

RIDING THE TORCH

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I

Flashing rainbows from his skintight mirror suit, flourishing a swirl of black cape, Jofe D'mahl burst through the shimmer screen that formed the shipside wall of his grand salon to the opening bars of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*. The shimmer rippled through the spectrum as his flesh passed through it, visually announcing his presence with quicksilver strobes of dopplering light. Heads turned, bodies froze, and the party stopped for a good long beat as he greeted his guests with an ironic half-bow. The party resumed its rhythm as he walked across the misty floor toward a floating tray of flashers. He had made his entrance.

D'mahl selected a purple sphere, popped the flasher into his mouth, and bit through an exquisite brittle sponginess into an overwhelming surge of velvet, a gustatory orgasm. A first collection by one Lina Wolder, Jiz had said, and as usual she had picked a winner. He tapped the name into his memory banks, keying it to the sensorium track of the last ten seconds, and filed it in his current party listing. Yes indeed, a rising star to remember.

Tapping the floater to follow him, he strode through the knee-high multicolored fog, nodding, turning, bestowing glances of his deep green eyes, savoring the ambience he had brought into being.

D'mahl had wheedled Hiro Korakin himself into designing the grand salon as his interpretation of D'mahl's own personality. Korakin had hung an immense semicircular slab of simmered emerald out from the hull of the ship itself and had blistered this huge balcony in transparent plex, giving D'mahl's guests a breathtaking and uncompromising view of humanity's universe. As *Excelsior* was near the center of the Trek, the great concourse of ships tiaraed the salon's horizon line, a triumphant jeweled city of coruscating light. Ten kilometers bow-ward, the hydrogen interface was an auroral skin stretched across the unseemly nakedness of interstellar space.

But to look over the edge of the balcony, down the sleek and brilliantly lit precipice of *Excelsior's* cylindrical hull, was to be confronted by a vista that sucked slobbering at the soul: the bottomless interstellar abyss, an

infinite black pit in which the myriad stars were but iridescent motes of unimportant dust, a nothingness that went on forever in space and time. At some indefinable point down there in the blackness, the invisible output of *Excelsior's* torch merged with those of two thousand and thirty-nine other ships to form an ethereal comet's tail of all-but-invisible purplish fire that dwindled off into a frail thread which seemed to go on forever down into the abyss: the wake of the *Trek*, reeling backward in space and time for hundreds of light-years and nearly ten centuries, a visible track that the eye might seemingly follow backward through the ages to the lost garden, Earth.

Jofe D'mahl knew full well that many of his guests found this prime reality visualization of their basic existential position unsettling, frightening, perhaps even in bad taste. But that was *their* problem; D'mahl himself found the view bracing, which, of course, justifiably elevated his own already high opinion of himself. Korakin wasn't considered the best psychetect on the *Trek* for nothing.

But D'mahl himself had decorated the salon, with the inevitable assistance of Jiz Rumoku. On the translucent emerald floor he had planted a tinkling forest of ruby, sapphire, diamond, and amethyst trees—cunningly detailed sims of the ancient life-forms that waved flashing crystal leaves with every subtle current of air. He had topped off the effect with the scented fog that picked up blue, red, and lavender tints from the internally incandescent trees, and customarily kept the gravity at .8 gs to sync with the faerie mood. To soften the crystal edges, Jiz had gotten him a collection of forty fuzzballs: downy globs in subdued green, brown, mustard, and gray that floated about randomly at floor level until someone sat in them. If Korakin had captured D'mahl's clear-eyed core, Jofe had expressed the neobaroque style of his recent sensos, and to D'mahl, the combined work of art sang of the paradox that was the *Trek*. To his guests, it sang of the paradox that was Jofe D'mahl. Egowise, D'mahl himself did not deign to make this distinction.

The guest list was also a work of art in D'mahl's neobaroque style: a constellation of people designed to rub purringly here, jangle like broken glass there, generate cross-fertilization someplace else, keep the old karmic kettle boiling. Jans Ryn was displaying herself as usual to a mixed bag that included *Excelsior's* chief torchtender, two dirtiggers from *Kantuck*, and Tanya Daivis, the velvet asp. A heated discussion between Dalta Reed and Trombleau, the astrophysicist from *Glade*, was drawing another conspicuous crowd. Less conspicuous guests were floating about doing less conspicuous things. The party needed a catalyst to really start

torching up lights.

And at 24.00 that catalyst would zap itself right into their sweet little taps—the premiere tapping of Jofe D'mahl's new senso, *Wandering Dutchmen*. D'mahl had carved something prime out of the void, and he knew it.

"—by backbreeding beyond the point of original radiation, and then up the line to the elm—"

"—like a thousand suns, as they said at Alamagordo, Jans, and it's only a bulkhead and a fluxfield away—"

"—how Promethean you must feel—"

"Jof, this nova claims he's isolated a spectral pattern synced to organic life," Dalta called out, momentarily drawing D'mahl into her orbit.

"In a starscan tape?" D'mahl asked dubiously.

"In theory," Trombleau admitted.

"Where've I heard that one before?" D'mahl said, popping another of the Wolder flashers. It wriggled through his teeth, then exploded in a burst of bittersweet that almost immediately faded into a lingering smoky aftertaste. Not bad, D'mahl thought, dancing away from Trombleau's open mouth before he could get sucked into the argument.

D'mahl flitted through the mists, goosed Ami Simkov, slapped Darius Warner on the behind, came upon a group of guests surrounding John Benina, who had viewpointed the Dutchman. They were trying to pump him about the senso, but John knew that if he blatted before the premiere, his chances of working with Jofe D'mahl again were exactly zip.

"Come on, Jofe, tell us something about *Wandering Dutchmen*," begged a woman wearing a cloud of bright-yellow mist. D'mahl couldn't remember her with his flesh, but didn't bother tapping for it. Instead, he bit into a cubical flasher that atomized at the touch of his teeth, whitening out every synapse in his mouth for a mad micropulse. Feh.

"Two hints," D'mahl said. "John Benina played one of the two major viewpoints, and it's a mythmash."

A great collective groan went up, under cover of which D'mahl ricocheted away in the direction of Jiz Rumoku, who was standing in a green mist with someone he couldn't make out.

Jiz Rumoku was the only person privileged to bring her own guests to D'mahl's parties, and just about the only person not involved in the production who had any idea of what *Wandering Dutchmen* was about. If

Jofe D'mahl could be said to have a souler (a dubious assumption), she was it.

She was dressed, as usual, in tomorrow's latest fashion: a pants suit of iridescent, rigid-seeming green-and-purple material, a mosaic of planar geometric forms that approximated the curves of her body like a medieval suit of armor. But the facets of her suit articulated subtly with her tiniest motion—a fantastic insectile effect set off by a tall plumelike crest into which her long black hair had been static-molded.

But D'mahl's attention was drawn to her companion, for he was obviously a voidsucker. He wore nothing but blue briefs and thin brown slippers; there was not a speck of hair on his body, and his bald head was tinted silver. But persona aside, his eyes alone would have instantly marked him: windows of blue plex into an infinite universe of utter blackness confined by some topological legerdemain inside his gleaming skull.

D'mahl tapped the voidsucker's visual image to the banks. "I.D.," he subvoked. The name "Haris Bandoora" appeared in his mind. "Data brief," D'mahl subvoked.

"Haris Bandoora, fifty standard years, currently commanding scout-ship Bela-37, returned to Trek 4.987 last Tuesday. Report unavailable at this realtime."

Jiz had certainly come up with something tasty this time, a void-sucker so fresh from the great zilch that the Council of Pilots hadn't yet released his report.

"Welcome back to civilization, such as it is, Commander Bandoora," D'mahl said.

Bandoora turned the vacuum of his eyes on D'mahl. "Such as it is," he said, in a cold clear voice that seemed to sum up, judge, and dismiss all of human history in four dead syllables.

D'mahl looked away from those black pits, looked into Jiz's almond eyes, and they cross-tapped each other's sensoriums for a moment in private greeting. Jofe saw his own mirrored body, felt the warmth it evoked in her. He kissed his lips with Jiz's, tasting the electric smokiness of the flashers he had eaten. As their lips parted, they broke their taps simultaneously.

"What's in that report of yours that the Pilots haven't released to the banks yet, Bandoora?" D'mahl asked conversationally. (How else could you make small talk with a voidsucker?)

Bandoora's thin lips parted in what might have been a smile, or just as easily a grimace of pain. D'mahl sensed that the man's emotional parameters were truly alien to his experience, prime or simmed. He had never paid attention to the voidsuckers before, and he wondered why. There was one beyond senso to be made on the subject!

"They've found a planet," Jiz said. "There's going to be a blanket bulletin at 23.80."

"Drool," D'mahl said, nuancing the word with most of the feelings that this flash stirred up. The voidsuckers were always reporting back with some hot new solar system, turning the Trek for a few months while they high-geed for a telltale peek, then turning the Trek again for the next Ultima Thule just as the flash hit that the last one was the usual slokyard of rock and puke-gas. The voidsuckers had been leading the Trek in a zigzag stagger through space from one vain hope to another for the better part of a millennium; the latest zig was therefore hardly a cosmic flash in Jofe D'mahl's estimation. But it *would* be a three-month wonder at least, and tapping out a blanket bulletin just before the premiere was a prime piece of upstaging, a real boot in the ego. Drool.

"The probabilities look good on this one," Bandoora said.

"They always do, don't they?" D'mahl said snidely. "And it always turns out the same. If there's a rock in the habitable zone, it's got gravity that'd pull your head off, or the atmosphere is a tasty mixture of hydrogen cyanide and fluorine. Bandoora, don't you ever get the feeling that some nonexistent cosmic personage is trying to tell you something you don't want to hear?"

Bandoora's inner expression seemed, to crinkle behind his impassive flesh. A tic made his lower lip tremble. What did I do *this* time? D'mahl wondered. These voidsuckers must be far beyond along some pretty strange vectors.

Jiz forced a laugh. "The torch Jof is riding is all ego," she said. "He's just singed because the bulletin is going to bleed some H from his premiere. Isn't that right, Jof, you egomonster, you?"

"Don't knock ego," D'mahl said. "It's all that stands between us and the lamer universe we have the bad taste to be stuck in. Since my opinion of myself is the only thing I know of higher in the karmic pecking order than my own magnificent being, my ego is the only thing I've found worth worshiping. Know what that makes me?"

"Insufferable?" Jiz suggested.

"A human being," D'mahl said. "I'm stuck with it, so I might as well enjoy it."

"A bulletin from the Council of Pilots." The words intruded themselves into D'mahl's mind with a reasonable degree of gentleness, an improvement over the days when the Pilots had felt they had the right to snap you into full sensory fugue on the spot whenever the spirit moved them. "Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . ." D'mahl pulled over a green fuzzball and anchored the floating cloud of particles by planting his posterior in it. Jiz and Bandoora sat down flanking him. "Six . . . five . . . four . . ."

Whichever guests were standing found themselves seats; there was no telling how long one of these bulletins would last. The Pilots have a grossly exaggerated sense of their own importance, D'mahl thought. And what does that make them?

". . . three . . . two . . . one . . ."

Human beings.

D'mahl sat on a bench at the focus of a small amphitheater. Tiered around him were two thousand and forty people wearing the archaic blue military tunics dating back to the time when Ship's Pilot was a paramilitary rank rather than an elective office. D'mahl found the uniformity of dress stultifying and the overhead holo of the day sky of an Earthlike planet banal and oppressive, but then he found most Pilots, with their naive notion of the Trek's existential position, somewhat simpleminded and more than a little pathetic.

Ryan Nakamura, a white-haired man who had been Chairman of the Council of Pilots longer than anyone cared to remember, walked slowly toward him, clapped him on the shoulder with both hands, and sat down beside him. Nakamura smelled of some noxious perfume designed to simulate wisdom-odors of moldy parchment and decayed sweetness. As an artist, D'mahl found the effect competent if painfully obvious; as a citizen, he found it patronizing and offensive.

Nakamura leaned toward him, and as he did, the amphitheater vanished and they sat cozily alone on an abstract surface entirely surrounded by a firmament of tightly packed stars.

"Jofe, Scoutship Bela-37 has returned to the Trek and reported that a solar system containing a potentially habitable planet is located within a light-year and a half of our present position," Nakamura said solemnly.

D'mahl wanted to yawn in the old bore's face, but of course the

viewpoint player hunched him intently toward Nakamura instead as the Chairman blatted on. "The Council has voted 1,839 to 201 to alter the vector of the Trek toward this system, designated 997-Beta, pending the report of the telltale."

D'mahl sat midway up in the amphitheater as Nakamura continued formally from a podium on the floor below. "It is our earnest hope that our long trek is at last nearing its successful completion, that in our own lifetimes men will once more stand on the verdant hills of a living planet, with a sky overhead and the smells of living things in our nostrils. We conclude this bulletin with brief excerpts from the report of Haris Bandoora, commander of Bela-37."

Behind the podium, Nakamura faded into Haris Bandoora. "Bela-37 was following a course thirty degrees from the forward vector of the Trek," Bandoora said tonelessly. "Torching at point nine . . ."

D'mahl stood on the bridge of Bela-37—a small round chamber rimmed with impressive-looking gadgetry, domed in somewhat bluish plex to compensate for the doppler shift, but otherwise visually open to the terrifying glory of the deep void. However, one of the four voidsuckers on the bridge was a woman who easily upstaged the stellar spectacle as far as D'mahl was concerned. She wore briefs and slippers and was totally bald, like the others, and her skull was tinted silver, but her preternaturally conical breasts and shining, tightly muscled flesh made what ordinarily would have been an ugly effect into an abstract paradigm of feminine beauty. Whether the warmth he felt was his alone, or his reaction plus that of the viewpoint player, apparently Bandoora himself, was entirely beside the point.

"Ready to scan and record system 997-Beta," the stunning creature said. D'mahl walked closer to her, wanting to dive into those bottomless voidsucker eyes. Instead, he found his lips saying, with Bandoora's voice: "Display it, Sidi."

Sidi did something to the control panel before her (how archaic!) and the holo of a yellow star about the diameter of a human head appeared in the geometric center of the bridge. D'mahl exchanged tense glances with his crew, somatically felt his expectation rise.

"The planets . . ." he said.

Five small round particles appeared, rotating in compressed time around the yellow sun.

"The habitable zone . . ."

A transparent green torus appeared around the holo of 997-Beta. The second planet lay within its boundaries.

There was an audible intake of breath, and D'mahl felt his own body tremble. "The second planet," Bandoora's voice ordered. "At max."

The holo of the star vanished, replaced by a pale, fuzzy holo of the second planet, about four times its diameter. The planet seemed to be mottled with areas of brown, green, blue, yellow, and purple, but the holo was washed out and wavered as if seen through miles of heat-haze.

A neuter voice recited instrument readings. "Estimated gravity 1.2, gs plus or minus ten percent . . . estimated mean temperature thirty-three degrees centigrade plus or minus six degrees . . . estimated atmospheric composition: helium, nitrogen, oxygen as major constituents . . . percentages indeterminate from present data . . . traces of carbon dioxide, argon, ammonia, water vapor . . . estimated ratio of liquid area to solid surface 60-40 . . . composition of oceans indeterminate from present data. . . ."

D'mahl felt the tension in his body release itself through his vocal cords in a wordless shout that merged with the whoops of his companions. He heard his lips say, with Bandoora's voice: "That's the best prospect any scoutship's turned up within my lifetime."

D'mahl was seated in the amphitheater as Bandoora addressed the Council. "A probe was immediately dispatched to 997-Beta-II. Bela-37 will leave within twenty days to monitor the probe data wavefront. We estimate that we will be able to bring back conclusive data within half a standard year."

