle of my closest friends.

Fearing Serenos took umbrage at a semisardonic comment that I made in council session (a remark, I swear, that I cannot even recall) and ordered me to leave his chambers. I compounded this error by standing my ground and questioning the state of his mental health. How could so small a thing, I asked, provoke such a disproportionate response? Had the Navarch not loved me, I might have been killed.

Instead, I was exiled for almost fourteen months among the fishermen who live in the licensed colony of Barbos on Marigold Island, which lies to the south of Guardian's Loop. These men had been made fishermen and sent to Barbos because they were mutants, but, unlike most of us, mutants who offended either by their appearance or their mephitic odor, this last the result of unbalanced body chemistries. Many of them looked and smelled like rheumy-eyed beasts, but they treated me well; and I became one of them, working with boats and nets through the entirety of my exile. Serenos relented only when I had promised him, by messenger, to obey him in everything.

Upon my return I found that I had little time to think of Marina or of marriage. My duties, strangely enough, had multiplied. I handled countless administrative functions for the Navarch at the Palace of the Navarchy and spent many days at a time in the pressurized sacristies of the Sunken Library. At the bottom of Pretty Coal Sack, I worked with men who were carrying on the monastic tradition of preserving mankind's accumulated knowledge. Technically, regardless of professed affiliations, everyone on Guardian's Loop was either a monk or a nun under the supreme authority of our abbot, the Navarch. But the gradual—the miraculously gradual—crumbling of belief had turned Windfall Last into a secular community, rigidly stratified and stringently ruled. The monkish work in the Sunken Library went on only because the Parfects had built the library for us and demanded that we continue to transcribe and catalogue the intellectual achievements of man. Therefore, we did so. And Fearing Serenos kept me totally occupied supervising these labors and innumerable others in the city itself.

Marina and I saw each other very seldom.

Eventually I protested that I would collapse from fatigue if not given a

respite, a chance to communicate with other people. The Navarch reminded me of my vow. I kept silence ever after, until one day Serenos dropped his heavy arm over my shoulder and told me that after my next sojourn to Azteca Nueva, under the dead volcano, he would permit me to retire on full pension from his service—provided that he might call upon me now and again for advice and comradeship.

I agreed.

But to the day of my departure, not one whit did my work abate. I seldom saw anyone but those engaged in the same projects and activities as myself. I had no time for horsemanship, no time for poetry.

On the evening before I was to leave for the Parfects' homeland, however, Marina came secretly to my apartment/office and talked with me about other times. We talked for several hours, sipping rum from crystal glasses. When she was ready to go, Marina told me to take care and gave me a chaste girlish kiss on the nose: goodbye to her second father.

Now she was kissing me with the welcoming kiss of a woman for her lover, and I returned the compliment, having realized it for a compliment, more devoutly, tonguing the warmth between her lips. At last we stopped. She stepped back and looked at me.

"Hello," I said. The sun raged small and white.

"Hello, Markcrier."

"I'm not used to such welcomes. The Navarch merely shook my hand; then he turned me over to the council members for thirty hours of debriefing. And in three days not one of those bastards kissed me."

"Not even Father?"

"No. When we were done, he loaned me a horse and told me to get lost."

"And now you're lost?"

"Less so than I might have thought. Show me what you're doing, where you're camping. Does the old *Galleon of the Hesperides* still hold together well enough to provide a lady botanist shelter?" I pointed at the channel that the sea had cut beneath the ship. "That looks ominous."

"It's not," she said. "Come."

We crossed the deck. Our legs brushed past and animated the umbels, stalks, and gleaming leaves that grew from the accumulated soil on the deck's planking. The salt breeze reanimated this vegetation when we were by, and perfume was everywhere.

Down into the forecastle we went.

By the light that came through the planks overhead I could see that Marina had swept this area and made it her own. She had suspended a hammock across two corners of the room and stacked several books and sketch pads beside the hammock. But a section of the tilted floor near the vessel's bow had fallen in, and through the ragged opening one could look down and see the dark water that had undercut the galleon. The light was stronger here, and a million flowers grew in the clumped dirt on both sides of the encroaching rivulet. The water here was only minutely saline because rain had apparently flushed the sea back upon itself several times during the recent rainy season. As we stood looking into the flower pit, the hollow sound of water lapping at wood made primordial echoes in our ears. At last we turned back to the rustic boudoir.

"Very good," I said. "But where's your transportation?"

"Oh, Hector. I gave him his head yesterday. He's up the beach most likely, nibbling at the green shoots that grow in one of the coastland swales."

"Yes, Hector. Good old Hector. Will he come back on his own?"

"With wet fetlocks and a matted chest. Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. I'm hungry."

"Me too."

We sat cross-legged on the askew planking, and Marina fed me. We ate biscuits and dried fruit and sucked on the stems of a canelike plant that Marina assured me was not poisonous.

"Are you glad to be back?"

"Now I am."

"Markcrier?" She let my name hang above the sound of echoing water.

"Yes?"

"What's it like living among the Perfects for so long?"

"Like being five years old again. Like being continuously embarrassed for wetting the bed. Like being caught in the act of liberating the legs from an all-too-alive grasshopper. I don't know, Marina. The experience has no corollaries."

"How did they behave toward you? Were they contemptuous?"

"No, no, nothing like. They were kind but... *aloof*. *Aloof* is a perfect word to characterize them because even when they engaged me in conversation, some part of their intellect remained... disengaged, uncommitted. Simply because there was no need for them to commit this withheld part, I suppose. But they were always kind."

"Were they always"—her voice became humorously insinuating—"naked?"

"Always. I'm surprised you're interested."

"Why? Everyone has a prurient streak." Marina handed me another biscuit and spat out a piece of fiber from the plant stem she had been sucking on. "What I really want to know is, did they go naked all year? Even when it was cold?"

"Every day, rain or shine."

"How could they?"

"No morals," I said.

"No, I don't mean that. I mean, how could they tolerate the cold?"

"I don't know. It never seemed to bother them."

"And you? Did you—?" She stopped.

"Go naked?"

"Yes."

"You're asking that of me ? A member of the Navarch's council ?"

"Yes. Did you?"

"No," I said. "They never expected that of me. Besides, the disparity between my own physique and the Parfects' would have been painful to me. No prepubescent lad ever likes to shower with the big boys."

"Oh, I see. The matter was not simply physical, but sexual as well."

"No, no."

"Well, then, what are they like?"

"I don't know. Like us, but more elegant."

"*Elegant* is an equivocator's word. Markcrier, you're trying to put me off; you're trying to tease me."

"I'm not. Besides, your curiosity is too much for me. And the word *elegant* says it all; it encapsulates the essence of the Parfects. You're teetering on an abyss, young woman, when you correct a sometimes poet on his diction."

"Very sorry, I'm sure. But I want to know what they're like."

"They're prigs, if you want the truth. They make love openly, they refrain from sermonizing, they speak whatever they feel—but somehow, don't ask me to explain it, they're still prigs. For nine months and two weeks of the time that I spent in the shadow of Popocatepetl, I was bored. My bones ached with ennui."

"I don't believe you."

"After the first two weeks they scarcely paid me any heed. And when they did, their kindness ran over me like cane sap."

"Did you write poetry, then? In all that time you were alone?"

"No."

"Why not? You used to complain of a lack of time."

"Marina, poetry is a spiritual need. Many of us in Windfall Last turned to poetry when we lost faith in the mythologies of our still-dying church. But it's impossible to express the spirit when the spirit is submerged, and among the Parfects I had no more divinity in me than does a teredo, a wood-burrowing shipworm. I couldn't write a line."

"Then you really believe they're creatures without original sin?"

"Marina, I deny original sin—but I acknowledge that man is carnivorous and cannibalistic, spiritually so."

"But the Parfects are different; you've already said that."

"Different, yes. They lack the more obvious human vices, the ones that are ours by way of evolutionary bequest. Doubtless, they have vices of their own."

"Such as?"

"You ask painfully pointed questions, don't you?"

"Yes. What sort of vices?"

I had to pause. The ship seemed to creak with old tethers and old strains, the sea wrack of yesterday. At last I suggested, "How about the vice of being insupportably boring?"

Marina laughed, unconsciously rubbed her seawing with her good right hand, tapped her bare feet on the rough planking. I grinned at her. In a way, she had made me go through my second debriefing in four days, and I think she realized that I couldn't talk about the Parfects any longer without decorating the account with an uncontrolled and perhaps subhysterical flippancy. She must have sensed my precarious mental state. At any rate, she laughed at me without malice and asked no more questions about my mainland stay.

We finished our makeshift meal and went down to the beach.

The whole of mankind on two islands in the Carib Sea. That thought

kept bubbling in my head even as I held Marina's hand and walked with her along the water's edge. Incongruous. Wasn't every man a piece of the continent, a part of the main? It seemed not— not any more—in spite of what the long-dead dean of St. Paul's had once written.

Paris being content with his grazing, we were going up the beach to find Hector; as we walked, Marina did not permit me to dwell on the metaphysics of mankind's general exile.

She said, "You're done with the council now, aren't you? Now that you're back from the mainland, you'll be given a pension and time to do what you want. Isn't that so, Markcrier?"

"So that accounts for my welcome. You're interested in my money."

"It's true, then?"

"I don't know yet. Serenos hasn't mentioned the matter since my return. How did you happen to know about it?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Your father?"

She nodded. "I ask only because I want it to be true. For your sake, Markcrier—not because the matter might in some way concern me."

I had nothing to say to that. The sea came up and covered our feet, then slid back down the wetted shingles as if unable to obtain purchase. I, too, was barefoot now, and I wondered how many bare feet and how many beaches this one same wave throughout the world had laved, this one same wave since Troy.

"My father and I have seen Fearing Serenos many times since your departure. We've been in his company often, Markcrier."

I looked at her. "Why?"

"Invitations. Always invitations."

"But just for you and your father. Never for Melantha? Never for your mother also?"

"Never."

I halted her and held her shoulders. "A transparent arrangement."

"Yes," she said. "But in the last two months I've been able to put him off. He's been busy, and I've spent a great deal of time sketching and collecting—with the *Galleon of the Hesperides* as my base."

"Has the Navarch mentioned marriage to you or your father?"

"No. That would be a loss of face, I suppose. He wants the first word to come from us, from either Father or me."

"Thank God for vainglorious scruple."

We looked at each other but said nothing. There was no need. We resumed walking, holding hands.

Finally we left the beach and clambered into the green underbrush. Marina ran ahead. I followed. We found Hector, a huge brown beast just as matted as Marina had said he would be, in a clearing beside a pond. His lips worked methodically on the greenness in his mouth, and his eyes unconcernedly blinked. Marina scratched him on the plane of his forehead and behind his ears. After drinking from the pond ourselves, we rode Hector back to the *Galleon of the Hesperides*. Although he wore no bridle, Hector responded to the pressure of Marina's knees and carried us surely home.

We arrived at four or five in the afternoon. The white blister of the sun had fallen farther toward the westward sea, and the light had thinned to a frightening paleness.

We released Hector at the foot of the rise upon which Paris still grazed, and the heavy mud-and-salt-encrusted creature plodded up the hillside to join his stablemate. Paris, glad for the company, tossed his mane, stomped, whinnied. Two convivial geldings at the top of the world, they murmured anecdotes to each other out of tirelessly working lips.

"Come on," I said to Marina.

"Where. We're home."

"Into the broken section of hull—where the flowers are."

She did not protest. She followed me. We waded into the long narrow channel that snaked up the beach from the sea; we splashed through this ankle-deep water toward the ship. At the hull's sea-ripped portal we had to duck our heads, but we passed through it without scraping flesh, without having to crawl. Inside, the smell of rotting wood, tempered by the smell of mallow and tropic rose, was not unpleasant. Though even paler here, the afternoon light ceased to frighten me; instead it cast a warm white haze over the groined interior walls, over the clover that sprang from the mud embankments on both sides of the rivulet. Marina and I faced each other. We might have been in a ballroom, so spacious and warm seemed the forward bilge of the *Galleon of the Hesperides*.

"We could have stayed outside," Marina said, not rebuking me. "I've seen no one on the beaches in all the time I've been camping and working here."

"I didn't want it that way. I wanted shelter and just you with me in the closeness of that shelter."

"Those things are yours, Markcrier."

I took her face in my hands and kissed her. We moved out of the rivulet, still kissing, and went down on our knees on one of the clovered embankments, went down together with infinite mansuetude and care. The sea exhorted us. Kneeling face to face, we unclothed each other. I removed the sleeveless hauberk from her shoulders and let the garment crumple to the ground behind her. She unlaced my tunic, she slipped it away from me, she pressed one perfect hand against my chest. Her eyes would not remove from mine.

"A child, Markcrier, are you afraid of a child?"

"No," I said. I had no time to say anything else.

"I'm not afraid of a child, even if we never married. But if it would displease you, the thought of my deformity being passed on; if you were to think me immoral for taking that chance—"

"There'll be no child," I said.

She looked at me expectantly, curiously, awaiting an explanation.

"There'll be no child because it isn't given to me to create one, Marina. We have both been visited by the ash, but my punishment is in some ways the crueler: sterility. Invisible but insidious."

After a moment she said, "Are you certain?"

