

FORCED CHANGE

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The creature came slowly over the softly mounded floor of the canyon, The sun glistened brightly across its scarlet carapace, exploding in scintillating sparks from flashing pedipods and belt legs that wound in strips beneath the humped oval of body. Gray dust smoked up behind in a fast-falling spray as the Whae crept from shadow pool to shadow pool like some ancient monster exploring a fatally arid landscape for coolness and water to wet its laboring gills and primitive lung. But, of course, there was no water. The cloudless expanse of sky was a mocking black slate with points of chalk pecked into its dull surface.

Within the hollow thorax of the tank animal two T'rae gazed out upon the desolation and their minds were grim. Jehan moved only his spindly arms as he manipulated the pale mass of ganglia and guided the great animal through the canyon complex. Beside him, Janh clung to the ribbed cavity staring out through the central pore. A whitish gold surface peered back. It lathered the scratched crystal with milky fire, through which the bobbing slopes of the steep walls could be dimly seen; then, a humped ridge of stone reared up to block the harsh sunlight.

The sudden darkness blinded Jehan. Before vision returned the Whae had butted its armored head into a great boulder that guarded the opposite wall of the pass like a hulking sentry. The tank animal growled threateningly as it attempted to shove the massive stone aside, and failed. Jehan leaned forward and touched a precise node on the ganglia to provide the intelligent direction that the simple-brained Whae would never know on its own, and the boulder tilted ponderously and rolled, its fall cushioned in a shallow bed of dust.

They lumbered on, and suddenly Jehan saw "a vivid imaginary figure dance before his eyestalks: a scene of horror as a living dome, an Eyno, was ruptured by a hidden bomb; its ribbed; membrane-covered spine and rib splines exploding outward, spouting a leaping fountain of misty vapor. T'rae bones and body shields lay bleaching in the terrible sunlight on the exposed thoracic floor in a chaotic pattern of agony and extinction. A hive had died. The destroyed Eyno lay amid the desolate gray plain in pathetic ruin, a thin plume of gas wobbling up from its cracked spinal core.

"The Talker," Jehan snapped. "I want to hear it."

Janh twisted his cheekplates into a grimace of pleasure.

"It is that near the time?"

Jehan did not reply; the glee in Janh's voice sickened him. He looked out at the canyon through the artificially enlarged and glazed: pore that punched through the thick carapace of the Whae before him, and concentrated on the deep'

Ha tracks that were still impressed on the dull colored dust and stones of the rill floor, as they would be millions of revs hence, for Waena changed only slowly, if at all.

Ahead, a wide fanlike slump of gravel and boulders nearly touched the opposite wall. It had proved a problem earlier when they had first entered the canyon.

As he guided the Whae about the slide, Jehan tried to drive the image of the ruined Eyno from his brain, but in his distraction he allowed the huge animal to approach too near the far wall and the right band of pedipods scraped on stone. The animal groaned inwardly, the sound of its pain loud within the hollow,

and slewed violently, straightening only as Jehan re-exerted his control. The Trae wheezed as a large globule of sweat splattered wetly down his hard thoracic plates, and suddenly the hollow seemed very cold.

Now the scarlet blob of tissue-plastered wetly across one of the exposed veins of the Whae-began to mutter as Janh brushed an articulated forehand across its spinal ganglia.

“Sector seven seven three, severe water leakage reported. Eyno tissue techs Jki and Jko assemble nerve corridor six for axon weld...”

Jehan tried to ignore the mutter of sound from the Talker even though he had asked for its activation, concentrating instead on the airless landscape.

“I wish‘?’... I wish there, had been another way,“ the T’rae said softly.

Janh turned slowly, his eyestalks quivering, multiple lens flashing brightly in the sunglow now pouring in through the pore, as if the T’rae bore two sparks of green fire atop his narrow domed head.

“Our hive was destroyed! How can you feel any sympathy, any compassion for thieves and murderers?” Janh pointed at Jehan’s thorax, emphasizing a dark, crusty stain that clung there. “His blood still spots your shield, our own nest brother, and he died killing the invaders of our sanctuary, the de-spoilers of our life system, Ghoulae who kill in fun and live off the blood of their victims.”