D'mahl was an abstract viewpoint in black space. A huge hazy holo of 997-Beta-II hovered before him like a ghostly forbidden fruit as the words in his mind announced: "This concludes the bulletin from the Council of Pilots."

Everyone in Jofe D'mahl's grand salon immediately began babbling, gesticulating, milling about excitedly. Head after head turned in the direction of D'mahl, Jiz, and Bandoora. D'mahl felt a slow burn rising, knowing to whom the fascinated glances were directed.

"Well, what do you think of *that*, Jof?" Jiz said, with a sly knife edge in her voice.

"Not badly done," D'mahl said coolly. "Hardly art, but effective propaganda, I must admit."

Once again, Bandoora seemed strangely stricken, as if D'mahl's words

had probed some inner wound.

"The planet, Jof, the *planet!*"

Fighting to control a building wave of anger, D'mahl managed an arch smile. "I was paying more attention to Sidi," he said. "Voidsuckers come up with planets that look that good from a distance much more often than you see bodies that look that good that close."

"You think the future of the human race is a rather humorous subject," Bandoora said loudly, betraying annoyance for the first time.

D'mahl tapped the time at 23.981. His guests were all blatting about the prospects of at last finding a viable mudball, and *Wandering Dutchmen* was about to begin! Leaping to his feet, he shouted: "Bandoora, you've been out in the big zilch too long!" The sheer volume of his voice focused the attention of every guest on his person. "If I were confined in a scoutship with Sidi, I'd have something better than slok planets on my mind!"

"You're a degenerate and an egomaniac, D'mahl!" Bandoora blatted piously, drawing the laughter D'mahl had hoped for.

"Guilty on both counts," D'mahl said. "Sure I'm an egomaniac—like everyone else, I'm the only god there is. Of course I'm a degenerate, and so is everyone else—soft protoplasmic machines that begin to degenerate from day one!"

All at once D'mahl had penetrated the serious mood that the bulletin had imposed on his party, and by donning it and taking it one step beyond, had recaptured the core. "We're stuck where we are and with what we are. We're Flying Dutchmen on an endless sea of space, we're Wandering Jews remembering what we killed for all eternity—"

A great groan went up, undertoned with laughter at the crude bridge to the impending premiere, overtuned with sullenness at the reminder of just who and what they were. D'mahl had blown it—or at least failed to entirely recover—and he knew it, and the knowledge was a red nova inside his skull. At this moment of foul karma, 2,4.000 passed into realtime, and on tap frequency E-6—

You are standing at the base of a gentle verdant hill on whose tree-dotted summit a man in a loincloth is being nailed to a cross. Each time the mallet descends, you feel piercing pains in your wrists. You stand in an alleyway in ancient Jerusalem holding a jug of water to your breast

as Jesus is dragged to his doom, and you feel his terrible hopeless thirst parching your throat. You are back at Calvary listening to the beat of the mallet, feeling the lightnings of pain in your wrists, the taste of burning sands in your mouth.

You are on the quarterdeck of an ancient wooden sailing ship tasting the salt wind of an ocean storm. The sky roils and howls under an evil green moon. Your crew scurries about the deck and rigging, shouting and moaning in thin spectral voices, creatures of tattered rags and ghostly transparent flesh. Foam flies into your face, and you wipe it off with the back of your hand, seeing through your own flesh as it passes before your eyes. You feel laughter at the back of your throat, and it bubbles out of you—too loud, too hearty, a maniac's howl. You raise your foglike fist and brandish it at the heavens. Lightning bolts crackle. You shake your fist harder and inhale the storm wind like the breath of a lover.

You look up the slope of Calvary as the final stroke of the mallet is driven home and you feel the wooden handle and the iron spike in your own hands. The cross is erected, and it is you who hangs from it, and the sky is dissolved in a deafening blast of light brighter than a thousand suns. And you are trudging on an endless plain of blowing gray ash under a sky the color of rusting steel. The jagged ruins of broken buildings protrude from the swirling dust, and the world is full of maimed and skeletal people marching from horizon to horizon without hope. But your body has the plodding leaden strength of a thing that knows it cannot die. Pain in your wrists, and ashes in your mouth. The people around you begin to rot on their feet, to melt like Dali watches, and then only you remain, custodian of a planetary corpse. A ghostly sailing ship approaches you, luffing and pitching on the storm-whipped ash.

The quarterdeck pitches under your feet and the skies howl. Then the storm clouds around the moon melt away to reveal a cool utter blackness punctuated by myriad hard points of light, and the quarterdeck becomes a steel bulkhead under your feet and you are standing in an observation bubble of a primitive first-generation torchship. Around your starry horizon are dozens of other converted asteroid freighters, little more than fusion torchtubes with makeshift domes, blisters, and toroid decks cobbled to their surfaces—the distant solar ancestors of the Trek.

You turn to see an ancient horror standing beside you: an old, old man, his face scarred by radiation, his soul scarred by bottomless guilt, and his black eyes burning coldly with eternal ice.

You are standing in an observation bubble of a first-generation torch-ship. Below, the Earth is a brownish, singed, cancerous ball still

stewing in the radiation of the Slow Motion War. Somewhere a bell is tolling, and you can feel the tug of the bellrope in your hands. Turning, you see a lean, sinister man with a face all flat planes and eyes like blue coals. His face fades into fog for a moment, and only those mad eyes remain solid and real.

"Hello, Dutchman," you say.

"Hello, Refugee."

"I'm usually called Wanderer."

"That's no longer much of a distinction," the Dutchman says. "All men are wanderers now."

"We're all refugees too. We've killed the living world that gave us birth. Even you and I may never live to see another." The bite of the nails into your wrists, the weight of the mallet in your hand. Thirst, and the tolling of a far-off bell.

You are the Dutchman, looking out into the universal night; a generation to the nearest star, a century to the nearest hope of a living world, forever to the other side. Thunder rolls inside your head and lightnings flash behind your eyes. "We've got these decks under our feet, the interstellar wind to ride, and fusion torches to ride it with," you say.

"Don't whine to me, I've never had more."

You laugh a wild maniac howl. "And I've got plenty of company, now."

You are the Wanderer, looking down at the slain Earth, listening to the bell toll, feeling the dead weight of the mallet in your hand. "So do I, Dutchman, so do I."

The globe of the Earth transforms itself into another world: a brown-and-purple planetary continent marbled with veins and lakes of watery blue. Clad in a heavy spacesuit, you are standing on the surface of the planet: naked rock on the shore of a clear blue lake, under a violet sky laced with thin gray clouds like jet contrails. A dozen other suited men are fanned out across the plain of fractured rock, like ants crawling on a bone pile.

"Dead," you say. "A corpse-world."

Maniac laughter beside you. "Don't be morbid, Wanderer. Nothing is dead that was never alive."

You kneel on a patch of furrowed soil cupping a wilted pine seedling in your hands. The sky above you is steel plating studded with overhead floodlights, and the massive cylindrical body of the torchtube skewers the

watertank universe of this dirt-digger deck. The whole layout is primitive, strictly first-generation Trek. Beside you, a young girl in green dirt-digger shorts and shirt is sitting disconsolately on the synthetic loam, staring at the curved outer bulkhead of the farm deck.

"I'm going to live and die without ever seeing a sky or walking in a forest," she says. "What am I doing here? What's all this for?"

"You're keeping the embers of Earth alive," you say in your ancient's voice. "You're preserving the last surviving forms of organic life. Some day your children or your children's children will plant these seeds in the living soil of a new Earth."

"Do you really believe that?" she says earnestly, turning her youthful strength on you like a sun. "That we'll find a living planet some day?"

"You must believe. If you stop believing, you'll be with us here in this hell of our own creation. We Earthborn were life's destroyers. Our children must be life's preservers."

She looks at you with the Wanderer's cold eternal eyes, and her face withers to a parchment of ancient despair. "For the sake of our bloodstained souls?" she says, then becomes a young girl once more.

"For the sake of your own, girl, for the sake of your own."

You float weightless inside the huddled circle of the Trek. The circular formation of ships is a lagoon of light in an endless sea of black nothingness. Bow-ward of the Trek, the interstellar abyss is hidden behind a curtain of gauzy brilliance: the hydrogen interface, where the combined scoopfields of the Trek's fusion torches form a permanent shock wave against the attenuated interstellar atmosphere. Although the Trek's ships have already been modified and aligned to form the hydrogen interface, the ships are still the same converted asteroid freighters that left Sol; this is no later than Trek Year 150.

But inside the circle of ships, the future is being launched. The *Flying Dutchman*, the first torchship to be built entirely on the Trek out of matter winnowed and transmuted from the interstellar medium, floats in the space before you, surrounded by a gnat swarm of intership shuttles and men and women in voidsuits. A clean, smooth cylinder ringed with windowed decks, it seems out of place among the messy jury-rigging of the first-generation torchships, an intrusion from the future.

Then an all-but-invisible purple flame issues from the *Dutchman's* torchtube and the first Treborn ship is drawing its breath of life.

Another new torchship appears beside the *Flying Dutchman*, and

another and another and another, until the new Trekborn ships outnumber the converted asteroid freighters and the hydrogen interface has more than doubled in diameter. Now the area inside the Trek is a vast concourse of torchships, shuttles, suited people, and the dancing lights of civilized life.

You are standing on a bulkhead catwalk overlooking the floor of a dirt digger deck: a sparse forest of small pines and oaks, patches of green grass, a few rows of flowers. Above is a holo of a blue Earth sky with fleecy white clouds. Dirt diggers in their traditional green move about solemnly, tending the fragile life-forms, measuring their growth. Your nostrils are filled with the incense odor of holiness.

And you sit at a round simmed marble table on a balcony cafe halfway up the outer bulkhead of an amusement deck sipping a glass of simmed burgundy. A circle of shops and restaurants rings the floor below, connected by radial paths to an inner ring of shops around the central torchtube shaft. Each resulting wedge of floor is a different bright color, each is given over to a different amusement: a swimming pool, a bandstand, a zero-g dance-plate, carnival rides, a shimmer maze. Noise rises. Music plays.

Across from you sits the Wanderer, wearing dirt digger green and an expression of bitter contempt. "Look at them," he says. "We're about to approach another planet, and they don't even know where they are."

"And where is that, Refugee?"

"Who should know better than you, Dutchman?" he says. And the people below turn transparent, and the bulkheads disappear, and you are watching zombies dancing on a platform floating in the interstellar abyss. Nothing else lives, nothing else moves, in all that endless immensity.

Manic laughter tickles your throat.

A planet appears as a pinpoint, then a green-and-brown mottled sphere with fleecy white clouds, and then you are standing on its surface among a party of suited men trudging heavily back to their shuttle. Hard brown rock veined with greenish mineral streakings under a blue-black sky dotted with pastel-green clouds. You are back on your balcony watching specters dance in the endless galactic night.

"Great admiral, what shall you say when hope is gone?" the Wanderer says.

And you are down among the specters, grown ten feet tall, a giant shaking your fist against the blackness, at the dead planet, howling your

defiance against the everlasting night. "Sail on! Sail on! Sail on and on!"

"No more ships! No more ships! Soil or death!" You are marching at the head of a small army of men and women in dirt-digger green as it bursts into the amusement deck from the deck below, bearing crosses wrapped with simmed grape leaves. Each chanted shout sends nails through your wrists.

And you are leading your carnival of ghosts on a mad dance through a dirt-digger deck, carelessly trampling on the fragile life-forms, strewing gold and silver confetti, flashers, handfuls of jewels—the bounty of the fusion torch's passage through the interstellar plankton.

You are in a droptube falling through the decks of a ship. Amusement decks, residential decks, manufacturing decks, sifting decks—all but the control and torch-tender decks—have been rudely covered over with synthetic loam and turned into makeshift dirt-digger decks. The growth is sparse, the air has a chemical foulness, metal surfaces are beginning to corrode, and the green-clad people have the hunched shoulders and sunken eyes of the unwholesomely obsessed. The vine-covered cross is everywhere.

You are rising through a lift-tube on another ship. Here the machinery is in good repair, the air is clean, the bulkheads shiny, and the decks of the ship glory in light and sound and surfaces of simmed ruby, emerald, sapphire, and diamond. The people are birds-of-paradise in mirrorsuits, simmed velvets and silks in luxurious shades and patterns, feathers and leathers, gold, silver, and brass. But they seem to be moving to an unnatural rhythm, dancing a mad jig to a phantom fiddler, and their flesh is as transparent as unpolarized plex.

You are floating in space in the center of the Trek; behind you, the Trekborn ships are a half-circle diadem of jeweled brilliance. In front of you floats the Wanderer, and behind him the old converted asteroid freighters, tacky and decayed, pale greenery showing behind every blister and viewport.

"Your gardens are dying, Wanderer."

"Yours never had life, Dutchman," he says, and you can see stars and void through your glassy flesh, through the ghost-ships behind you.

Two silvery headbands appear in the space between you in a fanfare of music and a golden halo of light. Large, crude, designed for temporary external wear, they are the first full sensory transceivers, ancestors of the surgically implanted tap. They glow and pulse like live things, like the gift of the nonexistent gods.

You pick one of the headbands, laugh, place it on the Wanderer's head. "With this ring, I thee wed."

Unblinkingly, he places the other band on yours. "Bear my crown of thorns," he says.

You stand on the bridge of a torchship, the spectral Dutchman at your side. Beyond the plex, the stars are a million live jewels, a glory mirrored in the lights of the Trek.

You kneel among tiny pine trees in a dirt digger deck beside the Wanderer, and they become a redwood forest towering into the blue skies of lost Earth, and you can feel the pain of the nails in your ghostly wrists, hearing the tolling of a far-off bell, feel the body's sadness, smell the incense of irredeemable loss.

You rise through a lift-tube, the Dutchman's hand in yours, and you hear the hum of energy as you pass through deck after jeweled and gleaming deck, hear the sounds of human laughter and joy, see crystal trees sprouting and rising from the metal deckplates. The flesh of the spectral people solidifies and the Dutchman's hand becomes pink and solid. When you look at his face, your own Wanderer's eyes look back, pain muted by a wild joy.

You float in the center of the Trek with the Wanderer as the ships around you rearrange themselves in an intricate ballet: Trekborn and converted asteroid freighters in hundreds of magical *pas de deux*, reintegrating the Trek.

You are droptubing down through the decks of a dirt digger ship, watching green uniforms transform themselves into the bird-of-paradise plumage of the Trekborn ships, watching the corrosion disappear from the metal, watching crystal gazebos, shimmer mazes, and bubbling brooks appear, as shrines to sadness become gardens of joy.

And you are sitting across a round simmed marble table from the Dutchman on a balcony cafe halfway up the bulkhead of an amusement deck. The central torchtube shaft is overgrown with ivy. The pool, bandstand, shimmer mazes, dance-plates, and carnival rides are laid out in a meadow of green grass shaded by pines and oaks. The bulkheads and upper decking dissolve, and this garden square stands revealed as a tiny circle of life lost in the immensity of the eternal void.

"We're Wanderers in the midnight of the soul," the Dutchman says. "Perhaps we're guardians of the only living things that ever were,"

"Flying Dutchmen on an endless sea, perhaps the only gods there be."

And you are a detached viewpoint watching this circle of life drift away into the immensity of space, watching the Trek dwindle away until it is nothing more than one more abstract pinpoint of light against the galactic darkness. Words of pale fire appear across the endless star-field:

WANDERING DUTCHMEN

by Jofe D'mahl

There was an unmistakable note of politeness in the clicking of tongues in Jofe D'mahl's grand salon. The applause went on for an appropriate interval (*just* appropriate), and then the guests were up and talking, a brightly colored flock of birds flitting and jabbering about the jeweled forest.

". . . you could see that it had well-defined continents, and the green areas *must* be vegetation . . ."

". . . oxygen, sure, but can we breathe all that helium?"

