

RICHARD LUPOFF'S "*After the Dreamtime*," in New Dimensions 4, was a sensitive and moving account of life aboard the bizarre sail-powered open-decked starships of the far future, crewed by the descendants of Australian aborigines. That story ended in violence and mutiny; now Lupoff carries his narrative onward, in a sequel that stands up as an independent story for those who may not have read its predecessor.

SAIL THE TIDE OF MOURNING

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Nurundere, captain, ordered his lighter to be hauled from the storage deck of *Djanggalawul* and fitted for use of Jiritzu. Sky heroes bent their efforts, sweat glistening on black skin, dirt of labor staining white duck trousers and grip-soled shoes.

Much thought was given to their work and the reasons for it although little was said of the matter. The people of Yurakosi were not given greatly to speech: a taciturnity, self-containment was part of the heritage of their race, from the days of their desert isolation in the heartland of Australia, O'Earth.

They alone of the scattered children of Sol carried the gene that let them sail the membrane ships. They alone carried in their skin the pigment that filtered out the deadly radiation of the tracks between the stars, that permitted them to clamber up masts and through rigging as had their ancestors on the pacific waters of O'Earth centuries before, while spacemen of other breeds clumbered and heaved about in their massive vacuum armor.

The brilliant light of the multiple star Yirrkalla wheeled overhead; *Djanggalawul* had completed her great tack and pointed her figureheaded prow toward home, toward Yurakosi, bearing the melancholy tale of her voyage to N'Jaja and N'Ala and the death of a passenger, Ham Tamdje of N'Jaja, at the hands of the sky hero Jiritzu.

Djanggalawul bore yet the scars of the attempt by surner meat to seize control of the membrane ship and force from her crew the secret of their ability to live unsuited in space. At N'Ala she had shuttled the surviving surners to the orbiting Port Corley, along with the bodies of those killed in the mutiny.

And now, passing the great tack at Yirrkalla, *Djanggalawul* heeled beneath the titanic solar wind that would fill all sails that bellied out from the rows of masts on her three flat decks. With each moment the ship gained momentum. Under the careful piloting of her first officer Uraroju she would sail to Yurakosi on this momentum and on the force of the interstellar winds she encountered on her great arcing course. There would be no need to start her auxiliary engines, to annihilate any of the precious rod of collapsed matter that hung suspended through the long axis of *Djanggalawul*, where it provided the artificial gravity for the ship.

Sky heroes swarmed the storage deck of the ship, readying Nurundere's lighter for Jiritzu. They fitted the tiny ship with food concentrate, tested her recyclers, tried her hinged mast fittings, and clamped the masts to the hull of the lighter in anticipation of her catapulting from the deck of *Djanggalawul*.

When the lighter was fully prepared, the sky hero Baime went to *Djanggalawul's* bridge to inform Nurundere and Uraroju. Others in the work party hauled the lighter from its place in the storage deck, refixed the now vacant moorings that had held the lighter, and worked the tiny ship through a great cargo hatch onto the main deck of *Djanggalawul*.

High above the deck Jiritzu stood balanced lightly on a spar near the top of a mainmast. He was dressed like any sky hero of the crew of *Djanggalawul*, in white trousers and canvas shoes, black knitted cap and turtleneck sweater, the costume declared by Yurakosi tradition to have been the costume of the sky heroes' ancestors on O'Earth.

A tiny radio had been implanted behind one ear, and strapped to his thigh was a close-air generator. The oxygen-rich mixture that it slowly emitted clung to Jiritzu, providing him with the air he needed for breath, insulating him from the extreme temperatures of space, providing an invisible pressure suit that protected him from the vacuum all around.

He watched the cargo hatch roll slowly back onto the deck beneath him, the one of *Djanggalawul's* three identical outer decks most easily accessible

from the lighter's storage place, and watched his fellow sky heroes haul the lighter onto the deck. He kept his radio turned off, and by tacit agreement no man or woman of *Djanggawul's* crew, not even Jiritzu's kunapi half Dua, approached the mast he had climbed or made any sign of knowing of his presence.

Nurundere himself strode from the bridge of his ship to inspect the lighter, now standing empty on the deck. Jiritzu could tell him easily, not merely by his distinctive cap of white with its wide black band, but by his pale skin, the protective pigmentation of the Yurakosi almost totally faded now, whited out by the passing years and long exposure to the radiation of the naked stars.