"I'm forty-one years old." And I had some understanding of the medusa of man's heart. "Does it make a difference to you?"

She leaned forward. She kissed me briefly. "No. I would have borne your children gladly, but had they been... *wrong*, somehow like me... I would have hated myself for making them suffer."

I covered her mouth with my own. Then we broke apart and clumsily finished removing our clothes. Although we were both adults and forgave each other for being human, our clumsiness embarrassed us. Marina turned aside and smoothed out her wrinkled hauberk for a resting place. This delay also confused us, but we embraced again and eased our naked bodies together—eased ourselves backward onto Marina's garment until our slow passion had deafened us to both our own breathing and the easy lapping of water against wood.

Without even thinking to be so, I was slow and easefully rhythmic; Marina ran a silken hand over the small of my back while her seawing—her ash-given seawing—clasped my flank. When I came, we were not together; but Marina held me as if I were part of her, and we lay without uncoupling for the duration of the afternoon's pale light.

The vulva smell of the sea intensified as the light failed, and soon we slept in each other's arms in a bed partaking of (as it necessarily must) the smells of the sea's basins.

The next day was Christmas. We saw white otters cavorting on the sand.

II

There is no life which does not violate the injunction "Be not anxious." That is the tragedy of human sin. It is the tragedy of man who is dependent upon God, but seeks to make himself independent and self-sufficing.

—REINHOLD NIEBUHR

We were married on the first day of the new century.

The ceremony took place on the bay of Pretty Coal Sack, and the sky pulsed with the blue-white urgency of an adder's eyes. The breezes blew soft; the sails of the vessels in the harbor puffed out with their airy pregnancies.

And although the Navarch was present among the guests, he did not preside over our brief nuptials as we had asked him to do. Instead, after the recitation of vows, he spoke with me in an abstracted manner for a few minutes and then kissed Marina on the cheek and wished her happiness. Marina tried to draw him out; she told him of the white otters we had seen and teased him about his overdone wedding-day solemnity. "This isn't a wake," she said. "You're permitted to smile."

"Oh, I smile, Marina, I smile in my own inward way." Then he bowed and left us. For the next twenty minutes he conferred with two elderly council members who happened to be standing on the periphery of the circle of our guests.

Between sips of rum and perfunctory exchanges of banter, I could not help glancing at him. His presence compelled attention. Moreover, Serenos had made a point of not speaking to Yves Prendick at all; that fact, along with his conspiratorial conference with my two former colleagues, cast a shadow over everything. I could not convince myself that these three venerable men were discussing only Windfall Last's innumerable social problems.

As a consequence, the seven riflemen who had come for the purpose of protecting the Navarch began to look like hired assassins. Positioned on two sections of the stone wall that partially enclosed the bayside altar, these men guarded all of us from assault with hunched, seemingly stupid backs. One or two of them stared down with set mouths. For that year had

been notable for the number of bloody confrontations between the Navarch's Gendarmerie and the disorganized but sometimes murderous packs of prol-fauves that had taken to roaming the harbor area. When Serenos left, however, he designated only two of these riflemen to remain behind as our protection against the prol-fauves. I did not greatly fear these debased human creatures, but the Navarch's parsimonious allotment of gendarmes amounted to a not-to-be-ignored expression of displeasure. And the displeasure of Fearing Serenos frightened me more than any rampant horde of prol-fauves.

I had not expected such curtness from the Navarch. On the day after Christmas I had gone to him and reminded him of his promise of releasing me from formal government service. He had acknowledged both his promise and his unaltered intent to honor that promise.

"When, m'Lord?" I had asked.

"Immediately. But for a single lapse, Markcrier, you have served me well for more than twenty years—twice among the mongrel Parfects. You deserve whatever I can grant you: pension, comfort, access to my person, permanent status as a member of the Navarchy."

"And marriage if I wish?"

"Marriage," he said slowly, the hair on his cheek planes rippling with an involuntary grimace, "if you wish." He looked at me. "I can tell that you've settled on someone, that you're asking my permission. Isn't that so, Markcrier?"

"Yes, m'Lord."

"And the woman is Marina Prendick. That's so, too, isn't it?"

I admitted what he had already guessed.

Serenos paced the chamber, his brutal hands clasped in front of him. I realized that the delicate brindle fur on the man's face, the fur concealing everything but his hard rat's eyes, made it impossible to determine his age. How old was he? How long had he ruled in Windfall Last before I became a member of his privileged council?

Serenos stopped pacing. He made an unhappy gesture with one of those

brutal hands. "You have my permission, Markcrier—but only because it is you who have asked. I set one condition. Will you hear it?"

No alternative existed. "I will hear it, Navarch."

"You are still a young man. One day I will call upon you to perform an additional service to Windfall Last. When that day comes, you will do as I ask."

"A legitimate service to the people, Navarch?" My question very nearly violated propriety, the distance between servant and lord. But I did not wish to be trapped by a man whose motives I did not trust.

"I would ask you no other kind," he said sharply. "A legitimate service to your people. Agreed?"

"Yes, Navarch."

And at that, Fearing Serenos had smiled like a water spaniel lolling its tongue. My fears were put to rest, for the Navarch smiled only when genuinely pleased, never as a means of expressing contempt or sarcasm. Therefore, I believed that no stigma would attach to my marriage with Marina, that the dangers we had imagined were indeed wholly imaginary ones. It is true that Serenos declined my invitation to preside at the wedding, but he had done so with self-effacing charm, pleading that he had long since forgotten the sequence of the rites and arguing that he did not choose to embarrass us with his clumsiness. I had expected this explanation and departed from his chambers a happy man.

Then, on the day of the wedding, the first day of the new century, I stood on the harbor flagstones and watched Serenos climb the stone steps that would lead him to the administrative cluster of Windfall Last and the hilltop battlements of the Palace of the Navarchy. Five brightly uniformed riflemen accompanied him; two remained behind.

Although no one but Marina's father and I seemed to realize it, we had been reprimanded. I knew that a reckoning would come. I walked among our many guests, sipped rum, ate orange slices, talked—but all the while I tried to anticipate the outward form that the Navarch's displeasure would take. No man, I supposed, deserved to live out his life in complete freedom from anxiety (nature did not ordain man for insouciance), but neither should a man have to contend daily with arbitrary and featureless threats

to his sanity. The two riflemen on the harbor parapet became symbols of a doom over which neither Yves Prendick nor I had any control. At that moment, an attack by the prol-fauves would have been preferable to the uncertainty that Serenos had bred in us—even with only two members of the Gendarmerie on the wall as our defenders.

In my distraction I began staring out to sea, wondering in which waters the rapacious sharks had attempted to slake their eternal hunger. I must have appeared forbidding company, for no one disturbed me.

That afternoon Marina and I returned to the *Galleon of the Hesperides*. We remained there a week. We did not see the white otters again, but no one came out from Windfall Last to summon us back. Still, I expected a messenger from the Navarch to arrive at any moment (sometimes I imagined an entire contingent of armed guards) to escort us, under arrest, back to the city. The white Carib sun could not burn away these fears, and Marina became aware of my uneasiness. I had to tell her what I feared. She accepted my account with a sort of facetious stoicism and kissed me. Our week drew to an end. Much to my surprise, no one murdered us in our sleep.

We returned to Windfall Last and took up residence in a climbing free-form structure on Dr. Prendick's estate, The Orchard. Grass and trees surrounded us, and our white dwelling, shaped from a plastic foam that had dried to the graininess of stucco, surrounded the bole of a giant magnolia palm. The Parfects had created both tree and house long before mankind's enforced removal to the island, just as they had built almost everything else on Guardian's Loop.

Like the tentacled devilfish that take over the shelters of other departed sea creatures, Marina and I moved into this sinuously magnificent dwelling. Her father called it Python's Keep. In our first years there, we seldom used that name, but the house did sheathe us as comfortably as its latest unshedded skin contains a serpent.

I continued to wait. We were left alone. Marina sketched, painted watercolors, worked at planting a vegetable garden in a sunlit section of the lawn. I made excursions to the Sunken Library. There I gathered material for a comparative literary history of the most interesting periods prior to Holocaust A. In the evenings we sometimes visited with Marina's parents. Yves told me a little of what was going on in the council sessions; Melantha gossiped with her daughter as if there were no difference in age

at all. I also wrote poetry, much of it as good as any I had ever written. And, of course, Marina and I fell into the not entirely unpleasant routines of people who are married. No children came from our love, but we had expected none.

Nevertheless, I continued to wait. Not for children, but for the reckoning I was sure must come.

Occasionally I saw the Navarch. He inquired about my work, gave his best to Marina, scrupulously avoided mentioning the affairs of Windfall Last. Although I continued to wait for the inevitable reckoning, my memory fogged. I could not explain to myself the source of my nagging, subliminal anxiety. Where had it come from?

The years went by. Nothing occurred to suggest that Fearing Serenos had worked out his delayed wrath against us. Had Marina and I been spared? Did the Navarch possess both a conscience and a forgiving nature?

Other occurrences led me to discard these hopes as vain ones.

In 5306 the Gendarmerie went into the streets on administrative command. On the first day they slaughtered a pack of prol-fauves; the fighting (riflemen against rock throwers, bottle wielders, and slingshot artists) lasted three hours and resulted in the deaths of eighty-two illiterate, shambling yahoos, not one of whom died understanding his predicament. There was blood from this engagement on the harbor flagstones for nearly a year, red-brown stains that gradually faded under the natural corrosives of sea water and pigeon crap. On the following days the Gendarmerie killed at a less spectacular rate; but riding horseback along the waterfront and shooting any adult male who had the twin credentials of raggedness and glassy-eyed idiocy, they managed to bag thirty or forty more. Eventually, even the most cretinous of the prol-fauves learned to stay away from the areas of patrol; and the once-vicious packs, never truly cohesive except in situations of unthinking rampage, disintegrated into a scattering of frightened, pitiable half-men. Taking pity, the Gendarmerie apprehended these stragglers instead of shooting them.

Public executions took place. In order to conserve rifle and small-arms ammunition (which the government manufactured on a limited scale for its own use), Serenos decreed that the captured prol-fauves would suffer

decapitation. On several scaffolds erected at bayside, the blade fell more times than anyone but the sadists on the Navarch's council desired to count. Crowds oohed at each new delicious dramatization, while the resultant gore drew another sort of devotee—carrion flies that iridesced in blue-green clusters over the damp scaffolds.

The majority of the population of Windfall Last accepted these tactics with delight and approval. Had not the Navarch dealt decisively with a troublesome social menace? This delight and approval continued unabated even when the Gendarmerie began mounting the severed heads on spikes and positioning the spikes at four-meter intervals along the harbor wall.

I recalled that I had once mentioned to Serenos the Elizabethan practice of ornamenting London Bridge in a like manner. How often I discovered that I had indirectly abetted the man's barbarism. This knowledge made me suffer uncannily.

Marina and I spent almost all our time at The Orchard. Python's Keep was secure, removed, isolated. Neither of us wished to go into Windfall Last and witness the grotesque reality of men's heads impaled on iron stakes, staring inland with hideous incomprehension. Too, I did not care to be reminded of my own failure to intervene in some way—or of the possible consequences of any such intervention. After all, the Navarch no doubt continued to believe that I had a debt outstanding, a debt he had consciously deferred the collection of. My anxiety was already too great to risk incurring another debt. In these ways I rationalized my refusals to act.

In 5307 the only word I had of the Navarch came to me through Yves Prendick, who had maintained his status both as Serenos's physician and as a member of the council of the Navarchy. Prendick said that Serenos never mentioned either Marina or me and that the old headchopper's health could be characterized by the single word *excellent*. Like me, Prendick did not know how old the Navarch was: it seemed that he had ruled Windfall Last forever and that we would be foolish to count on his dying very soon.

About this time Marina and I noted a strange thing about her father. Though he frequently marveled at the physical condition of his principal patient, he began to spend an untoward amount of time either tending to him or working in the theater of surgery where he (Prendick) had trained as a young man. Prendick did not talk about these long sessions away

from The Orchard, except to deny that Serenos was ill. "I'm engaged in some difficult experimentation which I've undertaken upon the Navarch's orders. I can't say any more. I won't." Having said this, he would invariably fall into silence or stride out of the room. In three months' time he grew irritable, whey-faced, and abstracted. And I, in turn, grew as suspicious of Marina's father as a man may be of someone he still respects and loves. What had happened to Prendick? What was he about? What did he mean by "difficult experimentation"?

Obsessed with these questions and a nebulous fear almost eight years old, I concluded that Prendick would be the Navarch's instrument of revenge. Fearing Serenos had forced Marina's father to an insidious betrayal. By what means he had done so, I could not even guess.

But I was wrong. The Navarch required no helpmates beyond his own cunning and faithlessness. Although I did not then understand this fact, the day of reckoning was fast approaching.

On the anniversary of my wedding, New Year's Day, 5308, I received word at Python's Keep that His Excellency Fearing Serenos desired my presence in the chambers of the Navarchy in the newly renovated administrative palace. At once. Without delay. This rococo complex of turrets and arches overlooked the entire city of Windfall Last from a hill that the Perfects had raised inland from the bay, and I knew that it would take me almost twenty minutes to reach the palace from Dr. Prendick's outlying estate. By then it would be noon, the precise hour that Marina and I had exchanged our vows.