Standing between Jiz Rumoku and Bandoora, Jofe D'mahl found himself in the infuriating position of being a vacuum beside the focus of attention. Eyes constantly glanced in their direction for a glimpse of Bandoora, but no gaze dared linger long, for at the side of the void-sucker, D'mahl was sizzling toward nova, his eyes putting out enough hard radiation to melt plex.

But Bandoora himself was looking straight at him, and D'mahl sensed some unguessable focus of alien warmth pulsing up at him from the depths of those unfathomable eyes. "I'm sorry the Pilots' bulletin ruined your premiere," he said.

"*Really?*" D'mahl snarled. "What makes you think your precious blatt has so much importance?" he continued loudly. There was no reason for the guests not to stare now; D'mahl was shouting for it. "You drecks expect us to slaver like Pavlov's dogs every time you turn up some reeking mudball that looks habitable until you get close enough to get a good whiff of the dead stink of poison gas and naked rock. Your blatt will be a six-month nova, Bandoora. Art is forever."

"Forever may be a longer time than you realize, D'mahl," Bandoora said calmly. "Other than that, I agree with you entirely. I found *Wandering*

Dutchmen quite moving." Were those actually *tears* forming in his eyes? "Perhaps more moving than even you can imagine."

Silence reigned now as the attention of the guests become totally focused on this small psychodrama. Some of the bolder ones began to inch closer. D'mahl found that he could not make out Bandoora's vector; in this little ego contest, there seemed to be no common set of rules.

"I'd like to atone for interfering with the premiere of a great work of art," Bandoora said. "I'll give you a chance to make the greatest senso of your career, D'mahl." There was a thin smile on his lips, but his eyes were so earnest as to appear almost comical.

"What makes you think *you* can teach *me* anything about senses?" D'mahl said. "Next thing, you'll be asking me for a lesson in voidsucking." A titter of laughter danced around the salon.

"Perhaps I've already gotten it, D'mahl," Bandoora said. He turned, began walking through the colored mists and crystal trees toward the transparent plex that blistered the great balcony, focusing his eyes on D'mahl through the crowd, back over his shoulder. "I don't know anything about sensos, but I can show you a reality that will make anything you've experienced pale into nothingness. Capture it on tape if you dare." A massed intake of breath.

"*If I dare!*" D'mahl shouted, exploding into nova. "Who do you think you're scaring with your cheap theatrics, Bandoora? I'm Jofe D'mahl, I'm the greatest artist of my time, I'm riding the torch of my own ego, and I know it. *If I dare!* What do you think any of us have to do *but* dare, you poor dreek? Didn't you understand *anything* of what you just experienced?"

Bandoora reached the plex blister, turned, stood outlined against the starry darkness, the blaze of the concourse of ships. His eyes seemed to draw a baleful energy from the blackness. "No theatrics, D'mahl," Bandoora said. "No computer taps, no sensos, no illusions. None of the things all you people live by. *Reality*, D'mahl, the real thing. Out there. The naked void."

He half turned, stretched out his right arm as if to embrace the darkness. "Come with us on Bela-37, D'mahl," he said. "Out there in your naked mind where nothing exists but you and the everlasting void. *Wandering Dutchmen* speaks well of such things—for a senso by a man who was simming it. What might you do with your own sensorium tape of the void itself—if you dared record it through your own living flesh? Do you dare, D'mahl, do you dare face the truth of it with your naked soul?"

"Jof—"

D'mahl brushed Jiz aside. "*Simming it!*" he bellowed in red rage. "Do I dare!" The reality of the grand salon, even the ego challenge hurled at him before his guests, burned away in the white-hot fire of the deeper challenge, the gauntlet Bandoora had flung at the feet of his soul. *I can face this thing, can you? Can you truly carve living art out of the dead void, not metaphorically, but out of the nothingness itself, in the flesh, in realtime? Or are you simming it? Are you a fraud?*

"I told you, Bandoora," he said, hissing through his rage, "I've got nothing to do *but* dare."

The guests oohed, Jiz shook her head, Bandoora nodded and smiled. Jofe D'mahl felt waves of change ripple through his grand salon, through himself, but their nature and vector eluded the grasp of his mind.

II

As he flitted from *Excelsior* to *Brigadoon* across a crowded sector of the central Trek, it seemed to Jofe D'mahl that the bubble of excitement in which he had been moving since the premiere party had more tangibility than the transparent shimmer screen of his voidbubble. The shimmer was visible only as the interface between the hard vacuum of space and the sphere of air it contained, but the enhancement of his persona was visible on the face of every person he saw. He was being tapped so frequently by people he had never met in senso or flesh that he had finally had to do something 180° from his normal vector: tap a screening program into his banks that rejected calls from all people not on a manageable approved list. He was definitely the Trek's current nova.

Even here, among the bubbled throngs flitting from ship to ship or just space-jaunting, D'mahl felt as if he were outshining the brilliance of the concourse of torchships, even the hydrogen interface itself, as most of the people whose trajectories came within visible range of his own saluted him with nods of their heads or subtle sidelong glances.

It almost made up for the fact that it wasn't *Wandering Dutchmen* that had triggered his nova but his public decision to dare six standard months with the voidsuckers—away from the Trek, out of tap contact with the banks, alone in his mind and body like a primitive pre-tap man. Waller Nan Pei had achieved the same effect by announcing his public suicide a month in advance, but blew out his torch forever by failing to go through

with it. D'mahl knew there could be no backing out now.

He flitted past *Paradisio*, accepted the salutations of the passengers on a passing shuttle, rounded *Ginza*, throttled back his g-polarizer, and landed lightly on his toes on *Brigadoon's* main entrance stage. He walked quickly across the ruby ledge, passed through the shimmer, collapsed his bubble, and took the nearest droptube for Jiz Rumoku's gallery on twelvedeck, wondering what the place would look like this time.

Thanks to Jiz's aura, *Brigadoon* was the chameleon-ship of the Trek; whole decks were completely done over about as often as the average Trekker redid his private quarters. Fashions and flashes tended to spread from *Brigadoon* to the rest of the Trek much as they spread from Jiz's gallery to the decks of her ship. Recently, a motion to change the ship's name to *Quicksilver* had come within fifty votes of passage.

Dropping through the decks, D'mahl saw more changes than he could identify without tapping for the previous layouts, and he had been on *Brigadoon* about a standard month ago. Threedeck had been living quarters tiered around a formalized rock garden; now it was a lagoon with floating houseboats. Sixdeck had been a sim of the ancient Tivoli; now the amusements were arranged on multileveled g-plates over a huge slow-motion whirlpool of syrupy rainbow-colored liquid. Nine-deck had been a ziggurat-maze of living quarters festooned with ivy; now it was a miniature desert of static-molded gold and silver dust-dunes, latticed into a faerie filigree of cavelike apartments. Fluidity seemed to be the theme of the month.

Twelvedeck was now a confection of multicolored energy. The walls of the shops and restaurants were tinted shimmer screens in scores of subtle hues, and the central plaza around the torchtube shaft was an ever-changing meadow of slowly-moving miniature fuzzballs in blue, green, purple, yellow, and magenta. The torchtube itself was a cylindrical mirror, and most of the people were wearing tinted mirror-suits, fogrobes, or lightcloaks. It was like being inside a rainbow, and D'mahl felt out of sync in his comparatively severe blue pants, bare chest, and cloth-of-gold cloak.

Jiz Rumoku's gallery was behind a sapphire-blue waterfall that cascaded from halfway up the curved bulkhead to a pool of mist spilling out across the floor of the deck. D'mahl stepped through it, half expecting to be soaked. Mercifully, the waterfall proved to be a holo, but with Jiz, you never knew.

"You who are about to die salute us," Jiz said. She was lying in a

blushing-pink fuzzball, naked except for blinding auroras of broad-spectrum light coyly hiding her breasts and loins. The pink fuzzball floated in a lazy ellipse near the center of the gallery, which was now a circular area contained by a shimmer screen around its circumference that rippled endless spectral changes. The ceiling was a holo of roiling orange fire, the floor a mirror of some soft substance.

"Better in fire than in ice," D'mahl said. "My motto." They cross-tapped, and D'mahl lay in the fuzzball feeling an electric glow as his body walked across the gallery and kissed Jiz's lips.

"Voidsucking isn't exactly my idea of fire, Jof," Jiz said as they simultaneously broke their taps.

"This is?" D'mahl said, sweeping his arm in an arc. Dozens of floaters in sizes ranging from a few square centimeters to a good three meters square drifted in seemingly random trajectories around the gallery, displaying objects and energy-effects ranging from tiny pieces of static-molded gemdust jewelry to boxes of flashers, fogrobes, clingers, holo-panes that were mostly abstract, and several large and very striking fire-sculptures. The floaters themselves were all transparent plex, and very few of the "objects" on them were pure matter.

"I cog that people are going to be bored with matter for a while," Jiz said, rising from the fuzzball. "After all, it's nothing but frozen energy. Flux is the coming nova, energy-matter interface stuff. It expresses the spirit of the torch, don't you think? Energy, protons, electrons, neutrons, and heavy element dust from the interstellar medium .transmuted into whatever we please. This current collection expresses the transmutational state itself."

"I like to have a few things with hard surfaces around," D'mahl said somewhat dubiously.

"You'll see, even your place will be primarily interface for the next standard month or so. You'll put it in sync."

"No I won't, oh creator of tomorrow's flash," D'mahl said, kissing her teasingly on the lips. "While everyone else is going transmutational, I'll be out there in the cold hard void, where energy and matter know their places and stick to them."

Jiz frowned, touched his cheek. "You're really going through with it, aren't you?" she said. "Months of being cooped up in some awful scout-ship, sans tap, sans lovers, sans change. . . ."

"Perhaps at least not sans lovers," D'mahl said lightly, thinking of Sidi.

But Jiz, he saw, was seriously worried. "What's the matter, Jiz?"

"What do you actually know about the voidsuckers?"

"What's to know? They man the scoutships. They look for habitable planets. They live the simplest lives imaginable."

"Have you tapped anything on them?"

"No. I'm taking a senso recorder along, of course, and I'll have to use myself as major viewpoint, so I don't want any sensory preconceptions."

"I've tapped the basic sensohistory of the voidsuckers, Jof. There's nothing else in the banks. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Should it?"

"Tap it, Jof."

"I told you—"

"I know, no sensory preconceptions. But I'm asking you to tap it anyway. I have, and I think you should." Her eyes were hard and unblinking, and her mouth was hardened into an ideogram of resolve. When Jiz got that look, D'mahl usually found it advisable to follow her vector, for the sake of parsimony, if nothing else.

"All right," he said. "For you, I'll sully my pristine consciousness with sordid facts. Voidsuckers, basic history," he subvoiced.

He stood in an observation blister watching a scoutship head for the hydrogen interface. The scout was basically a torchship-size fusion tube with a single small toroid deck amidship and a bridge bubble up near the intake. "Trek Year 301," a neuter voice said. "The first scout-ship is launched by the Trek. Crewed by five volunteers, it is powered by a full-size fusion torch though its mass is only one tenth that of a conventional torchship. Combined with its utilization of the Trek's momentum, this enables it rapidly to reach a terminal velocity approaching .87 lights."

D'mahl was a detached observer far out in space watching the scout-ship torch ahead of the Trek. Another scoutship, then another, and another, and finally others too numerous to count easily, torched through the hydrogen interface and ahead of the Trek, veering off at angles ranging from ten to thirty degrees, forming a conical formation. The area of space enclosed by the cone turned bright green as the voice said: "By 402, the scoutships numbered forty-seven, and the still-current search pattern had been regularized. Ranging up to a full light-year from the Trek and remote-surveying solar systems from this expanded cone of vision, the

scoutship system maximized the number of potential habitable planets surveyed in a given unit of time."

Now D'mahl sat on the bridge of a scoutship looking out the plex at space. Around him, two men and a woman in blue voidsucker shorts were puttering about with instrument consoles. "In 508, a new innovation was introduced." A small drone missile shot slightly ahead of the scoutship, which then began to veer off. "Scoutships now dispatched telltale probes to potentially habitable planets, returning at once to the Trek."

D'mahl was a viewpoint in space watching a stylized diorama of the Trek, a scoutship, a telltale, and a solar system. The scout was torching back to the Trek while the telltale orbited a planet, broadcasting a red wavefront of information Trekward. The scout reached the Trek, which altered its vector toward the telltale's solar system. The scout then left the Trek to monitor the oncoming telltale wavefront. "By turning the Trek toward a prospective system, then returning to monitor the telltale wavefront by scoutship, our fully evolved planetary reconnaissance system now maximizes the number of solar systems investigated in a given time period and also minimizes the reporting time for each high-probability solar system investigated."

D'mahl was aboard a scoutship, playing null-g tennis with an attractive female voidsucker. He was in a simple commissary punching out a meal. He was lying on a grav-plate set at about .25 g in small private sleeping quarters. He was a female voidsucker making love to a tall powerful man in null-g. "The scout's quarters, though comfortable and adequate to maintain physical and mental health, impose some hardship on the crew owing to space limitations," the neuter voice said. "Tap banks are very limited and access to the central Trek banks impossible. Scout crews must content themselves with simple in-flesh amusements. All Trekkers owe these selfless volunteers a debt of gratitude."

Jofe D'mahl looked into Jiz Rumoku's eyes. He shrugged. "So?" he said. "What does that tell me that I didn't already know?"

"Nothing, Jof, not one damned thing! The voidsuckers have been out there in the flesh for over half a millennium, spending most of their lives with no tap connection to the Trek, to everything that makes the only human civilization there is what it is. What's their karmic vector? What's inside their skulls? Why are they called voidsuckers, anyway? Why isn't there anything in the banks except that basic history tape?"

"Obviously because no one's gone out there with them to make a real senso," D'mahl said. "They're certainly not the types to produce one

themselves. That's why I'm going, Jiz. I think Bandoora was right— there's a beyond senso to be made on the voidsuckers, and it may be the only virgin subject matter left."

A little of the intensity went out of Jiz's expression. "Ego, of course, has nothing to do with it," she said.

"Ego, of course, has everything to do with it," D'mahl replied.

She touched a hand to his cheek. "Be careful, Jof," she said quite softly.

Moved, D'mahl put his hand over hers, kissed her lightly on the lips, feeling, somehow, like an Earthbound primitive. "What's there to be afraid of?" he said with equal tenderness.

"I don't know, Jof, and I don't know how to find out. That's what scares me."

Jofe D'mahl felt a rising sense of vectorless anticipation as the shuttle bore him bow-ward toward Bela-37, a silvery cylinder glinting against the auroral background of the hydrogen interface as it hung like a Damoclean sword above him. Below, the ships of the Trek were receding, becoming first a horizon-filling landscape of light and flash, then a disk of human warmth sharply outlined against the cold black night. It occurred to him that Trekkers seldom ventured up here where the scoutships parked, close by the interface separating the Trek from the true void. It was not hard to see why.

"Long way up, isn't it?" he muttered.

The shuttle pilot nodded. "Not many people come up here," he said. "Voidsuckers and maintenance crews mostly. I come up here by myself sometimes to feel the pressure of the void behind the interface and look down on it all like a god on Olympus." He laughed dryly. "Maybe I've ferried one voidsucker too many."

Something made D'mahl shudder, then yearn for the communion of the tap—the overwhelmingly rich intermeshing of time, space, bodies, and realities from which he was about to isolate himself for the first time in his life. The tap is what we live by, he thought, and who so more than I?

"Jiz Rumoku," he subvoiced, and he was in her body, standing beside a fire-sculpture in her gallery with a chunky black man in a severe green velvet suit. "Hello, Jiz," he said with her vocal cords. "Hello and good-bye."

He withdrew his tap from her body, and she followed into his, high above the Trek. "Hello, Jof. It's sure a long way up." She kissed his hand

with his lips.