The younger T’rae pushed the accusing finger away and turned his sight back to the canyon. For a time the only sound was the throbbing thunder of the Whae’s blood through the ribbed walls of the hollow, and the harsh grind of stone beneath the pedipods.

“How does this bring Jkio back?” Jehan asked at last.

“It doesn’t, but Jkio may rest easier knowing his murderers have been punished.”

“And those in the Eyno who had no part in the deed?”

Janh laughed coldly. “If they live in the Eyno, they take part in the decisions of the Eyno. Such it has always been, and such it always shall be. Do not fear killing so, brother; only through death shall we increase our own water, our own air, for Waena has not enough for all ‘who suck her stone. Life is for the fit, and by this killing we prove our fitness.”

So it is done, Jehan thought. With no way left to reverse the decisions born in rage. The T’rae knew a sickness in his gut, for suddenly he knew himself to be a coward.

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The Whae struggled up a steep rise and escaped from the notch of the canyon. Before it lay a slash of shadow and an endless expanse of darkly bright desert. The Whae slowed uncertainly as it crept from the darkness and shelter of the canyon, because his kind did not enjoy light. Their past was of darkness that still lived in their primitive brains no matter how the T’rae had shaped their bodies.

Within the living womb of the hollow the Talker began to emit a soft popping sound, and Jehan found his thoughts on Jen, his chambermate. At least with the female there were no torn remains to shudder over, as there had been with Jkio. The raid had not only taken food, water, and air, but females as well. Jen’s fate had been clean, leaving nothing behind but a bittersweet memory.

Hard snaps of sound burst from the membranes of the Talker. Mixed in with the noise was a mutter of

T'rae voices.

“Adjust it!” Jehan snapped at Janh.

“The creature is old,” Janh complained. “We should kill it so we can petition for a replacement.”

“Can you think of nothing but death?”

A voice grew out of the noisy confusion, and Janh fought to stabilize it, massaging the Talker's flabby body with his fingers. At last the voice came through strongly.

“Core tap incomplete. Regrow tap nodules and insert growth hormones...”

Jehan squirmed on the smooth pad of flesh that made a perch beside the ganglia, and the Whae ground on in its mindless flight, approaching a wide, shallow rill that snaked across the plain and disappeared into the distance. On the horizon a low range of hills had appeared with a single blunt mountain rearing from its center. Just above the brownish peak the Third World hung like a drop of cool water, seemingly poised to fall, but nothing more than a tantalizing lie in reality.

The Talker made a noise: an unpleasant sound, sharp and deadly. The voice rose, then faded into moaning incoherence, while in the background a shrill screaming began, and the Whae rumbled on, with silence draping its hollow like a mourning cloak.

Janh prodded the Talker into inactivity, its task finished for the moment. Now they had the choice of returning to the dead ruin of their Eyno beyond the mountains, or making for a still-living colony. Perhaps its members would accept them as long as they brought a Whae with them; Whae were useful.

“There had to *be* another way!” Jehan punched savagely at the un-protesting ganglia and the Whae accelerated with a useless surge.

Janh said nothing.

As the tank animal nosed over the steep rim of the rill it flopped forward at an angle, and Janh was forced to grab for support. Amid the confusion the rill lip suddenly exploded into incandescence. Dust rocketed skyward, and moments later the entire rill seemed to flash white.

“Night stones!” Jehan shouted at Janh.

Panic seized both T'rae, and Janh ripped their Breii from pouches hanging from the flesh walls of the hollow. He tossed one to Jehan. “Quickly,” he shouted. “If we are struck...”

The statement did not have to be finished.

Jehan allowed the Whae to continue under its own control while he stood, and put his slim feet one by one into the wide, anterior invagination just below the limp head sack of the Breii. The organism's flesh was warm, slightly damp, a cloying, sweetish darkness that Jehan pulled up about him, fighting to seat the flopping head with its crystal-faced pores, and slide his Climbs into each of the Breii's hollow appendages. Precious moments passed before Jehan pulled the two flanges of the slit together and squeezed their closute node. The Breii sealed itself and pressed close, enclosing the T'rae in a formfitting sack of protecting, living flesh. The air it exuded smelled musty, but it was air, and Jehan sucked it in through his abdominal pores hungrily.