Now that the anticipated moment had actually come, I found myself oddly composed: numbness and resignation, resignation and numbness. Not even Marina's tears could penetrate the shell of plastic indifference into which I withdrew. We had had seven complete years together, Marina and I. How much more could two ephemeral, parasitic creatures expect? The earth was not made for man, but we had fooled it for seven fruitful years.

I should have taken Prendick's autocart, but I did not. Knowing that my journey would take nearly an hour longer, I saddled Hector, now a tired, plodding beast, and left The Orchard on horseback. The white sun shimmered overhead, and in my numbness I almost forgot that I carried neither pistol nor rifle. What for? To be torn apart by renegade prol-fauves before reaching the Navarch's chambers would have been an exquisite

irony.

And Serenos did not appreciate irony.

Then let it befall, I prayed to no one in particular.

The Navarch's private chambers breathed with the vegetable moistness of a garden. Ushered into this closed hothouse over a thick scarlet carpet, I was made giddy with the richness of the air.

Vines tumbled down the walls, rough stone showed behind the vines, the upper portion of a tree grew through the floor in one leafy corner. I saw tapestries hanging free from two interior doorways. I saw also a large glass aquarium occupying a third of the wall opposite me. Golden fish swam through the fern-crowded waters there—golden fish, all of them golden. *(But where were the silver-gray sharks: the stupid dogfish with their evil porcine eyes?)*

And then I saw the gleaming mahogany-red surface of the Navarch's desk and, behind it, the illustrious person of Fearing Serenos himself. I had not seen him face to face in over two years.

"You're late, Markcrier," he said. "Approach."

I approached. There was not a chair other than the Navarch's in the room. I stood before the man and waited for some word from him. In no hurry to satisfy my numb curiosity, he leaned back and extended his arms inside the loose sleeves of the silken canary-yellow robe that bore the emblem of his office—a stylized ship in scarlet thread—over his left breast. Then he interlaced his fingers, dropped his hands to his lap, and examined me as if I were an exotic artifact washed ashore from Azteca Nueva. The image of a mischievous baboon who has just raided the wardrobe of a prince played before my eyes. I had to fight the image down.

"It's good to see you, Markcrier. It's good to know that you're a man who honors his commitments—even if he does so tardily."

"I obey my Navarch, m'Lord."

"In everything?"

"In everything that a man can reasonably be expected to obey."

His voice took on a husky resonance. "You equivocate."

I held my tongue.

"You do remember, don't you, M. Rains, the commitment that you made to me seven years ago? The promise that you gave me virtually on the eve of your wedding?"

"I've been unable to forget."

"Yes, I know. The strain has aged you, Markcrier."

I told him what his appearance told me. "You, m'Lord, have not changed. You've borne the troubles of these last several years without alteration."

The Navarch nodded. "Quite true." He looked directly at me. "But even though you've aged, Markcrier, you've not suffered. Your existence on Guardian's Loop has been an idyllic one. Leisure in which to write. A home well removed from two million citizens less fortunate than yourself. And"—he paused for a moment—"a beautiful wife."

I wanted to sit down. My hands had begun to sweat, and this allusion to Marina chipped a little of the enamel off my shell of indifference. I said, "No, I've not suffered."

"Indeed you haven't. But, M. Rains, you have earned all the things I've just mentioned, and no one begrudges you."

"That pleases me, Navarch."

"However, one cannot expect to live out his entire lifetime on exhausted past earnings. Don't you agree?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said, not understanding.

"Just as I told you to expect. I now want you to perform another service for Windfall Last."

"I want to sit down," I said. It took three or four awkward minutes, during which time Serenos studied me with arrogant dispassion, but someone finally brought in a chair. I sat down. The fish in the aquarium hovered seemingly just out of reach; I felt that I was swimming among

them.

"What is it you want me to do?" I asked when we were again alone.

"Go among the Parfects again. They no longer wish to wait a decade between visits from our envoys. Some urgency compels them."

I gripped the sides of my chair, digging my nails into the wood.

"I ask you," Fearing Serenos continued, "because you are still not an old man and because your knowledge of the Parfects is so much more complete than that possessed by any of the rest of us." The voice was insultingly oily, as if the Navarch already knew what my answer would be.

"No," I said. "You have no right to ask that of me."

"I may ask of you anything I like. Further, I may compel you to perform whatever I ask. Do you understand that, M. Rains?"

I spoke out of a profound numbness, a numbness entirely independent of the words that fell from my mouth. "No, m'Lord. You may not compel me in this."

"Indeed?"

"No, m'Lord."

"But I could, Markcrier. I could do so quite easily." His jowls reminded me of those of a large brindle dog. "Do you know how?"

"I have seen the heads on the spikes."

"Prol-fauves, every one. They have nothing to do with you, Markcrier."

"Nevertheless, I have something to do with them. Even should you threaten me with tortures, Navarch, I will not go among the Parfects again. You yourself pledged to spare me from that possibility seven years ago."

"No is your final answer, then?"

"I have no hesitation in refusing to perform a service that you have no right to ask of me."

"You insist on an extremely limited construction of what my rights consist of, M. Rains. In reality, no limits exist. At this very moment I could kill you without qualm or compunction, simply for refusing me. But I won't. You've already failed the major test of your loyalty to me—when I have given you everything that a man requires for his comfort."

Fearing Serenos stood up and walked in his sweeping yellow robes over the scarlet carpet to the tree that grew up through the floor. His hand touched something on the wall, and the ceiling opened like a giant Venetian blind—a blind with invisible louvers. White light sifted down through the skylight and paled the climbing foliage.

Serenos said, "I will give you the opportunity of performing a humbler mission so that you may both keep your word and repay me for maintaining you in your present comfort. Will you undertake this second mission, as humble as it is, without asking me another question?"

"Will it benefit Windfall Last?"

"*Not another question!*" he roared, shaking a fist. He paced for a full minute, enraged. Then he calmed and stared at me again. "Answer me, Markcrier: Will you do what I ask of you or not? Be quick."

I stood up. I no longer had the bravado to deny one of the Navarch's commands. Even if the trap were about to snap shut on me, the trap I had anticipated for so long, I could say nothing but what he expected. "Yes, I'll accomplish your *humble* mission for you. What is it?"

"A visit to some old friends."

Once again, the specter of exile. I had an instantaneous understanding of who my "old friends" were. My hands trembled.

"The fishermen on Marigold," Serenos said by way of needless explanation. "The ones you lived with for fourteen months."

"How long will I visit them this time?"

Serenos laughed. "Don't fear me, Markcrier. As I said, this is a humble mission, and it will require you to be away from your home and wife only a very brief time. A humble mission. You earn it by your forfeiture of the more important one." He laughed again, darkly.

"Who, then, will you send to the Perfects?"

"Now, now, M. Rains, don't begin to worry about the opportunity you've rejected. I imagine I can put the Perfects off a bit."

"Well, then, what am I to accomplish on Marigold Island?"

"There is an old man there whom you know quite well, I should think. An old fisherman. His name is Huerta." Serenos paused for my response.

"I know him," I said.

"Very good. Greet this man for me, tell him that I am lifting the interdict on his colony so that those who wish to return to Windfall Last may do so. Then bring him back with you. If it's possible, I will speak to him as one ruler to another." The Navarch crossed the carpet and stood directly in front of me. I had forgotten how tall the man was. He was of a height with the Perfects of smaller stature. "Can you accomplish this humble task for me, Markcrier?"

"Yes, m'Lord."

"Then do so. A ship will be waiting for you in the morning. Go to the Navarch's quay at sunrise." He turned his back on me and looked at the monstrously magnified fish in his aquarium.

"Yes, m'Lord."

And with his back still to me he said, "I'll never ask anything of you again, Markcrier."

On that cryptic note I went out.

In the morning I sailed to the fishermen's colony of Barbos on Marigold Island. Mankind still owned ships, still went out on the waters in slim vessels whose narrow bodies imaged the form of woman. Marina was such a vessel, bearing the burdens of our shared nights and loving with me against death. A ship was love, a woman was love. And it may be that the Perfects' knowledge of this fact had persuaded them to grant us movement on the seas, for they had denied us land vehicles and flying machines (with the exception of small balsa wood gliders and battery-powered carts). In the early days of the Navarchy on Guardian's

Loop, many sailors had hoped to use their ships as means of escaping the power of men such as Fearing Serenos. But there was no place to go. The Perfects would not permit these ships to make harbor anywhere in the world but at Windfall Last. Therefore, every vessel that departed port either returned home again or died the pelagic death of creatures infinitely older than man. Still, the sea continued to exist for our love, and ships moved over it, ships that imaged the form of woman.

Huerta greeted me warmly. He remembered my fourteen months' exile on Marigold Island. And I remembered him.

He was an incredibly ugly old man with bandy legs and a chin that was joined by both bone and flesh to his sternum. He had virtually no neck and walked with his shoulders thrown exaggeratedly back in order to compensate for the earth-locked angle of his head and eyes. His rib cage jutted. His heavy mouth had been pressed into an obligatory pout. Fortunately, he smelled only of salt water and fish oil, not of the bile and sulfur of an imbalanced body chemistry.

Standing on the beach with Huerta triggered a series of remarkable memories, pictures of Huerta's people fifteen years ago and of a bewildered young council member dirtying his hands with physical labor, suffering the stench and closeness of a variety of man he had not entirely believed in. Now I was back. But this time for only three days.

After entertaining me with clumsy feasts and sentimental trips to other encampments, Huerta at last delegated his authority to a one-eyed man of twenty or so (where there should have been another eye, there was not even a socket—only smooth unblemished flesh); and we departed Marigold Island on the afternoon of the third day.

At dusk on the homeward voyage I looked over the starboard railing and thought I saw the triangular caudal fins of four or five small sharks. But the turquoise glinting of the sea made perception difficult, and no one stood beside me to corroborate what I had seen. The last time I had sighted sharks (which was also the first and only time they had performed their cruel ballet for me), Huerta and I had been out together in his wooden skiff. Fifteen years ago. Could it be that these sleek fishes were returning to the waters of man? For no reason at all I thought of Fearing Serenos. When the sun finally set, bloodying the sea with its last light, I suffered a profound depression and went belowdecks to seek company.

We reached Windfall Last between midnight and dawn—I had no notion of the exact time. Huerta was taken from me by three uniformed men in cloaks. They had been waiting since the previous noon, they said, and assured me that Huerta would reach the Palace of the Navarchy safely. A bed awaited him, and the old man would have an audience with Serenos in the morning. I said goodbye to my old friend and declined the gendarmes' invitation to go with them to the Palace. I had decided to sleep in my own bed, beside Marina.

Since we had arrived at such an awkward hour, however, I had no transportation back to Python's Keep. Nevertheless, I did not go aboard again, but paced beside the ship's black impassive hull. The stars scoured fuzzy halos into the face of the night, and my feet, as I walked, made echoing *tlaks* on the flagstones.

Grotesque in the starlight, the impaled heads of the latest batch of slaughtered prol-fauves stretched away from me down both directions of the harbor wall. I tried not to look at them.

I had almost resolved to wake somebody up (perhaps even the Navarch himself, although that would have required a long walk and I had already declined one invitation to stay in the Palace) when a horse-drawn wagon came rattling down the street. This wagon, as it happened, belonged to the shipmaster, a taciturn man who had refused to say more than four words to me on our entire voyage. He came down the plank from his vessel at almost the same moment that the wagon ceased its wooden meanings; and I asked, then importuned, and then reluctantly ordered the man to give me passage home. Python's Keep was some distance out of his way, and he refused to behave as if he were not annoyed. He disapproved of the Navarch's lifting of the interdict, he resented me, and he thought Huerta (if I correctly interpreted his avoidance of the fisherman aboard ship) the vilest and most stomach-souring creature he had ever encountered. Strangely enough, the shipmaster's own wagoner looked himself to be a kind of living abortion—he had no arms and no tongue and smelled of dried excrement. He drove the wagon by manipulating the reins with his bare feet.

When Dr. Prendick's estate, The Orchard, at last came into view, green-black trees tangled against a lightening sky, I got down with relish and left my two charming comrades without a word.

Python's Keep was not dark. A light burned behind the stained-glass

port in the sculptured module at the base of the palm. A light for the returning voyager? My heart quickened; I did not think so. The stillness on the lawn was not the stillness of the tender hours before sunrise. It was another kind of stillness entirely.

I ran to Python's Keep, the taste of copper, like the grease from old coins, poisonous in my mouth.

Seated on the driftwood chair in the receiving chamber, Yves Prendick stared up at me with scoured eyes when I came in. His thinning gray hair stuck out comically on all sides as if he had just risen from bed. But because his head was tilted back a little, I could see his exposed throat and the angry lip of a long cut just above his Adam's apple. For a moment—so still did Marina's father seem—I thought he was dead. But the cut was a shallow one, and Prendick blinked at me, pulled himself erect, and raised an unsteady hand.

His voice seemed almost to come out of the wound in his throat. "Markcrier, Markcrier." He looked at me imploringly. "Don't go upstairs, she won't know you for a while anyway, so don't go up there, please, Markcrier."