"Take care," his voice said. Then she broke the tap, and D'mahl was alone in his flesh as the shuttle decelerated, easing up alongside Bela-37's toroid main deck.

"This is it," the shuttle pilot said. "You board through the main shimmer." D'mahl gave the pilot an ironic salute, erected his voidbubble, grabbed his kit and senso recorder, and flitted across a few meters of space to Bela-37's main entrance stage.

Stepping through the shimmer, he was surprised to find himself in a small closetlike room with no droptube shaft in evidence. A round door in the far bulkhead opened and a tall, pale voidsucker stepped inside. "I'm Ban Nyborg, D'mahl," he said. He laughed rather humorlessly. "This is an airlock," he said. "Safety feature."

Automatically, D'mahl tapped for a definition of the new word: *double-doored chamber designed to facilitate ship entry and exit, obsoleted by the shimmer screen.* "How quaint," he said, following Nyborg through the open door.

"Lose power, lose your shimmer, this way you keep your air," Nyborg said, leading D'mahl down a dismal blue pastel corridor. "Radial passageway," Nyborg said. "Leads to circular corridor around the torchtube. Five other radials, tubes to the bridge and back, that's the ship." They reached the circumtorchtube corridor, done in washed-out blue and yellow, walked 60 degrees around it past some instrument consoles and an orange radial corridor, then another 60 degrees and halfway up a green radial to a plain matter door.

Nyborg opened the door and D'mahl stepped into a grim little room. There was a g-plate, a blue pneumatic chair, a tall simmered walnut chest, a shaggy red rug, and beyond an open door, toilet facilities. The ceiling was deep gray, and three of the walls were grayish tan. The fourth was a holo of the interstellar abyss itself—pinpoint stars and yawning blackness—and it faced the g-plate.

"Bandoora's quarters," Nyborg said. "He's doubling with Sidi."

"Charming," D'mahl grunted. "I'm touched."

"Ship's got three tap frequencies: library, communications, external visual. Bridge is off limits now. You can tap our departure on external." Nyborg turned, walked unceremoniously out of the little cell, and closed the door behind him.

D'mahl shuddered. The walls and ceiling seemed to be closing in on him

as if to squeeze him into the reality of the holo. He found himself staring into the starfield, leaning toward it as if it were pulling him down into it.

He blinked, feeling the strangeness of the sensation, which drew his attention away from the holo and to his senso recorder. Ought to get all this down. He turned the recorder on, dropped in a hundred-hour pod of microtape, keyed it to his own sensorium. But the initial moment of vertigo had passed; now he was just in an excruciatingly dull little room with a big starfield holo on one wall.

D'mahl set the g-plate for one tenth g, just enough to hold him in place, and lay down on the padding. He found himself staring into the starfield holo again from this position. Did Bandoora actually like being sucked at by that thing?

Bandoora tapped him, audio only: "Welcome to Bela-37, D'mahl. We're about to torch through the interface. Perhaps you'd care to tap it."

"Thanks," D'mahl tapped back through the scout's com frequency, "but I'd rather record it in the flesh from the bridge."

"Sorry, but the bridge is off limits to you now," Bandoora said, and broke the tap.

"Drool!" D'mahl snarled to no one, and irritably tapped the scout's external visual frequency.

He was a disembodied viewpoint moving through the silent friction-less darkness of space. It was like being in a voidbubble and yet not like being in a voidbubble, for here he was disconnected from all internal and external senses save vision. He found that he could tap sub-frequencies that gave him choice of visual direction, something like being able to turn his nonexistent head. Below, the Trek was a jewel of infinitely subtle light slowly shrinking in the velvet blackness. All other vectors were dominated by the hydrogen interface, a sky of rainbow brilliance that seemed to all but surround him.

It was a moving visual spectacle, and yet the lack of the subtleties of full senso also made it pathetic, filled D'mahl with an elusive sadness. As the rainbow sheen of the hydrogen interface moved visibly closer, that sadness resolved along a nostalgia vector as D'mahl realized that he was about to lose tap contact with the Trek's banks. The interface energies would block out the banks long before time-lag or signal attenuation even became a factor. It was his last chance to say good-bye to the multiplex Trek reality before being committed to the unknown and invariant void beyond.

He broke his tap with the scout's visual frequency, and zip-tapped

through the multiplicity of the Trek's frequencies like a dying man flashing through his life's sensorium track before committing it to the limbo banks.

He stood among the crystal trees of his own grand salon. He was Dalta Reed punting across Blood Lake on *Lothlorien* and he was Erna Ramblieu making love to John Benina on his balcony overlooking Sundance Corridor on *Magic Mountain*. He watched *Excelsior* being built from the body of a welder working on the hull, and he flashed through the final sequence of *Wandering Dutchmen*. He riffled through his own sensorium track—making love to Jiz five years ago in a dirt-digger deck, moments of ten parties, dancing above a null-g plate as a boy, cutting *Wandering Dutchmen* at his editor—realizing suddenly that he was leaving the world of his own stored memories behind with everything else. Finally, he flashed through Jiz Rumoku's body as she led the man in the green velvet suit past a holoframe of the Far Look Ballet dancing *Swan Lake* in null-g, and then his tap was broken, and he was lying on his g-plate in Bela-37, unable to reestablish it.

He tapped the scout's visual frequency and found himself moving into the world-filling brilliance of the hydrogen interface behind the auroral bubble of Bela-37's own torch intake field. The lesser rainbow touched the greater, and D'mahl rapidly became sheathed in glory as Bela-37's field formed a bulge in the Trek's combined field, a bulge that enveloped the scoutship and D'mahl, became a closed sphere of full-spectrum fire for an instant, then burst through the hydrogen interface with a rush that sent D'mahl's being soaring, gasping, and reeling into the cold hard blackness of the open void beyond.

D'mahl shook, grunted, and broke the tap. For a panicked moment he thought he had somehow been trapped in the abyss as his vision snapped back into his flesh staring at the holo of the void that filled the wall facing him.

The lift-tube ended and Jofe D'mahl floated up out of it and onto the circular bridge of Bela-37-. The bridge was a plex blister up near the bow of the torchtube encircled by consoles and controls to waist level but otherwise visually naked to the interstellar void. Bow-ward, the ship's intake field formed a miniature hydrogen interface; stern-ward, the Trek was visible as a scintillating disk behind a curtain of ethereal fire, but otherwise nothing seemed to live or move in all that eternal immensity.

"Isn't there any getting away from it?" D'mahl muttered, half to himself,

half to Haris Bandoora, who had watched him emerge from the lift-tube with those unfathomable eyes and an ironic, enigmatic grin.

"You people spend your lives trying to get away from it," Bandoora said, "and we spend our lives drenching ourselves in it because we know there is no real escape from it. One way or the other, our lives are dominated by the void."

"Speak for yourself, Bandoora," D'mahl said. "Out there is only one reality." He touched a forefinger to his temple. "In here are an infinity more.

"Illusion," said a woman's voice behind him. D'mahl turned and saw Sidi—conical bare breasts, hairless silvered skull, tightly muscled body, opaque voidsucker eyes—a vision of cold and abstract feminine beauty.

D'mahl smiled at her. "What is," he said, "is real."

"Where you come from," Sidi said, "no one knows what's real."

"*Réalité c'est moi*," D'mahl said in ancient French. When both Sidi and Bandoora stared at him blankly, failing to tap for the reference, *unable* to tap for the reference, he had a sharp flash of loneliness. An adult among children. A civilized man among primitives. And out there . . . out there . . .

He forced his attention away from such thoughts, forced his vision away from the all-enveloping void, and walked toward one of the instrument consoles where a slim woman with a shaven untinted skull sat in a pedestal chair adjusting some controls.

"This is Areth Lorenzi," Bandoora said. "She's setting the sweep-sequence of our extreme-range gravscan. We automatically scan a twenty light-year sphere for new planeted stars even on a mission like this. We can pick up an Earth-massed body that far away."

The woman turned, and D'mahl saw a face steeped in age. There were wrinkles around her eyes, at the corners of her mouth, even a hint of them on her cheeks; extraordinary enough in itself, but it was her deep, deep pale-blue eyes that spoke most eloquently of her years, of the sheer volume of the things they had seen.

"How often have you detected such bodies?" D'mahl asked conversationally, to keep from obviously staring.

Something seemed to flare in those limpid depths. She glanced over D'mahl's shoulder at Bandoora for a moment. "It's ... a common enough occurrence," she said, and turned back to her work.

"And finally, this is Raj Doru," Bandoora said with a peculiar hastiness, indicating the other voidsucker on the bridge: a squat, dark, powerful-looking man with a fierce mouth, a sweeping curve of a nose, and bright brown eyes glowering under his shaven brows. He was standing, hands on hips, regarding D'mahl scornfully.

"*What is, is real,*" Doru said acidly. "What do you know about real, Jofe D'mahl? You've never confronted the reality of the universe in your whole life! Cowering behind your hydrogen interface and your tap and your mental masturbation fantasies! The void would shrivel your soul to a pinpoint and then snuff it out of existence."

"*Raj!*" Bandoora snapped. Psychic energy crackled and clashed as the two voidsuckers glared at each other for a silent moment.

"Let's see the great D'mahl suck some void, Haris, let's—"

"Everything in its time," Bandoora said. "This isn't it."

"Raj is an impatient man," Sidi said.

"A peculiar trait for a voidsucker," D'mahl replied dryly. These people were beginning to grate on his consciousness. They seemed humorless, obsessive, out of sync with their own cores, as if the nothingness in which they continuously and monomaniacally wallowed had emptied out their centers and filled them with itself.

D'mahl found himself looking up and out into the starry blackness of the abyss, wondering if that eternal coldness might in time seep into his core too, if the mind simply could not encompass that much nothingness and still remain in command of its own vector.

"Patience is an indifferent virtue out here," Areth said. It did not seem a comforting thought.

III

What do these people *do* with themselves? Jofe D'mahl wondered as he paced idly and nervously around the circumtorchtube corridor for what seemed like the thousandth time. A week aboard Bela-37 and he was woozy with boredom. There was a limit to how much chess and null-g tennis you could play, and the ship's library banks were pathetic—a few hundred standard reference tapes, fifty lamer pornos, a hundred classic sensos (four of his own included, he was wanly pleased to note), and an endless log of dull-as-death scoutship reports.

"Patience is an indifferent virtue out here," Areth Lorenzi had said. To D'mahl, it seemed the only virtue possible under the circumstances, and his supply of it was rapidly running out.

Up ahead, he heard footfalls coming down a radial corridor, and a moment later his vector intersected that of Sidi, striding beautifully and coldly toward him like a robot simmed in flesh. Even his initial attraction to her was beginning to fade. Inside that carapace of abstract beauty she seemed as disconnected from any reality he cared to share as the others.

"Hello, D'mahl," she said distantly. "Have you been getting good material for your senso?"

D'mahl snorted. "If you can call a pod and a quarter of boredom footage interesting material," he said. "Bandoora promised me something transcendent. Where is it?"

"Have you not looked around you?"

D'mahl nodded upward, at the ceiling, at space beyond. "Out there? I can see that from my own grand salon."

'Wait."

"For what?"

"For the call."

"What call?"

"When it comes, you will know it," Sidi said, and walked past him up the corridor. D'mahl shook his head. From Doru, hostility; from Bandoora, lamer metaphysics; from Nyborg, a grunt now and then; from Areth Lorenzi, a few games of nearly silent chess. Now brain-teases from Sidi. Can it be that that's all these people have? A few lamer quirks around a core of inner vacuum? Nothing but their own obsessiveness between them and eternal boredom? It might make a reasonably interesting senso, if I could figure out a way to dramatize vacuity. He sighed. At least it gave him a valid artistic problem to play with.

"All routine here," Ban Nyborg said, bending his tall frame over the readout screen, across which two columns of letters and numbers slowly crawled. "Star catalog numbers on the left, masses of any dark bodies around them on the right."

"A simple program could monitor this," D'mahl said. "Why are you doing it?"

"Computer *does* screen it, I'm just backing up. Something to do."

D'mahl shook his head. He had wandered into this comp center by accident — none of the voidsuckers had even bothered to mention it to him. Yet here was much of the equipment at the heart of the scoutship's mission: the ship's computer and banks, the gravscan readout, and a whole series of other instrument consoles he would have had to tap for to identify. But the dull gray room had a strange air of neglect about it.

"You sound almost as bored as I am, Nyborg," he said.

Nyborg nodded without looking up. "All waiting, till you get the call."

"*The call?* What call?"

Nyborg turned, and for the first time in nearly two standard weeks, D'mahl saw animation on his long face; fire, perhaps even remembered ecstasy in his pale eyes. "When the void calls you to it," he said. "you'll see. No use talking about it. It calls, and you go, and that's what it's all about. That's why we're all here."

"That's why you're here? What about all this?" D'mahl said, sweeping his hand in a circle to indicate the roomful of instruments.

He could visibly see the life go out of Nyborg's face; curtains came down over the fire in his eyes, and he was once again Nyborg the cyborg.

"All this is the mission," Nyborg grunted, turning back to the readout screen. "What gets us out here. But the call is why we come. Why do you think we're called voidsuckers?"

"Why?"

"We suck void," Nyborg said.

"You mean you don't care about the mission? You're not dedicated to finding us a new living world?"

"Drool," Nyborg muttered. "Scoutships don't need us, can run themselves. *We* need *them*. To get us to the void." He deliberately began to feign intense interest in what he was doing, and D'mahl could not extract a syllable more.

"Just how long have you been on scoutships, Areth?" Jofe D'mahl said, looking up from his hopeless position on the chessboard.

"About a century and a half," Areth Lorenzi said, still studying her next move. As always, she volunteered nothing.

"You must really be dedicated to the mission to have spent such a long life out here in nowhere," D'mahl said, trying to get something out of her. Those eyes hinted of so much and that mouth said so little.

"I've always heard the call."

"What's this call I keep hearing about?"

"The void calls, and for those who are called, there is nothing but the void. You think our lives are sacrifices for the common good of humanity?"

"Well, aren't they?"

Areth Lorenzi looked up at him with her ancient crystalline eyes. "We man the scoutships to reach the void, we don't brave the void to man the scoutships," she said. "We sacrifice nothing but illusion. We live with the truth. We live for the truth."

"And the truth shall set you free?" D'mahl said archly. But the reference blew by her since she had no way to tap for it.

Areth dropped her gaze. A note of bitterness came into her voice. "The truth is: No man is free." She moved her rook to double-check D'mahl's king and queen. "Checkmate in three moves, D'mahl," she said.

D'mahl found Haris Bandoora alone on the bridge looking stern-ward, back toward where the Trek had been visible until recently as a tiny bright disk among the pinpoint stars. Now the Trek, if it was visible at all, was nothing more than one point of light lost in a million others. Bela-37 seemed frozen in a black crystal vastness speckled with immobile motes of sparkling dust, an abstract universe of dubious reality.

A tremor of dread went through D'mahl, a twinge of the most utter aloneness. Even the presence of the enigmatic and aloof Bandoora seemed a beacon of human warmth in the dead uncaring night.

"Overwhelming, isn't it?" Bandoora said, turning at the sound of D'mahl's footfalls. "A hundred million stars, perhaps as many planets, and this one galaxy is a speck of matter floating in an endless nothingness." There was a strange overlay of softness in those dark and bottomless eyes, almost a misting of tears. "What are we, D'mahl? Once we were bits of some insignificant anomaly called life contaminating a dust-mote circling a speck of matter lost in a tiny cloud of specks, itself a minor contaminant of the universal void. Now we're not even that. . . ."

"We're the part that counts, Bandoora," D'mahl said.

"To whom?" Bandoora said, nodding toward the abyss. "To *that*?"