Soon Nurundere would have to return to Yurakosi himself, give himself over to the life of a ground squirmer, crawl with the small children and the old men and women of Yurakosi, the only inhabitants of the planet whose able sons and daughters were desperately needed to sail the membrane ships between the stars.

Not so Jiritzu.

Again and again his mind flashed to the terrible scene inside the passenger tank of *Djanggawul*, the moments when the surner meat, the passengers whose payments financed the flights of the membrane ships and filled the coffers of the sky heroes' home planet, had shown firearms—an act unknown on the peaceful, neutral ships—and had briefly imprisoned much of the crew.

Again Jiritzu relived the horror of finding his betrothed, Miralaidj, daughter of Wuluwaid and Bunbulama, dead at the hand of Ham Tamdje.

Again Jiritzu relived the pleasure, the terrible pleasure of killing Ham Tamdje himself, with his bare hands. At the thought he felt sweat burst from his face and hands. His leg, where a bullet fired by Ham Tamdje had torn the flesh, throbbed with pain.

He closed his eyes tightly, turned his face from the deck below him to the blackness above, reopened his eyes.

Above him gleamed the constellation Yirrkalla, beneath which *Djanggawul* had made her great tack. The colored stars formed the facial features of the Rainbow Serpent: the pale, yellow-green eyes, the angry

white nostrils, the blood-red venomous fangs. And beyond Yirrkalla, fading, fading across the immensity of the heavens, the body of the Rainbow Serpent himself, writhing and curving across the void that separated galaxies.

A drop of sweat fell from Jiritzu's forehead, rolled to the edge of one eye where it stung like a tiny insect, then rolled on, enlarged by a tear

He looked downward, saw that the work on the deck was completed, the lighter ready for his use. With heavy heart he lowered himself slowly to the deck of *Djanggalawul*, avoiding the acrobatic tumbles that had been his great joy since his earliest days on the membrane ships.

He walked slowly across the deck of the great ship, halted before the captain's lighter. A party of sky heroes had assembled at the lighter. Jiritzu examined their faces, found in them a mixture of sadness at the loss of a friend and fellow and resignation at what they knew would follow.

Nurundere was there himself. The captain of *Djanggalawul* opened his arms, facing directly toward Jiritzu. He moved his lips in speech but Jiritzu left his implanted radio turned off. The meaning of Nurundere was clear without words.

Jiritzu came to his captain. They embraced. Jiritzu felt the strong arms of the older man clasp about his shoulders. Then he was released, stepped back.

Beside Nurundere stood Uraroju, first officer of *Djanggalawul*. Some junior officer, then, had been left upon the bridge. Uraroju was a younger person than Nurundere, her protective pigmentation still strong, barely beginning to white out; she would have many years before her as a sky hero, would surely become captain of *Djanggalawul* with Nurundere's retirement to Yurakosi.

They embraced, Jiritzu for a moment closing his eyes, permitting himself to pretend that Uraroju was his own mother, that he was visiting his old people in their town of Kaitjouga on Yurakosi. The warmth of Uraroju, the feel of her womanhood, comforted Jiritzu. Then they released each other, and he turned to other men and women he would never again see, men and women who must return to Yurakosi with the tale of the tragic things that had transpired between Port Upatoi and Yirrkalla on the outward leg of their sail, and with the tale of the end of Jiritzu.

Watilun he embraced, Watilun the machinist and hero of the battle against the mutineers.

Baime he embraced, a common sailor, Jiritzu's messmate.

Kutjara he embraced, Kutjara with whom he had often swarmed the lines of *Djanggalawul*.

Only Dua, kunapi half to Jiritzu of the aranda, spoke in their parting embrace. Radios mute, Dua spoke in the moments when his close-air envelope and that of Jiritzu were merged, when common speech could be carried without electronic aid.

"Bidjiwara is not here," Dua said. None but Jiritzu could hear this. "The loss of her aranda half Miralaidj is too great for little Bidjiwara to bear. The loss of yourself, Jiritzu, is too great for Bidjiwara. She remains below, weeping alone.

"I too have wept for you, my aranda half, but I could not remain below. I could not forego our parting time."