"Prendick!" I grabbed his shoulders. "What do you mean 'won't know me'? Why the hell won't she know me?"

I turned to go up the stairs, but Prendick leaned forward, clutched the bottom of my tunic, and pulled me down to my knees with surprising strength. His eyes shimmered behind a wild provocative film. "No," he said. "Don't do that. Her mother's with her now, Melantha's up there with her, and she'll be all right if you control yourself."

"Prendick! Prendick, tell me what's happened!"

And restraining me with both hands, holding me on my knees before him like a supplicant before a priest, Marina's father told me what had happened. I continued to stare at the wound in his throat, the crimson lip that wrinkled as he talked. I thought: *The story you're telling me is an unpleasant story, I don't like it, it must be coming out of the angry half-developed mouth under your chin, a small malicious mouth, a story that has nothing to do with the sea and ships, a murderous narrative from an evil mouth, like the ravening undercut mouth of a shark, even though the sea has nothing to do, I don't think, with the malicious words*

that wrinkle under your chin. On my knees before Prendick, I listened.

"Early yesterday afternoon Fearing Serenos raped your wife, Markcrier," my wife's father said.

"He came to The Orchard with three soldiers of the Gendarmerie, found me in the main house, and invited me to accompany him to Python's Keep. He was extremely cordial, he talked of the work I've been doing for him, he said Marina deserved some word of explanation in regard to his disruption of your anniversary. He wanted to apologize, to explain. He thought highly of Marina. He said, 'You know how much I think of your daughter, Yves. You've always known, I think. You both deserve some evidence of my esteem for you,' or something very much like that. We went together to Python's Keep; the cloaked gendarmes followed, laughing with each other as soldiers do, as if they shared a joke. I thought that Serenos would order them to wait for us on the lawn. He did not; he asked them to enter Python's Keep with their dirty boots and their greasy rifles.

"Marina came down the stairs from the third-level module. The Navarch continued to chat amiably with me, the soldiers to whisper. I suspected nothing—even though the presence of the gendarmes bothered me.

"When Marina reached him and extended her arm in greeting, Serenos pulled her to him, kissed her violently, and then slapped her, once with each hand. This is for your father,' he said. 'And this is for your husband.' The soldiers laughed.

"I lurched forward, but one of the gendarmes slammed the butt of his rifle on my instep. Another pushed me into the wall and leaned against me with his forearm, choking off my breath. Marina screamed, but Serenos covered her mouth with his hand and raked her cheek with his nails. I could see blood, Markcrier, in the openings between his fingers, and the sight of it made me lurch forward again. Again, the rifle butt. Again, the gendarme shoving me to the wall. This time he put the blade of a long crescent-shaped knife under my chin and held it so that I could not move my head.

" 'Make a sound,' he said, 'and I will slice your jugular.'

"The third soldier ripped Marina's gown away from her, tore it straight

down her body, uncovered her for their greedy eyes. Then the Navarch grabbed the hem and tore it up to her waist. He put his knee between her legs. When she screamed, her mouth uncovered again, he struck her with the flat of his hand. I strained forward, but the gendarme who held me lifted the blade of his knife against my throat; I felt its edge slice into me.

"I was helpless, Markcrier. I could have died, I suppose, but I didn't have the courage to die. They made me watch as Serenos beat my daughter insensible; they made me watch him rape her, viciously rape her as the soldiers laughed. He lifted her like a puppet, again and again with his hands and body, biting her on the lips until they bled. I shut my eyes, Markcrier, I couldn't stand it. But by the laughter and the noise I know that Serenos raped her twice, once for her father, once for her husband.

"I wished that I could force my head forward, slice open my throat on the gendarme's knife. But I couldn't, I just couldn't, my body wouldn't move, and after a while it was over."

The story was over, the shark's undercut mouth ceased its wrinklins, the evil mouth resolved into a wound, and I found my strength coming back into me—just as if a soul-tormented priest had granted me absolution for the sin of doubting him. I stood up. Prendick's hands fell away from me.

"What about the gendarmes?" I said.

"No. He wouldn't let them touch her. They wanted to, but he wouldn't let them. They were afraid of him."

"Everyone's afraid of him."

Prendick sobbed.

"I'm going upstairs to my wife," he said.

As the stained-glass windows began to color with the translucent coming of dawn, I climbed the winding stairs to the room where Marina lay.

III

Thou talkest of harvest when the corn is green: The end is crown of every work well done; The sickle comes not, till the corn be ripe.

—THOMAS KYD

Strange as it may seem to the unscientific reader, there can be no denying that, whatever amount of credibility attaches to... this story, the manufacture of monsters... is within the possibilities of vivisection.

—H. G. WELLS

I contemplated revenge, even if it meant the abrogation of many things that I believed in and perhaps even my own death. I discussed revenge with Prendick, but his work in the theater of surgery kept him occupied seemingly day and night now, and he was too weary upon returning to The Orchard each evening to listen to the ignorant schemes I had concocted during his absences. His mysterious work—the work he would not talk about—drained him; it continued with more urgency than before Marina's rape. When he was home, however, I badgered him.

Once he told me pointedly that I should shut up. "If we fail," he said, "I'm afraid of what will happen to our family, to Marina and Melantha. You haven't thought about that, have you?" Still, the idea nagged. Only when Marina began to recover and became aware of what I was contemplating did the idea finally die. Marina helped it to its death.

"Markcrier," she said, "think about the way you've conducted your life. You're a genuinely good man—one of the few who live in Windfall Last."

"That's a rankly sentimental judgment."

"But a fair one. Now you wish to comport yourself in a way wholly but of keeping with the way you've lived."

"I want what's right."

"It isn't right to take a life when one hasn't been lost. I'm alive, Markcrier, I'm with you at this very moment."

And so I did nothing. Having been given a lesson in the morality of

post-Holocaust B (a morality that Serenos did not subscribe to), I kissed Marina, tended to her during the long days of her recuperation, achieved a strange inner peacefulness, and wrote two sections of a long poem that I called *Archipelagoes*. My doing nothing about Serenos, Marina convinced me, was in reality an active reaffirmation of the ethos that made us who we were. Three weeks lapsed.

We discovered that Marina was pregnant.

My own sterility mocked me, the fierce chagrin of the seedless. But too much philosophy ruled me, and I fought down both my chagrin and my incipient rage—with self-administered doses of temperance. I could see that Marina wanted the child. I did not tell her that I would never be able to love it. How could I tell her? We had resolved to live as intelligent human beings, we had determined not to seek revenge, we had committed ourselves to affirmation and love. My inner peacefulness dissolved, but I would dissimulate if Marina's happiness depended on thinking me happy. Unfortunately, it did. It always had. However, a diplomat learns how to role-play early in his career, and for the first time in our married lives I role-played for Marina. But God! how my own sterility mocked me, how my cancerous chagrin gnawed!

I acted my role well. The only clue I gave Marina to my real feelings was the fact that I did not resume work on *Archipelagoes*. This failure of discipline I attributed to excitement; there were too many other things to do. The mother in her aroused, the wife in her less perceptive, Marina believed me.

And for the final six months of her pregnancy I kept up the deception. I very nearly convinced myself that nothing was wrong, that we were indeed happy. But at night in bed I lay awake, knowing the truth. Before it became uncomfortable for her, I often turned to Marina in the early morning and kissed her half-awake and entered her with inarticulate desperation. She responded as best she could. She imagined that I had grown amorous with the psychological aphrodisiac of a new image of her—the image of her as a fertile, child-carrying woman. My amorousness derived instead from my intense need to believe that the child she carried had sprung from my own flesh: there was no love inside me on these mornings, only the sickness of my need and the mechanical impulse to fuck away the nightmares that pursued me through every waking moment. But in our shared waking hours I kept up the deception. I am

certain that she never knew. And she had either forgotten or forced herself not to think of the possibility of the child's being deformed.

Her time came upon her early. An hour before midnight.

We had expected her father to deliver the baby, but Prendick was busy in Windfall Last, occupied as always in the performance of his duty. Fearing Serenos ruled him, but Serenos ruled us all. Even when locked behind his own bedchamber doors, the Navarch manipulated the strings of our lives. Sometimes he could not have known in what pernicious ways.

Marina's contractions were frequent and long in duration; they caused intense pain in her lower back. We had made no provisions for the child's coming so early, and I did not know what to do. My wife's pain frightened me. After making Marina as comfortable as I could on our disheveled bed, I told her that I was going to the main house to fetch her mother. She understood, she told me that she would be all right, she winced involuntarily, piteously, at the onset of a new contraction. I left her and went to the main house.

When Melantha and I returned, Marina was screaming. She lay with her good arm and hand behind her head, clutching a rail in the headboard. Her seawing was twisted at a level with her shoulder, flattened awkwardly against the gray sheet. The linen under her hips was wet, her knees up and apart. Melantha straightened Marina's deformed arm, smoothed back the hair plastered against her brow, and helped her remove the underclothes that her amniotic fluid had soaked in breaking.

"I think this is going too fast," Marina's mother said. She was a tall woman with thin lips and eyes the color of bleached shells. "Much too fast."

"What can I do?"

"Get some fresh linen, Markcrier."

"Shouldn't I try to reach Yves? Can't we get him here somehow?"

"I don't see how. Just bring fresh linen, Mark. If you try to reach Yves, you'll only leave me alone for the delivery, everything's happening so quickly." Her thin mouth was Marina's mouth. She said, "You should be beside her—not on your way to Windfall Last."

Marina cried out, turned her head, stared with filmed-over eyes at the ceiling. Something was wrong. Something other than simple prematurity. I went out of the room and crossed an enclosed section of scaffolding to the utility module. Through the window of clear glass I could see the moon-projected shadow of Python's Keep on the lawn, an entanglement as tortuous as death itself. I found clean fragrant linen and returned to the bedroom.

Melantha had eased Marina forward along the bed so that she could squat between her daughter's legs and receive the infant as it was born. Marina lay on the fluid-drenched bedding that I had been sent to replace. Like a serving man at one of the Navarch's dinner parties, I stood with the sheets draped over my forearm.

"Put those down. There isn't time. Hold your wife's arms."

I obeyed. I smelled blood and salt. Leaning over Marina, I could tell that she did not see me; she squinted into a limbo somewhere beyond my head, her face was purpled with the agony of labor. "It's going to be all right," I said, knowing that it wouldn't. Something was wrong. Something other than early parturition.

Marina's mother spoke to her over the glistening mound of her belly, told her to concentrate, to push as if she were having a bowel movement. And I held Marina's shoulders and kissed away the salt on her furrowed forehead, saying, "It's going to be all right, it's going to be all right."

The first thing that came out of her womb came within five minutes of my return to the bedroom, so quickly did her labor progress. It was a sluggish, slowly flailing thing with a down of amber hair all over its body and tiny flippers where hands should have been. I looked at Melantha. Her thin mouth was set. She refused to acknowledge me. She placed the whelp, umbilical cord still trailing, on the bed beside Marina and told me to wrap it in the clean linen. The thing was alive. And very small. It did not cry. Perhaps twenty minutes had passed since my summoning of Mrs. Prendick from the main house—but Marina's contractions continued. She did not open her eyes; she still had not seen the product of her agony.

"There's another child, darling," Melantha said. "I want you to do what you did before, push when the contractions come."

"No," Marina said. "Oh, please, not another one, no, no."

"What the hell is this? What's going on? What is it?" The smell of blood and salt turned the room into a nightmarish slaughterhouse. I was powerless to control or influence events. Mrs. Prendick ignored me.

"Oh, lord," Melantha said after a while, talking in a whisper to herself. "This one has presented me its buttocks."

"What does that mean?" I demanded.

"A breech delivery," she said, finally showing a fissure in her apparent invincibility. Her voice broke. She held up her bloodied hands. "I don't know, I just don't know."

And she didn't know, for Marina's labor went into its second hour, then its third, with no progress. Melantha had no instruments; she would not have known how to use them if she had.

When the second thing at last permitted itself to be born, we had both exhausted our repertoire of hysterics. Marina was dead, the tiny creature out of her womb was dead, and Mrs. Prendick, her tall body twisted around upon itself, sat slumped on the floor where she had tried to play midwife. She was not asleep, she was not awake. I covered Marina. Then I picked up Melantha, carried her to another module, and placed her on a long brocaded divan. The night smelled of distant azaleas.

With that odor in my nostrils, I climbed back through the dark labyrinth of Python's Keep. As if hypnotized, I found my wife's deathbed. It had about it the ancient stillness of an archaeological dig. The corpses were remarkably well preserved, one small mummified form feigning life with shallow breaths. I picked it up and covered its mouth and nostrils with the heel and palm of my hand. It scarcely struggled. Then I lifted the other small corpse from its resting place and withdrew from the ancient tranquillity in which Marina slept. She was too far removed from me to elicit my grief.

Not grieving, merely sleepwalking, I carried the animal things from her womb downstairs to the lawn. I walked through the entangled shadow of Python's Keep.

In Marina's garden I dug shallow depressions with my bare hands and buried the things she had grown. For a long while I continued to dig; I tore at the soil with my bruised nails. At last I stopped and sat on my

haunches in the dirt—almost comprehending how little free will a free man has.