"To ourselves. To whatever other beings share consciousness on planets around whichever of those stars. Sentience is what counts, Bandoora. The rest of it is just backdrop." D'mahl laughed hollowly.

"If this be solipsism, let us make the most of it."

"If only you knew . . ."

"If only I knew what?"

Bandoora smiled an ironic smile. "You *will* know," he said. "That's why you're here. We can't be alone with it forever."

"What—"

"I've heard the call, Haris." Raj Dora had risen to the bridge, and now he walked rapidly to Bandoora's side, his brown eyes feverish, an uncharacteristic languor in his posture.

"When?" Bandoora asked crisply.

"Now."

"How long?"

"Twenty-four hours."

Bandoora turned and followed Doru toward the droptube. "What's going on?" D'mahl asked, trailing after them.

"Raj is going to suck void," Bandoora said. "He's heard the call. Care to help me see him off?"

At the round airlock door, Raj Doru took a voidbubble-and-flitter harness from the rack, donned it, took a flask of water and a cassette of ration out of a locker, and clipped them to the belt of his shorts. His eyes looked off into some unguessable reality that D'mahl could not begin to sync with.

"What are you doing, Doru?" he asked.

Doru didn't answer; he didn't even seem to notice D'mahl's presence. "Put on a voidbubble and see," Bandoora said, taking two harnesses off the rack and handing one to him.

D'mahl and Bandoora donned their harnesses, then Bandoora opened the airlock door and the three men stepped inside. They erected their bubbles, Bandoora sealed the door behind them, then the three of them

walked through the shimmer screen onto the scoutship's entrance stage.

Out on the narrow metal shelf, D'mahl found himself utterly overwhelmed by the black immensities, the infinite hole in which the scout-ship hung precariously suspended. This was utterly unlike the view from his grand salon, for here there was no concourse of ships or even torchtube wake to ease the impact of the abyss upon the soul. Here there was only a tiny ship, the abstract stars, three small men—and an infinity of nothing. D'mahl reeled and quaked with a vertigo that pierced the core of his being.

"Twenty-four hours, Haris," Doru tapped on the com frequency. He spread his arms, turned on his g-polarizer, and leaped up and out into the blackness of the interstellar abyss.

"*What's he doing?*" D'mahl shouted vocally. He caught himself, tapped the question to Bandoora as Doru began to pick up velocity and dwindle into the blackness along a vector at right angles to the ship's trajectory.

"He's going to suck void for twenty-four hours," Bandoora tapped. "He's answering the call. He'll go out far enough to lose sight of the ship and stay there for a standard day."

Doru was already just a vague shape moving against the backdrop of the starfield. As D'mahl watched, the shape fuzzed to a formless point. "What will he do out there?" he asked Bandoora quietly, a shudder racking his body.

"What happens between a man and the void is between a man and the void."

"Is it ... safe?"

"*Safe?* We have a fix on him, and he's still inside the cone of our interface. His body is safe. His mind . . . that's between Raj and the void."

Now D'mahl could no longer make Doru out at all. The voidsucker had vanished . . . into the void. D'mahl began to catch his mental breath, realizing that he was missing the only prime senso footage that had yet presented itself to him. He tried to tap Doru through the ship's com frequency, but all he got was a reject signal.

"I've got to get this on tape, Bandoora! But he's rejecting my tap."

"I told you, what happens between a man and the void is between that man and the void. The only way you'll ever bring back a senso of *this* reality, D'mahl, is to experience it in your own flesh and tap yourself."

D'mahl looked into Bandoora's cool even eyes; then his gaze was drawn

out into the black and starry depths into which Doru had disappeared. To which Doru had willingly, even ecstatically, given himself. Fear and fascination mingled inside him. Here was an experience the contemplation of which caused his knees to tremble, his heart to pound, and a cold wind to blow through his soul. Yet here too was an experience whose parameters he could not predict or fathom, a thing he had never done nor dreamed of doing, the thing that lay at the core of what the voidsuckers were. The thing, therefore, that was the core of the senso for which he was enduring these endless months of boredom. A thing, therefore, that he must inevitably confront.

"Why do you do it?" he tapped, turning from the abyss to face Bandoora.

"Each man has his own reason," the voidsucker tapped. "The call has many voices." He smiled a knowing smile. "You're beginning to hear it in your own language, D'mahl," he said.

D'mahl shivered, for somewhere deep inside him, the opening notes of that siren-song were indeed chiming, faraway music from the depths of the beyond within.

Standing on the bridge watching Bandoora disappear into the void, Jofe D'mahl felt like a hollow stringed instrument vibrating to yet another strumming of the same endless chord. Doru, Nyborg, Areth, Sidi, and now finally Bandoora had committed themselves to the abyss in these past three weeks, Areth and Nyborg twice apiece. Each of them had refused to let him tap them or even to discuss the experience afterward, and each of them had come back subtly changed. Doru seemed to have much of the hostility leached out of him; Nyborg had become even less talkative, almost catatonic; Areth seemed somehow slightly younger, perhaps a bit less distant: and Sidi had begun to ignore him almost completely. He could find no common denominator, except that each succeeding voidsucker had made him feel that much more isolated on Bela-37, that much more alone, that much more curious about what transpired between the human mind and the void. Now that the last of them was out there, D'mahl felt the process nearing completion, the monotonous chord filling his being with its standing-wave harmonics.

"Are you hearing it, Jofe D'mahl?" the quiet voice of Areth Lorenzi said beside him. "Do you finally hear the call?"

"I'm not sure what I'm hearing," D'mahl said, without looking away

from the immensities outside the plex. "Maybe what I'm hearing is my own ego calling. I've got to get a voidsuck on tape, or I've wasted all this time out here."

"It's the call," Areth said. "I've seen it often enough. It comes to each along his own natural vector."

With an effort, D'mahl turned to face her. "There's something you people aren't telling me," he said. "I can feel it. I know it."

Now it was Areth who spoke without looking at him, whose eyes were transfixed by the overwhelming void. "There is," she said. "The void at the center of all. The truth we live with that you deny."

"Drool on all this crypticism!" D'mahl snapped. "What is this cosmic truth you keep teasing me with?"

"To know, you must first taste the void."

"Why?"

"To know that, you must first answer the call."

A wordless grunt of anger and frustration exploded from D'mahl's throat. "You think I don't know the game you people are playing?" he said. "You think I don't know what you're doing? But why? Why are you so anxious for me to suck void? Why did you want me here in the first place?"

"Because of who you are, Jofe D'mahl," Areth said. "Because of *Wandering Dutchmen*. Because you may be the one we have sought. The one who can share the truth and lift this burden from our souls."

"Now it's flattery, is it?"

Areth turned to face him, and he almost winced at the pain, the despair, the pleading in her eyes. "Not flattery," she said. "Hope. I ask you, one human being to another, to help us. Bandoora would not ask, but I do. Lift our burden, D'mahl, heed the call and lift our burden."

Unable to face those eyes, D'mahl looked off into the star-speckled blackness. Bandoora could no longer be seen, but something out there was indeed beckoning to him with an unseen hand, calling to him with an unheard voice. Even his fear seemed to be a part of it, challenging him to face the void within and the void without and to carve something out of it if he had the greatness of soul to dare.

"All right," he said softly—to Areth, to Bandoora, to all of them, and to that which waited beyond the plex blister of the bridge. "You've won. When Bandoora comes back, I'll answer your damned call. As I once said,

I've got nothing to do but dare."

But the man who had said it seemed long ago and far away.

They were all out on the entrance stage in voidbubbles to see him off. "Eighteen standard hours, D'mahl," Bandoora tapped over the com frequency. "Remember, we've got a fix on you, and we can come right out and get you if it becomes too much. Just tap."

Inside his own bubble, D'mahl nodded silently. He fingered his water flask and his ration cassette. He tapped the time at 4.346. He could not for a moment draw his eyes away from the endless black sea into which he was about to plunge. Millions of pinpoint stars pulsed and throbbed in the darkness like needles pricking his retinas. A silent roaring pulsed up at him from out of the abyss, the howl of the eternal silences themselves. His body seemed to end at the knees. The void appeared to be a tangible substance reaching out to enfold him in its cold and oceanic embrace. He knew that he must commit himself to it *now*, or in the next moment flee gibbering and sweating into the psychic refuge of Bela-37.

"See you at 22.000," he tapped inanely, activating his g-polarizer. Then he flexed his knees and dived off the little metal shelf into the vast unknown.

The act of leaping into the abyss seemed to free him of the worst of his fears, as if he had physically jumped out of them, and for a while he felt no different than he had at times when, flitting from one Trek ship to another, he had temporarily lost sight of all. Then he looked back.

Bela-37 was a small metal cylinder slowly dwindling into the starry darkness. The five tiny figures standing on the entrance stage hovered on the edge of visibility and then melted into the formless outline of the scoutship. Nothing else existed that seemed real. Only the shrinking cylinder of metal, one single work of man in all that nothing. D'mahl shuddered and turned his head away. Somehow the sight of the pure void itself was less terrifying than that of his last connection with the things of man disappearing from view into its depths.

He did not look back again for a long time. When he did, his universe had neither back nor front nor sides nor top nor bottom. All around him was an infinite black hole dusted with meaningless stars, and every direction seemed to be down. His mind staggered, reeled, and rejected this impossible sensory data. Polarities reversed, so that the entire universe of stars and nothingness seemed to be collapsing in on him,

crushing the breath out of him. He screamed, closed his eyes, and was lost in the four-dimensional whirlpool of his own vertigo.

By feel, he turned off the g-polarizer, whirling inside the vacuum of his own mind, sucked spiraling downward into meaningless mazes of total disorientation. Half whimpering, he opened his eyes again to a new transformation.

It was as if he were imbedded in a clear, motionless, crystalline substance englobed by a seamless black wall onto which the stars had been painted. Nothing moved, no event transpired, time could not be said to be passing. It was the very essence of tranquillity; calming, eternal, serene.

D'mahl sighed, felt his constricted muscles relax and his mind drift free. He floated in the void like an immortal embryo in everlasting amnion, waiting for he knew not what. Nor cared.

Time did not pass, but there was duration. D'mahl floated in the void, and waited. Thirst came and was slaked, and he waited. Hunger came; he nibbled ration, and waited. He grew aware of the beating of his own heart, the pulsing of blood through his veins, and he waited. The kinesthetic awareness of his own bodily functions faded, and he still waited.

Nothing moved. Nothing lived. Nothing changed. Silence was eternal. Gradually, slowly, and with infinite subtlety, D'mahl's perception of his environment began to change again. The comforting illusion of being held in crystalline suspension in a finite reality enclosed by a painted backdrop of stars and blackness began to fade under the inexorable pressure of durationless time and forced contemplation. The clear crystal substance of space dissolved into the nothingness whence his mind had conjured it, and as it did, the stars became not points of pain on distant walls but motes of incandescent matter an infinity away across vast gulfs of absolute nothingness. The overwhelming blackness was not the painted walls of a pocket reality but an utter absence of everything—light, warmth, sound, motion, color, life—that went on and on without boundaries to give it shape or span to give it meaning. This was the void and he was in it.

Strangely, D'mahl now found that his mind could encompass this mercilessly true perception of reality, however awesome, however terrifying, without the shield of perceptual illusions. Endless duration had

stripped him of the ability to maintain these illusions, and between gibbering terror and a cool, detached acceptance of the only reality he could maintain, his mind chose detachment.

He was, and he was in the void. That was reality. He moved, and all else was static. That was real. He could hear the sound of his own breath, and all else was silence. That was inescapable truth. He could perceive his body's shape as the interface between his internal reality and the nothingness outside, and all else was formless forever in space and time. That was the void. That was the universe. That was prime reality. That was the reality from which men fled—into religion, dream, art, poetry, philosophy, metaphysics, literature, film, music, war, love, hate, paranoia, the senso and the tap. Into the infinity of realities within.

Outside the realities of the mind there was nothingness without form or end, minutely contaminated with flecks of matter. And man was but the chance end-product of a chain of random and improbable collisions between these insignificant contaminants. The void neither knew nor cared. The void did not exist. It was the eternal and infinite nonexistence that dwarfed and encompassed that which did.

D'mahl floated in this abyss of nonbeing, duration continued, and the void began to insinuate tendrils of its nonself into his being, into his pith and core, until it was reflected by a void within.

Jofe D'mahl experienced himself as a thin shell of being around a core of nothingness floating in more nonbeing that went on tunelessly and formlessly forever. He was the atom-thin interface between the void without and the void within. He was an anomaly in all that nothingness, a chance trick knot whereby nothingness redoubled upon itself had produced somethingness—consciousness, being, life itself. He was nothing and he was everything there was. He was the interface. He did not exist. He was all.

For more timeless duration, Jofe D'mahl existed as a bubble of consciousness in a sea of nonbeing, a chance bit of matter recomplified into a state it was then pleased to call life, a locus of feeling in a nothingness that knew neither feeling nor knowing itself. He had passed beyond terror, beyond pride, beyond humility, into a reality where they had no meaning, where nothing had meaning, not even meaning itself.

He tried to imagine other bubbles of consciousness bobbing in the everlasting void—on Bela-37, on the ships of the Trek, on unknown planets

circling those abstract points of light contaminating the sterile perfection of the abyss. But out here in the true void, in this endless matrix of nonbeing, the notion that consciousness, or even life itself, was anything but the improbable product of a unique and delicate chain of random interactions between bits of recomplicated nothingness called "matter" seemed hopelessly jejune and pathetically anthropocentric. One possible chain of unlikely events led to life and all others led back to nothingness. One misstep on the part of nonexistent fate, and the unlikely spell was broken.

The wonder was not that life had arisen so sparsely, but that it had arisen at all.

D'mahl floated in the blackness of the abyss, in the sea of timeless nonbeing, clinging to the life-preserver of one incontrovertible truth. I am, he thought. I exist, and every thought I've ever had, every reality that ever existed in my mind, also exists. This may be prime reality, but everything that is, is real.

Coldly, calmly, almost serenely, Jofe D'mahl waited in the silent immobile darkness for the recall signal from Bela-37, the call to return from the nonbeing of the void to the frail multiplexity of the worlds of man.

They were all out on the entrance stage in voidbubbles to greet him. Silently, they conveyed him inside the scoutship, their eyes speaking of the new bond between them. With a strange ceremoniousness, they escorted D'mahl into the ship's commissary. Bandoora seated him at a short side of one of the rectangular tables, then sat down across its length from him. The others arranged themselves on either long side of the table. It would have been a moot point as to who was at the foot and who the head were it not for another of the scoutship's endless holos of space forming the wall behind Bandoora. This one was a view of the galaxy as seen from far out in the intergalactic emptiness, and it haloed Bandoora's head in Stardust and blackness.

"Now that you have confronted the void, Jofe D'mahl," Bandoora said solemnly, "you are ready to share the truth."

Petty annoyance began to fade the reality of D'mahl's so recent experience from the forefront of his consciousness. This was beginning to seem like some kind of ridiculous ceremony. Were they going to treat his experience out there as an initiation into some ludicrous *religion*? Replete

with incantations, tribal secrets, and Bandoora as high priest?

"Say what you have to say, Bandoora," he said. "But please spare me the formalities."

"As you wish, D'mahl," Bandoora said. His eyes hardened, seemed to pick up black flashes of void from the holo of space behind him. "What happened between you and the void is between you and the void," he said. "But you felt it. And for half a millennium our instruments have been confirming it."

"Confirming what?" D'mahl muttered. But the quaver in his voice would not let him hide from that awful foretaste that bubbled up into his consciousness from the void inside.

"We have instruments far beyond what we've let you people believe," Bandoora said, "and we've had them for a long time. We've gravscanned tens of thousands of stars, not thousands. We've found thousands of planets, not hundreds. We've found hundreds of Earth-parameter planets orbiting in habitable zones, not dozens. We've been lying, D'mahl. We've been lying to you for centuries."