Night stones were striking everywhere outside by now, and Jehan tried to speed the Whae, but found his fingers clumsy through the thick epiderm of the Breii that surrounded them like a glove.

“Hurry,” he screamed at Janh, who was still struggling with his Breii.

Suddenly the Whae shuddered, and the hollow shook with the great animal’s agony. Three times it cried as white fire jumped down through the roof in glowing lances. Bone splintered, and flesh steamed as fluids boiled away in the sudden, explosive decompression. Jehan felt his Breii tighten and swell about him, but Janh was not as lucky. A fourth filament of fire burst down and struck the T’rae. Red mist sprayed from the gaping slit of the sack animal, and like a discarded puppet of flesh, Janh fell slowly backward onto the steaming floor and lay still. The Breii writhed with its death throes, but there was not enough left of Janh to even twitch.

Jehan turned away, his eyestalks fighting to turn inward. He overrode the emotion and kept his attention on the Whae, squeezing certain nodes so that the animal ground forward to top the far rim of the rill and began a sluggish advance across the barren plain, but its track wavered, and Jehan knew the animal was dying, for it had been wounded grievously and its brain was exposed to vacuum. It slowed.

Now Jehan used his greatest skill, his most persuasive delicacy to urge the last shred of life from the beast. Two e’ls distant -a range of low hills backed up to a mountain plateau. The hills were old: lava flows had dripped across their gently shelving sides, and rock-quakes had cracked them. Bisecting one hill was a narrow cleft. It offered limited safety and Jehan steered the Whae for it.

The Whae was strong, it had to be to take a living from the cold breast of Waena, but even its great strength had limits and at last the belts of pedipods slowed and stopped. The walls of bone and tissue quivered, and were still. Perhaps the Whae made some death cry, but Jehan could not know because the hollow Talker had been killed by the loss of air.

The night stones still fell, though raggedly now. So far a certain luck had held, but as Jehan wriggled up through the exit sphincter another stone struck the hillock of flesh that was the Whae. It quivered reflexively and Jehan was thrown into the hard pavement of lava. He rolled away- from the corpse as other night stones crashed down about him. Dusty geysers walked slowly across the plain.

Jehan got to his feet and ran for the cleft, his fear close behind, shouting and screaming in his brain, and urging him on.

The T’rae dashed into the ebon shadow of the cleft just as a night stone exploded above him. Dirt and gravel showered down, coating his Breii with a gritty film of magnetized dust. Jehan pawed angrily at the crystal pores, in the headpiece, but all he did was smear the coating around. Nearly blinded, he stumbled deeper into the darkness of the cleft.

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The crevice was ancient, but it had retained its steep walls. The floor was littered with accumulations of shattered stone and soft dust and walking was difficult. Jehan careened from one wall to the other in confused helplessness. A faint scattering of sunlight filtered down from the upper crags, but at the bottom of the cleft the light was pale and misleading.

Jehan walked. Why he walked he could not explain, for there were no Eyno in the mountain. Only the Old Ones had chosen the crags and depths of the nameless hills for hive sites, and there were no more Old Ones. Waena hac, killed them all. But still, Jehan walked.

Time passed as if in a dream, but finally the T’rae was forced by exhaustion to stop and rest. The Breii was heavy against his shields, and though it kept him alive through its metabolism; it was a burden, and visibility through its pores was marginal.

As Jehan sat quietly on a flat stone a shadow moved just beyond the turning of the cleft. Something small scurried out of the gloom, and the T'rae was astounded to see that it was an Oppet. The small scavenger of flesh had no possible reason for existing out here on the airless surface; an Oppet was a creature of the dark interior of an Eyno, a hunter of the dome's skin flanges where there was air, water, and dead meat.