For I was indeed free.

I resolved, as the tree-entangled dawn came back, to make Fearing Serenos regret the day of his own birthing. I resolved this with all the ruthlessness of incorruptible natural phenomena, the ruthlessness of sunlight and tide. Serenos would burn in a candle of gas; he would drown in the waters of a malignant moon. I resolved these things freely and knew that the Navarch would not escape my vengeance.

On the day of Marina's cremation, Prendick and I went down to the quay to scatter her ashes on the water. We had just come from the official crematory of the Navarchy, several rows of terra-cotta houses away from Prendick's waterfront hospital. We were alone. Marina's mother had remained in the main house at The Orchard, fatigued, uncommunicative, ill.

I carried an amphora—a narrow-mouthed jar—tenderly before me. This contained the final, soot-flavored residue of a human being, and I had to make a concerted mental and physical effort not to raise the jar to my lips and drink of my wife's ashes. Unlike the ashes, the jar was cool.

Together Yves and I descended the stone stairs to the flagstones on the quay. No ship was docked in the place we had chosen, and no sinister trunkless heads adorned the spikes along the harbor wall. The sky was the color of milk.

I began the ritual. I poured the ashes into my hand, waited for the wind to blow away from me, and scattered the ashes over the water on this gentle wind. Silently, Prendick followed my example. As we scattered Marina's ashes on the bay, I realized that her ashes, metaphorically, were those of Holocaust C, the fallout of a miniature Armageddon. On the rainbowed water she floated like sentient dust.

God no longer prophesied doom, he was through with us, nor did the Parfects truly concern themselves with our petty murders. Dust on the water Marina was, ash on the sea.

"Yves?"

He looked at me—not with a great deal of responsiveness, his hand feebly emptying its contents on the wind. In seven months he had grown slow and morosely sullen. How often he had been forced to change.

"Yves, we're going to do something about Marina's death."

"What?" He stared. "What will we do?"

"Kill Serenos. Or cripple him. Make him experience, in a similar species of coin, some part of the pain he's caused others."

"With what chance of success?" the doctor said. "And how?"

"You have a head, you have a heart, you once had a daughter. Whatever you decide or fail to decide, I'm going to do something, something to unburden my soul." I paused. "As the Navarch's personal physician, you have access to him."

Prendick stared. "What do you mean? What're you implying?"

"That you should use your head to determine how your access to Serenos will most benefit us. A very simple thing, Yves, very simple."

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he turned back to the water and cast a last meager handful of ash into the sea. Our conversation was over, but Prendick had begun to think. I saw inside his head, I saw his emotions running into little wells of intellection, I saw his mind turned into a bleached brain coral and from the brain coral into an ambiguous living thing, confined but free. Soon the wind blew across the empty mouth of the amphora, and the low bass notes of emptiness arose.

We left the quay.

Three days later Prendick invited me to visit him at the theater of surgery for an entire afternoon. Never before had he extended to me or anyone else in his immediate family such an invitation. I knew that the significance of this invitation lay in its following so obviously on our brief exchange on the quay.

Ordinarily, Prendick spent two hours every morning in the Palace of the Navarchy, whether Serenos demanded his attention or not. Then he went by carriage down the cobbled streets, past dwellings of rose-red

terra-cotta, to the waterfront and the only major building that the Parfects had erected among the salt-drenched quays. The theater of surgery was located in this structure, which everyone called Hospitaler House.

A monument of aluminum and glass, its windows polarized against the sun, Hospitaler House rose fifteen stories over the bay of Pretty Coal Sack on an immense round platform that seemed to float on the waters of the bay. Deep in the great cylindrical column upon which the Parfects had long ago erected this symbol of mercy, one might find the submerged, echoing, antiseptic chambers of the theater of surgery—if one were lucky enough to receive an invitation. Once inside the central chamber, the visitor encountered a window of gargantuan proportions facing toward the open sea. A window on a submerged world. When the waters of the Carib lay unruffled under the refracted sky, one could almost swear that the rippling dome of the Sunken Library, farther out in the bay, was visible.

A man in a frock escorted me into the central chamber of the column and departed.

I stood alone in the copper-bright vastness, the smells of alcohol and of something oddly zoolike preeminent among the odors that clamored there. Looking up, I saw that a kind of tier went around half the cylinder and that Prendick was standing on this level, his hands on the railing, looking down at me. He said nothing.

I navigated a path through the surgical equipment on the main floor until I was almost directly below him. His face sang with the madness of one who communes with the sea and with sea anemones, one who eats the hallucinogens of shipwreck and death. In fact, he looked like a poet—the way Markcrier Rains ought to have looked so soon after "personal tragedy." But he said nothing. Finally, to provoke some sort of response, I spat on my hands and did a mocking toe-tap dance on the sleek floor.

"Stop that," Prendick said, "and come up here. The stairs are over there."

I found the stairs and climbed up to him. Doors with metal sliding panels for windows made a circuit around the inside of the tier—ten or twelve such doors in all. They were all closed and tightly sealed, but on this level the zoolike smell overrode that of the alcohol; I knew that behind the

closed doors was the distinctly animal source of this smell. But the thought did not disturb me. Outwardly, I was loose and cheerful. Prendick, after all, was coming round and we would soon have a plan.

"What is this?" I said. "A cellblock for the dogs that the prol-fauves haven't eaten yet?"

"Let's not waste any time, Markcrier. I'll show you what it is." He selected one of the doors and slid back its window panel as if he were a medieval gaoler in the dungeon of his lord, which, to some extent, he in fact was. The copper panel slid smoothly aside. Unctuous as dead fish, the stench assailed me anew. Immediately upon the panel's opening, it coated the membranes of my mouth and nose like a rancid oil. I stepped back from the window. "My God, Yves!"

"Look, damn you, turn about and look!"

My mood declined from cheerfulness into apprehension. I examined Prendick's face, then forced myself to stare into the gleaming cell. The cell was clean, the walls gleaming, the floor an immaculate gray—so that the stench had to originate with the hoary creature that sat in the cell's far right-hand corner. An absurdly squat animal.

Propped in the angle of two walls, it appeared to be asleep, its paws draped decorously over its middle. A mantle of white fur, somewhat mangy and sparse, gave the beast the look of a worldly gentleman fallen on difficult times. Although fairly long through the torso, the animal had short deformed hind legs that canted outward from its body so that its sex lay exposed in a thin lawn of pubic white. Turgid and intricately veined, the organ had no apparent relevance to the body structure of the creature possessing it. But in spite of the piscine stench that had nearly overwhelmed me a moment before, I judged the animal to be anything but a predator.

I turned away from the window again. "It looks a little like a sea otter." *The memorable scent of hard flesh, intimate and pelagic, on Christmas day.* "Except for the size of its limbs and head. And the primatelike genitals. You've been carving on him pretty viciously, Yves, from what I can see."

"You don't see very much. Look again."

"Please," I said with some exasperation. "What for?"

"Look again, Markcrier. This time I'll wake him up so that you can make a more accurate judgment—although I'm glad that you think it looks like a sea otter, that being what I was striving for." He slid the copper panel back and forth across the window, causing it to clank against its frame. "Now look again!" he commanded me.

Exasperated, uncertain, afraid of what I was being shown, I looked. The animal had not moved, but now its eyes were open and luminous with fear. It remembered Prendick's knife, no doubt, the eventide eternities when the anesthetic had not taken hold.

Then the anomaly of its posture there in the corner struck me— the languidly hanging paws and the tight uncertain eyes. What was it in the creature's lineaments that so unsettled and mocked us? Since its head remained down, only its eyes—looking up under a shaggy misshapen brow—could be responsible for the shame I felt in spying on it: its eyes were the eyes of a human being, trapped but intelligent. The creature seemed unable to lift its head from its breast, but its frightened eyes flickered over our prying faces and showed us, beneath each upward-straining eyeball, a thin crescent of eloquent white.

I turned again to Prendick. Horrified, I shrugged noncommittally.

"That otter used to be a man, Mark. And the man he used to be was your friend from Marigold Island, I've forgotten his name. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Huerta?" I said incredulously.

"That's right. Huerta. I'd forgotten the name, it's been so long that Serenos has had me doing this one."

"Doing this one," I echoed. I stared at Prendick. The madness singing in his tortured face had softened into an expression of professional distance; he had no concept of the awesome disparity between his words "doing this one" and the gut-rending fact of converting a human being into an animal. His face registered a hysterical calm, his puffy eyes a smug aloofness from reality. Prendick, I realized, was grown into the archetypal mad scientist— with the telling qualification that his madness had seeped into him from the ubiquitous distillation of the Navarch's evil. I was

touched by that madness myself. How could I upbraid a madman for the enormities his madness had perpetrated? How could I condemn Marina's father for succumbing to the evil that had begun to drive me? I turned back to the cell window. Ignoring the stench, I shouted at the incomplete thing slouched against the wall, "Huerta! Huerta, it's Markcrier, I'm going to let you out, I'm going to try to help you!"

Huerta did not move, but the eyes—the eyes fixed on me reproachfully.

"I've decerebrated it," Prendick said. "It doesn't understand."

"Why? Why have you done this to him?"

"Because Serenos wanted me to. He said I could restore creatures like this one—and specimens of the prol-fauves—to a condition more suited to their natures or I could condemn my family to death by refusing to do so. Do you understand me, Markcrier? I'm not supposed to be telling you this."

"I understand," I said, going to the railing and looking across the operating hall at the huge window there. The sea pressed against the glass like a woman embracing her lover: crystalline ambiguity.

"At the turn of this century Serenos ordered me to perform experimental work on cadavers, simple work that never required me to be away from home. But about two years ago, perhaps more, he demanded that I 'create' things for him out of living human beings—things that would be demonstrably less than human. I was to use animals for models, both living animals and extinct ones." Prendick pointed at a door several meters down the tier. "There's a kind of protoman in there. A dawn creature, aeons before either of the Holocausts: the books sometimes call it *Homo habilis*. I did it very well, I think—at least in regard to its outward anatomy."

Prendick joined me at the railing. "Of course, after the cadavers the work was more difficult. The Navarch set deadlines. I had to be away from The Orchard for longer periods. After Marina's rape, he provided me with the old man who was your friend, the old man who became the raw material for the sea otter you've just looked at. Serenos said he wanted a sea otter this time. He specified a white one. But the old man was so old that he almost died while I was working on him..."

I folded my hands on the railing and put my head down.

Consolingly, Prendick put his arm around my shoulders; he whispered in my ear so that I could feel his breath. "Don't be upset, Mark. It wasn't a personal thing, what I did to your friend." He tapped my shoulder. "Besides, I have a plan."

I looked into the mutely singing eyes of my dead wife's father.

"You see," he said, "I can do the same thing to Fearing Serenos; I can do the *same thing* to the Navarch."

Long ago, in a very old book, I had read about a man who had attempted to turn animals into men through vivisection. What Marina's father was doing embodied the opposite notion; and although innately more repugnant than "humanizing" dumb beasts, it was a simpler task than the other. After all, the insidiously rational Dr. Moreau had failed because he could not instill a lasting human intelligence in his brutish subjects: the nebulous quality of humankind's "soul" invariably faded with time. But insofar as Prendick had succeeded in carrying out the Navarch's will, he had succeeded precisely because it is easier to destroy than to build, to demolish than to create.

Huerta (if one could forget his eyes) was an animal in every respect. The human being in him had departed with each successive incision of Prendick's scalpel, with each expert deletion of brain tissue, with each cruel alteration of his hands and feet. My rage grew. My heart pounded *ven-geance, ven-geance*. I knew that I did in fact wish to do the same thing to Serenos, to reduce him completely to the animal he already was.

Understanding that Prendick approached the world from the perspective of a madman enabled me to work with him. We were madmen together. I drew energy from his insanity as surely as if I were a psychic vampire. Prendick's plan had no more brilliance than the recommendation of a bactericide for a sore throat, but we sought to effect his remedy with all the insane zeal we could muster, and our very zealotry made the plan work.

It was two months after Marina's death in childbirth that we put this awkward strategy to the test, two months to the day. The first torrential rainfall of October scoured the streets outside the Palace of the Navarchy, scoured the stained terra-cotta dwellings, caused the rabid sea to foam

against the quaystones under the force of the October deluge. We had waited, Prendick and I, for just such a morning.

We left The Orchard in Prendick's battery-powered autocart and arrived together at the Palace perhaps an hour before the breaking of a thin winterish light. We had informed not a single other person of our intentions; and because Serenos would have suspected some sort of underhandedness if he had seen me, I remained in the hot, breath-fogged cockpit of Prendick's autocart while he ran up the seemingly varnished steps of the main administrative building. I looked around, prepared to hide if a gendarme in a poncho should approach. Since not a single member of the Gendarmerie came forward to check Prendick's vehicle and since it would be better for us if his autocart were not so brazenly conspicuous at the beginning of our ruse, I dared to expose myself for a moment and drove the autocart out of the way. I drove it into a high-walled shelter between the Palace itself and the eastern wall of the "imperial" stables. Because of the rain, no one challenged me.

Bitter cleansing rains of incredible ferocity conspired with us against the Navarch. It was fitting. Had not one of my ancestors washed his sullied body in such torrents and taken their name for his own?