He kissed Jiritzu on the cheek, his lips brushing the *maraiin*, the swirling scarifications born by all kunapi and aranda, whose meaning he, Dua alone of all Jiritzu's shipmates, understood.

Jiritzu clasped both Dua's hands in his own, saying nothing. Then he turned away and went to inspect the lighter given him by Nurundere. He found all in order, climbed upon the deck of the tiny membrane craft, signaled to the sky heroes on *Djanggalawul's* deck.

Watilun himself operated the catapult.

Jiritzu found himself cast from *Djanggalawul*, forward and upward from her deck, the distance between the great membrane ship and tiny lighter growing with each moment. He sighed only once, then turned to the task of sailing his new ship.

Above him lay the writhing length of the Rainbow Serpent. By conference with Nuruüdere and Uraroju over many days it had been settled that Jiritzu would not return with *Djanggalawul* to Yurakosi. His act in killing Ham Tamdje was understood. There was no question of trial, no accusation or even suggestion of crime.

But the tradition of the sky-hero peoples held sacred any passenger on the membrane ships.

Death of meat, membrane-ship passengers, ground squirmers traveling between the stars in the tanks of sky-hero craft instead of sealed in the bellies of massive conventional spacecraft, was almost unknown. There was the half-legendary story of Elyun El-Kumarbis, traveler from the pan-semite empire of O'Earth sailing aboard *Makarata* to Al-ghoul Phi, who had passed as a sky hero and died of space radiation, his body later launched into deep space at his dying request.

And there was the new tragedy of Ham Tamdje and his killer Jiritzu who could never again be permitted to ride the membrane ships as a sky hero.

Beneath Jiritzu and the lighter, *Djanggalawul* dwindled, her great membrane sails bellied out with starwinds, her golden skin reflecting the multicolored lights of the Yirrkalla constellation.

And above Jiritzu, Yirrkalla itself, the serpent face, leering and glowing its brightness.

He erected the masts of the lighter, fixed their bases on the three equilaterally mounted decks of the lighter, climbed each mast in turn, rotating gimbaled spars into position and locking them perpendicular to the masts. The sails, the fine, almost monomolecular membranes that would catch the starwinds and carry the lighter onward, he left furled for the time being.

From the top of a mast he pushed himself gently, parallel with the deck of the lighter. He floated softly to the deck, landing with bent knees to absorb the light impact of his lean frame on the lighter's deck.

He opened the hatch and crawled into the cramped interior of the lighter to check the instruments and supplies he knew were there—the compact rations, the lighter's multiradiational telescope that he would bring with him to the deck and mount for use, the lighter's miniature guidance computer.

Instead, before even switching on the cabin light, he saw two brief reflections of the colored illumination of Yirrkalla—what he knew must be two eyes.

He flicked on his implanted radio and demanded to know the identity of the stowaway.

"Don't be angry Jiritzu," her voice quivered, "I had to come along."

"Bidjiwara!" he cried.

She launched herself across the cabin, crossing it in an easy, gliding trajectory. She caught his hand in her two, brought it to her face, pressed his palm to the *maraiin*, the graceful scarifications on her cheek.

"Don't be angry with me," she repeated.

He felt himself slump to the deck of the cabin, sitting with his back to the bulkhead, the hatchway leading to the outer deck overhead, light pouring in. He shook himself, turned to look into the face of Bidjiwara, young Bidjiwara, she who was barely entering womanhood, whose voyage on *Djanggalawul* was her first as a sky hero, her first offplanet, her first away from Yurakosi.

"Angry? Angry?" Jiritzu repeated stupidly. "No, Bidjiwara, my—my dear Bidjiwara." He brought his face close to hers, felt as she cupped his cheeks in the palms of her hands.

He shook his head. "I couldn't be angry with you. But do you understand? Do you know where this little ship is bound?"

Suddenly he pulled away from her grasp, sprang back to the deck of the lighter, sighted back in the direction of *Djanggalawul*. Could he see her as a distant speck? Was that the great membrane ship—or a faint, remote star?

His radio was still on. He stood on the lighter's deck, shouted after *Djanggalawul* and her crew. "Dual Nurundere! Uraroju!"