The little oddity showed no caution in its approach, and because it was only a witless thing, Jehan crushed it with a stone and went to examine it more closely.

It was obvious from the first glance that the scavenger had been subjected to tissue sculpting, and reconstructed. Its mandibles were alloy-hard, and looked as though they could crush stone. The puzzle was, who would put such labor and time into a useless scavenger?

Jehan threw the crushed Oppet away and walked further into the depths of the cleft while strange thoughts wandered through his "rain. The crevice narrowed somewhat as it Wound Hack into the fractured hill, and about the distracted T'rae shadows darker than the shade shifted as movements stirred just beyond vision.

Suddenly Jehan froze. At his feet, partially obscured under a drift of dust, a slab of shaped stone had been incised with the sacred hieroglyphics of T'rophet. Was this cleft one of the lost dwelling places of the Old Ones? The thought ,was strangely exciting to the young T'rae, and he ran forward, eager and fearful at the same time.

The priests of T'rophet were remembered in legend to have had great powers and art. Some had actually known both Terza and Waena, and had walked the surfaces of each. But to actually discover one of the *ancient* places... Jehan stumbled around a shoulder of stone and stopped, amazed. Ahead of him the cleft widened into a high walled valley. A shaft of sunlight bore down from the heights and illuminated a wall of dark stone into which a massive portal had been carved. Its lintel bore the hieroglyphics of the Old Ones and a huge metal valve sealed the portal, the sunburst of Gpom on its *center* and gleaming brightly in the sun.

Jehan walked slowly into the valley. So great was his wonder that he did not notice the many footprints that scored the dust.

The portal towered high, seven times the height of a T'rae, and the door was untarnished. Jehan approached, this, and reverently reached up to trace the rays of the sunburst with the mittpaws of the Breii. A sense of antiquity came to Jehan, for here was the work of the first immigrants to Waena. Here had lived T'rae who had actually seen and set foot upon the home world. The immediacy of his death was forgotten as Jehan looked upon the ruins.

Opposite the portal the cliff had been extensively carved so that anyone leaving the portal could not help but see the frieze. The carving was surrounded by an abstract design. Within the frame of the design a number of squares showed T'rae tissue sculptors laboring, each shaping one further component of the great ship, the vessel that had brought the T'rae from Terza. Below this, a great inlaid mosaic showed both hemispheres of Terza itself. Beautiful Terza, so lovely in life, and so dead now. Terza, the world of tombs and poisoned air. If only the great leap outward had not failed. But it was failing. Waena was too harsh, too niggardly with, the necessities of organic life for the continued survival of the voyagers, and the Third World was too large, too lush for the T'rae.

Jehan felt his eyestalks clench, and forced them outward in anger. The T'rae would die, all things must die, but their greatest achievement would live on, for it was told here on imperishable stone for all who wished to see.

The T'rae turned to face the valve once again, pushed at it and was surprised to see it swing slowly

backward into the rock, exposing a tremendous, darkened passage leading back into the heart of the hill. Sunlight reflected off the polished floor and illumined the sculptured walls, which loomed in silence, guarded only by the memory of the Old Ones, and years of desertion.

It was not without a twinge of fright that Jehan entered, but the urge to explore was strong, and he doubted the ghosts of the Old Ones would prevent his innocent curiosity, for had they not been afflicted by the same disease?

The light faded as Jehan walked slowly away from the open valve, but no wispy presences glided out from the shadows to block his entry. Indeed, except for the lightlessness, his venture seemed unopposed.

Behind the facade of the portal a hall began, huge and domed, with walls intricately carved with scenes of the home world, bits of the past and Jehan felt a constriction of his, abdomen as he studied the leaping mountains and sprawling canyon that he had never seen, but knew to be beautiful in a part of his mind that was never conscious. The stone ceiling was lost in shadows but still the T'rae could make out supporting arches carved in the likeness of Albus, the tree; the tree that bloomed no more.