All I had to do was wait. Prendick knew where I would be. I crawled into the autocart's backseat—in reality, a storage well— and covered myself with a heavy tarpaulin. Immediately drenched in my own sweat, I listened to the roar of the world.

In time, Prendick would emerge into the rain with Serenos and the Navarch's inevitable uniformed riflemen—Molinier, his favorite, among them. The pretext for getting the Navarch to take a jaunt in the rain would be Prendick's avowal of a genuine miracle of vivisection at Hospitaler House. For several weeks Serenos had been pressuring my mad friend about his progress with Huerta, but Yves had put him off with clumsy excuses—so that we might take advantage of the beginning of the rainy season.

Now it had come. At no other time would the Navarch have even considered riding from the Palace to any other part of Windfall Last in a vehicle other than his ornate open carriage, a conveyance drawn by four identical Percherons. But like many men who place no value on the lives of human beings, he did not choose to let valuable animals suffer; therefore, we had assumed that Serenos would not require his beautifully groomed

horses to brave this inclement October morning. And we assumed correctly.

I heard footfalls on the flagstones. The door of the autocart opened, turning up the volume on the rain and allowing a gust of muggy wind to lift a corner of my tarpaulin. Then the slamming of the door and a return of the storage well's stifling humidity. Crouched under the tarp, I waited for some word from Prendick.

Finally he said, "He's going to ride with us, Markcrier—or with me, that is, so far as he knows. I'm driving over to the entrance to pick him up."

I said nothing. Moving through the rain, the autocart whined softly.

"Did you hear me?" Prendick said. "And it may be that his personal gendarmes will follow in another vehicle. Perhaps even on horseback, since their horses aren't his own coddled Percherons. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," I said. "I was just wondering what Serenos smells like when he's wet. Have you ever wondered about that?"

"No. Why would I wonder about something like that?"

I did not reply, and the tires of the autocart sloughed through the runoff from the Palace's rain gutters. Then the gentle whine of the batteries ceased altogether.

We were at rest.

There were voices and footfalls. The door opposite Prendick roared open, then kicked shut with a violent *thwump!* We rocked a little. Even from beneath my concealing canvas I could feel another body adjusting to the narrow confines of our autocart, a body of no small proportions.

Then again the amplified crackling of the rain and Prendick shouting out his window at someone: "Hell, no, I won't carry you in here! You're already sopping wet, your capes and jodhpurs all sopping! And this thing wasn't made to transport armies, it wasn't made to—"

A voice shouted back an indistinct response.

Then I heard the Navarch's voice (it was the first time I had heard it

since he had told me, *I'll never ask anything of you again, Markcrier*). Now he was leaning over Prendick and shouting at the undoubtedly miserable gendarme in the rain, in a voice that sounded both annoyed and authoritative, "Just follow us, Molinier, you and the others! Get in another goddamn vehicle and follow us closely. Dr. Prendick can be counted on to see me safely to Hospitaler House!"

Molinier or someone else responded unintelligibly. The window went up again, but I thought for a moment about Molinier. He was a handsome man in his late forties, with vestigial gill slits—unfunctioning, of course—just behind his jawbones on the upper part of his neck. I had known him relatively well in the final period of my service to Windfall Last. For a murderer, he was an amiable enough fellow. We had once worked together with a complete absence of either recrimination or jealousy.

Then the tires began whirring through water once more and the engine whining like a swarm of summer mosquitoes. The rain pounded the fiberglass hull of the autocart with barbaric tattoos, the patterns of which altered in intensity and rhythm every few minutes. I waited. I suffered the oppressive humidity of my closed-in hiding place.

But when Prendick said, "Your gatemens weren't very conscientious today, Navarch," I uncovered and stuck a pistol in the intimate depression at the base of Fearing Serenos's skull. The pistol had belonged to Marina.

"If you move," I said, "I won't hesitate to let this nasty little machine take a core sample of your gray matter."

There was a momentary silence. Then, "That could only be Markcrier Rains, Dr. Prendick. Such a nasty day for him to get out."

"Shut up," I said. I pushed the barrel deeper into the depression at the back of his head. I was enjoying myself: the rough language, the gun butt cradled in my palm, this conspiracy of dark rains and lofty madness. Moreover, Serenos shut up.

Because Prendick allowed the autocart to careen down the cobbled streets, rocking back and forth over its wheels, it took us very little time to reach Hospitaler House. Several unmasted boats pitched in their moorings beside the quays. A few fishermen huddled together on various decks, pointing and gesturing with heads and hands as if they were

demigods attempting to calm the sea. But except for some children we had passed beneath the Palace of the Navarchy, no other people had ventured outdoors.

We halted on the perimeter of the great platform on which the hospital seemed to float.

As soon as Prendick got out and went around to the Navarch's door, Serenos slammed it open, knocked Prendick down, and hurled his lithe muscular body into the downpour. I pursued. Bruising my upper thighs in the process, I lurched out of the autocart's backseat.

With rain slashing out of the sky into my face, I shot the Navarch in the calf. I shot him again in the buttocks. His royal vestments fluttering about him like the wings of a manta ray, he toppled and rolled onto his belly. The rain, like so many fluid needles, pinioned him to the concrete.

In a moment Prendick was up from his back, and the two of us lifted Serenos, held him erect between us, and stumbled with him toward the building's nearest entrance.

We went in.

Prendick found his keys and admitted us to the elevator that would drop us into the submerged operating hall of the theater of surgery. Down we went. In the closed quarters of the elevator, supporting Serenos as he bled, I realized that the man smelled exactly like a wet dog.

I grew angry. Why were we taking Serenos to the cloistered vivisection area to which only Prendick had access? We could end things quickly if we wished: I could shoot the bastard in the head at point-blank range and so conclude eight years of needless suffering. But we were down. We were on the floor of the operating hall.

Molinier and the other gendarmes were not long in arriving. On a closed-circuit television unit we watched them enter Hospitaler House. Prendick went upstairs and told them a remarkable story, one he had devised over two weeks ago especially for this critical confrontation: The Navarch had had a sudden and acute attack of stigmata in his hands and side, an unpredictable infirmity to which men in high positions had been mysteriously subject throughout all recorded history. Because of this attack of stigmata, Prendick went on, he had placed the Navarch in a

private room in one of the lower levels of Hospitaler House, where Serenos was now resting comfortably.

Meticulously observant, Molinier had seen evidence of blood on the streaming pavement outside Hospitaler House and in the upper hallway as well. He did not choose to take Marina's father at his word. Therefore, Prendick came back down to me and prepared to give Molinier the assurance that he wanted. Only when I forced the Navarch, at gunpoint, to announce over the hospital's intercom system the nature of his injuries, the extent of his loss of blood, and the fact that he would be staying with us for three or four more days, only then did the gendarmes accept the lies we had fed them. Molinier and the others left.

We drugged the Navarch. He lay unconscious on his stomach on one of the metallic operating tables, and we sat on stools and talked like two medical students above his inert form. We had stripped him, and the finely haired body of the man fascinated us. Ageless and heretofore invincible, Fearing Serenos had the animal vibrancy of a jaguar. The bullet holes in his calf and buttock actually hurt my heart; they were crimson insults to an otherwise perfect physique. But, seeing him naked, I hated Fearing Serenos even more than I had hated him after Marina's rape, or after her pregnancy, or after her preternatural labor. Beast creatures slept in the seed of the Navarch's loins.

"Well, what shall we do with him?" Prendick asked. "What sort of thing shall we turn him into? After I've removed the bullets?"

Turning toward the hall's immense window, I looked at the surprisingly calm waters beyond. Faint undulations swept against the glass, a stirring of unknown powers and unwritten poems.

"Well, Mark, what do you want to do?" Prendick came back into my line of vision; his mad eyes were upon me, opaque with dull expectancy.

"I want you to turn Serenos into a shark," I said. "I want you to give him the shape and the hairlessness and the blunt stupid nose of a shark. That's what I want you to do with him."

The mad eyes stared, they glinted. And without a single flicker of outrage, these same eyes acquiesced in the irrationality of my proposal.

And so we began.

No one truly knew what had befallen the Navarch, although Molinier demanded that Dr. Prendick provide him with tangible evidence that Serenos still lived. This ultimatum came on the second day of the Navarch's captivity, and Prendick, acting upon no stratagem but the intuition of his madness, simply replied that he could offer no such evidence because in a paroxysm of nocturnal spiritual ecstasy the Navarch had cast his eyes up to heaven and died! For some reason, Prendick filigreed this unlikely "official report" with the observation that the Navarch's ecstasy had followed closely upon his viewing a new marvel of vivisection, the Otter Man.

Although no word of Serenos's "death" reached the general public, Prendick's report went out to every member and past member of the Council of the Navarchy, including myself. Everyone believed. Inherent in this bizarre account of our leader's dying was a drama that no one could ignore. Had the multitudinous sins of Fearing Serenos at last run him to ground and figuratively torn away the flesh at his throat? If so, the punishment was just.

I had to laugh—at my coconspirator's inventive fantasy and at the sanctimonious reaction of the council members.

Because no one had seen me on the morning of the Navarch's journey to Hospitaler House, I was above suspicion. Therefore, on the fourth day of Serenos's confinement (the third day after the announcement of his death), I joined my former colleagues in the Palace of the Navarchy. They treated me with deference and respect. As the only man in Guardian's Loop's history ever to have lived twice in Azteca Nueva among the enigmatic Perfects, I had an enigmatic position all my own. Eight years in retirement had heightened for these men the illusion of my venerableness. And, finally, their quietly held knowledge that my wife had died as a result of Serenos's cruelty secured for me the status of a living martyr.

Desperate for direction, they turned to me. Even Molinier, who had expressed serious doubts about the complete accuracy of Prendick's report, accepted my assurances that no foul play had occurred. After all, I knew the doctor. He had suffered more than most of us at the Navarch's hands (quietly knowledgeable looks passed between the council members when I said this), but no man had been so diligent as my father-in-law in the impartial execution of his duty. Swarthy, keen-eyed, gill-scarred Molinier listened to my word and believed me.

Without seeking the office, I had become the interregal Navarch. I had not anticipated this outcome, had not been prescient enough to understand the impact of my own reputation. How could I have hoped to understand? My reputation and I shared nothing in common but those two amazingly complex words, Markcrier Rains.

Nevertheless, I assumed the pilot's role almost without thinking.

Although Molinier supported me in this capacity and rallied more than three-quarters of the Gendarmerie in my behalf, a small segment of our official police force chose to support an aging bureaucrat who had never quite acceded to the prefecture of the organization. Even while Serenos had ruled, this man—Duvalier— had openly criticized the policies and methods of his immediate superior, Molinier (perhaps with some justification, considering our relatively effortless capture of the Navarch); but Duvalier had not been removed from his position, primarily because he understood the delicate business of bodyguarding as no one else and because he had made fast friends with several of the more elderly council members. On the second day of my "reign," it became apparent that the faction supporting this man would not go quietly away of its own volition. Molinier approached me; he asked for permission to deal with these reprehensible few. I listened. Not yet aware of the power that resided in my simplest word, I told Molinier to do what had to be done.

The following day I discovered that twenty freshly severed heads decorated the spikes along the harbor wall. The faces were masks of hard black blood, and the sea gulls dived upon them with the impunity of falling sunlight.

Once again I had indirectly precipitated an atrocity. How many times would I be responsible for other people's deaths?

Although this question genuinely pained me, tortured me in the long midnights, I sublimated its painfulness and tried to glory in the newfound security of my position. I had become the Navarch. I hoped that I had not become Fearing Serenos.

A rumor started that the sea gulls near the harbor had gone mad and that they copulated in the air as they fell in screaming torrents on the impaled heads of the slaughtered gendarmes. I half believed the rumor and expected the heads to have been devoured the next time I ventured to the quays. The appetites of animals, sexual and otherwise, haunted my

thoughts.

Sea gulls copulating in the air?

IV

May no one die till he has loved!—SAINT-JOHN PERSE

Nevertheless, the disembodied heads of the rebel gendarmes greeted me when I finally found the time to visit Prendick at Hospitaler House. The libidinous gulls had not completely ravished them or themselves.

Trembling, I sought out Marina's father and came upon him in the sunken chamber of surgery. In the last several days he had taken the first strides toward effecting the metamorphosis of our drugged former leader. I wanted to halt this madness, but I could not. I convinced myself that the process had already gone beyond the point of legitimate reversal. If we stopped now, I argued to myself, Serenos would be a thing, a grotesque parody of his former self. Since we could not restore him, it was best to proceed. Moreover, I realized that under no circumstances would Prendick be likely to permit an interruption of his first tender modifications of our patient's anatomy. He pursued the animalization of Fearing Serenos with too much innocent enthusiasm to be put off by my sober moral concern. He had worked too hard already. Therefore, inertia ruled me—inertia and my own persistent desire to see the Navarch suffer. I delighted in Prendick's malicious skill.

"Markcrier," he said when I came into the hall. "Have you come to see how our experiment progresses?"

I ignored the question; I had other matters on my mind. "We must give the council a body, Yves. Molinier demands a body. Before we can announce Serenos's death to the populace of Windfall Last, there must be some evidence that he is, in fact, dead. Everyone wants a funeral."