"Why?" D'mahl whispered, knowing the answer, feeling it screaming at him from the holo behind Bandoora's head, from the voidsucker's opaque eyes, from the void beyond.

"You know why," Doru said harshly, "Because they're nothing but dead rock and gas. Over seven hundred of them, D'mahl."

"All of them should have been teeming with life by any parameters our scientists can construct," Areth Lorenzi said. "For centuries, we hoped that the next one or the one after that would disprove the only possible conclusion. But we've not found so much as a microbe on any of them. We have no hope left."

"Gets as far as protein molecules sometimes," Nyborg grunted. "Maybe one in eighty."

"But the telltale probes can't—"

"Telltale!" Doru snorted. "The telltale probes are more illusion to protect you people! We've got microspectrographs that could pick up a DNA molecule ten light-years away, and we've had them for centuries."

"We already know that 997-Beta-II is dead," Sidi said. "We knew it before we reported to the Council of Pilots. This whole mission, like hundreds before it, is an empty gesture."

"But why have you been lying to us like this?" D'mahl shouted. "What

right did you have? What—"

"What were we supposed to say?" Bandoora shouted back. "That it's all dead? That life on Earth was a unique accident? That nothing exists but emptiness and dead matter and the murderers of the only life there ever was? What are we supposed to say, D'mahl? What are we supposed to do?"

"For over two centuries we have lived with the conviction that our mission is hopeless," Areth said softly. "For over two centuries we have been leading the Trek from one false hope to the next, knowing that hope was false. Don't judge us too harshly. What else could we have done?"

"You could have told us," D'mahl croaked. "You could have told us the truth."

"Could we?" Areth said. "Could we have told you before you yourself confronted the void?"

Anger and despair chased each other in a yin-yang mandala at Jofe D'mahl's core. Anger at the smug arrogance of these narrow lamer people who dared treat all of human civilization as retarded children who could not be told the truth. Despair at the awful nature of that truth. Anger at the thought that perhaps the voidsuckers were hiding their true reason for silence, that they had kept the Trek in ignorance so that they wouldn't risk the termination of the scoutship program and with it the one act that gave their lamer lives meaning. Despair at the treacherous thought that the voidsuckers might be right after all, that the truth would shatter the Trek like radiation-rotted plex. Anger at himself for even thinking of joining the voidsuckers and sitting in such arrogant judgment.

"You lamer drool-ridden dreeks!" D'mahl finally snarled. "How dare you judge us like that! Who do you think you are, gods on Olympus? Living your narrow little lives, cutting yourselves off from the worlds inside, and then presuming to decide what we can face!"

His flesh trembled, his muscles twanged like steel wire tensed to the snapping point, and adrenaline's fire pounded through his arteries as his hands ground into the edge of the table.

But the voidsuckers sat there looking up at him quietly, and what he saw in their eyes was relief, not anger, or reaction to anger.

"Then you'll do it, D'mahl?" Bandoora said softly.

"Do what?"

"Tell them in your own way," Areth said. "Lift the burden from us."

"What?"

"When I tapped *Wandering Dutchmen*, I felt you might be the one," Bandoora said. "You sensed the edges of the truth. You seemed to be looking at the void and yet beyond. You know your people, D'mahl, as we do not. You've just said it yourself. Tell them. Make a senso that tells them."

"All this . . . this whole trip ... it was all a trick to get me out here ... to tell me this ... to drop your load of slok on me. . . ."

"I promised you the chance to make the greatest senso of your career," Bandoora said. "Did I lie?"

D'mahl subsided into his chair. "But you didn't tell me I was going to have to succeed," he said.

IV

The scoutship came in tail-first on a long shallow arc over the hydrogen interface, still decelerating. Tapping Bela-37's visual frequency, Jofe D'mahl saw the ships of the Trek suddenly appear in all their glory as the scoutship passed the auroral wavefront, as if the interface were a rainbow curtain going up on a vast ballet of motion and light.

Thousands of shining cylinders hung in the blackness, their surfaces jeweled with multicolored lights. The space between them coruscated and shone with shuttle exhausts and a haze of subtle reflections off thousands of moving voidbubbles. The thin purple wake of the Trek cut an ethereal swath of manifested motion and time through the eternal immobile nothingness.

The Trek seemed larger and lovelier than even D'mahl's memory had made it during the long sullen trip hack. Its light drove back the everlasting darkness, its complexity shattered the infinite sameness of the void; it danced in the spotlight of its own brilliance. It was alive. It was beautiful. It was home.

Bandoora had calculated well; as Bela-37 passed stemward of the Trek, its relative velocity dwindled away to zero and it hung in space about twenty kilometers behind the great concourse of ships. Bandoora turned the scoutship end-for-end and began to ease it toward the Trek, toward its eventual parking slot just behind the hydrogen interface. D'mahl broke his tap with the scout's visual frequency and lay on the g-plate in his room for a long moment staring into the starfield holo before him for the last time.

Then, like a lover reaching for remembered flesh after a long parting, like a man rising out of a long coma toward the dawning light, he tapped Jiz Rumoku.

He was sitting at a clear glass table sipping an icy blue beverage out of a pewter mug, washing down a swallow of lavender sponge. Across the table, Varn Kamenev was pouring himself another mugful from a matching pitcher. The table was on a disk of clear plex, floating, like dozens of others, through what seemed like a topless and bottomless forest of ivy. He didn't recognize the restaurant, but didn't bother to tap for it.

"Home is the hero," he said with Jiz's throat and lips, feeling her body warm to his presence.

"Jof! Where are you, what happened, let me tap—"

"Wait for the flesh, Jiz," he told her. "I'll be in your gallery within two hours. I wanted you to be the first, but I've got to zip-tap my way back to realities before I die of thirst."

"But what was it like—"

"Miles and miles of miles and miles," he said, feeling a surge of exhilaration at the thought that he was with someone who could and would tap for the reference. "Next year in Jerusalem," he said with her mouth. He kissed her hand with her lips and broke the tap.

And zip-tapped through the changes like a random search program for the phantom tapper.

He was Para Running, soaring naked in a low-g dive into a pool of fragrant rose-colored water heated to body temperature. He watched Bela-37 pop through the hydrogen interface with himself aboard from the sensorium track of the shuttle pilot, then watched it arrive back at the Trek on the news-summary frequency. He stood in his own grand salon glaring through the party's mists at Haris Bandoora, then tapped it in realtime—the bare emerald floor, the darkened crystal trees, and, beyond the plex, the great concourse of ships shining in the galactic night.

He was in John Benina's body, looking down on Sundance Corridor. Vines crawled up and down the sheer glass faces of the apartments now, and pines grew around the faceted mirror in the center of the square, subduing the usual brilliance. He tapped a fragment of *Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom*, a senso by Iran Capabula that had been premiered during his absence: bent over under a yellow sun in a clear blue sky, he was weeding an endless field of fantastically colorful flowers, soaked in their incenselike perfume. He danced a few measures of *Starburst* as male lead

for the Far Look Ballet. He made love for the first time on a hill of blue fur in *Samarkand*, for the last time at Jiz's, and a dozen times in between. He edited *Blackout*, his first senso, and *Wandering Dutchmen*, his latest. He dined amidst colored clouds on *Ariel* and at the shore of Blood Lake on *Lothlorien* and a dozen other meals between. He tapped random sequences of every senso he had ever made.

And when he was through, he was one with the D'mahl that had been, he was back in the universe of infinite realities that he had left; he was whole, and he was home.

Brigadoon, as D'mahl had expected, was totally transformed. But the nature of the current flash was hardly anything that he would have expected, and something about it chilled him at the core.

Twodeck was a sim of an ancient Alpine Earth village—simmed wooden houses, grass growing on synthetic loam, pine trees; even the bulkheads were hidden by a 360-degree holo of snowcapped mountains under a blue sky. The amusements of sixdeck had been cut down and ludicrously simplified to fit into an American county fair motif: Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, dart-and-balloon games, a baseball diamond, even mechanical sims of prize cattle, sheep, dogs, and pigs. Once again, the deck was enclosed in a 360-degree holo, this one of fields of corn waving in a breeze. Eightdeck, a residential deck, was a simmed African village—thatched huts in a circle, a kraal containing mechanical cattle and antelope, lions and hyenas slinking about the holoed veldt that enclosed it. Tendeck had actually been made over into a functional dirt digger deck: row after row of pine tree seedlings, thickly-packed vine trellises, beds of flowers, people in dirt digger green bustling about everywhere.

It wasn't so much the theme of the flash that appalled D'mahl—*Brigadoon* had gone through nature flashes before—but the monomania of its application, the humorlessness of it all, the sheer lack of brio. This latest transformation of *Brigadoon* seemed so deadly earnest, an attempt to accurately sim old Earth environments rather than to use them to ring artistic changes.

Twelvedeck, Jiz's deck, the epicenter of all of *Brigadoon's* waves of transformation, appalled him most of all. Everything was wood and trees. The shops and restaurants were constructed of simmed logs with rough bark on them; the windows were small square panes of plex set in wooden grillworks. The furniture in them was of simmed rough-hewn wood. The paths were flagstone. Huge simmed chestnut and eucalyptus trees were

everywhere, towering to the ceiling of the deck to form an almost seamless forest canopy, and dwarfing and almost crowding out the modest neoprimitive cabins. The air had been made redolent with the odors of burning leaves and moldering loam; birdcalls and vague animal rustlings burbled continually in the ear.

Jiz Rumoku's gallery was a single large room carved out of the simmed stump of what would have been an enormous redwood tree, with her living quarters a rude lean-to atop it. Inside, the walls and floor were simmed redwood planking, the ceiling was ribbed by heavy wooden beams, and an orange fire flickered and roared in a red brick fireplace. Elegant simmed oak tables and chests in the clean, severe Shaker style served to display representational woodcarvings, clay pottery, blue-and-white ceramic dishes, simple gold and silver jewelry, wickerwork baskets and animals, neohomespun clothing. Cast iron stoves, scythes, tools, and plowshares were scattered around the gallery.

Jiz stood behind a low table wearing a clinging, form-fitting dress of red-and-white checked gingham, cut in bare-breasted Minoan style. She was drinking something out of a clay mug.

"Jof!" she shouted, and they cross-tapped. D'mahl felt the scratchiness of the dress against her skin as his body kissed her lips and his arms hugged him to her. He tasted the remnants of the drink in her mouth—something sweet, slightly acrid, and vaguely alcoholic. His own lips tasted hard and electric by comparison.

"I don't know where to begin!" she said, as they broke the tap. "Let me tap your sensorium track of the trip!"

"Not in the banks yet," D'mahl said. "Remember, I was cut off."

"That's right! How bizarre! Are you actually going to have to *tell* me about it?"

"I'll tap the recordings into the banks soon enough," D'mahl mumbled, wondering whether he was lying. "But in the meantime, what's all *this*, talking about bizarre?"

"That's right," Jiz said, "you *have* been out of touch. How strange! The transmutational flash didn't last quite as long as I had expected, mostly because it began to seem so artificial, so out of sync with our future vector."

"Future vector?"

"Eden."

"*Eden?*"

"Our coming new home, Jof. We couldn't keep calling it 997-Beta II, could we? We had a referendum and 'Eden' won, though I preferred Olympia. I've always found the Greek mythos more simpatico."

Chimes of nausea rolled through D'mahl's being from a center of nothingness below his sternum. "Don't you think all this is a bit premature, Jiz?" he said.

"That's the nature of my game, Jof, you know that," Jiz said, touching the tip of his nose with a playful fingertip. "But this time, I'm doing more than creating flash. I'm helping to prepare us for the transformation."

"Transformation?"

She flitted around the gallery, touching wood, brick, clay, wicker, iron. "Oh Jof, you said it yourself in *Wandering Dutchmen!* Flying Dutchmen on an endless sea, that's what we've been too long. Eternal adolescents low-riding our faerie ships through the night. And now that we've got a chance to grow up, to sink new roots in fresh soil, we've got to sync our minds with the coming reality, we've got to climb off the torch we're riding and get closer to the ground. Wood, brick, iron, clay, growing things! *Planetary* things! We're preparing ourselves to pioneer a virgin world."

"Slok," D'mahl muttered under his breath. "Dirtdigger slok," he said aloud. Something like anger began simmering toward nova inside him.

Jiz paused, a butterfly frozen in mid-dance. "What?"

D'mahl looked at her, bare breasts held high over red-and-white gingham, proudly presiding over the synthetic primitivism she had created, over the vain and pathetic dream that would never be, and for a long moment she seemed to be made of thin clear glass that would shatter at the merest sound of his voice. The gallery, twelvedeck, *Brigadoon*, the Trek were clouds of smoke that would dissipate at a careless wave of his hand. Beyond and within, the void gibbered and laughed at poor wraiths who tried so hard to be real. How can I tell her? D'mahl thought. And to what end? To what damned end?

"Nothing," he said lamely. "I guess I just don't like the idea of growing up. I've got too much pan in my peter."

Jiz giggled as she tapped the triple-reference pun, and it enabled the moment to slide by. But D'mahl felt a distancing opening up between himself and Jiz, between himself and the Trek, between reality and illusion. Is this what it feels like to be a voidsucker? he wondered. If it is, you can torch it to plasma and feed it to the converter!

"But you've been out there, Jof," Jiz said, moving back across the gallery toward him. "You've read the telltale wavefront, you've looked inside the gates of Eden." Her eyes sparkled, but beyond that sugarplum glow D'mahl saw only the lurking void. "Are there oceans with fish and skies full of birds? Is the grass green? Do the plants flower?"

"A gentleman never tells," D'mahl muttered. What do I say, that the green grass is copper salts and the oceans are blue with cyanide and the skies full of poison? He began to feel more sympathy for the voidsuckers now. How could you make a life out of telling people these things? How do *you* like being the angel of death?

"Jof!"

"I can't say anything, Jiz, I promised not to."

"Oh come on, how could the voidsuckers or the Council squeeze a promise like that out of you?"

With enormous effort, D'mahl painted a smug smile across his face; the creases in his skin felt like stress-cracks in a mask of glass. "Because that's the quid I'm paying for their pro quo, ducks," he said.

"You mean . . . ?"

"That's right. You didn't think I'd spend all that time out there and let some dry-as-Luna bulletin from the Council upstage me, did you? No bulletin—997-Beta-II—Eden—is my next senso."

Jiz bounced up, then down, and kissed him on the lips. "I cog it'll be your greatest," she said.

D'mahl hugged her briefly to him, his eyes looking through her mane of hair to a set of plain clay dishes on an oaken chest beside the brick fireplace. He shuddered, feeling the void inside every atom of every molecule of matter in those simmed projections of a past that was dead forever into a future that would never be. He was committed to doing it now, the way through was the only way out, and he had taken it upon himself to find it.

"It had better be," he said. "It had damned well better be."

D'mahl stood in Aric Moreau's body amidst solemn people in their loathsome homespun wandering drool-eyed through tightly packed rows of pine seedlings jamming a dirt-digger deck on *Glade*. There was no attempt to sim anything here; the dirt-diggers were force-growing a forest for transplantation to the nonexistent fertile soil of Eden, and, as with the

other dirt digger decks he had tapped, aesthetics had been gobbled up by function. Angrily, he made excrement rain from the sky, turned the fashionable neohomespun garments to filthy denim rags, and threw in a few wrathful lightning bolts for good measure.

He ran the segment of Bela-37's report where the holo of 997-Beta-II hung like an overripe fruit in the center of the scoutship's bridge and made a tongue and mouth appear at the equator, giving a big juicy raspberry. He floated in the void, falling, falling, eternally falling into an infinite black hole dusted with meaningless stars. He caused the stars to become crudely painted dots on black paper, and punched his way out of the paper-bag continuum and into—the abyss.