The hall extended straight back into the core of the hill, into heart stone, and the T'rae realized that he could not go further without a light, but fortunately the hall was not the only cavity. Several side passages split off from it, the ones nearest the cleft valley possessing tall, narrow windows faced with crystal. These, with the now open valve, allowed some light to enter the deserted temple. Once the hall and portal had been sealed, as the massive lock on the back of the valve testified. Entry through the portal was made only in ceremony, after the winds of life had been guided into holding, and preserved for later release. Elsewhere in the temple there were probably double-valved chambers of smaller size for everyday traffic.

Jehan wandered into the network of lighted passages. Vacuum had preserved the fixtures of the temple flawlessly. There were metal decorative ornaments fastened to the stone walls that could have only been fashioned on the home world, their predominant theme being the sunburst Gpom, the father of all life.

At intervals the passages divided and a narrow crossway would lead back into the darkness of the hill's interior. There, as in the hall, darkness ruled and Jehan could not go; but the passages were enough for 'ne T'rae. There he found couches and stands of precious metal, and crystal tables set-with empty dishes of metal and carved stone.

But, of course, no food; not in a place inhabited by the dead and their memories, for neither needed sustenance, and at last Jehan lay down on one of the many pieces of furniture and prepared to rest. The day had been filled with death. Perhaps when he woke the horror would be stilled, but for now it churned in his brain like a grisly parasite.

While he slept he dreamed that the Old Ones had returned, that they whispered about the foot of his couch and wondered at the T'rae and at what they had become. Almost they despaired, and Jehan tossed uncomfortably in his dream to think that the Old Ones might be displeased.

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Then Jehan woke... and discovered that his dream had not been a complete fantasy. He was no longer in the passage, sunglow from the cleft windows no longer shone on him... and he no longer wore the Breii!

Jehan sprang from the metal bench, then froze as he saw the tall, hooded shape studying him from the deep shadows of the stone cell. The air was foul in the chamber; it seemed unused and forgotten.

“I know you, Old One,” Jehan whispered.

“I know you, Jehan of Mour.” the cowléd figure said in a dry sibilance.

“You do?” Jehan trembled with confusion. The polite greeting was not meant to carry truth.

The Old One motioned with a robed arm and Jehan caught sight of a dry, withered member like the branch of a dead tree, nothing like the smooth exoskeleton of a living T’rae. Was this creature dead? A memory that had not faded with time?

“You will attend me, Jehan of Mour.” The voice that issued from the cowl of the robe was quiet, but left no room for refusal. Jehan followed mutely as the Old One passed through a low portal of polished stone and entered a red-lit hall that sloped sharply downward into the very basement of the ancient hills. There was no opportunity to inquire of their destination, and the hall itself was barren of carving and ideograms.

“There is no reason to fear, Jehan of Mour,” said the old voice, as if reading the T’rae’s mind. The Old One turned his cowl and Jehan saw two sparks of green peering at him from the shadowed cave of dark cloth.

“I fear not, Ancient Master,” Jehan said respectfully. “Your wisdom is said to be gentle.”

“Indeed?” The robed figure halted by a small doorway though the passage extended further on into the rock. He pushed a stone door inward, and a cold draft moaned out. Jehan shivered. “Long have we suspected that our ‘wisdom’ has been as forgotten as ourselves and our teachings.”

“Only by some, Old One. Only by the foolish,” Jehan protested.

“And yet, today, many play the fool.” The cowléd head seemed to nod. “Even you, Jehan. You have slain more T’rae in one day than your loins will ever return to this poor shard of stone.”

The young T’rae hung his head and found he could make no reply other than to follow the Old One into the chill chamber; it was as if another will moved his spindly limbs. Then the Old One summoned a light.

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Jehan saw that they were in a sizable grotto of natural stone. Overhead, long tubes of bioluminescence glimmered, driving back the shadows, and on the polished floor crystal vats bubbled as their fluid contents were aerated. Behind the ranks of vats the metal casings of vast machines loomed.

“How will you repay your debt to your kind, Jehan of Mour?” The Old One studied the unhappy T’rae from the sanctity of his cowl. “Would you surrender your life that others might continue?”