"Give them a sealed casket and a cremation ceremony," Prendick said curtly. "Tell them that will suffice."

"And if Molinier should wish to examine the body?"

"I have *already* examined the body! I am the physician to the Navarch, and no one has the right to question my competence or loyalty." As if I had questioned both, he looked at me accusingly. "All you need do, Markcrier, is tell them that no one views the Navarch's body once it has been prepared for cremation. Tradition dictates this procedure. You're the new Navarch. Who'll not believe you?"

"What tradition, Yves?"

"None. But say it anyway. No one remembers the occasion of the previous Navarch's death; consequently, no one will challenge you about the funeral procedures. The history of Windfall Last," Prendick said in a faraway voice, "is not so well documented as that of several pre-Holocaust civilizations. How very odd that is."

"Yes. Odd."

"Come with me and see how your shark progresses, Markcrier. It's slow, it's very slow—but you'll be proud of me." In his eyes: the images of tangled seaweed and the minute tentacles of an old obsession, one we shared.

I followed him onto the tier above the chamber's main floor, the tier where I had come face to face with Emmanuel Huerta in his new incarnation. This thought I put in a far corner of my mind, but the odor of fish and fur recalled it to me with punishing vividness at brief unpredictable moments in my conversation with Prendick. The tier still reeked. I refused, however, to let these moments rule me.

We looked down on a large round tank that had not been in the theater of surgery on the day of Serenos's capture. A thin milk-colored solution swirled in the tank—a solution that apparently flowed through an assemblage of swan-necked glass tubing into the adjacent cleansing unit and then back into the barbarously foaming tank, endlessly recirculating, like pale blood. So evil did this apparatus look that I had the ridiculous idea that Prendick had created it solely for its appearance.

Fearing Serenos lay at full length in this milky whirlpool, his head held out of the water by means of a metal brace that forced his chin to point at the ceiling. And his face was naked. I would not have recognized the

Navarch had I not already known what to expect—primal nudity, the hairlessness of reptiles, flesh the color of burnt rubber.

Looking down at the open tank, at the milky solution laving Serenos's body, I asked, "Does he know what's going on? Have you... decerebrated him?"

"No. I'm not going to. We decided not to, didn't we?"

"Then he *does* know what's going on?"

"No, he doesn't. Look at him, Markcrier. He's on a heavy dose of slightly modified pentobarbital sodium. The drug serves two purposes. It keeps him anesthetized against the maceration process of the whirlpool, which is more frightening than painful, I should imagine; and it produced in his own metabolism the first evidences of a condition approaching that of poikilothermal animals: coldbloodedness. Once we remove him from the tank, a partial severing of his spinal cord will insure that he continues in this cold-blooded state, just like all good mantas and sharks."

"And what does the whirlpool do?"

Prendick stared not at the tank, but at the gently heaving waters of Pretty Coal Sack. "It also does two things. The solution in the tank consists in part of a depilatory agent to remove the Navarch's hair by inactivating the follicles themselves. I removed his facial hair by shaving and electrolysis. What's especially interesting, though, is that the solution contains another agent to soften his skeletal system and then reverse the ossification process altogether so that his bones turn back into pliant cartilage, the cartilage of the womb. At this very moment calcium and phosphorus are being leached from his bones, Markcrier. When his skeleton consists entirely of cartilage and when the poikilothermal condition has been firmly established, I can begin to use the knife." Prendick looked at me with a weary innocence. "Two or three months' work will remain even after I've removed him from the whirlpool. Perhaps for a Christmas gift I can deliver into your hands this predatory thing we have sired together. A shark will be born."

"Perhaps," I said.

And I left Yves Prendick to his work and returned, under guard, to the Palace of the Navarchy. I did not go back to Hospitaler House for nearly

two weeks—although Yves came to the Palace almost every morning to see me. I made use of this time away from the sunken surgical hall to strengthen my grip on the levers of power and to woo a population that could remember no Navarch but Fearing Serenos. Most of this courting took place during the public cremation ceremony, over which I presided from beginning to end.

I delivered an impassioned address about the right of men to govern their own lives within the limitations of the law; I read to the clustering crowd, flamboyant in their yellow and scarlet mourning dress, a small section of my uncompleted poem *Archipelagoes*.

The casket remained closed throughout the ceremonies, even when on brief display in the outer courtyard of the crematorium. When the casket was burned, consumed at incredible temperatures, it yielded royal ashes—though they were not those of Serenos at all, but instead the charred dust of a misbegotten sea otter that had once been Emmanuel Huerta.

I had ordered Prendick to kill Huerta in the least painful way he could devise; and on the morning before the requiem rites for Serenos, Yves had given the old fisherman a fatal anodyne. His body we had later concealed in the Navarch's casket for the purpose of the state funeral. No one doubted our story; no one wept for a last look at the late ruler's corpse.

All went well in the weeks immediately following the funeral. The people accepted me, the council supported my every recommendation, Molinier and his gendarmes dogged my footsteps with an assiduousness beyond reproach.

I did not go back to Python's Keep. I did not leave the city. Prendick returned to The Orchard every night to walk among the trees with Melantha, to keep her company, to calm her fears about his long sessions at Hospitaler House. But I would not return to Python's Keep. Too many mementos of another time crowded upon me when I stepped over the threshold, a fragrance as of ancient perfumes and constantly rejuvenating seas. I experienced again the powerful intercourse of two hearts, and the experience always hurt me.

Nevertheless, I saw Prendick often. I visited him in the submerged operating hall where he continued to mold Serenos into the ichthyoid form of something resembling a shark. He cut. He performed skin grafts.

He removed the former Navarch's genitals and sculptured his bifurcated lower body into the smooth, resilient fuselage of a fish. Working with the macerated bones of Serenos's skull, Prendick shaped a neckless head; he flattened the strong human nose; he moved the brutal eyes out of their forward-looking sockets and placed them on opposite sides of the streamlined sharkish snout.

Where a man had once existed, Marina's father saw to it that a knife-born member of the order *Selachii* came into being. I began to believe that no such man as Fearing Serenos had ever lived in Windfall Last, for the creature on Prendick's operating table bore no resemblance to any human being I had ever encountered. Its moist gray flesh was marbled with intimations of blue, its face grinned with the livid sewn-up grin of a museum horror. Things progressed nicely. But even though it was by then the middle of November, a great deal of delicate vivisection and grafting remained to be done.

And by the middle of November I had begun to make enemies.

Molinier could not understand my refusal to permit bodyguards to descend with me into the sunken chamber of surgery. I argued that the intricacy of my friend's experiments demanded a silent surgical environment.

Why, then, did the Navarch go so frequently to the operating area? Was his interest in vivisection so profound?

I argued that Prendick was engaged in activity that might one day free the population of Windfall Last from its biological heritage. One day the Parfects might choose to readmit us to the world we had twice repudiated, and they would do so because of my friend's work. I went to him so frequently because my presence steadied his hand, my encouragement made him aware of our trust in his skill. These lies I told Molinier on several occasions, but he held his skepticism in check and continued as my friend.

He did not become my enemy until I had made a severe tactical error by attempting to formulate policy on the basis of moral conviction. The poet ruled where the bureaucrat ought to have prevailed.

I decided that the Gendarmerie (even after Molinier's October purge) was at a strength incommensurate with its duties—that too many of its

members were callous self-seeking men who used their position as a *carte blanche* to insult, intimidate, bludgeon, and kill. I ordered Molinier to discover the identities of these men and to remove them from the police force.

At that moment, Molinier became my enemy.

Perfunctorily, he did what I asked—but the men whom he removed went down to the quays and destroyed the vessels, the nets, and the cargoes of a council member's private fishing fleet. None of the remaining gendarmes would make an arrest; not a single marauder came to justice.

While Prendick's knife made careful incisions in the flesh of the former Navarch, my idealism gouged jagged rents in my own, the current Navarch's, credibility. But now I had power. I persisted. I refused to toady to the old men and the fiery youths who encircled me with their own peculiar brands of avarice and who gave me immoral advice. Because of what Prendick and I had done, the position of Navarch belonged to me.

Let its use be worthy, I prayed. For I intended to use it.

Then one night as I lay in my canopied bed, the ghost of Emmanuel Huerta came to me in the form of a white otter and sang to me in my dream. On the next day I took action to lift the interdict on the fishermen of Marigold Island, just as Fearing Serenos had once falsely told me he had done. I decreed that all who wished to do so could return to Guardian's Loop; the day of enforced exile was done.

I sent a vessel to Barbos to deliver this happy news, but few of the fishermen there believed. They knew that Huerta had never returned to them.

The vessel I had dispatched eventually came home—gliding over the waters of Pretty Coal Sack, its sails as lewd as soiled linen, its prow dull and stupid-looking above the spitlike froth through which it cut. I waited on the quay. Not one of the members of the colony disembarked, however, and the shipmaster insisted that my lifting of the interdict had meant nothing to the people at Barbos, so wanting in discernment and gratitude were they all.

Several nights later a crewman from this vessel, whom I had granted a clandestine audience, told me that three fishermen from the colony had

come aboard ship, but that they had been murdered and cast into the sea not more than an hour out from Marigold. I believed this sailor, but I could do nothing.

The heavy rains continued to fall, drowning us with their vehemence and their unremitting noise. A biblical deluge for the world's last men, a deluge of tall rains striding over the earth.

As the rains fell, Prendick brought Serenos further along. He amputated his arms, smoothed the shoulders into his tough symmetrical body, began shaping dorsal fins from the skin he had cut away from the amputated arms—skin he had also treated in a chemical brine. Now when I visited Prendick, the smell of the surgical chamber drove me onto the tier above the main floor; I watched everything from a distance, literally and metaphorically aloof.

Exercising my power as Navarch, however, I tried to remain aloof from the evil that existed in Windfall Last. I proceeded with my catch-as-catch-can program of reform. Strangers and aliens seemed to surround me; they looked on as I ordered that all the iron spikes jutting skyward from the harbor wall be pried from their sockets and scrapped, never again to receive upon their cold lance-tips the heads of dismembered human beings. Even in this, unthinking men opposed me.

A work force of impressed prol-fauves removed the spikes from the wall, but the gendarmes whom I had sent to supervise this labor made bets among themselves and instigated bloody little combats among the individual work crews—so that prol-fauves used the dislodged spikes to maim and disembowel one another while their supervisors sat horse on the streets above them and cheered them on. Only the sudden onset of great winds and torrential rains prevented this casually provoked slaughter from developing into a small insurrection. Before the coming of the streaming torrents, the gendarmes had had to shoot several of the workmen for turning away from the quays and threatening to mob into the city with their crude weapons. On this same afternoon two horses with ripped bellies, having thrown their riders, bolted through the rain toward the Palace; slime-coated intestines gleamed with crimson intensity on the cobbles. Just as in Prendick's theater of surgery, I watched everything from a distance.

Again I had failed. Eight years of isolation from the ways of men had not prepared me for the frustrations of thwarted authority. How had my

Marina come to me from such a milieu of contradictory impulses? What sort of animal inhabited Guardian's Loop? Indeed, what sort of ambiguous animal ravened in my own breast, devouring both the bitter and the sweet?

At the beginning of December an unexpected thing happened.

Seemingly materializing from nowhere, a tall silver-eyed Parfect presented herself at the gate of the Palace of the Navarchy and told the gendarmes on duty that she would see the new ruler of our island. As a concession to our sensibilities, she wore a white linen robe with Grecian fretwork at the sleeves and hem. The guards fell back at once and found a council member to usher the Parfect into my chambers on the topmost floor.

When the Parfect entered, I was sitting beneath the open skylight looking at the fish in my aquarium and trying to decide if I should attempt sleep. Dusk had sifted down on me; my head ached. But startled by the twilight apparition of the Parfect, I stood up and discovered with shame that I was weeping. Inexplicably. I did not recognize this alien sister from either of my two stays in Azteca Nueva, but I embraced her as a friend.

We conversed in the fading light. She ignored the salt tears on the tilted planes of my cheeks and moved about the room as she spoke, gracefully gesturing with her hands. Her voice dealt with our human words—our pragmatic Franglais—with a precision born of unfamiliarity. My own voice faltered, faltered in attempting to reach her heart; but neither of us, in reality, said a great deal. The message of this visitor from Azteca Nueva consisted not so much of words as of a perfectly communicated *tone*.

Disappointment.

The Parfects felt disappointment. For centuries they had waited for us, delaying an inevitable decision. It was not enough that we merely struggled. Her voice smoothed out this last suggestion and played with another tone—although that of disappointment continued to undulate gently beneath the surface. The inevitable decision would be delayed again, this time for the purpose of receiving a final representative of mankind in Azteca Nueva. Serenos had put them off. Very well, then, the beginning of the new decade (still more than a year away) would suffice, and they desired that Markcrier Rains once again be that emissary—

—Markcrier Rains, he who no longer slept beside a woman sharing the sea-smell of her womb; he who held the poison-tipped scepter of a mysteriously fallen prince; he who on past occasions had walked haltingly among the Perfects of the luxuriantly flowered mainland, in the shadow of Popocatepetl.