There was no answer, only a faint, random crackling in his skull, the signals of cosmic radio emanations broadcast by colliding clouds of interstellar gas.

He dropped back through the hatch, into the cabin of the lighter.

He reached for Bidjiwara, took her extended hand, drew her with him

back onto the deck of the lighter.

"You know why I am here," he said, half in question, half assertion.

She nodded, spoke softly a word in confirmation.

Still, he said, "I will die. I am here to die."

She made no answer, stood with her face to his sweater, her hands resting lightly against his shoulders. He looked down at her, saw how thin her body was, the contours of womanhood but barely emergent from the skinny, sticklike figure of the boisterous child his dead Miralaidj had loved as a little sister.

Jiritzu felt tears in his eyes.

"I could not go back to Yurakosi," he said. "I am a young man, my skin still fine and black, protecting me from the poison of the stars. I could not become a squirmer, alone in a world of children and ancients.

"I would have thrown myself with all my strength from the top of *Djanggalwul's* highest mast. I would have escaped the ship, fallen forever through space like the corpse of El-Kumarbis.

"Nurundere said no." Jiritzu stopped, looked down at Bidjiwara, at her glossy, midnight hair spilling from beneath her knitted cap, her black, rounded forehead. For a moment he bent and pressed his cheek against the top of her head, then raised his eyes again to the Rainbow Serpent and spoke.

"Nurundere gave me his own ship, his captain's lighter. Take the lighter, Jiritzu," he said, 'I can unload at Port Bralku with the others, by shuttle. I need no glorious captain's barge. Sail on forever,' Nurundere said, 'a better fate than the one awaiting me.'

"You understand, Bidjiwara? I mean to sail the Rainbow Serpent, the tide that flows between the galaxies. I will sail as long as the rations aboard last. I will die on this little ship, my soul will return to the Dreamtime, my body will continue onward, borne by the Rainbow Serpent.

"I will never become a ground crawler. I will never return to Yurakosi.

No world will know my tread—ever."

Bidjiwara turned her face, raising her eyes from Jiritzu's ribbed sweater to look directly into his eyes.

"Very well, Jiritzu. I will sail the Rainbow Serpent with you. Where else was there for me to go?"

Jiritzu laughed bitterly. "You are a child. You should have remained aboard *Djanggawul*. You had many years before you as a sky hero. Look at your skin," he said, raising her hand to hold it before them both. No power lights were burning on the little ship, but the colors of Yirrkalla glowed white, green-yellow, blood red.

"Black, Bidjiwara, black with the precious shield that only our people claim."

"And your own?" she responded.

"My own pigment—yes, I too would have had many more years to play at sky hero. But I killed Ham Tamdje. I broke the sacred trust. I could sail the great membrane ships no longer."

He dropped her hand and walked a few paces away. He stood, his back half-turned to her, and his words were carried to her by the tiny radios implanted in both their skulls.

"And Miralaidj," he almost whispered, "Miralaidj—in the Dreamtime. And her father Wuluwaid in the Dreamtime. No."

He turned and looked upward through naked spars to the glowing stars of Yirrkalla and the Rainbow Serpent. "We should set to work rigging sails," he said.

"I *will* stay with you then," she said. "You will not send me away, send me back."

"Dua knew you were hidden?"

She nodded yes.

"My closest friend, my half, kunapi to my aranda. Dua told me a lie."

"I begged him, Jiritzu."

For a moment he almost glared at her, anger filling his face. "Why do you wish to die?"

She shook her head. "I wish to be with you."

"You will die with me."

"I will return to the Dreamtime with you."

"You believe the old stories."

She shrugged. "We should set to work rigging sails." And scurried away, flung open lockers, drew out furled sheets of nearly monomolecular membrane, scampered up a mast and began fixing the sail to spars.

Jiritzu stood on the deck, watching. Then he crossed to another of the lighter's three equilateral decks and followed the example of Bidjiwara.

He worked until he had completed the rigging of the masts of the deck, then crossed again, to the third of the lighter's decks, opened a locker, drew membrane and clambered to the top of a mast. There he clung, knees gripping the vertical shaft, arms flung over the topmost spar, rigging the sail.