Jehan felt fear mount his spine with fingers of ice, while beneath the hardness of his shields, his flesh crawled. But the fear was not in his mind.

“I am not a killer, Ancient One. I took nothing but revenge for my hive brother, and my hive which was destroyed.”

“Did your act bring life again to your Eyno, Jehan of Mour?” The Old One had not moved; and though his body and features were unreadable, his voice was sad.

“I did not enjoy it, Old One. But duty required it. The T’rae must have their pride.” It was truth, but suddenly it seemed a shabby truth, even to Jehan.

“That we know, for you were not a violent being, ever. But all acts bear their responsibilities, and some

demand restitution. By the old laws your life would have been forfeit, and here in these stone lands we still live by those laws.”

Jehan’s spirits fell. He did not desire death, but he knew the old laws had not been created lightly.

“Do you know what this place is, Jehan o Mour?” the Old One asked suddenly.

“I have never seen its like,” Jehan admitted. “And please, do not address me as Jehan of Mour. Mour is dead. It died on the gray lands with my people.” “Then you have no one?” “I am without a *hive*, and this day my last brother was slain by a night stone.” In the nearest crystal vat Jehan noticed a floating body that looked very much like an Oppet’. “You know this, of course.”

“Of course. We know much, even now,” the Old One replied lightly. A dry laugh came from beneath the cowl. “For the dead we are quite active.”

These words did not cheer Jehan. Was this creature a walking corpse? He was beginning to believe it.

The robed figure moved to the nearest vat and bent to study, the shadowy shape floating within. “Come, Jehan. Look on this.”

The young T’rae did look, although the aroma rising from the bubbling liquid was hardly pleasant. Under the churning surface an unmoving animal form bobbed, anchored by tubes of flexible plasmeld. Within the tubes amber solutions moved slowly, some entering the body, some leaving. Jehan was not sure of the identity of the animal, but its form was like a pupa of the T’rae, though much too large, and greatly changed.

“Do you know what this is?” the Old One asked. “No. I think I fear it.” “You fear life?” The old One’s voice was sharp.

“Only bent life,” Jehan answered after a moment.

“Ah,” the robed figure sighed, and moved from the vat, seemingly satisfied, to the wall where he took a cup from a metal shelf and filled it from a crystal jug. The liquid poured out purple, and had an unwholesome, poisonous appearance to it. The Old One turned again to face the young T’rae.

“Do you accept my judgment, Jehan?” The old voice rang eerily through the emptiness of the chamber, and Jehan trembled. But his voice remained strong, without a shiver of fear to mar it.

“I am a T’rae,” he said proudly. “I respect and live by the ancient laws.”

The cowed head nodded. “Then you must die by them, too, Jehan of dead Mour, for your life is forfeit.”

The Old One held out the cup. As one in a trance, Jehan stepped forward and took it. He hesitated only a moment, remembering his life in the hive and the faces of his dead friends, most particularly Jen. Then he drank deep and long, and did not hear the cup fall from his limp fingers to ring loudly on the stone of the floor.

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Light formed a drifting blob before blurred eyes. It was bright, almost painfully bright, but slowly the image sharpened, became so clear that its identity was certain. It was the sun. It shone with cold clarity over the rim of a cliff, the brown stone glowing harshly in contrast with the soft, ebon blackness of the sky.

“Jehan?” The voice was familiar, but it spoke only in the mind.

“Jen?” The words were but thought, the mouth would not, could not utter them... and Jen was gone. Death! Jehan was dead! The Old One had given him death. “I’m here.” Jehan felt a touch on his body and reached out. His hand found roughness, and he looked down from the heights for the first time. A female T’rae sat next to him on the dust of the cleft floor. Yet, it was not a T’rae. The shields were rough, not smooth, though the color was correctly scarlet, and the head seemed more massive, as well as the mandibles. They looked capable of crushing stone, and the abdomen had swollen from a tube to a massive oval. No longer was it a flexible bellows of tissue with the pore dots of breathing “spiracles punctuating the soft flesh.