No other could come in my stead, they had settled upon me. Windfall Last would find a ruler more suited to her disposition during my absence, and upon my return that new ruler would step aside for me. Then the decision would be withheld no longer; it would come down to us, out of either disappointment or forgiveness. And the world would be changed.

"Do not think us unfeeling, Markcrier," the Perfect said before leaving me. "It may be that we feel too deeply."

When she had gone, the twilight departing on the trailing hem of her Grecian robe, the room still contained something of her presence. Even in the resultant dark this intangible balm hung in the air, like the fragrance of foreign evergreens. The idea of living again in Azteca Nueva did not seem completely unpleasant.

Only in the morning, when sunlight cascaded in like harp music, did I realize that going once more among the Perfects would signal for me a private doom, a living suicide. I refused to see anyone that morning; I failed to visit Hospitaler House. Nearly thirteen months remained to me before the advent of the new decade, and in that time I might be able to devise an alternative acceptable to the Perfects. But I would not go, I would not. Still, it was almost a week before the lingering suggestion of the messenger's presence disappeared utterly from my council room.

On the ninth day of the month I went to Prendick again and found that his work was nearly done. He had given Serenos the crescentic underslung mouth of a shark. He had also given him an armoring of artificially cultivated placoid scales and teeth to occupy the predatory mouth.

As I watched from the tier of copper cages, Prendick went about the one task that he had purposely postponed until every other procedure of the metamorphosis lay behind him. Once again the tank came into play, but this time without all the paraphernalia of recirculation and cleansing. Marina's father had submerged himself in the tank, which now murmured with stinging salt water; and he was working on the snout of the creature suspended in traction over the water's surface.

I watched for almost three hours. During all this time Prendick and I exchanged not a single word; of late we had had less and less to say to each other, as if the surgeon's scalpel had split our tongues. We communed in other ways, knowing that only two of us—in all the world—knew of this ultimate degradation of Fearing Serenos. Prendick was mad, of course, and I... It was too late to concern myself.

The last step was taking place, the creation of the shark's louverlike system of gills: the fluttering blood-blue branchiae through which Serenos would breathe. Prendick had preserved this moment in order not to have to work in the water until he absolutely must. But the moment was upon him; and occasionally lowering his suspended patient into the tank and then raising him out again, he cut and cauterized, severed and tied. Sometimes he worked through the monster's cruel mouth.

At the end of the third hour, Prendick collapsed Serenos's useless lungs, administered a stimulant, and dropped him out of traction into the water—where his new respiratory system began to function. Then Prendick climbed out of the tank and grinned up at me, his face more cadaverous and his trunk and limbs more wanly etiolated than I had ever seen them. He looked ill.

But I grinned, too, and marveled at the drugged pseudoshark stirring its body and tail with lethargic gracelessness. We had done what we had set out to accomplish. If our specimen was not a perfect representative of order *Selachii*, it approached that ideal and nevertheless did us honor.

Still, we knew it would be impossible to release Serenos into the bay before he had recovered from the gill operation and gained the necessary stamina to compete with the sea creatures who would challenge him for prey. Prendick said, "Give him until Christmas, Markcrier," and those were the first words either of us had spoken since my arrival in the early morning. I had no doubt that even in the body of a lower animal Serenos would compete quite well. As a man, he had possessed a gift for tenacious survival; and although his brain had been cut into separate lobes and flattened into the narrow brain casing of a shark, Prendick believed that Serenos still had at least a portion of his former intelligence. He would not be ready for the open sea, however, for well over two weeks. An eternity.

In Windfall Last I received word of a plot against my life. Informers came to my gates nightly with fantastic stories of treason and rebellion. All pled for my ear, all expected reward.

A week before Christmas a man came to me with letters bearing the signatures of Molinier and a young lieutenant in the Gendarmerie. The contents of these letters pointed, without hope of any error, at the desire of these two men to kill me. The next day I ordered Molinier to send me the reports of the Gendarmerie's activities for the last two months. When they came, I compared the signatures on the reports with the handwriting and signatures of the assassination letters supposedly written by Molinier. No noticeable differences existed. I paid the informer, himself a member of the force, and told him to find at least five other gendarmes who shared his active loyalty to the Navarch. With less difficulty than I had expected, he did so.

These six men I dispatched at a predawn hour to Molinier's quarters in the lower courtyard; they took him from his bed and returned with him to a vacant section of the stables where I awaited their coming, two of the older council members at my side. We showed Molinier the documents, and I confronted him with the damning similarity of the signatures, studying his impassive face for those involuntary tics and crawls that of themselves confess the man. But he said simply, "I would never have put my name to a letter so crassly seditious, Navarch," and glared at me with unrepentant eyes.

My heart was torn. I did not believe him. I said, "You will die as quickly and as painlessly as a man may die, Molinier, because until now you refused to lie to me—even when you disagreed with my executive mandates."

He looked at me coldly. Soul-sick, I waved my hand and left.

The informant and his five companions took Molinier to the ivied wall between the stables. There they shot him. The rifle reports echoed over the flagstones like polyps exploding in their shells; a sea dream died with each report.

The repercussions of these shots were felt from the Palace to the quays. Because the force might have deposed me if properly unified, I left the Gendarmerie directorless. As a result, I could not leave my own sleeping chamber and conference rooms for fear that a fanatic worse than Molinier would slay me in the streets. In the Palace, the younger council members treated me with borderline courtesy and whispered among themselves.

But Prendick, who was now free of our self-imposed labor, stayed with

me during the afternoons and "monitored my health." While every other bureaucrat in the government engaged in intrigue, he kept me informed of our patient's progress. He seemed entirely unaware of the precariousness of my hold on the Navarchy. He thought only of Serenos, of our magnificent pseudoshark.

"He doesn't eat," Prendick said one afternoon in the administrative suite. "I'm afraid he's losing strength rather than gaining it."

"Why doesn't he eat?"

But Prendick responded, "To deny us our revenge, Markcrier. Some part of his conscious mind is operating to bring all our efforts to naught. He's *willing* himself to death. But to combat his will I drug him and feed him intravenously."

"He'll finally grow stronger, then?"

"I don't know, he's a preternatural creature. Do you know what I heard a simple fisherman once say of him?"

"No. What?"

"That Serenos and the Adam of Genesis are the same person. The fisherman claimed that Adam never really died but wandered throughout the earth cursing his fall and his own meekness before God after the expulsion from Eden. Since no one can remember when Serenos was born, the old fisherman believed the story. He believed that Serenos was Adam."

"A legend," I said. "The legend of the unregenerate Adam. It has great antiquity, Yves, but not a great deal of respectability."

"Well, if it's true," Yves said, "we've finally ended it."

"Yes, I suppose we have. Or else the unregenerate Adam is in the process of ending it himself. Forever. By foiling our plans for him. An extremely unregenerate Adam is Serenos."

"I don't want to lose him, Mark, not after all the work I've done. If he dies, I'd have to create another like him—only more detailed and less flawed than this one. My hands know what to do now."

To that I answered nothing. Marina's father had regained a little of his former color with several successive nights of uninterrupted and heavy sleep, but he still spoke from a nightmarish, topsy-turvy point of view. Had he transferred his love for the memory of his daughter to another of his children? Locked inside the Palace of the dominion that I ostensibly ruled, I did not understand how one could develop an affection for sharks, even man-made ones. Pride in accomplishment, perhaps, but never abiding affection. Spontaneous awe, perhaps, but never love.

When Christmas came, the old residual festivities took place, and everyone silently acknowledged the existence of a general truce.

Men and women danced in the streets. The ships in the harbor flew brilliant handmade banners of gold and scarlet. The officers of the Gendarmerie wore their blue dress uniforms and organized a parade of horses and men from the Palace to the quays, a parade in which drums, flutes, and teakwood mandolins (these last played by the only Orientals on Guardian's Loop) provided a gay and stately accompaniment to the clatter of horses' hooves. Sea gulls, screeching and wheeling, rode the updrafts above the Christmas festivities like animated diacritical marks on a parchment of pale blue.

At nine o'clock in the morning I went out on the balcony and told the gendarmes and the footmen in the courtyard that they too could join the merrymaking. The truce was both general and genuine.

Then I put on a cape with a hood, and Prendick and I left the Palace. We walked down the several levels of narrow rose-tinged houses to the hospital. There was a smell of rum on the morning breeze, and children ran down the cobbles and darted in and out of doorways, shouting. Most of them paid no heed at all to the deformities with which they had been born—unless of course their legs or feet had been affected, in which cases they sat on stoops and windowsills where their parents had placed them and shouted as insistently as the others. The children with untouched bodies seemed to have the grimmest faces; they played with the quiet determination of soldiers.

Prendick and I said nothing to either the children or the adults.

At Hospitaler House we got immediately to business.

The day had come to release Serenos into the waters of Pretty Coal

Sack. For five days Prendick had refrained from administering any sort of sedative or stimulant to his creation. He believed that a further delay in this final test would serve only to prolong our anxiety. I said, "It's now very much a question of sink or swim, isn't it?" but Prendick was either too distracted or too tactful to respond. In any case, we had no more opportunities for humor, however feeble or strained, for the duration of that protracted Christmas day.

The long experiment failed.

We placed the tank of sea water containing Serenos in a pressure chamber that was sometimes used by divers. We closed the weighted inner door and introduced enough water to fill the chamber completely—so that our pseudoshark could swim effortlessly out of the tank, free of all artificial restraints but the iron-gray walls of the pressure chamber itself. Then we opened the outer door and waited for the former Navarch to swim with measured slowness into the still, cathedral-solemn depths of Pretty Coal Sack. We felt our heartbeats echoing in the conches of our ears. We waited for our patchwork ichthyoid to float free of the shadow of the pressure chamber and into the boundless sun-warmed sea. We waited by the cold glass. We waited for the appearance of the thing we loved and hated, our hands clammy with salt sweat.

At last, the misbegotten body of the pseudoshark dropped laterally through the waters toward us. It moved its tail and fins with no apparent enthusiasm or purpose. Then it turned its sleek gray-and-blue marbled flank to the glass behind which we stood and slid down this transparent wall until it was level with our eyes. Here the creature hung, one piggish unblinking eye staring without hope or love into our sanctuary. The seas of the world stretched away behind it, but only the perfunctory movement of the raw pectoral fin betrayed that Serenos was still alive.

Then even that movement ceased, and Serenos died.

Created without an air bladder, as all sharks are necessarily created, the pseudoshark canted to one side, suffered a spasm throughout the length of its trunk, and drifted away toward the bottom of Pretty Coal Sack, spiraling down in dreamy slow motion.

When Serenos had disappeared, Prendick and I looked at each other in silence and then turned away from the window. Three months of our lives we had spent in this enterprise, no inconsequential portion of the time a

man has allotted to him. Prendick sat down and wept.

I thought, *And is it thus that we have finally avenged the death of a daughter and a wife? What manner of beast are we?*

It is the Year of Our Lost Lord 5309. Or so we believe. From the sea we came, and to the sea we eventually return. There is very little more to tell in this account of our exile in the terra-cotta city of Windfall Last.

On the day after our failure with Serenos, I abdicated my position as Navarch and thereby forestalled the inevitable assassination attempt. I did not take this action out of cowardice. Too many other factors influenced me.

The first of these was the knowledge that no emissary to the Parfects, no matter who he was, would alter their ultimate judgment upon mankind. Under no circumstances would I go again to Azteca Nueva; under no circumstances would I offer myself up as the ritual scapegoat of a species doomed from the very moment of its prehistoric inception, particularly when my own sacrifice—just like that of another long before me—would signify nothing, would mark the waste of still another spirit yearning toward the unattainable. For that reason and others, I abdicated. How could I face the Parfects after my part in Serenos's mutilation and murder?

Instead, I have settled upon another course of action, one that appeals to the tenets of my aesthetic and moral feelings.

Tomorrow morning in the sunken theater of surgery, I am to go under Prendick's knife. He has already agreed to my plan, and his insane dedication to the rationale behind it will see him through the disconcerting early stages of my metamorphosis. Later, when my resemblance to a shark has grown more and more faithful, he will forget altogether that inside the tapered head resides the essence and the intellect of his own son-in-law. He will not fail with me as we failed with Serenos—from that failure Prendick learned too much, his hands derived too many unconscious skills.

And three months hence I will go with supple zeal into the waters of the Atlantic, no more a man.

I am convinced that we are the freaks of the universe; we were never

meant to be. In our natures there is an improper balance of Stardust and dross, too much of one, too little of the other—but not enough of either to give us the perfection of the extreme.

My entire life has been a struggle to achieve that which the universe long ago decreed we might not achieve. I have been living with the delusions of the evolutionary mistake of which I am a product. But no more. Tomorrow morning I am tacking about into the indifferent winds of the cosmos and altering my course. Though perfection is denied me in the direction of the westward seas, I will attain it by swinging toward the dawn. God! even now the salt is in my blood and the power of a shark's primordial lust surges through my heart and loins!

I will swim against the current.

I will seek out the channel that cuts beneath the *Galleon of the Hesperides* and beach myself among the flowers. There I will die, knowing that the white otters will observe my death and scramble into the sea—aghast at so much unprincipled might.

And my death will be more honest than any single instance of a good man's piety.