He completed the work, looked across to the farthest mast, near the stern of the lighter. The Rainbow Serpent drew a gleaming polychromatic backdrop. The mast was silhouetted against the Serpent, and standing on the highest spar, one hand outstretched clinging to the mast, the other arm and leg extended parallel to the spar, was Bidjiwara.

Her envelope of close air shimmered with refraction of the colors of Yirrkalla. Jiritzu clung to the rigging where he had worked, struck still and silent by the beauty of the child. He wondered why she did not see him, then gradually realized, aided by the misty sidereal light of the region, that she stood with her back to him, her face raised to the great tide that flowed between the galaxies, her mind wholly unconcerned with her surroundings and unaware of his presence.

Jiritzu lowered himself silently through the spars and rigging of the lighter, through a hatchway and into the tiny cabin of the lighter. There he

prepared a light meal and set it aside, lay down to rest and waited for the return of Bidjiwara.

He may have dozed and seen into the Dreamtime, for he saw the figures of Miralaidj and her father Wulawaid floating in a vague jumble of shapes and slow, wavering movement. He opened his eyes and saw Bidjiwara lower herself through the hatchway into the cabin, white rope-soled shoes first, white duck trousers clinging close to her long skinny legs and narrow hips, then her black ribbed sweater.

"Our ship has no name," she said.

He pondered for a moment, shrugged, said, "Does it need one?"

"It would be—somehow I think we would be more with our people," Bidjiwara replied.

"Well, if you wish. What shall we make her name?"

"You have no choice?"

"None."

"We will truly sail on the great tide? On the Rainbow Serpent?"

"We are already."

"Then I would call our ship after the sacred fish. Let it bear us to the Dreamtime."

"Baramundi."

"Yes."

"As you wish."

She came and sat by him, her hands folded in her lap. She sat silently.

"Food is ready," he said.

She looked at the tiny table that served in the lighter as work space, desk, and dining table. Jiritzu saw her smile, wondered at the mixture in her face of little child and wise woman. She looked somehow as he thought

the Great Mother must look, if only he believed in the Great Mother.

Bidjiwara crossed the small distance and brought two thin slices of hot biscuit. She held them both to Jiritzu. He took one, pressed the other back upon her.

Silently they ate the biscuit.

Afterward she said, "Jiritzu, is there more to do now?"

He said, "We should check our position." He undogged the ship's telescope and carried it to the deck of *Baramundi*.

Bidjiwara helped him to mount it on the gimbaled base that stood waiting for it. Jiritzu sighted on the brightest star in Yirrkalla for reference—it was a gleaming crimson star that marked the end of a fang in the serpent face, that Yurakosi tradition called Blood of Hero.

On the barrel of the telescope where control squares were mounted he tapped all of the radiational sensors into life, to cycle through filters and permit the eyepiece to observe the Rainbow Serpent by turns under optical, radio, x-ray, gamma radiation.

He put his eye to the eyepiece and watched the Serpent as it seemed to move with life, its regions responding to the cycling sensitivity of the telescope.

He drew away and Bidjiwara put her eye to the telescope, standing transfixed for minutes until at last she too drew away and turned to Jiritzu.

"The Serpent truly lives," she said. "Is it—a real creature?"

Jiritzu shook his head. "The tides of the galaxies draw each other. The Serpent is a flow of matter. Stars, dust, gas. To ride with it would mean a journey of billions of years to reach the next of its kind. To sail the starwinds that fill the Rainbow Serpent, we will reach marvelous speed. As long as we can sail our craft, we can tack from wind to wind.

"And once we have gone to the Dreamtime, *Baramundi* will float on, on the tide, along the Rainbow Serpent. Someday she may beach on some distant shore."

He looked at Bidjiwara, smiled, repeated his statement.

Bidjiwara replied, "And if she does not?"

"Then she may be destroyed in some way, or simply—drift forever. Forever."

Jiritzu saw the girl stretch and yawn. She crossed the cabin and drew him down alongside the bulkhead, nestled up to him and went to sleep.

He lay with her in his arms, wondering at her trust, watching the play of sidereal light that reflected through the hatchway and illuminated her face dimly.

He extended one finger and gently, gently traced the *maraiin* on her cheek, wondering at its meaning. He pressed his face to her head again, pulled away her knitted cap and let her hair tumble loose, feeling its softness with his own face, smelling the odor of her hair.