“The Old One promised to be ” along soon. He greets each new member faithfully, but you woke early, a sign of strength.“

The mind voice was unmistakable. “You are Jen, but Jen is...” Jehan stopped in puzzlement.

“The slavers left me in the cleft as a sacrifice. It is their custom... or was, before you and Janh destroyed them. The Ancient Ones took me in and offered me life.”

“But you’re so changed.”

Jen laughed. “And you are not?”

Jehan looked down at himself and would have sucked in his breath, but he found that he had no breath, nor could he speak with his mandibles in the creaking chatter of the T’rae. Instead, his mind seemed to transmit like a Talke one to another.

“I am truly dead,” Jehan wailed unhappily, “and have gone to a place of punishment.”

A dry laugh-interrupted the young T’rae.

“You live, Jehan of Gpom, and have met your hivemate already, I see.” It was the Old One, still dressed in his shrouding robe, but as Jehan watched, the ancient T’rae loosened a belt, and allowed the robe and cowl to fall free of his body so that he stood revealed as another of the changelings, though his shields were a deep orange in color, evidence of great age.

“But” you talked to me before,“ Jehan protested.

The Old One set his cheekplates in a smile and touched a small box that he wore on a belt fastened about his upper thorax.

“Have you not noticed where you are, Jehan?”

Then it dawned upon the T’rae like the bursting of a star. He was exposed upon the surface of Waena... and he lived.

The Old One took a bit of whitish stone from a pocket of the discarded robe.

“Should you begin to feel faint you must take some of this. You cannot breathe as you are accustomed to, and must ‘eat’ your air. *It* is a conscious act, plus you have to carry a supply of ‘air stone’ with you, so until you are used to keeping this discipline in the fore of your mind one of us will always stay by you. I suspect you would Prefer the company of Jen, though, over my own aged self.” “What of water and food?” The Old One removed more rocks from his robe.

“These can be broken down into the basic needs of T’rae metabolism. This dark stone contains water locked within its chemical structure, learn it well. These lighter stones supply food value; your abdomen now contains a small biological factory which enables you to take raw minerals, somewhat like plants, and transform them directly into the proteins and carbohydrates that your living requires. The roughness of your exterior absorbs sunlight and uses this energy in your metabolic processes. Now you must spend much time outside storing up energy to tide you over the long night of Waena.” The Old One laughed. “I see you look baffled, but you will learn. Jen will help you. If our children can learn this new way of life, you certainly can.”

“There are children here?” “Of course there are children.” Jen made her thought carry a chastisement for ignorance and lack of imagination. “We are still T’rae, and I am a female, just as you are a male.”

Jehan considered that carefully and was delighted by its implications. The Old One nodded thoughtfully, seeing that his new student was catching on swiftly.

“But I was to die?” Jehan questioned suddenly.

“You are disappointed at discovering otherwise?” “Of course not, but...” The Old One laughed.

“Sometimes we must die before we can live. Come, Jehan. Once again, I would show you something.” The Old One drew on his robe and strode off toward the portal of the temple. The great metal valve stood open, gleaming brightly in the sun, as small groups of T’rae passed in and out.

Jehan looked at Jen.

“Go on, I will prepare our chamber,” she told him.

Jehan climbed awkwardly to his feet and tried to walk. His exoskeleton seemed heavier than his muscles remembered, and he felt sluggish. His joints creaked like old wood.

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Jehan caught up to the Old One as he entered the portal. They turned to the right and continued up a lighted passage.

“How was this done to me?” Jehan asked finally.

“You were placed in a growth vat and reshaped in the same manner the tissue sculptors of Terza created the Whae and Eyno from more primitive creatures, an ancient technique and one never before used on the T’rae in the past; philosophical reasons forbade it, but fortunately philosophies change.”

“But *am* I a T’rae?” Jehan pressed. “This is certainly not the body of a T’rae!”

The Old One motioned Jehan into a crossway and they began to mount a flight of broad steps. “A T’rae is a mind,” the Old One replied, as if he felt the distinction obvious and above mentioning.

They climbed in silence for a time.