He tapped a newstape from 708, the year 557-Gamma-IV had been the light that failed, and watched Trekkers in Biblical-style robes moping about a dirt digger deck crammed with overgrown flower beds and the reek of rotting vegetation. He exaggerated the sour expressions into ludicrous clown caricatures of themselves that melted slowly into pumpkins, and Big Ben chimed midnight. He stood poised on the entrance stage of Bela-37, reeling and quaking, utterly overwhelmed by the black immensities in which the scoutship hung precariously suspended.

He snorted, took the effects ring off his head like a discarded crown, and sat in the cocoon chair staring moodily at the microtape pod turning futilely on the output spindle of his editor. He pressed a blue button and wiped the pod. The slok I've been laying down these three days just isn't worth saving, he thought. I'm just diddling with the banks and the effects ring; it doesn't add up to anything.

And time was growing short. Everyone knew that Bela-37 had returned, and everyone knew that the reason there had been no bulletin was that Jofe D'mahl was going to release the news in the form of a senso. Jiz in her innocence and Bandoora in his cowardly cunning had seen to that. The longer it took for the senso to appear, the more cosmic import it took on, and the more certain people became that the only possible reason for releasing the scoutship report in this bizarre manner was to do karmic justice to the greatest and most joyous event in the history of the Trek, to write a triumphant finis to man's long torchship ride.

So the longer he sat here dead in space like a ship with its torch blown out, the farther people would travel along hope's false vector, the worse the crash would be when it came, the harder it became to conceive of a senso that could overcome all that dynamic inertia, and on into the next turning of the terrible screw. Now D'mahl understood only too well why the voidsuckers had chosen to lie for half a millennium. The longer the lie

went on, the more impossible it became to dare to tell the truth.

And what was the way out that the voidsuckers took? They ignored the asymptotic nature of the Frankenstein Monster they had created and gave themselves over to the void! For them, the ultimate reality was the greatest escape illusion of them all.

D'mahl slammed both hands angrily down on the edge of the editor console. All right, damn it, if the void is where all vectors lead, then the void has to be the core! It's the best footage I've got anyway. I'll go to the center, and I won't come back till I've got the heart of this senso beating in the palm of my hand.

He fitted the pod of his voidsuck onto the editor's auxiliary playback spindle and programmed continuous-loop replay. He started to program a twenty-four-standard-hour limit, then changed his mind. No, he thought, I want the power in my hand, and I want this to be open-ended. He programmed a cut-off command into the effects ring bank, threw blocks across all other effects programming, and put the ring on his head.

Now he would confront his void footage as if it were the original naked reality, with only the power to break the loop, without the reality-altering powers of the editor. And I won't use the cutoff until I can come back with what I need, he promised himself as he opened his tap to the voidsuck pod. I won't come back until I can come back riding my own torch again.

He was an immortal embryo floating free in the eternal amnion of the universal abyss, and the millions of stars were motes of incandescent matter an infinity away across vast gulfs of absolute nothingness. The overwhelming blackness was an utter absence of everything—light, warmth, sound, color, life—that went on and on without boundaries to give it shape or span to give it meaning. This was the void and he was in it.

But to his surprise, D'mahl found that his mind now immediately grasped this mercilessly true perception of reality without illusion, and with only the residual somatic vertigo and terror recorded on the sensorium tape. Even this soon faded as the tape's memory caught up with the cool clarity of mind it had taken him an unknown duration of disorientation and terror to achieve in realtime.

He was, and he was in the void. He moved, and all else was static. He could perceive his body's shape, the interface between his internal reality and the nothingness outside, and all else was without edge or interface

forever in space and time. Outside the realities of his own mind was void without form or end, minutely contaminated with flecks of matter, and man was but the chance end-product of a chain of random and improbable collisions between these insignificant contaminants. The void neither knew nor cared. The void did not exist. It was the eternal and infinite nonexistence that dwarfed and encompassed that which did. D'mahl experienced himself as a thin shell of being around a core of nothingness floating in more nonbeing, a trick anomaly of somethingness lost in timeless and formless forever. Nothing had meaning, not even meaning itself. The wonder was not that life had arisen but once in this endless matrix of nonbeing, but that it had arisen at all.

Black void, meaninglessly dusted with untouchable stars, the internal churnings of his own flesh, the utter knowledge of the utter emptiness that surrounded him, and timeless duration. Once you have reached this place, D'mahl thought, then what? Once asked, the question became ridiculous, for here in the void there was nothing to address any question to but himself. There was nothing to perceive but the absence of perception. There was nothing to perceive. There was nothing. There wasn't.

D'mahl floated in physical nothingness and mental void waiting for the transcendent revelation he had sought. Waiting for the revelation. Waiting for. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

Games chased themselves through his mind as he waited in the absence of event, in the absence of meaningful perception, in the absence of measurable time, in the total absence. He counted his own pulsebeats trying to reestablish time, but soon lost count and forgot even what he had been doing. He tried to imagine the nature of what it was he sought, but that immediately tangled itself up in tautological feedback loops: if he knew what he sought, he would not have to seek it. He tried to speculate on what lay beyond the infinite nothingness that surrounded him in order to establish some frame of metaphysical reference, but any such concept hovered forever in unreachable realms of mathematical gobbledygook. He tried to immerse himself in the nothingness itself and found he was there already.

Games evaporated from his consciousness, and then the possibility of games, and he became nothing but a viewpoint trapped in a vacuum of

nondata. The blackness of space could no longer be perceived as anything like a color, and the stars became no more than mere flecks of retinal static. Vision and hearing were becoming forgotten concepts in this utter nonreality where the only sensory data seemed to be the noise in the sensory systems themselves.

Thought itself began to follow the senses into oblivion, and finally there was nothing left but a focus of ache in the vast and endless nothing, a bonging mantra of boredom so total, so complete, so without contrast that it became a world of universal pain.

No, not even pain, for pain would have been welcome relief here.

Something somewhere whimpered. Something nowhere whimpered. Nothing nowhere whimpered. Why? Why? Why? it cried. Why? Why? Why? Why is this happening to me? Why is this not happening to me? Why doesn't something happen? Happen . . . happen . . . happen . . . happen . . . happen . . . happen . . .

A mental shout shattered the void. "Why am I doing this to myself?"

And there was mind, chastising itself. And there was mind, chastising itself for its own stupidity. There was mental event, there was content, there was form.

There was the mind of Jofe D'mahl floating forever in eternal boredom. And laughing at itself.

You *are* doing this to yourself, you silly dreck! D'mahl realized. And with that realization, the meaningless patterns on his retinas resolved themselves into a vision of the galactic abyss, speckled with stars. And in his mind, that vision further resolved itself into microtape unreeling endlessly on a pod in his editor in his living quarters on *Excelsior* near the center of the Trek.

You're doing it *all* to yourself, cretin! *You* control this reality, but you forgot you control it. There isn't any problem. There never was a problem. The only problem is that we refused to see it.

"Cut," D'mahl tapped, and he was sitting in his cocoon chair bathed in his own sweat, staring at the console of his editor, laughing, feeling the power of his own torch coursing through him, crackling from his fingertips, enlivening his exhausted flesh.

Laughing, he cleared the blocks from his effects banks. Who needs planets? Who needs life beyond the germ we carry? Who needs prime reality at all?

"*Réalité, c'est moi,*" D'mahl muttered. He had said it before, but hadn't

savored its full meaning. For on his brow he wore not a crown of thorns but the crown of creation.

He ran back a few feet of the tape and floated once more in the empty star-dusted blackness. He laughed. "Let there be light," he tapped. And behold, the firmament shattered, and there was light.

"Cut," Jofe D'mahl tapped. And sat hovering over his editor. And began to carve another segment of his own meaning out of the void.

A bright golden light fills your vision and a delicious warm glow suffuses your body. The light recedes until it becomes something no naked human eye could bear: the plasma heart of a torchtube, which seems to beat and throb like a living thing. And now you are straddling this phoenix-flame; it grows between your legs and yet you are riding it through a galaxy preternaturally filled with stars, a blazing firmament of glory. As you ride faster and faster, as the warm glow in your body builds and builds with every throb of the torchtube, letters of fire light-years high appear across the starfield:

RIDING THE TORCH

by Jofe D'mahl

And you scream in ecstasy and the universe explodes into crystal shards of light.

An old man with long white hair, a matted white beard, dressed in an ancient grimy robe, sits on a fluffy white cloud picking his red, beak-like nose. He has wild-looking pop eyes under bushy white brows and a shock of lightning bolts in his right hand. On the cloud next to him sits Satan in a natty red tuxedo, black cape, and bow tie, with apple-green skin and a spiffy black Vandyke. He is puffing on the end of his long sinuous tail, exhaling occasional whiffs of lavender smoke that smells of brimstone. You are watching this scene from slightly above, inhaling stray Satanic vapors. They are mildly euphoric.

"Job, Job," Satan says. "Aren't you ever going to get tired of bragging about that caper? What did it prove, anyway?"

"That my creatures love me no matter how much crap I dump on them," the old man says. "I don't see them building no Sistine Chapels to *you*, Snake-eyes."

"You really are a sadistic old goat, aren't you? You ought to audition for *my* part."

"You think I couldn't do it? You think you're such a red-hot badass?" The old man stands up, scowling thunders, brandishing his lightning bolts. "By the time I got through with those yucks, they'd be drooling to *you* for mercy. Either way, I am the greatest. Remember how I creamed those Egyptians?"

Satan blows lavender smoke at him. "Ten crummy plagues and a drowning scene. Strictly amateur stuff."

"*Oh yeah? Oh yeah?*" the old man shouts, flinging random lightning bolts, his eyes rolling like pinwheels. "I'll show you who's the tail-torcher around here! I'll show you who's Lord God Allah Jehovah, King of the Universe!"

"Oh, really?" Satan drawls. "Tell you what, you want to make it double or nothing on the Job bet?"

"Anytime, Snake-eyes, anytime!"

"Okay, Mr. I Am, you dumped all you had on Job and he still crawled on his hands and knees to kiss your toes. If you're such a hotshot, let's see you break them. All of them. Let's see you make the whole human race curl up into fetal balls, stick their thumbs in their mouths, and give up. That's the bet, Mr. In the Beginning. I'll take them against you."

"You gotta be kidding! I run this whole show! I'm omniscient, omnipotent, and I can deal marked cards off the bottom of the deck."

"I'll give you even money anyway."

The old man breaks into maniacal laughter. Satan looks up into your face, shrugs, and twirls his finger around his right temple. "You got a bet, sonny!" the old man says. "How's *this* for openers?" And with a mad whoop, he starts flinging lightning bolts down from his cloud onto the world below.

You are standing in a crowded street in Paris as the sky explodes and the buildings melt and run and the Eiffel Tower crumples and falls and your flesh begins to slough off your bones. You are a great bird, feathers aflame in a burning sky, falling toward a wasteland of blowing ash and burning buildings. You are a dolphin leaping out of a choking bitter sea into sandpaper air. You stand beside your orange orchard watching the

trees ignite like torches under a sky-filling fireball as your hair bursts into flame. You lie, unable to breathe, on an endless plain of rubble and gray ash, and the sky is a smear of cancerous purples and browns.

You are watching Satan and the wild-eyed old man drifting above the ruined ball of the Earth on their fleecy clouds. Satan looks a bit greener than before, and he sucks nervously on the end of his tail. The old man, grinning, flings occasional lightning bolts at small islands of green below, turning them to more gray ash and purplish-brown wasteland.

"Zap!" the old man giggles, flinging a bolt. "How's *that*, Snake-eyes? I *told* you I was omnipotent. They never had a chance. Fork over, Charley!" He holds out the palm of his left hand.

"I've got to admit that tops your Land of Egypt number," Satan says. "However . . ." He takes his tail out of his mouth and blows a pointed arrow of lavender smoke upward past your nose. Following it, you see dozens of distant silvery cylinders moving outward into the starry blackness of the galactic night.

"Oh, yeah?" the old man says, cocking a lightning bolt at the fleet of converted asteroid freighters. "I'll take care of *that*!"

"Hold on, Grandpa!" Satan drawls. "You can't win your bet that way! If there are none of them left to give up, then I win and you lose."

Trembling with rage, the old man uncocks his throwing arm. His eyes whirl like runaway galaxies, his teeth grind into each other, and black smoke steams out of his ears. "You think you're so damned smart, do you? You think you can get the best of the old Voice from the Whirlwind, do you? You think those shaved apes have a chance of making it to the next green island in their lousy tin-can outrigger canoes?"

"There's a sweet little world circling Tau Ceti, and they've got what it takes to get that far," Satan says, throwing you a little wink on the side.

"Don't tell me about Tau Ceti!" the old man roars. "I'm omnipotent, I'm omniscient, and I can lick any being in this bar!" He snaps his fingers and you, he, and Satan are standing on a rolling meadow of chartreuse grass under a royal-blue sky scudded with faerie tracteries of white cloud. Huge golden fernlike trees sway gently in a sweet fragrant breeze, swarms of tiny neon-bright birds drift among beds of huge orange-, emerald-, ruby-, and sapphire-colored flowers, filling the air with eldritch music. Red velvety kangaroolike creatures with soulful lavender eyes graze contentedly, leap about, and nuzzle each other with long mobile snouts.

"Here's your sweet little world circling Tau Ceti," the old man snarls.

"Here's the new Eden those monkeys are making for, and it's as good a job as I did on Earth, if I do say so myself."

"Maybe better," Satan admits.

"Is *it*?" the old man howls with a voice of thunder. And his eyes rumble and he flings a handful of lightning bolts into the air, and his face turns bright red with rage as he screams: "Turn to slok!"

And the sky becomes a sickly chemical violet veined with ugly gray clouds. And the chartreuse grass, the golden fern trees, and the bright flowers dissolve into a slimy brown muck as the birds and red velvet kangaroos evaporate into foul purple mists. And the brown muck and purple mists mingle and solidify. . . .

And you are clad in a heavy spacesuit, standing on an endless plain of purplish-brown rock under a cruel dead sky, one of a dozen suited, men crawling over the planetary corpse like ants on a bone pile.

You are watching Satan and the old man hovering over the converted asteroid freighters of the Trek as they slink away from Tau Ceti V into the galactic night. A gray pall seems to exude from the ships, as if the plex of their ports and blisters were grimed with a million years of despair's filth.

"Take a look at them now!" the old man crows. He snaps his fingers and the three of you are looking down into a primitive dirt digger deck from a catwalk. The scudding of green is like an unwholesome fungus on the synthetic loam, the air smells of ozone, and the dirt diggers below are gray hunchbacked gnomes shuffling about as if under 4 gs. "It won't be long now," the old man says. "It's a century to the next live world I've put out here. None of them are going to live to see it, and boy oh boy, do they know it!"

He snaps his fingers again and the three of you are standing by the torchtube in a first-generation residence deck: grim blue corridors, leaden overheads, ugly steel plating, row after row of identical gray doors. The people plodding aimlessly up and down seem as leached of color and life as their surroundings.

"And before their children can get there, they're going to start running out of things," the old man says. "Carbon for their flesh. Calcium for their bones. Phosphorus for their life's juices. Iron for their blood." The light begins to get dim, the walls begin to get misty. The people begin to slump and melt, and you can feel your own bones begin to soften, your blood thinning to water; your whole body feels like a decomposing pudding. "They're going to turn slowly to slok themselves," the old man says, leering.

He snaps his fingers once more, and you are an abstract viewpoint beside the old man and Satan as they hang over the dimming lights of the Trek.

"Well, Snake-eyes, are you ready to pay up now?" the old man says smugly, holding out his palm.

"They haven't given up yet," Satan says, dragging on the tip of his tail.

"You're a stubborn dreek!" the old man snaps irritably.