He too slept.

They awoke together, stirring and stretching, and looked into each other's face and laughed. They used the lighter's sanitary gear and nibbled a little breakfast and went on deck. Together they checked *Baramundi's* rigging, took sightings with her multiradiational telescope, and fed information into her little computer.

The computer offered course settings in tiny, glowing display lights and Jiritzu and Bidjiwara reset *Baramundi's* sails.

They sat on deck, bathed in the perpetual twilight of the Rainbow Serpent's softly glowing colors.

They spoke of their childhoods on Yurakosi, of their old people, their skins whited out by years of sailing the membrane ships, retired to the home planet to raise the children while all the race's vigorous adults crewed the great ships, sailed between the stars carrying freight and occasional passengers sealed inside their hulls, laughing at the clumsy craft and clumsy crews of all others than the aranda and the kunapi.

They climbed through the rigging of *Baramundi*, shinnying up masts lightly, balancing on spars, occasionally falling—or leaping—from the

ship's heights, to drop gently, gently back onto her deck.

They ate and drank the smallest amounts they could of the lighter's provisions, tacitly stretching the supplies as far as they could be stretched, carefully recycling to add still more to the time they could continue.

They lay on *Baramundi's* deck sometimes, when the rest time they had agreed upon came, Bidjiwara nestling against the taller Jiritzu, falling asleep as untroubledly as a young child, Jiritzu wondering over and over at this girl who had come to die with him, who asked few questions, who lived each hour as if it were the beginning of a long and joyous life rather than the final act of a tragedy.

Jiritzu felt very old.

He was nearly twenty by the ancient, arbitrary scale of age carried to the star worlds from O'Earth, the scale of the seasons and the years in old Arnhem Land in the great desert of their ancestral home. Six years older than Bidjiwara, he had traveled the star routes for five, had sailed the membrane ships across tens of billions of miles in that time.

And Bidjiwara asked little of him. They were more playmates than—than anything else, he thought.

"Tell me of El-Kumarbis," she said one day, perched high on a spar above *Baramundi's* deck.

"You know all about him," Jiritzu replied.

"Where is he now?"

Jiritzu shrugged, exasperated. "Somewhere beyond Al-ghoul, no one knows where. He was buried in space."

"What if we find his body?" Bidjiwara shivered.

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"In infinite space? What chance that two objects moving at random will collide?"

"No?"

He shook his head.

"Could the computer find him?"

He shrugged. "If we knew exactly when he was buried, and where, and his trajectory and speed and momentum... No, it's still impossible."

"Dinner time," she said. "You wait here, I'll fix it."

She came back with the customary biscuits and a jar filled with dark fluid. Jiritzu took the jar, held it high against the ambient light—they seldom used any of *Baramundi's* power lights.

"Wine," Bidjiwara said.

He looked amazed.

"I found a few capsules in the ship's supplies. You just put one in some water."

They ate and drank. The wine was warm, its flavor soft. They sprawled on the deck of *Baramundi* after the biscuits were gone, passing the jar back and forth, slowly drinking the wine.

When it was gone Bidjiwara nestled against Jiritzu; for once, instead of sleeping she lay looking into his face, holding her hands to the sides of his head.

She said his name softly, then flicked off her radio and pressed her lips close to his neck so their air envelopes were one, the sound carried directly from her lips to his ear, and whispered his name again.

"Bidjiwara," he said, "you never answered why you came on board *Baramundi*."

"To be with Jiritzu," she said.

"Yes, but why? Why come to die with me?"

"Tall Jiritzu," she said, "strong Jiritzu. You saw me aboard *Djanggalawul*, you were kind to me but as you are kind to children. Men

never know, only women know love."

He laughed, not cruelly. "You're only—"

"A woman," she said.

"And you want—?"

Now she laughed at him. "You man, you mighty man. You don't understand that all men are the children of women."

She drew away from him, slid her black ribbed sweater over her head and dropped it to the deck. He put his hands onto her naked back, trembling, then slowly slid them around her, touching her little, half-developed breasts, fondling her soft nipples with his hands.

She buried her forehead in the side of his neck, whispered against his throat, "For this, Jiritzu, I came aboard *Baramundi* for this."

He ran his thumbs down her breastbone, to her navel, to her white duck trousers, and peeled them down, and took her.