“The Eyno are filled with fools,” the Old One told Jehan suddenly. “They have fought the harshness of Waena so long that the violence has been carried over to our own people, and become a force of destruction that Waena could never have achieved. In another twenty revs there will be no more Eyno on the gray plains, and for the Terza T’rae, Waena will again be dead.”

“Then we are the Waena T’rae!”

“You grasp truth quickly, Jehan of Gpom.”

The stairway, narrowed and began to wind, spiral-fashion, steeply, upward, as if they were in a natural chimney in the stone which the ancients had shaped to their own advantage. Though the walls were but bare rock, and undecorated with light globes, a pale, milky glow seeped down to them from the upper levels, and as they climbed the light grew brighter.

Abruptly the stair debouched into a short corridor ending in a small room whose front wall held a single large pore, which looked out across the rugged top of a flat plateau.

The Old One took a peculiar instrument from a stone ledge and handed it to Jehan. The T'rae took it carefully, for plainly it was thing of great antiquity, something of the home world and the days of the first immigrants.

“Look out across the plateau, you have but to hold the lenses before your eyestalks.”

Jehan did as directed, childishly pleased at the manner in which distant features leaped wildly into nearness. He first scanned the horizon, then let his gaze wander the plateau.

“Old One!” The mental exclamation was involuntary. At first Jehan thought he was seeing the great ship, the very one that had carried the T'rae from Terza, but at once rejected this, for the objects resting on the plateau were machined from metal, and far too small. The largest of the objects was a square platform with four long legs, and a tattered, incomplete appearance. A short ledge and ladder extended down from the flat top, and on the ground beneath the ladder was a heap of litter. A little beyond this a heraldic device mounted on a thin spike had been thrust into the ground, its bright colors contrasting strangely with the drab desert of stone.

A third of an e'l away, on the crest of a low hill, a four-wheeled car sat unattended; it had a number of angular projections pointing at the sky, and a boxy tube aimed down at the legged platform.

“Surely our people made nothing as unnatural as that?” Jehan asked at last.

The Old One laughed.

“No, that is not their work. But it is the reason we changed our philosophy about the physical manipulation of the T'rae. These objects appeared in the Rev of Ephe, the legged platform descending on a needle of flame, carrying within its body people of the Third World. They spent part of a day rushing about gathering stones, setting up devices, and driving wildly over the plateau on a car they had brought with them, but we had barely begun to watch them before they crawled back into the upper portion of their ship, tossed out what seemed to be their skins, and departed in a flash of fire.”

The Old One lifted an arm and pointed at the black sky, and the lush blue globe hanging tranquilly above the plain.

“Obviously this station was but a feeble first step, but like all first steps it leads to others.”

“And so began the changing of the T'rae,” Jehan said.

“Yes, we deemed it necessary. The Third World is so bountiful in its resources that its peoples must never have known the strife of need. Thus, it was felt we could not meet them with the blood of our own people on our hands.”

“What did they look like?”

The Old One shuddered slightly.

“Huge, at least three times our height, with great round heads, and wide clumsy bodies, though how much of this was protection against the savage charms of Waena we could not determine. And they were constantly hopping, jumping, running. They never seemed to hold still in their frenzied activities. Some thought them mad.”

“But if the men of the Third World come to Waena to live, will they not have to change as we have done?” Jehan put the lenses to his eyestalks again and studied the relics.

The Old One did not answer at once. Instead he reached into his robe and withdrew two lumps of stone. He handed one to Jehan, and while they crushed the soft stone in their mandibles, they looked out at the odd metal devices of the men.

“I don’t believe so,” the Old One said finally. “Change was forced upon us because we tended to war among ourselves, but the men of the Third World must certainly lack this fault, being steeped in such plenty as their world provides. No, I think instead that it will be the T’rae who will change even further as the men come to teach us their ways, a meeting that may prove to be the climax of all the T’rae.”

Jehan considered that. The Old One possessed the wisdom of countless ages of T’rae, and held the remarkable power of T’rae science. He erred only rarely... why, then, did Jehan feel once again the cold fingers of fear playing the tunes of terror on his spine?