Satan blows out a plume of lavender smoke that seems endless. It billows and grows and expands into a great cloud of mist that completely envelops the fleet of converted asteroid freighters. "So are they," he says.

And when the lavender mist clears, the Trek has been transformed. Where there had been scores of converted asteroid freighters slinking through space in their own pall of gloom, there are now hundreds of new Trekborn torchships coruscating like a pirate's treasure of jewels against the black velvet of the night, promenading through the abyss behind their own triumphant rainbow shield, the hydrogen interface.

Satan laughs, he cracks his long sinuous tail like a whip, and the three of you are standing beside the great circumtorchtube coils of a sifting deck, amid recovery canisters, control consoles, and a Medusa's head of transfer coils. You can feel the immense power of the torch in your bones, through the soles of your feet. Satan points grandly from canister to canister with the tip of his tail. "Carbon for their flesh," he mimics in a croaking parody of the old man's voice. "Calcium for their bones. Phosphorus for their life's juices. Iron for their blood. And all of it from the interstellar medium itself, which you can't get rid of without shutting down your whole set, Mr. Burning Bush! They're not turning to slok, they're turning slok to themselves."

He breaks into wild laughter, snaps his tail again, and the three of you are standing in a small pine forest in a dirt-digger deck beneath a holoed blue sky inhaling the odors of growing things. "Lo, they have created a garden in your wilderness," Satan says, doubling over with laughter as the old man's face purples with rage. Another crack of the tail and you are floating above a grand promenade in a particularly brilliant amusement deck: restaurants in gold, sapphire, and silver, diamond tables drifting on null-g plates, gypsy dancers twirling weightless in the air, rosy fountains, sparkling music, and the smell of carnival. "And a city of light in your everlasting darkness."

Yet another snap of the tail and the three of you are drifting in the center of the Trek, surrounded by the great concourse of bright ships,

under the aurora of the hydrogen interface. Satan holds out his palm to the old man. "Does this look as if they're going to give up, Mr. Have No Others Before Me? All they'll ever need, and all from pure slok! They can go on forever. Cross my palm with silver, Mr. Creator of All He Surveys. Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command."

The old man's face turns from purple to black. Fire shoots out of his nostrils. The hairs of his beard curl and uncurl with a furious electrical crackle. "For I am a god of vengeance and wrath," he roars, "and I am going to smite them hip and thigh."

"You're wasting your dingo act on *me*, cobber," Satan drawls, puffing out lavender smoke rings. "They've got you by the short hairs."

"Oh, have they, sonny? Wait till they get to their next Ultima Thule!" The old man snaps his fingers with a peal of thunder and the three of you are standing in a forest of immensely tall and stately trees with iridescent green bark and huge sail-like leaves at their crown that roll and snap ponderously in the wind. A thick carpet of brownish mosslike grass covers the cool forest floor, punctuated with red, blue, yellow, and purple fans of flowery fungi. Feathered yellow and orange monkey-size bipeds leap from leaf to leaf high overhead, and fat little purplish balls of fur roll about the brownish grass nibbling on the fungi. The air smells of cinnamon and apples, and the slight overrich-ness of oxygen makes you pleasantly lightheaded.

"Let me guess," Satan sighs, sucking languidly on the tip of his tail.

"Turn to slok!" the old man bellows, and his shout is thunder that rends the sky and the forest crystallizes and shatters to dust and the brownish grass hardens to rock and the feathered bipeds and purplish furballs decompress and explode and you are standing on a plain of mean brown rock streaked with green under a blue-black sky soiled with green clouds, and the air reeks of chlorine.

"You're slipping, Mr. You Were," Satan says. "They don't need your gardens any more, for theirs is the power and the glory forever, amen."

"Oh, is it?" the old man says, grinning. "They don't need the old Master of the Universe any more, do they? You've been the Prince of Liars too long, sonny. You don't understand how these jerks have been programmed. For thus have I set them one against the other and each against himself. It's the oldest trick in the book."

He snaps his fingers and the three of you are pressed up against the outer bulkhead of an amusement deck as a wild-eyed mob of dirt-diggers surges through it, smashing crystal tables, toppling fire-sculptures,

brandishing crosses wrapped with simmered grape leaves, and chanting: "No more ships! No more ships! Soil or death!"

"They don't need my gardens any more, do they?" the old man gloats. "I can play their minds like harpsichords, because I created their universe, outer *and* inner." He snaps his fingers. "Look at your masters of energy and matter now!"

And you are standing in a corroding dirt-digger deck breathing sour air. The pine trees are stunted, the grass is sickly, and the dirt-diggers' eyes are feverish and shiny as they bow down to the vine-covered cross. "Groveling on their hands and knees where they belong," the old man says. "The old guilt routine, it gets 'em every time." He snaps his fingers again, and you are falling through a droptube through the decks of a well-maintained ship. The air is sweet, the lights clear and bright, the metallic and jeweled surfaces clean and sparkling, but the peacock crowds seem ridden with fear, whirling at nothing, jumping at shadows. "And if the right don't get them, the left hand will," the old man says. "Each man is an island, each man stands alone. What profiteth them if they gain the universe as long as I hold the mortgage on their souls?"

"Ah, but what profiteth them if they *forsake* your cheapjack housing development and *gain* their souls?" Satan says, blowing chains of smoke rings into each passing deck. The rings of lavender smoke alight on the brows of the people and turn into silvery bands—the first full sensory transceivers, ancestors of the tap. "Behold the tap!" Satan says as the transceiver bands melt into the skulls of their wearers, becoming the surgically implanted tap. "The Declaration of Independence from your stage set, O Producer of Biblical Epics! The bridge between the islands! The door to realities into which you may not follow! The crown of creation!"

Satan turns to you as the three of you leave the droptube in a quiet residential deck: walkways of golden bricks wandering among gingerbread houses of amethyst, quartz, topaz. He blows a smoke ring at you which settles on your head and then sinks into your skull. "What about it, man?" he asks you with a cock of his head at the old man. "Is Merlin the Magnificent here the Be-All and End-All, or just another circus act?"

Satan breaks into mad laughter, and then you are snapping your tail, laughing madly, and blowing lavender puffs of smoke at the old man, who stares at you with bugging pop eyes.

"Where did he go?" the old man says.

"Allow me to introduce myself," you say.

"The Lord is not mocked!" the old man shouts.

"Behold the master of space beyond spaces and times beyond time," you say, sucking on the tip of your tail.

You bounce one of the purplish furballs on your hand under huge iridescent green trees. You stand on the Champs Elysées in fair Paris on lost Earth. You dance in Jofe D'mahl's grand salon and pop a flasher into your mouth which explodes in a flash of pink velvet that transforms you into a woman making love to a golden man on black sands on the shore of a silver lake under blue and orange moons. You ride a surfboard of emerald light in the curl of a wave a mile high that rolls across an endless turquoise sea. You soar singing into the heart of a blue-white sun, burning yet unconsumed.

You are a viewpoint beside Satan and the old man rising through a lifttube in a torchship transformed. Somber dirt digger shorts turn to cloaks of many colors. Trees, ivy, and flowers sprout from metal deck-plates. Corrosion melts from the bulkheads of dirt digger decks, the vine-colored crosses evaporate, and sour-smelling gloomings become fragrant gardens of delight.

Anger boils through the old man. His red face dopplers through purple into ultraviolet black as sparks fly from his gnashing teeth and tiny lightning bolts crackle from his fingertips. "They've . . . they've . . . they've . . ." He stammers in blind rage, his eyes rolling thunders.

"They've eaten from the Tree of Creation this time," Satan says with a grin. "How do you like *them* apples?"

"For eating of the Tree of Good and Evil I drove these drool-headed dreeks from Eden with fire and the sword!" the old man roars with the voice of a thousand novas. "For *this* will I wreak such vengeance as will make all that seem like a cakewalk through paradise!"

And he explodes in a blinding flash of light, and now you can see nothing but the starry firmament and an enormous mushroom pillar cloud of nuclear fire light-years high, roiling, immense, static, and eternal. "For now I am become the Lord of Hosts, Breaker of Worlds! Look upon my works, ye mortals, and despair!"

And you are watching Jofe D'mahl flitting from a shuttle to the entrance stage of Bela-37. You watch him emerge from a lift-tube onto the bridge of the scoutship. And you are Jofe D'mahl, staring back through the plex at the Trek, a disk of diamond brilliance behind the rainbow gauze of its hydrogen interface. As you watch, it dwindles slowly to a point of light, one more abstract star lost in the black immensities of the

boundless void.

"Overwhelming, isn't it?" Haris Bandoora says, moving partially into your field of vision. "A hundred million stars, perhaps as many planets, and this one galaxy is a speck of matter floating in an endless nothing. Once we were bits of some insignificant anomaly called life contaminating a dust-mote circling a dot of matter lost in the universal void. Now we're not even that."

"We're the part that counts," you say.

"If only you knew."

"Knew what?"

"I've heard the call, Haris." Raj Doru, fever in his fierce brown eyes, has risen to the bridge and walked to Bandoora's side.

You are standing in a voidbubble on Bela-37's entrance stage with Haris Bandoora and Raj Doru. Your field of vision contains nothing but the tiny ship, the abstract stars, the two men, and an infinity of nothing. You reel with vertigo and nausea before that awful abyss.

Doru spreads his arms, turns on his g-polarizer, and leaps up and out into the blackness of the void.

"What's he doing?" you shout.

"Sucking void," Bandoora says. "Answering the call. He'll go out far enough to lose sight of the ship and stay there for a standard day."

"What will he do out there?" you ask softly as Doru disappears into the everlasting night.

"What happens between a man and the void is between a man and the void."

"Why do you do it?"

"Each man has his own reason, D'mahl. The call has many voices. Soon you will hear it in your own language."

And you are standing on the scoutship's bridge watching Haris Bandoora himself disappear into that terrible oceanic immensity.

"Are you hearing the call, Jofe D'mahl?" says the quiet voice of Areth Lorenzi, the ancient voidsucker now standing beside you like a fleshly ghost.

"I'm not sure what I'm hearing," you say. "Maybe just my own ego. I've got to get a voidsuck on tape, or I've wasted my time out here."

"It's the call," she says. "It comes to each of us along his own natural vector."

"There's something you people aren't telling me."

"There is, but to know, you must first taste the void."

You stand in your voidbubble on Bela-37's entrance stage, knees flexed, looking out into the endless abyss into which you are about to leap; millions of needlepoint stars prick at your retinas, and the black silences howl in your ears. You inhale and dive up and out into the unknown.

And you float in clear black nothingness where the stars are motes of incandescent matter infinities away across the empty purity of the abyss. Nothing moves. Nothing changes. No event transpires. Silence is eternal. Time does not exist.

"What is it that the voidsuckers know?" you finally say, if only to hear the sound of your own voice. "What is it that they hear out here in this endless nowhere?"

And an immense and horrid laughter rends the fabric of space, and the firmament is rent asunder by an enormous mushroom pillar cloud light-years high that billows and roils and yet remains changeless, outside of time. "You would know what the voidsuckers know, would you, vile mortal?" says the voice from the pillar of nuclear fire. "You would know a truth that would shrivel your soul to a cinder of slok?"

And the mushroom cloud becomes an old man in a tattered robe, with long white hair and beard, parsecs tall, so that his toenails blot out stars and his hands are nebulae. Novas blaze in his eyes, comets flash from his fingertips, and his visage is wrath, utter and eternal. "Behold your universe, upright monkey, all that I now give unto thee, spawn of Adam, and all that shall ever be!"

You stand on a cliff of black rock under a cruel actinic sun choking on vacuum. You tread water in an oily yellow sea that sears your flesh while blue lightnings rend a pale-green sky. Icy-blue snow swirls around you as you crawl across an endless fractured plain of ice under a wan red sun. Your bones creak under 4 gs as you try to stand beneath a craggy overhang while the sky beyond is filthy gray smeared with ugly bands of brown and purple.

"Behold your latest futile hope, wretched creature!" the voice roars. "Behold Eden, 997-Beta-II!" And you stand on a crumbling shelf of striated green rock overlooking a chemically blue sea. The purplish sky is mottled with blue and greenish clouds and the air sears your lungs as your

knees begin to huckle, your consciousness to fade.

And once more you float in a void sundered by a galactic mushroom pillar cloud that becomes a ghastly vision of an old man light-years tall. The utter emptiness of the interstellar abyss burns with X-ray fire from the black holes of his eyes, his hair and beard are manes of white-hot flame that sear the firmament, his hands are claws crushing star clusters, his mouth is a scar of death across the face of the galaxy, and his rage is absolute.

"Slok, stinking microbe!" he howls with a voice that blasts ten thousand planets from their orbits. "It's all slok! That's what the voidsuckers know. Lo, I have created a universe for you that goes on forever, time and space without end. And in all that creation, one garden where life abounded, one Earth, one Eden, and that you have destroyed forever. And all else is slok—empty void, poison gas, and dead matter, worlds without end, time without mercy! Behold my works, mortals, behold your prison, and despair!"

And his laughter shakes the galaxy and his eyes are like unto the nether pits of hell.

You shake your head, and you smile. You point your right forefinger at the ravaging colossus. "You're forgetting something, you lamer," you say. "I created this reality. You're not real. Evaporate, you drool-headed dreek!"

And the monstrous old man begins to dissolve into a huge lavender mist. "I may not be real," he says, "but the situation you find yourself in sure is. Talk your way out of that one!" He disappears, thumbing his nose.

And you are watching Jofe D'mahl, a small figure in a shiny mirror-suit standing alone in the eternal abyss. He turns to you, begins to grow, speaks.

"Have thou and I not against fate conspired,
And seized this sorry scheme of things entire?
And shaped it closer to the heart's desire?"

D'mahl's mirrorsuit begins to flash endlessly through the colors of the spectrum. Lightnings crackle from his fingertips and auroras halo his body like waves of hydrogen interfaces. "Let there be light, we have said on the first day, and there is light."

You are D'mahl as the entire jeweled glory of two thousand and forty torchships springs into being around you. "Let there be heavens, we have said on the second day," you say, and you are standing on a meadow of rolling purple hills under a rainbow sky in a dancing multitude of Trekkers. "And Earth." And the multitude is transported to *Erewhon*, where the dirtiggers have combined three whole decks and created a forest of towering pines and lordly oaks under an azure sky.

"Let there be matter and energy without end, we have said on the third day," you say, and you feel the power flowing through your body as you straddle a naked torchtube, as you become the torch you are riding. "And there is matter and energy everlasting."

"And now on the fourth day, we have rested," you say, floating in the void. "And contemplated that which we have not made. And found it devoid of life or meaning, and hopelessly lame."

"And on the fifth day," D'mahl says as you watch him standing in the blackness in his suit of many lights, "we shall give up the things of childhood—gods and demons, planets and suns, guilts and regrets."

D'mahl is standing in front of a huge shimmer screen overlooking the grass and forest of a dirtigger deck. "And on the sixth day, shall we not say, let there be life? And shall there not be life?"

Bears, cows, unicorns, horses, dogs, lions, giraffes, red velvety kan-garoolike creatures, hippos, elephants, tigers, buffalo, mice, hummingbirds, shrews, rabbits, geese, zebras, goats, monkeys, winged dragons, tapirs, eagles come tumbling, soaring, and gamboling out of the shimmer screen to fill the forest and meadow with their music.

And you are D'mahl, feeling the power of the torch pour through your body, flash from your fingertips, as you stand in the center of the Trek, awash in light and life and motion, saying: "And on the seventh day, shall we not say, let us be fruitful and multiply and fill the dead and infinite reaches of the void with ships and life and meaning?"

And you stretch out your arms and torchships explode into being around you as the Trek opens like an enormous blossoming mandala, filling the blackness of the abyss with itself, immense, forever unfolding, and eternal. "And shall not that day be without end?"