And the next day they were nearly out of biscuit and they went on half rations to make their supplies last longer.

They played children's games, shouting and chasing each other up and down the lighter's masts.

They leaped and sailed from the decks, past the membrane sails, into the emptiness, then hung for a moment and fell back, gently, to *Baramundli*.

Jiritzu leaped too hard, too high, and feared that he had broken from the ship. He looked up—down—into the coils of the Rainbow Serpent. He felt himself revolving slowly, helplessly hanging in the emptiness, alone and unshielded except by the close air his generator made and the protection of the pigment he carried in his skin.

He thought to cry for help, then held back. If he was afloat, Bidjiwara could not help him. He turned slowly, facing toward *Baramundi*, her membranes bellied with stellar wind, her deck reflecting the lights of the Serpent; he could not see Bidjiwara.

He turned slowly, facing toward the Rainbow Serpent, feeling as if he could fall forever into its colored bands, its long coils stretching no lesser distance than the span between galaxies.

He turned slowly, revolving on the axis of his own body, feeling no motion himself but watching the stars and the Serpent and *Baramundi* the sacred fish revolve slowly around him, wheeling, wheeling, when his outflung arm struck an object as hard and cold as the ultimate ice of a deadstar world.

He recoiled, spun involuntarily, stared.

It was—yes.

He looked back toward *Baramundi*, revolved using his own limbs as counterweights, placed himself between the corpse and the lighter and pressed gently with the soles of his rope-soled shoes against the hard, frigid corpse.

Slowly he drifted back toward *Baramundi*—and, wheeling again as he drifted, saw the corpse drifting away, upward or downward into the lights of the Rainbow Serpent.

As he approached *Baramundi* he pondered whether or not to tell Bidjiwara of his find. Finally he told her—the incredible happenstance had occurred.

Later they crept to the farthestmost deck for their loving, then back into the tiny cabin to sleep.

And soon *Baramundi's* supplies were exhausted, and still Jiritzu and Bidjiwara continued. Their water remained, and a few of the capsules. They had wine from time to time. They gave less effort to running the ship, ceased to play in the rigging, ceased to leap.

The wound in Jiritzu's leg resumed its throbbing intermittently. He would rub it, or Bidjiwara would rub it for him, and the pain would ease.

They made love, it seemed, with increasing frequency. The sensations of their couplings seemed to increase as lack of nourishment drew their bodies ever tighter ever more acutely into awareness of each other.

They lay together most of the time, seldom dressing fully.

They drank water only, their wine capsules exhausted.

They slept increasingly.

In *Baramundi's* cabin Jiritzu fed telescopic data into the lighter's computer, read the responses displayed on its little illuminated screen. After the acclimatization of his eyes to none but sidereal light, even the miniature display lights were dazzling: his eyes pulsed with afterimages for minutes following the exercise.

It was difficult to climb from the cabin back onto the deck.

Bidjiwara waited for him there, barefoot, sitting on the deck with her wrists clasped around her knees, wearing only her white trousers and black knitted cap. She smiled a welcome to him, asked a question wordlessly.

"Here," he said with a shrug. "Here is where we are. As we have been. Riding the Rainbow Serpent. Riding the tide. Sailing the starwinds."

He felt dizzy for a moment, reached out with one hand to steady himself against the telescope mount, then sank to a squat beside Bidjiwara.

She put her arms around him and he lay on the deck, his head in her lap. He looked up into her face. She was Bidjiwara the lovely child, Miralaidj her aranda half, she was Jiritzu's own mother on Yurakosi, the Great Mother.

He opened and closed his eyes, unable to tell which woman this was.

He reached and traced the *maraiin* on her cheek.

She nodded, began speaking softly, telling him the meaning of the scarifications.

When she had finished he took her hand, held it against his chest, and slowly told her the meaning of his own *maraiin*. He spoke with closed eyes, opened them when he felt a drop of wetness, saw her weeping softly, drew her face down to his own to kiss.

She lay down beside him and they embraced gently, then both slept.

After that they paid less attention to *Baramundi's* needs. Jiritzu and Bidjiwara grew weaker. They slept more, confined their activity to occasional short walks on *Baramundi's* decks. Both of them grew thinner, lighter. Their growing weakness seemed almost to be offset by the decreasing demands of the ship's artificial gravity.

They lay on deck for hours, watching the glow of the Rainbow Serpent. They were far beyond the Serpent's head now, the stars of Yirrkalla clustered now into a meaningless sparkler jumble far, far astern of *Baramundi*.

Jiritzu was awake, had taken a sparse sip of their little remaining water, left Bidjiwara to doze where she lay, her hair a mourning wreath circling her emaciated features. Jiritzu made his way unsteadily to the prow of *Baramundi*, bracing himself against masts and small stanchions as he walked.

He sighted through the ship's telescope, enjoying in a faint, detached manner the endless, kaleidoscopic changes of the Rainbow Serpent's multiradiational forms. At length he turned away from the scope and looked back toward Bidjiwara. He could not tell if she was breathing. He could not tell for a certainty who she was.

He returned to the telescope, tapped its power squares to cause it to superimpose its multiple images rather than run them in sequence. He gazed, rapt, at the Serpent for a time, then swung the scope overhead, sweeping back and forth across the sky above *Baramundi*.

He settled on a black speck that floated silhouetted against the glow of the Serpent. For a while he watched it grow larger.

He turned from the telescope back to the deck of the lighter. Bidjiwara had wakened and risen; she was walking slowly, slowly toward him.

In the glow of the Rainbow Serpent her emaciation was transformed to a fine perception that etched every line, every muscle beneath her skin. She wore sweater and trousers; Jiritzu could see her high breasts, the ribbed sweater conforming to their sharp grace, her nipples standing as points of reference for the beauty of her torso.

Her white trousers managed to retain their fit despite her starvation; Jiritzu discerned the lines of her thighs, the pubic swell over her crotch.

Her face, always thin, seemed all vertical planes now, forehead and temple, nostril and cheek. The ridges of her brows, the lines of her mouth were as if drawn on her face.

Her eyes seemed to have gained an intense brightness.

As she crossed the deck to Jiritzu she gained in strength and steadiness.

She held her hands toward him, smiling, and he felt his own strength returning to him. He took the steps needed to come to her, reached and took her two hands, clasped them in his. They embraced, calling each other's name.

The dark figure of Elyun El-Kumarbis dropped onto the deck of *Baramundi*. He strode to Jiritzu and Bidjiwara.

"Lovers!" he said. "Sky heroes!"

They turned to him, arms still around each other. Each extended a hand to him, felt his cold, cold.

"All my years," the O'Earther said, "I wanted no thing but to sail a membrane ship. To be a sky hero."

"Yes," Jiritzu said, "you are known to all sky heroes, Elyun El-Kumarbis. Your fame spans the galaxy."

"And where do you sail, sky heroes?"

"We sail the tide, we sail the Rainbow Serpent."

"Aboard your ship?"

"*Baramundi* has brought us this far, but no farther. It is fit now for us to return to the Dreamtime."

Elyun El-Kumarbis nodded. "May I—may I greet you as brother and sister sky heroes?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Jiritzu.

"Yes," answered Bidjiwara.

Elyun El-Kumarbis kissed them each on the cheek, on the *maraiin* scarifications of each. And his kiss was cold, cold.

Full of strength Jiritzu and Bidjiwara sprang to the spars of *Baramundi's* highest mast, scrambled up lines to the topmost spar of the lighter.

They looked back at Elyun El-Kumarbis, who stood wondering beside the ship's telescope.

They took each other's hands, dropped into place on the topmost spar, and together sprang with the full strength of their sky heroes' legs, toughened and muscled by years of training in the rigging of membrane ships.

They flew up from the spar, up from *Baramundi* the sacred fish, and looking back saw the fish flip his tail once in farewell.

They peered ahead of themselves, into the Rainbow Serpent, saw it writhe toward the far galaxies, heard its hissing voice urging, welcoming them.

They laughed loudly, loudly, feeling strength, warmth and joy. They plunged on and on, skimming the tide of the Rainbow Serpent, feeling the strength of the aranda, of all Yurakosi, of all sky heroes, mighty in their blood.

They threw their arms around each other, laughing for joy, and sped to the Rainbow Serpent, to the galaxies beyond the galaxies, to the Dreamtime forever.